

The Gods 280

Chapter 280: New Night, Old Dreams

Every smart villager knew: never go outside at night.

So no matter how anxious the players were, they'd have to wait until the dark sun rose the following day to track down Eposka. The first order of business, then, was how to spend the night.

This wasn't really a problem. Seasoned trial veterans could sleep literally anywhere — swampland, coffin camps, sewers. As long as there was a patch of ground to lie on, they'd manage.

But some people had no intention of wasting the long night. They wanted to step out and gather more intelligence about the trial.

Where there were workaholics, there were slackers. And so disagreements arose.

As the person with the "greatest" authority in the group, Cheng Shi's proposed solution was:

'I don't care what you do. I'm sleeping.'

And with that, he flopped onto the ground again, drifting off into an exaggerated fake sleep.

After him, Hong Lin and the Puppet Master each sat down and closed their eyes. Only the hunter and Zuo Qiu stirred, exchanging a glance before quietly slipping through the door.

Clearly, those two still wanted to unearth stories in the lightless dark.

Once outside and finding no one around, they shared one look and parted ways — one left, one right.

But before long, the hunter — Jiang Wumei — who'd gone one direction came circling back. He stared in the direction Zuo Qiu had disappeared, pondered for a moment, then turned his gaze toward the house.

"Night has come. Sweet dreams begin."

He murmured to himself, then quietly pushed the door open and tiptoed inside. Looking at the three peacefully resting players, he hesitated briefly, then settled near Cheng Shi. He sat down, closed his eyes, and fell asleep.

At that very moment, outside the door, a sound. The historian who'd just vanished pulled the door open a crack and peered at Jiang Wumei sitting beside Cheng Shi. A knowing smile crossed his face.

"Interesting. A Dream Peeping Ranger!"

Dream Peeping Ranger — the hunter of [Memory].

At last, the hunter who'd been disguised throughout the journey had revealed his true colors. But by then, he'd already gotten what he wanted.

Because dream peeping meant peeping into interesting dreams.

As for whether Cheng Shi's dreams were interesting — Jiang Wumei was sure they were. After all, this was a man who'd once toyed with Zhen Yi. A man like that was bound to have interesting dreams.

'So let me see — what fascinating things are hidden in a Fate Weaver's dreamscape?'

...

Jiang Wumei came to. He found himself standing in what appeared to be a primary school classroom. Dozens of children — none particularly old — sat at desks while a middle-aged woman with a fleshy, mean-looking face stood at the lectern.

The woman was saying something to the children. The hunter stood at the classroom door like a ghost, observing from the threshold.

Gradually, sound returned. He heard the cacophony of small children squabbling and the woman's sharp scolding.

"Shut up, all of you! Sit down!"

Don't blame me for not telling you — the uncle and auntie coming tomorrow don't like noisy children. If you want a mommy and daddy like kids out there, you'd better pipe down and stop making trouble for me!"

With that, the woman stomped away, muttering obscenities. At the doorway, she spat with a jealous glare.

"Tch — a bunch of little bastards. Who knows which brat is lucky enough to get picked by a family that rich!"

Jiang Wumei frowned as he watched her leave. Understanding dawned: 'An orphanage.'

"Cheng Shi. An orphan..."

He scanned the classroom, searching for Cheng Shi's likeness, but couldn't spot anyone resembling him. Not until a timid little girl in the very front row — practically under his nose — leaned over and whispered to her desk-mate:

"Little Ten, the uncle and auntie are coming tomorrow to see us. Why haven't you taken off your mask?"

'Mask?'

Jiang Wumei startled. On closer inspection, the little brat sitting right in front of him was wearing a startlingly realistic mask made from what looked like human skin!

'Wait — why would something like this exist in an orphanage?'

'The kid made it himself?'

'A child this tiny can produce something like this? What's it made of? How did I not even notice!?'

Jiang Wumei's curiosity was instantly captured. He abandoned his search for Cheng Shi and moved closer to study the boy.

Truth be told, his dream-peeping principle wasn't to find the dreamer. It was to collect interesting things, wherever they appeared. This satisfied his peculiar hobby and provided entertaining stories to offer his patron. Two birds, one stone.

So he examined the boy's mask — and discovered a blend of crudeness and ingenuity.

It wasn't a flawlessly lifelike mask. It was a disguise fashioned from dough — rolled thin and pressed over the face. The disguise was imperfect, but the boy was clever: he'd hidden every flawed edge beneath wisps of fine hair and in the shadow of his jawbone. At a casual glance, you truly couldn't tell anything was on his face.

The boy called Little Ten heard the girl's words, immediately clapped a hand over her mouth, and shushed her: "Keep it down! If Rong Mama catches me, she'll confiscate my mask again."

"But you look so ugly with it on — you'll never get picked. I heard Little Seven say that the uncle and auntie like pretty children. You're actually good-looking, so why would you—"

"Hehe, Little Seven lied to you. He snuck to the office and eavesdropped on Rong Mama. He came back and told me that these particular visitors don't like good-looking children. They're rich and want to stay low-key, so the kid can't be too pretty either.

See? I pulled an all-nighter making this new mask. With it on, I'm not as handsome, right?"

"What!? He's so mean! Then I want a mask too."

"?" The little boy froze. "No way — if I give you one, then mine was made for nothing!"

"Oh right. Fine, I'll let you have this chance. I'll wait for a uncle and auntie who like pretty kids."

"I mean, sure, but there's something kinda weird about what you just said..."

The two children's innocent banter nearly made Jiang Wumei laugh. He looked around and concluded that this "Little Ten" was very likely the Cheng Shi he'd come to find. That made him even happier.

"Young Cheng Shi. Interesting."

Before long the children dispersed. Jiang Wumei followed the boy to a restroom outside the classroom and watched him peel the thin dough-skin mask from his face, strip by careful strip. The hunter's eyes gleamed.

'It is him!'

'Cheng Shi!'

The eyes, the brow, the entire face — an exact match for the one in the trial!

Except that little Cheng Shi's features were more delicate — more endearing. No wonder he'd hidden his face. With those looks, any adoptive parents would pick him at first glance.

If Little Seven's intelligence was accurate, then he really did need to hide that face of his.

And just as little Cheng Shi removed the mask, the dream began to dissolve. Jiang Wumei wasn't surprised. He knew this was simply how dreams worked — the human mind never generated a complete dream.

All memories were scattered fragments, reshuffled without order, playing scene after scene in the sleeper's consciousness.

Jiang Wumei's vision followed Cheng Shi's consciousness into darkness. When he awoke, he was standing downstairs at the orphanage.

Before him stood a well-dressed couple. The refined husband was confirming adoption procedures with the institution. The gentle wife was soothing a child's nerves.

The lucky boy fidgeted, anxiously picking at his fingers, clearly overwhelmed. But Jiang Wumei saw something in those eyes that the child couldn't conceal: barely-restrained elation.

Ah yes — the boy was good-looking. But he obviously wasn't little Cheng Shi. He was the second-best-looking child in the orphanage.

Jiang Wumei vaguely recognized him, though he didn't know the boy's name.

At that moment, the paperwork was done. The rotund director laughed heartily, ruffling the boy's hair as he turned to the refined husband:

"Well then — Little Seven is in your hands, Mr. Du. Little Seven, now that you're going to live at Uncle Du's house — ah, no, you should call him Dad now! Hahaha."

"Director Hu, please don't tease the boy. Let him settle in first. I can see he's a fine-featured, gentle-looking child — must be a good kid. Your institution's education is quite impressive."

"Hahaha — naturally! Not to boast, but we've never missed a single day of instruction. Of course, none of it would be possible without generous sponsors like yourself. We owe you our gratitude..."

Watching the two men exchange pleasantries, Jiang Wumei smiled with understanding.

"Little Seven. Interesting."

He turned to look up at the orphanage — where little Cheng Shi was pressed against a window, watching from above. Jiang Wumei suddenly wanted very much to know what was going through the boy's mind right now.

So he leaped lightly. Like a feather, he drifted up to the windowsill where little Cheng Shi stood — and heard the most interesting sentence of the entire night.

Little Cheng Shi stood at the window, gazing at Little Seven being led away. He slowly turned the dough-skin mask over in his hands. No crying. No anger. Calm — impossibly calm for a child his age. He nodded to himself with the faintest hint of comprehension and murmured:

"I was deceived.

Little Seven lied to me.

So that's... how lies are used."