

## **The Gods 34**

Chapter 34: The Dawn That Pierces the Night

Reality, Unknown City, an Apartment.

Bai Ling woke up in her bed, feeling the warmth of sunlight seeping through the window and onto her face.

She raised her hand to touch her cheek, then pinched herself hard.

Ouch!

She wasn't dead.

The Final Gate was real.

She had survived again!

A brief smile spread across her face, and she even let out a small laugh of joy. But quickly, the smile froze and slowly faded as she stared blankly at the white ceiling.

"Why did you choose Him?"

Cheng Shi's question spun in her mind over and over, and she remembered her response clearly.

"Isn't it because I like Him?"

Yes, wasn't that the reason?

But... what exactly did she like?

Bai Ling slowly rose from bed, just as she always did after a trial, shedding her clothes and standing naked in front of the mirror, turning in circles as she examined the marks that [Corruption] had left on her body.

The sensation of embracing desire didn't feel unpleasant, but did she truly like it?

Maybe.

Bai Ling chuckled self-deprecatingly and dragged herself towards the bathroom.

It was an old, rundown apartment, but thanks to the collective prayers of the surrounding players, the water supply was still decent.

She turned the shower on to full blast, cranking the temperature to its highest setting, letting the scalding water pour over her skin, turning it red.

Her hands scrubbed her body relentlessly, even though there was nothing to wash off. She kept scrubbing, harder and harder.

She didn't stop until she was completely exhausted and collapsed onto the bathroom floor, falling into a deep sleep. Only then did this "self-punishment" come to an end.

In her dream, she found herself reliving the day the [Gods] descended. She stood before her only option, confused, and asked:

"To follow you, what must I do?"

That enticing, beguiling voice still echoed in her memory.

[Flesh, power, wealth, selfishness, greed, laziness... all will be the desires you may pursue.]

“But... I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

[Then bring them pleasure instead.]

Pleasure?

From that day on, a Sensory Predator who pursued “carnal indulgence” was born.

She had never harmed anyone. She only ever brought them...

Pleasure.

...

Hours later, Bai Ling slowly woke up again.

A smile returned to her face as she got up and dried herself off. She picked out a fresh, untouched dress from her wardrobe and began changing at a leisurely pace.

For most players, old clothes had only one destination— the trash.

But Bai Ling never threw her clothes away. Each dress was like a tape of memories, reminding her of the details of each trial she had survived.

Carefully, she hung up her previous dress, smoothing it out as she recalled every moment from the last trial.

But as she adjusted the hem, she noticed something tucked into the seam of the skirt.

A letter.

A letter written on a page torn from a book.

Bai Ling's hand flew to her mouth in shock. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. Trembling, she unfolded the letter.

Each beautifully written word slowly came into view, one by one, as her eyes scanned the page.

"An Invitation from the Torchbearers."

—

Reality, Unknown City, a Classroom.

Fang Shiqing held a piece of chalk and skillfully drew a symbol on the blackboard.

The moment she finished, the board twisted and contorted, transforming into a pitch-black door. Without hesitation, her gaze firm, she stepped through the door.

On the other side lay an endless void.

The moment she entered, invisible steps rose beneath her feet, carrying her to a designated destination far in the distance.

After only a few dozen steps, Fang Shiqing spotted a "person" sitting across from her—a being made entirely of burning candlelight, floating above the ground, looking down at her.

Feeling the entity's gaze, Fang Shiqing shook her head with a wry smile:

"Do you have to be this dramatic?"

“Shiqing, this is the treatment I deserve. I opened this path for you, a path even [The Gods] cannot see. Shouldn’t you praise me every time we meet?”

“Alright, alright—praise the great Flame of Hope. But could you stop calling me Shiqing? It’s way too cutesy.”

“Okay, Shiqing.”

“...”

Fang Shiqing rubbed her temples in exasperation. “Has he arrived?”

“Yes, he’s just ahead.”

Fang Shiqing nodded, ready to leave, but after taking a few steps, she paused and turned back, a puzzled look on her face.

“By the way, why don’t you call him ‘Torchy’?”

“...”

The entity made of candlelight froze for a moment, then hesitantly replied:

“I’m scared he’d punch me...”

“Pfft.” Fang Shiqing couldn’t help but laugh, her steps much lighter as she moved forward.

A short while later, she found herself standing in a bright hall, facing a towering man.

“You look cheerful. Did something good happen?” he asked.

“Are you injured?” Fang Shiqing’s brow furrowed slightly.

“A small wound, nothing serious. I ran into two [Corruption] Chosen and had a couple of skirmishes.”

The man spoke casually, but Fang Shiqing knew how terrifyingly dangerous such confrontations could be.

The difficulty level of trials in his rank was beyond what most players could even imagine.

But she didn’t press him for details—she simply nodded.

“Let’s get to business. Time is precious.”

“Hmm. I sent out two new invitations. One to the Forgotten Doctor, and one to the Sensory Predator.”

The man raised an eyebrow, surprised. “A follower of [Corruption]?”

“Yes, a follower of [Corruption].”

“And?”

“The doctor declined, but the predator... probably won’t.”

“Oh?” The man’s interest was piqued. He smiled, asking, “Why do you think that?”

“Because her heartstrings play the same melody as ours—filled with tones of compassion, dancing with notes of hope.”

“Are you sure this is a follower of [Corruption]?”

“I’m sure.”

“Hmm... You’re the Torchbearer. I’ll trust your judgment. So, shall I prepare the welcoming ceremony for our new recruit?”

Fang Shiqing’s thoughts drifted momentarily to someone, but she quickly dismissed the distraction and nodded with a smile:

“She’ll come.”

—

Reality, Unknown City, an Apartment.

Xu Lu woke with a scream, bolting upright from the table, knocking over a crystal ball and a stack of tarot cards.

She thrashed around as if someone had grabbed her by the throat, struggling until her back hit the wall. Only then did she realize...

She was no longer in the trial.

This was...

A resting area?

Ever since the [Gods] had assigned players fragmented living spaces, the word “home” had slowly faded from people’s minds.

Most players referred to their dwellings as “resting areas.” Some called them “temporary shelters” or “survival spots.”

Xu Lu stared at her hands in disbelief, then quickly began feeling around her body.

When she realized that she was completely unharmed—and alive—the fear in her eyes only intensified.

Why?!

Why had she survived after Cheng Shi dragged her through what she believed was the wrong Final Gate?

Why hadn’t he killed her when he had the chance?

Why had [Fate] warned her not to trust the follower of [Time] when, by all accounts, the follower of [Time] was the one who had been right?

Why?

Could it be that [Fate] had destined her to die?

Why?!

Ever since Xu Lu had begun following [Fate], there hadn’t been a single day where she failed to revere Him, to praise Him, to obey Him.

And in the end, He had guided her to her death?

Why?!

Was this her fate?

She refused to accept it!

Fear and anger swirled in her eyes, unyielding resentment and hatred growing as she gripped her Dice of Fate tightly. Her expression shifted, fluctuating between rage and disbelief.

From the rooftop, Xie Yang seemed to hear the commotion from the room below. He leaned over the edge, shouting anxiously:

“Lulu? Lulu? Are you okay? What’s happening?”

Xie Yang’s voice snapped Xu Lu out of her thoughts. She stopped herself just as she was about to throw her die and clenched her fist instead, holding back her frustration.

She quickly regained her usual tone, speaking in her familiar lilting voice:

“Brother Xie, I’m fine. I just accidentally knocked over the table.”

Despite her reassurances, she made no move to step into view, staying away from the balcony where Xie Yang could have seen her.

“As long as you’re okay! You didn’t get hurt in the trial, right?”

“Thanks to your potion, I’m fine. But... it seems I’ve run out.”

“Huh? Oh! No worries, I’ll ask Cheng Shi for another bottle. I bet he still has some.”

Cheng Shi!!

That name again!!

Xu Lu's mind was a whirlwind of chaotic thoughts as flashes of hatred crossed her face, but she forced herself to speak softly:

"Oh... I hope it's not too much trouble for you, Brother Xie."

"It's no trouble at all!"

—

Reality, Unknown City, Suburban Area.

Ah Ming lay on the ground, staring up at the blazing sun, his thoughts racing wildly.

After receiving [Order]'s command to eliminate the follower of [Chaos], only to be countered by Huang Bo, he had known he was as good as dead.

Trapped against the wall, tortured and feeling his life slowly drain away, he had even considered giving up entirely.

But just when he thought his life was about to slip away, a snap from the depths of the void pulled him back to reality.

He woke up, completely unscathed.

It was as if he had just entered the trial anew.

Ah Ming looked down at his perfectly restored body, utterly shocked.

He broke free from the blood-stained shackles and jumped down from the wall, glancing at the time. There were still two hours left.

Time?

Suddenly, it clicked.

It was the Forgotten Doctor's doing—it was [Time]'s magic, a State Rewind.

The doctor named Cheng Shi had saved him.

“Praise [Time]. Once again, I've cheated death.”

Afterward, Ah Ming tried to find the Memory Gate and track down his teammates, only to discover that they had already left the trial.

Not only that, but outside each Memory Gate, they had left instructions for him, guiding him toward the answers.

It felt like he had just woken from some terrible nightmare, where he had been tortured and left for dead.

But upon waking, the nightmare had ended, and the trial had already cleared itself.

“Cheng Shi... I owe it all to you...”