

The Gods 391

Chapter 391: Sure, We Can Gamble — But What's the Prize?

Gamble?

As expected of a Fate follower — the gambling urge ran deep.

Perhaps it was precisely this side of Cheng Shi that had prompted Him to bestow the Die of Fate upon his alternate personality, opening the path of faith?

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed to a slit. He scanned the surroundings, then looked down at Aph Ros's body and gave a slight nod.

"I'm not averse to a gamble. But generally speaking, the winnings should at least justify the stakes.

You know why I'm here — that great one, along with your Benefactor, commissioned me to keep you alive.

So my preference is to avoid unnecessary risks.

But you... hmm, you're an interesting friend.

I don't have many friends. For an interesting one, taking a risk isn't out of the question.

So tell me, Cheng Shi — before the child in Aph Ros's belly dies — tell me about your gamble. Most importantly: what can we win?"

Squinty Eyes' words were as sincere as ever. So sincere that even without Master of Deception, Cheng Shi knew every word was genuine.

'I've been making plenty of new friends lately. And if a friend is baring his soul, then as a follower of Deceit, wouldn't it be a waste of the Fun God's favor not to lean into this heart-to-heart?'

And so Cheng Shi launched into his grand persuasion offensive.

Anything involving the word "gamble" sent his persuasion skills rocketing skyward.

But his first target wasn't Old Zhang — it was Scorpio, standing off to the side.

He intended to talk the little brother with questionable survival skills out the door first.

He pulled out a die, tucked it into Scorpio's hands, and said:

"I'm already happy you followed me here. But what comes next is dangerous — honestly, I can't guarantee your safety. So go, brother. Find a quiet corner and hunker down until the trial ends.

Trust me. We'll win.

And Fate tells me this isn't goodbye. We'll meet again."

Scorpio's expression grew complicated. Every big shot he'd clung to before had treated him like a workhorse. A big shot like Cheng Shi who actually considered his feelings? Incredibly rare.

He looked at Cheng Shi's earnest face. He neither accepted nor refused. Instead, he suddenly asked a question that left Cheng Shi completely thrown:

"Brother Cheng... are you really Bald Uses Rejoice?"

"Guaranteed genuine." Cheng Shi blinked, then broke into a sincere grin. "Not to brag, but I'm the world's greatest Druid. Carrying you is no problem at all."

Zhang Jizu snorted at this and told Scorpio: "My advice — stay far away from him."

The comment dripped with mockery, obvious to anyone with half a brain. But the little assassin was too deep in his own emotions, interpreting Zhang Jizu's words as another nudge to help Cheng Shi convince him to leave.

'These two... they're really good people.'

'They handle the danger themselves. They share the trial rewards together.'

'Forget the upper tiers — in the entire game, where else would you find people like this?'

Scorpio wrestled with himself for a long time, then finally gave a firm nod.

"On my way here, I found an escape route. Brother Cheng, I'll be hiding nearby. If you need help, shout — I'll definitely hear you."

Without waiting for a refusal, he vanished into the shadows.

Watching the little assassin disappear, Cheng Shi burst out laughing.

Zhang Jizu raised an eyebrow. "What — interested in Time?"

"Time?"

No, no — I just thought of something amusing."

"What's amusing?"

"Baldy... never mind, I'll tell you after this is over."

Zhang Jizu's hands never stopped working, but his eyes flickered briefly with understanding. He thought to himself:

'So Zhen Yi's so-called "boyfriend" really does have a connection to Hong Lin?'

'Interesting. How'd she end up falling for him?'

After sending Scorpio away, Cheng Shi shifted gears and launched into the next round of persuasion.

He needed to answer Zhang Jizu's question: what could the two of them win from this gamble?

He turned to the squinting Zhang Jizu, and as he chose his words, he half-convincing, half-explained:

"What I stand to win is simple — a gamble that satisfies me. You should see it by now: I love to gamble. And that's exactly why He agreed to shelter my alternate personality.

So as long as you join me in this gamble, win or lose, I've already gained my 'benefit.'

As for you... Old Zhang, since you remember your mission, you should also realize: your mission is not yet complete."

"?"

Zhang Jizu squinted and frowned.

"True — there's still half a day until the trial ends. If you truly want to save this child, there could be unpredictable risks.

But if that's your reasoning, I'd say not gambling is the better return for me. No gamble means no risk. I could simply extract you and wait out the trial."

Cheng Shi shook his head vigorously.

"No, no, no — you're wrong.

You said you came here after praying to the Fun God. So let me ask: what exactly was the commission He passed through that great one?"

Zhang Jizu thought carefully for a moment—recalling the exact words.

"To do my best to keep a certain follower of His alive during the trial."

He repeated the phrase to Cheng Shi. Cheng Shi's grin stretched wide. Zhang Jizu was somewhat puzzled — he genuinely hadn't followed Cheng Shi's line of reasoning.

"Where's the problem?"

"Problem?"

There's no problem at all — the problem is with your interpretation.

Old Zhang, why do you think the Fun God wants me protected?"

This question struck at the heart of what had been nagging Zhang Jizu. Throughout their journey, he'd witnessed Cheng Shi's many lies, yet he still couldn't understand the true purpose of his mission.

Frankly, before meeting Cheng Shi, he'd never imagined encountering someone among peak players whose steadiness rivaled his own.

To be blunt: with Cheng Shi's level of caution, as long as he didn't court death deliberately, dying was basically impossible.

But he'd also noticed that Cheng Shi enjoyed courting just a little bit of death. When the gambling urge hit, the gleam in his eyes could practically lasso you onto his pirate ship.

Even so, this hardly seemed to warrant Deceit borrowing Death's mouth to deploy a Chosen One. Even if the two gods had struck a deal, a true god's command couldn't be a mere transaction. There had to be deeper meaning hidden within — meaning Zhang Jizu simply hadn't been able to see.

Seeing doubt creep into Zhang Jizu's expression, Cheng Shi rejoiced internally. This was the exact confusion he'd been waiting for.

"Can't figure it out, right? That's why I said your interpretation is flawed.

You know I'm His follower. I understand Him better than anyone.

Deceit is the universe's compendium of lies. His oracles never contain a single truth — much less would He go through that great one to assign you a task.

If He really did do this, then from where I stand, His true target isn't me — it's... you!"

"Me?" Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed until they formed a single horizontal line.

Cheng Shi stared at Gao Ya's face with a strange expression, thinking the feature that ought to be closing wasn't the eyes — it was those conspicuously large nostrils.

"Exactly, you.

The thoughts of a true god are beyond mortal comprehension. Even as His follower, I can't possibly guess what He's thinking. But I have a feeling — He seems to have His eye on you.

Back to the old topic: you know the gods are pushing Faith Fusion, and you've guessed that Deceit and Death share a close relationship.

That great one once intended to favor me. But at the time, I didn't know better. I split off a troublesome alternate personality and obtained the Die of Fate, so I missed that opportunity.

But there's no way the two of Them would abandon their Faith Fusion efforts. So think about it — is it possible that you...

might be the next candidate?"

Zhang Jizu frowned. He sensed layers beneath Cheng Shi's words.

'So you're saying the offer you tossed away got inherited by me? Is that it?'

But he had to concede: what Cheng Shi said... did make a certain amount of sense.

He'd harbored similar suspicions himself.

The question was: Zhang Jizu didn't believe he possessed any talent for Deceit. So why would He have taken an interest?

Cheng Shi noticed this doubt too. He paused briefly, then fabricated... supplemented... the logical gap.

"Because you can't lie."

"?"

"Ha — sounds absurd, doesn't it?"

Absurd is exactly right. If it weren't absurd, He wouldn't be the Fun God.

Think about it: when everyone learns that your second faith has embraced Deceit, what will they think of you?

When they face you, when they analyze your words — how will they react?

Even if everything you say is the truth, under Deceit's halo, your teammates and opponents alike will scrutinize every word three times over.

Lies can deceive, yes — but truth can too. Who'd ever suspect that a Gravekeeper who can't lie would lead everyone straight into a ditch... oh wait, straight into a graveyard?

Ha, I think that's His true purpose!

Sorry, Old Zhang — this might sting a bit. But I believe what He's interested in isn't you as a person — it's the entertainment value that would burst forth once you're painted with Deceit's colors!"

"Entertainment value..."

The explanation was ludicrous. Absurd. Completely unserious.

And yet Zhang Jizu dimly sensed that it... kind of made sense?

He digested Cheng Shi's argument, then asked through narrowed eyes:

"Keep going. I'm listening. Why do you say my mission isn't complete?"

Cheng Shi was on a roll now. Eyes blazing, he gestured grandly and continued:

"When you view the Fun God's trial from this new angle, you should realize: you haven't fulfilled His commission.

Because you haven't protected me!"

It sounded like a statement of the obvious. But Zhang Jizu knew Cheng Shi wouldn't waste time on trivialities. So he tried to re-examine the words through the lens of "entertainment" and "absurdity" — and within seconds, his eyes flew open.

He suddenly understood: a commission from Deceit should never be interpreted at face value. You had to...

parse it literally!

Cheng Shi saw realization dawn on his face and roared with laughter.

"See?"

The key to His mission of 'protecting me' isn't 'me' — it's 'protect'!

If I was never in danger, how could you possibly protect me?

So He probably foresaw this exact moment. And His position is clear: He wants you to gamble with me!

In a wager where lives are the stakes — 'protect' me!

Think about it, Old Zhang. Throughout these days of trials, you haven't once achieved that word 'protect.'

The Substitute Death Doll was meant to protect me. But it ended up being used on Mo Shu instead."

"..."

"He truly has His eye on you. You can think of it that way. But He's also set tests for you, and this trial is at least one of them.

Not being able to lie doesn't matter. Not often lying doesn't matter. As long as you can solve the problem He's written, it proves you have the inclination to draw closer to Him.

So, Old Zhang — this gamble isn't mine to decide. It's a multiple-choice question He's given you.

Embrace Deceit — or seek another path.

Now it's your turn to choose."

"..."

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Chapter 392: Fate Thief!

(School-opening day — 6000 words to ease the suffering~)

Zhang Jizu was a pragmatic man.

Cheng Shi knew this. But he'd still underestimated just how pragmatic.

After the persuasion speech concluded, Zhang Jizu weighed things briefly, then pulled from his storage space a heap of items Cheng Shi had never seen before.

Cheng Shi watched him crouch down and start arranging the equipment. He blinked. "Old Zhang, what are you...?"

"Whether or not He actually thinks that way doesn't matter. I've suddenly decided your words make a certain amount of sense.

If my second faith were Deceit, then whenever others exhausted themselves agonizing over everything I said, their mental energy would be silently drained. In terms of self-preservation, it'd add another layer of camouflage.

Since Prosperity has gone silent for so long, at this point, Deceit seems like a reasonable alternative.

Still — given the current situation, I'm worried that once this child is born, something truly catastrophic could happen. So I need to prepare.

Gamble? Sure.

But I prefer to add weight to my own side of the scale. That way, even if I lose, I can saddle the winner with enough baggage to sour their victory.

Give me a moment. Before the child's vitality cuts out entirely, I can get this done."

With that, Zhang Jizu took his pile of supplies and began setting up around the die-strewn cell.

Cheng Shi watched, bewildered, as the cemetery manager daubed and drew like some ancient priest — a bit here, a bit there. Unable to contain himself, he asked:

"What even is all of this?"

"I don't have your talent for instant teleportation. To be safe, I need to roughly calculate how many escape methods I can deploy before getting instantly drained to death.

This is an ancient totem teleportation array from the Nature Alliance of the Civilization Era. The techniques for carving the totems are extremely complex and the materials are hard to source, so almost no one studies them anymore.

But I'm fond of them — they're stable. Setting them up is a hassle, but triggering them is effortless. Perfect as escape routes during positional warfare.

Also, by adding other items into the totem matrix, you can integrate different powers — including certain resurrection tools. Essential survival gear."

"..." Cheng Shi listened with his jaw hanging. Watching Zhang Jizu work with practiced ease, he swallowed and asked: "Old Zhang, exactly how many times have you done this to get this good?"

"Three times per session, on average. Coincidentally, this is also the third time this session."

"????"

Cheng Shi was floored. "This session?"

"Mm. Set one up outside the Inquisition courtyard before starting the fire. Set one up the night we took shelter in the Inquisition while you all were sleeping. And now — the third time.

All done. This array currently has two functions. The first teleports me to a random area outside the array. The second indiscriminately resurrects any life-force-depleted being within it and randomly teleports them elsewhere.

Both are escape methods. The first is triggered by pressing a bloody handprint onto the ground. The second is triggered by death.

I hope we won't need the second one. But I'd suggest you open a cut on your hands now, just in case there's no time to draw blood when the moment comes."

"..."

Cheng Shi was utterly convinced.

'No wonder Squinty Eyes said he couldn't die. You shouldn't be called Zhang Steady — you should be called Zhang Steady-Saint!'

'The Steady-Saint has spoken. Time to draw some blood.'

Cheng Shi obediently sliced open both palms, then took a deep breath.

"In that case, I'm starting. But first — I need one more item."

Zhang Jizu raised an eyebrow and produced a fresh Symbiotic Ribbon from his storage.

Cheng Shi was stunned. "You guessed?"

"Mm. When you said you could supply vitality, I figured you might need this.

You're not the type to leave danger uncontrolled. If the risk couldn't be managed, I doubt you'd gamble at all.

But now I'm even more curious.

What item could possibly supply that much vitality? And given that the fetus is half-dead, how exactly do you plan to make it 'voluntarily' accept becoming a 'slave' to your ribbon — a shared recipient of your life force?"

Cheng Shi accepted the ribbon with a peculiar look, conveniently ignoring Zhang Jizu's first question. He laughed it off.

"I have a clever plan. Right now, all you need to do is stabilize its condition. Then I'll try to deliver it using my method."

Zhang Jizu squinted. Seeing that Cheng Shi wouldn't elaborate, he didn't press further. Instead, he gripped Turadin's hand directly, channeled an immensely concentrated healing spell through her corpse as a medium, and directed it toward the life inside her belly.

"Go ahead. I'm looking forward to your performance."

Oh?

Since the audience was seated, the show could begin!

Cheng Shi's lips curled into a devilish smirk. He crouched beside Turadin's corpse and began chanting some incomprehensible gibberish.

Zhang Jizu listened to these unintelligible sounds — he couldn't even confirm they were human language — and grew even more puzzled. But he had no idea it was all misdirection.

The trick to close-up magic lies in diverting the audience's attention. While Zhang Jizu squinted hard and focused intently on the changes inside Turadin's belly, Cheng Shi's hand — hidden behind his back — suddenly produced a mask. Slowly, he raised it to the nape of his neck, slid it along his jaw, and placed it over his face.

In that instant, this Fate priest silently transformed into a...

Fate Thief!

A Fate assassin — the Fate Thief!

Yes — he'd donned an assassin's mask.

The moment Cheng Shi had confirmed that the baby needed massive vitality to be born, his plan had already taken shape. And the keys were an assassin's mask and the spare Symbiotic Ribbon in Squinty Eyes' possession!

The Symbiotic Ribbon could transfer vitality, but it had a fatal drawback: the recipient had to voluntarily accept the shared link. The child inside Turadin's belly obviously couldn't accept such "aid" right now. Even if it were conscious, survival instinct would never allow it to accept an arrangement that left its life at another's mercy.

After all, in a certain sense, it was no longer an ordinary infant.

This was exactly why Cheng Shi had put on an assassin's mask — to become a Fate Thief.

True to the name, a Fate Thief specialized in stealing others' fates. Under Fate's blessing, these Fate assassins lurked in the shadows, endlessly scrutinizing the fates of all living beings. When they spotted a fate that interested them, they'd emerge to steal it and temporarily play the protagonist in someone else's script.

Simply put: they could temporarily assume another person's identity.

How long and how deeply they could sustain the replacement depended entirely on their talent combination.

Cheng Shi possessed zero fate-stealing talent. But that didn't prevent him from using the most primitive, most basic skill to steal the fetus's fate — to become, temporarily, even if only for a single instant, that fetus.

And then he could, on the fetus's behalf, "voluntarily" become the other end of the ribbon — sharing his vitality with himself.

After that, it was time for the Vitality authority to shine.

The plan was flawless. The execution was smooth. Though the monstrous fetus in the belly had given Cheng Shi quite a fright, there was zero resistance when he assumed its identity.

Cheng Shi used Squinty Eyes' item to link his own vitality with the fetus's. Under the fetus's frantic draining...

Nothing happened.

As it turned out, with Endless Life in his arsenal, Cheng Shi was essentially immune to sustained damage.

Before long, Turadin's belly had visibly swelled even fuller. The brimming vitality even began feeding back into her corpse, causing the previously shriveled skin to smooth out somewhat.

Zhang Jizu watched all of this unfold. His pupils tightened. Disbelief was written all over his face.

He was a priest, after all — arguably one of the most elite priests in the entire Faith Game. Yet he had never heard of any item that could endlessly funnel this much vitality into another being!

Was it an S-rank sacred artifact?

No — he owned sacred artifacts himself, and none produced effects this terrifying.

Could it possibly be an SS-rank quasi-divine artifact? Such items typically contained power on par with a Servant God's relics and were consumable. Using an SS-rank item to save a child who would soon dissolve back into history seemed absurdly wasteful.

Unless...

Cheng Shi knew this child would not dissolve into the trial's historical backdrop!

It would continue to live?!

Zhang Jizu froze, then swiftly hypothesized:

'Cheng Shi must know secrets I don't — perhaps even secrets about Them. That's why he's willing to burn an item of this caliber to win this trial.'

'Which means the child in Turadin's belly might be far more significant than it appeared!'

'Is it truly Corruption's Holy Infant?'

'Did Cheng Shi enter this Birth scenario carrying Corruption's will?'

'Hmm — that would explain things. From the very start, he'd been steering the child toward birth. He broke the problem with Corruption, preached to Turadin, laid every piece of groundwork — all for this moment!'

'But there's still one question: was that Time accident also part of his calculations? Did he quietly influence the little assassin into making that decision?'

'Doesn't seem like it. That assassin genuinely doesn't seem very bright.'

'Then how could Cheng Shi have been so certain the accident wouldn't derail his plan?'

The more Zhang Jizu thought, the more curious he became. He stole glances at Cheng Shi — drenched in sweat, not daring to relax for even an instant — and thought:

'Just how many secrets does this follower of Deceit know about Them?'

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Chapter 393: Accidents Always Come Uninvited

The child inside Turadin's belly was still draining vitality. Like a bottomless pit, it greedily sucked down the "milk" of survival, seemingly insatiable no matter how much it consumed.

The delivery was taking far too long — far longer than Cheng Shi had anticipated.

He'd originally thought he should actively manage the timing, ideally arranging for the monstrosity inside Turadin's belly to be born just seconds before the trial ended.

That way, when time ran out, they could settle their scores risk-free.

But now, it was clear he'd been over-optimistic.

He was terrified that the trial would end before this little monster was even born. So he turned stiffly toward Zhang Jizu, hoping Squinty Eyes had a solution.

Zhang Jizu was stunned too — first by how long the child's vitality drain was taking, and second by the sheer volume of vitality Cheng Shi was producing.

This total amount of vitality had clearly exceeded any player's comprehension.

He saw the plea in Cheng Shi's eyes and responded through narrowed lids:

"The flesh on the belly is growing richer. Let me try the scalpel again. If my read is right, once vitality reaches a certain threshold, the skin should become cuttable."

He drew a scalpel and traced a gentle line across the skin. Yet once again — nothing.

The belly felt soft and elastic to the touch, but it was utterly impervious to blades. No matter what Zhang Jizu tried — even burning it with a gasoline-soaked cotton swab — the skin showed zero change.

Cheng Shi frowned and pressed a hand over his ring.

Was it possible that conventional methods simply couldn't breach this belly's defenses? That only brute divine force could deliver the child?

But there was still time before the trial ended. He feared that blasting the baby out prematurely might trigger another catastrophe. So he could only wait — for a more opportune moment.

Yet in their exhaustion and razor-wire tension, the two of them overlooked something critical: history's script didn't revolve around them alone.

While they were meticulously counting down seconds to the ideal birth window, Berios — who had spent the entire day scouring the Church basement and finding no one — grew thunderously dark.

In the chamber where the false-god followers had been quartered, he found only a single corpse. Gou Feng, who should have been there liaising with the Church, had also vanished. The moment Dolgod's supreme ruler realized he'd likely been played, he rushed to the underground lake to confirm Go Lis's condition.

He'd assumed that without today's treatment, Go Lis would simply be less energetic than usual. What he hadn't expected was that upon descending, the normally listless Go Lis had gone...

completely berserk!

She thrashed her massive tentacles in a frenzy, churning the lake, shaking the ground itself. Something had clearly agitated her to the point where her entire body trembled and convulsed, as if only this violent struggle could banish her "pain."

The Head of Church saw his beloved reduced to this state and instantly understood: he'd been deceived. Worse — before departing, these fear-harvesting false-god followers had even tampered with Go Lis!

'Bold!'

'How dare you toy with the Church on Dolgod's own soil? How dare you desecrate Dolgod's guardian "deity"!'!

The sight of Go Lis in agony pierced the Head of Church's heart and ignited his fury. He slammed his staff into the ground, glacial light blazing in his eyes.

But misfortune never comes alone. At that precise moment, an even more livid Lis Field stormed in like a gale, and the instant he saw Go Lis in this state, his eyes nearly split with rage:

"Those mongrels' goal was never some damned 'fear'!

My men tell me huge disturbances have been coming from the Brotherhood's safehouse! They were searching for that so-called false-god Holy Infant all along!

They played us, Berios! You'd better tell me Go Lis hasn't been harmed, or else—"

"Or else what? Fool!"

The Head of Church's voice was frigid. Perhaps "fool" wasn't aimed at Big Beard alone — possibly at himself as well. After all, the decision to deal had been mutual, and he bitterly regretted how easily he'd trusted false-god followers.

But regret served no purpose. These followers were clearly nothing like previous small-time intruders. They were audacious beyond measure, daring to toy with Dolgod's supreme leader right under the Theocracy of Growth's nose.

Berios was a man of composure, but that didn't mean his tolerance was limitless.

And so, consumed by rage, he left Big Beard behind, gripped his staff, and climbed once more to the top of the Church tower.

Lis Field guessed his intent and grew even more furious:

"You'd use Go Lis again?! You'd plunge her back into confusion for the sake of your own anger!

Berios, is this what you call loving her?!

Stop! I'll go! Let me kill them. I'll bring their heads back to the lake — they'll pay for this blasphemy!"

Berios cast an icy glance at Lis Field.

"Those who blaspheme a 'god' must be punished by 'divine' judgment.

They didn't deceive me. They deceived Go Lis. They desecrated her hope and her future.

I will not allow Go Lis to be humiliated or harmed. So they must die beneath a God Descent.

I told you — you don't understand Go Lis. Brute force... is useless."

With that, Berios ignored the red-eyed Big Beard. He raised his staff high and pressed it against the god statue atop the tower. The belly-touching idol blazed with radiance once more as a blinding sun descended upon the Church tower at dusk.

As the light grew ever fiercer, the flagging Go Lis in the underground lake suddenly seemed activated by some hidden art. A single tentacle shot upright, surging through the tower's internal conduits, blasting through the tower's crown, and reappearing in the citizens of Dolgod's line of sight.

When Berios aimed his staff at the Brotherhood's safehouse, the colossal tentacle continued stretching skyward without limit. Then, with a thunderous crash, it hammered down and obliterated the entire district surrounding the safehouse into dust!

Cheng Shi never would have imagined that Zhang Jizu's contingency plan wouldn't be needed against the newborn child — but against Berios's wrath.

Scorpio, hiding near the safehouse, was the first to sense the apocalyptic aura. He flinched in alarm and immediately tried to warn Cheng Shi's group — but he was a step too late. He could only watch helplessly as the titanic tentacle screamed past his body, splitting wind and cracking thunder as it pulverized everything beneath his feet.

The two men, still channeling vitality into the child, had barely registered the incoming danger before disaster was upon them.

Cheng Shi, thanks to his Vitality authority, didn't die instantly. Instead, he was buried under tons of sand and debris, driven deep into the ruins — his entire being pummeled into a daze.

Zhang Jizu was flattened into a human pancake. But the totem array on the ground instantly resurrected him at the surface. He was caught in the blast-wave's storm, tumbling twice through midair before landing steadily on his feet. Without wasting a single second, he pulled a robe from his storage to cover his bare body.

As for the third person in that underground cell...

Gao Ya... yes, the third person was Gao Ya.

Zhang Jizu had been parasitizing Gao Ya's body, suppressing her consciousness. But when both of them died simultaneously, the array resurrected Gao Ya as well!

She materialized somewhere outside the ruins, just like Squinty Eyes. The instant she revived, her face was deathly pale and full of dread.

She didn't flee first. She didn't scan for external threats. Instead, she immediately looked down at herself — checking her body's condition.

Only upon confirming she was still female did the deep furrow in her brow ease slightly. She exhaled heavily, then wrapped her shapely figure in a piece of torn fabric.

Finding no teammates nearby, she frowned in thought for a moment. From her storage space she produced a rust-covered thumbtack and quietly pressed it into the ground at her feet.

After completing this, she turned and ran.

The trial was nearly over. Whether Cheng Shi won or not, her priority was to distance herself from the epicenter, preserve herself, and make it back alive.

She had more important things to do!

Cheng Shi buried underground, Zhang Jizu steadily observing, Gao Ya withdrawing — Berios's fury had rained down upon the players' heads, yet hadn't killed a single one.

But the ruins contained more than just three people.

There was also... an unborn child!

Turadin's child!

In truth, just moments ago, Cheng Shi had sensed the trial's end approaching. He was ready to attempt a "cesarean" using Thundering Judgment.

But Berios's God Descent had beaten him to it, seizing the surgeon's scalpel.

The method differed, but the result was the same — different routes, same destination.

Under the colossal external force, the child — now gorged on vitality — was finally born!

But its birth came not from its mother's body. Its mother's corpse had been blasted to powder, and the instant the belly separated from the host, the child finally escaped the flesh prison that had trapped it and burst free.

Yet the moment it entered this world — before it could even open its eyes to take in reality — the devastating force of God Descent seized it and slammed it underground.

This world seemed to greet its arrival with a horrifying act of annihilation.

More ironic still: even in death, the one who ground Turadin's corpse to dust was none other than her "lofty" "father" and her "mother" who had become a mass of slime and flesh.

The only "person" their fury managed to kill was Turadin's already-dead corpse.

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Chapter 394: Memory Never Misses Its Cue...

The child didn't die.

Not only was it alive — it had even found its "wet nurse" among the rubble.

Whether it was the Symbiotic Ribbon's pull or Fate quietly intervening, this infant who shared vitality with Cheng Shi had fallen alongside him, buried together beneath the ruins.

The instant Cheng Shi laid eyes on the male infant, his pupils contracted sharply. Ignoring the pain screaming through his body, he reacted like a startled cat and instinctively fired Thundering Judgment at it.

And then...

BOOM — he fried himself.

"..."

The charred infant tumbled into his arms. The moment they made contact, it raised a pair of brilliant, enchanting eyes and looked at him with a smile.

Can you imagine how horrifying this picture was?

Deep underground in collapsed ruins, in a pitch-dark, suffocatingly tight space, a monstrosity capable of draining a Chosen One of all vitality was lying on your chest — charred black — just a fist's width from your face, grinning at you, staring with unblinking eyes that glowed a faint violet...

"..."

The moment Cheng Shi met those eyes, his brain went white with a thunderclap.

But his rational mind persisted. He forced down the terror, calculated the remaining time, and when he realized there were still at least several minutes until the trial ended, he... couldn't take it anymore.

'No — this child is too dangerous. Since the life that should not have been born has already been born, it dying after birth shouldn't count as going off-topic, right?'

The thought took root. The more Cheng Shi considered it, the more sense it made. The entire process lasted about one second before he made his decision. He curled a finger at the infant in his arms and activated...

Never Lost Gambling Gear!

He ran!

He didn't dare gamble on whether killing the child via the Symbiotic Ribbon would cause the trial to fail. He'd survived until the final minutes — he couldn't exactly tear down his own stage. So he bolted, teleporting to the surface via his die.

And the die on the surface was the very one he'd slipped into Scorpio's hands when "convincing" him to leave.

When Scorpio saw his Brother Cheng materialize before him — charred head to toe — he felt no joyful relief at their reunion. Instead, pure horror seized him. He whipped out the Arc of Time Restoration and slashed at Cheng Shi without hesitation.

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. His heart lurched. He was about to dodge when he realized there was still a similarly charred infant clinging to him!

Turadin's child had teleported to the surface with him through Never Lost Gambling Gear!

'This is bad — it's latched onto me!'

His heart sank into an abyss. Scorpio's blade struck the child's back but dealt zero damage. Worse, the Time power imbued in the Arc of Time Restoration had absolutely no effect on the infant — if anything, it made his smile three shades brighter.

!!!

It didn't fear Time!

What on earth was this thing?!

Squinty Eyes had never said the ribbon could share movement talents! Yet everything unfolding before him screamed that he and this child had somehow become... one entity!

'No — this ribbon has to go.'

'Even if it means losing the trial in the final second, I can't leave this trial with something unclean attached to me.'

Seeing Scorpio's attacks were useless, Cheng Shi clenched his teeth, pinched the Symbiotic Ribbon in his hand, and issued a death decree to the infant on the other end.

A Symbiotic Ribbon "slave's" life or death hung entirely on the caster's will. So when Cheng Shi willed death, the infant should have died.

But it didn't!

Cheng Shi watched in horror as the ribbon crumbled to nothing in his hand. The infant's expression froze, then its smile vanished entirely. Its gaze slowly turned cold. Nothing about this was going well.

His spine went rigid. He immediately produced the Tomb End Stone from his storage.

He was prepared to use Decay's power to rot this newborn life — to eliminate the danger while it was still containable.

But just as he was about to act, Scorpio lunged forward with a grave expression, producing a dagger, and thrust it straight at the infant in Cheng Shi's arms.

"Watch out, Brother Cheng!"

With the little assassin's explosive shout, Cheng Shi watched as the child clinging to him went "whoosh" — and vanished into thin air.

He stared in shock, looking at Scorpio in disbelief. The assassin was gritting his teeth, watching the dagger in his hand gradually dissolve, his face the picture of painful loss.

That was...

Memory's power?!

???

'Wait — you're pulling Memory on me at a time like this?!

Cheng Shi was shaken. And nobody could blame him — Memory had traumatized him one too many times.

Even though Scorpio was genuinely helping him, the mere thought that Memory had stuck its nose in at the trial's finale made Cheng Shi's entire body go numb.

"Brother, you'd better explain what that was... so I can mentally prepare myself."

Scorpio seemed to read Cheng Shi's concern. He shook his head with a bitter smile.

"Don't panic, Brother Cheng. It's not an item that alters history — it's one that... traces it back."

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He instantly thought of a profession: Old Hunter — Memory's assassin!

"Exactly. It's an Old Hunter's Dagger. It doesn't change history. It simply exiles whatever I stab into the past — into a previous era of history.

Once the target drowns in history's tidal wave, we're safe!

So, Brother Cheng — when you bluffed at the start saying I was an Old Hunter, the reason my reaction was so dramatic was because...

I actually am one."

???

Cheng Shi's brain froze. "You're an Old Hunter?"

'Impossible — Master of Deception told me you were an Another Day Assassin!'

His gaze sharpened. He studied Scorpio with newfound gravity and asked, not entirely certain:

"You... broke your oath?"

Scorpio's face drained of color. He pressed his lips together and nodded.

"...Yes, Brother Cheng. You guessed right. I'm an Oathbreaker. As for why...

It's all in the past. Let's not go there."

'Hiss—'

'This little assassin is something else. How did you manage to follow two faiths that both oppose mine and still latch onto my leg?'

But trivial thoughts could wait. There was still a mountain of problems to address.

Even though this time Memory's power wasn't used to record history, Cheng Shi still needed to know where Turadin's child had been exiled.

"Where in history did you banish it?"

"I can't control it, Brother Cheng. I'm not a true Old Hunter. This was just a contingency I'd saved for myself. I can't use it with the precision I once had — only the dagger's most basic function.

That child has been randomly exiled into a fragment of history. As for which one — nobody knows."

"..."

Cheng Shi nodded. He didn't press further. Instead, he simply said "Thank you" to Scorpio.

Wherever that child had gone, Scorpio had undeniably solved a massive headache for him right there and then.

He could feel it — his connection to the child was fading.

No — it had disappeared entirely.

'Good. As long as I'm not entangled with anything bizarre, the rest... can be left to time.'

'Just let there be no more surprises in these final minutes.'

And at that same moment, Zhang Jizu vaulted onto a rooftop nearby.

Cheng Shi turned to look. The two brothers in adversity locked eyes, each reading in the other's gaze the sheer, trembling relief of surviving catastrophe.

'Thank god Old Zhang had that backup. Without it, we'd have been crushed.'

But just as Zhang Jizu was about to close the distance to his protection target — determined to prevent any last-second accidents — he suddenly saw Cheng Shi frown, snap his fingers, and vanish from both their sights yet again.

"..."

Squinty Eyes' face went dark. He stopped mid-step, stood where he was, and sighed. 'What is this restless con man up to now?'

Cheng Shi hadn't wanted to take risks in the trial's final moments either. But Berios's fury felt abnormal. Even if they'd skipped today's treatment for Go Lis, it shouldn't have been enough to make him deploy Go Lis again to destroy them.

After all, Go Lis's condition was poor. Every time the Church invoked the so-called "God Descent," it inflicted damage on Go Lis herself.

So Cheng Shi was curious about what had actually happened inside the Church. One snap of the fingers later, he teleported back via a die.

He'd originally planned to sneak into the underground lake and see what had transpired. But before he could even blend into the chaotic Church interior, he spotted the Chieftain — the only one who'd been left behind at the Church — slipping out of the inner hall with a tense, nervous expression.

Cheng Shi's eyes narrowed. 'Could the upheaval have something to do with him?'

He immediately frowned and followed. But after only a few steps, his vision plunged into endless darkness.

[Wish Trial (Born Equal — Birth) Challenge Successful]

[Calculating score and settling rewards...]

[Player: Cheng Shi — Performance Rating: S]

[Item Obtained: Umbilical Shackles (S) ×1]

[Item Obtained: Theocracy History (C) ×1]

[Item Obtained: Dolgod God-Worshipping Wood Carving (A) ×1]

[Item Obtained: Token of the Gate of Joyous Lust: Broken Ribbon (SS) ×1]

[Road to Ascension: +16]

[Ladder of Ascent: +3]

[Current Road to Ascension Score: 2204 — Global Rank: 390,157]

[Current Ladder of Ascent Score: 175 — Path Rank: 38]

[Trial Cleared. Exiting...]

...

Chapter 395: Trial Cleared, But the Story Is Far From Over

Life Era, Land of Hope.

In the central-southwest of the Land of Hope lay an uninhabited desert. A grand god-worshipping altar had once stood here — the pilgrimage site for all peoples of the Three Wu Tribes. But across eons of upheaval, the traces of faith had slowly been weathered into handfuls of yellow earth, mixing into the endless sand, gone without a trace.

All that remained were colossal fragments of fallen walls towering above the rolling dunes, offering fleeting shelter to whatever poor souls wandered in — a reminder that the previous civilization had drawn its curtain, and a testament to what loneliness truly meant in the face of history.

A nomadic tribe, staggering and struggling, limped to this place. With sandstorms raging on all sides, they sheltered here for several days.

They'd assumed it was nothing more than a brief interlude in their fight for survival. None of them could have imagined that the tribe's destiny would pivot from this very spot.

During their stay, a child from the tribe was playing in the sand beneath a massive stone column. He accidentally dug through the ground and tumbled with a shriek into a sand hole below.

Other tribesmen rushed over to dig him out. But when they pried open the stone slabs beneath their feet and discovered a hidden chamber, everyone froze.

The tribe's leader hurried over as well. No one knew his real name. Everyone simply called him Gor Ba — a name inherited from the previous leader.

He was a wise old man, his face etched with the trials of this era. One glance and he recognized this as a place once occupied by Uma Sinners — the chamber was still strung with rows of dead infants, now swaying in the sand-laden wind as daylight reached them for the first time.

Gor Ba understood well that in this era, survival without divine patronage was impossible. Unfortunately, his tribe wasn't a cast-off branch of any major clan — they were a settlement formed spontaneously by wandering beggars.

They too craved divine protection, but had never found a way to attract His gaze.

Now, the opportunity seemed to have arrived.

He urged his people to take up arms and kill these dead infants — to punish sinners on Birth's behalf, and through this offering, attract His attention.

But some tribesmen had heard tales of the Uma Sinners. They were afraid, terrified, and resistant. Even if they couldn't attract His gaze, they shouldn't attract His wrath. These Uma Sinners were clearly atoning for their sins; killing them now — who knew whether He'd be pleased or enraged?

But they'd all misunderstood Gor Ba's true intent. Punishing sinners on Birth's behalf was merely a pretext. What he actually wanted was to kill these Uma people, steal their Umbilical Shackles, disguise the entire tribe as a new generation of Uma Sinners, and then head north to beg the Ulun Herdsmen for protection.

Only that way could they survive and endure in an era where one couldn't live without faith.

"But that's blasphemy too, Chieftain!" the tribesmen protested.

Gor Ba laughed heartily.

"If blasphemy can keep my people alive just as well as worshipping the gods, then what's wrong with blasphemy?"

Besides — the moment we 'inherit' these shackles, aren't we already atoning?"

Those words moved these faithless, desperate survivors. And so, in what had once been the Three Wu Tribes' sacred pilgrimage site, in the hidden chamber of the last surviving Uma clan, Gor Ba led his tribesmen in slaughtering the final Uma bloodline to extinction.

Everyone gathered the Umbilical Shackles from the ground, their eyes kindling with the hope of living.

And right at that moment — just as Uma Sinner blood flowed across the tribesmen's feet, just as Uma limbs scraped against their lips — Gor Ba suddenly felt his vision blur. Out of thin air, a charred infant dropped from the sky!

The infant didn't cry. The instant it hit the ground, it splashed blood across Gor Ba's face. He was stunned senseless by the impossible sight, but moments later he snapped awake and threw himself to his knees before the infant, prostrating in worship. He summoned every ounce of strength and screamed:

"He has bestowed upon us a Holy Infant! He has cast His gaze upon us!"

My people — He has granted us a Holy Infant! He has seen us!"

Terror froze on every face. They looked at one another. Then, swiftly, thunderous celebration erupted!

They embraced, they knelt, they wept with gratitude. They believed that under Gor Ba's leadership, they had finally won Birth's mercy — that they had become a tribe graced by His gaze.

After the fervent jubilation subsided, several devout tribesmen approached on their knees, kneeling beside Gor Ba to study the heaven-sent Holy Infant. With trembling reverence, they asked:

"He's a boy..."

Chieftain, how should we address him?

And how should we raise him?"

Gor Ba crawled forward two shaking paces. Using the blood of the Uma Sinners, he washed the char from the infant's body, then fixed his blazing gaze on those uncanny, captivating eyes. Summoning his courage, he gave this heaven-sent Holy Infant a name.

"Gor Ba. From this day forward, he is our tribe's new Gor Ba!"

And so, on that day, this wandering tribe of beggars welcomed their new chieftain — an infant who had appeared by accident, bestowed from the heavens.

A Holy Infant of Birth.

Little Gor Ba was easy to raise. He never cried, never misbehaved. Each day, beyond smiling, he would simply stare in a particular direction, lost in thought.

Over time, the elder Gor Ba — serving as interim chieftain — came to believe that the direction the Holy Infant gazed toward must hold divine guidance. And so he resolutely changed course, abandoning the journey north to seek the Ulun Herdsmen's protection. Instead, the tribe set off in the direction the Holy Infant was looking, searching for His guidance.

And so, dragging along everything they'd scavenged from the Uma chamber — relics, secrets, and artifacts — they changed direction.

Much later, the tribe entered the territory of the Dol Federation and, guided by the Holy Infant, knocked on the gates of Dolgod.

At that time, the Theocracy of Growth was under the rule of a Head of Church of Uda bloodline. When he saw the Umbilical Shackles in the tribe's possession, an instinctive kinship born of ancient blood ties — and an inexplicable goodwill outsiders could never fathom — compelled him to open the gates and settle them inside.

And it was in Dolgod that little Gor Ba gradually grew up.

His childhood held few pleasures. He was quiet and spoke little throughout his youth. But his people were patient and accepting — after all, he was a heaven-sent Holy Infant who had guided them to a stable life. Everyone in the tribe respected him, loved him, and obeyed his every word.

Until one day, the Uda-blooded Head of Church questioned why they had stopped atoning and proposed the establishment of a Blasphemy Confessional. Only then did the tribe realize that stealing the Uma Sinners' identity came at a price — and that price was continuing to atone to Him, just as the real Uma Sinners had done, in order to keep their place in the city.

...

Chapter 396: History Has More Than One Face, But the World Only Believes One Corner

Because the Theocracy of Growth and Dolgod sheltered the Uma Sinners — not some nameless tribe of wanderers.

And so, under the Head of Church's pressure, these disguised "Uma Sinners" had no choice but to hang themselves up once more — just as they'd found the real Uma Sinners — shackling themselves and suspending from the ceiling of the Blasphemy Confessional.

But before begging for forgiveness, the young Gor Ba — uncharacteristically — made a single request of the Head of Church.

The Uda-blooded Head of Church was pleased by his Uma kin's cooperation, so he agreed.

And so, before the last "Uma Sinner" was hung, Dolgod lost a handsome young man — and gained a girl as beautiful as the moon itself.

"Gor Ba, as long as I hold my seat, the Uma people will have a place in Dolgod, and the Theocracy of Growth shall be grateful for your devotion."

"Head of Church, Gor Ba is a thing of the past. From today, my name is...

Go Lis.

How do you like my new name?"

"It suits your beauty. But why change it?"

"Because...

I feel this name suits me better.

Until we meet again, my dear Head of Church."

That night, the beautiful young woman clasped the umbilical-cord shackles onto herself with her own hands. In the final instant before transforming into a dead infant, she gazed at the luminous moonlight streaming through the window and smiled — devastatingly.

"How many times... has it been now?"

...

Time flowed like sand through a crack. Years later, Dolgod's supreme power changed hands. The ascendant Uda Head of Church was stoned to death before the Church gates. The once-glorious Blasphemy Confessional was rebranded as the Evil Infant Inquisition — a place everyone shunned.

But under the current Head of Church's leadership, Dolgod entered a remarkably stable period.

And in this era, on another moonlit night, two boys snuck hand-in-hand into the Evil Infant Inquisition.

When they saw the dead infants covering the ceiling, the curious pair grew frightened.

"Berios, are you sure you heard someone calling you?"

"Didn't you hear it too, Lis Field?"

"But these Uma Sinners are no different from corpses. How could they possibly speak?"

"I only trust my ears. Quiet — let me listen carefully."

And so the two trembling boys carried a ladder through rows of dead infants, searching for the voice that had called to them. It wasn't until the moon reached its zenith that they finally found their target.

Strangely, neither of them had actually heard the dead infant speak. Yet when they drew near, desire itself whispered in their hearts that this was the one.

So they unsealed a dead infant that had been calling to them all along. They released an Uma Sinner from her shackles. And on their Benefactor's behalf, they forgave this "sinner's" crime of blasphemy.

With the two boys' help, Go Lis opened her eyes once more beneath the moonlight.

She lay naked before the two wide-eyed, enthralled youths. She smiled knowingly, then raised a single finger and pointed at the young Berios. And Berios...

lost his own desire. He became as composed as a sage, guarding his piety.

Then she raised another finger and pointed at the young Lis Field. And Lis Field's possessiveness grew without limit. He eagerly agreed to Go Lis's every demand, transformed himself into the most perfect container, and bore for Go Lis...

another version of herself.

Watching everything replay without a hitch, Go Lis smiled carelessly and walked out of the Evil Infant Inquisition.

She was about to resume her chase of Him — the one she'd never gotten close to.

"Time brings shackles, but it also brews opportunity.

Only this way can I approach Him an infinite number of times. Isn't that right?"

Go Lis stepped out of the Inquisition, lifted her gaze to the radiant moon, and smiled — a smile more beautiful than the moon itself.

Everything after unfolded exactly as Cheng Shi understood it. Lis Field was discarded as a pawn. Berios ascended to the Head of Church's throne. And of course, behind all of it, a single hand had been pulling every string. She hung over Dolgod like the moon itself — everyone lived beneath her light, yet no one knew that her glow was reshaping Dolgod into something entirely new.

Until Lis Field gave birth to the child Go Lis had granted him.

What he didn't know was that the moment that child was born, Go Lis appeared in his home and swapped her soul with the infant's.

She had always been herself. In her cycle through Time, there had never been any other variable. And the child whose soul was swapped into her body had long since become a desire puppet — a stand-in, sent in her place to approach the Birth she could never reach!

She couldn't bear the thought of dying on the road to reaching Him. So she found a test subject — an identical one, also a scapegoat, one carrying her own bloodline.

So it was no wonder Lis Field harbored maddened feelings for the child he'd borne — because that child had always been her. It had always been Go Lis!

Go Lis was hung back on the ceiling. And the "Go Lis" who'd been refined into a desire puppet followed the original's insights and began attempting to approach Birth.

Until she transformed into a mass of foul, stinking flesh. Until Berios once again pinned his hopes on finding a cure among false-god followers. And at that point, these crazed heretics would scheme to extract every advantage they could from the Theocracy's Head of Church — including getting close to the so-called "God Descent" and trying to extract morsels of "divine" "flesh" from the god-like monster.

Go Lis understood them perfectly. No — more accurately, she understood desire perfectly.

So she left a tiny gift from Corruption inside the desire puppet "Go Lis's" flesh.

When these false-god followers inevitably got their hands on genuine "divine flesh," the clever ones would immediately devour it. But the moment they swallowed something that didn't belong to them, the power of desire erupting from that flesh would guide them to the abandoned Evil Infant Inquisition — to unseal a dead infant hanging high above.

And so, one day, some lucky soul would again — on a brilliant, moonlit night — liberate Go Lis from her self-imposed penitent bonds.

No — by then she no longer called herself Go Lis. Because the Berios she had watched grow up would give her a new name. And that name was:

Turadin.

"Compared to Turadin, I obviously prefer Aph Ros.

So — who will be the next protagonist to take the stage?

Will it still be you, my brother?"

...

Chapter 397: Life Is Born Rough, and Birth Has Always Been Insane

(Thanks for all the support — 6500!)

Reality. A hospital in an unknown province and city.

Gou Feng bolted upright in bed, gasping for air. His face was deathly white, painted with terror — yet beneath the fear, glints of excitement and wild joy flickered in his eyes.

Outsiders would struggle to tell whether the elation was simply relief at surviving. But only Gou Feng himself knew: in that trial, he had obtained exactly what he'd come for.

As for what that was...

His expression shifted with nervous anticipation. He extended a hand and cast a small Birth spell upon himself. Immediately, his belly began to rapidly swell!

Just like Turadin under the Descent Technique — a fully rounded belly, clearly harboring a new life on the verge of being born!

Yes — he had brought a child back from the trial!

Behind everyone's backs, he had smuggled out a child!

And this was precisely why Gou Feng had refused to let Zhang Jizu treat him. He'd been suppressing his gestational aura with everything he had — disguising it in the same way he'd disguised Turadin's aura. From the very moment Zhang Jizu had resurrected him, he'd been in disguise.

No matter how hard Squinty Eyes thought about it, he would never have guessed that when he resurrected Gou Feng in the ruins, he hadn't revived just one person — but a genuine "one corpse, two lives"!

As for how the child in his belly had gotten there...

Don't forget how Gou Feng had survived the Scavenger's pursuit!

To disguise himself as a dead infant and evade Mo Shu's hunt, he'd released an Uma Sinner and used the Chieftain's talent to birth another copy of himself from the Uma Sinner — a body double to die in his place.

But remember: when Uma Sinners are "forgiven," their first priority is to find a suitable container for their child!

By Dolgod local standards, Gou Feng's gender might not have been appropriate. But as a Birth player, Gou Feng absolutely qualified as a "suitable Descent Technique container."

And so the most absurd thing imaginable happened. While fleeing for his life, Gou Feng had still found the greed to take a little extra. He and the Uma Sinner had each given the other a child — except the Uma Sinner never expected that the Chieftain's offspring would kill him, devour his corpse to mature, become another Gou Feng, and fanatically die as a substitute for its creator.

Meanwhile, Gou Feng himself — in the split second before the child in his belly had begun gestation — had unhesitatingly clamped the Umbilical Shackles onto his own ankles and hung himself from the ceiling!

Through this unthinkable sequence of maneuvers, he'd not only dodged mortal peril but won the bet for his own life. And most importantly, he'd brought back an Uma child.

He had extracted an Uma Sinner bloodline from the trial into reality!

And the reason he'd gone this far was, of course, his trial prayer wish!

Gou Feng hadn't lied. He really did need useful equipment. And the moment he'd encountered the legendary Uma Sinners inside the trial, he'd known he'd found exactly what he wanted.

Umbilical Shackles!

These restraints that could reduce enemies to helpless meat — for a Birth warrior who could fight with a mob of offspring, they were the ultimate weapon.

Just imagine: if Gou Feng possessed enough Umbilical Shackles, then when the Chieftain's tribe spawned en masse, a gang of hulking warriors swinging shackles — cornering enemies with nowhere to retreat, grinning savagely — that scene...

The thought alone was terrifying.

So Gou Feng had bet big. Even before his safety was guaranteed, he'd thought one step further ahead — and ultimately, through sheer luck, brought this child back to reality.

This was also why he'd been so genuinely grateful to Cheng Shi. Without Cheng Shi, Zhang Jizu would never have rescued him from the Inquisition, and his plan would have died in its cradle.

Of course, Uma Sinners were different from Uda Rioters — they were born without memories, and without instruction they couldn't manufacture Umbilical Shackles. But that didn't derail Gou Feng's plan, because the Faith Game held plenty of methods for tracing memories and history through bloodline.

So what he lacked wasn't a method — it was materials.

Since they were called Umbilical Shackles, these terrifying restraints were naturally forged from Uma Sinner umbilical blood.

And now, Gou Feng possessed a child who could endlessly produce the raw material.

As for why a single child could endlessly produce umbilical blood...

That was better left unexplained. Praise Birth — everything stems from the power He bestows.

Of course, beyond the child, Gou Feng had other spoils.

He stroked his swollen belly, then pulled a chunk of blackened flesh from his storage space.

When he sensed the residual Birth divinity within it, the Chieftain broke into a satisfied grin.

"Who'd believe I brought back a piece of...

Envoy's flesh from a trial?

Haha, even though she wasn't an Envoy at that point in time, this flesh is undeniably of the same origin as Him.

Good. Very good. This trial was worth every bit of it.

Cheng Shi, Zhang Jizu...

Masters. Absolute masters. I love you guys."

...

Reality. An apartment in an unknown province and city.

A spacious, sunlit room. Light poured through enormous floor-to-ceiling windows, illuminating everything and warming the air.

But anyone who saw the room's furnishings would feel not warmth — only bone-deep cold.

Because spread across a long table against the wall lay countless biological limbs and bizarre instruments of every shape and description.

Headless, broken puppets. A specimen of a giant spider whose legs resembled tongues. A living dagger with its blade coated in unidentified fluids. And a still-twitching, writhing bull-head on a snake-neck...

This was clearly not a laboratory — yet every item on the table looked as though it had been stitched together from chimeric experiments, flooding any viewer's heart with bottomless dread, urging them to flee.

But not everyone feared these things. To their owner, at least, every single piece was a perfect work of her own hands.

Yes — her.

She was, of course, the Folly singer: Gao Ya.

When Gao Ya awoke in her room, she strode out with a grave, resolute expression. Without hesitation, she rummaged through her long table of tools, extracting three items from the countless instruments, and arranged them before her.

The three peculiar objects were:

A puppet container with all biological activity stripped out. A special adhesive capable of bonding flesh to soul. And...

a "Birth authority," crafted using the Uda Rioters' God Reproduction Technique.

Yes — Gao Ya possessed this thing. That was why she had such detailed knowledge of the Uda Rioters' God Reproduction Technique!

She hadn't become a woman for the sake of being a woman. She'd needed the Uda Rioters' relic to gestate a child of Uda bloodline — and to do so, she'd been forced to pray for a gender-changing trial.

And the reason she wanted a child? Naturally... to grow stronger.

She was a follower of Folly, obsessed with divinity fusion. She also happened to specialize in researching Silence puppets. So when she'd stumbled upon the Uda Rioters' relic, she'd hatched a plan for a fusion experiment between Silence and Birth.

She'd already prepared a Silence puppet. All she lacked was a Birth soul.

And now, she would personally give birth to that soul.

When she bonded the Birth soul to the Silence puppet, the resulting transformation would provide invaluable first-hand data for her divinity research.

Better still — if the experiment succeeded, she'd gain a controllable, conscious, dual-faith puppet.

And the control mechanisms binding this puppet would extend beyond standard puppet-mastery techniques — to include the shackles of blood kinship!

This would dramatically enhance the obedience of a sentient puppet.

The experiment's allure was irresistible — enough to justify the cost of certain... "things."

But no matter. The moment the experiment succeeded, she could simply pray for another trial and restore herself to her original form.

Besides, she'd already used Folly techniques to pinpoint the historical spacetime of the previous trial. Returning to that story was merely a single prayer away.

Everything was within the Soloist's plan.

With that thought, Gao Ya looked at herself in the mirror and broke into a manic smile.

"There are so many madmen in this world — naturally, I must be one of them.

If I don't become even crazier, how can I hope to catch up with those who've been graced by Their gaze?

Cheng Shi... Zhang Jizu... just wait. You'll hear my name again very soon.

The next time we meet, I promise you'll be stunned!"

...

Chapter 398: Brother Cheng, Don't Tell Me You Also...

Trial. A city square in an unknown location.

Beneath a massive Prosperity god-tree statue, a nervous Scorpio slowly opened his eyes.

By rights, having just finished a trial, he shouldn't have needed to jump straight into another one. At the very least, he should have spent some time reviewing the previous trial and contemplating the elusive Time "miracle."

But...

He'd realized that in the end, he'd never found where the Time miracle was supposed to appear. Instead, he'd witnessed a whole trial's worth of Birth "miracles."

Of course, what others might call "miracles," followers of Birth would regard as nothing particularly remarkable — birthing things left and right was simply what they did.

Scorpio wasn't a Birth follower. Unable to glean any insight, he'd pragmatically launched another trial. The reason for such urgency was obvious: he'd used up every trump card he had.

The life-saving Old Hunter's Dagger was gone. To boost his survival chances before the next special trial arrived, he'd decisively prayed to his Benefactor, Time, for a new trial.

His wish: to find something else that could keep him alive.

So when he opened his eyes and surveyed the five teammates before him, those leg-spotting eyes of his immediately locked onto a dashing female player with long, flowing hair.

Clearly a Prosperity follower. That playful smirk and imperious gaze — definitely a high-level player!

A high-tier Prosperity player in a Prosperity scenario — if that wasn't a prime thigh to cling to, what was?

But... Prosperity again?

Scorpio suddenly thought of Cheng Shi from the last round.

'Brother Cheng was truly a good person.'

Just as nostalgia flickered in his eyes, the long-haired female player finished appraising the group. She smirked and turned to another female player beside her, teasing:

"All new faces. Looks like no luck.

I told you your prayer wish was unreliable. There are so many players in the game — running into him directly is nearly impossible."

The pink-haired girl beside her responded to the teasing with a noncommittal silence, merely tugging her baseball cap a little lower over her face and offering a quiet "Oh."

Seeing her lapse into silence, the long-haired player laughed heartily and boldly introduced herself to the group:

"Name's Hong Lin. Druid. Score: 2741."

Shocked silence crashed over the team.

"How MUCH?!"

"Wait, hold on — I think my hearing aid's broken!"

"2700?! No way! I just wished for enough hair to try a new hairstyle, and I run into a 2700 monster? Bro — I mean, sis — are you Bald Uses Rejoice?"

Hong Lin didn't bother hiding her identity. She nodded casually. "That's me."

Hm?

Who?

At the keyword, Scorpio's head snapped up toward the teammate who'd practically screamed his throat raw, then rapidly swiveled to the long-haired female player.

Bald Uses Rejoice? Druid?

'It matches!'

'But why is the score so high?'

'And... why is it a woman?'

Scorpio stared at Hong Lin, and suddenly the image of Cheng Shi vanishing before his eyes at the end of the last trial flashed through his mind.

!!??

'Could it be that Brother Cheng rushed off so urgently to...'

'No way — Brother Cheng, you too...?'

'Wait, but if this is really Brother Cheng, why does she look like she's never seen me before?'

"..."

'Well, I guess... this kind of thing is hard to bring up, isn't it...'

'No no no — I shouldn't think like that. It's the apocalypse. Everyone has the right to choose their own gender.'

'But Brother Cheng, weren't you kind of into Gao Ya...?'

'...Never mind. That's all in the past.'

A whirlwind of thoughts raced through Scorpio's mind, yet in the end he said nothing. Instead, he let out a quiet sigh and suppressed every flicker of excitement and confusion in his eyes.

'Who would've thought I'd cling to the same big thigh in two consecutive trials?'

'Brother Cheng... no, Sister Cheng has been so good to me.'

He'd sorted himself out — but his silky emotional transitions had thoroughly confused Hong Lin.

She'd never seen such complex emotions on a teammate's face, especially emotions that seemed to be directed at her.

'What's going on?'

Ordinarily, other players would have said nothing and simply observed this emotionally unstable teammate more closely over time, gradually uncovering the story.

But Hong Lin was different. She was blunt by nature. And besides, this trial was practically her personal run. So she looked at Scorpio with keen interest and asked directly:

"I don't think I know you. So why does it look like... you know me?"

"..."

Scorpio's expression grew impossibly complicated. He was even starting to wonder if Cheng Shi had been messing with him.

'Sister Cheng, do you want me to recognize you or not...!'

Just as Scorpio wavered in agonized indecision, the pink-haired little fox beside Hong Lin suddenly raised her head and asked hesitatingly:

"You know Cheng Shi, don't you?"

"???"

Scorpio's brain froze. Hong Lin blinked — then quickly put two and two together. Her mouth twitched and her face settled into an expression of speechless exasperation:

"Alright, tell us your story. We've got... plenty of time."

"Bro... Brother Cheng, then I'll really start talking?"

"?" The little fox blanked, then immediately widened her eyes and began scanning the others with amazement. "Cheng Shi? He's HERE?!"

"?" Hong Lin's face went dark as she realized Scorpio seemed to be addressing her. Something occurred to her and for a moment she was simultaneously so angry and so amused by her own thoughts that she could only nod repeatedly. "Oh, sure, sure. What did you just call me?"

"Um... Sister Cheng?"

BOOM—

Hiss—

As a crater exploded in the ground before him, the other teammates stood rooted in place, scalps tingling, shivering uncontrollably.

'This is the power of a Chosen One?!'

'Absolutely terrifying!'

...

Reality. A cemetery in an unknown province and city.

Come to think of it, in the current state of reality, city cemeteries were perhaps the one setting that had changed the least.

Aside from a few extra weeds, the place was identical to how it had been before the Faith Game's arrival.

The paths were still cleared by someone. The headstones were still maintained by someone. Even the number of graves... continued to increase steadily.

At this very moment, Zhang Jizu — wearing a cemetery worker's uniform and holding a small carving knife — was etching something onto a brand-new headstone.

A closer look revealed the four characters: Tomb of Mo Shu.

Yes — Squinty Eyes was carving a grave for Mo Shu. And not just Mo Shu. Every teammate he'd been matched with whose death he'd confirmed would be "buried" in this cemetery after the trial ended.

That was why, even in a world where travel between regions was impossible, the cemetery's headstone count continued to climb.

He was using Death's commemoration to chronicle the game-time of the Faith Game!

Of course, Mo Shu hadn't truly died — only his duplicate had. But hey — everyone needs small goals. What if one day they come true?

...

Chapter 399: Squinty Eyes' Moment of Faith

Just as Zhang Jizu finished carving the last stroke on the headstone and was about to stand it upright, his vision went black without warning.

But he didn't panic. He simply closed his already-squinting eyes, and when consciousness returned, he quietly cracked them open again to a slit.

Of course, that was just his sensation — his entire being had already become a pale white skull.

As anticipated, when his sight returned to normal, he saw beneath his feet the familiar fishbone staircase, the towering Bone Throne atop it, and the colossal skull sitting upon the throne.

Death!

His Benefactor had summoned him once more.

"Praise the great God of Death." Zhang Jizu offered his devout greeting.

At this moment, his mind was overflowing with questions — so many that he desperately wanted to ask whether this trial had truly been, as Cheng Shi claimed, a trial bestowed upon him by Deceit. But before he could speak, the great one cut him off.

His tone seemed even more placid than usual, impossible to read.

"You. Did. Well.

My. Transaction. With. Deceit. Is. Complete.

As. For. What. You. Are. Thinking...

Though. I. Am. Not. On. Good. Terms. With. Deceit. I. Must. Admit:

Void. Far. Better. Suits. This. Era. Than. Life.

Faith. Will. Ultimately. Converge. Into. One.

So. If. You. Wish. To. Walk. The. Path. Of. Deceit...

I. Do. Not. Object.

But. You. Must. Remember:

On. His. Road. The. World. Past. Future. None. Of. It. Contains. Truth."

With that, the giant skull's eye sockets flashed with green flame. A small skull burst free from the river of skulls flanking the fishbone stairs and rolled to a stop before Zhang Jizu.

Zhang Jizu was still parsing the meaning behind his Benefactor's words when the great one continued:

"Life. Is. Not. Void.

But. Void. Can. Contain. Life.

If. You. Truly. Wish. To. Draw. Closer. To. Void.

Use. It. To. Pray. To. Him.

I. Expect. Deceit. Will. Not. Refuse."

The moment the words fell, the ground beneath Zhang Jizu shuddered. A colossal surge of white bone erupted before his eyes, sweeping the entire Fishbone Hall apart into fragments.

He floated, dazed, in the void. Before long, he plummeted downward — and returned to reality.

He set the headstone down and examined the small skull his Benefactor had bestowed. It was clearly tinged with Deceit's essence. Its face bore no eye sockets, no nasal cavity, not even teeth — just a bone-white surface adorned with two elongated slits for eyes, like a mask of Deceit.

But upon closer inspection, Zhang Jizu noticed the bone face looked uncannily like... himself?

On an ordinary mask, the eye-slits tilted upward at the corners — because Deceit loved entertainment above all, so every mask wore a smile.

But the one in his hand had perfectly level eye-corners. It looked exactly like an elongated pair of squinted eyes...

'So this is the token Deceit left with the great one?'

'Cheng Shi was right? That trial was aimed at me?'

'But wait — am I being mocked?'

Zhang Jizu's emotions turned strange. He sat in silence, connecting every detail from the trial, organizing his thoughts again and again.

Only when he'd finished sorting through every thread of faith did he realize he truly didn't have many good alternatives.

Life was universally wild. Descent was self-destructive and terminal.

Civilization was rigid and hidebound. Chaos was wall-to-wall lunatics.

Existence would have suited him, but They seemed to have no interest in him.

Meanwhile, Void had inexplicably offered him a chance to choose...

Fate was beyond mortal comprehension. So by elimination, only Deceit remained.

Zhang Jizu rubbed the skull thoughtfully, deliberated a moment, then made his decision.

He would apply another layer of protective camouflage to himself. If nothing else, at least he wouldn't fall too far behind everyone else on the path of Faith Fusion.

So he murmured to the skull: "Cannot distinguish..."

Before he could finish — he vanished again.

When he next opened his eyes, he was floating in the void. Gazing at the infinite darkness below, Zhang Jizu squinted as hard as he could.

And the moment he squinted, a pair of dazzling, magnificent stellar eyes opened before him.

Star-points flashed with rhythmic radiance. Spirals spun in mesmerizing cadence. The instant those eyes opened, the entire void seemed to catch His mood and turned merry.

This was Zhang Jizu's first audience with Deceit. Although he'd already heard descriptions of Deceit's appearance from certain people's mouths, actually standing before a pair of stellar eyes still left him slightly nervous.

For safety's sake, he led with praise.

"Praise the great God of Deceit."

Same formula — just Death's divine name swapped for Deceit's.

Hearing this, those upturned stellar eyes tilted even further with amusement. They studied the Squinty Eyes before them and giggled:

"As expected of Old Bones' little bone — that wooden expression is a perfect copy of His."

"..."

That single sentence broke Zhang Jizu's brain.

He'd heard certain... rumors about the Fun God. But he'd never imagined those rumors were true!

He was actually a deity who mocked, taunted, and even hurled insults at other gods!

Zhang Jizu had only ever had audiences with three deities. War had never shown its face. But whether it was his Benefactor, Death, or Truth — who seemed quite interested in him — every one of Them spoke and acted like lofty, exalted divine beings.

And yet this one...

'Why does He feel like a fusion of Zhen Yi and Cheng Shi?'

'No, no — that's backwards.'

'What I should say is: Zhen Yi and Cheng Shi really are His followers. They've imitated their Benefactor to an eerily faithful degree.'

But Zhang Jizu had no idea how to respond to this. All he could do was plaster on a standard smile and meet silence with silence.

Seeing him go quiet, the eyes rotated once and teased again:

"What — could it be that Old Bones is actually your second faith, and at the very start of that Path of Fate, the one you chose first was...

Silence?"

"..."

'It had nothing to do with Silence until just now. That one sentence of Yours dropped me straight into Silence's territory.'

Zhang Jizu was so mortified he could barely breathe. To avoid leaving a bad impression at his first audience, he forced himself to respond:

"Great deity, forgive my boldness. I feel... not entirely aligned with Your will. So I've been deeply puzzled: why did You... choose me?"

"Oh? If you don't accept my will, then why pray to my token?"

Don't you know this constitutes the highest crime of blasphemy!"

As He spoke, those stellar eyes narrowed just like Squinty Eyes' own. Instantly, the merry atmosphere of the void shattered. From nowhere, an endless torrent of biting, howling wind erupted.

The gale screamed and tore — as if in the next second it would rip this blasphemer floating in the void to shreds.

Zhang Jizu felt sensation draining from his limbs. His fingers were freezing. Even his vitality was evaporating at terrifying speed. But instead of panicking — he actually stopped being nervous. Something like enlightenment flickered in his eyes as he looked up at those stellar orbs and stated, dead serious:

"In the great domain of Deceit, there is no truth. Therefore, You are not truly angry. Everything I'm seeing should be an illusion."

"..."

Now it was the eyes' turn to fall silent.

The narrowed gaze slowly opened wide. The star-points ceased their twinkling. The spirals stopped spinning. As if having lost interest, He sighed:

"Some aptitude, but not much. Some entertainment value, but also not much.

This is why I dislike the Pen Pusher. He's too boring — boring as a genuine piece of wood.

You're Old Bones' follower. Don't be as stiff and serious as the Pen Pusher.

Though you got one thing wrong. Hee~

I wasn't angry, true. But that doesn't mean the Void storm was an illusion."

Those words sent a jolt through Zhang Jizu's heart. Before he could wonder who "the Pen Pusher" was, cold sweat was already beading on his forehead and back.

Because he discovered his vitality was genuinely running dangerously low, and no matter how he tried to move his frozen extremities, they refused to budge.

'This is bad. Reality hidden within illusion, illusion woven into reality. His thoughts and temperament truly are harder to read than any other being's!'

The eyes watched Zhang Jizu's panic and found their amusement once more, bursting into laughter:

"Not bad. I'm already looking forward to seeing you lie."

The eyes blinked softly. Star-points connected into lines, conjuring a grinning mask out of thin air. It drifted down and settled before Zhang Jizu.

"Alright, that's enough for this audience.

I need to hurry over to Old Bones' place and mock Him a couple of times, or today'll be too boring.

Gone."

"..."

Zhang Jizu watched Deceit vanish before him, utterly at a loss for words. If not for the overwhelming divine power of Void that he couldn't resist, he'd almost believe he'd just had an audience with Zhen Yi.

Thinking of Zhen Yi, his eyes narrowed once more.

'So that's how she was "born"?!'

'Zhen Xin's frightening, obnoxious alternate personality was actually... imitating Him?'

'Then what about Cheng Shi — was he doing the same thing?'

Thoughts swirled endlessly as his consciousness sank. When Zhang Jizu opened his eyes again, he was back in the real-world cemetery. And the skull in his hand...

His hand had been ravaged by the Void's gale. The skull had been replaced by a grinning mask, now lying on the ground.

He healed himself wearily. Only when dusk had nearly faded to black did he have the strength to pick up the mask at his feet. Gazing at this artifact of his second faith, Zhang Jizu murmured through narrow, conflicted eyes:

"Deceit..."

Cheng Shi was right after all. His existence seems to revolve entirely around entertainment. He's looking forward to seeing new entertainment from me.

Cannot distinguish true from false, disregard the line between reality and illusion.

He speaks as if nothing matters. But is this road truly so easy to walk?

Whatever — now that I've taken this step, I won't look back.

Come to think of it, if Deceit and Death can fuse...

then in the future, would the line between real death and fake death...

stop being quite so clear?"

...

Chapter 400: Goodbye, Evil Infant Inquisition? No — Hello Again, Evil Infant Inquisition!

When Cheng Shi opened his eyes, he found himself not back on his rooftop but standing before the entrance to a building.

Moonlight canopied above, its gentle glow pooling at his feet, tracing every ornamental pattern on the doors with crystalline clarity.

The building was far too familiar. The instant Cheng Shi recognized it, cold sweat erupted across his body and he froze.

The Evil Infant Inquisition!

He was standing once more before the doors of Dolgod's Evil Infant Inquisition!

Only this time, the Inquisition hadn't been abandoned to decay or reduced to ruins by "heaven-sent fire." It looked immaculate — exquisitely crafted, magnificent, grand — as if freshly completed.

Cheng Shi stood before the doors to the inner hall on gold-lined flagstone. Before him loomed jade-inlaid gates, firmly shut.

He swallowed nervously. Without a word, he retreated two steps.

But he failed.

This was clearly not the real Evil Infant Inquisition. The sprawling outer courtyard no longer existed behind him. After a single step backward, his spine struck an invisible wall that bounced him right back to the doorstep.

His heart sank. He scowled deeply.

'This is bad — they want me to open the door?!'

'But... should I?'

'What's hiding inside?!'

'Uma Sinners' vengeance? A trap laid by the Theocracy of Growth?'

'No — the trial is over. By all logic, people and things lost to history shouldn't be able to touch me anymore. So...'

'This has nothing to do with them. It has to do with Them!'

'Which one?!'

'Which deity has summoned me?'

Given the previous trial's subject matter, the first name that came to mind was Birth.

But his impression of Birth wasn't one of theatrical mystery.

Remembering that indescribable Divine Pillar, Cheng Shi figured that if Birth wanted him, He'd simply drop the Pillar on the rest area rooftop — not dump him in front of some ornate door.

So who else could it be?

Could it be... Corruption?

That didn't fit either. Corruption was said to preside over the Sea of Desire, manipulating all worldly emotion and appetite.

If it were Him, Cheng Shi wouldn't still be agonizing. Under amplified desire, he'd probably have already pushed through the door.

He racked his brain but couldn't form a single reasonable hypothesis. In the end, he could only pin it on his own Benefactor.

'Lord Benefactor... it's not You, is it?'

'This inexplicable sense of being toyed with reeks of the Fun God's handiwork.'

'But what do You want me to do?'

'Push open this door and have an audience?'

'That's a fresh one. Saw my last trial and decided to incorporate "current events" to manufacture fear?'

'Fine, fine, fine — whether or not You're behind that door, whether or not You're even watching, I don't have just one Benefactor. I refuse to believe the great Fate would lead me astray!'

"The paths of coming and going — all are destined!

Praise Fate!

Your radiance shall guide me upon the fixed path and shelter me from all misfortune."

After bellowing Fate's prayer at the top of his lungs, Cheng Shi gritted his teeth and reached out...

to scatter dice across the floor behind him.

'A steady heart must never be abandoned. I learned that from Squinty Eyes!'

Only after evenly carpeting the narrow ground with dice did he reach toward the Evil Infant Inquisition's great doors once more.

But just then — perhaps because Cheng Shi had taken too long to react — the door was pushed open from the inside.

"Hummmm—"

"Click, click—"

Cheng Shi's reflexes were razor-sharp. The instant he saw the door budge and heard the creak of hinges, he leaped backward to the farthest possible point, back pressed against the air wall, ring clenched, scalpel drawn, battle-ready.

He sensed someone behind the door. This ruled out the Fun God hiding inside — but the problem was, he couldn't imagine what kind of "person" could bring him here after a trial.

'Don't tell me it's another one like Kataro — some deity's spokesperson?'

While Cheng Shi's taut nerves raced, the door opened slowly.

The crack between the two panels widened, bit by bit, until the hazy moonlight illuminated the hall within. A figure — strange yet familiar — gradually came into view.

When that sculpted, flawless face appeared, Cheng Shi's brain detonated with a thunderclap.

His body locked up. Pupils constricted to pinpoints. Nerves bowstring-taut.

He stared at the figure before him in utter disbelief and couldn't help but gasp:

"It's you! Turadin?!"

Yes — the person who'd pushed open the inner hall doors of the Evil Infant Inquisition was Turadin.

But he also didn't look like Turadin.

Because he bore almost no resemblance to when Cheng Shi had first met him. Now, long hair cascaded free, brows and eyes were sharply defined, his build was tall and lean, his bearing ramrod-straight.

A bewitching smile adorned his face. His arms opened wide, as if greeting a long-lost friend with delight — yet upon closer inspection, the gesture more closely resembled a worshipper expressing devotion to some lofty deity above.

More than that, "Turadin" wore a black robe trimmed in gold and moon filigree, eyes closed, murmuring some unheard melody. Bathed in moonlight, his appearance grew ever more... saintly.

But this "sanctity" was unlike any holiness Cheng Shi had ever encountered.

This lofty, sacred, solemn figure evoked not reverence, not fear, not even the self-abasing awe of inadequacy. Instead...

it stirred desire. The urge to defile.

Yes — to defile!

Fury, hatred, possessiveness, ecstasy...

Wrestling, slaughter, embrace, passion...

Countless desires tangled and surged into Cheng Shi's skull, turning his eyes instantly bloodshot, forcing him to gasp for air.

And at this sight, "Turadin's" smile grew all the more enchanting. He didn't step from the inner hall. He simply watched Cheng Shi's face and smiled as though welcoming an old friend.

"My brother, you seem to have forgotten — I've changed my name. I'm no longer called Turadin.

I'm called...

Aph Ros.

And, my brother — it was you who told me His divine name. It was you who pushed me into His arms. It was you who taught me His will.

And now, reunited with an old friend — why aren't you happy?"

'Happy my ass!'

Cheng Shi couldn't even spare the energy to fake a smile. He was pouring every fiber of his being into suppressing the desire raging inside him — desire more ferocious than anything he had ever experienced — because he was terrified of what he might do if he let go.

But he still clenched his jaw and ground out a reply:

"Who the fuck is your old friend.

The Aph Ros I know... is a woman!"

...