

The Gods 289

Chapter 289: Nightmares at Night's End

The days that followed were much the same. In Jiang Wumei's eyes, Old Jia didn't seem like an ordinary man at all — more like a [Fate] singer. A prophet.

Little Cheng Shi's every thought and action was anticipated and deftly defused.

Wrapped in Old Jia's web of deception, little Cheng Shi grew up honest.

He genuinely believed the world worked fine without lies — because everything bad had been blocked from reaching home, kept out by Old Jia's lies.

On the eve of the college entrance exams, Old Jia was collecting empty beer bottles at a barbecue stand. He overheard a customer boasting about their child being last year's top scorer. For a long time, Old Jia stared at the man with undisguised envy.

He didn't look away until the unnerved customer drained his beer and handed over the bottle. Then Old Jia sighed, took it, and left.

At home, he found Cheng Shi hunched over the desk studying. He said nothing. Just sat beside him.

Cheng Shi sensed something off and asked: "Old man, what's wrong? Nobody beat you to the bottles?"

Old Jia scoffed: "How could they? I collected the most — forty-four. Old Liu was so slow he only got ten, and those were my leftovers."

Jiang Wumei listened from the rooftop and nodded with a grin. Indeed — Old Liu had collected forty-four, Old Jia got ten, and those were someone else's leftovers.

Oh right — plus the one the top-scorer's dad personally handed over.

"What — worried I won't do well?"

"Don't overthink it. You just take the test like every other test. Whatever you get will be better than your old man."

"I'd say so too."

"Why you little—"

Old Jia slapped the table. Father and son dissolved into laughter.

Then the time came for university, and the family had no money.

Old Jia was so worried he didn't even visit the park for three days. He paced outside his door until finally — while Cheng Shi was at school — he knocked on the Sun woman's door.

The woman was visibly surprised and ushered him in.

Old Jia sat on the sofa in silence for a long while. When he spoke, it was two words: "Borrow money."

The woman paused. She walked to her bedroom, lifted the bedsheet, extracted several stacks of bills from a bed literally made of cash, put them in her handbag, and set it before Old Jia.

"I won't need that much... And I can't pay it back."

The woman bit her lip and smiled wryly: "It's all yours anyway. No need to pay back."

"What I gave away stopped being mine."

The woman flared up and jabbed a finger at him: "If you showed even a fraction of your real skills, little Shi would have enough for ten lifetimes! Why won't you?"

Old Jia rubbed his forehead and sighed.

"Cheaters die young. Gamblers never end well. Look at me — this is how it ends. A man should be honest. That dirty stuff can't touch him."

"You enjoyed the good life for half of yours, and now you're making a child suffer with you?"

Old Jia froze for a moment, then smiled with quiet pride: "He's not suffering."

The woman was clearly infuriated by that smug pride. She pointed and sputtered at Old Jia, but in the end couldn't bring herself to curse.

"Fine, fine! He's not suffering, I am! How much do you need?"

"Twenty thousand. Enough for four years' tuition. Little Shi will earn his living expenses himself. I'll write you an IOU."

"Can you even write?" The woman sneered.

"..." Old Jia opened his mouth but no words came out.

She stared at him for a long time, sighed, grabbed a piece of paper, and started writing. When finished, she produced — with practiced ease — a brand-new, sealed box of red ink paste and handed it over for Old Jia to stamp his thumbprint.

Old Jia truly couldn't read. He examined the indecipherable document, recognized only the number 20000, counted ten times to make sure there weren't extra zeros, then nodded and asked with a grin:

"This isn't loan-shark terms, is it?"

The woman snapped: "Are you signing or not? No signature, no money."

Old Jia hesitated, gritted his teeth, and pressed his thumb.

The instant he signed, the woman's eyes lit up. She snatched the document, pressed it to her chest with both hands, and strode toward the bedroom — abandoning her "guest" without a backward glance.

"Take your money and get out. Scram. Seeing you gives me a headache."

Old Jia sighed. He took exactly twenty thousand. Not a penny more.

Jiang Wumei, eavesdropping from the rooftop, was desperately curious about what was written on that paper. So one day, when the Sun woman was out strolling, he picked her safe lock and took a peek.

The contents were concise:

"Old Jia owes Sun Yuying ¥200,000,000,000 (two hundred billion yuan). This lifetime isn't enough to repay — carry it into the next."

Jiang Wumei laughed. Who writes an IOU in Arabic numerals? Once tampered with — just as this Aunt Sun had done, tacking endless zeros onto the end — there'd be no way to sort it out come collection time.

But his laughter died instantly. Because the moment he laughed, he realized the clown wasn't Old Jia anymore.

It was himself.

He fought the urge to tear the sour-smelling receipt to shreds, then carefully returned it to its place.

After that, Cheng Shi went off to university. Father and son said goodbye at the campus gates. Cheng Shi embraced his new life. Old Jia... didn't leave.

Apparently worried Cheng Shi couldn't support himself on part-time wages alone, Old Jia found a place in a nearby urban village, secretly picked up odd jobs, and saved money for his son. The monthly sum wasn't much, but from what Jiang Wumei had observed of Cheng Shi's spending habits — it was exactly enough. Precisely enough.

Until one day, shortly before Cheng Shi's graduation, Old Jia collapsed.

Walking home at night, he suddenly crumpled on an empty road. Jiang Wumei watched from a tree, not daring to move.

Sure enough, after lying there for a while, Old Jia got up on his own. He dusted himself off and spat furiously at the ground.

"The hell — is there nobody around, or does nobody give a damn?"

Then he shuffled home with his hands behind his back.

But Jiang Wumei could tell: that collapse wasn't an act. Old Jia's body was truly failing.

Old Jia seemed to know it too. Yet he kept gritting his teeth, hanging on near Cheng Shi's campus for as long as he could.

Finally, one day, he couldn't hold on anymore. He gazed at Cheng Shi's dormitory from the school gates, then took a bus home.

First, he borrowed Aunt Sun's bathroom and took the most thorough shower of his life. After, he handed her a tape recorder. Then he went home, lay down on the bed that belonged to him and Cheng Shi, and closed his eyes with a smile.

Nobody expected it. A man who'd looked hale enough — gone, just like that.

That afternoon, Cheng Shi called home.

Watching Old Jia's phone buzz on the bed, Sun Yuying — who'd cried herself hoarse — bit down hard, choked back the sobs, picked up the phone, and pressed play on the recorder.

Cheng Shi's voice crackled through the line:

"Hey? Old man, I'm about to land a job. Listen — this company has great benefits. The colleagues are... decent. I think the boss is interested in me. He invited me to a second interview."

Two seconds of silence from the recorder. Then Old Jia's voice:

"Oh, oh, that's good. Real good. I hear you. Don't get cocky now. At the company, treat people nice, work hard, and — be honest!"

"Yeah, yeah — you've been nagging the same thing for years. My ears have grown calluses.

Hm? Wait — old man, your voice sounds funny.

You're not crying, are you? Hahahaha! Don't cry! Once I make money, we'll have the good life."

"The hell I am! I'm not crying!"

"I don't have a mom, so you can't even 'go to hell' me properly."

"...Little Shi. You're an adult now. Don't say things like that. It won't sound good if your coworkers hear."

"...Oh. Okay. I'll fix that."

"I know you too well. That mouth of yours is the only part of you that listens. Anything else? If not, I'm hanging up. Your Aunt Sun is knocking again."

"Seriously, old man — Aunt Sun is that rich. What does she see in you? Don't lie to me. I figured it out ages ago. She's waited for you her whole life. Why don't you two just get together? Hmm, no wait — 'get together' doesn't even cover it. If she became my mom, I'd be a second-generation rich kid!"

Sun Yuying had been listening the entire time. She was digging her nails into her own leg to stay silent — but hearing this, a choked sob escaped before she could clamp a hand over her mouth.

On the other end, Cheng Shi heard the noise. A beat of silence. Something seemed to click. His voice turned slightly hesitant:

"Old man... did I call at a bad time?"

A few seconds of silence from the recorder. Then an explosive roar:

"The hell!?! You little brat! Need another beating? She's a decent woman! We don't deserve her! Don't go running your mouth and let your Aunt Sun hear!"

"...Oh. I'll stop."

"That mouth of yours — you need to learn. All right, I'm hanging up. Busy."

"Busy? Busy with what? The old geezers at the park are probably dead by now from old—

Er. Habit. I'll fix it. I won't joke like that anymore.

Anyway — say hi to Aunt Sun for me. Once I sign the contract, I'm coming back to take her to dinner. Mooched off her all these years — finally get to pay one back."

"Tch."

"Beep — beep — beep—"

The line went dead. Sun Yuying threw herself onto Old Jia's body and wept.

Jiang Wumei's scalp tingled. His mind went completely blank.

He couldn't believe that any human could predict the future this precisely. Old Jia had anticipated almost every single word and reaction from Cheng Shi. He'd even timed the silences in his recorded responses to match the pauses in a conversation that hadn't happened yet.

'Can a human — a human with no blessing from any God — actually do this?'

The last sound on the tape was a single scoff. Jiang Wumei didn't know whether Old Jia was mocking Cheng Shi's matchmaking, mocking his own life, mocking the fate he couldn't overcome — or perhaps mocking the Ranger himself.

'Did he see me? Did he know I was there?'

Jiang Wumei shuddered with lingering fear — and even greater excitement. He'd found it. The most magnificent dream in his entire career as a Dream Peeping Ranger. If he offered this memory to his patron... what kind of reward would He bestow?

The thought made him restless with anticipation.

But a perfect story needed an ending. So he pressed down his excitement and continued to watch.