

The Gods 381

Chapter 381: We Can Cooperate, But You Have to Do Me a Favor

"Hmph. Filthy thoughts, filthy deeds — every ruler since time immemorial has been this breed of scum. Disgusting." The red-bearded Lis Field spat vehemently, apparently harboring nothing but contempt for his Head of Church, Berios. And after his spitting, he couldn't resist turning to Cheng Shi for another jab: "You too — your face alone makes me sick!"

"..."

Berios seemed long accustomed to Lis Field's attitude and didn't bother responding. But Cheng Shi took exception to that.

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'Insult me all you want, but leave my face out of it. Since when is being good-looking a crime?'

Yet under the circumstances, Cheng Shi couldn't exactly fire back — getting caught lying red-handed to your face was embarrassing enough. So he stood there, eyes on the floor, and took the mockery without protest.

Berios, seeing that Cheng Shi had stopped arguing, didn't press further. He — or rather, the two Birth followers in the room — didn't seem to care about Dolgod at all. Their attention was fixed on something else entirely, something the players had never been privy to.

The Head of Church studied Cheng Shi with grave intensity for a moment, then spoke in a measured tone:

"I don't care where you come from. I don't care who you worship. I can even pretend everything that happened yesterday never occurred. But only on one condition — you...

must do me a favor."

There it was!

Just as Cheng Shi had predicted, Berios wouldn't have allowed two strangers inside unless there was room to negotiate. What he hadn't anticipated was how smoothly things were progressing — even after being caught in a lie, they'd still arrived at this point. It made him vaguely suspicious.

'Could this be a trap?'

"Hmph, you fool. With that expression on your face, how do you expect them to trust you?" Lis Field scoffed, then turned to Cheng Shi with a scowl:

"I can help you collect those ridiculous so-called 'fears' in Dolgod — let you go grovel at your false god's stinking feet. But you'll need to prove you're worth the trouble.

Boy, this isn't a collaboration. It's a transaction.

I supply the money. You supply the goods. But the goods had better meet my standards."

Cheng Shi blinked in surprise. He'd assumed Lis Field was merely a chess piece Berios had placed to play factional games. Now it seemed more like Lis Field was Berios's partner.

They had shared interests?

Cheng Shi didn't respond immediately. Instead, he tilted his head to look past Lis Field at the Head of Church. Berios said nothing, but his expression clearly endorsed Lis Field's proposal.

Cheng Shi's curiosity deepened. He laughed heartily.

"I love transactions. So tell me, Big Beard — what kind of goods are you after?"

Lis Field bristled slightly at "Big Beard" but didn't erupt. He continued:

"The healing power of a false god.

I know you mongrels who worship false gods have at least some abilities. I have a patient. If you can cure her, then from this day forward, however much fear you want to collect in Dolgod — I'll provide it."

"A patient?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow. 'Well, what a coincidence — healing is my specialty.'

'Put it this way: there isn't a single patient in this world who's ever given me a bad review.'

Cheng Shi smiled — a genuinely happy smile.

"Honestly — if this weren't my first time in Dolgod, I'd think you two were setting me up.

How did you know I have some expertise in treating patients?

I'm not one for big talk. I'm a practical man. Lead the way — every second sooner I see the patient is a second sooner she's free of suffering."

The moment those words landed, both Church leaders visibly reacted. Berios's pupils contracted sharply, his grip on the staff cracking audibly. Lis Field's eyes blazed — he whipped out a broad-bladed cleaver and hacked it into his own shoulder.

"Here — heal me first. If you can fix this wound, I'll take you to see her immediately!"

His manic display genuinely startled Cheng Shi. Watching the spray of blood paint a harsh red line across the room, Cheng Shi frowned. Perhaps he'd underestimated the situation.

He didn't rush to act. Behind him, Scorpio stepped forward to stand at his side, whispering:

"Brother Cheng, shouldn't we go back and discuss the healing thing with Brother Zhang first?"

'Discuss with Squinty Zhang?'

'When it comes to caution, I might be a tiny, tiny bit below him. But when it comes to healing, I hold dual priest credentials as a Clown and a Fate Weaver. You're telling me I can't match a single Gravekeeper?'

Scorpio's sharp senses caught Cheng Shi's disdainful look. He stiffened and quickly rephrased:

"What I mean is — our team has division of labor. Everyone has their strengths. Brother Cheng, you're the fighter. Brother Zhang, he's the healer. So..."

'I'm the fighter...' After everything, someone had finally discovered his "shining quality"?

Cheng Shi was touched — and graciously rejected Scorpio's suggestion.

'What you said actually makes sense. To be safe, I probably should bring Squinty Zhang in. But I'm going to try first.'

'After all, even if you want to call in the specialist, you need a preliminary diagnosis first, right?'

"So as a Druid, I've decided to give it a shot!"

Cheng Shi chuckled, turned to Lis Field, and fired off a perfectly pure healing spell.

A Fate Weaver's healing spell — no talent augmentation, but for a simple blade wound, it was more than sufficient.

Sensing a healing energy distinctly different from Birth's, both Berios's and Lis Field's eyes brightened simultaneously.

Big Beard touched his now-healed shoulder, then grabbed Cheng Shi by the wrist and started dragging him downstairs.

"Come — follow me!"

Scorpio's whole body shuddered. He could only twitch the corners of his mouth helplessly. Seeing his lifeline being hauled away, he immediately fell in behind, terrified Big Beard might do something to his Brother Cheng.

Berios brought up the rear with unfathomable eyes, descending step by step — not downstairs, but underground.

They were heading to the basement beneath the Church!

Before long, Lis Field had led Cheng Shi and Scorpio to the deepest level of the underground complex. After unlocking over a dozen steel gates and triggering four or five concealed mechanisms in solid walls, the narrow underground passage suddenly opened up. Cheng Shi quickened his pace and found himself standing before a pitch-black underground lake.

And in that lake — its surface rippling with ink-dark undulations — there lay not one, but countless colossal tentacles, bloated and collapsed across the lake floor!

Innumerable jet-black eyes, dark as the night sky, broke the surface. They blinked feebly, turning to regard the visitors in the underground passage.

Even though Cheng Shi had sensed something strange hidden beneath the Church from the moment Big Beard opened the first underground gate, he never imagined the strangeness would be this!

'These aren't — they can't be the "God Descent" from last night?!

And not just one!

His pupils contracted. His spine went rigid. Behind him, Scorpio trembled, jaw clamped shut, not daring to breathe.

The instant Lis Field saw those tentacles, he forgot about everyone behind him entirely. He sprinted to the nearest tentacle at the lake's edge and began stroking the eyelid of one enormous eye with an expression of aching tenderness, his voice gentle as a whisper:

"Go Lis, I'm back. Are you alright?"

That bastard Berios had the nerve to command you. He's hurting you — he's hurting you, and you're too kind to refuse.

But don't be afraid. This time I've truly found someone who can use healing power — a foll... a follower of a foreign god. He might be able to cure you. Once you're healed, we can be together again, just like before.

Are you happy, Go Lis?"

"..."

Watching the scene unfold, Cheng Shi and Scorpio — their minds spinning through every melodramatic scenario imaginable — were both stunned senseless.

What?

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Chapter 382: Quiet Down and Listen to Some Gossip

Cheng Shi squeezed out a stiff smile, retreated half a step, and tilted his head toward the Head of Church behind him.

"Head of Church, please don't tell me this is the 'patient' you were talking about?"

"It is."

Berios's tone was as frosty as ever, but Cheng Shi could hear that the cold undertone wasn't as flat and emotionless as it had been atop the tower. Something complex and unreadable had been woven into it.

With the patient's identity confirmed by the family, Cheng Shi's heart sank.

'Things have gone sideways. The creatures I've been treating keep getting more bizarre. If this keeps up, who knows what kind of monstrosity I'll have to heal next.'

Scorpio had also recovered from his initial shock. He took several deep breaths and, struggling to contain his unease, whispered:

"Who is... she?"

Berios stepped forward. The staff he leaned on touched the ground with deliberate care, not producing even the faintest sound. His icy tone softened, barely perceptibly.

"Go Lis. The Dol Federation's greatest god-worshipper. Birth's most devout follower. Dolgod's guardian 'deity.' And...

my beloved wife."

"???"

"..."

Both players went slack-jawed.

What?

Whose wife?

Cheng Shi blinked furiously, staring at Big Beard and the tentacles engaging in tender intimacy at the lake's edge. His mental processor emitted a sharp whine and started smoking.

He desperately wanted to ask:

'Head of Church, your wife and your partner are being intimate and tender right over there. How can you be so calm?'

'The three of you...'

Just as he was wondering whether the scenarios his imagination was constructing were perhaps a bit too conservative, Lis Field spoke up from the lake's edge, his voice seething with fury.

"You don't deserve her!

You're the reason Go Lis became what she is! You dare say you love her?

The one who loves her most in this world is me!

You manipulated her with your filthy, sordid faith into marrying you. She should have been mine! My wife!

Berios, you led her astray, you used her, you tortured her — your sickening pretense of affection is revolting!

Go Lis should hang you up — just like those Uma mongrels — suspend you from the top of the Church tower and wait for your even more revolting Benefactor to come rescue you!"

Lis Field unleashed his tirade in a frenzy, and every sentence made the gleam in Cheng Shi's eyes burn three shades brighter.

'Well, well, well. Who'd have guessed — beneath what seemed like a straightforward medical transaction lay a scandal of this magnitude!'

'A bombshell involving the absolute upper echelon of Dolgod!'

Cheng Shi was thrilled. After all, a world without gossip was a world without joy. He silently shut his mouth, stood obediently to the side, and perked up his ears to listen with rapt attention, determined not to miss a single word.

Scorpio did the same — but as the designated alarm system, he kept half his attention on surveillance and escape routes rather than investing everything into eavesdropping.

Today's deduction opportunity was already spent. Without that fallback, the little assassin valued his life dearly.

Berios showed not the slightest trace of guilt at Big Beard's verbal assault. He walked to the mass of tentacles with his staff, mimicked Lis Field's movements, and gently stroked the sticky, uneven skin of the tentacle's surface.

"You don't understand her. This was her choice. I merely respected it."

"Bullshit!

Delusional fantasies should be stopped, not enabled!

You never loved her! You're killing her!

This is all your fault, Berios! If Go Lis dies, you are her murderer!"

An unreadable emotion flickered through Berios's eyes at those words. He looked at his wife and, for a rare instant, allowed a faint smile to cross his face — before the cold mask of the Head of Church settled back into place.

"How long are you two going to stand there watching? The treatment can begin."

Cheng Shi snapped out of gossip-mode with a start and rubbed his hands together with an awkward grin.

"My apologies. Doctor-patient relations are tense these days. If you family members don't vent a little first, it's hard for us physicians to start work."

The other two obviously couldn't make sense of this nonsense. Big Beard didn't bother trying. He turned a vicious glare on Cheng Shi and growled:

"Now that you've been brought here, you've lost the right to refuse, boy. Cure her and you get everything you want. Fail — I don't need to spell out what happens."

Cheng Shi twitched the corner of his mouth. "That's not what you said before we came down here."

"Too late for regrets. The lake floor is littered with false-god followers just like you. No one escapes this place.

Of course, I'd much prefer you heal her. Then we can all walk out of here together.

I hate this place too — this dark, damp, nauseating hellhole!"

Cheng Shi wasn't actually intimidated by Big Beard's threats. With a die in hand, he could leave anytime he pleased; empty menaces wouldn't faze him.

But he still went ahead and dutifully examined Go Lis's "body," because his mindset had already shifted. He'd transformed from a player chasing cooperation for a speed-run into a gossip-hungry bystander dying to dig up historical dirt.

He was burning to know what had happened among these three people. And if Go Lis was Berios's wife, was she Turadin's mother?

'What a family. The father — a corrupt, scheming Head of Church. The mother — an eight-limbed octopus. The child — pregnant with herself. Truly, birds of a feather flock together.'

But the instant Cheng Shi tentatively placed his hand on one of Go Lis's tentacles, his pupils contracted sharply. He froze on the spot.

Big Beard noticed the change immediately. He lunged forward, his voice urgent: "What is it? Can you heal her or not?!"

Could he?

That was genuinely hard to say. Because her condition...

'Hiss—'

Looked awfully familiar.

Cheng Shi narrowed his eyes, suddenly reminded of a certain "person" he'd dealt with not long ago.

The Barren Walker!

Right now, Go Lis gave him the exact same impression as the Barren Walker — a massive shell brimming with divine power, yet stripped of a soul to command it!

It was a vague sensation. Had he not clashed with the Barren Walker before, Cheng Shi would never have detected this state — flesh and blood that had once nurtured divine force.

But how had she cultivated divinity within her own flesh?

Had she fused with a fragment of divinity?

How?

Cheng Shi frowned slightly. He ignored Big Beard's impatient badgering and examined several more tentacles before confirming — it was no illusion. Residual traces of Birth's power genuinely lingered within her flesh.

But the power was strange — fragmented, feeble, and entirely concealed. That explained why he hadn't sensed anything unusual when he'd watched the enormous tentacle strike last night.

'Damn. Preliminary diagnosis failed. He really did need to bring Squinty Eyes in for a consultation.'

But Cheng Shi was never one to worry about saving face. He cleared his throat twice, turned to Scorpio, and said:

"Ahem — so, about that, could you go fetch the specialist for a joint consultation? The situation's more complicated than expected. We'll probably need a combined procedure — I can't handle it alone."

"..." Scorpio had half expected this, yet he still couldn't help but admire Cheng Shi's brazenness.

He nodded and looked at Berios and Lis Field, indicating he needed to leave.

Berios's gaze sharpened. He glanced at Big Beard.

Big Beard clearly didn't want to leave his beloved Go Lis, but for the sake of her treatment, he held back.

"You'd better not be tricking me. Otherwise, I'll rip you out of Dolgod root and stem!

Hurry — lead the way. Bring the person back quickly. Move!"

With that, he grabbed Scorpio and headed for the surface.

After they left, Berios fixed his cold gaze on Cheng Shi and spoke.

"You can ask what you want to ask now."

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Chapter 383: Oh Turadin, You Know Nothing About Your Family

"As expected of the Head of Church — ever perceptive.

Lady Go Lis's... condition is rather complex. I already have some ideas, but the method is risky, and there's one prerequisite."

Berios's eyes widened ever so slightly, a trace of excitement flickering beneath his composure. But he didn't respond immediately, instead tightening his grip on the staff as though weighing whether Cheng Shi's words were truth or lies.

"I can tell you love your wife deeply. In that case, I trust you won't refuse my treatment plan. The prerequisite isn't complicated. Lady Go Lis's soul has suffered some kind of accidental damage from an external force. As for what that external force was — you should know better than I do.

I can attempt to repair her soul, but first I need to know how she ended up like this."

Berios's expression froze. "What does that have to do with the treatment?" he asked coldly.

Cheng Shi shook his head honestly.

"Nothing. It has absolutely nothing to do with the treatment method. But it has everything to do with my mood.

I told you we're here to collect fear. From that, you should be able to deduce that the deity we follow holds authority over certain aspects of emotional perception.

Your story will be the perfect catalyst for my emotions. When my emotional state is at its peak, the treatment process will go much more smoothly.

So if you want to say there's some connection — well, it's not entirely wrong."

Indeed — Cheng Shi was being completely honest. He simply wanted to hear the gossip. Berios had no way of knowing whether what he'd said was true or false. The normally lofty Head of Church deliberated for a long time, scrutinizing Cheng Shi multiple times before finally choosing to trust him — just this once.

It wasn't really trust, though. From his perspective, if Go Lis could be healed, these stories didn't matter. And if she couldn't, the listener would end up as lake-bottom nourishment anyway, trapped forever in this underground chamber.

And so, under Cheng Shi's eager anticipation, Berios began to speak.

Whether it was to stir Cheng Shi's emotions or because he'd genuinely lost himself in memory, the story Berios told went far beyond Go Lis alone. He started from his own childhood, carrying Cheng Shi back to a Dolgod of several decades past.

In those days, Dolgod was still under the rule of the previous Head of Church — the one who had used the Evil Infant Inquisition to usher Dolgod into a golden age, only to die suddenly upon being promoted to Bishop of the Federation.

Before that former Head of Church had departed Dolgod, the young Berios and Lis Field had still been the best of brothers.

Raised by the Church, nurtured under the constant drumbeat of religious education, they grew strong. Both were exceptionally gifted and genuinely devout, and many in the congregation regarded them as the next generation's hope for the Theocracy of Growth. Even the Head of Church himself showed them great favor.

But excessive adulation bred arrogance. Especially once they began handling Church affairs, youthful curiosity swelled with their expanding knowledge until, one day, curiosity conquered faith. The two conspired to sneak into the Church's most prominent institution: the Evil Infant Inquisition.

Inside, they saw rows upon rows of suspended infants. Brimming with confidence that Birth's blessing protected them, the two boys felt no fear whatsoever of these so-called sinners. So with reckless audacity, they freed one of the dead infants.

The moment the Umbilical Shackles were released, the curled-up infant gradually reverted into a nude, flawless young woman.

That Uma woman was Go Lis.

It was the first time either Berios or Lis Field had ever seen such a beautiful girl. She was like a lunar spirit descended to earth — in their eyes, more beautiful than every female citizen of Dolgod combined.

Her exquisite face and immaculate body struck them both straight through the heart, and both fell in love in the same instant.

But Go Lis was no ordinary object of courtship. She was a self-condemned Uma Sinner!

Remember — the first thing an Uma Sinner does after being freed from her shackles is to find a suitable container and use the Descent Technique to birth an heir to continue the bloodline!

So when Go Lis was unsealed and saw the two blushing, trembling, heart-pounding boys before her, she smiled happily.

She knew that Dolgod possessed the power to change one's sex. And so she extended an invitation to the two boys — to join her here, in this cold, eerie Inquisition, and conceive a child together.

Of course, in this arrangement the "father" would be her. And the "mother" would be one of the two boys.

Berios — for the sake of his future and his faith — gritted his teeth, suppressed his desires, and refused her on the spot. But Lis Field fell completely. He raced back to the Church that very night, changed his sex, and returned to the Inquisition. There, right in front of Berios, he became the recipient of Go Lis's Descent Technique.

Ordinarily in Dolgod, sex change and conception were the most unremarkable business imaginable. But the problem was that the child in Lis Field's belly had been fathered by an Uma Sinner. Even though the vast majority of believers had no idea the enforcers inside the Evil Infant Inquisition were Uma Sinners, certain Church leaders did.

Dolgod could shelter Uma Sinners, but it could not allow one to seize supreme power through offspring. The petrification death of the previous Head of Church remained fresh in memory. So the Church's power-brokers abandoned their investment in Lis Field and elevated Berios to the position of heir apparent.

Yet Berios still didn't give up on Go Lis. Not a single woman in all of Dolgod was more beautiful. Even though Lis Field was already carrying Go Lis's child — this was Dolgod. There were no moral taboos here.

And he knew: only by climbing to the pinnacle of Dolgod's power could he override all objections and openly unite with an Uma Sinner.

So he pursued supreme authority with one hand and secretly courted Go Lis with the other.

Under Berios's tireless pursuit, Go Lis... accepted.

Her reasons were simple. The Theocracy of Growth's heir apparent stood closer to Him than any commoner, and the Uma people's hereditary obsession was to draw near to Him and beg His forgiveness.

Although Go Lis believed Birth had already forgiven her, she still wanted to be even a little closer to Him.

So she accepted Berios's pursuit. On the day he ascended to Head of Church, she became his lawful wife — and his representative at the Evil Infant Inquisition.

As for Lis Field, who had lost in both "career" and "love" — he did not give up. He declared that he respected Go Lis's devotion but firmly believed her piety was temporary. Eventually, she would see the truth and return to his side.

He was willing to wait. But what came wasn't Go Lis's change of heart. It was a catastrophe.

His and Go Lis's child had grown up. Even in early childhood, the girl had begun to resemble Go Lis. Her appearance filled Lis Field with dread — he feared that his unrequited longing might drive him to something foolish, and he feared the little Go Lis's beauty would cause turmoil within the Church. So in an act of ruthless resolve, he clamped the Umbilical Shackles onto the child himself and hung her back on the second floor of the Evil Infant Inquisition.

And that was the ordained fate of a newborn Uma Sinner.

Until, over a decade ago, someone stumbled into the Inquisition and unsealed her — finally bringing this toddler-formed "Go Lis" back into the world.

Lis Field had no desire to raise the child. The Head of Church took pity on her circumstances, adopted her, had her sex changed, claimed her as his own, and named her Turadin.

"..."

By this point, Cheng Shi's brain had burned through its last fuse.

So Turadin was so stunningly beautiful because she was a perfect copy of her mother Go Lis's appearance?

No wonder she'd said she was originally a woman — because the Descent Technique was designed to produce another version of oneself!

It all fit. Every piece clicked into place.

But here was the thing: in terms of biological parentage, her "father" should be Go Lis. As for the "mother"...

At that thought, Cheng Shi's jaw dropped slightly. His expression was priceless.

'Oh no. Turadin, oh Turadin — you know absolutely nothing about your family.'

'The one you think is your father isn't actually your father. The one you think is your mother is actually your father. And the man you believed to be the Church's opposition leader? His real identity is your mother!'

'And what a magnificent beard your mom has grown...'

"..."

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Chapter 384: Pitiful Turadin, Laughable Dolgod

On the surface, Cheng Shi listened with a patient smile. Inside, his mind was detonating one thunderbolt after another, his hands behind his back frantically counting on his fingers for fear of getting the tangled family tree wrong.

But one thread of logic still didn't add up. Cheng Shi remembered Turadin saying that only Berios's bloodline could unlock the seals in the library. If Turadin wasn't actually Berios's child, then how had the future Aph Ros broken the library's seal?

And why had Berios killed this replica of Go Lis — killed the child he'd painstakingly raised?

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow. He had his suspicions, but suspicions alone weren't reliable. So he shelved his questions and kept listening.

Go Lis's story was clearly far from over.

When the previous Head of Church had been promoted to Bishop and Berios gradually took over the Theocracy of Growth's affairs, Go Lis's faith — just as Lis Field had predicted — began to change.

She suddenly realized that even becoming a member of the Theocracy of Growth, even becoming the current Head of Church's wife, had not brought her any closer to Him.

People were people. They could never approach the lofty divine. The vast, unbridgeable chasm between mortal and god plunged her into despair — so deep that she contemplated ending her own life.

Berios saw Go Lis's anguish. To help the woman he loved find her footing again, he began gathering any intelligence that might help her draw closer to Him.

Such intelligence typically circulated among followers of false gods — rife with fabrication and delusion, offering no legitimate path.

But Berios wouldn't give up. And so he secretly collected every scrap of god-audience intelligence he could find, hoping for even a single useful lead.

What he hadn't anticipated was that one day, while he was away from the Church, Go Lis came looking for him and discovered his collection. Over the few days he was absent, she secretly began experimenting on herself.

Her self-condemning guilt had already driven Go Lis to the brink of madness. She applied various false-god ritual methods to her own body, desperately begging for Birth's gaze. But she failed.

In mere days, she went from a beautiful Uma Sinner to a writhing mass of stinking, filthy flesh.

Though she retained her consciousness, though she became immensely powerful, though from certain false-god followers' perspectives she had become something akin to a "deity" — she had unquestionably failed. She had felt no trace of Birth's attention or proximity.

By the time Berios returned to Dolgod and discovered what had happened, it was too late. He cursed himself for the decision to gather that intelligence, but every method the Church possessed proved useless. His only hope was to continue searching among false-god lore for a way to restore Go Lis.

When Lis Field learned of this, he added a new identity beneath his Church persona — the underground king of Dolgod.

One white, one black — two intelligence networks, both firmly in their hands. All for the sake of collecting every false-god secret art they could, to save the woman they both loved who had been transformed into a monster.

And that was the real reason Berios and Lis Field had brought Cheng Shi to the underground lake.

Now Cheng Shi understood.

The Descent Technique sealed in the library was probably never sealed to suppress a "blasphemous forbidden art" at all. The Head of Church had been fishing.

It was obvious: false-god followers seeking to grow stronger had limited options beyond praying to unreliable deities. The alternative was scouring for techniques that major powers had rejected — and forbidden arts that blasphemed the true gods were the most appealing bait of all.

First, such forbidden arts — so carefully guarded by the Churches — had to be formidably powerful. Second, unlike unverifiable rumors passed down through hearsay, sealed forbidden arts had documentation and fixed locations. They were concrete targets.

So as long as false-god followers learned of these sealed arts, their hunger for power would inevitably drive them to try getting their hands on one.

Berios was clearly exploiting this psychology.

As for why false-god followers knew so precisely what was sealed in the Church library — naturally, it was because the fishing operation also employed Dolgod's underground king, Lis Field.

The two men's partnership had allowed them to monitor virtually every heretic who entered Dolgod.

So when Berios discovered that the person who'd broken the library's seals wasn't one of the heretics they'd been tracking but rather his own "child" — he'd hesitated. He'd had to consider the possibilities:

He feared this night's chaos wasn't one of Lis Field's staged provocations, but a genuine attempt by someone to seize the secret arts and plot against the Church.

He feared that the defiant, world-hating son he thought he knew had suffered a moment of madness and planned to use Uma secrets to "destroy" Dolgod in some fashion.

Berios might have felt nothing for Dolgod itself, but he could not afford to lose the Theocracy of Growth, much less the Head of Church's seat. Because only with that power and position could he continue gathering everything he needed to save his beloved Go Lis.

And so, after prolonged hesitation, the Head of Church steeled his heart and obliterated his son on the spot.

What he didn't know was that the child he killed wasn't truly Turadin — but a Turadin from another future.

The absurd twist was that Turadin's killer was his nominal mother — his biological "father"!

That enormous tentacle had clearly been an extension of Go Lis's mutated flesh.

Decades ago, she had given Turadin life. Last night, she had taken it away...

But that wasn't even the most absurd part. The most absurd part was that both of them clearly knew the one who had died was Turadin — yet during their earlier meeting, neither this nominal father nor that biological mother had spoken Turadin's name even once.

In their eyes, Turadin didn't even rank as high as a false-god-worshipping stray dog who could heal Go Lis!

'How... pitiful.'

The rest was easy enough to deduce.

Turadin could break the library's seals probably because of her bloodline — not Berios's, but Uma blood.

The seals had likely been crafted by Go Lis for the Church. After all, no one knew the Uma better than another Uma. And Turadin happened to be Go Lis's flesh and blood, which was why her bloodline could undo those very seals.

With that realization, every piece of last night's chaos fell into place.

Cheng Shi kept his composure outwardly, but inside he felt a deep sense of resignation. 'Indeed — trials might be the players' stage, but the true protagonists of history are never them.'

Still, Dolgod was a genuinely fascinating place.

An Uma Sinner of extreme devotion to Birth had goaded a pair of once-devout youths into abandoning their faith entirely.

A Head of Church who followed Birth had left his blasphemous rival untouched and was even seeking anti-Birth methods alongside him.

A cold, heartless father had killed his own child to save the child's braindead mother — only for fate to inadvertently birth another "loving" father and the very child he'd least wanted to see.

Setting aside what Birth thought about all this, or what role Time had played in the story's evolution, just Fate alone...

'Still as inscrutable as ever.'

'Sigh, Lord Benefactor — no wonder You're constantly getting cursed at. With situations like these, how could You not be?'

'Then again, all things considered, the reason I was able to destroy Mo Shu's clone in this trial was entirely thanks to Fate.'

'Fate may have its pitfalls, but those pitfalls all seem to end up beneath the feet of the enemies trying to kill me.'

'All praise to Fate!'

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Chapter 385: Wanted to Fuse Divinity, But Took the Wrong Path

By the time Cheng Shi had finished hearing the entire story, Lis Field had returned with Scorpio and Zhang Jizu.

But what he hadn't expected was that Gao Ya and Gou Feng had been brought along too.

?

'Wait — if everyone's here, what about Turadin?'

Squinty Eyes clearly knew this was Cheng Shi's top concern. The moment he descended, rather than gaping at the tentacles collapsed in the lake like Gao Ya was doing, he gave Cheng Shi an almost imperceptible nod.

Cheng Shi understood immediately — Squinty Eyes had already settled Turadin in a safe place, and there would be no problems.

He raised an eyebrow and walked over. Pulling Zhang Jizu aside, he summarized the melodramatic story and had Zhang Jizu examine Go Lis's condition as well.

But before the frowning Zhang Jizu could make any discoveries, Gao Ya stepped forward and leaned in to whisper to both of them:

"I can sense divinity in her body."

"?" Cheng Shi blinked, then glanced at Squinty Eyes. Truth be told, he'd also detected something like divinity in Go Lis's tentacles — but it was extremely faint and unlike anything he'd encountered before, leaving him uncertain. Zhang Jizu was equally unsure whether it was residual divinity, and could only shake his head slightly.

Seeing that even Squinty Eyes couldn't confirm it, Cheng Shi asked with genuine interest: "Not bad. How did you spot it?"

Gao Ya pressed her lips together, wavered for a moment, but ultimately chose to speak:

"I've conducted numerous divinity hybrid experiments and studied many states of divinity collapse. Some of them closely resemble the divine residue inside her body."

"Impressive. Do you Folly followers run experiments every day with nothing better to do?"

"So what kind of divinity hybrid residue is inside Go Lis? Birth and what?"

"No, you've misunderstood." Gao Ya shook her head, her expression complicated. "The 'hybrid' I'm referring to isn't the fusion of two different divinities — it's the blending of identical scattered fragments of divinity."

I don't have the resources to acquire sufficient divinity for experiments, so I can only collect large quantities of objects bearing divine fragments, extract the traces from them, and then combine those traces together to find a method of transferring them into a human body.

Put simply: peak players may use scattered fragments of divinity, or even deconstructed pieces of a divinity puzzle, but what I work with are fragments of those fragments.

What you end up with from hybridizing those is an approximation that doesn't quite resemble anything real. But undeniably, after integration, there is a brief instant where it erupts with power close to a genuine divine fragment.

So my guess is that this Go Lis used a variety of archaic divinity-fusion methods to modify herself, attempting to become...

part of Him.

But she obviously failed. I don't think it's because He rejected her approach — I think she simply had no idea how to assemble Birth's divinity. She lacked clear guidance."

At this point, a mix of admiration and wistfulness colored Gao Ya's eyes.

"All I can say is she was extraordinarily reckless. It's like a traveler struggling to survive in a desert — she had no map, only raw grit. But raw grit alone can't carry you out of a desert, so she collapsed in the sand.

Yet she was also lucky, because the place where she fell is actually quite close to the oasis. She just needs a bit more strength and guidance.

The strength to stand back up, and clear guidance on where to go."

By this point, Cheng Shi had basically grasped the situation, because his original treatment plan had already involved giving Go Lis fresh "strength."

He gave Gao Ya a thumbs-up and grinned. "Well done. Today, I'll grant you three seconds to look down on me. Three, two, one — there it is, you controlled your Folly urge. You've made progress, Lady Gao Ya."

Then, ignoring Gao Ya's darkened expression, he turned to Zhang Jizu. "Old Zhang, I'm thinking of administering a strong stimulant. What do you think?"

Zhang Jizu's eyebrow twitched at the nickname, but he answered through narrowed eyes: "Birth divinity?"

"Exactly — Birth divinity. I want to stimulate her with her own Benefactor's divinity. Maybe it'll just bring her right back."

"Or she could die outright from the shock, or mutate further. Everyone throughout history who's tried to fuse with divinity has been a lunatic, and lunatics never fare well."

"If the worst happens, how do you plan to survive six more days while the Theocracy of Growth hunts us down? Have you really thought this through?"

Cheng Shi waved a dismissive hand:

"No, no, no — I haven't considered any of that. All I know is that's not how you save someone."

This treatment will take a very long time. At minimum six days. And over a treatment period that long, I can't just give without getting something in return. So the Theocracy of Growth needs to cooperate with us first and spread the rumors about the Holy Infant.

When the heretic affair becomes the talk of all Dolgod, when Turadin safely delivers her child, when the trial-end notification flashes before my eyes — whether or not the treatment is finished, our journey in Dolgod is over.

And these people and things, long since deceased in history, will sink once more to the bottom of the Sea of Memory, awaiting the next curious souls to fish them out.

What do you think of this plan?"

"..." Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed until they nearly vanished. He truly couldn't think of a steadier approach, so he nodded. But after nodding, he fixed Cheng Shi with a pointed look. "Viable. But I'm curious — how did you figure out that I have Birth divinity sealed inside me?"

"?"

Cheng Shi froze.

'Hold on — Old Zhang, the Birth divinity I was planning to use is the one sealed inside me. I called you over so you could help me extract the divinity Big Cat sealed in my body. Don't tell me you also...'

But a heartbeat later, Cheng Shi erased the surprise from his face. A sly grin crept across it as he raised his eyebrows.

"Lucky guess. But this time I won't let you take a loss. You contribute some first for the emergency, and I'll trade you something else for it."

Zhang Jizu gave him a sideways look, said nothing, and nodded.

With the internal discussion concluded, Cheng Shi happily took the plan to Berios and began bargaining.

Berios frowned in contemplation. Before he could speak, Big Beard interjected in a grave tone:

"Fine — but you need to show me results first.

Not on me this time. On... Go Lis."

"Easy enough." Cheng Shi smiled and waved Zhang Jizu over. There was no need to reveal his own priest abilities in front of Zhang Jizu.

Zhang Jizu understood instantly. He raised his hands and fired off two dense, concentrated healing spells at Go Lis.

These ordinary healing spells couldn't repair a body ravaged by failed divine fusion, but they could ease her pain and restore a measure of vitality.

Sure enough, after the two healing spells landed, the colossal tentacles in the underground lake reared upright once more, swaying gently.

The countless enormous eyes covering her body blinked rapidly, as though trying to communicate something to everyone present.

At the sight, Big Beard trembled with excitement. Berios, too, exhaled with visible relief.

For the moment, these false-god followers appeared trustworthy enough. Their cooperation was acceptable.

"Lis Field — the Church can't be seen doing these things. Their demands will be on you."

Big Beard completely ignored the Head of Church. He stroked Go Lis's tentacle for a long while, then suddenly turned to Cheng Shi and declared:

"Tonight. Tonight, Dolgod will be blanketed in fear.

Go collect the fear you want. I told you — cure her, and I'll give you anything.

Go Lis, I've finally found hope for your recovery. Are you looking forward to seeing me again, Go Lis?"

"..."

Watching this burly man tenderly caress another man's wife, Cheng Shi smacked his lips. No comment.

He side-eyed Gao Ya, hoping the resident savage commentator might lob a few zingers to liven things up. But Gao Ya clearly wasn't stupid. She side-eyed him right back, scoffed, and said nothing.

Cheng Shi pursed his lips.

"In that case — pleasure doing business?"

"You'll move into the Church. Until the treatment cycle is complete, I will not tolerate any disruptions to this deal.

I'll have a space cleared in the basement. It's close to here — convenient for your treatments.

But I must warn you: without myself or Lis Field present, you'd best not barge in here on your own."

Berios dropped this pronouncement and left. Under the Head of Church's directive, this group of Dolgod's most blasphemous heretics moved into the Theocracy of Growth's most deeply hidden sanctum that very day.

A pack of shameless blasphemers, in the Church's bowels — a place even devout believers never knew existed — embarked on a mission to save the most devout follower of Birth.

You had to admit: the rhythm of it all was pure Void.

...

Chapter 386: The Child Stealing Brotherhood

By the evening of the second day, not a single player could have predicted the method Lis Field would use to plunge all of Dolgod into panic.

It wasn't until the moon had passed its zenith that the Soloist and the little assassin returned from their scouting mission with news so startling that every other player fell silent at the same time.

Kidnappers had appeared in Dolgod. Many families' children — and even pregnant women — had been abducted without a trace.

Cheng Shi froze for a moment, then immediately thought of an organization — one that Turadin had once mentioned:

The Child Stealing Brotherhood.

At the time, he hadn't fully grasped what kind of organization it was. Now the name said it all: it was precisely what it sounded like — a group that stole children.

You had to admit — in a city that worshipped Birth, stealing Birth's "future" was a form of blasphemy only slightly less extreme than converting to Corruption.

Moreover, judging by Berios's attitude, he clearly knew about all of this.

Indeed — Dolgod's greatest filth was hidden within its most sacred Church. Lis Field truly was the underground king of Dolgod.

For the players, the fear had been generated. The next step was figuring out how to link that fear to Corruption's Holy Infant.

Several players huddled together to brainstorm. But after a long silence, no one spoke. Finally, an impatient Gao Ya broke it with a cold declaration:

"These are nothing more than faded echoes buried in ancient history. What is there to hesitate about?"

Pointless kindness is stupidity. Can you two really not figure this out at your tier?

It's simple: find the children, kill the children, pin the blame on other false-god followers. That would amplify Dolgod's fear to the absolute maximum. Then spread word that a Holy Infant is about to be born, and everyone will fear him — everyone will demand the Church find him and kill him.

Berios is cooperating with us. He obviously won't suspect us. So as long as Turadin delivers the child at exactly the right moment, we complete the trial perfectly.

It's that simple. Don't tell me you haven't thought of it!

What exactly are you all agonizing over?"

Cheng Shi listened with a low whistle of amazement. 'What a wretched piece of work, this Folly follower.'

Gao Ya wasn't wrong — it was indeed a straightforward method, and everyone present had already thought of it. The problem was: sneaking off to murder a group of innocent children — who was going to do it?

One look at the furrowed brows told the story. Nobody was willing to carry out something so unconscionable.

The little assassin thought it over for a long time, sighed, and said: "There are still five days left. We don't need to go that far. Let's think — maybe there's another way?"

Gao Ya's contemptuous gaze swept over everyone. She scoffed and walked back upstairs.

Cheng Shi watched her leave, snorted a laugh, and shook his head.

'Folly followers only care about results, never the means. That's exactly how they end up creating horrifying things like Substitute Death Dolls.'

'These self-proclaimed geniuses are beyond saving.'

Zhang Jizu noticed Cheng Shi's relaxed, wholly untroubled expression and knew he probably already had a solution. He nudged him:

"Stop holding back. Spill it."

Cheng Shi laughed openly.

"There's an even simpler method. The Soloist is too stuck in the player's perspective.

This trial may be history, but it's also a real past. It's teeming with flesh-and-blood people. Why does the protagonist have to be us?"

At that, Zhang Jizu furrowed his brow in contemplation and nodded slowly, apparently guessing Cheng Shi's approach.

"The Child Stealing Brotherhood?"

Cheng Shi raised his eyebrows, once again marveling at how perfectly Squinty Eyes' brainwaves synced with his own.

'He may not pull elaborate stunts himself, but his understanding of them is second to none.'

"Exactly — the Child Stealing Brotherhood. All we need to do is leak word that the Brotherhood are actually followers of Corruption, that they're searching for their Holy Infant, and that's why they've kidnapped all those children. Once the rumor's out, people will naturally rally against them.

Driven by fury, the rumors will only grow more outrageous, more terrifying. By that point, our plan is already half-complete. After all, a clandestine organization operating beneath the Church can't exactly step out into the open and issue a public denial.

The infamy they've amassed will drag them into a pit of indefensibility. When the time is right, we simply deliver Turadin to the Child Stealing Brotherhood and, at the perfect moment, make a public appearance claiming they've found the true Holy Infant and are about to bring the child into the world. Done.

As for whether Big Beard will suspect us...

Even if he does, it won't matter. We're treating Go Lis. Compared to the Brotherhood being exploited, Go Lis clearly takes priority. It's an open scheme he can't refuse."

Scorpio drew a sharp breath, pondered for a moment, and then bowed deeply in admiration. "Bro, I'm in awe."

Gou Feng's eyes were practically blazing. He was about to say something to Cheng Shi, but Cheng Shi quickly pressed him back down with a hand.

"Big guy, please don't say it. I already know what you mean."

Gou Feng froze mid-motion, then burst out laughing.

Cheng Shi shivered slightly at the sound, then said with genuine feeling:

"Dolgod's waters run too deep. If we drag this out any longer, I'm afraid more problems will surface. Let's wrap this up as quickly as possible. Once Turadin delivers the baby, we scatter immediately.

I keep getting the feeling that hanging around you lot is asking for another accident!

But speaking of which...

Old Zhang, where exactly did you stash Turadin?

Share the location — just in case something happens to you in the next few days. I need to be able to retrieve her."

Zhang Jizu glanced at Cheng Shi. His expression grew rather colorful.

He didn't say a word, but Cheng Shi read his face instantly — and his own expression immediately became equally colorful.

He twitched the corners of his mouth, utterly stunned. "Don't tell me you... already sent Turadin to the Child Stealing Brotherhood?"

Zhang Jizu's eyes had narrowed to mere slits. He paused for a moment, then nodded.

"Yes."

"???" Cheng Shi went numb. "You predicted me?"

"...No, not really. Pure coincidence.

On my second trip to the Inquisition, I noticed a few suspicious trails. At first I thought nothing of them. But on the third trip — when we were fleeing the Church — I spotted the same individuals again.

Their positions had swapped, but the targets they were watching hadn't changed.

It so happened that during the daytime, on our first trip to the Inquisition, I'd noticed the households along the route. Four words summarize them: families with young children.

So I kept it in mind.

After you two departed this morning, I made contact with those individuals. They may not have appreciated my methods of contact, but that didn't stop me from extracting useful information.

They were members of the Child Stealing Brotherhood."

Scorpio was the first to freeze. He mentally retraced every observation he'd made along the way, utterly baffled. "Brother Zhang, I was also watching the surroundings the entire time. How did I miss these people? If someone was tailing us, as a fellow shadow-dweller, there's no way I'd have zero awareness of it."

Zhang Jizu explained with a smile:

"Here's the funny thing — they weren't conducting ordinary surveillance. They had 'died' in obscure corners near their targets that nobody would ever notice."

Scorpio's eyes went wide, and he let out a gasp. "Dead people?!"

...

Chapter 387: The Uneventful Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Days

"They weren't dead — but their bodies were 'dead.'

They existed in an extremely subtle state. A state that let them blend into the environment while still retaining consciousness.

Dolgod truly is a remarkable place. If not for His blessing, I never could have detected their presence."

"Impressive. And then? How did you think to send Turadin to them, and how did you pull it off?" Cheng Shi clapped his hands in admiration and pressed on.

"Initially, I had no such plan. But after you and Scorpio departed this morning, and after I extracted intelligence from those men, I suddenly realized the Child Stealing Brotherhood was quite interesting.

They kidnapped citizens' children and expectant mothers, yes — but they didn't use them as leverage for extortion or dark rituals. They simply took them in. Children who needed to be born were delivered.

Children who needed raising were raised. Just like the Church, they brought these children up safely, then indoctrinated them and recruited them as fresh blood for the organization.

That's how this underground blasphemous organization has survived all this time — they've passed the tragedy down, generation after generation.

What's more, I even found that children raised within the Brotherhood had far higher levels of happiness and sense of belonging than ordinary Dolgod citizens.

Their attitude toward these children, their methods of upbringing — they were even better than those of the children's own parents or the Church.

This baffled me. I kept wondering: what was the point of an organization that looked more like a charity than a kidnapping ring going to such lengths to antagonize the Church?

They had no ulterior motive. They seemed to exist purely for the sake of existing.

It wasn't until you told me about Lis Field that I realized it was nothing more than the Church's tool for controlling the underworld.

And once I knew the Brotherhood only stole but never killed their 'hostages,' I thought of a way to turn the 'extraordinary' back into the 'ordinary':

Let them guard Turadin in our place.

The Inquisition wasn't safe. Since a God Descent could obliterate houses and the library at the Head of Church's whim, there was nothing stopping it from obliterating a burned-out Inquisition too. So to protect Turadin, I decided to 'deliver' her to the Child Stealing Brotherhood.

I had Gou Feng alter the gestational aura on Turadin's body to make her look like a mother still far from delivery. After a bit of disguising, I swapped her for a pregnant woman at the same stage and placed her inside someone else's house.

And that particular house just happened to have a Brotherhood spotter nearby.

So as of last night, Turadin had already been moved into a Brotherhood safehouse..."

Cheng Shi listened with his jaw on the floor. He mentally upgraded Squinty Eyes' steadiness rating yet again.

He shook his head in marvel, then asked after a pause:

"You can do makeup too?"

"..."

"..." Scorpio stiffly turned to stare at Cheng Shi, seemingly wondering why this man always fixated on the strangest details.

Zhang Jizu also chuckled. He nodded with mild exasperation:

"Before my gig guarding the cemetery gate, I did a stint as a mortician. Did plenty of dead people's faces — living ones were a first, though."

"..."

'Truly His Chosen One!'

'Full-spectrum service, one-stop shop.'

Cheng Shi was floored.

"So, as expected, Turadin has already been taken by the Child Stealing Brotherhood?"

I admit, your thinking was genuinely solid. But letting her leave your sight — isn't that a bit risky?

Don't look at me like that — even if I have a way to track her location, that's all it is. I have no idea what she's experiencing in there. So...

Old Zhang, I'm putting a lot of trust in you. Don't screw me over!"

Zhang Jizu showed no hint of concern. He smiled, eyes squinting again.

"Relax. If I dared let her out of my sight, I naturally have a way to ensure she won't die from any accident.

I've already linked her life to mine.

Funny enough, this is actually a rather uncommon Prosperity item."

With that, Zhang Jizu produced a long, blood-slicked cord.

Everyone stared at the cord in his hand — which looked suspiciously like an umbilical cord — and froze. They all shared the same thought: 'This is supposed to be a Prosperity item?'

Only Cheng Shi knew it genuinely could be a Prosperity item, because that deity was itself an existence of hybridized flesh and wood, living in symbiosis.

Only now, that existence had become Void.

Still — pulling out an umbilical cord right now, in the middle of a Birth scenario? The vibe was profoundly unsettling.

"..." Cheng Shi couldn't control his expression. His face locked up for an instant, but he quickly broke into a sly grin. "You're an Uma Sinner too?"

Zhang Jizu gave him a withering side-eye and explained on his own:

"Symbiotic Ribbon. Consumable. It links two living beings, allowing the recipient to share the user's vitality and life force.

One caveat: the recipient must be willing. And once the link is established, their life or death hangs entirely on the user's will."

"Great stuff. Got any more?"

"...No. It's a one-time consumable. Even the best items can't survive being wasted."

'Liar!'

'Squinty Zhang is lying to me!'

A glint flashed through Cheng Shi's eyes. He looked at Zhang Jizu's narrow little slits and pursed his lips.

'The world is going to hell. My own bro is playing mind games with me.'

'How is normal use 'wasting' it? I feel like that was aimed at someone, and it had better not be me.'

"Alright, alright. I never imagined my plan would already be in motion before I even set it up.

But it's a good thing, actually. At least we can see the finish line now, right?

Tomorrow, I'll trouble our assassin brother to go spread the word. Once the rumors are flying, and the moment Turadin is about to go into labor — we win.

All praise to Birth! All praise to Corruption! All praise to Prosperity!

It's finally about to end. I hope everyone sleeps well tonight.

Good night, Makabaka."

"..."

...

Cheng Shi did indeed sleep well.

Early on the third day, when he opened his eyes, a black-faced Lis Field had already kicked open the players' door and stormed in, seething with fury.

"Was this your doing?!"

Cheng Shi, still groggy and grumpy, dug a finger in his ear, then tilted his head and leaned it forward, pretending he hadn't heard:

"Lord Lis Field, what did you say? I didn't quite catch that."

'Didn't catch that?'

Hmph!

Seeing Cheng Shi's attitude, Lis Field was about to explode — but then he thought of Go Lis, forced his rage back down, and growled:

"Today's treatment had better continue. If anything goes wrong, I'll remember all of this when the reckoning comes."

'I hope we're still around for your reckoning, Big Beard.'

Cheng Shi shrugged it off and obediently followed him down to the underground lake for the day's treatment session.

It wasn't really "treatment" in any meaningful sense — just dragging Zhang Jizu along to hit Go Lis with a few healing spells. As long as Go Lis perked up, Big Beard and the Head of Church would believe she was on the mend.

The truth, of course, was that the players hadn't even deployed any divinity-based measures yet.

They were saving that for the final day — just in case something went wrong before then.

And so, under this tacitly cooperative arrangement, the players drifted through the four most comfortable days of the entire trial.

No external threats. No internal fractures. Food, shelter, and basic needs all accounted for. An entire Church full of NPCs helping them complete their objective. And they could even enjoy the occasional spectacle of the Folly follower humiliating herself. It was absolute bliss — perfectly aligned with Cheng Shi's ideal of "coasting."

But tragically, just as he'd finally achieved the pinnacle of "coasting," he no longer wanted to coast.

The speed-run hadn't panned out, but the trial itself would succeed — of that he was certain.

Or so every player believed, as the plan proceeded without a hitch and everyone expected to welcome the child's birth on the seventh day. That was when the accident happened.

...

Chapter 388: The Death of Zhang Jizu?

Squinty Eyes was dead.

Against all expectations, just as the group was preparing to sneak out of the Church basement to retrieve Turadin, before anyone even reached the door, Zhang Jizu — walking behind the others — collapsed to the ground without warning.

Cheng Shi, right beside him, caught him with lightning reflexes. But the moment he saw Zhang Jizu's flesh and vitality wither in an instant, his entire body shriveling into a skeleton wrapped in skin, Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply. He immediately gripped his ring.

Scorpio's heightened senses made him the second to react. He whipped around, disbelief flooding his widened eyes, and drew his Arc of Time Restoration with blinding speed, carving ring after ring of Time swamp-traps around the entire group.

Gou Feng furrowed his brow and dropped to one knee. He clutched Zhang Jizu's hand, his face turning a terrible shade of dark.

"His vitality is severed. He's... dead."

The words hit like a physical blow. A chill surged from the base of Gao Ya's spine straight to her skull. She went rigid, immediately scanned the surroundings, and clenched both fists. Opening her mouth, she launched into a melody of calming and reinforcement, driving every person present into a state of razor-sharp focus.

"What's going on? Brother Cheng, didn't you say the Scavenger was dead?"

"???" Gao Ya snapped her head toward Scorpio, incredulous. "He's actually dead?"

Cheng Shi's expression darkened. Now was clearly not the time to discuss the Scavenger. Mo Shu was undoubtedly dead — but the question was: what had felled Old Zhang?

The question had barely formed before the answer struck him. Cheng Shi's face contorted as he shouted, "This is bad!" and snapped his fingers, vanishing on the spot.

Seeing his lifeline disappear, Scorpio jolted and instantly connected the dots. He gripped his weapon tight and took off toward the place they'd been planning to visit.

But Gao Ya seized his wrist and barked:

"If you don't want to die, don't move! Whatever killed a Chosen One Gravekeeper in an instant is not a situation we can involve ourselves in.

If you want to survive, there's only one option: stay here, guard the Gravekeeper's body, and wait for the Fate Weaver to return.

Otherwise, don't blame me for not warning you when you die out there."

Scorpio froze, then hardened. "Brother Cheng isn't a Fate Weaver — he's a Druid!"

"?" Gao Ya nearly laughed with rage. Of all times for this — could his brain not rotate even a little?

She felt like she was talking to a brainless idiot. And Scorpio's next action only confirmed her assessment.

He wrenched free of her grip and declared firmly:

"Even if we need to guard Brother Zhang's body, the two of you are more than enough. I have to go help. Brother Cheng shielded me from the greatest danger, and I created this much trouble for him. No matter what, I need to go see what's happening.

If I can help, great. If not, at the very least I can be his eyes!"

"Tch. So in this entire trial, exactly how many threats did you 'detect' in advance? Those eyes of yours — are they even functional?"

Scorpio's face went dark. He lowered his head and marched off.

Seeing she couldn't stop him, Gao Ya cursed with a grimace: "Stupid. You're going to die."

"No — I trust Brother Cheng. He won't let me die. Hold down the fort. I'm going!"

With that, the little assassin shadow-shuttled and vanished.

After Scorpio's departure, the black-faced Gou Feng dropped to the ground and furrowed his brow tightly.

Gao Ya glanced at him and sneered. "I thought you were the sentimental type. Turns out I misjudged you — fooled by a little assassin.

He's the sentimental one. So what about you, Chieftain? What's your excuse for feigning weakness?"

Gou Feng rubbed his head in agitation but didn't respond.

His fear ran far deeper than the others'. Zhang Jizu had left something inside him — a control mechanism — and now the person controlling him was dead. What would happen to that thing inside him?

He didn't even know what the Chosen One of Death had planted in him!

Seeing the Chieftain ignore her, Gao Ya frowned slightly.

She didn't press further. Instead, she walked to Zhang Jizu's body, crouched down, and began examining the skin-wrapped skeleton with meticulous care.

The cause of death was obvious enough — something uncanny had drained every drop of his vitality in an instant. But what force could strip a Chosen One of all vitality so quickly?

She had her suspicions. Instinct made her reluctant to entangle herself with this matter. But Folly's relentless curiosity kept pushing her to study Zhang Jizu's remains, determined to extract some fresh, useful "knowledge" from his manner of death.

And when she grasped Squinty Eyes' head and pried open his tightly shut eyelids, two bloodshot sockets — nothing but crimson — blazed into her sight.

Those orbs seemed to pulse faintly. More than eyeballs, they resembled two irregularly throbbing sacs, as if something inside was struggling to burst free.

Gao Ya's gaze sharpened. She thought, 'Not good,' and immediately threw herself backward — but she was too late!

The two pure-red blood-sphere eyeballs detonated without warning. Countless frenzied, worm-like threads of blood — wriggling like earthworms — erupted into the air like confetti, spattering across Gao Ya's head and face.

Gao Ya shrieked in horror, scrambling backward on all fours. But as she retreated, her eyes slowly narrowed to slits.

Gou Feng's pupils contracted at the sight. He started to rise, but she had already executed an agile leap to land before him. She clamped a hand on his shoulder, pinning him in place, and spoke in a deep, frowning voice:

"Stay here. Don't move. Handle Berios. Otherwise, I'll sacrifice you to that great one."

With that, she narrowed her eyes, rolled her body loose, and without an instant's hesitation, took off in the direction Scorpio had vanished.

Gou Feng watched the "Folly follower" disappear with a terror that nearly stopped his heart. Only after she was gone did his pulse hammer back to life. His strength gave out and he collapsed to the ground, discovering he was drenched head-to-toe in cold sweat.

"It's him!

Then what about Gao Ya...

Is she... dead? Just like that?"

He turned to stare at the skeleton on the floor, wrapped in its sheath of shriveled skin, at the empty eye sockets where crimson had exploded outward. Swallowing hard, he shuffled two more steps backward in horror.

'So this is a Chosen One of Death!'

'Can he really... be killed?'

...

Meanwhile.

The moment Cheng Shi saw Zhang Jizu fall, he knew something had gone wrong again — and this accident had a ninety-nine percent chance of originating from the target beyond his line of sight: Turadin.

So he immediately used Never Lost Gambling Gear to teleport to Turadin's side. But he was one step too late.

Because the instant Squinty Eyes hit the ground, he should have realized — Turadin was already dead.

Turadin was indeed dead. She had died inside the cell the Child Stealing Brotherhood had prepared for her.

Though it was called a cell, its construction and décor were virtually indistinguishable from an inn's quarters. Its only distinction was that it lay deep underground at the city's edge, sealed away from sunlight. Apart from that, the living conditions were no worse than genuine surface dwellings.

And there were many such cells down here, far below the ground.

This was where Lis Field had indoctrinated the Brotherhood's abducted children into new brothers.

And right now, a mother who had been on the verge of delivering their newest "brother" was dead.

Just like Squinty Eyes — drained of all flesh and vitality, she lay dead in a corner of this cell.

When Cheng Shi landed, spun around, and discovered Turadin's corpse, the shock drove him an involuntary step backward. The surge of raw terror was so immense it instantly charged the Bone Servant Le Le'er's Ring to full capacity.

"Shit..."

"What the hell is this thing?!"

...

Chapter 389: The Life That Should Not Have Been Born!

Pupils constricted to pinpoints, spine rigid as a pillar of stone — that was Cheng Shi's state right now.

He stared at Turadin's corpse and needed an eternity to gather his shattered consciousness back together, slowly reassembling it into something resembling composure and clarity.

Not that anyone could blame him for such a reaction, because he had never imagined a person's death could look this horrifying, this grotesque.

Turadin had been drained dry. Just like Zhang Jizu, wrinkled skin had been pulled taut over bare bones. But she was different from Squinty Eyes — because she'd been pregnant. A child on the verge of being born had been growing in her belly. And today was the very day she was supposed to go into labor.

That meant Turadin's belly would reach peak distension today.

And from what Cheng Shi could see, that was exactly the case.

But this was precisely what made it so uncanny. Some unknown force should have drained every drop of flesh and vitality from her body, and by all rights her belly should have been no exception.

Yet atop that withered, skeletal corpse, the balloon-taut belly still brimmed with living flesh — not a trace of vitality collapse in sight.

And that wasn't all. Right now, this enormous pregnant belly wasn't even spherical. Pressing outward against the membrane-thin skin were one grotesque face after another, along with handprints.

The outlines of eyes, noses, mouths, ears, and hands — like impressions pushed from inside through a thin sheet of clay — were stamped all across Turadin's belly, warping its shape into something nightmarish, frozen into a ghastly, horrifying sculpture of flesh.

An ordinary person would take one look and think something was trying to claw its way out of this "cage of flesh" — that it had struggled halfway free before losing its strength, freezing in place along with its prison forever.

Cheng Shi stared at the scene, jaw clenched, unable to move.

He was rattled.

Probably no one in the world wouldn't be.

This was bone-chillingly terrifying and sanity-eroding. Looking back, he hadn't been this scared even while delivering Hu Xuan's baby.

The stark contrast between the withered corpse and the plump, living belly created a crushing sense of unreality — a feeling of "reason peeling away from existence, the grotesque materializing from the Void."

After a long, long time, Cheng Shi exhaled heavily. He'd finally recovered. And it seemed he'd already deduced why Turadin and Zhang Jizu had died.

The child.

Without question, their deaths were connected to whatever was inside Turadin's belly.

This child had drained every last drop of their vitality!

Of course, given how things had escalated, it was clearly no ordinary child anymore...

Whether it was Turadin's extremity of devotion catalyzing something, or whether Corruption — enthroned upon one of the sixteen divine seats — had genuinely turned its gaze upon this place, the result was the same: the child in Turadin's belly had undergone a mutation on the very day it was meant to be born. It was no longer the "Holy Infant" the players had jokingly planned to manufacture — it had truly become...

a life that Birth deemed "should not have been born."

Cheng Shi didn't know what relationship it had with Corruption, nor whether it had genuinely become the so-called Holy Infant. All he knew was that the Holy Infant's descent had failed — because Turadin's mortal body apparently couldn't supply the energy it needed to be born.

No — not just Turadin. Even a Chosen One of Death had been drained dry!

Without even knowing it, Squinty Eyes had contributed his vitality to the Holy Infant's arrival, and even that hadn't been enough!

A black hole that could drain a Chosen One who'd openly claimed he couldn't die — what kind of thing was this?!

So Cheng Shi panicked. He wasn't sure he could deliver this child whose birth had apparently failed.

He wanted to win. But the premise of winning was being alive to collect the prize. And as things stood, even if he somehow saved this child's life, nobody could predict what would happen the moment it was actually born.

But if he gave up now, all the suffering of this entire trial would have been for nothing. Worse, he'd have lost Old Zhang on top of it all.

Whether Zhang Jizu was truly dead remained debatable, admittedly. But even if he wasn't, a fetus capable of draining a Chosen One wasn't going to be easy to handle.

Its birth might drain Squinty Eyes a second time — and not just Squinty Eyes. Himself, too...

'I do not want to end up as a human husk...'

Cheng Shi frowned and was about to plan his next move carefully when something suddenly occurred to him.

Wait!

The authority of "Vitality"!

Could Prosperity's "Vitality" authority withstand this fetus's drain?

If it could...

Cheng Shi's eyes lit up. The gambler in him was stirring again.

'Already lost an Old Zhang. Can't just eat losses without earning anything back, right?'

'If I don't make this bet, won't this trial be a total loss?'

Cheng Shi wrestled with himself for a long while, weighing gains and losses dozens of times over, until he finally twisted the words "gains and losses" into "gains and gains."

"You can't just keep losing without winning. When it's time to gamble, you gamble. But first — I need a backup plan."

With that, Cheng Shi stood, stepped back, and used his scalpel to disassemble the cell door. He cleared an open space, then scattered dice across the entire floor.

Next, he pulled out the Puppet Grip he'd picked up from Gao Ya and slipped it onto his left hand. This way, even if danger struck, at least the A-grade glove could slow down whatever came at him.

Finally, he retrieved a magic lamp from his storage space and hung it high from the ceiling, ensuring every corner was bathed in light — so he'd have instant access to his shadow at all times.

After finishing these preparations, Cheng Shi took a deep breath. Right hand clenched around the Fun Ring, he crept step by step to Turadin's side.

His hand brushed lightly against the uneven, nightmare-sculpted belly, feeling for any movement inside. But after only two touches, his brow knotted tight.

He couldn't detect a single pulse of life in there.

Had the vitality dissipated?

That shouldn't be. The skin felt so smooth and warm to the touch. He could faintly see red blood flowing through the stretched-thin veins. The flesh was so plump and healthy it was in better condition than an ordinary person's belly. How could he not sense its presence?

Had the birth failed? Was it dead?

Or was it... not a living thing at all?

Cheng Shi's heart clenched. Staring at the misshapen belly before him, he summoned his courage once more, extended a single finger, and pressed it lightly into one corner of the skin. Then he slowly increased pressure, pushing the skin inward.

He was going to use this crude method to determine what had gone wrong with the child inside.

But the moment he'd pressed barely an inch deep, he suddenly felt a powerful finger from inside Turadin's belly pressing back against his fingertip through the paper-thin skin!

That single point of contact sent a bone-piercing chill erupting from his fingertip, racing along the nerves of his arm straight to the crown of his skull. His face contorted. He yanked his hand back and vanished on the spot, reappearing at —

Gou Feng's side.

"HOLY SHIT!!!"

The Chieftain stared blankly at his "good brother," whose face had gone a ghastly shade of blue-white, and froze in utter bewilderment.

'He... didn't come back specifically to curse at me, did he?'

...

Chapter 390: Old Zhang, Do You Dare to Gamble?

As it turned out, when confronting immense horror, no backup plan was more effective than simply getting the hell out.

The instant Cheng Shi laid eyes on Gou Feng, the terror suddenly didn't feel so overwhelming anymore.

He scanned his surroundings and noticed that Squinty Eyes' body seemed different from how he'd left it. The discovery sent a wave of relief coursing through his taut nerves.

'That Zhang Steady truly isn't dead!'

'I knew it — a Chosen One of Death had to have some tricks up his sleeve. Otherwise, he'd disgrace that great one's title.'

But why were Scorpio and Gao Ya both missing?

The little assassin had almost certainly chased after him. And the Soloist?

Scared off?

No — that couldn't be. She shouldn't have the guts to run.

Gou Feng, sitting off to one side, read Cheng Shi's confusion and spoke in a muffled voice once he'd steadied himself:

"The Gravekeeper resurrected using the Soloist's body. He's already gone looking for you."

"?"

'Squinty Zhang used Gao Ya as a host body to come back?'

'Doesn't that mean he's now...'

'Tch. Does this count as "beggars can't be choosers"?''

The terror that had gripped Cheng Shi evaporated entirely upon hearing this news. He looked at Squinty Eyes' corpse and shook his head with an amused laugh.

'Oh well — dead is dead, I suppose. And with two helpers on the way, this gamble might not be lost after all.'

Cheng Shi thought for a moment, said "Thank you" to Gou Feng, and vanished once more.

When he reappeared in the cell where Turadin had died, the previously empty room now held two additional figures.

The Another Day Assassin, Scorpio — and the cuckoo-nesting Gao Ya—edition Zhang Jizu.

Zhang Jizu showed no surprise at Cheng Shi's sudden arrival. He was already crouched beside Turadin, conducting an "autopsy" with practiced ease — a sight that reminded Cheng Shi of something he'd once said: "The cemetery's livelier at night."

"..."

'Bro, your nerve is something else.'

Scorpio's face was sheet-white as he rushed over. "Brother Cheng, are you okay?"

He'd clearly been scared witless too.

'As long as I'm not the only one who was terrified, it doesn't count as embarrassing.'

Traces of lingering fright still clung to Cheng Shi's face. He broke into a smile, wiped his face clear, and clapped Scorpio on the shoulder with genuine satisfaction. "I wasn't wrong about you. Kid's got a future."

Then he walked straight over to Zhang Jizu and grumbled:

"Squinty Zhang, next time you resurrect, can you do it faster? You scared me half to death — I was this close to going to explain to that great one that your death had nothing to do with me!"

Zhang Jizu's narrow eyes crinkled with amusement. "You didn't look 'worried' — more like 'terrified.' Before we climbed in, we heard someone screaming profanity. That was you, wasn't it?"

He had to admit — Gao Ya's face looked better with squinted eyes than with wide ones. But knowing Zhang Jizu's soul was operating it from the inside made the whole thing profoundly weird.

"How'd you think of using the Soloist's body for resurrection? Did you kill her?"

"I didn't kill her. I merely suppressed her consciousness temporarily — a form of parasitism.

I have many resurrection methods. Unfortunately, our curious Folly teammate was the first to trigger the one most disadvantageous to her. I was short on time, so I had no choice but to inconvenience her.

Also, stop changing the subject. We were talking about the screaming."

"..."

'I have many resurrection methods...'

'Listen to that — does that sound like normal human vocabulary?'

'So the reason low-tier players die so easily is because you've hoarded all the resurrection techniques?'

'You know, Zhang Steady, you don't exactly seem like a good person either.'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips and selectively went deaf: "What? Bad signal. Say again?"

"..." Zhang Jizu side-eyed him but didn't stop. Instead, he continued tearing down the facade: "I said someone got scared off by an unborn baby."

"How come your soul's in the Soloist's body and your words already smell like Folly..." Cheng Shi muttered under his breath, then dramatically cupped his ear and put on a dead-signal act. "Hello? Hello? Can you hear me?"

Seeing his shameless, unbothered attitude, Zhang Jizu shook his head with a laugh and steered back on track.

"It's not dead yet."

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. His expression snapped to serious. "I know — I noticed too!"

"Oh? Suddenly the signal's crystal clear?"

Zhang Jizu turned to Cheng Shi with a teasing smirk. Cheng Shi's face locked up.

"Joking aside.

It truly isn't dead yet. But it's close.

I can feel its condition deteriorating. It's struggling unconsciously, trying to latch onto anything that could help it be born. But it's futile. I've tried — Aph Ros's belly is no longer ordinary flesh. The scalpel can't cut through it.

What we're dealing with now isn't delivering a normal child. It's delivering an extraordinary monstrosity!

I can roughly guess — it probably is the life the trial spoke of, the one that should not have been born. As for why this life came about through our hands...

Maybe you should ask yourself that, Cheng Shi."

Cheng Shi gave an awkward laugh, unsure how to respond. But soon he sighed and asked with all seriousness:

"So, in your opinion, this child...

should we save it, or not?"

The question was posed as if seeking advice. But the moment Cheng Shi asked, Zhang Jizu already knew the answer.

He wanted to save it. After all, they'd worked this hard for days specifically to win the trial.

Honestly, at Zhang Jizu's tier, plenty of people clung to obsessions of every variety. But someone who worked this tirelessly just to beat a single trial...

That was rare.

After all, points were arguably the easiest resource to accumulate in this Faith Game. Play casually and they'd pile up. There was no need to take things this seriously.

He studied Cheng Shi's eyes, reflected for a moment, then spoke deliberately:

"Know how I died? My vitality got drained completely.

Whatever's inside Aph Ros's belly is dangerous. It's no longer the fake Holy Infant we planned to manufacture. It's become a terrifying monstrosity.

As for what kind of monstrosity, whether it belongs to Corruption or still worships Birth — none of that is clear yet.

All I can infer from my own death is that Aph Ros, as the mother, simply couldn't provide the energy required for its birth. That's why it ended up like this — trying to 'break out' on its own."

Zhang Jizu pointed at the grotesquely misshapen belly of the corpse, his expression grave.

"But it absorbed too little vitality. Not enough to shatter the flesh prison that nurtured it!

Cheng Shi, if you want to save it, you'll need to supply massive amounts of vitality. That kind of vitality isn't easy to come by — unless you have..."

"Prosperity divinity?" Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. Unless you have Prosperity divinity.

And don't look at me like that — I do have some Prosperity divinity sealed inside me."

Zhang Jizu smiled and extracted a wisp of emerald light from within himself.

"I once considered drawing closer to that deity, so I collected some. But judging by how fast I just died, the divinity I carry probably won't be enough to sate the monster in that belly.

It's already transcended the category of ordinary life. I can't be certain what kind of havoc this life form will cause once it's born.

But — if you want to save it, or rather, deliver it — it's not impossible.

If you can produce Prosperity divinity comparable to what I've sealed away, the two combined might let me attempt it.

But it's only an attempt. I make no guarantees."

Listening to Squinty Eyes' sincere, heartfelt counsel, Cheng Shi broke into a happy smile.

He could see Zhang Jizu's dilemma. At this tier, risking enormous danger for a few points — and on top of that, sacrificing a large quantity of Prosperity divinity to deliver an unclassifiable child — was objectively foolish.

To put it bluntly: pure idiocy.

So he didn't blame Zhang Jizu for the diplomatic wording. The message was crystal clear — he was advising Cheng Shi to give up.

But he was also genuinely a stand-up brother. He was at least willing to contribute half his Prosperity divinity for Cheng Shi's stubbornness. What he didn't know was that Cheng Shi's "Vitality" authority might be able to save this child directly, with no divinity sacrifice necessary.

So for Cheng Shi, the method of rescue wasn't the problem. The problem was whether there would be risk afterward.

If there wasn't, then delivering the child and clearing the trial — he couldn't call it a massive win, but at least he'd break even.

But if the situation spiraled after the delivery and put him and Old Zhang in danger again, that would truly be losing the wife and the army.

Cheng Shi could accept taking a small loss himself. What he couldn't accept was dragging a generous brother along for the ride.

He frowned in contemplation, weighed the scales several times over, and finally devised a comparatively safe plan.

"I might have a way to save this child. But the situation we're facing is too complex. I need help. Old Zhang — do you dare to gamble with me?"

Zhang Jizu's eyes shot wide open, then narrowed to slits. He asked in disbelief:

"You're confident? You have a safer method than just pumping in Prosperity divinity?"

The matter of the Vitality authority wasn't something he couldn't tell Old Zhang, but now wasn't the right moment. So Cheng Shi rephrased. Seeing Squinty Eyes stunned by his response, he shook his head, then nodded.

"I have a method. But no guarantees.

I can supply the vitality this child is missing. But I can't be certain that delivering it won't trigger an even greater danger — a danger possibly worse than the instant death you just experienced.

So—

Old Zhang... do you dare to gamble?"

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