

The Gods 286

Chapter 286: Night Falls Again — Sweet Dreams Return!

Discussion was one way to drive cooperation forward. But not every discussion reached a conclusion.

After a stretch of silence, everyone understood that tonight's debate would end without resolution. Some players didn't follow [Prosperity] and felt nothing for historical NPCs — so naturally, they'd prefer whatever method was easiest.

But Hong Lin clearly didn't see it that way. She might not care about points, yet she seemed unwilling to rush through this trial carelessly.

Cheng Shi observed her for a long time. For once, he couldn't read whether the Chosen One objected to slaughtering innocents — or simply wanted another round against a worthy opponent.

She seemed to be savoring today's battle.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi smiled. In that case...

"This is apparently a tough call for everyone. How about this — tomorrow we head out again. If my theory holds, Eposka will definitely attack us again. After all, the [Prosperity] power on Baldie is far more potent than anything on the Mushroom-Footed People.

We'll gather more intel on Eposka then. Maybe that'll help us make a better decision. Sound good?"

The instant the words landed, Hong Lin's eyes flashed. She clearly liked this plan.

Cheng Shi noticed and laughed to himself. 'Sure enough — she's not a [Prosperity] follower at all. She's a [War] follower!'

The group exchanged silent glances, everyone nodding in agreement. The trial was only two days in. They had plenty of time.

With tomorrow's plan set, the players once again settled into rest mode, each finding their own way to endure the long night. Cheng Shi's method was characteristically simple:

Sleep like the dead.

Without sparing anyone a glance, he walked straight to a corner of the main house, flopped down, and was out cold within moments, breathing evening out.

The others watched in marvel.

Whether the Fate Weaver actually fell asleep that fast was anyone's guess. But the size of his heart — that was clearly genuine.

Hong Lin glanced thoughtfully at Cheng Shi, then sat down at a fair distance, closing her eyes to rest. Zuo Qiu gave an awkward chuckle and slipped out the door. The Puppet Master didn't stir, sleeping in her puppet's embrace.

The hunter considered following Zuo Qiu out — but after scanning the room and glancing at Cheng Shi's position, he weighed his options and decided to stay.

Typically, on the second night after a Dream Peeping Ranger had peered into someone's dreams, the sleeper — influenced by [Memory] — would recall even more past memories. The night's dreamscape would be far richer.

Jiang Wumei didn't want to miss this. And since Cheng Shi had shown zero reaction to Zuo Qiu's veiled hints — apparently oblivious — the hunter decided to risk it.

Truthfully, he was confident in his dream-peeping ability. Throughout the entire trial, he'd been invisible — doing only what was asked, saying nothing extra, going along with whatever the team decided, never voicing an opinion.

This carefully cultivated wallflower persona existed for one purpose: better access to teammates' dreams.

Zuo Qiu had called him a man with peculiar habits. He was right — but the habit belonged to Jiang Wumei, not Zuo Qiu.

He was trapped in the swamp of peering into others' memories, unable to pull himself free... no. Unwilling to pull free.

Only this secret thrill gave him a scrap of personal joy in a world with no future.

So after careful deliberation, he sat down near Cheng Shi once more. Closed his eyes. Held his breath. Drifted in.

Night falls again — sweet dreams return!

...

When Jiang Wumei came to, he found himself in the same familiar orphanage.

The children had rotated by now. Few faces from last night remained — but little Cheng Shi was still here, taller now, and had become the undisputed king of the kids.

Jiang Wumei found this amusing, so he trailed the boy like a ghost.

Tonight's dream — enhanced by [Memory] — was noticeably more vivid than the last. Time flowed faster.

Through careful observation of little Cheng Shi and those around him, Jiang Wumei soon pieced together what had happened in the orphanage between these two "nights."

Little Cheng Shi had learned to lie. And his lies were as flawless as his mask-disguises!

He wielded falsehoods like tools, navigating effortlessly between the administration, the tutors, and the children — saying what people wanted to hear, never letting truth leave his lips. Through sheer deception, he'd transformed his formerly miserable existence into something genuinely comfortable.

Jiang Wumei also learned from a tutor that little Cheng Shi had actually manipulated the director into firing Rong Mama — along with every other cruel staff member like her.

The run-down orphanage had somehow begun to thrive, all thanks to one tiny puppet master pulling strings from behind the curtain.

But good times didn't last. Tonight — or rather, in this dreamscape — while little Cheng Shi was sneaking into the director's office to gather fresh intelligence, a hidden camera in the director's cabinet finally caught him.

Nobody knew why the director had planted a micro-camera in his own office. Little Cheng Shi hadn't even known cameras could be that small. So he was caught.

The humiliated, authority-challenged director was furious. He called in favors and found an adopter — planning to remove this "troublemaker" through legitimate channels.

And that was when Jiang Wumei finally met little Cheng Shi's "first family member."

His name was Old Jia. As for which "Jia" — Jiang Wumei couldn't be sure, because Old Jia himself apparently didn't know either.

On the day he came to adopt Cheng Shi, he wore a shirt of seemingly fine fabric, pressed trousers, and old but clean leather shoes. Socks... he wasn't wearing any. He stood at the orphanage's reception desk, stiff and nervous, waiting for them to bring little Cheng Shi out.

When a tutor dragged the reluctant boy to him, Old Jia's first words to the red-faced little Cheng Shi were:

"What happened to the kid's face?"

Little Cheng Shi rolled his eyes. "AIDS. It's contagious."

The tutor's face went black. She smacked the back of his head. "Kids say the darndest things. He had paint on his face. We just scrubbed it off. It's from scrubbing, not from disease."

Jiang Wumei couldn't help laughing. It wasn't paint at all — it was the dough-skin mask.

Before the visit, the little schemer had crafted a new mask, disguised himself as another child, and hid in someone else's bed. Five or six sweating tutors had spent the entire morning hunting him down.

As for the child whose identity he'd stolen — that poor kid was still bawling his eyes out in the attic storage room.

But the tutors couldn't be bothered with the victim right now. Priority one was getting cette troublemaker out the door, as directed by the director.

Old Jia listened and nodded repeatedly, hands tucked in his pockets: "Oh, oh, that's fine, that's fine. Scrubbed him clean. Scrubbed him up good."

Little Cheng Shi rolled his eyes again. He clearly didn't think much of this awkward, unimpressive "father."

Compared to previous adopters, Old Jia was hands-down the shabbiest one in years.

"All right, take Little Ten to register. The director pulled strings for you — got the green-light fast track. Once the paperwork's done, he's your son. Hurry up."

Old Jia trembled with excitement. He looked at the scowling little Cheng Shi and slowly, tentatively, extended his hand.

Little Cheng Shi glanced at it with disdain and turned away.

Old Jia froze in place.

But after a moment, little Cheng Shi heaved a resigned sigh and reached back to take his hand.

A small child couldn't defy an adult's decisions. Since that was how it was, he might as well "be obedient, be compliant" — maybe that docility would make his future life slightly less unbearable.

This wasn't Jiang Wumei's own sentiment. It was what he read in little Cheng Shi's eyes.

Old Jia gripped the boy's hand with trembling excitement — then immediately loosened his hold to something gentler, beaming:

"Come on, kid. Let's go home."

"Register. Didn't you hear? There's paperwork." Little Cheng Shi sighed at the man's cluelessness.

"Oh, oh, right, right — register. Ma'am, where do we register again?"

The tutor sighed and led Old Jia and little Cheng Shi to the adoption office.

Inside the consultation room, Old Jia picked up a pen. His hands shook so badly he couldn't write. After wobbling for a long while, he set it down, face tight with embarrassment.

"I... I can't read."

Little Cheng Shi chuckled softly. He didn't look down on the man. Instead, he picked up the pen and began filling out the form himself. After a minute, he asked:

"Hey — what's your name? I need to write it."

Old Jia looked at little Cheng Shi. Something shifted and turned behind his eyes. Finally, with an expression both complex and tender, he answered:

"Old Jia."

"They want a first and last name. Don't tell me your surname is 'Old' and your given name is 'Fake'?"

"Oh, oh, I get it, I get it. My surname is Cheng..."

"Which Cheng?"

"The one that's... that's..."

Little Cheng Shi lost patience. He scrawled the character "程" and pointed: "Can you read this? Is it this one?"

Old Jia squinted hard, then nodded rapidly: "That's the one, that's the one!"

"Your surname is Cheng, so why do people call you Old Jia?"

Old Jia grinned: "My name is Cheng Jia! They just got used to calling me Old Jia. The 'Jia' means 'first' — like 'first in the world.'"

"What a weird name." Little Cheng Shi muttered, writing "Cheng Jia" on the form.

"And what about me? What's my name?"

"Huh?"

Little Cheng Shi pointed at the document. "I need to fill in my name. You have to give me one. Honestly — who's adopting whom here? I go by Little Ten — 'little' as in small, 'ten' as in the number. Want me to just put that down?"

"No no no — you have a name! You have a name! I already picked one for you."

"Oh?" Little Cheng Shi's interest was finally piqued. "What is it?"

Old Jia clenched his fist and said with absolute conviction:

"Cheng Shi. The 'Cheng' from Cheng Jia. The 'Shi' from 'honest.'"

"Cheng Shi? Tch. Sounds weird."

Little Cheng Shi seemed to think of something. He held Old Jia's gaze for a long moment. Seeing the bright, steady light in those clouded old eyes, he smacked his lips and wrote "Cheng Shi" on his adoption agreement.

He didn't seem to dislike the name. Or perhaps he simply didn't care what he was called.

And that was the first time he ever wrote his own name.

Cheng Shi.

The "Cheng" from Cheng Jia. The "Shi" from "honest."