

The Gods 287

Chapter 287: Cheng Shi and Old Jia

Reality was far bleaker than imagination. When Cheng Shi followed Old Jia back to his so-called "home," he discovered the man had no job at all. When money ran low, he picked through garbage or took odd jobs.

His outfit? All fake.

Truly "Old Fake" indeed.

For a boy raised in an orphanage, this "home" was almost unbearably run-down — worse than even the attic storage room where he used to be locked up.

No warm little bed. No clean desk. No playmates. Just four walls, one bed, one table — missing a leg corner.

The entire place didn't contain a single electrical appliance. Oh wait — there was the ceiling light that flickered on and off.

Yet strangely, when little Cheng Shi took this all in, he wasn't dejected. Not even disappointed. He simply asked, flat and calm: "Where do I sleep?"

Old Jia pointed at the dark end of the sleeping platform: "You take the inside. I'll take the outside."

"Oh."

Without even undressing, little Cheng Shi climbed up, pulled the greasy quilt over himself, closed his eyes, and fell asleep.

Old Jia stared at the boy, then glanced at the blazing sun outside, and shook his head with a smile. He closed the door and left.

Since this was Cheng Shi's dream, Jiang Wumei had no idea where Old Jia went. He only knew that shortly after the man left, the little fox-cub Cheng Shi popped awake, pinching his nose against the smell.

He listened for sounds, then jumped off the bed, grabbed his little backpack, and headed straight out.

This was an urban village. The winding alleys leading in were so tangled that even the Ranger nearly lost track — but the boy had followed the path in only once, head down, and now retraced it perfectly, like an old horse finding its way home.

It seemed little Cheng Shi had no intention of staying with Old Jia.

"Running away? Interesting."

Jiang Wumei trailed him like a specter. The moment they stepped out of the village, they spotted Old Jia's figure inside a small shop at the entrance.

Little Cheng Shi immediately went silent and pressed himself against the wall. Then came the voices of the shopkeeper and his "father."

"Hey, Old Jia! Hit it big? Actually buying ham sausage today?"

"No big money. Not for me. For the kid."

"Huh? Since when do you have a kid? Find him in the trash?"

"Don't run your mouth! He's mine. Not good for kids to hear that kind of thing."

"Fine, fine. Get out of here — your smell's making me nauseous. You've got a kid at home now and you're still this filthy? Careful he catches something. Go wash up."

"I know. Mind your business."

Old Jia gathered his purchases and headed home. Little Cheng Shi stood pressed against the wall, brow furrowed. Something wavered in his eyes. Then he sighed, let his head droop, and trudged back too.

But he walked faster. So by the time Old Jia returned, little Cheng Shi had already "just woken up" — right on cue.

"Awake? Come on, eat up. There's meat."

"Oh." Little Cheng Shi hopped off the bed, looked around the bare room, and scrunched his mouth. "How do I wash my hands?"

Old Jia froze. Scratched his head.

"Hold on — I'll go borrow a basin."

"..." Watching Old Jia scramble out, Cheng Shi stood in the shack laughing. But eventually the laughter trailed off — he didn't know what he was laughing about anymore. He picked up the ham sausage, glanced at the label, and muttered with an indescribable expression: "Not bad. At least it's not expired."

It wasn't the worst of beginnings. At least the old man and the boy accepted each other. Little Cheng Shi settled into his impoverished new home honestly enough.

But he never discarded his "tools." The household was poor, but at least he could supplement things with his greatest skill — not his hands, no, his mouth. He could swindle a bit to make ends meet.

Their next-door neighbor was a wealthy woman surnamed Sun. Getting on in years but well-maintained.

Nobody knew why a rich woman — especially a rich woman — would live here. But Jiang Wumei realized that a huge swath of the village's properties actually belonged to her. She was a wealthy, idle landlady.

Little Cheng Shi figured this out quickly and began dropping by Aunt Sun's place every few days to mooch food.

The woman didn't mind, though she wasn't exactly warm either. She treated him like a pet she was feeding.

But mooching wasn't sustainable. Many things that had been available at the orphanage were luxuries here. Until one day, the craving got too strong. Little Cheng Shi found a bottle cap on the ground, skillfully painted a perfect "WIN ANOTHER BOTTLE" stamp on the inside, and marched into the shop to trade it for a soda.

The shopkeeper didn't notice a thing. He actually handed over the drink.

But the instant he stepped outside, Old Jia caught him.

Old Jia had just returned from work. Seeing little Cheng Shi chugging cola, his expression darkened. Without a word, he pulled cash from his pocket, went into the shop, and paid.

Little Cheng Shi watched. He said nothing either. Head down, he trailed Old Jia home.

This was the first time Old Jia was angry. No matter how little Cheng Shi tried to explain during the walk back, the man didn't smile once. At home, he told Cheng Shi to lie face-down on the bed and stay still.

Cheng Shi's stubborn streak flared. Without a word, he threw himself face-down. Motionless.

He'd already guessed what Old Jia was about to do.

Sure enough — Old Jia grabbed the broom handle from behind the door and brought it down on little Cheng Shi's backside.

It hurt. Even Jiang Wumei winced. But little Cheng Shi didn't make a sound.

Old Jia was shaking with anger. "A person has to be honest their whole life! Lying is wrong! And liars never come to a good end! Do you understand?"

Little Cheng Shi turned his face the other way. Through tears he refused to shed, he shot back defiantly: "I lied all the time at the orphanage! My life was way better there than here!"

"..." Old Jia choked. His trembling hand dropped the broom. After a silence, he said: "And that's why you ended up with me. That's what lying gets you."

"..."

This time, little Cheng Shi was the one struck speechless.

Father and son spent an awkward, silent night. Not a word passed between them.

The next morning, Old Jia left early. Cheng Shi, too sore from the beating to get off the bed, lay face-down staring at nothing for half the day.

Around noon, Old Jia came back. Drenched in sweat. And he'd brought an entire case of cola. Brand new.

Little Cheng Shi stared at the box. A tangled storm behind his eyes.

The boy who hadn't cried after being hit with a broomstick suddenly broke down and wept.

Old Jia saw the tears. He didn't say a thing. He just unpacked the lunch he'd bought and set it on the bed next to the boy.

Little Cheng Shi sobbed for a while, then asked in a stuffy, muffled voice: "Eat with me."

Old Jia grinned stupidly: "They feed us at the construction site. I'm stuffed already. How else would I have the energy to work?"

The instant the words left his mouth, his stomach growled. Loudly.

"..."

Little Cheng Shi stared at Old Jia's stomach. Old Jia didn't even blush — he clapped a hand over his belly and bolted for the door, calling over his shoulder: "See? Ate too much — gave myself the runs! You go ahead, I gotta hit the latrine!"

"..." Little Cheng Shi watched his father vanish. He curled his lip in "disgust." "'A person has to be honest their whole life. Lying is wrong'... and who said that again?"

But the muttering dissolved into fresh tears. He cried and ate. Didn't leave Old Jia a single bite. Didn't waste a single morsel.

When Old Jia came back and saw the containers — cleaner than if they'd been washed — he smiled with quiet satisfaction.

From that day forward, the dreams stopped being interesting.

Because Cheng Shi stopped lying.

He seemed to have discovered that the world could be perfectly fine without deception. So he settled down and lived honestly alongside his father.

Time in the dream began to blur past. After Cheng Shi started school, Jiang Wumei found less and less to hold his interest. He was like a third member of the household now — witnessing little Cheng Shi grow up, following him from primary school to middle school to high school, and finally watching him scrape together a "decent enough" university admission.

But before enrollment, the impoverished family ran headlong into their second great challenge: tuition.

Jiang Wumei knew exactly what was in this household. Better than the father and son did, even. The combined savings of both of them probably couldn't cover the bus fare to campus, let alone fees. Short of borrowing, there seemed to be no solution.

But just as Cheng Shi was tearing his hair out over the problem, Old Jia came home one afternoon — with twenty thousand yuan.