

MAN-MADE GODS

廢線彼端的人造神明

After accepting an invitation to join a beta-test for a mysterious product, college student Yi-hao gains control over a magical entity known as the “God of Theft”. Power, however, comes at a price, as Yi-hao and the other beta-testers are forced to band together to avoid falling victims to a nefarious plot.

College student and board game aficionado Yi-hao is invited to participate in a beta-test for a mysterious product called “Deity Series”. Writing it off as a scam, Yi-hao shares the invitation letter with his best friend Hui, not expecting that Hui will actually encourage him to accept the offer. His curiosity piqued, Yi-hao joins the beta-test, and thus comes into possession of the “God of Theft” who enables Yi-hao to materialize any object at will.

Not long afterwards, Yi-hao receives a letter informing him that all of the beta-testers are in grave danger, and must meet up to discuss the threat. When the appointed time comes, only seven beta-testers of the original twenty arrive. The writer of the letter informs them that the missing beta-testers appear to have been kidnapped. Using the powers granted by their various “Deity Series”, the remaining beta-testers decide to work together to ensure each other’s safety, while also investigating what is behind the disappearances.

Some in the group, however, know far more than they are letting on. Others are reticent to speak too freely because they are already under threat from their common enemy. Others still have yet to reveal themselves, placing their trust in secrecy and self-reliance. Yet none of their secrets compare to those hidden by the “God” company itself: the nefarious purpose behind the development of the “Gods” and the source of their occult powers in the global conflicts of the past century.

Novelist Xiao Xiang Shen has always proven adept at weaving together his twin passions for Taiwan history and supernatural



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folktales. With *Man-Made Gods*, he has taken things a step further, incorporating elements of the superhero and science fiction genres, and even ideas inspired by tabletop strategy games. Packed with pitched battles, devious ploys, puzzling conundrums, and occult powers, this tightly-paced techno-fantasy will delight genre fans even as it shines a light on the legacy of Taiwan's colonial and cold-war past.

Xiao Xiang Shen 瀟湘神

Novelist and VR game designer Xiao Xiang Shen is a member of Taipei Legend Studio and an avid researcher of local folklore whose work brings the mystical side of urban spaces to life. His short story "Taipei Scrolls" won a bronze medal at the Kadokawa Fiction Awards in 2012, as well as the King Car Fantasy Fiction Prize in 2014. He has written multiple novels set in Taiwan during the Japanese occupation, as well as a reference manual of creatures from Taiwanese folklore which became the basis for a well-known virtual reality game. Rights to *Chopsticks* – his fiction collaboration with Mitsuda Shinzo, Xerses, JeTauZi, and Chan Ho-Kei – have already been sold in Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Thailand.

MAN-MADE GODS

By Xiao Xiang Shen

Translated by Brendan O'Kane

Chapter 1: Do You Need God in Your Life?

“Thank you, *sempai!*”

With a final bow, the members of the Kendo Club got to their feet and began drifting away, talking and laughing or grabbing their bags and heading off to change. I rose, hefting my bamboo practice sword in my left hand. My heart was still pounding from practice, but my head was still in the game. I mimed drawing my blade, picturing a mighty foe standing before me, and advanced, bellowing mentally, to strike him down.

I struck only air, of course, because that’s what a practice strike is. I returned to my starting position and prepared to strike again.

I was in the basement practice room of a university gymnasium in the Gongguan district of Taipei. This was our dojo, and *sempai* had taught us to treat it with the utmost respect. We bowed when we entered, bowed when we left, and treated everything in it with the appropriate reverence. This lent the space something of a magical aura, and made me feel bad about not getting better at kendo.

I was getting ready to do another 20 or 30 practice strikes when someone tapped me on the shoulder.

“Hey, Number One.”

Looking over my right shoulder, I saw Hui holding a kendo mask in one hand and resting the blade of a practice sword against me with the other. He smiled. “Wanna spar?”

He looked like he’d just stepped out of a sauna. Sweat plastered his hair to his face and beaded at the tips of his eyelashes.

I wiped my own forehead. “We just did three hours – you’re not tired?”

“Is that a ‘no’?”

It sounded like a challenge, but he had a cheerful expression. I laughed: who could say no to that face? Turning my wrist, I traced a ∞ in the air with the tip of my sword, planted my feet in a stance, and pointed the sword at Hui.

“All right, I’ll add to your misery if you want. Didn’t you just lose to Cheng-yin *sempai*?”

“Get back to me when *you* can win a fight against *sempai*. Or maybe I should just teach you a lesson right now and save him the trouble.”

He stepped back to an appropriate distance and pulled the mask over his head. His smile vanished beneath the mask, and the mood changed: it wasn’t good old Hui standing in front of me

anymore: it was some foul fiend from who knows where. *Uh-oh*. I'd talked a good game, but was beginning to suspect I'd just bit off more than I could chew.

This was Wen Cheng-hui. He and I went way back – so far back that you could keep going even before either of us were born. Our dads were friends and workmates, and their wives, which is to say our mothers, were old friends too – Hui's mom was the one who set my parents up in the first place. He and I grew up playing together, and we knew one another about as well as anyone could. We lived in the same neighborhood, went to the same kindergarten, elementary school, and middle school, and even tested into the same high school. "Number One" is me, your humble narrator. My real name is Cheng Yi-hao. Different characters from "Number One", *yi hao*, but that's where the nickname comes from.

And yes, Yi-hao is a pretty weird name – when I was in elementary school, my homeroom teacher had to ask me how the characters were pronounced. My aunt who teaches Chinese literature was the one who came up with the idea of naming me after the Song-dynasty scholars Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao, the Brothers Cheng, though that doesn't explain why my parents went along with it. Anyway, I always used to wonder what was up with the two rare characters in my name, which is probably how I ended up majoring in Chinese literature.

Hui had assumed a fighting stance. I pulled on my mask, mimed drawing my sword, leveled the tip at him – and we were on.

Stillness is at least as important as motion in kendo. (I say this as if someone at my level has any business making pronouncements about kendo.) I had no idea what "poised to strike" meant before I started learning kendo. *Kendoka* don't charge at each other out of the gate – we wait, giving the opponent time to betray some subtle weakness, some tiny movement. We cross swords, lightly probing until we sense an opportunity – but is it a real opportunity, or a clever feint? That's where the skill comes in. Like if it were me, I'd—

"*Men!*"

Hui's shout echoed around the dojo, closely followed by the sound of his practice sword hitting my helmet.

I didn't even have time to probe his defenses.

Of *course* I didn't! He'd been studying kendo since he was little, and he was the head of our high school team. I was a star athlete. I'd hung out with him in Kendo Club, but that was just playing around – I was no match for Hui at anything except talking smack. He returned to the neutral position, the textbook picture of *zanshin*, took a few steps back, and spun around gracefully, laughter ringing out from behind his mask.

"Have we learned our lesson about underestimating Cheng-yin *sempai*?"

Spare me, I thought – Cheng-yin *sempai* is no match for you! But losers don't get to talk back: all I could do was raise a hand in assent.

It was 10 pm by the time we'd changed out of our kendo *gi*. The city never slept, it seemed: out on the street, silvery lights shone and sparkled with crystalline clarity, and even the stores that had closed for the night still had the lights for their signs on. We left the campus by the rear gate, and

even though there was hardly anybody on the street the somewhat lonely wind still carried a human warmth.

“Hey, Hui.” I hurried to match his pace. “When *sempai* asked a minute ago... you don’t think he found out about me, do you?”

“Nnnnnn... It’s not impossible.” He flashed a mischievous, devil-may-care grin.

We’d run into the club president while we were changing. He changed into his street clothes and nodded at us in greeting. I’d never known him to be particularly friendly – the pressures of being the club president, Hui said. On his way out of the bathroom, the president asked: “Hey, Number One, what core courses are you taking this semester?”

Without realizing it, I found myself glancing at Hui. “He didn’t sign up for any,” he said.

“He can’t answer for himself? Never mind – if Hui says it, it must be true. *Ganbatte*, Number One.”

What was *that* supposed to mean, I wondered, feeling shaken. Maybe he was just making conversation – but what if he was onto me? What if he just wanted to watch me squirm? I shook my head at Hui, who still didn’t get it. “I wouldn’t be so cocky. You’ll be in trouble too if I get found out.”

“What’s it got to do with me?”

“If I get caught, whatever – I just stop coming to Kendo Club. But you lied to cover for me.”

“Did not. You really didn’t sign up for any core courses at our school this semester.”

A smart-ass answer if ever I heard one.

Not that there was anything all that bad about my deep dark secret. Hui and I joined different clubs in high school, but we still hung out with each other’s clubs – so I wasn’t a complete beginner at kendo, and Hui had joined me for more tabletop games than I could count. We’d ended up doing different majors at different colleges, but we were both still in Taipei, so we’d decided to keep the habit going. We might be at different schools now, but we were still showing up at each other’s clubs.

The head of the Gaming Club had no problem with people from other schools joining us, but Kendo Club was different. They had to compete against other schools’ clubs in tournaments, and if they ever found out that a student from another school was using their facilities it would have been a problem. Nobody ever said so explicitly, but it was obviously an extremely gray area – so from the start, I’d pretended to be a student at Hui’s school.

Why not just join the Kendo Club at my own school? Because that would have been missing the point entirely: the idea was to hang out with Hui, not face off against him at a tournament! Even so, if the club president really had found out about me, there was bound to be some fallout for Hui. Maybe I should just stop going, rather than risk spoiling things between him and his teammates.

“Don’t worry,” Hui said, patting me on the arm as if he could read my thoughts. “The truth is, the club needs me. He wouldn’t do anything to me.”

“Vain much? I wasn’t worrying about *your* ass,” I shot back.

“Nice diction, Lit major. You’re a credit to your department.”

“Nobody asked *you*, Philosophy.”

The two of us walked our useless majors to the bus stop. Hui lived near his campus, but I had to take the bus all the way back to my dorm. Ordinarily we’d stand there chatting until my bus came, but that night we were silent for some reason. Maybe he just wasn’t dressed for the weather: there was a slight chill in the air, and he slung his practice sword slung behind his back and crossed his arms as if he was cold. The wind blew his hair askew, and he seemed to shrink in the cold.

“Hui, can I ask you something?”

“Huh? Sure.”

“Where’s Wangxin?”

Silvery light from the streetlamps picked out Hui’s profile as he turned to look at me. He stiffened momentarily, but tried to play it off.

“What’re you asking about that for?”

“You’ve been acting a little distracted – why else would you lose a fight to Cheng-yin *sempai*?”

“Hey, what was I saying about not underestimating Cheng-yin *sempai*?”

“Oh, spare me, I’m not *that* clueless. Cheng-yin *sempai*’s never beaten you before – the two of you aren’t on the same level. And you didn’t bring Wangxin. That’s never happened before.”

Hui had nothing to say to that. He cocked his head, his expression unreadable, and snorted.

“Nothing gets past you, does it? I might’ve known you’d notice.”

Me and anyone else with a working pair of eyes.

“Wangxin” was the name of Hui’s practice sword, and it was no ordinary sword. His father ordered it for him from Japan after he won a kendo championship, so you can imagine how much it meant to him. He didn’t just keep it at home, either: for the last few years, he’d carried it into battle with him as a sort of good luck charm. It was practically a part of him – anywhere Hui went, Wangxin wouldn’t be far away.

But the moment he’d opened his sword bag that evening I’d seen that he’d brought a different practice sword. I couldn’t very well ask him during class, and forgot to mention it while we were sparring afterwards. Until just now.

“It’s not...broken, is it?”

Wangxin had accompanied Hui through every victory, every defeat – if it broke, there’d be no replacing it.

“Don’t worry, Wangxin is fine.”

I exhaled. “Well, that’s a relief. So how come you didn’t bring it? Is it back at the dorm?”

Hui made no reply. For a moment, he stood there expressionless and unreadable, like Rodin’s “The Thinker” – but then the corners of his mouth twitched up in a faint smile.

“Thanks, Number One – I’m glad you noticed. But I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why not?”

“Because.” Hui sighed dejectedly. “I’m sorry, man. I don’t want you to think I’m hiding anything, but I really don’t want to talk about it right now. I didn’t think you’d notice, so I wasn’t going to say anything, and...it’s temporary, okay? I’ll explain it once it’s all over.”

“Once *what’s* all over?” This was unsettling. “What’s going on? You in some kind of trouble?”

“Depends what you mean by trouble.”

He tried to leave it there, but I wasn’t reassured at all. “If you’re in any trouble, you know you can tell me, Hui. Anything I can do to help, I will.”

“You really don’t have to worry about me, man – It’ll just make me feel worse if you do. Just leave it, okay?”

“But— ”

Hey! I’ve been trying not to butt in, but is this how you treat your friends? Did you miss the part where he said he didn’t want to talk about it?

The hairs on the small of my back pricked up.

The question had come from nowhere. Hui and I were the only people standing within a few meters of the bus stop. It was just us and the disembodied voice. Hui hadn’t heard it, but he heard me cut myself off and spoke up earnestly to fill the gap. “I appreciate it, Number One, I really do – but that’s all I’m going to say for now, so how about you save us both the trouble.”

I could tell he wasn’t mad at me, but the disembodied voice was keeping me from giving him my full attention. For a moment, I froze.

Hey, your friend is talking to you.

“Number One?” Hui’s voice softened a little. “You mad at me?”

“Not mad. I’ll stop with the questions.” I said. “I’m not *that* annoying, am I?”

I felt stupid. In point of fact, my questions *were* annoying – as if Hui needed my help. He didn’t have to tell me anything he didn’t want to. It wasn’t like I didn’t have secrets of my own.

The disembodied voice, for instance.

“Good man.” Hui exhaled and patted me on the shoulder. “Sorry, Number One. I’ll explain when I can, I promise, but for now let’s just talk about something else, like... Like that weird e-mail you got the other week. What happened with that?”

“E-mail?” I didn’t know what he was talking about.

“You remember – ‘Do You Need God in Your Life?’”

Aha.

Of course he meant that e-mail. I blushed, momentarily at a loss. My bus came into view in the distance, and I took the opportunity to dodge the question.

“That’s me.”

He waved. “See you next week.”

I watched uneasily as the bus approached, then stepped to the edge of the street and waved to the driver. Then I turned back to Hui. “I didn’t reply, just left it there.”

“Aw. Seems kind of a shame.”

“You said yourself, it was probably just a scam aimed at people who aren’t as smart as they think they are.”

The bus pulled up in front of me and opened its doors. I boarded, and Hui waved goodbye from the sidewalk. As I sat down, the disembodied voice spoke up again.

Playing dumb, lying to your friend – is that any way to behave?

“And whose fault is *that*,” I thought, knowing the voice would hear me. “I can’t say anything about it because of the NDA *you people* made me sign! I wouldn’t have tried to brush Hui off otherwise.”

Hey now! No one put a gun to your head. Ours is an age of contractual relationships – respect the almighty contract! Or are you going to say you’re the kind of person who just hits ‘Accept’ without reading the terms and conditions?”

I didn’t know whether to be angry or amused as I glared at the owner of the voice – yes, there was one, even if I was the only person who could see him: a little man in a traditional loose-fitting cloth robe, about a foot tall, with arms and legs as slender as a china doll’s. The voice sounded like a grown man’s, but his face was obscured by a curious little hat that made it impossible to guess his age.

Defying gravity, the strange little man floated in mid-air, looking at me with an air of smug condescension.

Nothing clever to say to that, eh? You’d better get those brain cells working harder than that, Yi-hao. So you thought our company was ‘scamming people who aren’t as smart as they think they are’, did you? Hah! Why don’t you just tell him the truth? I’d love to see the look on his face when he finds out it’s for real.

“Not happening. No point telling him if he can’t see you.”

With that mental rejoinder, I turned to look out the window, ignoring the little man. We had stopped at a red light. Outside, a man on a scooter looked idly into the bus while he waited for the light to change, accidentally catching my gaze. He wouldn’t be able to see Him, of course. The strange little man might as well have been a hallucination. Turning away, I turned my gaze back toward the distant past—

Wait, no, it was just two weeks ago.



“Do You Need God in Your Life?” said the unread message.

I felt a surge of annoyance – were missionaries branching out into spam now? How did they get my address? What was the point of finding an e-mail provider with good spam filtering if it was just going to let stuff like that slip through? *Waste of money*, I thought as I opened the message.

Dear Sir/Madam:

We are delighted to inform you that you have been chosen to be a beta tester for “God”. A revolutionary new product that we believe will change the world – once it has been thoroughly tested to assess its potential impact on society. That’s where you come in.

You don’t need us to tell you that “God” has capabilities far beyond human understanding. Everything from the meteorological (e.g. lightning and floods, as in ancient mythology) to the supernatural (flight, telepathy, etc.). Our products can work miracles. That’s why we’re calling our new line of God-enabled products the Deity Series. But you don’t have to take our word for it. Join our beta test and see for yourself.

Now that we’ve finished alpha testing, we’re inviting a limited number of “God-less” individuals to join our closed beta. Your testing and feedback won’t just help us put the finishing touches on our product – they’ll be a key source of information for the Legislative Yuan in drafting regulations to limit the impact of God. (We have no doubt that the launch of such a powerful product is virtually certain to change the way our society operates.) Are you willing to help test God? If so, please print and sign the attached non-disclosure agreement and fax it back to us for immediate access to the God beta; otherwise, please let us know so that we can offer this opportunity to some other lucky tester.

The message was signed “Kuang-shih Technology Holdings Co., Ltd”. There was a fax number at the bottom.

...???

Or maybe “whaaaa?” would be a better way of putting it, though words can’t really capture how confusing and straight-up weird the message was. So it wasn’t missionary spam after all, but... “God?” “God” as in “God-damn, that’s weird,” maybe. And “Deity Series?” Give me a break. All the stuff about changing the world and rewriting the laws sounded pretty scammy to me.

I marked the message as Spam and told Hui about it afterwards.

He didn’t respond the way I expected.

We were in the bathroom changing back into our street clothes after Kendo Club the next day when I told him about the message, making a joke of the whole thing. I thought he’d laugh along with me, but when he answered me from the next stall over he sounded almost serious. “So you think it’s a scam?”

Whaaaa?

“Uh, yeah? I’m sorry, they’ve got God-powered technology that’s going to change the world and let me control the wind and lightning? Besides, faith is incompatible with science; that’s just common sense. They’ve got to be wildly overselling whatever it is, at the very least.”

“Science is science and faith is faith, Number One. Different magisteria, no issue with compatibility. Lots of scientists who believe in God.”

Analyzing everything again. This is why people hate philosophy majors.

“And sure, they’re probably overselling it to some degree. Doesn’t necessarily make it a scam – worst-case, maybe it just isn’t as big a deal as they’re saying. I don’t know what kind of new tech they’ve got, but you’re saying it’s an obvious scam, and I don’t see any evidence for that.”

“OK, but think about it: ‘God’ means something supernatural, right, by definition? Supernatural means *supernatural*. There’s no technology that can control the winds and the rains, or turn lead into gold, or rain down fire on a city and turn anyone who looks back into a pillar of salt or whatever. That’s not ‘overselling’, it’s a whole different ballgame.”

“Granted, it’d be pretty amazing if they could turn you into a pillar of salt, but it’s basically just chemistry, isn’t it?”

“No, Hui, and I’m glad there aren’t any science majors around to hear you say that.”

“OK, fine, I won’t pretend I understand chemistry. But controlling the wind and changing lead into gold has to be at least within the realm of possibility for technology. I read somewhere that rainmaking actually worked because people burned a lot of wood for the rituals, and the smoke particles gave the rain something to condense around. ‘Supernatural’ is just a function of the observer’s comprehension of the underlying technology. With sufficiently advanced technology, ‘supernatural’ just becomes natural. So how can you be so sure this ‘Deity Series’ of theirs can’t do things that appear to you to be supernatural?”

Hui finished changing and opened his stall door. I rushed to finish changing, still dubious.

“I’m not so sure about the whole changing the world and upending the laws part, though.”

“Granted. I’m not saying I *believe* the e-mail. At first blush it does sound like a scam targeting people who aren’t as smart as they think they are – but I think you’re dismissing it a little too hastily, Number One. Besides, changing the world and upending the laws is one of the main things technology does!”

“Yeah?”

“I mean not all tech, obviously, but just think about the last century or so. The Industrial Revolution makes it possible for workers to sell their labor, and then you need the Labor Standards Act. People invent cybercrimes, then other people write laws against cybercrimes. Modern life isn’t the way it is just because people chose to live this way; they were also pushed in this direction by the way technology developed. Or over-developed. Do you think anyone actually sits down to decide what kind of life they want for themselves? Our own creations end up taking choices away from us – how about that for ironic?”

Hui had a point. After two centuries of breakneck scientific progress, punctuated every now and then by the rise of life-changing new technologies, how could I be so sure that the “Deity series” wasn’t the latest? Still, to say that technology was the thing driving humans...

“I don’t buy it.” I finished changing and opened the stall door. “Technology doesn’t just develop indiscriminately – public opinion holds it in check with things like cloning and gene-splicing. I don’t understand this stuff any better than anyone else does, and it’s not for me to say what technology should or shouldn’t do – but by the same token, if it’s not up to me, then it isn’t

my responsibility. Or my problem. Besides, it's like the guy says in *Jurassic Park* – 'Life finds a way.' Wherever the technology ends up, people will find a way to adapt to it."

Hui smiled faintly.

"I'm probably making too much of it." We walked out of the bathroom, and his voice echoed around the empty basement corridor. "But it's important to think about what kind of life you want. When an idealistic politician ends up betraying their principles, it usually isn't because they were chasing the money – it's because the money led them astray. Right now we think we're the ones in charge of technology, but if we're not careful it could easily go the other way. Still—"

He stopped suddenly.

"If I got a message about something that had the potential to change the world in my inbox, I'd be falling all over myself to try it out." He looked back from the dimly lit other end of the corridor. "If the world has to change, I'd at least like to get ready in advance. If you're not up for it, Number One, you can always give it to me."

"Like I'd let you get mixed up in a scam."