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Chapter 1: Scholar Meng Hao

The State of Zhao was a very small nation [1. The State of Zhao is named after the historical State of Zhao]. Like other small nations in the lands of South Heaven, its people admired the Great Tang [2. The Great Tang is named after the historical Tang Dynasty] in the Eastern Lands, and they admired Chang'an [3. Chang'an is named after the historical Chinese city Chang'an]. Not only did the king carry this admiration, all scholars in the State of Zhao did. They could see it, almost as if they stood atop the Tower of Tang in the capital city, oh so far away.

This April was neither extremely cold, nor scorching hot. Light winds caressed the land, passing the Qiang Di flutes of the Northern Reaches, blowing over the lands of the Great Tang. Under the twilight sky, it lifted the fog-like dust, then swirling, twisting, reached Mount Daqing in the State of Zhao. Then it fell onto a young man who sat there on the mountaintop.

He was a lean young man, holding a bottle gourd and wearing a clean blue scholar's robe. He appeared to be about sixteen or seventeen. He was not tall, and his skin was somewhat dark, but his bright eyes sparkled with intelligence. And yet, all his intelligence seemed to be hidden by the frown on his face. He seemed lost.

"Failed again..." He sighed. His name was Meng Hao, an average student from Yunjie County, which lay at the foot of the mountain [4. Meng Hao's name in Chinese is 孟浩 (mèng hào) - Meng is a family name. Hao means "great" or "many"]. Years ago, his parents went missing, and did not leave much behind in the way of assets. Education was expensive, so he was almost completely broke.

"I've taken the Imperial exams three years in a row. In all that time, I read books written by the sages until I wanted to throw up. Maybe that isn't the path for me after all." Filled with self-deprecation, he looked down at the gourd bottle, his eyes bleak.

"My dream of becoming an official and getting rich just keeps getting farther and farther away. I might as well forget about trying to reach the Great Tang... How useless to be a student." He laughed bitterly. Sitting there on the silent mountaintop, gazing at the bottle gourd in his hand, he looked increasingly lost. He began to feel fear. What would he do in the future? Where would he go?

Perhaps a high-ranking official would take an interest in him, or a beautiful young maiden. Or would he continue to take the exams, year after year?

There were no answers to the questions. He was but a teenager, and this feeling of being lost had devoured him like a giant invisible mouth. He truly felt afraid.

“Even the teachers in town can only make a few pieces of silver. That’s worse than Uncle Wang’s carpenter shop. If I’d realized that earlier, I could have learned some carpentry skills from him. At least then I wouldn’t be starving like I am now.” He grew silent for a while.

“I don’t have much food or money left at home. I owe Steward Zhou three pieces of silver. What am I going to do?” He raised his head and looked up at the sky, blue and grand. It was so large you could not see its ends. Much similar to how he could not see his future.

After a while, Meng Hao shook his head and took out a slip of paper from his robe. He read it carefully, placed it in the gourd bottle, then stood up and threw the gourd down the mountain.

At the bottom of the mountain was a wide river which never froze during the winter, and was said to flow all the way to the Great Tang.

Meng Hao stood on top of the mountain, watching the gourd bottle drift further and further along down the river. He stared unblinking. For a moment, he seemed to have glimpsed his mother, and the happiness of his childhood. The gourd carried his dreams, his wishes, and his hopes for the future. Perhaps one day someone would pick it up, open it, and read the note.

“Regardless of what I do, be it study or work, I will keep on living.” This was his personality: intelligent and determined. If he wasn’t this way, he would not have been able to survive after his parents left.

He raised his head toward the sky, the stubborn look in his eyes growing deeper. He was about to head down the mountain.

At that exact moment, he heard a weak voice coming from a nearby cliff. The sound seemed to be borne along by the wind. As it passed Meng Hao’s ears, it was almost too faint to notice.

”Help... help...”

Meng Hao stopped for a moment, shocked, then listened carefully. As he concentrated, the sound of the voice calling for help grew stronger.

“Help...”

He walked a few steps forward until he had nearly reached the edge of the peak. When he peered over the edge, he saw a person, his body sticking out of a crevice halfway down the cliff. Pale face full of fear and desperation, he cried for help.

“You... you’re Meng Hao, right? Help, Scholar Meng! Help me!” It was a teenager. As soon as he saw Meng Hao, he expressed surprise and happiness, having suddenly found hope in a desperate situation.

“Wang Youcai [5. Wang Youcai’s name in Chinese is 王有才 (wáng yǒu cái) – Wang is a common family name. Youcai means “to have talent or ability”]?” Meng Hao’s eyes grew wide as he looked at the young man. He was the son of Uncle Wang, who owned the carpentry shop in town. “How did you end up here?”

Meng Hao looked at the crevice. The cliff itself was quite steep, and it seemed impossible to climb down. The slightest carelessness would send the climber falling into the river.

Considering how fast the river flowed, if you fell in, the chances of dying were about ninety percent.

“It’s not just me, there are other people from nearby towns,” Wang Youcai gushed. “We’re all stuck here. Brother Meng, let’s not chat, please, just help us get out.” Perhaps he had been hanging out of the crack for too long. His hands grasped at the air, and if not for his compatriots, who grabbed him by the shirt, he would have slipped and fallen down the cliff. His face turned pale with fear.

Meng Hao realized the danger. But he had climbed the mountain alone today, and had no rope. How could he save anyone? At that moment, he turned and realized that the mountainside was covered with rattan vines.

As frail as he was, it took him two hours to find a rattan vine that was long enough. Breathing heavily, he dragged the rattan to the cliff. Calling out Wang’s name, he bent over and lowered the rattan down the cliff.

“You still haven’t told me how you got down there,” Meng Hao said as he lowered the vine.

“By flying!” It was not Wang Youcai who spoke the words, but another young man who stuck his body out of the crevice next to him. This boy looked feisty and intelligent, and spoke with a loud voice.

“Bullshit! You can fly?” mocked Meng Hao, pulling the rattan vine back up a bit. “If you can fly down here, then why don’t you fly back up?”

“Don’t listen to his nonsense,” said Wang Youcai, clearly worried that Meng Hao wouldn’t lower the rattan vine back down. “We were captured by a flying woman. She said she’s going to take us to some Sect to be servants.”

“More bullshit?” said Meng Hao dismissively. “Only Immortals from legends can do that. Who believes in that?” In books he had read, there were stories of people who became rich after meeting Immortals, but it was all just lies.

Just as the rattan reached the crevice, Wang caught it. But then, Meng Hao suddenly felt a cold wind behind his back. From the temperature around him, it seemed winter had returned. He shivered. He slowly turned to look back, then screamed and stepped forward into emptiness, beginning to fall off the cliff.

He had seen a woman in a long silver robe and pale face, standing there staring at him. It was impossible to tell her age. She was extremely beautiful, but radiated a coldness that made one feel as if she had just crawled out of a grave.

“Sometimes when you find certain things with certain qualities, it’s just fate.”

When the voice hit his ears, it felt like bones rubbing together. This woman seemed to possess some sort of strange power, and when Meng Hao looked into her eyes, his whole body felt ice cold, as if she could see through him. As if he could hide nothing from her.

Her words still floating through the air, she shook her wide sleeve, and suddenly, a gust of greenish wind picked up Meng Hao. He flew down the cliff with her. His mind went blank.

When they reached the crevice, the woman waved her hand and threw him inside. As for her, she stopped moving, as did the greenish wind. Wang and his three friends scurried backward in fright.

The woman stood there, not saying a word. She raised her head and glanced at the rattan vine.

Meng Hao was so nervous he had started shaking. He stood up, glancing around quickly. The crevice was not spacious, and was in fact quite narrow. Even with only a few people inside, there was not much room.

His eyes fell on Wang and the two other young men. One was the clever fellow; the other one was clean and pudgy. The two of them shivered, looking as if they might cry from fear at any moment.

“I was short one person,” said the pale-faced woman. Now she looked at Meng Hao instead of the rattan. “I’ll put you in with them.”

“Who are you?” asked Meng Hao, concealing his fear. He was an educated person and had a strong personality. Despite being afraid, he controlled himself and did not panic.

The woman said nothing. She raised her right hand and waved, and the green wind appeared again. It lifted up all the young men, and they flew out of the cave together with the woman, shooting up into the sky. They disappeared. Left behind was only Mount Daqing. It stood there, straight and tall, merging in the darkness of twilight.

The blood drained from Meng Hao’s face. He saw himself within the green wind, crossing the sky. As he flew above the ground, wind blew into his mouth, making it impossible to breathe. A word appeared in his head.

“Immortals?” He held his breath for the amount of time it would normally take to breathe ten times, until he couldn’t hold on any more. Then he passed out.

When he opened his eyes, he found that they had landed on a platform paved with green stone, halfway up a mountain. More rolling mountains surrounded them. Clouds and fog drifted about; this was definitely not the mortal world. The beautiful peaks of the surrounding mountains looked very strange.

Wang and the other young men woke up, scared and shivering. They stared at the back of the woman.

Standing in front of her were two Cultivators wearing long green robes. They appeared to be in their twenties. They had sunken eyes with fear-inspiring green pupils.

“Excellent work, Elder Sister Xu,” said one of the men, his voice flattering. “You found four talented young babies.”

“Take them to the Servants’ Quarter,” said the woman, her face cold, not even looking at Meng Hao and the others. Suddenly, her entire body transformed. She became a rainbow and then disappeared into the mountains.

By this time, Meng Hao had recovered his composure. He stared, numb, at the place where the woman had disappeared. An expression appeared on his face which had not appeared there for sixteen years. His blood boiled.

“Servants?” he thought. “If the work is for Immortals, the pay must be good.” Now that he knew the people didn’t want to kill them, he took a step forward.

“Sister Xu has reached the seventh level of Qi Condensation,” lamented the second of the Cultivators. “The Sect Priest bestowed a Wind Pennant upon her, which means even though she isn’t at the Foundation Establishment stage, she can still fly.” He looked arrogantly down at Meng Hao and the others.

“You and you,” he said pointing at Wang and the clever young man. “Follow me to the Southern Servants’ Quarters.”

“What is this place?” Wang asked, his voice and body both shaking as the Immortal pointed at him.

“The Reliance Sect.”

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