

## The Gods 371

### Chapter 371: The Future Scorpio Visited — The Vagrant and Miss Moon

Scorpio came clean. His reasoning was crystal clear and simple.

While Cheng Shi had vanished to parts unknown and Gao Ya had slipped into the crowd to spread rumors, Scorpio had been wondering whether he could accelerate the trial's progress.

After all, nobody knew if Cheng Shi's plan would succeed, and back then there was still a Scavenger lurking outside, watching them like a tiger eyeing its prey.

So he devised a plan. At the stroke of midnight, the very instant a new day began, he used his deduction ability to travel into Dolgod's future!

His goal was to find someone — someone who knew when the life that should never have been born would arrive.

Scorpio reasoned that since Dolgod harbored a life that should never have been born, regardless of whether that life had actually come into existence, events surrounding it would inevitably have caused enormous upheaval in some version of the future. At the very least, there would be historical traces or people who knew the inside story.

So he decided to search through countless futures for that person, bring them back, and have them guide everyone to find the life that should never have been born — to stand guard over it in advance and thereby alter the future.

It was a straightforward approach, and a common problem-solving method among Another Day Assassins who possessed special Time-based deduction powers. However, under Cheng Shi's earlier leadership, Scorpio hadn't wanted to use it, because doing so would waste his lifesaving opportunity.

But now, the lifesaving opportunity he'd held in reserve might not actually save his life. Better to spend it and clear the trial sooner.

And so he traveled to the future. The moment thunder rolled across Dolgod, he activated his talent and set off on his path of searching through deductions.

Scorpio had expected this needle-in-a-haystack task to drain every ounce of his mental energy. He'd even steeled himself for failure from the very start. Yet he never imagined he'd be so fortunate — after only six deductions, he found someone in one of Dolgod's futures who claimed to know the whole affair.

The man called himself Aph Ros. He was a homeless vagrant — face covered in scars, back hunched with age. Apart from clothes that were still more or less intact and a body odor that wasn't overpoweringly foul, he had virtually no redeeming qualities.

When Scorpio found him, he was outside a tavern, chatting up a female citizen.

Remarkably, the woman showed no disgust at Aph Ros's unsightly appearance. On the contrary, she seemed to be enjoying their conversation immensely.

Scorpio was absolutely certain he'd only paused out of curiosity — definitely not because the woman was so strikingly beautiful — but that coincidental hesitation allowed him to overhear something from Aph Ros's mouth that sounded suspiciously like what he'd been searching for!

The vagrant leaned against the railing by the tavern's back door, his raspy, whistling voice showering the woman before him with endless compliments, his cloudy eyes making no effort to conceal their covetous appraisal of her beauty and figure.

"I should thank the Church for not driving people like me out of Dolgod. That's the only reason I had the chance to meet you, beautiful miss."

The woman had been drinking. A rosy flush spread across her fair skin. She stood poised, offering a slight nod and a captivating smile that melted Scorpio's — no, that melted Aph Ros's heart.

"I feel as though I'm gazing upon tonight's most beautiful moon," Aph Ros flattered shamelessly, sending the woman into a fit of delighted laughter. "I don't even know your name yet, Miss Moon."

"A tongue that sweet must have found quite a few moons for Dolgod," the woman giggled behind her hand, her tone teasing but without a trace of contempt. "Just call me Moon. I like the name."

Aph Ros straightened up with uncharacteristic composure and adopted a conspiratorial air.

"Beautiful Miss Moon, no matter who else asked me this, I'd never tell them. But you're different. You're so elegant and perceptive — I can see you're nothing like those gossip-mongering noblewomen. I'm sure you'd never breathe a word of my secret. Am I right?"

The woman's smile grew even more enchanting. She studied the vagrant before her once more, glanced left and right to make sure nobody was eavesdropping, then gave a demure nod — but behind those bright eyes, excitement blazed like fire.

Clearly, she was becoming interested in this man.

Aph Ros curled his lips into a grin, stepped forward, and leaned close to Miss Moon's ear to whisper. His voice was already hoarse and deep; lowered further, it became truly inaudible to anyone nearby.

But such tricks were useless against Scorpio. He was an assassin — one with razor-sharp senses — so even standing at a distance, he could hear every word the vagrant said with perfect clarity.

"I'm not really a vagrant. I was once part of the Church myself. You could even say that before the Church Guard was established, I too once upheld order in Dolgod."

Miss Moon gasped and clapped a hand over her mouth. "How is that possible?"

"Why wouldn't it be, beautiful lady? You look quite young — I'd guess you've never heard of a place called the Evil Infant Inquisition. Then again, that institution was probably destroyed in a great fire before you were even born."

"My father told me about that fire! Were you one of the staff there? You're really that... old?"

"Ah... beautiful Miss Moon, age is just a number. It's meaningless. What truly matters is time. Generally speaking, the passage of time makes certain people even more attractive, wouldn't you agree?"

"Are you talking about yourself?" Miss Moon laughed behind her hand.

"Obviously." Aph Ros flicked his hair.

"Fine, I'll admit there's something to that. But I'm more curious about your identity. Did I guess right?"

"Correct. Absolutely correct. You're not only beautiful but astonishingly intelligent."

Aph Ros lavished praise without restraint, making Moon blush to the tips of her ears.

"I was indeed a member of the staff there. Though a fire and internal power struggles within the Church cost me my former position — don't look so shocked, darkness exists everywhere. Nowhere is truly clean, is it?"

But my old colleagues were sentimental enough not to banish me from the city. And thanks to them, I had the fortune of meeting such a beautiful and enchanting moon tonight."

"But Father told me the Church is the most sacred place. How could they..."

"Once upon a time, Miss Moon. Your father wasn't wrong — the Church truly was a sacred place, once. But ever since heretics used the Profane Birth method to contaminate Dolgod, the faith here has never been pure again!"

"Ah!" Miss Moon let out a startled cry and clapped her hand over her mouth. She seemed to feel she'd stumbled upon something she shouldn't have heard, yet curiosity drew her ever closer to Aph Ros.

"What is the Profane Birth?"

"The Profane Birth is... a blasphemous secret that occurred before you were born."

Seeing that his hook had been taken, the vagrant didn't continue. Instead, he simply smiled, stepped back with gentlemanly composure, smoothed out his more-or-less intact clothes, and slowly extended his hand.

"The rest of the story comprises the most unspeakable secrets lurking beneath Dolgod's pleasant facade. I can't tell it here. Beautiful miss, if you have the courage, come with me to a certain place. Once we're there, you might learn the most terrifying — and fascinating — story that has secretly unfolded in Dolgod over these past centuries...

So, will you come?"

...

Chapter 372: A Guide from the Future

Miss Moon was tempted. She pressed her lips together tightly, staring at the outstretched hand before her, torn and hesitant — but after a few seconds, she squeezed her eyes shut and placed her hand forward.

She grasped nothing but air. The vagrant had vanished. So had the mysterious stranger who claimed to know Dolgod's secrets. All that remained was empty space and the bewildered stares of those around her.

Miss Moon's face flashed with shock, but that shock quickly gave way to even greater excitement.

A man who could simply vanish before her very eyes — didn't that prove he truly came from somewhere mysterious?

She craned her neck and looked in every direction, but the figure was nowhere to be seen. Still, she thought perhaps he was playing a joke on her, so she decided to wait — at least until the moon rose. Then the mysterious stranger could judge for himself which was more beautiful: her or the real moon.

But to Miss Moon's disappointment, she stood there alone all night without the mysterious vagrant ever returning. What she didn't know was that he might never come back at all.

Because... Scorpio had already taken him.

Just as the elated Aph Ros was about to claim the evening's prize, Scorpio seized his hand and dragged him into a dark alley.

Aph Ros seemed scared senseless. He collapsed to the ground and trembled.

Scorpio let out a cold chuckle and got straight to the point, asking whether he knew about an incident from over a decade ago — something involving a life that should never have been born.

The vagrant shook and said nothing, but Scorpio could clearly see he knew. So he offered extravagant rewards: come with him to a certain place, and as long as the vagrant could help find clues relating to this matter, he'd receive a fortune in gold and a genuine citizen's identity.

The vagrant was tempted — just as Miss Moon had been before him — conflict written all over his face.

But he agreed quickly enough. For a man like him, the lure of money was apparently irresistible.

What he didn't know was that Scorpio's promises were entirely fabricated. He had none of those things, nor would he bother acquiring them for an NPC. It was the only trick he'd learned from Cheng Shi — making things up on the spot.

And so, this Aph Ros from ten years in the future was carried by Scorpio's Time deduction power into the present, overwritten onto the current timeline.

Cheng Shi listened from start to finish with a deepening frown. When the story ended, only one question lingered in his mind:

"Was that Miss Moon really that beautiful?"

"?"

"..."

Seeing the speechless looks on their faces, Cheng Shi gave an awkward laugh:

"Just lightening the mood. Don't take it seriously.

I think our assassin brother's plan was excellent — better than I could have expected. And I don't see anything wrong with how it was executed. So where did things go wrong?"

Cheng Shi rubbed his chin, furrowed his brow, and quickly spotted the flaw.

"I think I see it. So... this Aph Ros you brought back — where did he go?"

Cheng Shi had hit the crux of the matter — the very thing that had been tormenting the two of them!

After Scorpio brought Aph Ros back, he happened to arrive just as the Theocracy of Growth was ushering in the God Descent. Under the overwhelming pressure of the colossal tentacle, Scorpio froze for a moment — and in that single instant of distraction, the Aph Ros who'd followed him back simply vanished!

He'd run. Slipped away from Scorpio's side without a sound!

It seemed he hadn't been lying — he really might have been a former Church worker, because in the blink of an eye he navigated from the outer courtyard to the inner hall with practiced ease, then disappeared into the crowd. The oppressive aura of the God Descent, the Head of Church's proclamations, the chaotic footsteps and deafening clamor — all of it hampered Scorpio's perception and prevented him from tracking the man immediately. And so...

He was gone.

The more Cheng Shi heard, the deeper his frown became. He thought for a moment, then spoke again:

"You're a 2,100-point player, and even you were shaken by that enormous tentacle. He's just an ordinary NPC — and he managed to escape in that gap?"

"Are you sure you saw correctly?"

"I'm sure. He had no special abilities whatsoever!"

I've racked my brain, and the only explanation I can think of is that he'd experienced this scene before. Combined with being a former Church staffer, he'd developed some degree of immunity to the God Descent's inexplicable pressure. After all, the tentacle only startled me — it didn't actually emanate any negative effects outward.

He said he once worked at the Evil Infant Inquisition. So I'm wondering — could he be an Uma Sinner?"

At this, Cheng Shi let out a knowing laugh.

"Now that's interesting. And that's exactly where the real problem lies.

You might not know this, but the fire at the Evil Infant Inquisition burned the entire facility to the ground. If he truly lived through that event, he absolutely cannot be a surviving member of the Inquisition's staff — because unless I'm mistaken, M... Old Zhang already wiped out every last Uma Sinner remaining in Dolgod."

"...Huh? The Gravekeeper started the fire?" Scorpio was stunned. "Why would he set a fire? Was that part of our plan too?"

Gao Ya had evidently pieced it all together. Her brow furrowed as she seemed to be connecting the clues laid out before her, and just as she arrived at some hazy conclusion, the alarm bells in the Church's rear courtyard began to toll once more.

"Dong — dong — dong —"

Church personnel nearby stared toward the rear courtyard in shock. They couldn't fathom that someone would dare cause trouble inside the Church while the God Descent was in effect.

Several older members peered back and shouted in outrage: "The library! A traitor has broken into the library!"

Cheng Shi jolted at those words. "This is bad — Turadin's back!"

With that, he snapped his fingers and vanished on the spot, reappearing in the rear courtyard corridor. Scorpio wasn't far away and immediately shadow-stepped after him.

Gao Ya's gaze flickered between the tentacle writhing atop the tower and the direction of the library. She lowered her head in thought for a moment, then hurried after them.

But at that very instant, the terrifying tentacle swaying above the tower suddenly shifted direction and came crashing down toward the library in the rear courtyard!

"BOOM —"

Before Cheng Shi could even reach the library's entrance, an enormous shadow blotted out the moonlight overhead, sweeping past him to slam into the ancient, stately building. Dust and debris erupted skyward; the earth heaved and shook.

That single strike virtually leveled the Church's entire rear courtyard. Everyone inside the compound was launched slightly off the ground by the violent tremor.

Cheng Shi skidded to a halt, his expression dark as he watched this ancient building — a repository of countless scriptures, sealed forbidden arts, and heretical texts — reduced to rubble before his eyes. His heart sank.

Turadin... was he still alive?

What a ruthless father. Did he know it was his own son stealing from in there?

Or did it not matter who it was — on a night this chaotic, he intended to use this devastating blow to reassert his inviolable, sacrosanct authority?

Cheng Shi spun around to look up at the tower. The figure standing before it appeared all the more "sacred" under the moonlight.

Head of Church Berios stood at the tower's summit, his cold gaze fixed on the library's direction, and once again proclaimed to his congregation:

"Heretics attempted to fish in troubled waters within the Church, seeking to free the sealed forbidden texts. My Lord has guided me to destroy those texts, denying them even the slightest opportunity.

All members of the congregation, assemble in the main hall. The Church will organize a force to systematically purge the remaining heretics from the city. The glory of Birth shall not be desecrated by any evil!"

With that single declaration, the chaos within the Church visibly subsided. Everyone began filing toward the front hall. Cheng Shi watched the window for maneuvering within the Church slam shut, and with a frown, he ducked toward the rest area where the players had first arrived.

He couldn't go against the flow of people now. His only option was to evade everyone's line of sight first, then quietly search for Turadin's whereabouts. He refused to believe someone that clever would die to his own father's attack. Turadin would have understood his father's nature — he wouldn't have done something so reckless at a time like this.

Even if his devotion to Corruption was fanatical, he hadn't lost his mind.

And so Cheng Shi followed the crowd toward the front hall, reuniting with Scorpio and Gao Ya along the way. The moment they entered, they seized their chance amid the confusion to dash toward the rest area.

But just as the three of them were about to push through the door, a hoarse voice called out to them from the far end of the corridor.

Cheng Shi froze mid-step and whipped around — the person peeking out from the end of the hallway looked somehow familiar!

That silhouette...

"My brother, over here! I'm over here!"

"Turadin?!"

Cheng Shi's eyes went wide with shock. He immediately led the others over, but when he rounded the corner and saw Turadin's current state, his pupils contracted ever so slightly.

He wasn't the only one. Scorpio and Gao Ya froze too — one slack-jawed, the other pensive.

"Wait, how did you—"

"What's the matter, my brother? Don't you recognize me?"

...

Chapter 373: New Teammate — Tura

Cheng Shi's mind went blank.

Because the person standing before him was not Turadin at all, but a... lady, draped in Church robes and nearly unrecognizable.

Yet when this lady performed that embarrassingly familiar gesture toward the three of them and recited the utterly unsurprising prayer in a hoarse voice, Cheng Shi narrowed his eyes.

Sure enough — no, she was indeed Turadin.

That wasn't right either. Her name now should be Tura...

Wait, dude, you too?!

Cheng Shi studied Turadin with a peculiar expression for a moment, then turned to look at Gao Ya beside him.

Gao Ya clearly understood what his gaze meant. She furrowed her brow, let out a cold huff, and deliberately looked away to avoid his teasing stare.

"Your voice..."

"To achieve success, one must endure suffering, wouldn't you agree, my brother?"

Turadin's voice had been ravaged by the power of Oblivion into something hoarse and grating, but she didn't seem to care about such details. Wasting no time, she pointed behind her, tossed them several Church robes, and took off running deeper into the corridor — the meaning clear: the players should hide with her first.

Cheng Shi threw the robe over himself and followed her into the room at the end of the hallway.

Only after Turadin shut the door and locked it again did she let out a breath of relief.

Cheng Shi eyed this cautious newest female member of their team with great interest. Without a word, he fired off a healing spell at her.

Gao Ya watched Cheng Shi's practiced opening move and snorted with amusement, then turned to Scorpio.

"Have you ever seen a Druid that knows healing spells?"

Scorpio was a bit dazed too. He shook his head — then quickly nodded.

"Well, I'm seeing one now, aren't I? I've heard that some high-score talents include class-switching abilities. Chosen Ones really are something else."

"..."

Gao Ya rolled her eyes so hard the contempt practically dripped off her face.

She'd never imagined that players above 2,000 points could still be this clueless. But deep down she understood — Scorpio's mind wasn't the sharpest, yet his instinct for reading people was spot-on. At the very least, he'd latched onto the right coattails.

Under Cheng Shi's healing, Turadin's voice and features gradually improved. The flesh on her face filled out and regained its vitality, her tone growing ever more melodious. Frankly, compared to Gao Ya, Turadin's transformation seemed even more successful.

When she touched her face and realized she'd been fully restored, Turadin smiled and pulled back her hood, revealing a face of breathtaking, extraordinary beauty.

Honestly, in all his time across the Land of Hope, Cheng Shi had never beheld such a magnificent face. Bright eyes shone like dazzling stars, and the curves of her nose and lips seemed like the work of a master sculptor achieving perfection.

If Hu Xuan's beauty was a blend of allure and elegance, then the Turadin before him was the embodiment of perfection and refinement.

All three were struck speechless by Turadin's stunning female form. Cheng Shi, somewhat astonished, nudged Scorpio with his elbow and whispered:

"Was Miss Moon this beautiful?"

Scorpio shook his head frantically.

"I can say with certainty — Miss Moon couldn't hold a candle to a single strand of her hair."

"..." Cheng Shi shot Scorpio a strange look, thinking, 'Who knew you were such a sucker for a pretty face.'

Hearing such sincere praise, Turadin's smile grew even more radiant. The coquettish way she laughed behind her hand was enough to make even Gao Ya, a fellow "woman," feel a flutter.

"So there really was a Miss Moon?"

"?"

"Hm?"

"..."

At those words, the expressions of all three players shifted from admiration and wonder to something strange and unsettling.

Cheng Shi fixed Turadin with a dark, searching gaze and asked with a growing headache: "It seems you went through quite a lot during the time I couldn't find you?"

"Yes, quite a lot. But don't worry, my brother — I promise you, it was all good things."

"Excellent. I like good things. Setting everything else aside for the moment, my brother — oh wait, my sister — can you tell me why you chose to become a woman?"

I've already guessed part of it, but I'm afraid my guess might be wrong."

Turadin smiled, a smile brimming with allure.

"Your guess isn't wrong, my brother. It's your question that's wrong.

You shouldn't be asking me why I chose to become a woman. You should be asking why I became a man."

What?

All three froze, simultaneously bewildered.

Cheng Shi blinked rapidly. Scorpio's brain short-circuited. Gao Ya's face went rigid.

Turadin didn't leave them in confusion for long. She pointed at herself, then at the direction of the prayer room, and said with a smile:

"I was originally a woman. I simply chose to become a man a few years ago.

Today, I've merely returned to what I was before."

At this, Cheng Shi was all but certain his suspicion was correct. He looked at Turadin with a complicated expression and asked:

"Was it worth it?"

Hearing that, Turadin dropped all traces of her smile and answered with grave solemnity:

"My brother, you shouldn't say such things to me. You are the one who revealed His name to me. You are the one who brought me closer to His will. You are the one who wrote down His vision for me.

You are my evangelist. You...

should be even more devout than I am!"

Cheng Shi had no retort. For the sake of continuing the trial, he could only resort to his usual sophistry:

"Your path is wrong, my... sister.

Your obsession runs too deep. What we should pursue is freedom — doing as our hearts desire. Following Him isn't about being devout or not. He won't choose to watch over someone based on their devotion. What He wants is for everyone to find liberation, to embrace their desires.

So as long as I live according to my own ways, I am always a practitioner of His will."

Turadin's eyes shone brighter with every word Cheng Shi spoke. She adored this kind of philosophy, especially her evangelist's interpretation of His will.

Every fresh, rebellious statement like this sent her spirits soaring and her soul resonating.

"Yes, you're right. But I've always felt that spontaneous devotion is itself a form of following one's heart, isn't it?"

"..."

'Right, right, everything you say is right, bro — no, sis. Your comprehension is off the charts. Truly worthy of the Head of Church's daughter.'

Cheng Shi shook his head with a rueful laugh, then continued:

"Never mind all that. What's your plan now?"

The library's been destroyed. I don't know what happened inside, or what your maniacal father is up to. What I'm saying is — the Descent Technique we were looking for has probably already been reduced to ashes. Even if you've changed back into a woman, you've likely lost your chance...

Actually, fine, I'll be honest. I might still have an opportunity in my hands, but you need to decide.

Are you prepared to become the mother of Corruption's Holy Infant?"

That's right — a mother!

Cheng Shi had seen through it. This fervent new follower of Corruption, whom he'd basically conned into the faith, intended to use her own body to carry and birth a so-called Corruption Holy Infant!

Such god-worshipping behavior couldn't exactly be called insane — it was far too common in the Life Era. Of the patients Cheng Shi had treated, nine out of ten had reasons for having children that were more outrageous than Turadin's. The remaining one was roughly on par.

So Cheng Shi wasn't particularly shocked. It was just that his mind still held the image of Turadin from that afternoon — cold, rational, contemptuous of faith — and he couldn't quite reconcile it with the fanatically devout figure standing before him. It left him somewhat dazed and wistful.

Then, linking it to the "Miss Moon" that Turadin herself had mentioned earlier, Cheng Shi wondered: had the Aph Ros from the future already found the person Scorpio had been looking for? And was that person none other than the Turadin standing right in front of him?

Wasn't this all a bit too convenient? When exactly was the temporal baseline Scorpio had used for his deduction?

Just as he voiced this question and fell into contemplation, before Turadin could respond, Gao Ya beside him let out a scornful laugh and shook her head.

"Time's unexpected influence has dulled your observation, Cheng Shi.

She doesn't need your opportunity at all. Because...

she's already a mother."

"???"

What?

Cheng Shi was stunned. He whipped his head toward Gao Ya, then quickly back to Turadin — and noticed that Turadin's hand had indeed been resting at her waist, occasionally caressing her abdomen.

Cheng Shi had assumed it was a nervous habit. He never expected...

'Hang on, sis — aren't you moving a little too fast?'

'Where did the child come from?'

'Did you just conjure it?'

Wait — the Descent Technique?!

A flash of insight crossed Cheng Shi's eyes as he recalled the Church library that had just been obliterated.

"You stole it? And escaped unscathed?" He stared at Turadin in disbelief.

Turadin nodded with a smile — but within that smile lingered a trace of sadness that Cheng Shi couldn't quite comprehend.

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow, and his expression turned uncharacteristically solemn. For the sake of the trial ahead, he needed to understand exactly what had happened inside the Church during his absence.

He pricked up his ears and listened for a moment to the activity outside. Hearing that the congregation was still gathering in the front hall, he spoke in a low voice:

"We don't have much time. Tell me about what you've been through, Lady Turadin."

Turadin gave a small nod and held nothing back, pouring out every detail of everything she'd experienced that night.

First and foremost — the Descent Technique of the Uma Sinners, sealed within the library.

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Chapter 374: The Descent Technique of the Uma Sinners

"If there is any record of blasphemy in the history of Birth's faithful, then the Uma were undoubtedly the first group of blasphemers ever documented.

But they didn't abandon Him. Rather, they worshipped Him too fervently — so fervently that their methods of devotion became extreme and distorted, gradually veering off the proper course of faith until they devolved into outright sacrilege.

As everyone knows, His will is reproduction and procreation. Since ancient times, every tribe that followed Him — even if only for the sake of their own growth and expansion — had to align themselves with His will.

Until one day civilization was established. Tribes and clans no longer had to worry about population — and that was when fanatical worship took a different turn.

The Wulun people discovered that blindly following Birth only made their tribe grow ever larger, yet the resources they could extract from the land were finite. More people meant less for each individual. So they abandoned Birth and converted to Prosperity, seeking to ensure that every living person could fully enjoy their long lives.

The Uda were craftier still. They fabricated a so-called 'Child of Birth' identity in an attempt to monopolize resources. This foolish act drew the hatred of every other tribe, and they were hunted nearly to extinction. You all probably know about that.

As for the Uma, their blasphemous thoughts predated the Wulun people's by far.

Even during the era of tribal expansion, they realized their population growth couldn't keep pace with the speed of territorial expansion. Gestation took too long, newborns were too fragile, and maturation was too slow.

With vast unclaimed lands beckoning, they couldn't afford to wait for so many of their people to lose combat capability to pregnancy. So they drew upon His divine power and developed the first forbidden art in the history of Birth — the Descent Technique.

When someone used the Descent Technique on a physically mature member of the tribe, that person could conceive immediately and give birth to a newborn within mere days.

Though they had no method to accelerate the newborn's growth, they had at least shortened the next generation's timeline by nearly a full year compared to other tribes.

That was the miracle of the Descent Technique. With this secret art, the Uma quickly became the dominant power of those lands."

Turadin's explanation was thorough, and Cheng Shi listened attentively — yet he still didn't understand.

"From what you're describing, this Descent Technique sounds perfectly normal. Procreation is something He welcomes. They merely accelerated the process. How is that blasphemy?"

Even as he spoke, Cheng Shi thought: if that counted as blasphemy, then where did all those bizarre talents that modern Birth players possessed come from? Weren't they all gifts from Him?

Turadin wasn't finished. She continued:

"Since you've all forsaken Him, you should be familiar with His will. The ancient tribes have always passed down interpretations of His will.

All devout believers held that 'birth' was the process by which a newborn drew closer to Him. They believed the fetus was nearest to Him — that before a fetus developed consciousness, its nascent awareness was filled entirely with His image. They could clearly perceive His truest form.

The fetus would then strive to evolve toward His likeness. But since the divine power humans carried was limited, this evolution almost always failed. After birth, the newborn could only reproduce a tiny fraction of Birth's appearance.

And precisely because the newborn didn't resemble Him, He would withdraw His favor, strip the memory of His appearance from the human mind, and bestow upon them independent intellect and personality.

The worshippers believed that the more intelligent a person was, the more closely they had evolved toward His likeness during the fetal stage. This process of evolution was regarded by the ancient tribes as the most devout offering to Him.

But the Descent Technique profaned that offering, because it rendered evolution entirely useless.

When someone used the Descent Technique to birth a child, that child was indeed born rapidly — but when it grew up...

it became an exact copy of the person who had cast the Descent Technique!

This art severed the fetus's opportunity to draw closer to Him, replaying the caster's already-determined evolutionary process a second time.

The Uma people intended to use this method to artificially select their smartest and most valiant members. They copied themselves over and over, until they became the strongest tribe!

They stole Birth's divine power but instead of offering it back, they used it for territorial conquest and tribal subjugation — to satisfy their own hunger for domination. It ran directly counter to His will.

And so, after conquering the entire North, the Three Wu Tribes fractured under divine punishment."

"..."

Cheng Shi understood immediately. So the Uma were the original Corruption believers?

Even if they weren't, seeds of Corruption's delusions had certainly taken root in their hearts. But then again, all humans harbored desire — it was unavoidable.

Except...

Cheng Shi turned to Gao Ya with a thoughtful look. "So the reason for the Three Wu Tribes' split that you said you didn't know about — it was divine punishment?"

Gao Ya nodded with a frown, then turned to Turadin. "What kind of divine punishment?"

"The desires of the human heart.

The Uma united the North through desire, yet they couldn't control the diverging desires within their own people, and so they were torn apart.

He used the very means by which they had forsaken Him to punish them in return.

To Birth's faithful, this is perhaps terrifying. But for us, it should be a history worth celebrating, wouldn't you say?

It was also because of this that the Uma, stripped of their dominion, sank into perpetual dread. Generation after generation, they begged for His forgiveness.

The invention of the Umbilical Shackles was meant to return themselves to a fetal state and once again earn His gaze — because they still clung to the belief that fetuses were closest to Him."

"..."

Cheng Shi suddenly felt like laughing. He thought he'd figured out the real reason the Three Wu Tribes had splintered — and it probably had nothing to do with divine punishment from Birth. It was simply...

What is long united must divide; what is long divided must unite.

When contradictions of governance gradually surfaced due to insufficient ruling power, civilization naturally fractured. The same old path the Civilization Era had taken to its end.

The irony was that Birth's faithful believed their god had punished the blasphemers, never realizing He might not have paid them any attention at all — might not even have cared.

Because Brother Mouth had once said that fetal evolution didn't occur because fetuses perceived His appearance and tried to approach Him. Rather, they were guessing what appearance He preferred and trying to take that form to please Him.

So if Brother Mouth hadn't been lying, then every interpretation of Birth's will throughout the Life Era's history — all of it — was wrong.

No wonder most players' understanding of Him had gone astray; the history they'd learned was riddled with errors from the very foundation. Everything passed down through the generations had been flawed from the start.

How... pitiable.

And there was something even more pitiable — because this legendary forbidden blasphemous art had apparently been adopted by the Benefactor they worshipped as a talent to bestow upon players in the Faith Game.

The Chieftain's blessing, or those various "birth oneself" talents — weren't they just different versions of the Descent Technique?

So He never considered it blasphemy at all. The ones who branded it sacrilege were... His own followers. Those ignorant, fanatical believers.

Cheng Shi's expression was complicated, his heart heavy with emotion.

'Faith... what an impossible thing to pin down.'

But to return to the matter at hand — if everything Turadin said was true, then whose child was she carrying?

Who had stolen the Descent Technique?

And who had used it on her?

Surely it couldn't be that vagrant from the deduced future... Aph Ros?

Cheng Shi's gaze turned somewhat peculiar. He looked at Turadin, uncertain, and asked:

"Are you satisfied with the title 'Miss Moon'?"

Turadin burst into laughter, utterly unbothered by his teasing.

"Satisfied. Completely satisfied."

Cheng Shi's face stiffened slightly, and understanding dawned.

'No question about it — the child is Aph Ros's!'

'Then where is he?'

'Dead in the library?' Quite possibly — because a faint shadow of sorrow had flickered across Turadin's eyes when she spoke of the Descent Technique.

'Hold on — you two met once, and that was enough to spark feelings?'

'Or did you already know each other? Who exactly is he?'

How bizarre. A vagrant from a deduced future had somehow conceived a child labeled as Corruption's offspring with Turadin in the present!

'Wonderful, wonderful. So the "insider" Scorpio's contact claimed to be — this is what "insider knowledge" meant!'

'Truly magnificent!'

So had this unexpected ripple in Time helped them find the life that should never have been born — or had it personally created one?

What exactly had the Aph Ros of that deduced future experienced? And what had Turadin, the Holy Infant's mother in that future timeline, been through?

Cheng Shi was burning with curiosity. His eyes gleamed as he addressed Turadin:

"The child is Aph Ros's. Very well. I'm dying to know what happened between you two to produce this crystal of life.

Don't tell me you fell for some vagrant Casanova's 'moon praise.' Go on — don't stop. Tell me your story.

I simply must know."

...

Chapter 375: If the Holy Infant Needs a Mother, Then Why Not Me?

Before Cheng Shi revealed part of the answer, Gao Ya was the first to figure it out.

This follower of Folly could always deduce the full picture from the faintest of clues. But she wasn't shocked by the current situation — she'd experienced far more absurd things before.

She only marveled at how many coincidences were laced throughout this affair. The conclusions they led to were somewhat unexpected, yet still within the bounds of comprehension.

Scorpio, on the other hand, was utterly stupefied.

He never imagined that after all its twists and turns, everything had circled right back onto the track Cheng Shi had laid out — and that the one who'd steered it back on course was none other than himself. He didn't know what to think. He could only stare, dumbfounded.

He looked at Turadin, murmuring: "You... and Aph Ros... conceived a child?"

Turadin nodded without reservation. "Yes. He and I conceived a child."

"That fast?"

Ah no, what I mean is — so the child's mother is you?"

Scorpio's expression was complicated. An inexplicable excitement flickered in his eyes, yet his brow was knotted tightly. He seemed torn between whether he should be happy or not, and this peculiar emotional conflict was plain to see for the other two, leaving both Cheng Shi and Gao Ya momentarily stunned.

Cheng Shi immediately thought of something. He raised an eyebrow. "Does this have to do with your prayer?"

Scorpio nodded, his expression complex. His respect for Cheng Shi's ability to read people deepened further.

"Yes. That's right."

"So what exactly did you pray for? Can you tell us now?"

Scorpio wrestled with himself for a moment, then slowly began:

"I prayed to witness a miracle of Time, so that I could comprehend Time at a higher level..."

But right now I'm not sure whether what's unfolding before us is really what I was looking for...

If it is — a person from a deduced future conceiving a child with someone in the present — that looks more like a miracle of Birth than anything...

And here's what else I've been thinking. In the deduced future where Aph Ros existed, when I found him, he didn't seem like someone who'd personally experienced Turadin's pregnancy. I could sense a hint of alarm and confusion at my appearance.

Yet now he's become the child's father...

So did he deceive me and conceal something, or did his arrival alter the present's future?

The Time miracle I was searching for — could it really be something I set into motion with my own hands?

But a temporal entanglement of this degree hardly qualifies as a miracle.

Brother Cheng, you said the Uma Sinners at the Inquisition all died in the fire. So who exactly is he?"

Cheng Shi could tell — Scorpio didn't really care who Aph Ros was. What he cared about was why Turadin had chosen Aph Ros as the child's father, because from her attitude, the conception was entirely voluntary.

In other words, it most likely wasn't Aph Ros who chose Turadin — it was Turadin who chose Aph Ros.

Why?

Scorpio, kept in the dark on every front, couldn't figure it out. But this time Cheng Shi couldn't enlighten him either, because these temporal coincidences were beyond his understanding as well.

One thing, however, was certain: Turadin knew everything.

He turned to Turadin with a smile. "You're not the least bit surprised by our discussion, so you know that Aph Ros came from the future, correct?"

He confessed this to you?

How fascinating. Even knowing he was someone who shouldn't exist in the present, you still chose him at this critical juncture. So I'm guessing...

you know him, don't you?"

Know him?

Well, one might say she did.

Turadin smiled and stroked her belly. In her eyes mingled both yearning and compassion. Her expression looked even more conflicted than Scorpio's, giving Cheng Shi the odd impression that Turadin felt sorry for Aph Ros.

Sorry? For a vagrant — a philandering, hideous, hoarse-voiced vagrant? What was there to pity?

The moment that thought surfaced, Cheng Shi went rigid as if struck by lightning. He swallowed hard, every nerve twitching violently.

Because he suddenly remembered that Turadin was also a philanderer. Before "he" had become "she" again, Turadin had been an expert in the pursuit of carnal pleasures. Their initial deal had been for Cheng Shi to introduce Gao Ya to him — he'd had designs on Gao Ya, who had already transformed into a woman at the time.

And most importantly, after Cheng Shi's battle with Mo Shu, Turadin had been wounded — flesh mangled beyond recognition by the ravaging power of Oblivion!

Even just moments ago, when she'd called out to the three of them, her voice had still been hoarse!

Philandering. Hideous. Hoarse-voiced...

When three coincidences collide, can they still be called coincidences?

Cheng Shi sucked in a sharp breath and immediately turned to Scorpio for confirmation.

"I'm guessing that before you entered your deduction, you heard thunderous rumbling across the city, right?"

The sudden question caught Scorpio off guard. He then nodded quickly. "That's right. Five great thunderclaps followed by an unbroken rumble. That's when I slipped into the future."

Just as he'd thought!

Cheng Shi narrowed his eyes. It all lined up — because by that point, Turadin had already been thrown out the window and fled, still bearing the wounds inflicted by Oblivion's ravages!

And the Aph Ros he'd never personally met was very likely Turadin from the future — pulled back by Scorpio from some timeline where all the players had vanished and where Corruption's propagation had failed!

The implications were staggering.

Was this too much of a coincidence?

No, no, no — it was too absurd. How could the world produce such serendipity?

Cheng Shi decided he was overthinking. He slapped his own face, clearing his head for a moment. But when he looked at Turadin again, he clearly saw in her eyes something unmistakable — self-pity.

'Oh no. I guessed right!'

'It's him!'

'He is the future Turadin. He is Turadin herself!'

'This is insane!'

'The world has gone insane!'

By now Gao Ya had caught on too. After Cheng Shi's expression shifted dramatically, hers finally changed as well.

The sheer absurdity exceeded even her imagination. She stared at Turadin in shock, and for the first time her tone carried no trace of Folly's sardonic edge — only a burning thirst for Truth's knowledge:

"Aph Ros... is you from the future, isn't he?!"

"Huh?" Scorpio's brain melted. "Wait — no, don't — that can't — huh?"

Turadin caressed her belly and nodded firmly.

"Yes. He met me. He recognized me. He told me everything.

He said he came from a future where 'the evangelism plan failed, all of you vanished unexpectedly, the Corruption faith died in its cradle, and I was expelled from the Church.'

But since he was the Head of Church's child, they didn't drive him out of Dolgod. Instead, they faked Turadin's death, cast him out of the Church, and left him to fend for himself.

Stripped of his identity, all he could do was rename himself Aph Ros.

With nothing left, his only pursuit was to physically embody Corruption's final will to the very end.

Until one day, over a decade later, he saw this brother again."

As she spoke, Turadin turned toward Scorpio. Something detonated inside Scorpio's skull, and understanding crashed over him — back in that dark alley, Aph Ros hadn't been trembling from fear. He'd been trembling from exhilaration!

Because Scorpio's very appearance seemed to confirm something for him, and a spark of hope had suddenly reignited in his heart!

That was why Scorpio had described him as "alarmed yet confused" — because Aph Ros had never expected to see one of those Corruption believers again after all those years!

A Corruption believer who hadn't aged a single day!

"He was so overjoyed he could barely contain himself. He wanted to reveal himself to this brother right then and there, but he realized this brother didn't seem to recognize him anymore.

He noticed the discrepancy but kept silent, terrified that this sole opportunity would slip through his fingers once more.

And when he was truly brought back to the past — to our present — he found peace.

He told me that in that moment, only one thought filled his mind: he could not let Corruption's faith die a second time in this era!"

"..."

Cheng Shi was numb. He didn't know what expression to wear, yet his mind teemed with questions.

"So how did he find you? Some shared-memory instinct?"

"No. It was instinct, but not shared memory.

I don't know what he experienced in his own past, but what I can tell you is that we stumbled upon each other by sheer accident — neither of us deliberately sought out the other."

!!!

That single sentence was enough for Cheng Shi to reconstruct every remaining detail.

Indeed, Turadin was right. Their meeting wasn't born of some intuition shared between two versions of the same person. It was because of...

their fanatical, unwavering devotion to Corruption!

Cheng Shi narrowed his eyes and sighed with deep emotion. "The two of you... met in the prayer room."

"Yes!

I met him in the prayer room. He'd arrived a step before me.

I was thinking — since Corruption's Holy Infant must have a mother, why couldn't that mother be me?

I worship Him. I follow Him. I yearn for His will to save the entire world. If I could have that honor, I would die content.

So the very moment I fought my way back to the Church, the prayer room was my first destination.

And he...

He wanted to change the misfortune of the future, to make amends for the regrets of the past, to ensure Corruption's will would continue to endure. So from the instant he returned to the present — no, even in that alley when he was 'threatened' — he'd already resolved that Corruption's faith must not perish again on Dolgod's soil.

He simply hadn't expected to truly be brought back to the past. So when he discovered he had an even greater opportunity, he seized the first chance to slip into the prayer room.

When I saw him, I didn't recognize him. But he recognized me — after all, my appearance was what he'd once looked like.

And the moment he saw me, he withdrew his steps and yielded the opportunity to me.

He told me the story of his wretched life, and he begged me — please, don't become another him. Don't become another pitiful soul sleepwalking through the second half of life like the walking dead.

It was in that very moment that I suddenly grasped the true essence of Corruption's will.

Because I remembered what you once told me — that following the desires of your heart is the greatest offering to Him.

And at that moment, I had only one desire: to make sure that neither he nor I would ever know regret again!

So I returned to my original self and asked him for a child."

...

Chapter 376: The Plan Begins — Joy Under Fear

Turadin's blazing gaze locked onto Cheng Shi, her eyes brimming with gratitude and trust.

Cheng Shi swallowed hard, his smile frozen stiff enough to frighten.

'Bro — no, sis — no... whatever. First things first: your decision was entirely of your own volition and had nothing whatsoever to do with me.

All the Corruption coming out of my mouth is fake. But you — you look terrifyingly real.'

Absolutely terrifying!

"So the father of the child in your belly — the future you, Aph Ros — where did he go?"

Turadin's face darkened.

"He stole the Descent Technique and immediately used it to bestow a child upon me. But he chose not to flee.

Because he is me. We both understand our father. That cold-blooded Head of Church Berios — if he wanted to quell tonight's chaos, he would certainly make an example of someone. And if that someone were me, the effect would be unexpectedly powerful.

Besides, he knew it was me. The seals in the library were all crafted by his own hand — only the blood of Berios's bloodline could undo them. The moment someone broke the seal on the Descent Technique, His Eminence the Head of Church had already sentenced his own child to death.

So Aph Ros is dead. He sacrificed himself so that our Holy Infant could come into the world."

Turadin's voice dropped low, but after stroking her belly a few times, a renewed light began to shine in her eyes.

"But they don't know anyone named Aph Ros. All they know is that the Head of Church's child is dead.

So Turadin is dead — killed beneath the God Descent summoned by his own father.

And the one standing before you now is a follower of Corruption, your sister, the mother of the Holy Infant — Aph Ros.

Well, my brother? Do you like my new name?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

Cheng Shi didn't dare utter a word, because he remembered what Turadin had just explained: children born through the Descent Technique grow up to become identical copies of the caster.

So, in this tapestry painted with the colors of Birth, Corruption, and Time, the final scene was...

The present Aph Ros and the future Aph Ros had together conceived a new Aph Ros, soon to be born.

"..."

Cheng Shi clenched his hands helplessly, his mind in utter disarray. Watching Turadin's belly visibly swelling before his very eyes, he suddenly thought of his Birth acquaintance.

'Hiss—'

'If Hu Xuan were here too, could this situation get even more convoluted?'

The instant that thought surfaced, Cheng Shi shook his head furiously, flinging the mad tangent from his mind.

He looked at Turadin with a complicated expression, fell silent for a moment, and finally steered the conversation back on track.

"Fine. Regardless of everything else, our plan so far has been... going smoothly. Yes, smoothly.

Now we have the Holy Infant too. Everything is in place.

It's time to spread the news of the Holy Infant — to let everyone know that far above in the starry sky, a new deity has begun to turn its gaze toward Dolgod!

I never told you about my Lord's divine name propagation plan. Not because I didn't trust you, but because without the Holy Infant, any plan would be nothing but castles in the air.

But now things are different. Now we can launch the plan.

And this plan is called — Joy Under Fear!"

"Joy Under Fear?" Turadin murmured the name under her breath, her eyes alight with excitement.

Gao Ya watched this NPC being led along so thoroughly and turned her head away, barely suppressing a contemptuous snicker. She couldn't help herself, but she also didn't dare sabotage Cheng Shi's plan. So she compromised — mocking in a whisper.

Scorpio was dumbfounded again. He hadn't expected the accident he'd caused to somehow find its way back on track, yet he also couldn't recall Cheng Shi ever mentioning a plan called "Joy Under Fear."

He looked at Cheng Shi, his heart a turmoil of emotions.

'Bro, just how many plans have you got hidden in there?'

'Watching you turn Turadin into... this — honestly, it's a little frightening. You wouldn't be pulling the same thing on me, would you?'

Cheng Shi naturally had no idea Scorpio was badmouthing him internally — and that for once, his suspicion had hit the mark. He nodded and continued addressing Turadin:

"That's right — Joy Under Fear.

Fear is our Lord's gift. Joy is our Lord's guidance.

If we want His existence to be accepted by Dolgod's ordinary Birth-following citizens, conventional evangelism won't work. Their minds have been so thoroughly poisoned they've hardened into stone. They refuse to adapt. Their devotion is blindly fanatical."

Gao Ya's eyelid twitched at those words. She shot Cheng Shi a look and opened her mouth — then closed it again.

Cheng Shi gave her a meaningful glance, then pressed on:

"So we need to take an unconventional approach. First, we strip away the shell of their fanatical faith. Then, into their exposed, vulnerable hearts, we drive a shot of pure Corruption will — straight into the core!

Step one: spread Corruption's divine name as widely as possible. Fabricate terrifying stories of blasphemy against Birth. Plunge all of Dolgod into fear.

Of course, we cannot allow the Theocracy of Growth to trace any of it back to a source — otherwise the fear won't have time to build.

Once fear has blanketed every corner of Dolgod, we find a way to introduce Corruption's true will. We show the fearful masses that He isn't terrifying at all — that He is, in fact, quite 'joyful.'

The release that comes after sustained fear will amplify the citizens' emotional pendulum to its extreme, and they'll experience manifold happiness. Our Lord's will would then be like a seed dropped into the fertile soil of their hearts — slowly germinating.

By the time they realize that following Corruption lets them live far more freely and unreservedly than following Birth, the deity watching over this city from the sky above... might just change."

With every sentence Cheng Shi spoke, Turadin grew more fired up. Judging by her expression, she wanted nothing more than to execute the plan that very instant and change the Theocracy's allegiance within days.

But Cheng Shi had no intention of actually accomplishing all this in a matter of days. His real goal was to buy time. As long as Turadin gave birth and they endured the trial's remaining duration, whatever Dolgod became afterward was none of his concern.

And the trial's fiction wouldn't become real history anyway — after all, there were no more followers of Memory here.

"That's the general idea. As for the specific execution, I think that you, Aph Ros, understand this far better than I do."

With Cheng Shi's encouragement, Turadin swept aside the hurricane of emotions on her face and gave a firm, resolute nod.

This galvanizing moment had finally arrived. She felt as though she could see the most brilliant ray of dawn piercing through the darkness — the brightest possible future for Dolgod.

And so she smiled — a genuine, heartfelt smile — one so radiant it drained the color from the entire room, leaving the three people present seeing nothing but Turadin's breathtaking face.

"Aph Ros... what a hopeful name."

Turadin chuckled softly, then turned serious. "To be honest, I don't actually know how to do any of this."

???

That single sentence plunged all three into silence.

Cheng Shi stumbled and nearly face-planted on flat ground.

Gao Ya almost failed to restrain her contemptuous glare, hastily turning her head to channel her entire reservoir of ridicule at the ceiling.

Cheng Shi's expression froze into something ugly. He managed a strained laugh and was about to speak when Turadin continued, as if delivering a dramatic pause:

"But I can find someone who does."

Phew—

'Thank goodness. Almost broke character mid-bluff.'

If the Head of Church's offspring he'd worked so hard to protect turned out to be dead weight, Cheng Shi's reputation would've been utterly ruined.

"Who?"

"Someone I don't particularly like.

If we want to fabricate blasphemies against Birth that provoke the Church's wrath and the public's terror, we need someone who understands the Church — and understands Dolgod even better.

I know Dolgod well enough. But when it comes to the Church, I'm only familiar with its vulnerabilities. This person knows the Church inside and out — even better than I know my own father, Head of Church Berios.

The things that terrify the Church and the Head of Church — I imagine this person would find them rather delightful.

And he's probably the true culprit behind tonight's chaos. He seized the opportunity created by the commotion you started to move against my father — driving the great and selfless Head of Church to mercilessly kill his own son.

So I believe seeking him out is the right move."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, somewhat surprised. "It sounds like he's your father's rival within the Church?"

"Precisely, my brother. You truly are perceptive."

"...Save the flattery for later. If he's a follower of Birth, do you really think he'd help us just for the sake of political infighting?"

"One needn't be a follower of Birth before becoming Head of Church, my brother. We're not the only two clever people in this world.

Lis Field isn't truly devout toward Birth. He's simply enamored with the power that Birth grants him.

If Corruption could offer him that same power, his faith would be Corruption. And aren't we in need of someone to manage Dolgod in His name?"

Perfect!

Admiration flashed through Cheng Shi's eyes. He nearly started a round of applause for Turadin.

'You — you were born to belong to Corruption.'

This Lis Field character sounded like a pitiful soul enslaved by his lust for power. Then again, the thirst for power was itself a species of desire within the Sea of Desire — making him a "colleague" of sorts.

Still, he had to wonder — was this Theocracy of Growth genuinely not a Corruption incubator in disguise?

...

Chapter 377: Squinty Eyes Rejoins the Team

"I'll take you to find him right now!"

Turadin looked excited. The plan hadn't even started yet, but she seemed to already envision the day Corruption would descend upon the world.

But Cheng Shi wasn't about to let her take that risk personally. As things stood, whether man-made or heaven-sent, the child in her belly very much looked like it could be the life that should never have been born. If anything happened to Turadin, an entire day's effort would be wasted.

So Cheng Shi shook his head and refused Turadin's suggestion. He peered through the window at the situation outside and spoke gravely:

"Setting aside the fact that all Church personnel are gathering in the main hall and we can't approach easily — the importance of the child in your belly alone means you cannot show your face in public for these next few days.

Before the plan is complete, the highest priority isn't spreading His name — it's protecting the Holy Infant!

Once the Holy Infant is born, even if we leave Dolgod we can still use what happened here to spread His will elsewhere. But if the Holy Infant dies, everything starts over from scratch."

Turadin stiffened at those words, then looked at him with confusion. "My brother, you said we needed to create a Holy Infant — that's precisely why I conceived this idea of carrying one myself. As much as I want this child to be that Holy Infant, I must remind you: the child in my belly was not truly chosen by Him."

"No. From this moment forward, he is our Holy Infant. The true, divinely chosen child of destiny." Cheng Shi turned around, smiling brightly.

"Is this also part of your plan?" Turadin reflected on the entire course of her pregnancy, her expression turning peculiar.

"Of course not — this was obviously an accident. I never imagined you'd be so... devout. But that doesn't stop an accident from becoming part of the plan.

Think about it: if even we don't believe this child is the Holy Infant, how can we deceive — I mean, how can we convince others to believe?

A lack of conviction leads to cracks everywhere. So from this moment on, the child in your belly can only be — and must be — our Holy Infant."

Turadin looked down at her belly, her gaze inscrutable.

Honestly, she didn't resist the idea. She was even eager for this kind of "recognition." Yet under the weight of years of traditional faith, she still instinctively felt that fabricating divine authority was blasphemous.

But every time that thought arose, she recalled what Cheng Shi had told her:

Embracing desire is the greatest offering to Him.

So if she were a little greedy right now — if she claimed this hollow title — wouldn't that, too, draw His gaze?

"Lis Field is a cautious old fox. Without me there, he won't believe any of you."

'Old fox?'

'What a coincidence — I've been itching to see if I can fool an old fox.'

"You're already dead. Remember — Turadin is dead. Killed by his magnanimous, selfless, Head of Church father. When you think about it, Lis Field is the one who got you killed.

He got you killed, and now you — back from the dead — want to go find him? That doesn't make sense.

I have a more reasonable way to get him on board with our plan. What you need to do is find a safe place and deliver the Holy Infant. From the looks of it...

he seems rather eager to arrive."

As he spoke, Cheng Shi glanced at Turadin's belly.

Since the Descent Technique could compress months of gestation into mere days, Turadin's belly was growing by the minute.

"Very well. You are His most devout follower. I'll follow your arrangements."

"..."

'That's a pretty terrifying title you just slapped on me, sis.'

Cheng Shi gave a nervous laugh and hunched his shoulders, then turned to address his teammates behind him:

"The night's deep. Let's find somewhere to rest first. After we dodge the Church's sweep tonight, Scorpio and I will go see this Lis Field. As for you, Lady Soloist — once Old Zhang returns, you'd better stick close to him and protect the mother of our Holy Infant.

Otherwise, the Hunter lurking outside won't be nearly as reasonable as I am."

Turadin seemed about to say something, but a look from Cheng Shi silenced her.

Gao Ya's expression shifted several times. She fixed Cheng Shi with a hard stare and spoke in a low voice: "Why not go under cover of darkness? If you wait until tomorrow morning, can you guarantee you'll be back before noon?"

"I can't."

"You—!!"

"But don't forget — Old Zhang is here. As long as you stick close to him, I don't think the pastry chef out there will be able to kill you. Old Zhang doesn't strike me as the cold-blooded type."

Gao Ya snorted. "Followers of Death don't even have blood. What's there to be hot or cold about?"

"Death, as a deity, has a form and divine essence that mortals cannot comprehend. But His followers aren't all bloodless skeletons.

Warm blood flows through my veins — of that I have no doubt. A follower of Folly shouldn't make such mistakes."

Just then, Zhang Jizu appeared at the window from outside.

The moment he showed his face, he rebutted Gao Ya's words, then rapped on the glass twice, signaling for them to let him in. Scorpio rushed forward and opened the window. Zhang Jizu vaulted through, landed inside, and smiled at everyone in the room.

But the instant he noticed the pregnant, vaguely familiar young woman, his smile froze.

"Turadin?"

Turadin greeted him with a gentle smile. "Turadin is the past. My name is Aph Ros now."

?

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed to slits. He nodded pensively, then turned to Cheng Shi, clearly expecting an explanation. But Cheng Shi shot back a question of his own, slightly taken aback: "You came alone?"

"There are two of us. He's keeping watch outside. When we arrived, we saw the Church personnel assembling, so we left one person outside as backup — just in case."

Cheng Shi raised his eyebrows, pleased. 'Classic Zhang Steady.'

"Sounds like you and the Chieftain hit it off? You trust him that much?"

Zhang Jizu smiled through narrowed eyes. "Not really. But it's fine — I drugged him."

"..."

'Steady!'

'Steady as a rock!'

Cheng Shi clapped his hands in admiration. He grabbed Turadin with one hand and Zhang Jizu with the other, and right there in front of everyone, he placed their hands together.

"You heard everything. I'm entrusting Aph Ros to you now, Old Zhang."

Watching what looked like a teary-eyed father giving away his daughter, Zhang Jizu's freshly opened eyes immediately narrowed back to slits.

"It took me a long time to pinpoint your location. On the way here, I only heard the voice of the Folly follower. Don't you think you owe me an explanation of the current situation, and..."

His gaze dropped to Turadin's still-swelling belly, and he frowned.

"...and what exactly is going on with this 'Aph Ros'?"

"I'll explain on the road. Let's find shelter first. Once we're there, I'll tell you a little bedtime story. Trust me — after hearing it, you'll sleep like a baby."

"..." Zhang Jizu had his doubts, but Cheng Shi was already pushing the two of them toward the exit.

"Old Zhang — keep her safe. That's the one thing. Keep her safe and we win."

Turadin was bewildered by it all, but her focus wasn't on the tangled relationships among these Corruption followers. Right now, only one thought occupied her mind: protect her child — the Holy Infant of Corruption, as declared by Cheng Shi himself.

Zhang Jizu's pragmatism far outweighed his curiosity, so he heeded the advice and moved first. Scorpio latched on without hesitation and followed close behind.

It was Gao Ya, trailing at the rear, who studied the backs of Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu with a slight frown. She noticed something different in their expressions compared to daytime — a certain ease that hadn't been there before. It sparked a suspicion. After a moment of contemplation, she flinched, eyes widening in disbelief as she muttered under her breath:

"Impossible. Is a Chosen One really that easy to deal with?"

No — this might be a test. They're testing my allegiance!"

Gao Ya's gaze sharpened. Seeing the group creeping along the courtyard walls toward the exit, she broke into a quick jog to catch up.

"Whether or not they've dealt with the Scavenger, as long as I listen to the Fate Weaver, I'll most likely survive until the end. Hang in there, Gao Ya. Hope is right in front of you — you can't die yet!"

...

Chapter 378: Return to the Inquisition

Cheng Shi's group carefully skirted the Church personnel's line of sight, scaled the inner courtyard wall, and slipped out. They hadn't gone far when they spotted Gou Feng keeping watch in the bushes outside the Church.

The burly, imposing Chieftain looked utterly diminished now — hunched over, face ashen, all traces of his earlier bravado gone.

But he still loved to smile. The moment he saw Cheng Shi, that bloodless mouth split into a grin.

"Cheng Shi, thank you."

"?" Cheng Shi blinked, then realized Zhang Jizu must have said something to Gou Feng that led to this misunderstanding. But it was too trivial to correct, so he simply nodded along. "We're teammates. Of course."

Gou Feng's smile grew even brighter, and a hint of color actually returned to his face.

"No — nothing in this world is a matter of 'of course.' You've earned my gratitude, and I'll remember you.

I was right to like you."

"..."

'Bro, ease up — you're scaring me.'

'Remembering me or not doesn't matter. Just don't repay me with your life when the time comes, and I'll thank the heavens.'

"Save the pleasantries for later. Let's find a place to hide first. Aph Ros — is there anywhere that could slip past the Church's sweep?"

Turadin furrowed her brow in thought and was about to speak, but Zhang Jizu beat her to it.

"I happen to know a place."

"Where?"

"The Evil Infant Inquisition!"

Cheng Shi froze. "The Inquisition?"

He mulled it over for a moment and found the idea quite risky.

"The Inquisition was just burned down. You must have run into Church personnel going in to investigate when you left, right?"

If I were them, I'd never inspect a site of that kind of anomaly only once. We can probably slip past the search parties, but it's better not to take the risk."

But to his surprise, Zhang Jizu shook his head.

"I also assumed the Church personnel outside the Inquisition would take a burned-down Church facility seriously. But after I revived the Chieftain, I noticed they barely reached the outer courtyard before refusing to go any further.

They just gave a cursory glance around, checked the second floor from a distance, and then — terrified of being associated with the dead Uma Sinners in any way — fled as fast as they could.

The laughable part is that after they left, there wasn't a single person anywhere near the Inquisition's front door.

That's why I thought the Inquisition might make a good hiding spot."

Was that so?

Cheng Shi's expression shifted. He frowned and turned to Turadin, only to find equal shock written on her face.

But what shocked her wasn't the Church personnel's attitude — it was the fact that Squinty Eyes had been up to something inside the Inquisition.

"That fire was your doing? You burned all the Uma Sinners to death?"

"No, no, no — the fire truly fell from the sky. We just happened to be there and rescued a friend while we were at it."

"Happened to be there..." Turadin's expression turned utterly exasperated. "Was that accident also part of the plan?"

Cheng Shi gave an awkward laugh. "If you'd like to think so, that works too. But never mind that — do you think hiding in the Inquisition is viable?"

"It should be viable. That place was the previous Head of Church's personal territory. Even my father didn't want to get too involved with it. After the Uma Sinners began their path of atonement, their temperaments turned bizarre. Aside from the Uda, who considered themselves children of Birth, nobody wanted anything to do with them."

"Then let's go!"

With Cheng Shi's decision made, the group hurried back to the Inquisition.

The route was the same familiar path. Zhang Jizu took point, leading everyone along the walls, dodging every Church member still rushing about on the streets. His practiced movements left Cheng Shi deeply impressed.

"Old Zhang, your sense of direction is something else."

"Walk an old road enough and your feet know the way."

"..."

'Damn, he out-cooled me with that one.'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips in disdain and dropped the conversation.

Before long, the group had vaulted the high wall again and slipped into the burned-out second floor of the Inquisition. Staring at the scattered piles of Uma ash, Cheng Shi frowned and asked:

"So these Uma people — how exactly did they atone?"

Turadin murmured something under her breath to the ashes, then raised her head with a sigh.

"Remember the history I just told you? In the ancient tribes' understanding, the fetus was the existence closest to Him. So these people reverted themselves to a fetal state to earn Birth's sympathy — to make Him look upon them once more.

Once the Umbilical Shackles are put on, they cannot be removed by the wearer alone. Only external intervention can free them.

And this act of being helped by another — in the eyes of the Uma Sinners — represents His forgiveness!

When a defenseless, helpless infant is rescued by an outsider, it means that Uma Sinner has been cleansed of their sin — transformed into a free soul, unburdened by guilt.

But the Uma people's predatory nature is etched into their bones and isn't easily discarded. So when they're reborn into new life, the very first thing they do is find a physically suitable 'container' and use the blasphemous Descent Technique on her once more.

In their manic worldview, the sin of this new descent falls upon the newborn. When that child grows up, it will pick up the same unlocked Umbilical Shackles, revert itself to a fetus, and await His forgiveness — continuing the cycle.

It's only through this that the Uma people, shunned and despised by all, have managed to barely survive until today.

But the poor soul who's forced to become an Uma breeding vessel doesn't see it that way. She can only live in the terror of blasphemy, slowly driven mad by her own fear — or die in helpless anguish.

That's why I warned you — don't provoke these lunatics.

Although now... I suppose we'll never face that risk again."

Something nagged at Cheng Shi after hearing this "absolution story" of the Uma Sinners. He frowned in thought for a moment, then asked:

"I recall that the Uda Rioters' God Reproduction technique makes the next generation believe they carry Uda blood. Does the Descent Technique have a similar effect?

Does the newborn retain any of the caster's memories?"

"No. The newborn inherits only the previous generation's superior bloodline and constitution. They still need someone to raise them and teach them about the world."

"I see." Cheng Shi nodded thoughtfully, then suddenly turned to Gou Feng. "You... as His follower, you knew all this, didn't you?"

Gou Feng nodded, his face pale, still apparently enduring tremendous pain.

"That's right. I'd read about these accounts in old Life Era records. That's how I used this method to escape death."

Cheng Shi nodded without pressing further, then turned to Squinty Eyes. "Go rest, everyone. I'll take the night watch. After we survive tonight's sweep, Scorpio and I will head out to find Lis Field first thing in the morning."

Everyone nodded and cleared patches of ground amid the ruins to rest. Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes and cast a calming spell on the entire group.

"You should rest too. I'll take the watch." Zhang Jizu walked over to Cheng Shi and spoke in a low voice.

Cheng Shi tilted his head with a grin. "That line sounds awfully rehearsed. Did you pull the graveyard shift every night back at the cemetery?"

"Mm. My colleagues all hated the night shift, but I didn't mind it. So when they made the schedule, they always put me on nights."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow in surprise. "They were marginalizing you. Someone as sharp as you must have noticed."

Zhang Jizu smiled through those narrow slits of eyes. "So what if I noticed? It's not like I could quit. Besides, the night shift has its perks — compared to the quiet daytime, the cemetery is much livelier at night."

"..."

'Livelier?'

'That "lively" had better be the mortal-realm kind of lively.'

"So that's why you chose Death? You like those chattering little skulls?"

At Cheng Shi's teasing, Zhang Jizu laughed and shook his head.

"Before I set foot on the path of Death, I had no idea they were so noisy. But it's nice, actually — a world of nothing but skulls is far more straightforward than the hearts of the living."

Cheng Shi studied Squinty Eyes with fresh interest. "Mind if I ask what happened to those colleagues of yours?"

"Them?" Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed to absolute slits, and his tone turned wistful. "I imagine they've all gone to serve that great one."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and smiled knowingly.

He understood perfectly. The "serving" that Squinty Eyes spoke of didn't mean walking the path of Death as he did. It meant becoming like those chattering little skulls — laid beneath the white bone steps leading up to the Bone Throne.

'Indeed — the one who survives to the end is the ultimate winner. That axiom held true before the game descended, and it holds true after.'

'As for how to survive until the end...'

'Some chose to slay every rival. Others chose to endure in silence.'

Squinty Eyes might be the latter — but that didn't mean he couldn't be the former.

'This Gravekeeper is truly fascinating.'

"Oh right, one more thing — why didn't you give our Chieftain teammate a healing spell? He's looking rather rough."

The words were barely a whisper — so quiet that if not for Zhang Jizu's exceptional hearing, he wouldn't have caught them at all.

Zhang Jizu glanced pensively at the Chieftain resting alone in a corner, then answered just as softly:

"He refused. He said he needed the pain to keep his nerves taut and his mind alert."

"And you believed that?" Cheng Shi asked, taken aback.

"Not really. But since he refused, why would I insist on healing him?"

"..." 'Fair. Completely fair.'

'Drop the healer complex. Respect your teammate's fate.'

Cheng Shi smacked his lips and glanced once more toward Gou Feng's direction, but said nothing more.

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Chapter 379: Bro, That's Not What You Said Last Night!

The night passed uneventfully.

Just as Squinty Eyes had predicted, the Theocracy of Growth's people were busy all night, mobilizing large numbers of personnel to sweep every corner of Dolgod for suspicious signs. They caught plenty of petty thieves and troublemakers, but found absolutely nothing related to heretics.

After all, there were no actual heretics. The whole affair was nothing more than Lis Field exploiting the chaos to make a move against Turadin's Head of Church father.

And even if there were heretics, every last "heretic" had hidden inside the ruins of the Inquisition — a place the Church personnel deliberately avoided during their search. Small wonder they came up empty.

The next day, before dawn had even broken, Cheng Shi took Scorpio and departed from the main group, heading toward the place Turadin said they could find Lis Field.

The two of them had barely slept a few hours, yet showed no trace of fatigue as they threaded cautiously but swiftly through the early-morning crowds toward their destination.

As for why Cheng Shi had specifically brought Scorpio along — Time's power was the easiest to demonstrate visually and had the most dramatic impact. Whether for fooling people or making an impression, it was the best choice.

Moreover, Scorpio was an assassin with razor-sharp senses. Even if he did nothing else, having him serve as a human alarm system was worth plenty.

Scorpio naturally had zero objections to this arrangement. He practically wanted to strap himself to Cheng Shi's leg, lest the man sprint off and leave him behind.

When you thought about it, this little assassin was actually the smartest of the bunch. His mind might not be the quickest, but he'd been faithfully practicing what he'd declared at the very start: treat the big shots sincerely, and let them carry you to victory.

When it came to clinging to a strong teammate's coattails, he was nothing if not consistent.

The two walked briskly. Scorpio scanned the surroundings with vigilance while Cheng Shi observed the crowds. The citizens of Dolgod still wore visible traces of unease — the previous day's chaos had clearly

spread. Despite the Church's best efforts to contain the situation, panic had seeped through the population.

After all, when a God Descent appeared, ordinary people who didn't know the inside story couldn't help but assume the worst.

They feared evil spreading through Dolgod and dreaded heretics hiding among the populace, sowing discord. Little did they know that at this very moment, the biggest "heretics" were walking right beside them — and listening to every word of their conversations with crystal clarity.

After walking for some time, Scorpio — trailing behind Cheng Shi — couldn't hold back any longer. He furrowed his brow in confusion and asked uncertainly:

"Bro, where are we going?"

We seem to be heading in the wrong direction.

Tura... Aph Ros said Lis Field's house is behind the market northeast of the Church. But this road...

looks like it's heading back to the Church?"

"You're right. This is the road back to the Church."

"Huh?" Scorpio felt he'd been trying very hard to keep up with Cheng Shi's thinking, but he'd failed yet again. This man never seemed to play by conventional logic — if something didn't go sideways, it apparently didn't count as following the plan.

Cheng Shi smiled. "Change of plans. We're not going to find Lis Field. We're going straight to the Church to find... Berios."

Scorpio stumbled mid-step, his face aghast.

"The Head of Church? We're going to find Turadin's father?"

Bro, that's not what you said last night!"

"You said it yourself — that was last night. The moon in the sky has already turned into a sun. Is it really so strange for me to adjust the plan?"

"..."

Scorpio forced a stiff smile and obediently followed without another word.

He wished he had the kind of brilliant mind that Folly followers possessed, but he simply didn't. What he did have over most Folly followers, though, was obedience and a willingness to set aside his pride.

Seeing that Scorpio had stopped asking questions, Cheng Shi clicked his tongue. It seemed to remind him of a certain past acquaintance who'd never been good at playing along. He sighed, then went ahead and explained unprompted.

"Turadin made a good point: faith, humanity, and wisdom — a person can have at most two of the three. Which two do you think her father Berios chose?"

Scorpio pondered for a moment, then ventured:

"Faith and wisdom?"

Even a tiger wouldn't eat its own cubs. But he killed his own child, so he's clearly lost his humanity."

Cheng Shi nodded, then shook his head.

"Half right. He does lack humanity, but..."

he also lacks faith.

I said at most two of three. There can also be cases where someone takes only one. And Berios took only wisdom.

He is a cunning, deeply calculating power-broker!"

"What?" Scorpio was stunned. He shook his head vigorously. "He's the Head of the Theocracy of Growth! How could he possibly have no faith?"

"That's exactly what interests me most. Think about it — even Turadin admitted her father is an old fox. If even Turadin could see through Lis Field's true nature, do you really think Berios, as head of the Church, couldn't?"

Unlikely. As rivals, Lis Field might understand Turadin's father better than Turadin does. By the same logic, how could Berios not understand Lis Field?

Yet even knowing his opponent was a power-hungry schemer who wasn't particularly devout toward their Benefactor Birth, the esteemed Head of Church never dealt with his rival.

If he were a truly devout follower of Birth, the mere fact that someone 'lacked faith' would have been enough to cast Lis Field into the abyss.

But he didn't.

After thinking it through, I can only reach one conclusion: our dear Head of Church is no devout believer himself. He probably lets his rival make small moves deliberately, then reasserts his authority by quelling the resulting chaos.

He's a masterful ruler — but not a faithful devotee.

The Theocracy of Growth in Dolgod may well be rotten to its core.

Since nobody here is truly devout, and since Berios is himself a political player, why should we go to a middleman when we can deal directly with the man himself?

We can cooperate with him. Offer mutual benefit. In the propagation of an evil faith throughout Dolgod, we each get what we want — he reinforces his power and standing, while we craft our Holy Infant's legend.

That way, the Church can reap a wave of public admiration without lifting a finger, and with the biggest insider helping us, we slip underground when the incident ends and happily conclude the trial.

Everyone wins. Isn't that wonderful?"

Scorpio's eyes grew wider with every word. He swallowed hard, gazing at Cheng Shi with something close to reverence.

'Is every 2,400-point player this terrifying at reading people?'

He wanted to ask what would happen if Cheng Shi guessed wrong, but after opening and closing his mouth several times, the words never came. His subconscious told him the big shot's deduction was very likely correct. Yesterday's events were still fresh in his mind — so far, the man hadn't been wrong once.

"In that case — if the cooperation goes through, could we frame the Scavenger as the real heretic and have the Church's God Descent eliminate the... threat for us?"

Cheng Shi glanced back at Scorpio with a hint of surprise, thinking, 'The little assassin's quite sharp. No real fools at this tier.'

"Good idea. But it's no longer necessary — the Scavenger is already dead. You're safe."

"???"

Scorpio froze in his tracks, his mind detonating like a thunderclap. He was completely dumbstruck.

The Chosen One of Oblivion — dead?

How? Killed by the combined forces of the Chosen Ones of Prosperity and Death?

When? Oh right — the thunder! The earth-shattering thunder from last night! It was then!!

So in that brief window when those two had vanished, they'd joined forces and killed the Scavenger?!

'How — is killing a Chosen One really that easy?'

"Bro, you guys..."

"We what?" Cheng Shi sensed Scorpio's shock and cut him off with a vigorous head-shake before he could finish. "It wasn't us. Last night, the heavens were in a bad mood and casually hurled a couple of lightning bolts that just happened to land on his head. By the time I found him, he was already dead. Nothing to do with me."

'Sure, sure — nothing to do with you at all!'

Scorpio didn't believe a word of it. His eyes practically blazed with adoration.

'Bro, let me ask you something — can you just glue me to your leg?'

'I desperately want to level up. Please, carry me!'

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## Chapter 380: Berios and Lis Field

The Church was still under lockdown. Every staff member wore an unpleasant expression.

Understandable enough — they'd worked through nearly the entire night without rest and found nothing out of the ordinary. Nobody wanted to do grunt work that yielded zero results.

So the Church today was blanketed in gloom.

The only trace of activity came from the swarm of laborers pouring into the rear courtyard to clear the library's wreckage. Mixed in among the workers, the two of them drew no attention whatsoever and strolled right into the Church without a single question asked.

Halfway through, they quietly broke away from the group and headed for the Head of Church's office atop the tower.

Daytime was different from night — they couldn't very well crawl up the walls. So both of them disguised themselves before carefully making their way up.

But the moment they reached the floor where the Head of Church's room was located, they found a sharp-eyed elderly man standing at the top of the staircase, watching them with a gaze as piercing as a hawk's.

Scorpio flinched and started to draw his weapon, but Cheng Shi grabbed his arm. He flashed a textbook smile at the Head of the Theocracy of Growth, perfectly unembarrassed.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Head of Church."

They had never been this close to the Head of Church before. This Berios was nothing like the figure from last night — the stern representative of Birth swinging his staff atop the tower to quell chaos. Up close, he looked more like a shrewd, composed, wiry old man.

His penetrating gaze lingered on Cheng Shi for a moment. Then he slowly raised his staff, pointing its tip — carved with countless infants clustered together — directly at Cheng Shi.

At this sight, before Cheng Shi could even react, Scorpio's spine went rigid. Instinct kicked in — he seized Cheng Shi's hand and yanked him back three paces, then drew his Arc of Time Restoration and instantly carved a rift of Time between them and the old man.

Cheng Shi looked at the little assassin beside him with a touch of surprise, then broke into an even brighter smile.

He patted Scorpio's hand, signaling him to relax.

"Easy now. The Head of Church means no harm."

'No harm?'

'The staff is already raised!'

'Last time he raised it, the God Descent tentacle obliterated the entire library! How are you not scared, bro?'

Berios cast a cold glance at Scorpio, then eyed the twisted Time energy spanning the gap between them. He frowned — and then, just as Cheng Shi had predicted, lowered his staff once more.

"So you truly aren't from Dolgod."

At those words, the tension coiled tight inside Cheng Shi finally unwound.

'Phew — that was close. Gamble paid off.'

He wasn't unafraid. He'd simply buried every ounce of fear deep inside. The instant Berios had raised the staff, Cheng Shi's fingers had quietly closed around the Fun Ring — freshly charged by Scorpio — and his other hand had gripped a die.

He had an escape route ready at any moment, which gave him the nerve to test the waters. What he hadn't expected was that the coattail-clinging little assassin beside him would instinctively move to shield him in that moment...

'Interesting. Whether that was genuine or not, I appreciate it.' In that instant, Cheng Shi quietly revised his assessment of the little assassin, and a new idea took shape in his mind.

But there was no time for stray thoughts. Right now, he needed to carefully confront the formidable, imposing Head of the Theocracy of Growth.

"Dolgod is an inclusive city. That's precisely why we had the opportunity to meet you, great Head of Church, isn't it?"

"Nauseating flattery. You're as slippery as Lis Field. Come up — let me see what sort of people have caused such a commotion in Dolgod."

With that, Berios turned and walked away, striding straight into his chamber.

Cheng Shi exchanged glances with Scorpio, raised his eyebrows, and jerked his chin — time to drop the theatrics and follow.

Scorpio wiped the cold sweat from his forehead, hastily dispersed the Time barrier, then whispered breathlessly:

"Brother Cheng, weren't you afraid he'd just straight up kill us? This is a boss-level character! When I saw him raise that staff, my legs were shaking."

"Afraid of what? He knew the moment we entered the Church. If he wanted us dead, he'd have done it already. Why wait until now?"

"Pull yourself together. Walking in there like this will only drag down our negotiations."

Scorpio exhaled another shaky breath. "Give me a second..."

Cheng Shi laughed in mild exasperation. "Don't put the other guy on too high a pedestal. Think of it this way — he chose to talk after seeing your Time power. Doesn't that suggest he might be afraid of you too?"

He fears unknown forces disrupting Dolgod's peace.

See? Doesn't that feel better?"

Scorpio blinked, and his slightly hunched spine straightened instantly.

"You know what... that actually works."

"..."

Cheng Shi shook his head with an amused laugh and took the lead up the stairs.

Upon returning to this familiar office, Cheng Shi didn't passively wait for the other party to speak first. He cut straight into it with a smile:

"I don't know how the Head of Church regards people like us, but I can assure you — we have no intention of disrupting Dolgod's peace, nor do we wish to challenge your supreme authority. We're merely passing through and wanted to collect a few things here."

Berios stood by the window, staff never leaving his hand. He turned and spoke in a deep voice.

"What things?"

"A measure of fear. We follow another deity — one unknown to the world. To make our offering to Him, we need to collect a certain amount of fear."

"Hmph. Heretics, as expected. Followers of false gods have always been despised by every Church. How dare you speak of a false god in my presence?"

Berios radiated authority without raising his voice. He lifted the staff again, eyes boring into Cheng Shi like lightning — as though the next instant, the God Descent summoned through that staff could swat them both dead on the spot.

But Cheng Shi had already seen through the man. He noticed that the Head of Church wasn't entirely indifferent, nor was he unconcerned about their identities. Several times while scrutinizing Cheng Shi, his gaze had flickered briefly toward Scorpio.

That told Cheng Shi something — the old man seemed to be searching for something as well.

'Now that's interesting. The Theocracy of Growth's dictator. Dolgod's de facto ruler. A man of such stature — what could he possibly lack?'

Cheng Shi smiled faintly, entirely unfazed by the pressure. He took several more steps forward and struck at the heart of what Berios was thinking.

"That which exists has reason to exist. If the so-called false god you speak of has never been hunted down by the true gods, then surely there are still places in this world that need such gods. Wouldn't you agree?"

"You can call your own Benefactor a false god without blinking. You're truly a faith-parasite."

"Correct. The Head of Church has a keen eye. I'm no devout man. I follow Him for nothing more than power. And if I may speak candidly — even here in Dolgod, counting the Theocracy of Growth itself, the number of truly devout followers can probably be counted on one hand.

Even you, Head of Church...

are you truly as devout as the people believe?"

For Berios, Cheng Shi's words were the gravest of insults. And yet this Head of Church said not a single word in response.

He studied the pair with a dark expression, then turned his back to them. His gaze swept over the believers and laborers milling about below the tower, lingering for a long time before he spoke again:

"Turadin was seduced by you people into breaking the seal on the Uma Sinners' Descent Technique in the library, wasn't he?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow at this, uncertain of the old man's true feelings toward his son. But his mind raced, and in a flash of inspiration, he tossed the blame elsewhere.

"Actually, no. After last night's investigation, we discovered it was someone in your Church named Lis Field who orchestrated the whole thing.

Last night's thunderstorm was merely us eliminating a traitor. Where there are people, there is betrayal — even we who follow a false god have traitors to deal with.

The disturbance was simply a bit louder than intended, and unfortunately, others used the chaos to make their own moves.

We've come today, firstly to clear up the misunderstanding, and secondly to deepen our cooperation with you — with the Theocracy of Growth.

Of course, if yesterday's events caused trouble for Dolgod, we're prepared to offer appropriate compensation.

Head of Church, please believe me — we have the means to back that up."

"Oh? And what about the fire at the Inquisition?"

"I can guarantee — that had absolutely nothing to do with us."

Berios turned around. His hawk-sharp gaze fixed on Cheng Shi for a long moment. Then he let out a cold snort and struck the floor with his staff. A resonant thud echoed through the room — and immediately, the curtain beside the bookcase was drawn aside, revealing a hooded, masked Church member who stepped out from behind it.

Cheng Shi's eyes narrowed. The spot this person had emerged from was the exact same corner where he and Turadin had hidden before.

But this person...

"An expert — I didn't even sense his presence!" Scorpio stepped forward, curved blade in hand, face taut with vigilance.

The large man walked up to Berios, slowly pulled back his hood, and removed his mask. The instant Cheng Shi saw the full red beard covering the man's face, he froze.

Because he remembered — just before departing this morning, Turadin had told him that Lis Field was a burly man with a thick red beard, conspicuously distinctive within the Church and impossible to miss.

?

So the person before him was... Lis Field?

He was Berios's man?

The Church's only two opposing factions — standing on the same side all along.

Cheng Shi blinked, took only a moment to process, and immediately understood everything before him. He looked at the pair and couldn't help but clap in admiration.

"Impressive. I'd assumed you two were knowingly playing rivals in some calculated drama. I never imagined it was actually a joint performance — each of you embedded in the other's camp.

Head of Church, you truly live up to your title. I am in awe!"

...