

The Gods 401

Chapter 401: You're Perfect in Every Way — Except You're Too Smart

Cheng Shi wasn't wrong. He truly had never met the "real" Aph Ros.

The Aph Ros that Scorpio had brought back from the future had been beaten to death in the library by his own past-self's father before ever meeting Cheng Shi. So Cheng Shi genuinely didn't know him.

Or to be more precise: Cheng Shi had no idea whether the Aph Ros standing before him was the one who'd been the father, or the one birthed by Turadin.

Either way, he had zero desire to befriend an Aph Ros who kept yanking his emotions around.

Seeing Cheng Shi's attitude, Aph Ros looked a little hurt.

His eye-corners drooped slightly. In an instant, he shifted from gleeful welcome to the verge of tears.

And when his mood changed, a wave of inexplicable sorrow and grievance surged through Cheng Shi's chest.

"You... forgot me?"

The sudden flood of grievance crashed over Cheng Shi like a tidal wave, making him empathize so viscerally that his nose stung and tears threatened to spill.

But he caught himself immediately, grabbed his scalpel, and drove it straight into his own thigh. While the violent pain commandeered his senses, he seized the fleeting window of clarity and snarled:

"I have never had a friend who'd lay hands on his own friends!"

Perhaps the word "friends" registered. Aph Ros halted his grief, studied Cheng Shi with keen interest, and gradually withdrew his emotion-influencing power. A delighted smile spread across his face:

"You... consider me a friend?"

The question only deepened Cheng Shi's dread.

Whatever this Aph Ros was, he was definitely no longer the helpless Turadin from the Theocracy of Growth.

If anyone was helpless here, it was Cheng Shi himself.

The other party was terrifyingly powerful. Cheng Shi couldn't even be sure whether this "he" might actually be a "Him"!

'Is He Corruption?'

'...Probably not?'

Cheng Shi had never heard of Corruption taking a male form.

At that moment, Aph Ros seemed to read his confusion. He offered a playful smile, spread his arms, and casually spun in place.

The gilded black robe flared out into a moon-drenched parasol. Moonlight flashed before Cheng Shi's eyes, and in the span of a single revolution, the handsome youth transformed into a girl of staggering beauty.

Turadin!

The real Turadin had appeared — as breathtaking as when Cheng Shi had first laid eyes on her. Only tonight, bathed in moonlight, she looked even more perfect.

"Better? Recognize me now?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened as he watched her laugh happily from within the doorway. His nerves wound tighter still.

Honestly — not only didn't she look more familiar, she now seemed even more of a stranger.

After all, the real Turadin had needed to visit a prayer room to switch genders. And now...

One twirl and she could swap from male to female?

Ha — was that supposed to be funny?

It was not funny!

Because it meant the Aph Ros before him was indisputably an existence possessing power beyond mortal ken!

'Who is He?'

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed. A flash of inspiration struck, and he thought of a way to test the waters. He immediately feigned an expression of sudden realization, lowered his head in devout prayer, and intoned:

"Praise Corruption!"

Aph Ros, who had just finished spinning and was eagerly anticipating shock on Cheng Shi's face, heard the unexpected praise for Corruption. She raised an eyebrow, smiled deeply and meaningfully, bowed her head, and echoed with equal reverence:

"Praise... Corruption!"

!!!

That single sentence told Cheng Shi everything he needed to know: this Aph Ros was not Corruption — not the supreme deity of the Descent path!

'As long as it's not a true god, things are manageable.'

A stone lifted from his heart. But countless more still weighed upon him.

Though she kept smiling, the silent, mounting pressure was even more terrifying. He didn't dare speak carelessly.

'This isn't a player. This isn't a "familiar god." And I'm afraid my reckless mouth could bring unforeseen disaster.'

He decided to temporarily convert to Silence.

Aph Ros appeared to be a master of human nature. Seeing Cheng Shi scrutinize her without a word, she laughed so hard she shook like a branch in the wind:

"People shouldn't suppress their desires. Curiosity is one of them.

My brother — you're the one who told me to embrace desire. So why are you abandoning that philosophy now?"

Cheng Shi scoffed and replied with feigned indifference:

"My desire to suppress my desires is itself a desire!"

So I'm still embracing desire!"

"?"

Aph Ros blinked — then threw her head back in peals of laughter:

"Ha? Hahahaha!

Fascinating — absolutely fascinating!

Every time I hear your interpretation of His will, I feel myself drowning in admiration, then suddenly enlightened.

You should have been Corruption's darling.

What a pity you're a fake.

Leave Them. Come back to Corruption's embrace. Then we'll be true siblings, my... brother!"

'I knew it — something's off about her!'

'Then she's...?!'

But just as Cheng Shi was about to dig deeper into her identity, his eyes flew wide.

Aph Ros casually waved a hand. Before Cheng Shi's stupefied gaze, the black robe on her body dissolved into smoke and vanished.

A flawless body appeared uncovered beneath the moonlight, enveloped in lunar mist like a luminous jade stone impossible to look away from.

"Whether it's spiritual agony or carnal pleasure;

or power and control, or beauty and fame —

I can give you all of it, my brother.

Just take one step forward. Grasp my hand. After that, you won't need to think about anything. And you'll become like me — the freest, happiest, most carefree person in this Sea of Desire.

Trust me. I would never deceive you."

Aph Ros hadn't moved a step. She merely extended that jade-white arm. In her telling, it seemed all Cheng Shi needed to do was raise a hand — and infinite power and endless joy would be his.

But staring at that hand hovering within reach, Cheng Shi suddenly laughed.

"Ha, hahaha, hahahahaha!"

The abrupt laughter genuinely caught Aph Ros off guard. She startled for a heartbeat, then quickly arranged an enchanting smile and fixed her gaze on Cheng Shi's eyes:

"What are you laughing at?"

Cheng Shi's laughter faded, and his expression gradually turned sly. He stabbed himself in the thigh again. Using the searing pain to clear his head, he slowly rose to his feet, looked at the immaculate beauty before him with undisguised mockery, and sneered:

"I'm laughing because no matter how you preen and pose, you can't step one foot out of that invisible cage.

What's the matter — so desperate for me to plunge into the Sea of Desire and dance the waltz of Descent with you?

Then why not leap out and seize my hand yourself, Ms. Aph Ros?

Is your desire to dance not strong enough?

No — I can see it. Your emotions are plenty saturated. Frighteningly so, to be frank.

But... since you've already stripped down, why not be more direct?

Could it be that this door is trapping you in another world — and I have to come willingly before you can 'embrace' me, madam?!"

With that, Cheng Shi's eyes blazed as he took one step forward — so close his nose nearly touched hers.

Yet Aph Ros showed no delight at his approach. Instead, her expression gradually darkened.

Worse — that jade-white arm she'd extended had passed straight through Cheng Shi's body, protruding from his chest!

An illusion!

The arm was a phantom!

It had no physical form at all!

As for its owner — Cheng Shi believed she probably did have a physical body. But that body existed inside the door — on the other side of a gate that was emphatically not the Evil Infant Inquisition's!

What had made Cheng Shi suspicious of Aph Ros's situation — beyond noticing she'd never once crossed the threshold — was remembering a certain item received after the trial cleared:

The token of the Gate of Joyous Lust!

Gate! Another gate!

It was that word "gate," combined with his observation that Aph Ros couldn't step over the threshold, that made him suspect this "door" was the real problem!

"Just as I thought — you can't get out." Cheng Shi sneered, confidence flooding back.

Aph Ros stared at him in silence for a long moment, her expression layered and complex. Wordlessly, she dressed herself again. Then, with a wistful sigh, she said:

"My brother, you're perfect in every way. Except...

you're too smart."

...

Chapter 402: Existence Has Become the Past

"You're not the Aph Ros I know!

Who the hell are you?"

Having discovered the other party couldn't cross the threshold or harm him, Cheng Shi's voice grew noticeably bolder.

He studied that flawless face, thinking:

'This Gate of Joyous Lust looks like a follower of Corruption. So... is she actually Corruption's Envoy?'

Cheng Shi couldn't be sure. In his imagination, a Corruption Envoy shouldn't be so... gentle.

Yes — gentle.

Aph Ros's methods were too soft. Despite constantly tugging at his emotions, she'd employed no other means, no display of Corruption's power.

Cheng Shi had witnessed firsthand the terror of Corruption's talents. He couldn't believe that a being capable of summoning him here had nothing else up her sleeve.

Of course, perhaps the invisible threshold was restricting her. Cheng Shi didn't understand this "gate," so he could only maintain maximum vigilance.

And so, immediately after his big talk, he scrambled back to the air wall — that single step of distance was, to Cheng Shi, the most reassuring buffer imaginable.

Aph Ros stood motionless, watching Cheng Shi retreat, seeming thoroughly unimpressed.

She shook her head with a bitter smile and asked, heartbreakingly pitiful: "Am I not beautiful?"

Cheng Shi was honest: "Beautiful. Extremely beautiful. But my mother told me the more beautiful the woman, the more terrifying."

Aph Ros considered this thoughtfully, nodded, spun around once more, and reverted to male form. He locked eyes with Cheng Shi and asked again with a coy smile:

"And now?"

"..." Cheng Shi's mouth twitched. "She also said the same applies to men."

Aph Ros couldn't hold back a laugh. "You have a good mother."

"..."

Cheng Shi strongly suspected that was an insult masquerading as a compliment. He wanted to shoot back "So do you," but then realized that would actually be praising the other party, so he reluctantly let it go.

Aph Ros didn't know what Cheng Shi was thinking. He only knew his "recruitment" had failed.

"What a pity, my brother. We never did end up walking the same path.

I naively believed you were truly His follower. I never expected you'd deceive me.

So — whose follower are you, really?

Let me guess...

Hmm, you're observant, and skilled at constructing logic. So... you wouldn't happen to follow Truth, would you?

That rigid scholar spent his entire life pursuing the path of becoming 'Him' — utterly devoid of fun. Doesn't quite suit you.

Let me think... Civilization is full of filth, but thanks to noble Order, it remains governed. You don't strike me as a Civilization walker.

Life isn't worth considering. Descent is impossible. Chaos... all simpletons. Not you.

So that leaves — oh~

I see. You're an Existence practitioner?

You're helping your Benefactor organize Memory?

Hmm, you frowned. So that's not it either.

Could it be...

you belong to Time?"

At that last question, Aph Ros's tone turned instantly cold. His face darkened — as if merely pronouncing Time's divine name were a detestable act.

This shift wasn't something Cheng Shi observed consciously. He felt it through Aph Ros's emotional contagion — experiencing the visceral revulsion as if it were his own.

But Cheng Shi sensed something off in what had been said. His frown deepened further.

And then — Aph Ros caught that micro-expression. He froze, then broke into a smile of sudden realization.

But the laughter carried less the relief of epiphany and more the sting of self-mockery — mockery at his own ignorance!

"So another era has passed. Existence has become the past, hasn't it?"

My good brother, I'm so curious. Tell me — in the era that followed Existence, who ascended to the pinnacle of the gods?

You...

are a follower of the new gods, aren't you?"

!!!!

'New gods!'

'What new gods?!'

Cheng Shi's mind went blank — thoroughly, comprehensively blank!

His brain buzzed like a struck bell. From the moment he'd heard "Existence has become the past," the ringing hadn't stopped.

'Why doesn't Aph Ros know about Void?'

'He even called Void's two deities "new gods"!'!

'So... is she really Him?'

'An Envoy of Corruption — imprisoned, most likely by Time — before Void's arrival?!'

Cheng Shi's eyes overflowed with confusion. Face drawn with complexity, he looked at Aph Ros and asked:

"Gate of Joyous Lust — that's your divine name, isn't it?"

Aph Ros's expression grew even more layered. Whether it was because he'd been imprisoned so long he'd lost track of the age, or because a name unspoken for countless millennia had been invoked again — his eyes brimmed with wistful sentiment.

"I told you, my brother. You're perfect in every way — except you're too smart."

'Smart?'

'But the Turadin I knew idolized choosing wisdom above faith and human nature!'

'What — have you forgotten?'

Cheng Shi said nothing. But his eyes said everything.

His equally wistful gaze silently asked Aph Ros: why have you become this?

But Aph Ros didn't answer this time. Instead, with infinite desolation, he mocked himself:

"I thought He had remembered me. Forgiven me. Sent you to save me.

But it turns out — all of this was merely a glance of no consequence as the new gods surveyed the universe.

Ha. He was never merciful. None of Them have ever been merciful.

Gods — since you've already claimed your Divine Thrones, why imprison yourselves within yet another set of rules?

Even He — even Corruption, who birthed me into this world — never embraced His own desires. How, then, can He expect the world to drown in the Sea of Desire?

Ha. All of it — delusion.

Truly... how boring."

With that, Aph Ros turned and walked away, losing all interest in the mortal beyond his door.

His desolation was so thick and so crushing that Cheng Shi was splashed by the emotional shrapnel. Instantly, he plunged into despair, collapsed to his knees, and howled at the sky.

But he never stopped observing. Every time he seized a moment of emotional control, he drove the scalpel into his own thigh, then fought his emotions savagely — wrestling for control of his own consciousness — and forced himself to look into the mysterious interior of the Evil Infant Inquisition, watching Aph Ros's departing figure.

He couldn't be sure if it was an illusion, but he thought he glimpsed — deep in the hall's shadows — a mass of dark, writhing flesh.

When he looked up again, both the trace of flesh and Aph Ros's silhouette had vanished.

As the scene before him faded, the emotions that had shattered Cheng Shi gradually dissolved. Gritting his teeth, he rose to his feet, wanting to shout one final question — "What exactly happened?" — but before he could open his mouth, the scenery shifted in an instant. He was back on the rest area rooftop.

There he stood, legs drenched in blood, shaken and alarmed, brow furrowed, staring ahead without moving.

'Eras...'

Aph Ros had mentioned "eras."

Among players, the word "era" was common enough, but it didn't refer to periods belonging specifically to Them. Players typically used the term "epoch" for those — because each epoch corresponded to the peak reign of certain deities.

So did Aph Ros's "eras" correspond to what players understood as epochs?

The problem was: the Land of Hope had never had an Existence Epoch!!

Then what did that "era" refer to?

Cheng Shi frowned deeply, lost in thought. He had the distinct feeling he'd stumbled upon something monumental.

...

Chapter 403: Calling Old Friends — An Exchange of Memories

Cheng Shi still hadn't moved. He'd been standing in place for quite some time now.

Not because he was being controlled — but because he was waiting!

Waiting for the next audience.

Ordinarily, Cheng Shi never expected audiences with deities. But today was different. The last trial's rhythm had been far too strange — strange enough that he was convinced it all had to be Their orchestration.

They likely wanted to tell him something through that deliberately distorted trial. The problem was, he hadn't figured out what. So he was waiting for a more straightforward "explanation."

How arrogant — a mere player, standing there waiting for the gods to explain themselves.

Yet Cheng Shi simply felt this wasn't over. Even the reunion with Aph Ros had to have some meaning behind it.

Because clearly, Aph Ros was trapped — and with very high probability, imprisoned by Time.

But if an entity imprisoned by a true god could still summon him, then another true god's power had to be involved. And that was the god Cheng Shi was waiting for!

But evidently, he'd overthought things.

From the first light of dawn until the sun stood at its zenith, not a single deity summoned him. Not even the two of Void.

Yet this very anomaly only proved the trial had hidden issues!

Seeing no audience forthcoming, Cheng Shi had to try another approach. He was too curious. He wanted to understand what lay beneath this trial and what Aph Ros's "eras" meant.

So he pulled out his dice, preparing to pray to the Fun God.

But just as he was about to recite Deceit's prayer, he put the dice away again.

"No — before seeking an audience, there are other ways to learn about these so-called 'eras'... and about Aph Ros."

Cheng Shi muttered under his breath, then retrieved the Standard Phone from his warehouse.

He quietly spoke a name. The call connected before long. The voice on the other end was steady and authoritative as ever.

"It's me."

Cheng Shi smiled at the familiar voice, then quickly lowered his pitch:

"I know it's you. I want to ask about someone."

The other person clearly paused, then chuckled.

"Is that you?"

Cheng Shi blanked. He frowned.

He could tell this wasn't a bluff — "Dragon King" genuinely seemed to know who he was.

Yes — the person on the other end was none other than the current Chosen One of Deceit: Li Jingming.

But even as a former Memory follower, he shouldn't have known Cheng Shi's identity.

'What's going on — did Big Cat let something slip?'

Not wanting to waste time and confirm his identity, Cheng Shi immediately rasped back:

"It's not."

"Mm, then it is.

I only like exchanging memories face-to-face. I've never done a phone trade. But for you, I'll make an exception."

Cheng Shi blinked again. Keeping his voice low: "Why?"

"I hear you tricked Zhen Yi?"

'...Damn.'

'He really does know!'

'Who the hell's been gossiping behind my back?!'

'Is my identity that easy to guess? It's only been a few days, and everything's leaked?'

Cheng Shi's face darkened, but he maintained his disguised voice: "How'd you guess?"

Li Jingming chuckled: "You don't know?"

Cheng Shi's heart lurched. Instinct told him something had gone wrong again: "What should I know?"

"You really don't know. This is a... fascinating memory.

Zhen Yi called everyone. She told them her boyfriend also got Tu Tou's phone, and asked them to 'check in on him often' and 'call him to keep him company.'

But she conspicuously skipped Tu Tou. So when everyone phoned Tu Tou to ask about it, the good-natured Tu Tou was still trying to cover for you.

That's when everyone figured out the truth — Zhen Yi's Fate Weaver boyfriend named Cheng Shi did indeed have Tu Tou's phone. And what's more, Tu Tou's relationship with him seemed... pretty good?"

???

'Shit!'

'I'm offline for two days and this happens?'

Cheng Shi was speechless, gripping the phone in frustrated silence. Then Li Jingming spoke again:

"I don't have much time — I've got a trial to run. Consider that memory a welcome gift for a new friend. Now tell me — what memory do you want to exchange, Cheng Shi?"

'Exchange memories — that's his condition?'

'As expected, even under the banner of Deceit, he's still practicing Memory's will.'

'How does the Fun God even feel about you?'

'A Memory Oathbreaker bearing the title of Deceit Chosen while doing Memory's bidding — sure, that's entertaining, but from any angle it's the Fun God who loses out.'

'Unless He's watching for His own entertainment?'

"..."

'You really are something, Lord. You don't even spare yourself.'

Seeing the jig was up, Cheng Shi laid his cards on the table.

"I'll trade my own memories for information about someone."

"Your memories?" Li Jingming savored this for a moment, then suddenly laughed. "Interesting. Accepted. So — whose story do you want?"

His words were even more brazen than Cheng Shi's god-waiting stance — as if no matter whose name emerged from Cheng Shi's lips, he could narrate their tale.

Cheng Shi's eyes darted. He deliberated briefly, then tested the waters: "An Envoy of Corruption."

Li Jingming clearly hadn't expected Cheng Shi to inquire about not a player, but a deity. He wasn't particularly shocked, though. After a brief pause, he replied with measured authority:

"Certainly. Which one?"

"..." 'Brother, you really do know a lot.'

Cheng Shi didn't answer. Instead, he lobbed back a question that struck Li Jingming as utterly baffling:

"If you don't tell me who they all are, how am I supposed to know which one?"

"?"

This time Li Jingming truly fell silent.

The last time a phone call had left him this speechless was when Zhen Yi had impersonated Zhen Xin.

'Void really is Void. Whether it's Deceit's followers or Fate's, in certain respects they all share that quintessentially Void quality.'

With that thought, Li Jingming shook his head and laughed:

"Fair enough — my oversight. Then whose story do you want?

Drasilco, Aph Ros, or Tria?"

!!!

'Aph Ros!'

Upon hearing that name, Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply. His breath caught.

'He truly is one of Them!'

'Aph Ros is an Envoy of Corruption!'

'Not only that — Corruption has three Envoys?'

'Or does Li Jingming only know of three?'

Even if he only knew three, that was already extraordinary. Cheng Shi hadn't known of a single one.

He'd only just now confirmed Aph Ros's identity.

'Good. Now that the intel's secured, next step is...'

Cheng Shi cleared his throat lightly and pulled the receiver away:

"Ahem, actually — never mind. I don't want to know anymore. Let's talk next time. Thanks for the company, Dragon King. Until we meet again."

Without waiting for a response, he hung up.

"Beep... beep... beep..."

Listening to the dial tone, the smile froze on Li Jingming's face.

But soon enough, he laughed again — roaring with mirth.

"Hahaha! Fascinating. Absolutely fascinating.

I just got swindled by a Fate Weaver. Hmm, come to think of it, the rumor about him tricking Zhen Yi probably isn't a rumor after all.

However...

This Fate Weaver doesn't seem to understand Memory very well.

A person's thoughts, actions, movements — every trace of life is memory. The moment you asked that question and hung up my call, Cheng Shi, your story was already committed to my memory.

So — let me guess. Which of those three...

did you recently encounter?"

...

Chapter 404: Blow the Whistle — Phone Calls Just Don't Hit Right

Cheng Shi didn't want to share his memories, so he scammed Dragon King.

Though calling it a scam was generous — he hadn't actually heard Aph Ros's story either.

If one had to frame it a certain way, two Deceit followers had engaged in a brief telephone sparring match, and Cheng Shi felt he'd come out slightly ahead.

But knowing Aph Ros's identity alone didn't resolve his confusion. What he wanted wasn't a label — it was the reason Birth and Deceit had shoved Aph Ros right in front of him.

The trial was bestowed by Birth. Yet the one ultimately tied to him was a Corruption Envoy. Did that make any sense?

It did not.

Bewildered, Cheng Shi pondered for a moment and made another call. He wasn't sure this one would even connect — but to his surprise, it went through.

An elegant voice tinged with a hint of coquettishness answered:

"Hello?"

At the sound of that long-absent voice, Cheng Shi involuntarily shivered.

He hadn't said a single word — he'd only let out a breath — yet somehow the person on the other end seemed to guess who it was:

"Cheng Shi?"

"..."

'Are you all cheating? Every last one of you?'

'You can identify me from breathing?!'

Cheng Shi's brain short-circuited. He forced an awkward laugh and greeted her while curling his toes:
"Hu Xuan, long time no see."

The other side laughed — warmly, happily.

"It really has been. Where's the Night Curtain Spring Whistle I gave you? Why haven't you blown it?"

"..."

'Sis, do I dare?!'

'One toot and I'm afraid this rooftop's headcount jumps from one to three — maybe more!'

'That whistle is NOT meant for normal circumstances!'

Cheng Shi's mouth twitched. He laughed it off:

"Blowing a whistle would disturb the neighbors. The person across from me is a light sleeper. I'd hate to bother him.

A phone call works just fine, you know? The second I found out you had a phone, I contacted you right away."

"Is that so? Then I should thank Tu Tou?"

And then, on the other end, Hu Xuan laughed — and even without seeing that smile, Cheng Shi felt an instinctive Birth-related impulse stir in his subconscious!

'She's gotten stronger again — even her voice carries His color now!'

Hu Xuan continued with a soft chuckle:

"When she ran into me yesterday, I was debating whether to accept the phone to stay in touch with a new friend. Looks like I made the right call.

You're the first friend to phone me, Cheng Shi. I'm very happy."

'Huh?'

'Wait — huh?'

'What do you mean yesterday?'

'Sis, that "I contacted you the second I found out" was just a pleasantry — I didn't actually mean it!'

"..." Cheng Shi's brain stalled. He'd never imagined an offhand courtesy could bury him like this. He blinked in bewilderment, then rushed to explain. "I—"

"Everyone's talking about you and Zhen Yi... Is it true?"

"I—"

"I recall you didn't get along with her sister. So is this your way of getting revenge on Zhen Xin?"

"I—"

"In that case, giving me a child could also count as a form of revenge against her, couldn't it?"

"Huh? No, I—"

"Blow the whistle. Phone calls just don't hit right.

I'm guessing you didn't call to catch up. Perfect timing, actually — I have something to pass along to you too. So...

Blow the whistle, Cheng Shi. Whatever you want to know, I can tell you."

"..."

'Sis, I'm terrified. Can I please get a word in?'

Cheng Shi wanted to hang up. But he could tell that the "something" Hu Xuan mentioned was probably... a very good something!

'Damn it — Aph Ros's influence must have left aftereffects. There's a greedy impulse devouring my reason!'

'Anything the Birth Chosen, the Eternal Sun candidate, is willing to part with can't be ordinary. Free loot — why say no?'

But just as quickly, he squelched that thought.

'No — steady, Cheng Steady. You can't lose your head. That thing probably costs a life to obtain — or maybe is a life!'

'Remember what that great one said: greed is the path to death!'

While his brain churned in panicked debate over whether to risk it, a different question suddenly struck him:

In reality — how could Hu Xuan even come to him?

He jolted. Then, disbelieving:

"You succeeded?"

Hu Xuan laughed.

"Not yet. But I'm on the right path now.

Ever since I met you, Fate seems to have begun favoring me. So...

I should thank you.

Relax — I can't break the Convention's constraints. I'm just looking at you from far away.

Mm. One look is enough."

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened: "You even know about the Convention."

"Surprised?"

Compared to me knowing about the Convention, the fact that you know about it is what surprises me.

I really don't have the luck.

And I'm starting to regret. If back then I had..."

"Stop, stop, stop — hold on, Hu Xuan. One question. You want me to blow this whistle, and it has nothing to do with luck — correct?"

The other end fell silent for a moment, then chuckled softly: "Correct. Nothing to do with luck. But it does involve... Him."

'Him?!'

'Who?'

'Birth?!'

Cheng Shi frowned. Was the thing He wanted to convey split in half — with one part entrusted to Hu Xuan?

But that seemed absurdly prescient. How could He have foreseen Cheng Shi would phone Hu Xuan?

Or was it that regardless of whether he made this call, He'd have arranged another encounter — engineering a meeting between Hu Xuan and him?

If so — there was no escaping it?

After lengthy deliberation, Cheng Shi decided to trust Hu Xuan one more time.

If she was telling the truth, then this friend was well worth having. And if she was lying — better still. One phone call to see through a so-called friend was a bargain.

So he agreed, hung up, and with trembling hands retrieved the Night Curtain Spring Whistle from his storage. He raised it gingerly to his lips and gave it the faintest blow.

A crisp, bright note rang out — the kind that filled you with surging spirit and energy the instant you heard it.

Just as Cheng Shi sensed something off about this particular brand of "energy," he noticed his hands had turned white.

But he quickly realized it wasn't his skin — the rooftop had gotten brighter!

The sunlight was growing blindingly intense.

Cheng Shi startled violently. Something occurred to him. He looked skyward in utter disbelief — and there it was: a sun rivaling reality's own, blazing into existence directly above him!

Right on the rooftop!

Close enough to touch!

!!!

Cheng Shi gaped, scalp tingling. He'd never imagined the "meet-up" Hu Xuan described would look like this!

'Sis — you call this "looking at me"?!'

'You're not going to melt everything on my rooftop, are you?!'

Cheng Shi gulped, flashing back to several months ago — scrambling in panic beneath the fire-rain of the Wrath of Abomination.

And the scene before him now looked terrifyingly familiar!

...

Chapter 405: The Second Sun That Rose on the Rooftop

"Hu... Hu Xuan?"

Cheng Shi stared up at the colossal sun overhead, momentarily at a loss.

But soon he noticed something strange: this newborn sun could be looked at directly!

Despite blazing as fiercely as the real sun, its light didn't sear the eyes. The surrounding temperature hadn't even changed.

The sunlight that fell on him carried no heat at all. Compared to a real sun, it was more like a colossal phantom.

As Cheng Shi continued staring directly into it, a hazy figure gradually coalesced from the churning heat haze at the sun's center.

One glance and he recognized her — Hu Xuan!

They hadn't seen each other in ages, yet she looked the same as ever. A deep-V black halter dress hugged her alluring figure, snapping Cheng Shi's memory back to that first encounter in Far Dusk Town!

The moment Hu Xuan materialized, she smiled warmly and extended her hand toward Cheng Shi.

"Come."

Cheng Shi shuddered and instinctively stepped back.

Seeing his familiar rejection, Hu Xuan laughed lightly and shook her head:

"Funny. Everyone else is terrified of Zhen Yi but not of me. Only you, Cheng Shi — you're not afraid of Zhen Yi, yet you're afraid of me alone.

You're the one who brought me to this height. So why won't you walk further alongside me?"

Cheng Shi forced a stiff smile:

"We don't need to hold hands. Walking side by side gets us just as far.

Besides — you said the whistle has nothing to do with luck. So speak plainly. I'd rather not let anyone see a second sun on my rooftop."

"Don't worry. They can't see it."

?

Cheng Shi frowned, suddenly realizing his assumption had been wrong. The Night Curtain Spring Whistle wasn't a physical summon — it had induced a hallucination?

But hallucinations were Void's domain. How could a Birth artifact produce this effect?

Hu Xuan read his confusion and patiently explained with a smile:

"If the birth of life is called Birth, then why can't the birth of an illusion be as well?"

BOOM—

That single sentence set Cheng Shi's brain ringing.

He suddenly understood: Birth's authority wasn't limited to Life. Birth was no "pushover" whose domain everyone else could poach.

He was clearly a player in the war among gods. While other deities — led by Truth — were seizing His authority, He was seizing theirs right back.

And that "theirs," from the looks of it, appeared to be... Void?

'Hold on, sis — why does this feel like you stole my family's chickens, sold them, and came back to give me a dividend?'

Cheng Shi's heart lurched. He wondered whether Deceit and Birth had struck yet another deal beyond mortal comprehension — one that allowed Birth to appropriate Deceit's domain.

Otherwise, given what he knew about the Fun God, His authority shouldn't be so easy to take.

Hu Xuan had no idea Cheng Shi's imagination ran this wild. She simply assumed the miracle of "birthing illusions" had dazzled him. She quickly broke the silence with a smile:

"I won't waste your time. I do have something for you. Just moments before you called, I'd finished an audience with Him.

He said He'd recovered another child. But this child is still trapped somewhere and can't escape. So He entrusted the child's belongings to me for safekeeping."

'A child?!'

"Wait — hold on!" Cheng Shi's pupils shrank. He cut in before she could finish: "What child?"

"A child like me."

Cheng Shi's eyes flew wide. Disbelief flooded his voice: "An Envoy of Birth?!"

Hu Xuan nodded. "Yes. His Envoy."

"..." Cheng Shi's chest tightened. Instinct told him this child was connected to himself. But what he'd encountered was a Corruption Envoy — how could it be...

A name suddenly flashed through his mind. And the instant he thought of that name, cold sweat broke out across his back.

He stood frozen for a long moment, then stammered: "That child — no, that Envoy — who is it?"

Hu Xuan's expression turned solemn. After all, as someone who hadn't yet become an Envoy herself, this person was a genuine Envoy of Birth.

"Sin Brood Mother — Go Lis. My Lord's first child, and His rod of discipline."

"WHO?!!"

Cheng Shi was stupefied.

He confirmed he'd heard correctly. He confirmed he'd guessed correctly. Birth's Envoy was indeed Turadin's mother, Go Lis!

Though it made sense. She was, after all, the relentless woman who'd tirelessly remodeled herself to get closer to Him.

So in history, Birth had accepted her?

But if He'd accepted her, why had He "lost" this child?

Cheng Shi was perplexed. He quickly organized his thoughts and voiced the question. But Hu Xuan's answer left him standing there, completely stupefied.

"The Sin Brood Mother's situation is special. Because she isn't only my Lord's Envoy. She's also...

Corruption's Envoy."

???

'What did you just say?!'

Before the wide-eyed Cheng Shi could squeeze the stunned "holy shit" from his throat, Hu Xuan continued:

"Her other identity is Corruption's Envoy — the Gate of Joyous Lust, Aph Ros!"

!!!

'Of course it's him!'

'No — it had to be him!'

When every single thread pointed to something being wrong, the most wrong one was the truth!

"You're saying Go Lis and Aph Ros... are the same person?"

Hu Xuan was slightly surprised by his reaction, but she nodded.

"You could say that. But they're the same... deity.

It sounds like you know of them?

No — you've met them?

You called me because of Go Lis?"

Cheng Shi emerged from the depths of his shock, smiled bitterly, and nodded: "Yes. But actually — because of Aph Ros."

'How can Aph Ros be Go Lis?'

The doubt had barely formed when brilliance flashed in Cheng Shi's eyes. He had the answer in an instant.

Setting aside how she'd become her own mother in history's grand narrative, within the trial he himself had experienced, she'd clearly had the opportunity.

And that opportunity was—

The Oathbreaker Old Hunter, Scorpio, had exiled the newborn Aph Ros into the historical past. And from this vantage, that infant had likely — through some twist of fate — become the original Go Lis!

So the story of Dolgod was far more abstract and insane than anything he'd witnessed!

Turadin gave birth to herself. Then she mated with her future self to create a new version of herself, who was sent back in time to become the original version of herself!

From start to finish — Go Lis, Turadin, Aph Ros...

They'd all been the same person!

...

Chapter 406: Go Lis's Desire and Aph Ros's Obsession

(6000!)

Time had woven his story into a loop. So the Time miracle the little assassin had hoped to witness — he'd actually witnessed it already. He'd even been the one to set it in motion.

Cheng Shi had thought Fate was wondrous enough. Who knew His rival, Time, was every bit as extraordinary.

But one question remained: why had Time inexplicably entered the tug-of-war between Corruption and Birth?

What role was He playing in this unthinkable ethical drama?

Confused, Cheng Shi shared what he could of the trial's story with Hu Xuan.

Though Hu Xuan was a heavy-hitter in Birth's camp, her "seniority" was far too shallow. She'd risen so fast that she lacked the depth of knowledge other Chosen Ones had accumulated. This was also her first time hearing about Go Lis. She knew barely more about Go Lis's past than Cheng Shi did.

But after hearing the name from her Benefactor's lips, she'd made a point to learn what she could about this so-called "first child."

So she still had intelligence to share with Cheng Shi — information he could never have obtained from the outside world.

Because she'd read it off Birth's Divine Pillar.

"You can view His Divine Pillar?" Cheng Shi was astonished. Being an Envoy candidate came with perks aplenty.

"Yes. During audiences, with His permission, I can.

Though each audience, under the influence of His aura, triggers another... metamorphosis in me."

"..."

'Metamorphosis...'

'Sis, that's a delicate way to put it.'

'In a certain sense, you and Aph Ros are the true kindred spirits.'

Cheng Shi licked his dry lips: "So what exactly is His Divine Pillar? Another Envoy like you?"

Hu Xuan shook her head with a soft laugh:

"No. Think of it as a manifestation of His will.

My Lord values new life above all, but He's deeply sentimental. That's why He strings together all the Life Marker Boards of the vanished — as a memorial to His departed children.

To some degree, you could even see it as Him, or a part of Him."

"..." Cheng Shi felt their solemn, straight-faced discussion of Birth was off-kilter somehow. He quietly shut his mouth.

Hu Xuan soon laid out what the Divine Pillar recorded about Go Lis — though her account wasn't entirely clear, since the Pillar contained only terse entries, not detailed histories.

What was certain: Go Lis's birth predated Aph Ros's by far.

And Aph Ros's birth hadn't come about through the trial Cheng Shi experienced, but through Go Lis's "devotion"!

Yes — devotion!

The historical Go Lis was identical to the trial's Go Lis: relentless in her pursuit of her Benefactor, using every means necessary. And precisely because she indulged, without limit, in her desire to approach a deity, she "fortunately" attracted Corruption's gaze. Through ceaseless evolution, she became Corruption's emissary — Aph Ros.

But becoming an entity opposed to Birth was never her goal. She still wanted to approach Him. She'd merely drawn close to Corruption on the way, and since Corruption didn't refuse her, Aph Ros used Corruption's power to strengthen herself — all while singularly, consistently pursuing one aim: closing the distance between herself and Birth.

And so!

It was Go Lis's desire that gave rise to the Gate of Joyous Lust. And it was Aph Ros's obsession that evolved into the Sin Brood Mother.

They were twin-born, yet they were the same person.

This ethically twisted relationship gave Cheng Shi an aching jaw. Seeing his conflicted expression, Hu Xuan remained perfectly composed — as if such matters were hardly worth mentioning among Birth followers.

She continued:

"But there's something very strange. On the Divine Pillar, the two of them aren't registered as one entity. They're... separated by an enormous span.

If they're truly the same person, there shouldn't be a temporal gap. Even if there were, a short one would be understandable.

But the gap between them on the Pillar is far too wide. I even spotted Civilization-epoch Life Marker Boards between them — ones resembling the Bormed people."

Cheng Shi listened, frowning, and thought once more of Aph Ros's mention of "eras."

'So what exactly happened in that Existence era he spoke of?'

'Did Time enter this story during an era that belonged to Him?'

'What does the real history look like? Would Hu Xuan know?'

Cheng Shi's curiosity got the better of him. He asked — but Hu Xuan shook her head, indicating she didn't know either.

"I only know He's trapped somewhere. And now, learning from you that Time most likely imprisoned Him...

Birth is uncontentious. He's a very... 'stable' deity. So I can't fathom what kind of conflict existed between Him and Time that led Time to imprison His first child!"

'Stable?'

'Sure — you Birth people are consistently insane. I'll give you "stable."'

Cheng Shi frowned, suspecting Time's imprisonment of Aph Ros probably had nothing to do with Birth. Perhaps Time's target was Corruption, and since Aph Ros and Go Lis were one being, she'd been caught up in the same punishment.

But without a conclusion, he said nothing. He simply listened.

"Also — I personally witnessed Go Lis and Aph Ros vanish from the Divine Pillar. That means the two of them, who'd long since faded from history, were fished out of the river of time by someone.

I'd assumed that person had to be a peak player. I never imagined it would be you, Cheng Shi."

"?"

Cheng Shi blinked in surprise: "Didn't you say He asked you to deliver something to me? How could you not have guessed—"

He stopped mid-sentence and went quiet.

'Damn — I got played.'

No — "played" wasn't quite right. He'd played himself.

Hu Xuan had only said she "had something to give him" and that "it involved Him." She'd never said anything else. It was Cheng Shi who'd over-imagined and mentally inserted Birth into the picture.

So...

Hu Xuan's arrival had nothing to do with Birth at all. She'd come of her own accord!

The instant Cheng Shi realized this, he looked up at Hu Xuan with wordless exasperation — only to see her smiling coyly with one hand extended. That single, innocuous gesture was enough to silence every objection he'd been about to raise.

"I didn't lie. And I really do have something for you."

With that, Hu Xuan produced a blood-red shackle and gently presented it to Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi stared at the painfully familiar object. His mouth twitched. From his own storage, he produced an identical one...

Umbilical Shackles!

"?"

...

Chapter 407: Servant God Artifact — Sinner's Regret

Seeing this, the elegance froze on Hu Xuan's face.

It was a rare chance for Cheng Shi to embarrass Hu Xuan. He chuckled softly:

"Is it this?"

Hu Xuan's expression turned peculiar. She frowned in thought for a moment before nodding:

"I didn't expect He'd grant this to you. That happens to align perfectly with my own idea."

"?"

Cheng Shi blinked, then immediately grasped Hu Xuan's meaning!

This Life Sage — whom he'd inadvertently propelled toward Envoy candidacy — was actually planning to give him the item Birth had entrusted to her safekeeping!

Cheng Shi stared at her in disbelief, eyes locked on her smiling gaze:

"Have you lost your mind? You want to transfer His gift and His trust?!

Aren't you afraid He'll punish you?"

"Caught on, did you?"

But I'm not crazy.

You heard it yourself — He gave it to me for safekeeping. That means I temporarily have the right of disposal. And my method of disposal is entrusting it to a friend for preservation. That's a legitimate transfer of rights, not blasphemy.

Besides, if my Lord dared give Go Lis's belongings to me, it means He can reclaim them at any time, no matter whose hands they're in...

Furthermore — He also gave you a shackle. So He clearly had His eye on you already.

Who's to say He didn't anticipate my decision?"

Cheng Shi's expression was complicated. He knew this was Hu Xuan returning a favor, but the method was too reckless — it might cost her the bright path ahead.

Yet he couldn't refuse. She was clearly dead set on giving it to him.

'But sis — this might be fine for you, but it makes things hard for me.'

'Who knows what Birth will think of me.'

'A Deceit con man holding items belonging to a Birth Envoy, who also happens to be connected to a Corruption Envoy.'

'...Isn't this mess tangled enough already?'

Cheng Shi looked at the Umbilical Shackles in his hand and sighed softly:

"Birth is not Fate. How could He see the future?"

"And an illusion is not life. Yet why was I able to be born from a phantom sun?"

"..."

'Sis, you've changed. You were never this good at sophistry before.'

Cheng Shi understood the implication: since Birth had already seized Deceit's authority, He could just as well seize Fate's.

They shared a glance. Both read the other's thoughts perfectly. Hu Xuan smiled and nodded.

"The one in your hand is probably an ordinary Umbilical Shackle — something those ignorant Uma people used to deceive themselves.

What I have is a fragment of the Sin Brood Mother Go Lis's power. On a true god, such power would be called authority. On an Envoy, it's merely a lost ability — like a Servant God Artifact."

With a gentle wave, Hu Xuan floated away the Umbilical Shackles from Cheng Shi's hand while sending her own blood-red shackle toward him.

Cheng Shi took it and examined it closely. His gaze deepened.

Sinner's Regret (SSS): Servant God Artifact. Formed from the crystallized devotion shed during the Sin Brood Mother's self-atonement.

Special Effect — Sinner Redemption: You may mark yourself and other designated targets as "Sinners." Once marked, all Sinners will be bound and suspended in the lingering resentment He left behind, until their faith becomes devout once more or someone rescues them.

Special Effect — Devout Carnival: Each time you conceive, give birth, or cause another to conceive or give birth, you gain one opportunity to remove any target's "Sinner" mark.

Special Effect — Blasphemer Doom: Any life that blasphemes Birth will automatically receive a "Sinner" mark.

'Hiss—'

'This looks like a hard-control Servant God Artifact!'

'If I mark every person in sight as a Sinner... that's basically a screen-wipe!'

Cheng Shi sucked in a sharp breath and looked at Hu Xuan, wanting to confirm if the item was as broken as he imagined. She smiled and nodded:

"You're probably right. But it doesn't work on devout followers of my Lord.

You see, what the Sin Brood Mother despised most were blasphemers of my Lord. She spent her entire existence punishing them on His behalf — including herself.

That's why she earned the title of my Lord's 'rod of discipline.' But the title wasn't bestowed by my Lord himself. It was an honor given by the followers who knew of Go Lis's existence across the long sweep of history.

I know you're a priest. You lack essential combat options. Even grafting others' destinies doesn't guarantee a suitable opportunity in every trial. So this should suit you well.

As for removing your own Sinner mark — if you find that troublesome, consider blowing the whistle I gave you.

I believe I have ample ability to remove as many marks as you'd like."

"..." Cheng Shi's face went rigid. He wanted to thank her for this "friendly concern," but feared his gratitude might be misinterpreted, leading to concern so excessive that it produced Cheng family descendants. So in the end, he settled for silence.

After a wordless moment, he thought it over and solemnly said: "Thank you."

Hu Xuan smiled with a graceful nod, as though she'd done something utterly trivial. She regarded Cheng Shi and continued:

"Honestly, a Servant God Artifact should only exist after a Servant God has fallen. Go Lis clearly vanished from the Divine Pillar, meaning she's been revived — yet this Sinner's Regret hasn't disappeared.

So her current state puzzles me. Combined with the trial you described, I wonder whether there's still an ongoing game between Them — one whose outcome hasn't yet materialized?"

Cheng Shi frowned, thinking Hu Xuan was right.

Birth, Corruption, and Time were definitely locked in a game. As for its nature — nobody but Them could know.

Even as close to Birth as Hu Xuan was, she wasn't yet the true Eternal Sun. Understanding matters to this degree was already impressive.

"You've changed. You're wiser, and far more composed."

Hu Xuan laughed. "I thought you'd say I've gotten more beautiful. Am I not?"

"..."

"I hear Aph Ros is the master of desire — the most beautiful existence among Them. Since you've met her, tell me: between her and me, who's more beautiful? Or... who attracts you more?"

"..."

Cheng Shi desperately wanted to temporarily Oathbreak into Silence, but after a beat, he managed a reply:

"Aph Ros is a man."

"?"

Now it was Hu Xuan's turn to be stunned.

She truly didn't know much about the opposing faith's Gate of Joyous Lust. After all, the Sin Brood Mother was herself a newly discovered Birth Envoy. Because Go Lis was obviously female, she'd subconsciously assumed Aph Ros was too.

She hadn't expected Aph Ros could change gender at will.

So Cheng Shi's answer wasn't wrong — just incomplete.

Perhaps among Birth's camp, gender was irrelevant. But for ordinary, real-world players, the distinction still mattered greatly.

After a moment of bewilderment, Hu Xuan concealed her embarrassment behind a graceful smile.

"The Night Curtain Spring Whistle's duration is limited — not suited for long chats. Next time, I'll find a better medium to see you. When that happens... don't decline my call."

"..."

"Oh, and Cheng Shi — if you ever wish to leave behind something precious in this insane game, please remember to tell me first.

I can set aside every blessing of Birth and bear for you a child of Void. You should know — I now have that ability."

"..."

Cheng Shi was numb. He'd never been this terrified of making conversation in his life.

'Sis, please stop. Every sentence you say is Void enough.'

'Even more Void than me.'

Seeing Cheng Shi's awkward discomfort, Hu Xuan laughed brilliantly once more.

Her silhouette slowly dissolved as the phantom sun dimmed above. At the very end, she left Cheng Shi with only this:

"Don't lose what He's given you. And also..."

Remember to blow the whistle often."

Cheng Shi smiled stiffly, rooted in place. The instant the sun vanished overhead, he immediately started shaking his head — violently — trying to dislodge every irrelevant thing he'd just heard.

'Terrifying!'

'Never want to hear anything about Birth ever again.'

...

Chapter 408: When in Doubt, Ask... Fate

Not wanting to think about it was one thing, but clarity was another matter entirely.

Cheng Shi sat on the ground, carefully organizing every scrap of information in his head — sifting through the mountain of intelligence for clues, trying to unravel Aph Ros's story and even the gods' intentions.

But after a long while, he realized he simply couldn't puzzle out affairs between deities on his own. So he gave up.

Gave up on speculation, and switched to... "consulting" Them directly.

If it involved the gods, then perhaps only They understood Themselves.

So he picked up his dice once more and began praying with genuine devotion.

"Lie like yesterday, snee—"

He hadn't even finished the sneer when — whoosh — Cheng Shi vanished from the spot.

When he opened his eyes, a pair of cold, distant stellar eyes hung in the void, staring down at him without moving.

From the look of them...

'Uh oh — definitely not Fate!'

Cold sweat instantly drenched Cheng Shi's back. He didn't even bother composing his expression — he hung his head and launched into earnest praise.

But this time he'd learned his lesson. The rhetoric was no longer ornate — it was plain. Perfunctory, even. Just in case he looked up to find Deceit again.

"Praise You, great Fate.

May Fate forever remain Fate."

This was certainly a fresh breed of praise — freshly perfunctory. But Fate found the novelty appealing.

Compared to strings of fawning platitudes, this brief, essence-cutting praise clearly pleased Him more.

The cold eye-corners thawed slightly, and the entire void took on hints of phantasmal color.

Cheng Shi caught the shift from the corner of his eye. His heart settled — this was indeed Fate.

So he couldn't wait to raise his head. Disregarding whatever divine decree his Benefactor might have in store, he blurted out a very large question:

"Lord Benefactor, I seem to have gotten entangled with Corruption's Envoy, Aph Ros. Is this...

a faith invitation from Corruption?"

The question was blunt. Blunt enough to casually discuss one deity's affairs before the face of another who didn't belong to that Path.

But Cheng Shi had the confidence. Not because he presumed to know his Benefactor's temperament — but because Fate had once said, "If you have questions, simply ask!"

It was a promise bestowed upon Cheng Shi after his return to Fate — an offer to answer questions about the universe.

Of course, since this trial had been prayed for via Deceit, Cheng Shi hadn't wanted to bother Fate. But since he was already here...

'I'm already here — might as well ask!'

The stellar eyes in the void flickered faintly. Hearing the question, They responded without joy or sorrow:

"You're overthinking."

"..."

'Lord Benefactor, that stung a little.'

Cheng Shi's expression stiffened. He forced a laugh to save face:

"Good then, good then. I've no intention of leaving Void.

Even if He did extend an invitation, I'd decline.

My path was fixed long ago!"

Regardless of whether Cheng Shi meant it — or whether it was genuine — the words sounded pleasing to Fate's ears.

The eye-corners softened another three degrees. The gaze settled on Cheng Shi. The inner spirals turned slowly, as if reading the trajectory of Cheng Shi's past and present destiny. Then He spoke again:

"The fixed has not changed. But remember:

Stay away from Corruption.

He is not an existence mortals can approach.

Also — He never issues invitations. Every life that sinks into the Sea of Desire does so willingly.

They cannot control the desires in their own hearts. Using His summons and guidance as an excuse, they approached Him on their own."

'He never invites?'

'Even His summons and guidance are excuses?!'

Cheng Shi was dumbstruck. He'd always assumed Corruption's followers had their desires amplified and distorted by their Benefactor...

So why was his own Benefactor describing Corruption as... a "victim"?

He was puzzled, but Fate clearly wasn't finished.

"Aph Ros is a tragedy. But He does not deserve pity. He created all of this with His own hands.

As for why Deceit sent you into a Birth trial — perhaps They've signed yet another agreement unknown to outsiders.

He always likes signing these things with others. But they rarely serve any purpose."

"..."

'Lord Benefactor, why does Your tone just now sound like Folly?'

Cheng Shi didn't dare respond. He quietly produced the Gate of Joyous Lust token — a few broken ribbon fragments — and presented them before the divine gaze:

"Lord Benefactor, then this..."

"Merely the self-rescue attempt of one imprisoned. This token allows you to visit His door at any time. But like His Benefactor who never actively invites, He cannot force you to push it open — unless...

driven by your own desires, you open it yourself.

Pay Him no mind.

You did well not to succumb to desire and push open His door.

The 'Gate of Joyous Lust' was not a divine name bestowed by Corruption. It was a title given by Time.

When a mortal opens that gate, their desires become forever uncontrollable — they merge with the Sea of Desire, becoming a basin into which desire back-floods endlessly. After that, they pursue nothing but the joy of descent.

Aph Ros once dreamed of building a paradise of desire where all beings would revel. But His vision was rejected by Existence. And so Time pronounced upon Him... the Eternal Prison sentence."

'Eternal Prison!'

At those words, Cheng Shi inexplicably thought of that S-rank Time talent — Eternal Prison — a hard-control talent that suspends its target in frozen time.

'So Time has a thing for imprisonment?'

'Uh — that's not the point!'

Cheng Shi shook his head, purging stray thoughts, and pressed on:

"Lord Benefactor, but why would a Corruption Envoy receive a title from Time? Corruption Himself... had no objections?"

The stellar points gradually ceased their flickering. He cast a distant glance toward the direction of the Sea of Desire, and even His tone carried weight now.

"He never refuses. And He will not refuse. Just as He never invites and will not invite.

Because indulging desire inherently means shattering refusal. That is why I warn you:

Stay away from Him.

Even Order's voice has already been corrupted. Mortals like you should not be tainted by Him in any way."

'Order was corrupted?'

Cheng Shi startled, suddenly recalling something the great one upon the Bone Throne had once said — "Order has a problem" — and the so-called "Order's fear, Fear (Order)."

'So Order's problem was caused by Corruption?'

'Order lost to Corruption?!'

Cheng Shi was stunned. He stared wide-eyed at the icy eyes, desperate for confirmation. But Fate did not reveal the ancient truth.

"Those matters are far beyond your reach. Thinking about them serves no purpose.

You need only walk your own path with unwavering resolve."

"But Lord Benefactor, I'm still quite curious. If Corruption refuses nothing, would He refuse someone killing Him?

Or to put it another way — if a deity tried to seize His authority, or sought His downfall — would He...

also not refuse?

For example... You... erm... the other sibling deity of Void."

This was breathtakingly blunt — blunt enough to lay bare the gods' practice of stealing each other's authority right on the table.

He'd even named names, pointing at his own Benefactor!

Though he'd tried to backpedal, in truth, if anyone besides Cheng Shi had laid out the gods' dirty laundry before a deity's face, they'd probably already be having an audience with Death.

No — more likely a direct audience with Oblivion, followed by a painless exit from this world.

But Fate was uniquely tolerant. He didn't punish Cheng Shi. He merely fell silent for a moment.

He too was weighing whether Cheng Shi should know these things.

But seeing Cheng Shi's earnest, hopeful eyes — and considering his devotion was acceptable — those eyes offered a brief reply:

"Nor would He."

!!??

...

Chapter 409: Fate Is Not Only Fixed — There Is Also Change

'What does He mean, "nor would He"? If that's the case, how is Corruption still alive and holding authority?'

Fate wasn't finished. He sighed — a sigh laden with awe for the unknown.

"Not one among us can truly see Corruption for what He is.

This scenario you described — 'a god wanting Corruption to fall' — has already played out in past eras.

Order, the mightiest being in the universe, once sought to personally sanction Corruption and eliminate this most destabilizing force. But even He failed.

The gods know only that Corruption hides within the Sea of Desire. But no one knows where.

He once jested to me that Corruption might not exist at all — that perhaps the Sea of Desire is Corruption itself. I disagreed.

Because signing the Convention requires each signatory to surrender their authority. Corruption's authority was included among them. So He must exist.

I am Void's essence. I can perceive the universe's truth. Yet even I struggle to see through the Sea of Desire to the fate hidden beneath the world's desires. He is supremely skilled at concealment — mysterious and dangerous.

So remember: have no contact with Him whatsoever. Otherwise, even Void may not be able to fish you out of the Sea of Desire."

"..."

'Hiss—'

Cheng Shi sucked in a sharp breath. Corruption was that terrifying?!

'None of the gods know where He is?'

'Even Order fell to Him!'

'Even Fate — who can see the future — can't see through whatever lies beneath the Sea of Desire?!'

'Oh no — Lord Benefactor, if You'd told me sooner I'd have been running for my life. How could I have gone around causing chaos under Corruption's name during the last trial?!'

'He hasn't got His eye on me, has He?'

'Also — the one who told You Corruption might not exist... that was the Fun God, right?'

'Only He would have that kind of imagination.'

'I sure hope the Fun God is right. Because if Corruption really does exist, then maybe I really am screwed — one big joke about to drown in the Sea of Desire!'

At that thought, Cheng Shi nearly cried. Face full of anxiety, he asked again:

"Lord Benefactor, I have a few more questions..."

The pair of eyes truly was patient. They glanced at their follower:

"Speak."

"You just mentioned 'eras.' I heard the same word from Aph Ros. I'd like to ask — these so-called 'eras,' compared to the epochs players understand..."

Before he could finish, the eyes blinked once and conjured a gust of Void wind that blew Cheng Shi's mouth shut.

"This you need not know."

!!??

Cheng Shi's heart clenched. He instantly realized the concept of "eras" had to be extraordinarily important — possibly more so than even the Convention. The gods never hesitated to speak openly about the Convention in front of him, yet now They'd physically silenced him to stop him from discussing "eras"!

His mental abacus started clattering.

'Since Fate won't tell me, Deceit probably won't either. So the only remaining source for understanding "eras" is...'

'Aph Ros!'

It now appeared that only this "friend" — the one who'd first told him about "eras" — could explain what they actually meant.

But the problem was: his Benefactor had just told him to stay away from Corruption. How could he approach Corruption's Envoy right under Fate's watchful eye?

'Oh right — Aph Ros has another identity!'

'If contacting the Gate of Joyous Lust is forbidden, then reaching out to the Sin Brood Mother should be fine, right?'

Cheng Shi pondered silently, then inspiration struck. He looked up again:

"Lord Benefactor, I received certain Birth-related gifts from a friend. But I'm unfamiliar with these powers. So I'd like to ask...

how might I consult the original owner of these powers to learn how to wield them properly?"

He was playing dumb — pure and simple. He didn't expect to learn anything from this question. He was merely testing his Benefactor's attitude toward him contacting the Sin Brood Mother, Go Lis.

Fate surely knew about it. His destiny couldn't be hidden from the true Fate!

So Cheng Shi's reasoning was: having his Benefactor's support would be ideal. At absolute worst, he simply couldn't provoke his boss's opposition. As long as Fate had no objections to contacting Go Lis, it would prove that approaching Aph Ros wasn't actually dangerous.

And if He did object — well...

He'd ask another Benefactor who didn't.

Sure enough, Fate couldn't be fooled by such transparent rhetoric. He gave a cold snort, and His gaze slowly returned to its frigid state.

"You shouldn't have as many schemes as He does. What is fixed should stay fixed."

Cheng Shi gritted his teeth. Heart pounding, he mustered his courage:

"But Your domain isn't only the Fixed, Lord Benefactor — it also includes Change!

Since what's fixed is already set, then why not have a little more change beyond the fixed?

I believe this must be one of the reasons You agreed to Faith Fusion with Void's other true god, Lord Benefactor!"

His words rang out powerfully, but inside he was running on empty.

Put nicely, this was a suggestion. Put bluntly, it was provocation. And provoking a deity was virtually synonymous with blasphemy.

Probably no deity would tolerate a follower overstepping so brazenly — except...

Fate.

Because He truly was tolerant.

To Cheng Shi's utter astonishment, these words not only failed to anger those eyes — they actually sent Him into contemplation.

This scene felt achingly familiar. It was as if Cheng Dashi, returning from that Existence loophole, had said to Him:

"Since the ending is already determined, why don't we stage one more climax of change within this fixed script, Lord Benefactor!"

It was the memory of that line that made Fate fall silent.

He'd already given the future Cheng Shi one chance. And now...

He decided to give the present Cheng Shi one as well.

Fate favored the Fixed, yet also doted on Change. And as it happened, both wills found their echo in Cheng Shi.

The void bloomed once more with phantasmal colors. Those eyes — barely containing the warmth at their corners — spoke with cloud-like calm, without joy or sorrow:

"What change do you desire?"

?

Cheng Shi blinked. Then — euphoria.

'I'm in!'

His mind raced. Then, eyes blazing, he looked up:

"I want..."

to make Aph Ros — this Corruption Envoy, this prisoner of Time — work for our Fate...

as an employee!"

Yes. He dropped the act.

'I don't actually want to see some Sin Brood Mother. My real objective is to meet the Gate of Joyous Lust, Aph Ros, again!'

...

Chapter 410: Employment — The Return of Employment

'Employment?'

What an "elevated" concept. At least to the lofty deities, the only beings who could be said to "work for" Them were the Servant Gods from each Path of Fate.

And Aph Ros happened to be a Servant God.

The stellar eyes narrowed slightly. The spirals within froze for a moment. He seemed to see through Cheng Shi's thoughts but didn't call them out — simply letting him continue his "ramblings."

"Just consider this, Lord Benefactor.

Birth and Corruption stand opposed, yet they spawned an Envoy who simultaneously serves both!

This should have been a trifling matter between Life and Descent. So why did Time insist on interfering?

He's our Fate's rival, Lord Benefactor. What if He's studying Aph Ros for inspiration — trying to create some kind of Fate-Time hybrid Envoy to disgust You?

After all, You are a great being who selflessly shelters all Your followers. Time is surely targeting exactly that, plotting to move against You... err, set a trap.

So we can't sit and wait for doom. We need to strike first — seize control of Aph Ros before Time can act. That way, no matter what He does, we'll have enough time to counter.

Lord Benefactor, does that sound right?"

The eyes rotated slightly and nodded.

"It does not."

"...Huh?"

'If it doesn't, then why did You nod?!'

Cheng Shi was numb. His brain buzzed. Everything he'd just said — wasted?

The eyes glanced at Cheng Shi and spoke again, icy and solemn:

"It was Aph Ros who committed blasphemy first. That is why Time imprisoned Him.

Your understanding of Fate runs deep, but you know nothing about Time.

He doesn't care about these things. He only cares whether the future He deduces and the present He marks are precise and flawless.

Beyond that, He doesn't care. And never will."

"So Aph Ros disrupted Time's precision, which earned the Eternal Prison sentence?"

But didn't You say Aph Ros merely wanted to build a paradise of desire for all? How does that conflict with Time's will?"

"...You ask too many questions.

What He blasphemed was not Time."

'Not Time?'

'Then it's Memory?'

'Existence only has two gods. If He blasphemed Memory, why did Time act?'

'Are They that close?'

'Even closer than You two?'

'And what does desire have to do with Memory, anyway?'

Cheng Shi grew even more confused, but this time his Benefactor offered no explanation.

So he paused briefly and pressed ahead:

"Fine — even if Aph Ros has nothing to do with Time, that doesn't prevent him from being connected to our Fate!

Lord Benefactor, please hear me out. I don't mean to approach Corruption. I don't mean to free Aph Ros. I mean to make the imprisoned Aph Ros useful to us."

The eyes had clearly seen through Cheng Shi's intentions. Without further explanation, He gave a light "hm," signaling Cheng Shi to continue.

Cheng Shi chose his words carefully:

"You said Corruption is dangerous and must be avoided. But flip the perspective: if we need to keep our distance, can't we push our enemies into Corruption's Sea of Desire instead?"

Err, I may have misspoken. The great Fate observes the universe's destiny from above, bearing no grudges against any being. Even Time is merely a petty thief who steals Your scraps.

But the 'enemies' I mean aren't necessarily enemies in the literal sense. It's just a general term.

Let me give You an example. The Destined Ones — that organization. Not bad, right?"

The instant those words fell, the star-points in the eyes began flickering rapidly.

Cheng Shi read the signal. Confidence surged. He grinned:

"For an organization to grow, we need to recruit.

But You're busy with ten thousand affairs. You can't spend every day helping me dece— I mean, gazing upon these lucky souls who resonate with Fate's will.

So I was thinking: why not construct a meeting place suited for the Destined Ones? With such a space, spreading Your will and recruiting more Destined Ones would be far more... erm... convenient.

What I'm proposing is this: we set that place right in front of Aph Ros's door. I've been there. The space is small, but safe enough.

Most importantly, the trapped Aph Ros inside can serve as a free tool.

First — Corruption's desire-pull can help us screen out the weak-willed.

Second — Time's cage, requisitioned by Fate, becomes a base for spreading our faith. Whether or not Time cares, from the outside it looks like our Fate came out on top, doesn't it?

And as You said, the imprisoned one can be ignored. So as long as I hold firm, it doesn't count as contact with Corruption.

Of course, even if I slip up and take one wrong step — that tiny bit of Change should still fall within the Fixed.

Everything is Fate's choice. Your devoted follower merely added minor embellishments to that choice. And yet — those small touches might convince even more people to walk the path of Fate!

Don't You agree?"

"..."

The void went still.

Cheng Shi's throat was parched by the time he finished. He'd expected some sort of response from his Benefactor. But those star-woven eyes only cast him a single dispassionate glance — then vanished into the void.

Cheng Shi blinked. Before he could say another word, a gust of wind swept him from the void back to the rooftop.

Looking at the familiar scene, his heart sank.

'Oh no — did I say something wrong and anger Him?'

...

Meanwhile, the moment Cheng Shi fell from the void, those eyes of stars and spirals reopened in the same spot.

He blinked twice. Black mist billowed through the void. Before long, from within the churning darkness, a magnificent, resplendent building slowly "birthed" itself into existence. Upon closer look — it was the very Evil Infant Inquisition Cheng Shi had visited not long ago!

Yes — He had transported the prison of a certain someone directly before His own eyes.

Gazing at this relic from another era, the spirals in His eyes spun faster and faster, as if trying to read every thread of fate contained within.

The Inquisition's great doors remained shut, but a voice soon emerged from within.

That hoarse, wretched sound — like slabs of rotten flesh squeezed and ground against each other — pushed out syllable after syllable that made the skin crawl.

"A... relic of Life... welcomes... the arrival of the new god."

As the voice faded, the Inquisition's doors slowly opened.

In the shadows behind them, tentacle after writhing tentacle twisted and reared, glistening with slime. Countless eyes across her body clamped shut. She faced the stellar gaze in the void and lowered herself in abject humility.

Of course, a mass of tentacles "lowering themselves" essentially meant flattening to the floor.

The lofty eyes regarded this scene with cold detachment and issued the eternal resonance of Void.

"I am not Birth. And you need not grovel so."

"True God above... propriety... must not be neglected."

"Pretenses are useless before me.

You tempted my follower for one reason alone: to learn whether the era following Existence could tolerate your fantasy of turning the universe into a paradise of desire.

I can give you the answer: yes, it could.

But it is meaningless.

Because whether your paradise or your fate — all will, when the era ends, become Void along with everything in the universe."

Hearing this, the tentacles behind the door trembled violently.

Before long, the spread mass of flesh reconvened, sculpting itself into a flawless, jade-like body. Manic laughter spilled from her lips.

"Hahaha, hahahahaha! Fascinating. Absolutely fascinating.

So this is Void's era?

Good. Existence should walk toward Void.

I love Void! Hahaha — so I take it those two from Existence probably don't care for You?"

The nude figure laughed uncontrollably, laughed until tears threatened to fall. Only after a long while did she lean on the doorframe to pull herself upright, weaving shadow from the floor into clothes to cover herself.

She fixed a blazing gaze on those lofty eyes — fearless, yet brimming with respect.

"The humble Aph Ros greets You. May the True God forgive my ignorance. Might I have the honor of hearing the divine names of You and Your sibling deity of Void?"

The eyes showed no reaction. Still cold. They merely swept a glance across Aph Ros's face, then spoke without joy or sorrow:

"You do not have that honor.

A folded fate will not appear in the universe's script. So cease your futile struggles.

I have come to tell you this: the Sea of Desire may block Order, but it cannot circumvent Fate.

Do not attempt to tempt my follower again. Otherwise — neither Life nor Descent will prevent you from embracing Void ahead of the universe."

Without giving Aph Ros a chance to retort, both the Evil Infant Inquisition and the eyes vanished simultaneously from the void.

Aph Ros felt the world blur before her — and she was back in Time's prison.

That new god of Void had plucked her from the cage with casual ease, and returned her just as effortlessly. And through all of it, Time — the deity who'd imprisoned her — hadn't reacted in the slightest!

'What kind of being is He?'

Aph Ros collapsed — not from fear, but from excitement. From exhilaration.

She'd suddenly realized that, through a twist of fate, she'd found a breach. And this breach might very well be her ticket out of this prison!

She wanted to leave. Of course she wanted to leave!

In here, she could only look back on the past. But out there, she could resume pushing her universe-shaking magnificent blueprint — drowning all existence in desire, endlessly birthing, until the day Birth and Corruption finally fused!

At the thought, Aph Ros broke into deranged laughter once more.

She lay on her back, staring at the densely inscribed divine patterns on the ceiling, lips curled high, eyes drifting.

"My brother... how many more surprises will you give me?"

Will we meet again?

I can feel your longing. Come see me. Come look at me.

I truly... can't wait..."

...