

## The Gods 290

Chapter 290: There's No Free Lunch in This World, But Mine Happens to Be a Bit Pricey

Cheng Shi, who was in the middle of job hunting, received Old Jia's instructions and naturally felt at ease. He quickly signed the contract, then picked an early date to head home and surprise Old Jia.

But the surprise never came. Instead, he reaped a full harvest of dread.

Old Jia was gone. The neighbors had buried him. The money came from Aunt Sun next door. Lured by the promise of a hefty sum, no one had breathed a word of it to Cheng Shi.

On the day Cheng Shi came home, he couldn't find Old Jia. All he saw was a letter in Old Jia's own hand, placed on that table missing one corner.

On the envelope, two characters were scrawled in shaky, crooked writing: Cheng Shi.

The "Cheng" of Cheng Jia. The "Shi" of honesty.

Cheng Shi froze the moment he saw it.

He knew Old Jia had never learned to write his own name in his entire life. Over the dozen-plus years Cheng Shi had spent in school, the old man had only ever managed to learn these two characters. The handwriting looked like a dog had dragged its paw across the page, but in Cheng Shi's eyes, it was more beautiful than any calligraphy in the world.

This was the name the old man had given him.

And when he saw his name written by Old Jia's hand on an envelope, he already guessed what the letter meant.

His hands began to tremble.

It was just a thin sheet of paper, but it felt heavier than a thousand pounds. He tried several times and couldn't pick it up.

Only when his tears became impossible to hold back did he force his shaking hand down onto the envelope, press it flat against the table, and slide the letter out.

It was a single sheet of A4 paper, folded several times. He opened it to find just four words: Live well, kid.

Printed. Not handwritten.

One glance, and Cheng Shi's tears fell like a collapsing dam.

He burst through the door, crying out in every direction, shouting "Old man!" At first it was "old man," then it became "Dad," and then it turned into "Cheng Jia," until his heart-rending sobs had reddened the eyes of every neighbor within earshot. Finally, an auntie couldn't bear it any longer and pointed him in the right direction.

Cheng Shi sprinted along that path, running into a cemetery. Before long, he found the old man's grave.

The headstone was blank — not a single character on it — which suited Old Jia's personality. But Cheng Shi knew the old man hadn't arranged his own burial. It must have been Aunt Sun who set up the headstone.

As for Aunt Sun... her grave was right beside the old man's. No one knew how she had passed, or whether she had truly passed at all. But in the end, she had still chosen to be his neighbor.

Cheng Shi knelt before the grave and wept uncontrollably. Jiang Wumei stood far behind him, his heart a tangled mess of emotions.

'What a tragic man,' he thought. 'Deceived by lies from infancy, and even at the death of the father he loved most, still kept in the dark by lies.'

Old Jia had undoubtedly wanted Cheng Shi to turn out well. In the latter half of his life, he had lied for over a decade, acted for over a decade, and raised Cheng Shi into an honest, good person. But in the end, one last, devastating lie had shattered Cheng Shi's defenses.

'No wonder this Fate Weaver managed to outwit even Zhen Yi...'

Fate had witnessed his misfortune. Lies had threaded through his entire "life."

To have endured all of that and still held on until the Faith Game descended — then become a top-scoring player within it — was no small feat.

Oh, right. Old Jia had told him to live well. That was probably what drove him.

Jiang Wumei watched the unconscious, sobbing Cheng Shi and felt utterly lost. He had never witnessed such a vivid dream, nor felt such a deeply moving set of memories. Over the course of a single night, it was as if everything had happened right beside him — as if he himself were Cheng Shi, deceived from start to finish.

The witnessing was over. It was time to leave.

He rubbed his face, his expression dazed, and began walking toward the cemetery exit. But as he walked, he noticed something strange about the cemetery. The names on these headstones — why were they so... peculiar?

Jiang Wumei frowned and glanced to the side. The headstone by his leg bore a brief epitaph:

"Chen Han, Dream Peeping Ranger, 1394."

What?

He did a double take, thinking his eyes were playing tricks. He rubbed them and looked again, but the words were carved there clear as day — no illusion.

Panic flickered through him. He took a few more steps forward and saw the next headstone:

"Wei Fengming, Dream Peeping Ranger, 1517."

His heart lurched. He stared in disbelief, then whipped his head around in a frantic scan of the surroundings. But there was no one else in sight — only Cheng Shi, collapsed unconscious before Old Jia's grave.

Jiang Wumei sensed danger with razor-sharp instinct. He didn't know where the threat was coming from, but his rational mind screamed at him to get out — now. He broke into a mad dash toward the cemetery gate.

The Ranger ran fast, swift as the wind. Headstones blurred past in his peripheral vision, stretching endlessly behind him. But even as the shapes smeared into streaks, he could still read the epitaphs on those stones lined up like a low wall hemming him in:

"Zhu Youyou, Dream Peeping Ranger, 1656."

"Cheng Meng, Dream Peeping Ranger, 1877."

"..."

"Song Siqi, Dream Peeping Ranger, 2204."

"Jiang Wumei, Dream Peeping Ranger, 2319."

!!!

This was insane!

The last headstone with a name on it — bore his own!

In this absurd dream-cemetery, he had found his own grave!!!

A tidal wave of terror engulfed Jiang Wumei. He skidded to a halt, drew his longbow, and surveyed his surroundings with a rigid spine. How could he not realize by now? The master of this dream had known about his presence all along.

And the spot where he now stood was directly at the cemetery gate.

From behind the massive stone pillar at the entrance, a figure stepped out. Red-eyed, it spoke to him:

"How annoying. I already made myself forget all of this. Why did you have to come and trick more tears out of me?"

Jiang Wumei looked toward the voice — and saw none other than Cheng Shi.

But this wasn't the Cheng Shi weeping at Old Jia's grave. This was his teammate — the Fate Weaver, Cheng Shi!

His eyes flew open, pupils contracting violently. Alarm bells shrieked inside his skull, his mind whited out, and a jolt of sheer terror surged from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet. He barely had the strength to draw his bowstring.

But survival instinct made him move. He didn't attack — because some small, desperate hope still flickered in his heart.

Swallowing hard, rigid with tension, he ground out each word:

"I... did nothing... to harm him."

Cheng Shi's tears were still flowing, but his lips curved into a smile:

"True, Ranger. You're cleaner than any Dream Peeping Ranger lying here.

"But I have just one question for you. Just one:

"Will you offer everything you saw tonight to Him?

"If you say no, I'll let you go."

A flicker of hesitation crossed Jiang Wumei's face. He clenched his jaw and forced out: "No."

A lie.

Good. Very good.

Cheng Shi wiped his tears and smiled with casual indifference.

"I never liked anyone disturbing him. I didn't want him showing up in this disgusting game. And I certainly didn't want to reunite with him in some way I couldn't predict. So — sorry about this, Ranger.

"You know how it is. I'm a liar. You can't trust a word I say."

BOOM—

Before he even finished speaking, thunder had already cracked. He was still the same cautious Cheng Shi — the kind who never gave his enemies a single opening.

"But Ranger, I do want to tell you one thing. There's no free lunch in this world.

"You listened to someone's story, so naturally you have to pay the price.

"It's just that my story happens to be a bit pricey.

"Roughly one life's worth."

Looking at the Ranger before him — blasted into a charred corpse — Cheng Shi raised his hand again. Another shot.

BOOM—

"Goodbye, Ranger. Sweet dreams forever."

And so the Dream Peeping Ranger died within the dream.

Two claps of thunder rolled past, and a torrential downpour began.

It was raining. In this cemetery drenched in sorrow, a storm wept for the cruelty of fate.

Cheng Shi stood staring blankly at the ashes at his feet. Something crossed his mind, and he shook his head with a wry laugh.

"Come to think of it, I should thank you all. That image of the old man as a father — it was you Dream Peeping Rangers who helped me complete it. Every time one of you came, I felt his love for me grow a little deeper."

Then he lifted his gaze toward the version of himself still collapsed, weeping, against the headstone. The dreaming Cheng Shi had woken — doused awake by the rain hammering down from the sky. His tears dissolved into the downpour. His sobs were swallowed by the storm. As if the grief were no longer there.

But only Cheng Shi knew that this was when he'd been at his most desperate — because in that moment, all he could think was: 'Why is even the heavens mocking me?'

It was from that day on that he began to despise fate.

"Well... it's all in the past now."

Cheng Shi sighed, fighting the urge to look back one more time, and turned to leave.

"Old man, I know you loved playing chess, so I found you a new partner.

"But watch out — he might be really good at memorizing game records."

His steps faltered, and his voice choked again.

"Old man, I have to go. I'll probably forget a few more things about you again...

"But this time I learned something. So you were jealous of the other parents whose kids aced the imperial exams, huh?

"Yeah... the imperial exam. I'm not that smart. I wasn't great at school. Acing the exam might've been a stretch.

"Then again, there aren't really any imperial exams anymore, are there..."

Cheng Shi trailed off and suddenly laughed. He turned one last time to gaze at the cemetery fading into nothing, and with his final tear, he said his absolute goodbye to Old Jia.

The tear fell. The dream dissolved.

At that same moment, inside the Main House of the Mushroom-Footed People's village in the Sighing Forest, Cheng Shi — who had slept soundly through the night — opened his eyes.

Dawn had broken.