

Transmigrated into a Grandpa, Embracing the Laid-Back Life

- Chapter 1: Reincarnated as a Ghost?

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[1,733 words]

In this boundless, lightless stillness, Lin Yu's consciousness had drifted for nearly five hundred years. Should he make that choice? The thought, like a cluster of faint flame, flickered in the endless darkness.

Memories surged and dragged him back to the moment he first arrived in this realm.

Back then, he was nothing but a lone wisp of a soul, exposed naked under a hostile sun. Sunshine was no longer warmth but a scorching poison that burned spirit, every ray bringing tearing agony, his soul-body on the verge of dissipating. In the brink-of-collapse despair, he fled frantically on instinct, and smashed into a place that felt safe.

His consciousness sank into it: a tiny storage world, scattered with jars and objects. His taut nerves suddenly relaxed, and the endless black swallowed him, plunging his awareness into total interruption.

He woke slowly after an unknown span of time.

Still groggy, a fragment of nightmare clung to him—the tattered battle banner whipping in a fierce wind, the battlefield strewn with corpses like spilled ink. A blood-soaked Taoist in cyan robes, face contorted, eyes burning with resolve and madness.

He clutched an archaic ring tight, then shoved it violently into his cracked chest, his scream seeming to pierce time: "Seal this demonic artifact with my soul! Let it sink for ten thousand generations!"

A hangover-like headache made Lin Yu reach out habitually for the phone on his bedside to check the time.

His fingertips touched nothing but void and cold.

He shot his eyes open. There was no familiar ceiling, only unchanging gloom. He finally took in his surroundings: dozens of sealed pill bottles, a pile of strange ores, and several stacks of yellowed talismans scattered nearby.

His brain crashed instantly. A second ago he had been in a brightly lit office, hunched over a computer screen, tearing his hair out over a client's blueprints.

How did he end up here?

An absurd yet singular thought detonated in his mind: I... transmigrated?

The dead silence stretched on, until Lin Yu numbly accepted reality.

He had transmigrated.

Strangely, in this pitch-black void, he could see everything with uncanny clarity.

There was no system, no golden finger, not even a living body granted to him—fate had treated him brutally. He roared in silence, questioning the absurdity: why did he have to transmigrate into such a... thing?

Even stranger, he faintly felt an invisible restraint wrapped around his soul, like cold thorns that brought stinging pain. The source seemed to be this very ring. The cyan-robed Taoist's dying scream lay branded deep in his consciousness.

At first, he drifted like a ghost, helplessly observing. This space spat out and swallowed items at random—sometimes a razor-sharp sword, sometimes a pile of spirit-rich pills. They appeared and vanished in an instant. After long observation he finally deduced his situation: he was trapped inside a storage magical treasure.

Time lost all meaning there. After an unknowable interval, he found, to his astonishment, that his insubstantial "body" gradually solidified and he could move freely within that tiny world. An unprecedented sense of power grew and surged through his illusionary limbs and bones.

He tried several times to leave. A few attempts to "go out" came with agonizing burns from the outside sun, pain as if his soul would be reduced to ash, forcing him to retreat in humiliation. Those agonizing costs revealed the full picture of his prison—a plain, archaic storage ring.

Through repeated burns and despair, an idea flashed through Lin Yu's mind: perhaps he could cling to the ring itself—neither leaving nor fully sealed off—so he could interact with the outside world.

He carefully attached his consciousness to the ring's cold band. That risky move finally let him glimpse the outside world and hear external sounds, while sparing him the sun's searing pain.

With a subtle shift of thought, he froze. A novel sense of control rose up, as if invisible limbs had extended, and the storage space bowed to him.

He was like a Trojan horse virus: parasitic in the ring, yet possessing independent will, completely free from its owner's control.

"Have I become an artifact spirit?" Lin Yu muttered quietly. At the same time he clearly "saw" deep within the ring's inner wall the invisible shackles of thorn-like restraints entwining the soul, seeming to coexist oddly with his newfound control.

The cyan-robed Taoist's face flickered in the ghostlight of the shackles.

Centuries drifted by like a flick of a finger. When Lin Yu finally recovered some clarity from his muddled "ring life," he realized with a start: damn, this remnant soul of his had drifted here for almost sixty years plus half a cycle! What nearly scattered his barely solid soul again were the following four hundred years.

During those long four centuries, the ring had changed hands no less than six times!

Each change of owner made his soul-flame tremble.

Why? Because he knew all too well the nature of cultivators who held precious treasures. Possessiveness? It was embedded in their bones. A ring with an unknown, inhabiting ghost?

To them, it was like finding an unexploded bomb in their backyard.

Lin Yu could bet that if he dared appear before any "owner," or made a sound, whether the person was a righteous-looking gentleman or a malevolent power, their first reaction would be ninety-nine to one—silence him! Or worse, drag him out to be used as a component for alchemy or forging. That would be a soul-shattering end, not even a sound left.

So Lin Yu shrank to the deepest part of the ring, making himself thinner than air, quieter than stone. He watched coldly as six "fortunate" owners passed like a revolving lantern.

The first was an exuberant young man who found the ring and grinned ear to ear, thinking he had discovered an ancient treasure. The next day, while showing off at the market, a jealous wandering cultivator smacked him in the back of the head with a club. Before the treasure had even warmed, it was gone.

Lin Yu clicked his tongue inside the ring: "Don't flaunt wealth, the ancients weren't lying." Just as the youth died and the ring changed hands, the thorny restraint around Lin Yu's soul trembled, and a cold breath was sucked away. He stared at the inner wall and saw a very subtle, dark-red streak appear, like dried blood.

The second owner was a scruffy, down-and-out wandering cultivator who treated the ring like a lifeline, muttering to it daily, praying for an old master to teach him divine arts.

One stormy night after a training mishap, he fell into a demonic deviation, blood poured from his orifices, and he died miserably.

Lin Yu shrank his soul: "This host's mental fortitude is no good, too dependent on objects, dies too easily." As the wandering cultivator's soul vanished, another blood streak quietly formed beside the first, the chill stronger.

The third was a ruthless female demonic cultivator. After getting the ring she grew paranoid, feeling something watching her, and tossed it into a smelting furnace to try to melt it. The furnace went out of control, exploding so that both person and furnace were left only half a wall.

Watching that towering inferno, Lin Yu's heart still skipped: "That chick's dangerous!" At the moment the flames consumed her, the third blood streak surfaced. The thorny seal seemed to draw sustenance, tightening its bind.

The fourth was a self-styled righteous old scholar who tried every purification charm to cleanse the "evil spirit" in the ring, driving Lin Yu to distraction. While studying an ancient evil formation, he inadvertently triggered counterblow and was "purified" into a wisp of blue smoke.

Lin Yu sighed: "Curiosity killed the cat, and the old scholar too..." As the scholar became blue smoke, the fourth blood streak was etched, and the inner wall's red glow became faintly visible.

The fifth was a treasure-hunting opportunist riding a streak of luck; after getting the ring he was on cloud nine. But during an exploration of an ancient powerhouse's tomb, he triggered a chain of traps and was pierced by ten thousand arrows.

Lin Yu lamented: "Where people walk by the river, who doesn't get wet? Even the king of finds can't survive courting death." Blood sprayed the tomb, and the fifth streak extended like a living thing, weaving with the other four, the stabbing pain in Lin Yu's soul growing ever clearer.

The sixth was a pill-refining fanatic who stuffed the ring with poisons and half-baked pills as high-level storage. During a new formula test the pill furnace exploded, releasing toxic gas that corroded him until he died in unspeakable agony.

Lin Yu rolled his eyes in the thick poison fog: "Be professional, will you? Refining pills is risky; join at your own caution!" When the poison finally ate away the fanatic's last life, the sixth blood streak formed violently. The six streaks together created a strange, incomplete pattern inside the ring that exuded an ominous murderous aura.

The thorny seal that wrapped his soul burned hot, as if ready to grind into the origin of his soul at any moment.

Lin Yu fixed his “sight” on the newly formed blood pattern. A chill rose from the depths of his soul and made his soul-flame flicker: “Six already... this ghostly seal has absorbed so much death energy... if more people die... this thing might really blow!”

This was far more than a mere master-killing mechanism. The ring itself was a terrifying malevolent object! The cyan-robed Taoist’s dying sealing had been continuously weakened and activated by the deaths of successive owners!

However, in those anxious, drawn-out years, Lin Yu wasn’t left empty-handed. In a deeply hidden corner of the ring, he accidentally “touched” a brilliantly crafted spirit-concentrating array!

That formation was running silently, tirelessly siphoning faint spirit energy from the outside and nurturing his remnant soul.

But the array’s flow was already dim, like a candle in the wind, on the verge of extinction.

Worse, the spirit array seemed to be in a subtle antagonism with the six blood-streak seals; each cycle of the formation looked particularly difficult.

Thanks to that “spirit buffet,” his nearly dissipated soul fragments were barely able to cohere. Though far from vigorous, he was no longer a wisp of smoke—at least he had formed a translucent body with hands and feet.

Lin Yu touched the array with his thought, feeling the faint pulse, and cracked a grin: “Hey, the heavens don’t absolutely extinguish a soul? The ancients weren’t wrong...

Uh, this time I actually managed to touch it before it went out? But how long can this spirit-gathering array hold? And will that lethal seal finally erupt when the next owner arrives?”

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[1,401 words]

The previous "landlord," that unlucky pill-refining fanatic, had exploded himself into a sky of bloody mist.

In the chaos, a faintly glowing ring was mistaken for some shiny bauble by a passing spirit-feather bird with poor eyesight. It snatched the ring in one bite and carried it back to its nest.

Lin Yu lay in the bird's nest for several days, listening to the mother bird and the chicks go about their daily business, and felt as if he was about to comprehend "bird-speech."

That was far more pleasant than listening to those short-lived landlords' dying wails.

He had temporarily escaped the sight of human cultivators. The seal pattern formed by the six blood streaks seemed to quiet down for lack of a "target," no longer emitting such a violent murderous aura.

The stinging pain from the thorny seal wrapped around his soul body had also eased a little, letting him, for once, take a breath.

He even began to enjoy the peace. For now, he didn't have to worry about when the next host would die, nor fret about when that damned seal might explode.

Until today, when a pair of grimy little hands pushed aside the weeds at the edge of the nest.

A pair of striking black-and-white, curious eyes, like two black grapes, stared fixedly at the ring.

Lin Yu's soul flame leapt.

It was a child. A boy of about ten, wearing a patched coarse cloth short jacket, with mud smudges still on his face.

"Wow!" The boy stifled an exclamation and carefully reached out a finger to poke the cold band of the ring.

Lin Yu's soul-body trembled.

This is bad!

A thousand images of reckless kids courting death flashed through his mind. Would the boy flick it like a marble? Trade it with the village idiot for a skewer of candied hawthorns? Or proudly bring it home to his parents like a treasure?

At the thought of the ring possibly falling into the hands of some narrow-minded, greedy villager, Lin Yu felt his spirit weaken. Compared to the previous six landlords who had at least been cultivators, mortals were even more uncontrollable. Their ignorance and greed could be deadlier than a cultivator's killing intent.

Worse, if this child were to die accidentally in his ignorance—even by falling or drowning—the seventh blood streak on the ring might form in an instant!

The "murderous vessel" seal the cyan-robed Taoist had mentioned would very likely collapse the moment the seventh blood streak completed, releasing unimaginable horror. Lin Yu's remnant soul would be the first to be obliterated without a trace!

The boy grinned, showing two rows of teeth, and chuckled. He snatched up the ring, shoved it into his shirt, and nimbly slid down the tree trunk.

Lin Yu felt the boy begin to run with short energetic legs through the forest.

"Second brother! Second brother! Look what I found!" The boy's clear shout pierced the ring's barrier, making Lin Yu's soul go numb.

This is terrifying! Lin Yu panicked completely. The sense of crisis rose like never before. This was no longer just exposure—this was a countdown of life and death!

Kids this age can't keep secrets! If he shouted about it and the whole village found out, bringing unwanted attention or accidents, the next victim of this "murderous-star ring" could very well be this naive boy! And once the seventh blood streak appeared, there would be no turning back for Lin Yu!

No. Absolutely not!

Five hundred years of survival-based cultivation suddenly unleashed an unprecedented will to live. He had to stop this child from revealing the secret, and he had to prevent anything that might lead to the child's accidental death! Passive waiting to die? No—this time he had to act!

There was no other choice!

Just as the boy was about to burst out of the woods toward the village where smoke rose from the kitchens, Lin Yu made up his mind. The thorny seal wrapped around his soul seemed to sense his resolve and trembled slightly.

He gathered the pitiful scrap of soul power he had and warped the ring's inner space. Novel scenes from his past life flashed through his mind—an air of mastery, yes, a demeanor suited to a high master! Immortal bearing, the white-bearded grandpa type!

He forced his faint soul-image into a seated, cross-legged phantom of an old man with flowing white whiskers. Though the details were vague and retained a somewhat translucent, gelatinous texture, the aura had to be convincing.

"Ahem."

An elderly, weak cough sounded directly inside the boy's mind.

Su Ming, who had been running full tilt, stumbled and almost face-planted.

"Who? Who is speaking?" He stopped dead, eyes wide with fear as he looked around. Only the rustle of leaves in the wind answered him.

"Li—ttle child..." Lin Yu's voice sounded again. He deliberately mimicked the tone of the old immortal in dramas he remembered, stretching the syllables to sound distant and mysterious.

Su Ming shuddered, his face paling as he clutched his chest. The voice seemed to come from his own bosom!

His trembling hand took the plain, rustic ring out.

"Is... is it you talking?"

"Indeed." Lin Yu kept up the aloof master persona, his heart thumping. "Good heavens, this act is embarrassing. I hope he doesn't think I'm a demon. Worse, I hope his hand doesn't slip and he throws the ring, breaking it and triggering some damn mechanism!"

Su Ming stared at the unremarkable ring in his palm, his mouth forming an "O." Though a mountain village kid, he'd heard elders tell tales about spirits.

He did not throw the ring away. Instead, curiosity overcame his fear and he whispered, "Who... who are you? Are you an immortal grandpa from the mountain?"

This was promising!

Lin Yu brightened inside and continued to hold his pose. "Old man here... is but a remnant soul, sleeping in this ring for a thousand years. Today, I was awakened by you, little child." (Inner thought: Sleeping? More like bound by that damned seal for five hundred years!)

He spoke ambiguously on purpose, neither fully admitting to being an immortal nor denying an extraordinary origin.

Su Ming blinked, his young mind racing. "A thousand years? Then... then you must have lived for a very, very long time?"

"Long enough... to have forgotten the passing of the ages." Lin Yu sighed deeply, letting his tone carry a world-weary sense of a master lonely at the top.

In truth he was thinking: does five hundred years count as long? Compared to a thousand, is it lacking? The key wasn't how long he'd lived, but how to survive until the next blood streak didn't fall!

Su Ming cradled the ring like a priceless treasure, his eyes full of reverence and wonder. He lowered his voice like a conspirator and asked, "Grandpa! Are you very powerful?"

"Powerful?" The phantom hesitated—hard to answer. If he said he was powerful, he would be lying; he was a shabby soul tied up by a seal. If he said he wasn't, how could he manipulate the boy? How would he keep this child obedient and alive?

He chose to shift meanings.

"Old man... no longer concerns himself with worldly affairs. Fighting and killing are acts of the reckless. True doctrine lies in longevity and in... living sufficiently long."

Inner thought: Survive! You must survive! If you live longer, I live longer!

This line summed up his five centuries of survivalist strategy.

Su Ming half understood but seized on a key phrase. "Live long? Like the old locust tree at the village entrance?"

"...You could put it that way." Lin Yu's notional mouth twitched and he forced an explanation. "All things under heaven have lifespans. Cultivators who defy fate fight for that sliver of life. But all that striving often ends as dust. Only those who know how to avoid danger and cling to life can see the final vistas."

Inner thought: For example, I watched over six unlucky fools' graves.

He was already brainwashing his future "new landlord," instilling the core principle—survival above all!

Su Ming nodded as if understanding, then brightened with excitement and said, "Grandpa! You're so powerful! I'll take you home to show my parents and brothers! They'll be so happy!"

With that he bounded off again.

"Stop!" Lin Yu snapped, panic raising his voice eight tones higher, nearly breaking character. The thorny seal tightened sharply with his emotional fluctuation.

Su Ming froze, jolted by the stern command.

Lin Yu immediately realized he'd slipped, and hurried to soften his tone. He adopted a solemn, almost pleading cadence with a barely perceptible urgency and said, "Little child, do you know the meaning of 'an innocent man is punished because he bears treasure'?"

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[850 words]

"Ah?" Su Ming looked completely bewildered.

Lin Yu sighed inwardly and began his "First Lesson in Survival," the life-or-death lesson on how to stay alive.

"This ring is a wonder of heaven and earth. My existence is an enormous secret! If it's exposed, divine punishment will surely fall!" He intensified his tone, "If you tell anyone about this, whether it's your parents or your elder brothers, you will bring death upon them, and upon yourself!" Inner thought: Divine punishment my foot, I'm just worried about the seventh blood streak appearing and everyone being finished!

He deliberately spoke with extreme gravity, even invoking divine punishment.

Su Ming's face drained white. "Death... death? Why? My parents are good people."

"Precisely because they are good people, they cannot guard such a treasure, nor can they bear the cost of knowing this secret!" Lin Yu coaxed in a leading tone, his voice laden with unquestionable weight, "Think about it, if the village finds out your family has a talking treasure ring, what would happen? If outsiders hear about it, what then? What about those immortal masters who can fly and hide across the lands, what would happen then?"

"They... they would come and steal it?" Su Ming was not stupid; he immediately grasped the crux and turned even paler.

"Not steal." Lin Yu's phantom shook its head, the tone grim, "It would be a catastrophe! They would kill to take the treasure, turn your whole family into mute corpses, and then take the ring." Inner thought: Okay, that's a bit exaggerated, but the consequences of the seal collapsing are pretty much catastrophic too!

Those words poured like ice water over Su Ming's excitement. He remembered how the village butcher, Old Wang, had his hand chopped off by passing bandits for hoarding an extra few pounds of meat. A talking ring was far more valuable than meat...

He shivered in terror and gripped the ring even tighter as if clutching his own little life.

"Th-then... what should I do?" Su Ming's voice quivered with tears.

"Very simple." Lin Yu judged the moment right and threw out his core objective, "From today on, everything about me and this ring, you must not tell a single soul. Not one word! It is your greatest secret and your greatest responsibility! Can you do that?"

Inner thought: Right, responsibility! Keeping your own life safe is keeping both our lives safe!

Su Ming nodded vigorously, his face taut, his eyes filled with a solemnity he'd never shown before. "I can! I swear! I won't tell anyone! Not even my second brother! I won't tell even if I die!"

"Good." Lin Yu exhaled in relief, feeling the thorny seal that strangled his soul ease by a hair. Convincing a child was still well within reach. Temporarily safe... for the time being.

He looked at the nervous yet resolute boy before him, and that thought rose again, strong and insistent.

Six previous landlords, all mature cultivators, had died so quickly they became nourishment for the seal's blood streaks. Perhaps... a youth whose nature was not yet fixed, a blank slate who would obey him completely, was the ideal "host"? Maybe that was the key to preventing the seventh blood streak from forming?

He could start over and train him into a perfect heir of survival. If the boy grew strong, Lin Yu would be safe. If the boy lived long and steadily, that damned seal couldn't find new nourishment in death! His pension plan... no, survival plan could last a long, long time.

"Little one, what's your name?" Lin Yu's tone softened considerably, carrying a faint, almost imperceptible hope.

"My name is Su Ming."

"Su Ming..." Lin Yu murmured the name as if reciting a wish, "Would you be willing to accept me as your master?"

Su Ming froze. Become an apprentice? To an old man who lived in a ring and seemed powerful?

It sounded stranger than the tales told by the village storyteller, but it also... carried an indescribable pull.

"Accept you as my master... what would I learn? How to live longer?" Su Ming asked, curious but anxious.

"Indeed." Lin Yu's phantom nodded slightly, looking inscrutably profound, "I can teach you how to identify danger, how to avoid calamity, how to live steadily in this treacherous world. Perhaps... to live like an immortal in the eyes of others." Inner thought: The point is to avoid anything that could make you croak!

He paused, then offered the final bait, the wish he felt most truly at this moment.

"Do you want to change your fate? Do you want to grasp... the power to survive?"

Those words struck Su Ming's heart like a heavy blow. He thought of his mediocre talent, his parents' backs bent from endless work, his elder brothers' expectations and worries over his future. The power to survive... to change fate!

Those four words planted like a seed, landing deep within him and quickly taking root.

He looked at the ring in his hand and no longer saw cold metal, but a bright, unknown road—a path that could lead his family away from disaster and toward a steady life.

He inhaled deeply, knelt solemnly before the ring, and struck a solid, resounding kowtow against the leaf-strewn forest floor.

"Master!"

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Chapter 4: Learn to Take a Hit First

[1,990 words]

A crisp, clear "Master!" rang out, falling on the fallen leaves and resonating within Lin Yu's soul.

Lin Yu's ethereal form almost couldn't hold itself together, shuddering and nearly dissolving into a blur. Inner thoughts: Wow, this kid gets into character fast! Is the newbie village tutorial starting already?

He forcibly steadied his "Mysterious Dust Master" persona, maintaining a voice as calm as an ancient well: "Rise. Under my tutelage, tedious formalities are unnecessary. However, there are three ironclad rules you must never forget, my disciple."

Su Ming lifted his dirt-stained forehead, his eyes sparkling brightly: "Please speak, Master!"

"First, the existence of myself and this ring is the greatest secret of your life. Heaven knows, Earth knows, you know, I know. If one more person learns of it, it will mean death for both master and disciple." Lin Yu's tone carried unquestionable authority.

Su Ming's young face turned serious, and he nodded emphatically.

"Second, think thrice before you act, plan before you move. Do not fight for momentary pride, but seek lifelong peace. Remember, the one who lives the longest is the true winner." This was essentially Lin Yu's blood-and-tears summary of five hundred years of survival tactics.

"Your disciple remembers, Master," Su Ming replied solemnly.

"Third..." Lin Yu paused; he hadn't actually thought of a third rule yet.

His eyes (if a soul form had them) shifted, taking in Su Ming's patched coarse cloth shirt and his bare, scarred little feet. Inner thoughts: This "vessel for navigating the world" is way too shabby! Needs some patching up first!

"Third, eat well and grow strong. The physical body is the vessel for navigating the world. If the vessel isn't sturdy, how can one cross the sea of suffering?"

Su Ming was stunned. He had expected some earth-shattering sect rule, not this.

His nose tingled, his eyes reddened again, and he let out a forceful "Mmm!"

Lin Yu mentally gave himself a thumbs up. Perfect! It both demonstrated the master's caring concern and resolved the awkwardness of not having a third rule ready.

Just as he was basking in his own cleverness, Su Ming suddenly exclaimed "Ah!", his little face instantly falling.

"Disciple, what is it?" Lin Yu asked, trying to keep his tone steady.

"Master... I... I need to hurry back home!" Su Ming hopped anxiously from foot to foot. "I snuck out of the village school today! Teacher Zhou must have already told my father!"

Lin Yu: Village school?

Alarm bells rang in his mind. What? There's schooling in the script? My future prodigy disciple is an academic underachiever? The keel of this "vessel" isn't even laid yet, and the captain's about to become illiterate?

"Young child, why would you abandon proper studies to run off into the mountains?" Lin Yu's voice took on a stern edge.

"The characters Teacher Zhou taught today were too difficult... I... I couldn't memorize them, and I was afraid he'd hit my palms," Su Ming's voice grew quieter as he spoke, his head drooping.

Lin Yu almost choked on his soul energy. Well then, after all my careful selection, I ended up with an illiterate host? No, an academic underachiever! How are we supposed to achieve the ultimate retirement plan of "you become the big shot while I lounge around"? Can't read secret manuals, can't recognize pill recipes, how are we supposed to reap benefits later?

"Nonsense!" Lin Yu's voice suddenly rose sharply. "The path of cultivation begins with the first step. Reading and writing are the keys that unlock the door to wisdom! If you can't even open the door, how can you talk about cultivation?" If you're illiterate, how am I supposed to read any secret manuals we might get later? My five-hundred-year-old soul doesn't recognize your local tadpole script!

"Hurry! Return at once!" Lin Yu urged.

"But... I'll definitely get beaten if I go back," Su Ming said with a terrified expression.

"Beaten?" Lin Yu's ethereal form seemed to let out a cold laugh. "How can a disciple of mine fear a mere beating?"

He shifted his tone, his voice becoming profound and mysterious once more.

"This is your first lesson upon entering my school, called 'Concealing One's Edge'. A blade that shows its edge too readily is easily broken. Temporary forbearance is for the sake of longer-lasting peace. One beating can appease your father's anger, calm your teacher's wrath, and allow you to continue your studies. This is a worthwhile trade!"

Su Ming was confused by the explanation, but he understood the words "worthwhile trade".

He gritted his teeth: "Alright! Master, I'll go back and take the beating right now!"

Saying this, he carefully tucked the ring into his chest, covering it with his ragged clothes, and sprinted down the mountain on his short legs.

The evening glow dyed the village's dirt road a golden hue.

Su Ming walked home with his head lowered, shuffling along like a little quail that had done something wrong. When he was still several dozen feet from his doorstep, he saw

his second brother, Su Yang, leaning against the crooked tree by the courtyard gate, looking in his direction.

"Where have you been running off to? Father's face is practically black as a pot bottom," Su Yang came forward and flicked Su Ming's forehead.

He was a head taller than Su Ming and much more robustly built.

"Second Brother..." Su Ming called out timidly.

Su Yang looked him over, his brow slightly furrowed: "Something's off. You're not just scared of getting beaten today."

He leaned in closer, lowering his voice: "Your eyes are shining like you found gold ingots. Spill it, what good stuff did you dig up in the mountains? A phoenix egg?"

Su Ming's heart skipped a beat, his master's words immediately ringing in his ears.

He quickly shook his head, making it swing like a rattle drum: "No! Nothing at all! I just... just got fascinated watching ants move house!"

Su Yang studied him suspiciously for a long moment but ultimately didn't press further, just patted his shoulder: "Alright, be smart later, don't talk back."

The moment they stepped into the courtyard, a sharp woman's voice rang out.

"Well, look who's finally back, our little scholar of the Su family! So, how was the learning in the mountains compared to Teacher Zhou's? Did some monkey give you private lessons?"

The speaker was his eldest brother Su Feng's wife, Wang Chuntao. She stood under the eaves with her hands on her hips, her lips curled in a mocking sneer.

Su Ming's face instantly flushed bright red.

In the center of the courtyard, his father Su Shan was squatting on the ground, silently sharpening a firewood knife. The grinding stone scraped against the blade with a harsh "scrape... scrape..." sound, each stroke feeling like it was scraping against Su Ming's heart.

His mother, Mrs. Chen, peeked out from the kitchen. When she saw Su Ming, her face was full of worry. She seemed about to say something but was glared back into silence by Su Shan.

Su Shan stood up, slipped the firewood knife back into his waistband, and casually picked up a bamboo strip as thick as a thumb that was leaning against the wall.

He didn't say a word, just crooked his finger at Su Ming.

Su Ming trembled all over and closed his eyes in despair.

"Father..." Su Yang stepped forward, blocking Su Ming. "It was me! I told Xiao Ming to go find some medicinal herbs for me! It's not his fault!"

"You?" The previously silent eldest brother Su Feng suddenly spoke up. He walked out of the house, his gaze falling on Su Yang like a sharp blade. "He plays truant, and you help him lie? The family tightens its belt to pay for his education alone, and this is how he wastes it?"

Su Feng pushed Su Yang aside and snatched the bamboo strip from his father's hand.

"Father, I'll do it! Today I'm going to straighten out both their temperaments for sure!"

Su Shan glanced at his eldest son and silently stepped aside, giving his tacit approval.

The bamboo strip whistled through the air and landed hard on Su Ming's back.

"Smack!"

A burning, sharp pain instantly spread.

Su Ming flinched from the pain, clenched his teeth, and didn't make a sound.

He remembered his master's words.

"Concealing one's edge... Endurance... This is a worthwhile trade!"

"Still dare to play truant?" Su Feng roared.

Su Ming remained silent.

"Smack!" Another strike landed on his leg.

Su Ming staggered, almost falling to his knees, but he stubbornly held his ground.

Lin Yu "watched" this scene from within the ring, mixed feelings swirling in his heart. Tsk tsk, a domestic violence scene. This kid's got tough bones. Good, good, damage resistance is an essential quality for a survival-focused cultivator. Well, consider it body tempering.

"Eldest Brother! Stop hitting him!" Su Yang grew anxious and rushed forward to grab the bamboo strip.

Su Feng swung his arm back, and the strip landed solidly on Su Yang's arm.

"And you have the nerve to speak!" Su Feng's anger intensified. "It's because you spoil him all the time that he dares to cause such trouble! Today I'll teach you both a lesson!"

In the courtyard, the sounds of the bamboo strip striking, angry shouts, the mother's tearful pleas, and Wang Chuntao's fake attempts at intervention—"Oh my, stop it!"—all mingled together.

Seeing his second brother getting beaten while protecting him, Su Ming could no longer hold back his tears, which streamed down mixed with snot.

It wasn't the pain; it was hatred for his own uselessness.

Late at night.

Su Ming lay face down on the bed, his back burning with pain.

Second brother Su Yang came in quietly holding a small bowl of medicinal ointment and began gently applying it to his back.

"Brother, I'm sorry," Su Ming's voice was muffled by the pillow.

"Silly boy, why say that," Su Yang's voice was somewhat hoarse. "Just don't be so foolish anymore. Father and Eldest Brother only want what's best for you."

After Su Yang left, Su Ming opened his eyes in the darkness.

"Master," he called out in his mind.

"Hmm," Lin Yu's voice responded, carrying a hint of... satisfaction? "How do you feel?"
Inner thoughts: The pain of flesh is minor; what matters is that he internalized the lesson.

"It hurts," Su Ming answered honestly.

"Good that it hurts," Lin Yu said leisurely, his tone carrying the steadiness of an elder. "What has today's pain taught you?"

Su Ming thought for a moment and said: "It made me understand that I'm too weak. I can't even protect myself, and I ended up dragging Second Brother down with me."

"The youth is teachable," Lin Yu was very pleased. "Then, starting tomorrow, what should you do?"

"I will study hard!" Su Ming's tone was incredibly firm. "I will carve every character Teacher Zhou teaches into my mind!"

"Good," Lin Yu's voice held a faint, fox-like smile. Finally managed to steer this kid onto the right path... ahem, guide him properly.

"Master," Su Ming asked again, "Is your knowledge hidden within very profound texts? Once I learn all the characters from the village school, will I be able to understand your teachings?"

Lin Yu's soul form froze. Ouch... that's a tricky question! Can't very well say the master doesn't recognize them either, can I?

He cleared his throat (metaphorically) and began his long-contemplated "art of persuasion," his tone sounding profoundly mysterious: "Not so. This old master's Dao has long transcended the constraints of written words, transforming into the ultimate principles of heaven and earth. However..."

He shifted his tone.

"...words are the vessels that carry 'principle'. If you don't even have a vessel, how can you cross the sea of wisdom? Every character you learn now is like laying down a keel, hammering in a plank, for the great ship that will one day carry the 'Supreme Dao'."

"Therefore, your first task is to drain every last drop of ink from that old scholar Zhou Wen Yuan's belly! Can you do that?"

Lying face down on the bed, even though the pain in his back was still piercing, Su Ming's eyes shone with an intimidating brightness in the darkness.

He seemed to see a brand new path to power unfolding from the pages of yellowed books.

"I can!" Su Ming declared solemnly.

Seeing that Su Ming had been successfully persuaded, Lin Yu also smiled with satisfaction.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,313 words]

The night was as thick as ink that couldn't be diluted.

Su Ming lay prone on the hard earthen bed, the wounds on his back stinging with a piercing pain as the ointment took effect. He gritted his teeth, burying his face in the musty-smelling pillow without making a sound.

"Does it hurt?" Lin Yu's voice sounded lazily in his mind.

"Mhm." Su Ming responded gloomily.

"Hurting means it's working." Lin Yu's tone gave no indication of emotion. "Remember this feeling. Your body is like a broken boat trying to cross a sea of suffering. Today's beating was just waves slapping against the deck. If the boat isn't sturdy, when storms come, it will be destroyed instantly with everyone aboard."

What he actually thought was: "I need to improve this kid's physical condition. My retirement plan can't collapse right after I started paying into it."

Listening to his master's words, the pain in Su Ming's back seemed to take on special meaning.

"Master, I understand."

"Understanding alone isn't enough." Lin Yu shifted topics. "Starting tomorrow, you must memorize every single character Teacher Zhou teaches, without missing a single one. For a boat to be sturdy, it needs blueprints first. These characters are your blueprints."

Su Ming hesitated slightly. "But... my memory isn't good."

"The slow bird must start flying early, and diligence can compensate for clumsiness." Lin Yu's voice carried undeniable authority. "This old master has ways to help you. Now, do something else."

"What is it?"

"Take off the ring."

Su Ming was startled but complied, pulling the cold ring from his chest.

"Your household has many eyes, and your second brother is particularly observant. If you keep wearing it while sleeping, you'll eventually be discovered." Lin Yu instructed. "See that crack in the roof beam? Hang it on that protruding wooden splinter inside the crack."

Su Ming looked up and, by the faint moonlight streaming through the window, indeed spotted an inconspicuous crack in the overhead beam. Stepping on the bed frame and standing on tiptoe, he carefully hung the ring there.

The ring disappeared into the darkness as if it had never existed.

"Alright, go to sleep." Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of satisfaction. "Rest well. Tomorrow is your second lesson after joining."

The next day, as dawn was just breaking.

Su Ming climbed out of bed. The wounds on his back still hurt, but when he thought of his master's words, he felt filled with motivation.

At the breakfast table, the atmosphere was somewhat heavy.

Eldest brother Su Feng buried his head in his porridge, while Wang Chuntao glanced sideways at Su Ming.

Father Su Shan remained silent as usual, but placed an extra serving of pickled vegetables in Su Ming's bowl.

Mother Mrs. Chen looked at him with concern. "Little Ming, does your back still hurt? Maybe don't go to school today, ask the teacher for leave."

"Mother, I'm fine." Su Ming shook his head and quickly finished the porridge in his bowl. "I'm full, going to school now."

He grabbed the cloth bag hanging on the wall and rushed out of the house as if escaping.

Su Yang watched his retreating back, his brow furrowed tightly.

"Hey, Su Ming!" Just as he stepped out of the courtyard gate, he bumped into neighbor Widow Li carrying a basin of water. Her voice was loud and clear. "Why are you running so fast? Don't you dare skip Teacher Zhou's class again! The teacher was mentioning you just yesterday!"

"Kid, who is this auntie with the built-in amplification array?" Lin Yu's voice sounded in Su Ming's mind, carrying a hint of teasing.

Su Ming quickly replied in his mind: "That's Auntie Li, the neighborhood gossip. But her heart isn't bad."

"Understood, village-level intelligence distribution center, high-risk interpersonal unit. Recommend maintaining safe distance." Lin Yu responded.

Su Ming vaguely grunted "mhm" and kept walking, almost jogging as he disappeared around the corner of the alley.

In the courtyard, Su Yang straightened up after finishing chopping a load of firewood, sweat droplets sliding down his sturdy arms. Watching Su Ming's hurried retreating figure with his tightly furrowed brow, he turned and exchanged a look with Mrs. Chen.

In the schoolhouse, the air was filled with the smell of old books.

"People at birth are naturally good..."

Teacher Zhou was stroking his goatee, swaying his head as he led seven or eight children in reading. Lifting his eyelids, he spotted Su Ming sneaking in through the back door, crouching low.

The reading voices abruptly stopped.

"Su Ming." Teacher Zhou's voice wasn't loud, but it made the entire schoolhouse so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

Su Ming walked to the front of the hall with his head lowered, proactively extending his left hand.

The sound of the ruler cutting through the air was short and sharp.

"Smack!"

Three red marks quickly swelled on his palm, burning with pain. Su Ming clenched his teeth, not making a sound.

Tsk, corporal punishment, such backward educational methods. Lin Yu shifted to a more comfortable "position" inside the ring. But "this is also a lesson, kid. First rule of survival: never get caught."

Teacher Zhou withdrew the ruler, his gaze showing some regret at Su Ming's failure to meet expectations, then resumed stroking his beard.

"Their natures are similar, but their habits make them different... continue reading!"

Su Ming moved back to his seat, his left palm feeling like it was holding a ball of fire.

He used his right hand to open the book, its edges curled and yellowed.

"Kid, how does it feel?" Lin Yu's lazy voice emerged. "This is called tactile memory method. Simple and brutal, but highly effective for a blockhead like you."

Su Ming ignored the teasing in his mind. He stared at the unfamiliar character "beginning" in the book as if trying to carve it into his eyes.

"Their natures are similar, but their habits make them different..."

The buzzing reading voices filled his ears again. He took a deep breath, suppressing the burning sensation, and opened his mouth to join in.

The sound echoed through the small schoolhouse, making the window paper vibrate.

Su Ming's throat grew dry from reading, and the stinging in his palm gradually turned into a numb, swelling heat.

He focused with unprecedented intensity, every character rolling out of his throat feeling like he was hammering stubborn iron.

After who knows how long, Teacher Zhou's ruler lightly tapped on the lectern.

"Tap."

The buzzing in the room instantly vanished.

Teacher Zhou cleared his throat, his slightly clouded eyes sweeping over each young face.

"Put away your books. Grind ink, prepare to learn today's new characters."

Night fell once again.

"People at birth are naturally good..."

He wasn't sleeping, but was instead hunched over the table, using a charcoal stick to repeatedly practice the day's new characters on a worn wooden board.

The door was pushed open silently, creating a crack.

Su Yang stood outside the door, quietly watching the thin figure under the lamplight, his expression complex.

His younger brother had returned today without saying much, just going straight to his room after eating. He had thought he was tired, but never expected... he was studying hard?

This was too unusual.

He pushed the door open and walked in.

"Little Ming."

Su Ming jumped in fright, hurriedly trying to hide the wooden board.

"Second brother?"

Su Yang walked to the table, picked up the board covered with characters, then looked at Su Ming's bloodshot eyes.

"You..." Su Yang's voice was somewhat hoarse. "At school today, did the teacher punish you?"

"No." Su Ming lowered his head.

Su Ming's heart was pounding wildly, his master's warning echoing in his ears.

He couldn't say anything, not a single word.

He raised his head, his eyes suddenly reddening.

"Brother," his voice carried a tremor and lingering fear. "I'm scared."

Su Yang was taken aback.

"I'm scared of being beaten again." Tears fell from Su Ming's eyes, his voice filled with grievance. "Even more scared... scared of seeing father and eldest brother hit you again. If I study hard, they won't get angry anymore, they won't beat us anymore."

"Their natures are similar, but their habits make them different... continue reading!"

The fear of being beaten was real. Not wanting to implicate his second brother was also real.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 6: Pretend to be a bad student

[1,054 words]

Su Yang looked at the tear stains on his younger brother's face, and the slight suspicion in his heart was instantly replaced by heartache. He reached out, somewhat clumsily wiping the tears from Su Ming's face, his throat feeling tight.

"Silly boy." Su Yang's voice was a bit hoarse as he awkwardly ruffled Su Ming's hair, "Wanting to study is a good thing, your brother supports you. As for father... don't take it to heart, that's just his temper."

He sighed, "Don't study this late in the future, it wastes oil." Su Yang's voice softened, "Go to sleep early, you need to wake up early tomorrow."

"Mm."

Su Yang turned and left, gently closing the door behind him.

Outside, he leaned against the wall, the heartache on his face gradually fading, replaced once again by a lingering trace of doubt.

Xiao Ming's explanation was perfectly reasonable, yet he couldn't shake the feeling that things weren't that simple.

The look in that child's eyes while reading today didn't seem like fear, but more like... he had found some kind of treasure, a kind of genuine focus and desire from the heart.

Inside the room, Su Ming let out a long sigh and slumped into the chair.

Su Ming lifted his head, roughly wiping his face with his sleeve, his eyes still red.

"Master, I..."

"You did very well." Lin Yu's tone carried a rare hint of praise, "Crisis management handled quite effectively. Successfully transformed an internal family conflict into the core driving force for your personal striving, while also consolidating the loyalty of the 'second brother' this important support unit. Not bad, reminiscent of my days as a project manager."

Su Ming only half-understood.

"Remember, survival rule number two: tears are the final weapon of the weak, but also the most effective disguise of the strong. Used properly, they're worth more than a thousand words." Lin Yu continued his teaching, "Your second brother is a quality unit, belonging to high-quality assets, needs to be maintained well."

Su Ming responded with a muffled "Mm." He picked up the charcoal stick again, his gaze falling on the wooden board.

The flickering lamplight illuminated his face, which showed unprecedented determination.

The next day.

In the schoolhouse, Teacher Zhou was stroking his goatee, swaying his head as he led seven or eight children in reading.

Su Ming sat in the corner, remarkably not zoning out for once. He sat up straight, his eyes fixed intently on the scroll in Teacher Zhou's hands, his ears perked up like a rabbit's, not missing a single syllable.

Teacher Zhou quickly noticed the unusual behavior from that corner.

He stopped leading the reading and paced over to Su Ming's side, his cloudy eyes revealing a scrutinizing gaze.

This kid played truant and got beaten yesterday, and today he's like a completely different person?

"Su Ming." Teacher Zhou tapped the desk.

"Here!" Su Ming jolted and stood up.

"The ten new characters taught yesterday, do you still remember them? Come up front and write them from memory."

Su Ming's heart immediately leaped into his throat.

"Don't panic." Lin Yu's voice sounded just in time, "This old master has imprinted the stroke structures of those ten characters into your mind. You just need to copy them."

Su Ming took a deep breath, walked to the front, and picked up a half-bald writing brush.

He closed his eyes, and sure enough, ten incredibly clear large characters appeared in his mind, every stroke and line as if carved with a knife.

He opened his eyes, lifted the brush, and dipped it in ink.

"Wait!" Lin Yu urgently stopped him, "What do you think you're doing? Aiming for a perfect score?"

Su Ming froze, asking in his mind, "Isn't that right?"

"Fool!" Lin Yu sounded exasperated, "The outstanding tree attracts the wind! You, who just yesterday played truant because you couldn't read, today suddenly have perfect memory and masterful brushwork? Do you want to tell Teacher Zhou that you've been possessed by a monster, or enlightened by a deity?"

Cold sweat instantly broke out on Su Ming's back.

"Then... then what should I do?"

"Concealing One's Edge! Don't you understand what Concealing One's Edge means?" Lin Yu patiently instructed, "Remember, from today onward, your goal isn't to be the best, but to be the student who 'is always working hard, but has average talent and shows slight improvement.' This way you won't arouse suspicion, while still satisfying your parents and teacher. Safe, low-key—that's the way!"

"Deliberately write three characters wrong." Lin Yu gave precise instructions, "Two with wrong strokes, one simply write as a homophone. Make the mistakes reasonable, make them look like the kind of mistakes a slacker like you would make!"

Su Ming steadied himself, the brush tip moving across the paper.

He wrote seven characters correctly, with neat strokes, far better than before. Then, he deliberately wrote the two "kou" in the character "shan" as one "kou", and omitted one horizontal stroke below the "bai" in the character "xi". Finally, he wrote the character "yuan" as "yuan".

Teacher Zhou came over to look, his eyebrows first furrowing tightly, then gradually relaxing.

He stroked his beard and nodded.

"Hmm... three wrong. But remembering seven counts as improvement." He pointed at the mistaken characters, "The strokes here are incorrect, one stroke is missing here, and this character is a homophone but different character. It shows you've been putting in some effort, but your foundation is weak and your mind isn't particularly sharp."

He sighed and waved his hand, "Go back and sit down. Diligence can compensate for clumsiness, just work harder in the future."

"Yes, Teacher." Su Ming felt as if pardoned from execution, lowering his head as he returned to his seat.

Lin Yu breathed a long sigh of relief inside the ring, "That was close, that was close. This kid does have some acting talent. The boy is teachable, the boy is teachable indeed."

During the following recitation session, Lin Yu began remote guidance again.

"When reciting the 'Three Character Classic' later, deliberately stammer twice, slow down by half a beat. Show that kind of 'I'm desperately trying to remember, but just can't recall' embarrassed feeling, understand?"

So when Teacher Zhou called on Su Ming, he stood up, stammering, his face flushed red, taking half the time an incense stick takes to burn to finish reciting one section, with two mistakes in the middle.

Far from getting angry, Teacher Zhou instead showed a hint of pleased expression.

This was more like Su Ming's proper level! Although still clumsy, at least his attitude was correct.

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Chapter 7: Cultivation?

[1,248 words]

"Alright, enough idle chatter, let's get to tonight's main topic." Lin Yu's voice turned serious. "Yesterday I said that for a ship to be sturdy, you need blueprints first. Today, let's talk about the timber for shipbuilding."

"Timber?"

"It's your body." Lin Yu evaluated bluntly. "Your physique isn't even comparable to rotten wood—at best, it's like a waterlogged, decaying stick. A single gust of wind could snap you in half, and you still dream of crossing the sea of suffering? Keep dreaming."

Su Ming's cheeks flushed with warmth.

"So, starting tonight, our cultivation will proceed on two fronts. Studying characters during the day is 'drawing the blueprints,' while at night we must 'select the timber'—no, 'forge the timber.'"

"Master, what should I do?" Su Ming immediately perked up.

"Simple, begin with a basic stance." Lin Yu directed. "Stand up, feet apart, shoulder-width. Yes, just like that. Then, squat down until your thighs are parallel to the ground, and extend your arms straight in front of your chest."

Su Ming followed the instructions, assuming a somewhat crooked posture.

"Master, what is this called?"

"This posture, in ancient traditions, has a resounding name." Lin Yu's voice became profound and mysterious.

Su Ming held his breath.

"It's called the 'horse stance.'"

Su Ming: "..."

"Don't underestimate this stance." Lin Yu sensed his disbelief. "This is the ultimate method to train your lower body strength and core stability. If you ever get into a fight later, standing more firmly than others means you're less likely to fall. If you need to run for your life, having strong legs means you can outrun others by several streets. One extra street could mean one extra life."

Su Ming took a deep breath and sank his center of gravity lower.

It was fine at first, but in less time than it takes for one incense stick to burn, his thighs began trembling uncontrollably.

Beads of sweat formed on his forehead, sliding down his cheeks and dripping onto the ground.

"Back... straighten your back! Are you a boiled shrimp?" Lin Yu's voice roared in his mind. "Tuck in your stomach! Lift your hips! Imagine there's a red-hot iron nail beneath your butt—dare you sit down?"

Su Ming jolted, sharply lifting his hips upward, instantly making his posture much more proper.

But what followed was a needle-like soreness in his thigh muscles.

"What's all that shaking? Did you install sewing machines in your legs?"

"Hold on! Think of Teacher Zhou's ruler! Think of the way your eldest brother looks at you!"

"Every drop of sweat you shed now is capital for survival in the future! Whether I can collect my pension until retirement depends entirely on these legs of yours!"

Gritting his teeth, Su Ming's vision blurred with sweat, his entire body feeling as if it no longer belonged to him.

He felt like he wasn't performing a horse stance, but rather carrying a mountain on his shoulders.

After what felt like an eternity, just as he felt he was about to fall apart, Lin Yu's voice finally sounded again.

"Alright, time's up. Get up."

Su Ming felt as if granted amnesty, his legs going weak as he collapsed sitting on the ground, gasping for breath heavily.

His two legs felt filled with scalding lead, sore, numb, and swollen.

"How does it feel?"

"My legs... aren't mine anymore." Su Ming panted.

"Good, that means the training was effective." Lin Yu said with satisfaction. "This is the first introductory lesson, called 'body forging.' You'll practice this every night from now on. Now, rest a bit, we're moving to the second lesson."

"There's... more?" Su Ming groaned.

"Of course." Lin Yu said matter-of-factly. "The body is the ship, the mind is the captain. Even if the ship is built sturdily, if the captain is blind, it will still hit reefs and sink. Now, we begin training the captain."

"Training the captain?"

"Sit cross-legged."

Struggling to get up, enduring the soreness in his legs, Su Ming sat cross-legged on the earthen bed.

"Close your eyes, don't think about anything."

Su Ming closed his eyes, but his mind became even more chaotic.

The new characters learned during the day, Teacher Zhou's face, Second Brother's gaze, the soreness in his legs... all churned in his mind like a pot of boiling porridge.

"Master, I... I can't do it."

"I didn't ask you to achieve that." Lin Yu's voice was calm. "What you need to do now isn't to chase these thoughts away. The more you chase them, the more persistent they become. Like the stray dogs at the village entrance—if you glare at them, they think you want to play and will keep pestering you."

"Then what should I do?"

"Ignore them." Lin Yu said. "Just sit quietly and observe these thoughts. Watch them come, watch them go. Whether they want to do somersaults in your mind or sing songs, let them be. You are merely a spectator, someone sitting by a river, watching the water flow by. The fish, shrimp, water plants, and rotten leaves in the river have nothing to do with you."

"This method, I call it 'meditation.'" Lin Yu's voice carried a distant tone. "It's a supreme wonderful technique to temper your soul. When your soul grows stronger, your memory and comprehension will naturally improve accordingly."

What he actually thought was: "This is the meditation course I paid big money for in my previous life to cope with the 996 work schedule, mainly for stress relief and improving sleep quality. Never thought I could repurpose it here, packaging it as a cultivation technique—I'm truly a genius."

Following Lin Yu's guidance, Su Ming tried to "watch" the thoughts in his mind instead of driving them away.

He struggled to regulate his breathing—inhale, exhale.

The soreness in his legs remained evident, and a faint stinging pain came from the wounds on his back.

A thought emerged: "My legs are so numb."

Just as Su Ming was about to focus on this numbness, Lin Yu's voice sounded: "Watch it, don't engage with it."

So he tried hard to pull his attention back, continuing to focus on his breathing.

Another thought popped up: "What new characters will Teacher Zhou teach tomorrow?"

"Watch it, don't engage with it."

"Eldest Brother seemed unhappy today..."

"Watch it, don't engage with it."

...

It was like playing a game of whack-a-mole—thoughts kept popping up one after another, and Su Ming repeatedly pulled his attention back to his breathing.

The process was tedious and difficult.

But he didn't give up.

His master said this was a wonderful technique to temper the soul.

He remembered his terrible memory, remembered Teacher Zhou's frustrated expression.

He had to persevere.

Time passed slowly in the silence, the oil lamp's flame flickering gently, casting his elongated shadow.

Gradually, the soreness and numbness in his legs seemed to fade.

The chaotic thoughts in his mind, like children who had tired themselves out from playing, appeared less frequently.

His breathing became long and steady.

At one moment, he truly felt like a spectator by the river, and the world quieted down.

Although it lasted only a brief instant, that unprecedented tranquility and focus shook him deeply.

"Alright, that's enough for today." Lin Yu's voice sounded timely, breaking the stillness.

Su Ming slowly opened his eyes, feeling refreshed and clear-minded, with even his physical fatigue significantly reduced.

"Master, just now I..."

"You've begun." Lin Yu said lightly. "Feels good, doesn't it? Keep at it, the benefits are greater than you imagine. Now, hide the ring properly and go to sleep."

Obediently, Su Ming hung the ring back in the crack of the roof beam.

Lying on the earthen bed, he fell asleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow.

This sleep was unprecedentedly deep and sweet, completely dreamless.

Inside the ring, Lin Yu's ethereal figure shifted into a more comfortable lying position, as if having completed today's work quota.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 8: Crouching Dragon

[1,243 words]

The morning cooking smoke and the silence at the dining table were the unchanging melody of the Su household.

Su Ming buried his head in his bowl, quickly drinking the rice porridge so thin you could see your reflection, his movements swift like a fledgling bird afraid of having its food snatched away.

"Oh, look at our little scholar, trying to chew through the bottom of the bowl and eat the characters right into his stomach?" Wang Chuntao's voice carried its usual sharpness as she tapped her chopsticks against the rim of her bowl. "What's the use of just eating? The knowledge needs to go into your brain."

"Say less!" Mrs. Chen came out carrying a plate of pickled vegetables, glaring at her eldest daughter-in-law. She walked to Su Ming's side and transferred the boiled egg from her own bowl into his.

"Xiao Ming, eat more. Studying taxes the mind."

Su Ming's movements paused briefly, but before he could speak, his father Su Shan put down his own bowl and grunted a muffled "Hmm" from the side.

Su Ming split the egg into two halves, returning one half to his mother's bowl and burying the other in his porridge. Then he lifted the bowl and drank it all in one go.

"I'm going to school." He put down the bowl, grabbed his cloth bag, and slipped out of the courtyard like a gust of wind.

In the courtyard, Su Yang watched his younger brother's retreating back, then glanced at their father's gleamingly sharpened firewood chopper, lost in thought.

At the schoolhouse, Teacher Zhou was explaining a new short essay.

"...Therefore, the superior man is cautious when alone." He stroked his beard, his gaze sweeping over the students below.

"Who can explain the meaning of these two characters, 'cautious when alone'?"

The children looked at each other, the children from wealthier families avoiding eye contact, afraid of being called upon.

A thin, weak hand hesitantly rose in the corner.

Teacher Zhou looked somewhat surprised as he turned to Su Ming. "Su Ming, you may speak."

Su Ming stood up, his cheeks slightly flushed as all eyes in the schoolhouse focused on him.

"Replying to Teacher, I... I think 'cautious' means to be careful, and 'alone' means by oneself. So it means even when you're by yourself, you should still be careful."

His simple answer was almost laughable, drawing soft snickers from the class.

"What should one be careful about?" Teacher Zhou didn't laugh, instead pressing further.

"Careful... careful not to do bad things." Su Ming's voice grew even softer. "Because even if no one sees, you yourself know in your heart."

The surprise in Teacher Zhou's eyes deepened as he looked at this youth who had been beaten for skipping school just days before. Though still somewhat awkward, there was now a hint of contemplation in his eyes.

"Hmm, not bad." Teacher Zhou nodded, signaling for him to sit down. "Though not entirely accurate, you're not far off. 'Cautious when alone' speaks of how a superior man's conduct and integrity should still conform to righteousness even when unsupervised. That you could grasp the concept of 'knowing in your own heart' is already commendable."

He cleared his throat and looked at the others. "Did you all hear that? Studying isn't just about recognizing characters, it's about understanding principles! Though Su Ming may be slow, he applies his mind. What about you?"

The children who had been snickering immediately lowered their heads.

Su Ming sat down, quietly letting out a sigh of relief.

"Beautiful." Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind, carrying a hint of lazy approval. "Textbook-level Concealing One's Edge. You demonstrated your 'diligent thinking' while exposing your 'superficial understanding' as a poor student. Teacher Zhou probably sees you through a 'promising block of wood' filter now."

Su Ming responded mentally, "Master, I was really nervous just now."

"Being nervous is good," Lin Yu said. "Survival Rule Three: Never be the most conspicuous one, whether the best or the worst. The middle ground has the least wind, the safest place."

Night.

Su Ming's room had become his secret cultivation ground.

"Squat lower! Get your butt down! Who are you showing off that high posture to?"

Lin Yu's voice relentlessly drove him on in his mind.

Su Ming's legs trembled like leaves in an autumn wind, sweat soaking through his back, flowing down his spine groove with an unbearably itchy sensation.

"Master... I... I can't take much more."

"Can't take it? You still have to!" Lin Yu snorted. "Did you think cultivation was like hosting a dinner party? This is replacing the keel of your broken-down ship! Every extra drop of sweat now means one more breath you can take when running for your life later!"

What he actually thought was: "Hang in there, my retirement insurance! This is all future premium payments, can't miss a single drop!"

Finally, the horse stance time ended. Su Ming plopped down on the ground, feeling like his legs no longer belonged to him.

Before he could even catch his breath, Lin Yu's new command arrived.

"Get up, lie face down."

"Huh?"

"On the ground, do fifty 'Prostrate Dragon Crawls'." Lin Yu thought to himself, "I'm truly a naming genius."

"What's a Prostrate Dragon Crawl?"

"It's using your hands to support yourself on the ground, moving your body up and down like a stick." Lin Yu concisely explained the new cultivation exercise he had invented.

"This is a peerless technique for training your upper body and core strength! When you get knocked down in the future, you'll be able to get up faster than others - might just save your life!"

Gritting his teeth, Su Ming pushed up his exhausted body.

One, two...

"Master, I think I understood something at school today." He spoke while panting, trying to distract himself.

"Oh? Tell me about it."

"The Concealing One's Edge you taught me isn't just about not drawing attention." Su Ming's movements slowed, but his voice grew clearer. "It's more about making others... feel at ease about me."

Lin Yu's soul form paused for a moment.

"The student is teachable." For the first time, genuine satisfaction colored Lin Yu's voice. "You're finally not a complete block of wood. Remember, the human heart is the world's most unpredictable formation, yet also the strongest shield. Make everyone underestimate you, and you'll possess the sturdiest armor."

After physical training ended, it was time for soul tempering.

Su Ming sat cross-legged on the kang bed, eyes closed in meditation.

Now, he could quickly enter that "observer" state.

Thoughts still flowed like a river in his mind, but he was no longer swept away by them.

"Tonight, we'll increase the difficulty." Lin Yu's voice sounded. "Split off a thread of your attention to 'listen' to the sounds in your room."

Su Ming complied.

He heard the crickets chirping outside the window, the soft snoring from his parents' room next door, the moan of wind passing under the eaves, and even... the "thump-thump" beating of his own heart.

"Split off another thread of attention to 'feel' the sensations on your skin."

He felt the slight coolness of the air, the friction of his coarse cloth clothing, the thin calluses left on his palms from practicing writing.

"Good." Lin Yu's voice carried guidance. "Spread your soul out like a net to perceive everything around you, but don't get drawn to any single point. This is the embryonic form of 'multitasking,' and the foundation for future environmental detection and danger avoidance."

He mentally added: "This is also the 'multithreading work capability' that future elites must possess. Master this well, and even if you can't cultivate immortality later, you can still outcompete your peers as an accountant."

Su Ming immersed himself in this marvelous perception, completely unaware of the passage of time.

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Chapter 9: I Can't Survive Anymore

[1,226 words]

The days passed by in a cycle of concealing one's abilities during the day and cultivating diligently at night, and before they knew it, a month had gone by.

Su Ming's eyes were much brighter than before, and the entire person resembled a small blade of grass stubbornly growing through cracks in stone, exuding a silent tenacity.

His changes were noticed by everyone in the household.

At the dinner table, Wang Chuntao's sarcastic remarks had decreased significantly, because she discovered that this younger brother-in-law was much more efficient at chores than before, whether chopping firewood or carrying water, never complaining of exhaustion.

Mrs. Chen, on the other hand, felt increasingly heartache for him, always trying to find ways to prepare some tasty treats for him.

The one who had changed the most was Su Shan.

One evening, Su Shan returned from town carrying a small package.

During dinner, in front of the whole family, he opened that oil-paper wrapped package.

Inside weren't food items, but rather a stack of hemp paper, a small ink stick, and a brand new writing brush.

"For... for me?" Su Ming was stunned.

These items would cost the family several days' worth of expenses.

"Mm." Su Shan squeezed out a single word through clenched teeth, pushing the items toward Su Ming. "Teacher Zhou said you... are diligent. Stop using charcoal sticks."

Su Feng and Wang Chuntao both stared in astonishment.

Su Yang, however, smiled. He patted Su Ming's shoulder, his eyes filled with heartfelt relief.

Su Ming's eyes instantly reddened. He grasped that writing brush that still carried the scent of ink, holding it as if it were the most precious treasure in the entire world.

"Father..."

"Eat!" Su Shan roughly cut him off, burying his head in his bowl to shovel rice.

At night.

Su Ming used his new writing brush to carefully copy the "Hundred Family Surnames" character by character onto the new paper. The newly purchased brush had a flexible tip, and the hemp paper carried a faint fragrance of grass and wood, infinitely better than the rough wooden boards.

He wrote slowly and steadily.

For each character, he first mentally reviewed the stroke structure that Lin Yu had deconstructed before putting brush to paper.

"Zhao, Qian, Sun, Li..."

"Hmm, not bad." Lin Yu's lazy voice sounded in Su Ming's mind, like a foreman inspecting his own enterprise. "After more than a month of intensive training, your common character library has expanded to six hundred and three characters. Barely meets our company's 'intern' hiring standards."

The little abacus in his mind clicked loudly: "Physical fitness KPIs are steadily improving, cultural KPIs exceeded expectations. It's just this 'spiritual energy node exploration' project—not a shred of progress after a whole month. This backwater place really is a strategically abandoned region."

He changed his tone: "The ring that houses my soul is called the 'Profound Heaven Ring.' It contains its own internal space, storing some of this old man's collections from back in the day. But to open it requires something called 'spiritual energy.'"

"Spiritual energy?" This was the first time Su Ming had heard this term.

"Yes, a type of energy that drifts freely between heaven and earth. You ordinary mortals cannot perceive it, much less utilize it." Lin Yu dangled the bait. "Only by absorbing spiritual energy into your body and embarking on the path of cultivation can you truly push open the door to a new world. Only then will you have even the slightest bit of self-preservation ability."

"Then how... how can I obtain spiritual energy?" Su Ming's heart pounded wildly.

"Difficult, more difficult than ascending to the blue heavens." Lin Yu's tone was filled with worldly wisdom. "Places rich in spiritual energy are all occupied by major sects and powerful factions. As a mountain village boy, how can you compete? Unless... you have the assistance of heavenly treasures and earthly wonders."

He deliberately paused, fully arousing Su Ming's anticipation.

"Or, with the most basic energy guidance method, forcibly draw a wisp into your body at a relatively abundant spiritual energy node, igniting the spark of cultivation."

"Master, do you have such a method?"

"Yes, naturally I do." Lin Yu's voice carried a trace of pride. "But we have the method—where is the spiritual energy node? This impoverished backwater has spiritual energy as thin as the rice soup in a widow's household—where could we possibly find one?"

Su Ming's heart, which had just been ignited, was doused with a bucket of cold water.

"However..." Lin Yu spoke again, "Nothing is absolutely certain. Perhaps nearby, there hides some weak node that we don't know about. Starting tomorrow, besides your cultivation, you need to do one more thing."

"What thing?"

"Observe." Lin Yu said solemnly. "Use the meditation method you've learned to perceive your surroundings. Where do you feel most comfortable, where do the flowers and grass grow most luxuriantly, where are the insects most active... Spiritual energy is the source of all living things' vitality. Where it exists, all things will be different."

"Find it. This is your first real test to enter the path."

Ten days later.

"Master, I still can't sense the 'spiritual energy' you mentioned." He felt somewhat discouraged. "I've checked all around the village—the place where flowers and grass grow most luxuriantly is behind Aunt Li's outhouse, and where the most insects gather is under Butcher Wang's meat table."

Lin Yu's soul twitched.

"Ahem, process of elimination—this also demonstrates a scientific spirit of exploration." He forcefully saved face. "This shows that the true opportunity isn't in this tiny place. We need to set our sights further."

Just then, Second Brother Su Yang's voice came from outside the courtyard gate.

"Little Ming, are you asleep? Wake up early tomorrow, don't be late again."

"Got it, Brother!" Su Ming quickly responded, blowing out the oil lamp.

In the darkness, he carefully placed the written papers under his pillow, as if they weren't just paper, but stepping stones leading to the future.

The next day, at the schoolhouse.

After finishing the day's lessons, Teacher Zhou didn't dismiss class as usual.

He cleared his throat, his slightly cloudy eyes sweeping over each young face, and the schoolhouse instantly fell silent.

"There's one matter I need to discuss with you all." Teacher Zhou's voice carried a note of gravity. "At the beginning of next month, the county academy in Qingshi Town will open registration for the 'Tongsheng' examination records. Anyone ten years or older, with a guarantor's recommendation, can register to obtain eligibility to take the Xiucai examination next spring."

The room erupted in barely suppressed commotion.

Take the Xiucai examination!

For these mountain village children, these three words seemed as distant as the moon in the sky.

"This old teacher, entrusted by my mentor from the county academy, can recommend two people." Teacher Zhou's statement was like a massive rock thrown into a pond, stirring up waves.

Two spots!

Everyone's breathing grew heavy, their eyes burning with intense light.

Su Ming's heart thumped violently.

Go to town? Take the Xiucai examination?

He instinctively looked toward Teacher Zhou, his eyes unable to conceal his longing.

"Quiet!" Teacher Zhou rapped the table with his ruler. "This matter is no trivial affair. The journey is long, and travel expenses must be provided by yourselves. More importantly, those I recommend must have upright character and solid scholarship. Over the next half month, I will select two of you based on merit."

With a loud clang, the dismissal bell rang. The children burst out of the schoolhouse like a flock of startled sparrows, carrying this astonishing news to every corner of the village.

Su Ming remained frozen in place, his mind in complete turmoil.

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Chapter 10: Venture Capital

[1,048 words]

Lin Yu's voice echoed in Su Ming's mind, "No! Absolutely not! We need to lay low! We must lay low! The nail that sticks out gets hammered down! The bird that takes the lead gets shot first! Have you forgotten the survival principles I taught you?"

"But, Master..." Su Ming silently retorted in his heart, "This is an opportunity."

"An opportunity? This is a fishhook! Dangling delicious bait while hiding a deadly net underwater!" Lin Yu spoke with heartfelt distress, "What kind of place is Qingshi Town? Crowded with people and prying eyes, filled with all sorts of characters! Going there would be like delivering ourselves to the enemy! What if we encounter a sharp-eyed cultivator who sees through my existence? We'd both be instantly refined into a pair of tragic lovebirds with our souls scattered to the winds!"

Su Ming was momentarily stunned by his outburst.

"Then... should we forget about it?"

"Forget about it?" Lin Yu's tone suddenly shifted, becoming conflicted, "Just giving up like that seems... not quite right either."

He fell into an internal struggle.

"Maintaining the status quo keeps risks controllable. Disadvantages: trapped in this dead-end situation, resources drying up, slowly dying. This is called the 'conservative waiting-for-death strategy.'"

"Breaking the stalemate might bring contact with new resources, new information, and obtaining the 'Child Scholar' title as a low-level social identity for camouflage. This is 'risky strategic investment.' Disadvantages: unknown risks multiply dramatically, could lead to instant death."

Lin Yu's soul drifted restlessly within the ring.

"Damn it, my choice paralysis is acting up."

He suddenly stopped: "I've got it! Our goal isn't to become the most dazzling genius, but to become the 'most reliable, most obedient, most trustworthy' one in Teacher Zhou's eyes! We need to make him feel that choosing you won't bring brilliance, but will absolutely never bring mistakes!"

"Master, what should I do?"

"From now on, you need to show 'eagerness' for this opportunity, but also display 'lack of confidence' in your own abilities." Lin Yu began his directorial career, "You need to work harder than before, but when asking Teacher Zhou questions, focus on the more basic ones. You need to make everyone, including Teacher Zhou, see you as a 'clumsy uncut jade' that needs a master's guidance to shine!"

"Understand? What we want isn't stunning talent, but the highest evaluation of 'proper attitude!'"

That evening, the atmosphere at the Su family dinner table was unprecedentedly tense.

The news that Teacher Zhou was selecting people to go to town had already spread throughout the entire village.

"Little Ming, do you want to go?" The first to speak was Second Brother Su Yang.

Su Ming nodded, then shook his head, keeping his head down while eating.

"If you want to go, then fight for it!" Eldest Brother Su Feng, who had been silent until now, suddenly spoke with a steady, powerful voice, "Our Su family has never produced a scholar!"

Wang Chuntao didn't speak, but placed a large portion of vegetables into Su Ming's bowl.

Su Shan put down his wine cup, his cloudy eyes looking at his youngest son: "Don't worry about the money."

After dinner, Su Feng pulled Su Yang to a corner of the yard.

"Second brother, empty words are useless. A round trip to town, plus necessary expenses, will cost at least one tael of silver. Father's savings can't cover that." Su Feng looked toward the dark mountains in the distance, lowering his voice.

Su Yang nodded: "I know. I've saved three hundred copper coins over the years, but that's far from enough."

"Tomorrow, come into the mountains with me." Su Feng's eyes turned sharp, "We'll go deeper. With good luck, if we hunt a musk deer or dig up some valuable medicinal herbs, that should be enough."

"Eldest brother, the deep mountains are dangerous."

"Dangerous or not, we have to go!" Su Feng patted his younger brother's shoulder, his tone leaving no room for argument, "For Little Ming, it's worth it!"

Their conversation was very quiet, but every word clearly reached Su Ming's ears as he stepped out of the house.

He leaned against the doorframe, his body feeling somewhat cold.

So those two spots weren't just about academic competition—they carried the weight of one tael of silver behind them.

That was something his two brothers were going to risk their lives to obtain from the mountains.

He returned to his room, closed the door, and stood in the darkness for a long time.

"Master."

Lin Yu's voice lacked its usual laziness, carrying a rare seriousness, "Foolish, so foolish! This is typical high-risk, low-return primitive capital accumulation! Gambling with their lives—if they fail inside those mountains, any future prospects become worthless!"

He drifted restlessly within the ring space, his soul form becoming somewhat unstable.

"I want to get that spot." Su Ming's voice was soft, but each word felt carved in stone.

Lin Yu fell silent.

He could feel that something within this kid had been ignited.

"Ah, damn family warmth, it always interferes with my 'Heartless Great Dao' teaching." He sighed inwardly, "Forget it, forget it, consider this an additional emotional investment in my retirement insurance project."

Su Ming lay on the cold earthen bed, eyes wide open, completely sleepless.

"Right now, there's nothing you can do." Lin Yu's voice grew heavy, "The only thing you can do is turn their 'investment' into tenfold, hundredfold returns. Sleep now, conserve your energy for tomorrow, and play your part well."

Su Ming closed his eyes, but the words "For Little Ming, it's worth it" echoed repeatedly in his mind like a brand.

As dawn barely broke, movement could be heard in the yard.

Su Ming dressed and went out to see Eldest Brother Su Feng already carrying his bow and arrows, with a firewood knife at his waist. Second Brother Su Yang was checking a cloth bag containing dry rations and a water pouch.

Mrs. Chen, her eyes red-rimmed, stuffed two boiled eggs into Su Feng and Su Yang's bags: "Be careful on the road, don't go too deep, come back early if you can't find anything."

Wang Chuntao stood by the door, her lips moving slightly, finally only saying: "Husband, come back soon."

Su Shan squatted on the doorstep, smoking his pipe one puff at a time, his face obscured by swirling smoke.

Su Feng said to his parents in a deep voice: "Father, Mother, don't worry."

The brothers' figures soon disappeared into the morning mist.

Su Ming stood in the yard, his fists clenched so tightly that his nails dug into his palms.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,292 words]

In the schoolhouse, the clear sound of reading aloud couldn't suppress the children's excited discussions.

"My father said if I can get the spot, he'll buy me a complete set of writing materials!" a chubby boy wearing silk clothes boasted loudly.

"I heard from my second uncle that Qingshi Town is huge, a hundred times bigger than our village!"

Su Ming turned a deaf ear, spreading out the hemp paper Su Shan had bought him, carefully copying the lesson text stroke by stroke with his new brush.

His concentration caught Teacher Zhou's attention, and also drew dissatisfaction from another person.

"Hmph, what's the use of cramming at the last minute?" a sarcastic voice sounded.

Su Ming looked up—it was Zhao Rui, the village chief's son. His family was well-off, he was one of the top students in the schoolhouse, and also the strongest contender for this spot.

Zhao Rui glanced sideways at the new paper and brush on Su Ming's desk, curling his lips: "Oh, got new gear? Your family's really willing to spend. But even with the best brush, what you write still looks like chicken scratch."

Several followers immediately burst into laughter.

Su Ming ignored him, lowering his head to continue writing.

While Su Ming endured torment in the schoolhouse, Lin Yu was taking stock of his "assets" inside the ring.

"Ah, I'm really dirt poor."

His soul form floated in the storage space, looking at the scattered items before him.

In the corner sat a small pile of dull, lackluster stones—a few low-grade spirit stones with nearly depleted spiritual energy.

"Just this little stash isn't even enough to fill the cracks between teeth. If used for Su Ming, I probably wouldn't even hear a sound."

Beside them stood a broken sword, with only half the blade remaining and an ancient hilt, covered in rust stains.

"A murder weapon, pass. This thing has too much killing intent—Su Ming's frail body would get seriously ill just from touching it."

What concerned Lin Yu most were three jade slips lying quietly.

He moved his soul form closer, extending his consciousness into one of them. Complete chaos—the restrictions on it couldn't be broken with his current soul power.

"Damn, encrypted files."

He probed the second one, succeeding this time. Countless pieces of information flooded his mind—it was a cultivation method called "Greenwood Longevity Art."

"A wood attribute technique, balanced and gentle, actually suitable for beginners. But..." Lin Yu carefully "read," "The opening requires drawing energy into the body, visualizing green wood, communicating with the essence of Yi Wood... This kid doesn't even recognize all the characters yet. If he misunderstands a single word and visualizes the essence of Yi Wood as the big locust tree behind the outhouse, qi deviation would be the least of his worries—he might instantly turn into a vegetable."

He shook his head, abandoning this tempting idea.

"No, the risk is too high. On the path of cultivation, one wrong step leads to countless more. Practicing recklessly without guidance equals suicide. We still need to solidify his cultural foundation first, then find a reliable sect to serve as the 'starter village'—that's the safest strategy."

He looked at the final jade slip, which only had two ancient characters carved on it—"Alchemy Formulas."

"This might be useful later."

After finishing his inventory, Lin Yu let out a long sigh.

"A pile of scrap metal, a few dead batteries, and three pieces of software that need 'activation codes' and 'beginner tutorials.' My golden finger is practically a hell-difficulty start."

Before school ended, Teacher Zhou conducted his usual questioning session.

His gaze swept across the room, finally settling on Su Ming.

"Su Ming, you tell us—what does 'reviewing the old to know the new' mean?"

This question was very simple; almost everyone knew the answer.

Zhao Rui's face showed a contemptuous smile as he waited to see Su Ming embarrass himself.

Su Ming stood up, nervously clutching the hem of his clothes: "Teacher, this student believes 'reviewing the old' means reviewing what has been learned. 'Knowing the new' means understanding new principles."

"Hmm, what else?" Teacher Zhou pressed further.

Su Ming paused, then followed the train of thought Lin Yu had taught him last night, speaking haltingly: "This student thinks... reviewing old knowledge is like repeatedly walking a path you've taken before. The more you walk it, not only do you remember the path better, but you might also notice flowers and plants by the roadside that you didn't pay attention to before, or find a new shortcut. That's the 'new.'"

This analogy was simple but very vivid.

Teacher Zhou's eyes lit up.

He nodded approvingly: "Well said! The metaphor is simple, but the principle isn't shallow. When studying, the biggest taboo is swallowing dates whole. To have such insight shows you've truly applied yourself. You may sit down."

Zhao Rui's face instantly turned beet red.

Su Ming sat down, quietly sighing with relief in his heart.

"Excellent!" Lin Yu snapped his fingers in Su Ming's mind. "You both demonstrated your depth of thinking and maintained the 'simple and dull' persona. Now when Teacher Zhou looks at you, he's probably automatically added eight layers of 'uncut jade filter.'"

The sun gradually sank westward.

In the small Su family courtyard, the atmosphere was so oppressive it felt suffocating.

Mrs. Chen paced back and forth in the yard, occasionally looking toward the village entrance.

Wang Chuntao had also stopped her work, sitting on the doorstep with worry filling her eyes.

After eating dinner, Su Shan brought a stool and sat at the courtyard gate.

The sky darkened bit by bit.

Su Ming's heart also sank along with the fading light.

"Master, they... couldn't have had an accident, could they?"

Lin Yu: "Don't scare yourself. Your eldest brother is an experienced hunter—he knows his limits."

Although he said this, Lin Yu's soul form was also tense.

His weak spiritual sense couldn't extend far beyond the ring. Right now, he was just as blind and deaf as Su Ming—they could only wait.

This feeling of being unable to control the situation made him utterly despise it.

Just as the atmosphere in the courtyard was about to freeze solid, faint footsteps came from the direction of the village entrance.

One stumbling, one heavy.

Su Shan abruptly stood up, while Mrs. Chen and Wang Chuntao rushed to the courtyard gate.

Two dark figures slowly approached under the moonlight.

It was Su Feng and Su Yang!

Su Yang was dragging a dead river deer with one hand! Su Feng seemed to be carrying another smaller prey on his shoulder.

"They're back!" Mrs. Chen's voice carried urgency and finally released tension as she rushed forward first.

"Brother!" Su Ming also rushed over. Under the moonlight, he saw clearly: Su Feng's sleeve was torn with a gash, his arm showing some scrapes and dust; Su Yang's clothes were splattered with dark red bloodstains, clearly from the prey, his face showing exhaustion but his eyes bright.

"It's nothing," Su Feng grinned, showing white teeth, his smile full of weariness and pride. "We spent half the day dealing with that wild boar—it just grazed me, didn't even break the skin. Finally took it down in the end!" He threw the smaller prey he was carrying onto the ground with a dull thud.

"Little Ming, we have enough money for going to town." Su Feng patted his younger brother's shoulder, his voice filled with satisfaction.

Su Ming looked at the two heavy prey on the ground, at the bleeding scrapes and dust on his eldest brother's arm, at the large dark red stains on his second brother's clothes and the sweat still on his forehead—something scalding surged into his eyes.

He didn't cry, just bit his lip hard.

He stepped forward, silently taking the largest river deer from Su Yang's hands, using all his strength to lift it onto his own thin shoulders.

The weight was heavy, almost crushing the breath out of him.

He knew this wasn't just the weight of a river deer.

This was his future, the future his two brothers had fought with all their might to secure for him.

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Chapter 12: I want to go next time too

[1,200 words]

The roe deer on Su Ming's shoulders pressed down until his bones ached, but he didn't retreat a single step.

He could smell the heavy scent of blood and earth coming from the roe deer, mixed with the mountain forest aroma his eldest and second brothers had brought back. This odor rushed into his nostrils, carrying more weight than any words could.

"Hurry, hurry inside!" Mrs. Chen's voice carried a sob as she stepped forward to help, but Su Feng stopped her.

"Mother, we've got this."

Su Feng and Su Yang worked together to drag the two prey animals into the courtyard, the heavy thud of their landing startling half the yard.

"Oh my heavens!" A head popped up from behind the neighboring wall—it was Widow Li from the village.

"Su family's eldest, you... you've hunted wild boars?" Her voice was particularly loud in the quiet night.

Su Shan kept his head down, tapping his tobacco pipe against the doorstep as a form of greeting.

Wang Chuntao had already recovered from her initial worry, now wearing a somewhat proud expression as she declared loudly, "Sister Li, your eyesight is quite sharp. Not just wild boars, but a fat roe deer too!"

Widow Li's eyes instantly lit up like two lanterns. She quickly circled out of her own courtyard gate and approached the Su family's entrance, craning her neck to peer inside.

"Goodness, so big! Su Feng, Su Yang, you two are truly skilled! This means a small fortune for you!" She clicked her tongue in admiration. "Taking these to town tomorrow should fetch quite a bit of money, right?"

"It's for Xiao Ming's travel expenses to register as a Child Scholar in town." Wang Chuntao's words carried a barely noticeable hint of boasting.

At these words, Widow Li's expression became even more animated.

"Child Scholar? Xiao Ming is going to become a Child Scholar? Oh my, this is wonderful news! Our village is going to have a scholar!" She slapped her thigh, getting as excited as if her own son had passed the exam.

Su Ming stood to the side, listening to these words, feeling his face grow warm.

Looking at his eldest and second brothers' exhausted faces, his heart was filled with mixed emotions.

"Alright, alright, it's late at night, stop making so much noise." Mrs. Chen said while anxiously pulling Su Yang aside to check him over, urging, "Chuntao, go quickly and heat some water for them to wash up. There's still warm food in the pot, heat it up for them."

"Understood, Mother." Wang Chuntao responded promptly, turning to enter the kitchen. Soon the whooshing sound of the bellows could be heard.

Su Shan stood up, walked over to the small wild boar, crouched down to carefully examine its wounds, then touched its tusks. After a long moment, he finally uttered, "Well done."

Receiving their father's approval, both Su Feng and Su Yang showed smiles—smiles that carried the relief of having a heavy burden lifted.

The night grew deep.

After washing up, Eldest Brother Su Feng was pulled back to his room by Wang Chuntao. Faint sounds of murmuring conversation and worried complaints could be heard through the door panel.

Su Yang finished bathing, changed into clean old clothes, and was holding a bowl of steaming meat broth, slurping it down noisily.

Mrs. Chen sat right beside him, using the dim oil lamp to apply ointment to the cut on his arm from a tree branch scrape, continuously muttering, "I told you not to go deep into the mountains, but you wouldn't listen. What if you had encountered a black bear..."

Su Yang chuckled, "Mother, Eldest Brother and I knew our limits. That wild boar was cunning—we spent half the afternoon circling around it before finding an opportunity."

Su Ming sat silently on a small stool, watching everything unfold.

During this meal, he had eaten almost nothing.

When everything was finally tidied up, Su Yang yawned but didn't return to his own bed, instead walking straight into Su Ming's room.

"Xiao Ming, I'm sleeping with you tonight." He plopped down onto the earthen bed, patting the space beside him.

Su Ming nodded, took off his outer clothes, and lay down too.

The two brothers lay side by side in the darkness, only able to hear each other's breathing.

"So, what do you think?" Su Yang suddenly spoke up, his voice carrying a hint of pride. "Your second brother is pretty capable, right? Said I'd get you the travel money, and I definitely got it!"

"Mhm." Su Ming squeezed a syllable from his throat.

"You didn't see that wild boar charging at us—it was like a small mountain!" Su Yang grew animated and began gesturing enthusiastically as he described the scene. "Your eldest brother shot an arrow into its hind leg, which really pissed it off. It went crazy and charged straight at us. I was standing there with my firewood knife, thinking, 'This is it, I'm done for today.'"

Su Ming's heart tightened.

"Luckily I reacted quickly and threw myself against that big tree next to me. The beast slammed headfirst into the tree, knocking itself senseless. Your eldest brother took the chance to shoot another arrow..."

Su Yang recounted the story with great excitement, as if telling someone else's adventure.

But Su Ming could hear the life-and-death danger hidden beneath his brother's deliberately casual tone.

"Second Brother," Su Ming turned over to face him, "did it hurt?"

Su Yang's movements stopped.

In the darkness, he remained silent for a moment before saying in a low voice, "Just some scraped skin, what kind of pain is that?"

He continued, "Xiao Ming, you don't know this, but Father actually went to town secretly to ask around. Just to register at the county school, you need to pay fifty copper coins as 'tuition gifts.' Round-trip travel expenses, lodging costs, plus gifts for the teacher—all together, you can't get by without at least one tael of silver."

One tael of silver.

For this family, it was an astronomical amount.

"Eldest Brother and I discussed it—the harvest from the fields is just enough to get by, so selling grain isn't an option. We had no choice but to take our chances in the mountains." Su Yang's voice grew very soft. "Father and Mother are getting older, so this task could only fall to Eldest Brother and me."

Su Ming's nose stung with emotion. He bit his lip hard to keep any sound from escaping.

"Don't overthink it." Su Yang seemed to sense his emotions and reached out to pat his shoulder. His palm was warm and rough. "You're the only one in our family with the talent for studying. Eldest Brother and I were born to work with our strength. If you can pass the Xiucai exam and become an official, then our lives will have been worth it."

"When that time comes, your second brother can also benefit from your success, strutting around town proudly. Let's see who would dare look down on us mountain folk then!"

Su Yang said this and laughed first, his laughter filled with longing.

"Second Brother, next time I want to go too." Su Ming said softly.

"Go to sleep." Su Yang didn't want his younger brother taking risks. He yawned and turned over. "Tomorrow you need to get up early for schoolhouse. Make sure you remember everything Teacher Zhou taught you, don't bring shame to our Su family."

Soon, even snoring sounds filled the room.

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Chapter 13: This business will drag the whole village down with it.

[2,093 words]

Su Yang was completely exhausted, practically falling asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

Su Ming, however, lay awake with his eyes open, staring at the pitch-black ceiling, completely devoid of sleepiness.

Lying beside him was his second brother.

An older brother who, in order to scrape together one tael of silver for him, dared to risk his life against a wild boar.

"I must secure that spot," Su Ming declared in his heart, his voice quiet but firm as molten iron.

"Nonsense, your two brothers almost sacrificed their lives! If you don't get it, I'll be the first to refine you into the ring's artifact spirit!" Lin Yu said irritably. "You need to learn something from this experience!"

"Learn what?"

"Learn the essence of 'laying low!'" Lin Yu's voice was thunderous. "Why did they have to risk their lives? Because they had no other options! They have no skills, no safer channels to earn money! So, once this matter is settled and you return from town, our top priority is to launch the 'Family Poverty Alleviation and Prosperity Drive' Plan Number One!"

"What plan?"

"I need to consider this carefully, but I will absolutely help your family escape poverty and become prosperous," Lin Yu's voice carried a confident, strategic tone.

Su Ming's heart was stirred into activity by Lin Yu's words.

Prosperity? Poverty alleviation?

This notion, like a seed, fell into his heart.

"So," Lin Yu's tone softened, "for now, put away those useless feelings of gratitude and guilt. Your brothers' investment is a 'sunk cost'—it's already been spent. The only thing you can do is ensure this investment yields the maximum return."

"Sleep now, conserve your energy. Starting tomorrow, you need to show Teacher Zhou a 'clumsy uncut jade' who will exhaust every effort to seize this opportunity. Play the part fully, secure the spot. That is the best repayment for your brothers."

Su Ming slowly closed his eyes.

Second Brother's even snoring was right beside his ear, that warm body heat passing through the thin clothing, gradually warming his icy hands and feet.

He clenched his fist.

He knew that from tonight onward, the burdens he carried were different.

As dawn's first light barely touched the sky, the Su family's small courtyard was already stirring.

Not the usual leisurely pace of farm life, but a kind of busyness suppressed with excitement.

Wang Chuntao was packing several black steamed buns into a cloth bag, muttering, "Father, Eldest Brother, eat these on the road, don't go hungry."

Mrs. Chen stood to the side, repeatedly checking the hemp ropes binding the game, afraid the pelts might get damaged on the bumpy road and not fetch a good price.

Su Shan squatted in the center of the yard, taking puffs from his long-stemmed pipe one after another, smoke swirling around him, obscuring his expression.

Su Feng and Su Yang were carefully wiping mud off the wild boar's tusks with a ragged cloth. The small wild boar and the roe deer were placed side-by-side on the flatbed cart, like two silent trophies.

"Father, I want to go with you too," Su Ming walked out of the house, a trace of pleading in his eyes.

Su Shan lifted his eyelids to glance at him, didn't speak, just shook his head.

"Little Ming, don't cause extra trouble," Su Feng straightened up, wiping sweat from his forehead. "The road to town isn't easy; your small frame can't handle the strain. Stay home and properly review your lessons—that's your real task."

Su Yang also chimed in: "Yes, Little Ming, we'll be back before dark. Wait at home for our good news!"

Su Ming looked at them and didn't insist further.

He knew that in this family, everyone had their own battlefield.

His battlefield was in the schoolhouse, in the books. His brothers' battlefield was in the mountains and forests, on the muddy path leading to town.

The creaking sound of the cart faded into the distance. Su Ming stood at the doorway until the three figures disappeared around the bend at the village entrance.

"Master, will they get a good price?"

"Don't know," Lin Yu's voice was lazy. "I'm not a market analyst. But according to the principle of equivalent exchange, one small wild boar plus one adult roe deer should be more than enough to cover the initial investment for your Child Scholar candidacy."

He paused, his tone taking on a teasing note: "What? Afraid they'll lose their shirt?"

Su Ming didn't speak, turned back to his small room, and picked up the already dog-eared "Three Character Classic."

That day, Su Ming was distracted.

Teacher Zhou's lessons sounded vague and indistinct. The provocative looks Zhao Rui threw his way, he ignored completely.

His thoughts, following that creaking cart, had flown dozens of miles away to Qingshi Town.

He imagined his father haggling over prices, imagined his eldest and second brothers carrying the heavy game, imagined the shrewd or mean face of the town butcher shop owner.

Finally, as the sunset glow dyed the sky orange-red, familiar footsteps and cart sounds came from the village entrance.

Su Ming was the first to rush out.

Su Shan walked at the front, his pipe already lit, his steps noticeably lighter than when they'd left.

Su Feng and Su Yang followed behind, one pushing the empty cart, their faces unable to conceal their exhaustion and smiles.

"You're back!" Mrs. Chen and Wang Chuntao also went to greet them.

"How did it go? How much did you get?" Wang Chuntao's voice was the most urgent.

Su Feng grinned, pulled a heavy cloth bag from his chest, and handed it to Su Shan.

Su Shan didn't take it, just gestured with his chin toward Su Ming.

Understanding, Su Feng walked over and stuffed the bag into Su Ming's hand.

"Little Ming, take it. This is yours now."

The bag felt surprisingly heavy in his hand.

Su Ming untied the opening. Inside were two pieces of broken silver and a large string of heavy copper coins, gleaming temptingly in the sunset light.

"That butcher shop manager was fairly honest," Su Yang said excitedly. "He gave eight hundred coppers for the boar, five hundred for the roe deer—thirteen hundred coppers total! That's over one tael of silver!"

One tael of silver!

This number made Mrs. Chen's eyes instantly redden.

Wang Chuntao was even more overjoyed, her voice rising an octave: "Heavens! Over a tael of silver! Now Little Ming's travel expenses to town are absolutely covered!"

Su Ming clutched the bag, his knuckles white from the force.

He could feel that this bag didn't contain cold silver and copper, but his eldest and second brothers' blood and sweat, the hope they had exchanged by risking their lives against wild beasts.

The weight of it burned, making his palms tingle.

That night, Su Ming lay on the heated bed, placed the money pouch by his pillow, and tossed and turned, unable to sleep.

"Feel it?" Lin Yu's voice drifted up. "This is the primitive accumulation of capital. Bloody, violent, full of uncertainty. Your eldest and second brothers were lucky, exchanging their efforts unscathed for one tael of silver. If luck had been bad, what might be lying on that cart now could be them."

Su Ming remained silent.

"One tael of silver, thirteen hundred coppers. Sounds like a lot, right?" Lin Yu's tone became like a shrewd accountant. "But how long can this money last? The tuition gifts for your registration at the county school—fifty coppers; round-trip travel expenses—at least one hundred coppers; lodging and meals in town—even at thirty coppers a day, ten days is three hundred coppers; plus the cost of ink, brushes, paper, inkstones, social expenses and networking... Kid, this one tael of silver will at most let you loiter at the 'newbie village' gates; it won't even buy you a full ticket."

Su Ming's heart sank. He had never calculated so meticulously, always thinking one tael of silver was an astronomical figure. Now, dissected by his master, he realized how inadequate it truly was.

"So, we can't let them risk their lives anymore," Lin Yu's tone turned serious. "This kind of one-off deal carries too high a risk for too low a return. What we need to do is establish a sustainable, low-risk, high-return industry!"

"Industry?" Su Ming was unfamiliar with the term.

"Yes, industry!" Lin Yu's voice took on a grand, strategic quality. "Let me ask you, what do you lack most in your studies?"

"...Paper," Su Ming answered immediately.

The few sheets of hemp paper on his desk were bought by Su Shan gritting his teeth; he used them with extreme frugality.

"Exactly! Paper!" Lin Yu sounded like he'd snapped his fingers. "For scholars, paper is food, it's weaponry! And this stuff—your father knows best how expensive it is in town. We'll go into this business!"

"Paper-making?" Su Ming was so startled he almost sat up. "Master, I... how would we know how to make paper?"

"You know, because I know," Lin Yu said confidently. "That bamboo grove on the back mountain is the best raw material. The plant ash by the river is natural alkali. Once you master the method, even producing the roughest straw paper can be exchanged for strings of copper coins in town!"

Su Ming's breathing grew rapid.

The bamboo on the back mountain, the plant ash by the river—these most ordinary things in his eyes, under his master's description, seemed to transform into a mountain of gold.

But then he cooled down: "Master, no. If our family suddenly knows how to make paper and sells it for money, what will the villagers think? What will the Village Chief think? I understand the principle—'wealth shouldn't be flaunted.' We'd be targeted."

"Teachable, indeed!" Lin Yu exclaimed in admiration. "You haven't been blinded by the mountain of gold; you still consider the risks. Good! The first principle of the 'Laying Low Way' is safety! So of course we can't operate alone!"

"Not alone?"

"Right! How can we hog such a good thing all to ourselves?" Lin Yu's laughter held a cunning edge. "You have to drag the whole village into this with you!"

Su Ming was completely bewildered.

"Listen carefully, here's my plan," Lin Yu's voice lowered, like a military strategist imparting a secret scheme.

"Step one: the source of the technology. You'll say that when you go to town this time, you accidentally found a tattered piece of paper tucked inside an old book while browsing in a bookstore. This reason is untraceable and unverifiable!"

"Step two: disclose the technology publicly. You find your father, then have your father approach the Village Chief. Say that your Su family is willing to offer this formula to lead the entire village to prosperity together!"

Su Ming couldn't help interrupting here: "Give it away? Then wouldn't our efforts be wasted?"

"Silly boy, think long-term!" Lin Yu said, sounding exasperated. "This is called technology equity! Think about it—the formula is ours, the core technology is in our hands. The Village Chief wants reputation, wants achievements—he'll definitely support it. The villagers want to earn money, want work—they'll treat your family like living bodhisattvas!"

"When the time comes, establish a village-run paper-making workshop. The Village Chief acts as general manager, responsible for external sales and handling trouble. The villagers provide labor—cutting bamboo, burning lime—earning hard-work money. And your Su family, as the technology provider, doesn't need to do anything, just sit back and collect a share!"

"A... share of what?" Su Ming felt his heartbeat accelerating.

"Thirty percent! Not a single percent less!" Lin Yu stated decisively. "You must tell your father, this is the bottom line! We're providing the pot that lets the whole village eat their fill; taking thirty percent of the broth is perfectly justified! The Village Chief takes twenty

percent as compensation for management and risk-bearing. The remaining fifty percent is distributed among the villagers who contribute labor. No one can find fault with this distribution plan!"

Lin Yu's voice was magical, sketching a grand blueprint in Su Ming's mind.

"Imagine that scene. Your rival Zhao Rui—his father Zhao Dequan, for the sake of the workshop's business, not only can't cause you trouble, but has to treat you like a treasure, afraid you, the 'Technical Director,' might quit."

"The uncles and aunts in the village, when they see you, won't call you 'that bookworm from the Su family' anymore, but 'the Literary Star who brought us wealth.'"

"Your family will become the core of the entire Su Family Village. This is called transferring risk to the collective, binding interests and people's hearts to yourself! This is the ultimate secret of the 'Laying Low Way'—the safest fortress is to make yourself the interest community of everyone!"

Su Ming lay in the darkness, his eyes frighteningly bright.

He could almost see the bamboo grove on the back mountain not as bamboo anymore, but as rows of wealth waiting to be harvested.

The money pouch in his hand was no longer just travel expenses to town, but the first stepping stone to launch this enormous plan.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 14: This Uncut Jade Seems a Little Off

[1,071 words]

Morning mist had not yet cleared when Su Ming stepped through the dew toward the schoolhouse, the edge of his worn cloth shoes fraying a little more. Master Lin Yu's "earnest counsel" still echoed in his mind.

"Remember your persona: poor family background, average talent, but suddenly awakened, determined to be the hardworking, slow-but-steady kid. Your eyes must look pure, your answers sincere, even the sting of poverty on you must radiate the glow of striving. If you play this part well today, the spot is yours; if you botch it, all is lost. Understand?"

Su Ming didn't reply. He only gripped the corner-worn Analects in his arms a little tighter.

The atmosphere in the schoolhouse was heavier than usual. Even the most restless kid, the one nicknamed Monkey, held a book, but kept glancing toward the door and at Teacher Zhou who sat upright.

Everyone knew the moment had come to decide who would go to town to compete for the Child Scholar exam spots.

Zhao Rui sat in the front row, wearing a brand-new indigo tunic, his hair slicked properly with hair oil. He lifted his chin slightly, a smile of confident entitlement at his mouth, as if the spot was already his to claim.

When he saw Su Ming enter, his gaze swept over Su Ming's faded clothing and scuffed shoes. He snorted, not loud but perfectly audible: "Tch, some people just can't see their place. Think a little grit will flip their fate? They don't even see if they're made of the right stuff."

A few students who usually followed his lead let out low, muffled laughs.

Su Ming's step faltered; his knuckles went pale.

"Ignore him." Lin Yu's voice sounded lazy and drawling, "Your stage isn't here, it's up there." He was pointing at the empty space in front of Teacher Zhou.

Su Ming lowered his eyes, took his seat, and took out his book, pretending not to have heard. That silent defiance hit Zhao Rui like a fist on cotton; his face tightened.

"Quiet." Teacher Zhou tapped the ruler on the desk, then swept a calm gaze across the room, lingering slightly on Su Ming and Zhao Rui.

"Only two spots are available for the town exam." Teacher Zhou spoke slowly and clearly, "This will affect your future. We will not test recitation or dictation today; I'll ask one question."

He turned and wrote two strong characters on the dark wooden board behind him with white chalk—

Why.

"Why study?" Teacher Zhou set down the chalk, his eyes steady, "Come forward one by one, write your answers on the board, and recite them to everyone. No word limit, speak from the heart."

"Zhao Rui, you first."

Zhao Rui straightened, smoothed his collar, strode forward, and after a brief hesitation put pen to board. His handwriting showed some skill: composed structure, clear strokes.

“To study is to seek clarity, to learn propriety and righteousness, to understand changes through time, to bring honor to the family and not disappoint one’s parents’ hopes.” He read aloud, voice resonant, carrying obvious confidence.

A few approving sounds came from below. The answer was steady, unimpeachable, and very much the straightforward ambition of many scholars.

Teacher Zhou gave a slight nod, neither approving nor dismissive. “Mm, you may step down.”

Zhao Rui glanced with pride at Su Ming and returned to his seat.

One by one, the other students went up.

“My father says studying will exempt you from corvée...”

“My mother says if I study I can go to the city and be an accountant, not work the fields...”

“If I study... I can eat full meals...”

Answers were all sorts of things, honest and sometimes comical, and the atmosphere in the schoolhouse lightened a bit.

Finally, Teacher Zhou called the last name.

“Su Ming.”

Su Ming rose and walked to the board. He did not start writing immediately. He closed his eyes.

Flashes ran through his mind: Eldest Brother Su Feng silently wiping his hunting knife, the ugly old scar on his forearm; Second Brother Su Yang shouldering firewood, a fresh blood scratch across his sweat-damp back from a branch; his father at night on the threshold, puffing dry tobacco, his face carved by worry and hardship by firelight; his mother touching the one, two, three coins they’d gotten from selling a wild boar, equal parts joy and fear, secretly dabbing at her tears.

That money was heavy, pressing pain against his chest.

He opened his eyes, inhaled deeply, and began to write. His handwriting remained crooked, even clumsy from pressing too hard, yet every stroke carried a fierce determination.

He wrote only a few lines.

When he finished, he set down the pen, turned to face everyone, his cheeks a little flushed but his eyes unusually clear as he looked straight at Teacher Zhou.

“I study,” his voice low, a young hoarseness to it, yet it cut clearly into every ear, “so that my eldest brother and second brother won’t have to risk their lives in the mountains anymore.”

The schoolhouse fell silent at once.

Silence so complete you could hear a pin drop.

The kids who had been laughing moments ago were stunned. They might not understand bringing honor to the family, but they knew wild boars bite, they knew parents worry, they knew how heavy the word steady could be.

The smile on Zhao Rui’s face froze; his mouth opened but any mockery felt suddenly cruel and hollow. He could feel the eyes around him shifting oddly.

“Perfect!” Lin Yu cheered in Su Ming’s head, “True feeling, straight to the heart! That sealed it!”

Teacher Zhou leaned forward slightly, his hand on the lesson plan, knuckles whitening. He had taught for many years and heard all sorts of answers, grand or pragmatic, but never had an answer, spoken in such plain language by such a frail boy, felt so heavy and so burning.

This was no longer an abstract goal; it was a real future a boy was trying to shoulder for his family, perhaps for the whole village.

After a long moment, Teacher Zhou exhaled heavily. He rose, walked up to Su Ming, and his penetrating gaze rested on the boy’s face for a long time, as if relearning him.

In the end he did not offer praise in words. He reached out with his broad, rough palm and slapped Su Ming’s thin shoulder three times, each smack measured and firm.

Each one felt like a silent entrustment.

He returned to his desk. His voice regained its calm, but carried an undeniable authority that spread through the schoolhouse:

“The two spots for the Qingshi Town exam are decided—Su Ming and Zhao Rui.”

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 15: The Old Fox

[1,656 words]

When Teacher Zhou finished speaking, his words landed like a stone thrown into a calm pond, sending out a thousand ripples.

Inside the schoolhouse, the children's expressions were a spectacle. Some were shocked, some puzzled, some jealous, but most were simply bewildered.

They couldn't understand how Su Ming's few blunt, homespun sentences could be put on the same level as Zhao Rui's grand-sounding words, and even seemed to have the upper hand.

Zhao Rui's face shifted from the color of pig liver to deathly pale, then swelled into a bluish-purple. He felt Teacher Zhou's phrase "I'll award it to Su Ming and Zhao Rui" was not an announcement but a verdict.

A verdict of his failure.

The literary talent he prided himself on looked so pale and powerless compared to Su Ming's words, which smelled of blood and soil—a joke.

"Class dismissed." Teacher Zhou tapped the ruler, and did not add another word.

The students left one after another. As they passed Su Ming, their gazes grew complicated.

Zhao Rui let out a haughty snort through his teeth, shoved Su Ming hard in the shoulder, and strode off.

"Alright, alright, don't stare, they'll be gone soon." Lin Yu yawned in Su Ming's head.

"Su Ming, stay behind." Teacher Zhou's voice came again.

Su Ming stepped to the desk, bowed respectfully and saluted, "Teacher."

Teacher Zhou looked at him with approval, with sentiment, and with a faint, hard-to-notice worry. He took a booklet from his book chest.

The booklet wasn't thick. Its cover was yellowed coarse hemp paper, stitched with thin hemp thread, the corners worn—clearly handled countless times by its owner.

"This is the Thousand Character Classic." Teacher Zhou handed the booklet to Su Ming, "I copied it by hand when I was young, and I added some of my annotations."

Su Ming received it with both hands. The booklet felt warm, carrying a faint scent of ink and the weight of years.

"Teacher, this is too precious..."

"Take it." Teacher Zhou waved a hand, "Your literacy is shallow, your foundation unstable. In town, even in the county, there will be plenty of people smarter and better-off than you. What you said was very good—its merit is in being 'true', in being 'real'. But remember, there are many people who prefer pretty words. Your path is going to be much harder than Zhao Rui's."

"Student remembers."

"Go, study well these few days. Do not disappoint your brothers' hard efforts, and do not... disappoint the heart within you."

Su Ming cradled the Thousand Character Classic, bowed deeply, and left the schoolhouse.

Lin Yu's voice thrilled, "This old teacher truly favors you! This hand-copied volume is worth more than ten taels of silver!"

By the time Su Ming returned home, the news had flown through the whole village like it had grown wings.

In the courtyard, Mrs. Chen and Wang Chuntao were surrounded by a group of women, led by Widow Li, the village's mobile gossip hub.

"Oh, Sister Chuntao, I told you, your Xiaoming is the Literary Star descended to earth! Now he'll become a Child Scholar!"

"Yes, yes, when he becomes an official, don't forget us villagers!"

Wang Chuntao stood straighter than ever, her smile impossible to hide, while she modestly said, "Oh, nonsense, it's not even started yet; he's just going to see the world a bit."

Su Shan squatted on the threshold, the pipe smoke from his tobacco blinking in little bursts. The faint smile at the corner of his mouth was more genuine than usual.

Su Yang and Su Feng grinned widely, stupidly happy.

When they saw Su Ming return, the courtyard's mood reached its peak.

"Xiao Ming is back!"

The commotion made Su Ming a little awkward. He hugged the Thousand Character Classic and greeted everyone in turn.

At that moment, a strong, full-voiced call came from the gate.

"Brother Su, at home?"

Everyone turned and froze. The visitor wore a silk shirt, his belly neither large nor small, his face bearing a friendly smile—Village Chief Zhao Dequan.

Behind him trailed a sulking Zhao Rui.

The courtyard conversation fell silent. The villagers politely said hello and dispersed.

Su Shan quickly stood, patted his chest, and rushed to greet them, "Village Chief, what wind has brought you here? Come, sit in the house!"

"No, no." Zhao Dequan waved, his gaze landing directly on Su Ming, as if appraising a newly unearthed porcelain.

"I'm here to offer congratulations." Zhao Dequan said with a chuckle, "Su Ming, that child has promise! I heard my son tell me about what he said at the schoolhouse—well said! It touched the hearts of us farmers! Filial, steady! This is how a scholar should behave!"

His string of praise left the entire Su household dumbfounded.

Su Shan and Mrs. Chen didn't know what to do with their hands, only managing to keep saying, "Village Chief, you flatter us."

Zhao Dequan tugged his son closer by the shoulder and, addressing Su Ming, said, "Su Ming, look, my boy was spoiled by us since childhood. He recited a few dead texts and doesn't know his place. The road to town is long and as his father I'm really uneasy. You're steadier and more sensible than he is. On the journey, I ask you to bear with him, to look after him."

At these words even Su Yang's eyes widened.

Ask Su Ming to look after Zhao Rui? The sun must have risen in the west.

Zhao Rui's face flushed bright red, ready to retort, but his father shot him a glare that quieted him.

Zhao Dequan pulled a small pouch from his pocket and thrust it into Su Ming's hand, "One hundred wen here. Not much—consider it this elder's gift to buy you two tea along the road. Don't refuse, or you'll be insulting me the Village Chief."

Su Ming held the pouch and it felt hot in his hand.

"Accept it!" Lin Yu's voice decisively rang in his head, "Not accepting would be a public slap in his face. Take it, smile! Yes, that simple, honest, slightly overwhelmed expression—hold on to that!"

"Th—this is too much, Village Chief..." Su Ming stammered.

"Do accept!" Zhao Dequan didn't wait for objections; he pushed the pouch into Su Ming's bosom and patted his shoulder, "It's settled! On the journey, you two must be like brothers and support each other! I must go now, I still need to check the fields."

With that he pulled the humiliated-looking Zhao Rui and left, briskly, not giving the Su family time to respond.

Once the father and son disappeared through the gate, the Su family came back to themselves.

"What was that about?" Su Yang couldn't help but blurt, scratching his head.

Only Su Shan, smoking in silence, after a long time, exhaled, "He's buying favor for our family."

"Father's right." Lin Yu analyzed in Su Ming's head, "That old fox is a hundred times smarter than his son. He knows you've made a name for yourself with Teacher Zhou and the villagers."

"He sent money and publicly 'bound' you two as brothers. It's an investment. If his son fails, and you succeed, he can always pull out today's good deed as leverage. If something happens on the road, or his son gets into trouble, he can say, 'I entrusted my son to Su Ming's care,' and wash his hands of responsibility."

"That one hundred wen is not for tea. It's your liability insurance. Welcome to the adult world, kid."

Su Ming lowered his head and looked at the little pouch. For the first time he felt how many curved paths and hidden meanings there could be in human interactions.

That night, the Su household packed Su Ming's things.

Mrs. Chen dug out the best patch-free old garment, folded it again and again, and put it in the bundle. She baked ten dry, hard loaves of black bread and wrapped them in oiled paper.

"Save these for the road, town food is expensive." She fussed as she packed, her eyes rimmed red.

Su Shan handed Su Ming a cloth bag containing a bit of silver and said only two things.

"Keep the money safe, don't show it off."

"When you reach town, first find Teacher Zhou's friend and follow his arrangements."

Eldest brother Su Feng was taciturn, merely checking Su Ming's shoes. Finding a few loose stitches, he threaded a needle and clumsily repaired them by lamplight.

Late at night, Su Yang quietly slipped into Su Ming's room.

He pressed a small knife into Su Ming's hand. The sheath was wooden, the handle wrapped with hemp cord, polished shiny from wear.

"Second brother, this is..."

"Take it." Su Yang lowered his voice, "It's the skinning knife Father used for hunting. I sharpened it. Keep it on you for protection."

He hesitated, then his gaze turned solemn, "Remember, it's not for seeking trouble. It's to give you the confidence to stab if someone tries to harm you. We don't bully others, but we mustn't be bullied."

Su Ming took the cool-iron knife and gripped it tightly.

He knew this bundle held his mother's care, his father's instructions, his elder brother's meticulousness, and his second brother's protection.

This was everything his family had prepared for him.

At dawn the next day, the path outside the Su yard was already filled with people.

Su Ming shouldered his modest bundle and bowed deeply to his family.

"Father, Mother, Big Brother, Sister-in-law, Second Brother, I'm leaving."

"Be careful on the road!" Mrs. Chen couldn't hold back and wiped her eyes.

Su Shan puffed his tobacco, the smoke blurring his face.

Su Ming turned and walked step by step toward the village entrance.

Under the old locust tree a cart hitched to a mule waited.

Zhao Rui sat impatiently on the cart. Seeing Su Ming approach alone, a sneer of superiority flickered across his face.

Su Ming ignored him and stopped a few paces from the cart.

"Hmph, country bumpkin, can't even hire a cart." Zhao Rui muttered under his breath.

Su Ming looked up at the winding mountain road in the distance, then glanced back at the figures at the village entrance that were already blurring.

"We're off." Lin Yu's voice sounded in his head with a touch of schadenfreude, "'Newbie village babysitting mission' officially begins. Mission objective: protect our 'giant-baby ADC', ensure safe arrival at Qingshi Town. Mission reward: unknown. Mission penalty: unknown."

"Good luck, young man."

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 16: The First Lesson in Social Practice

[1,588 words]

The mule cart creaked and jolted over the stone-strewn dirt road, kicking up a cloud of yellow dust.

Zhao Rui sat on a soft cushion, still feeling uncomfortable all over. He lifted the cart curtain and looked at Su Ming walking silently by the roadside, a mocking smile curling his lips.

"Hey, Su Ming, are your legs made of iron? We've been walking almost an hour, aren't you tired?"

Su Ming didn't turn his head, answering calmly, "I'm fine."

“What good is saving a few coins on carriage fare? By the time we reach town, you’ll be worn out, how will you study then?” Zhao Rui’s voice dripped with superiority. “Not like me. I conserve my energy, so I’ll be full of vigor when we get to town.”

The driver was an old man in his fifties, surname Qian, hired by Zhao Dequan from the neighboring village. He kept his head down and drove, ignoring the boys’ conversation, the wrinkles on his face deeper than the ruts in the road.

“So far, your choice seems right. Look at that Zhao Rui, like a peacock spreading its tail, afraid no one will notice his bright feathers,” Lin Yu observed calmly.

Just as the mule cart turned a mountain bend, several people suddenly appeared in the middle of the road.

Five burly men blocked their path, chests exposed and darkened. They carried all kinds of weapons—machetes, wooden clubs, and even a rusty firewood knife.

The leader had a scar running from his eye to the corner of his mouth; when he grinned, the scar crawled like a living centipede.

Old Qian’s face drained white in an instant; he could no longer grip the whip, and his hands trembled as he halted the mule.

Zhao Rui inside the cart hadn’t grasped the situation yet, and peered out impatiently. “Old Qian, why aren’t you moving? Stop dawdling!”

When he leaned out, his gaze met the malicious eyes of the scar-faced man.

Zhao Rui’s face turned as white as Old Qian’s.

“G—good sirs, what—what is the meaning of this?” Old Qian asked in a trembling voice.

The scar-faced man hoisted his machete, strolled forward, and tapped the cart pole with the blade’s flat. “Nothing special. This road? My brothers and I just fixed it up, filled all the holes. If you want to pass, you owe us some hard-earned money, right?”

“Toll for fixing the road?” Zhao Rui heard clearly from inside the cart, and anger flared in his chest.

He had always been the village bully; he had never suffered such humiliation. He figured these men were common thugs looking to extort money.

“‘Giant Baby ADC’ is getting emotional, showing signs of initiating a group attack! Su Ming, hold him back! Don’t let him speak!” Lin Yu fretted, practically about to combust.

But it was already too late.

Zhao Rui whipped the cart curtain aside, leaped down, his calves trembling but his bravado fully on display.

“Do you know who I am? My father is the village chief of Su Family Village, Zhao Dequan! If you dare touch me, aren’t you afraid my father will report you and have you thrown in jail?”

At those words, the air froze.

Old Qian closed his eyes in despair.

Su Ming’s heart sank to the bottom of his stomach.

The scar-faced man paused, then exchanged glances with his brothers and burst into a thunderous, mocking laugh.

“Hahahaha! Village chief? How terrifying!” the scar-faced man laughed until he seemed to cry. “Brothers, today we’re lucky—we’ve hit a big fish! The son of the village chief!”

“The village chief’s son must be loaded!”

“Strip him and see if the village chief’s child has gold trim!”

The mountain bandits laughed uproariously. The way they looked at Zhao Rui was like looking at a lamb already skinned and cleaned, ready for the pot.

Lin Yu calmly instructed, “Disciple, maintain your poor identity. You’re safer than Zhao Rui now. If anything happens to Zhao Rui, run into the forest immediately.”

Zhao Rui’s face drained of all color. He finally realized that the identity he had boasted about was not a talisman here, but a death sentence.

“What...what do you want?” His voice shook desperately.

“We don’t want anything.” The scar-faced man’s smile vanished; his eyes went cold. “Originally, we’d have been satisfied with eighty or a hundred wen as tea money, get friendly, and move on. But you had to use your village chief father to press down on us.”

He stretched out a big hand like a palm fan, grabbed Zhao Rui by the collar, and hoisted him up.

“I hate people like you the most, always pressing others with your status!”

“Unload this cart! Everything down!”

Two bandits rushed forward, roughly tossing luggage, cushions, and provisions from the cart onto the ground.

Zhao Rui's ornate case holding brushes, ink, paper, and inkstone was kicked open; its contents were scattered everywhere.

"There's...money in my bosom..." Zhao Rui wailed, trembling as he pulled out a heavy pouch.

One bandit snatched it, hefted it, and counted through it with bright eyes. "Big brother! Not small! Three or four hundred wen!"

"Search him! Search carefully!" the scar-faced man ordered.

Soon, the purse Zhao Dequan had tucked in for him and the few silver pieces he had hidden in his shoe were all produced.

Two bandits forced Zhao Rui to the ground; his cotton robe was torn to shreds, and he looked as miserable as a beaten rooster.

Throughout, Su Ming stood rooted in place, motionless.

He bowed his head, both hands clenching his little bundle, his body trembling slightly, his eyes filled with fear—perfectly playing the part of a frightened, impoverished youth.

But his hand was always on the skinning knife his Second Brother had given him, hidden in the bundle.

The knife's cold handle steadied the blood hot in his veins.

He knew that rushing in now would only add another corpse to the tally.

"Lie low. Let him be. The wind brushes the ridge while the strong do as they will; the bright moon shines on the great river while the wicked act as they please," Lin Yu's voice hummed in his head like a lullaby. "Your money is your family's hard-earned sweat and future investment. Zhao Rui's money is his father's—money meant to buy lessons. They're different in nature and value; don't confuse them."

The scar-faced man's gaze finally landed on Su Ming.

He appraised Su Ming from head to toe—his laundry-faded old clothes, the frayed cloth shoes, and the pitiful little bundle.

"Come over here."

Su Ming stiffened, slowly lifting his head and looking at him with a timid expression.

He shuffled over.

“What’s in the bundle?” the scar-faced man asked.

“Uh...just some hard black wheat buns, and...two old sets of clothes to change into,” Su Ming’s voice was thin as a mosquito’s, trembling with fear.

“Open it. Let me see.”

Su Ming’s hands shook harder as he untied the bundle, revealing dry, hard black wheat buns wrapped in oiled paper.

A bandit reached in and rummaged; aside from a few patched-up clothes, there was nothing else.

“Big brother, just a poor bastard,” the bandit sneered with disgust.

The scar-faced man frowned and looked at Su Ming again.

He saw Su Ming’s eyes.

They held fear and nervousness, but deep within them was an odd calm, like an ancient well that ran deep under a storm.

This wasn’t the look of a stunned child.

The scar-faced man’s chest gave a sudden, inexplicable jolt.

He’d been on this road for over ten years, seen many desperate men, and killed more than one. He had a beastlike instinct.

This shabby kid, unremarkable as he seemed, gave him a faint, indescribable sense of danger.

Like a snake hidden in the grass.

Leave it alone, and nothing happens; move, and someone dies.

“Forget it,” the scar-faced man waved, irritation flaring for no reason. “A penniless kid—what could he have? Bad luck!”

“Let’s go!”

He shot one last vicious glare at Zhao Rui sprawled on the ground, hoisted the stolen goods with his men, and strode off.

Only after the group disappeared over the next ridge did the world regain its deathlike silence.

All that remained were the mule's anxious whinnies and Zhao Rui's uncontrollable sobs.

Old Qian slumped to the ground, gasping for breath as if pulled from the water.

Su Ming slowly loosened his grip on the knife handle; his palms were slick with cold sweat.

"Crisis resolved. This social practice class is a success," Lin Yu breathed out. "Disciple, you applied the core 'survival' principle—being poor is the best shield—perfectly avoiding all risk. Class rating: excellent."

Listening to his master's summary, Su Ming walked over to Zhao Rui and, seeing him with his face smeared with snot and tears, felt no schadenfreude.

He bent down and quietly picked up the scattered books and brushes, one by one, putting them back into the torn case.

Zhao Rui lifted his head and stared at Su Ming with bewilderment, humiliation, and an undefinable complex mixture of emotions.

He couldn't fathom why those brutal bandits had taken everything from him yet left this poorer bumpkin untouched.

"Don't...don't touch my things!" he suddenly screamed, shoving Su Ming away. He crawled on the ground and clutched the books to his chest like a madman.

Su Ming stumbled but didn't get angry; he only watched quietly.

After a long while, Zhao Rui's cries gradually quieted.

He sat on the cold ground, clutching the tattered case like a child abandoned by the world.

Old Qian recovered himself and looked at the ruined mess and the emptied mule cart, grief tearing at him.

"What...what should we do now...how will I report this to the village chief..."

Su Ming walked over to Old Qian, took two black wheat buns from his bundle, and handed one over.

"Old Qian, eat something."

Old Qian took the hard bun dumbfounded, staring at Su Ming's calm face. His mouth opened but no words came out.

Su Ming took one bun himself and ate small bites.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 17: First Steps into Qing Shi

[1,397 words]

The black wheat bun was dry and hard, scraping his throat until it ached.

Su Ming nibbled at it in small bites, like a squirrel stashing food for winter; every motion showed how precious it was to him.

The remaining road felt so stifled the atmosphere could be wrung dry.

Zhao Rui hunched on the cart board, covering his head with a ragged coat, saying nothing. He looked like a plucked rooster that could no longer fluff up.

Old Qian's whip arm had lost much of its strength; he kept glancing back at the empty cart bed and letting out long sighs.

Only the mule still trod tirelessly, the creaking wheels the lone soundtrack of the journey.

Su Ming swallowed the last bite of bun, drank some of the slightly cool water from his waterskin, and turned his gaze to the distance.

At the edge of the horizon, a faint blue-gray line appeared.

As the mule cart drew closer, that line thickened and rose, until it resolved into an imposing city wall.

The wall was built from massive bluestone blocks, each stone mottled and weathered by wind and rain, like the wrinkles on the face of a taciturn old soldier.

"Arriving at the Newcomer Village main city—Qingshi Town," Lin Yu's voice carried a flicker of interest.

The mule cart stopped at the end of the line before the city gate.

People and vehicles entering the city formed a long serpent: farmers pushing wheelbarrows of vegetables, itinerant merchants carrying crates, and several ornate carriages with curtains tightly drawn, giving off an air of aristocratic unapproachability.

It was the first time Su Ming had seen so many people.

A jumble of sounds poured into his ears like boiling porridge: hawking cries, bargaining voices, the lowing and snorting of oxen and horses, the rumble of wheels...

A complex smell hung in the air: livestock dung, the sour stench of sweat, and an indistinct tantalizing aroma of food drifting from the city.

All of it excited and at the same time instinctively tensed his body.

He reflexively pressed his hand against his chest, where one or two or three qian of silver were hidden, and that cold skinning knife.

That was all the courage he had.

“Don’t be nervous, relax,” Lin Yu soothed. “What you need to do now is observe and learn. Watch their clothes, listen to their accents, analyze their identities. This is a real world, far more vivid than anything in your books.”

When it was their turn to enter, a sallow-faced city guard sauntered over and prodded the cart board with the spear in his hand.

“Where from? What business in the city?”

Old Qian hurriedly fumbled out a few copper coins and, wearing a smile, handed them over. “Captain, they’re from Su Family Village, bringing two young gentlemen into town to seek schooling.”

The city guard weighed the coins, then glanced at the two boys on the cart.

His eyes fell first on the disheveled, listless Zhao Rui, then at the raggedly dressed Su Ming, and a trace of contempt crossed his face.

“Seeking schooling? Looking like this?” He scoffed, waving his hand. “Move along, move along! Don’t block the way!”

Zhao Rui’s body twitched; the coat slipped from his head, revealing a face flushed bright, but he did not jump up to argue as he used to.

A bandit’s blade is far sharper than a city guard’s mockery.

The mule cart creaked through the gate.

Darkness fell for a moment, then the scene burst into light.

Qingshi Town revealed itself before Su Ming without reservation.

Wide streets were likewise laid with enormous bluestone slabs, polished smooth and shining by the years. Lining the roads were row upon row of shops.

Restaurants, teahouses, cloth shops, rice stores, pawnshops... signs of all kinds swayed in the breeze.

People jostled shoulder to shoulder, neatly dressed. Men wore silk shirts, women sported silver hairpins; even the children wore brand-new cloth and chased each other through the crowds.

The prosperity made Su Ming feel as if he'd stepped into a surreal dream.

He had never seen such tall buildings, such bright fabrics, nor smelled such enticing steamed meat bun fragrance.

He stood at the roadside like a small weed uprooted from rural soil and suddenly planted into a wealthy flowerpot, utterly out of place.

"Disciple, tuck away that country-bumpkin look! Yes, exactly like that, keep your head down, watch the road. Show a little humility and timidity—it's in line with your current persona."

Zhao Rui jumped down from the mule cart as well.

The moment his foot hit the familiar bluestone, the confidence that came from being the Village Chief's son seemed to return a little.

He straightened his torn clothes, lifted his chin, and resumed that haughty posture.

Seeing Su Ming's "dumbfounded" expression, the resentment inside him finally found an outlet.

"Hmph, peasant!" Zhao Rui's voice was low but full of deliberate disdain. "Eyes all wide? Never seen anything before? This is Qingshi Town!"

Su Ming only silently withdrew his gaze, making no reply.

His silence, to Zhao Rui, was assent—a sign of inferiority.

“Don’t you dare talk nonsense when you meet my aunt, or you’ll embarrass my father!” Zhao Rui grew more animated, as if loud boasting could wash away the humiliation of the road. “My aunt handles the records at the county academy; she manages the student registrations for the whole town. Whether you can be registered as a Child Scholar depends on her good graces!”

Old Qian drove the cart to a designated carriage depot, then led the two through a maze of alleys.

Su Ming walked and silently committed the route to memory.

His mind was a dry sponge, greedily absorbing everything around him: which shop clerks looked most alert, which alley reeked the worst, which beggar in the corner seemed the most dangerous...

When they passed an herbalist’s shop, his steps suddenly paused.

A bamboo plaque outside the medicine shop displayed various herbs drying in the sun.

“Stop.” Lin Yu’s voice turned suddenly serious. “Look at the plaque on the left, third row—see the plant that looks like dry grass with blackened roots?”

Su Ming scanned it.

It was an unremarkable withered weed: yellowed leaves, shriveled roots, mixed among higher-quality herbs as if tossed in casually.

“This is ‘hei jie cao’,” Lin Yu said, a hardly noticeable excitement in his tone. “It’s worthless on its own, a poor herb for feeding livestock. But look closely at its root—doesn’t it have a faint ring of silver veining that other hei jie cao lack?”

Su Ming focused and indeed saw, on that shriveled black root, a hair-thin circle of silver lines that was barely visible in the sun.

“This is a mutated specimen subtly nourished by residual spiritual energy! The spirit energy content is negligible, but it proves one thing!”

“Near Qingshi Town there must be a spiritual energy node! Even if it’s a nearly exhausted micro-node!”

Lin Yu’s voice was like Columbus discovering a new world: “This is a clue! It’s the spark of hope for our ‘spiritual energy prospecting project’! Boy, remember this medicine shop, remember what that plant looks like! This is our first major breakthrough!”

Su Ming’s heart thudded wildly in response.

“What are you gawking at? A pile of rotten grass—what’s so interesting?” Zhao Rui snapped impatiently and shoved him aside. “Move on! Dawdling country bumpkins are country bumpkins, you don’t even know herbs!”

He cast a contemptuous look at the cheap herbs at the medicine shop entrance.

Su Ming straightened after the shove but felt no anger. He glanced back at the shop named “Hui Chun Hall” and etched its location into his mind.

After winding through a few more alleys, Old Qian stopped before an imposing residence.

A vermilion wooden door stood between two stone lions, and a plaque above the lintel read “Zhou Residence.”

Zhao Rui immediately straightened, and then stamped the door knocker with a loud “bang bang bang.”

“Who is it?” came an impatient voice from inside.

After a moment, a side door creaked open and a footman in a green cap peered out, rubbing sleep from his eyes as he surveyed them.

When he saw the tattered Zhao Rui and Su Ming, and Old Qian beside them, his brow immediately furrowed.

“Beggars, move along! This is the Zhou Residence, not a charity!” the footman waved irritably, about to close the door.

“Impertinent!” Zhao Rui’s face flushed dark. “Open your dog eyes and see who I am! My aunt is the second madam of your house! Go inform them at once and tell them Zhao Rui from Su Family Village is here!”

The footman hesitated, reexamining Zhao Rui with suspicion.

“Su Family Village? Zhao Rui?” he sneered. “Wait here.”

With that he slammed the door shut with a bang.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 18: The Zhou Residence's Show of Power

[1,643 words]

The door slammed shut right in front of them, the gust of air it created ruffling the disheveled hair on Zhao Rui's forehead.

The purplish-red flush hadn't even fully receded from his face before a new layer of humiliated fury painted it a sickly green.

"Snobbish bastards who judge people by their appearance!" Zhao Rui cursed under his breath at the tightly shut wooden door, though his voice lacked any real conviction.

Old Qian stood to the side, wringing his hands, his expression uglier than if he were crying.

Su Ming stood quietly, his eyelids lowered, as if everything that had just happened had nothing to do with him.

The sun slowly moved from the eaves in the east directly overhead.

The stone lions flanking the entrance grew hot under the sun. Occasionally, servants dressed in decent clothes would enter or exit through a side gate nearby. Spotting the three "country bumpkins" standing at the main entrance, they would cast looks of disdain or curiosity before deliberately walking around them.

Zhao Rui's emotions shifted from initial rage, to restless anxiety, and then to unease. He paced incessantly, like a wild beast trapped in a cage.

Outside the gate was the dusty reality; inside was the glamorous, respectable home of the relatives he had fantasized about.

"*Creeeak—*"

That side gate finally opened again.

It was the same servant in the blue clothes and small cap. He sauntered out, his face wearing undisguised mockery.

"Follow me." He snorted through his nose, turned, and walked inside without even bothering to give them a proper look.

He didn't lead them along the wide, smooth main path. Instead, he guided them onto a narrow, crushed-gravel service path meant for servants.

The path was very narrow, bordered on one side by a high courtyard wall and on the other by the rear walls of various compounds.

Through gaps in the foliage, Su Ming could catch glimpses of the exquisite pavilions, terraces, and towers within the main courtyards and hear the faint sounds of laughter and conversation drifting from within. It all seemed so distant.

After traversing the long service path and rounding a corner piled with miscellaneous items, the servant stopped before a small courtyard that looked particularly remote and desolate.

This courtyard wasn't much larger than Su Ming's own home courtyard. A few sickly, crooked-neck trees grew within, making it appear bleak and oppressive.

"Second Madam, your nephew is here," the servant called towards the house, his voice dripping with perfunctoriness.

The door curtain was lifted, and a woman emerged. She wore a slightly worn sapphire-blue robe, with only a single silver hairpin in her hair.

She appeared to be in her thirties, her face somewhat haggard. Seeing the three disheveled figures in her courtyard, especially taking in Zhao Rui's bruised, swollen face and tattered clothes, her eyebrows immediately knitted tightly together.

"Rui'er? You... how did you end up in such a state?"

This woman was precisely Zhao Rui's paternal aunt, the wife of the Second Branch of the Zhou family, Zhao Chunlan.

"Aunt!" Seeing a familiar relative, Zhao Rui's nose stung with sudden emotion. All his grievances surged up, and his eyes instantly reddened. "We... we were ambushed by mountain bandits on the road!"

Zhao Chunlan's face changed color. She hurried over, pulling Zhao Rui to check if he was injured, and asked in a hushed, urgent voice, "The money? The belongings? Were they all lost?"

"They... they were all robbed," Zhao Rui's voice dropped low.

Zhao Chunlan's face instantly turned deathly pale.

Just then, the curtain of the main room was lifted again, and a middle-aged man with a goatee, dressed in scholar's robes, walked out.

He was tall and thin, with a slightly sallow complexion. His eyes held the scrutinizing arrogance of someone long accustomed to a position of authority.

"All this racket and commotion, what kind of propriety is this!" The man's opening words seemed to make the air in the courtyard grow several degrees colder.

This man was precisely Zhao Chunlan's husband, Zhou Kang, who served as a Record Keeper at the County School.

Zhou Kang's gaze swept over Old Qian and Su Ming. The look in his eyes was as if he were viewing two piles of annoying rubbish. Finally, his eyes landed on Zhao Rui, and his frown deepened.

"You are Zhao Dequan's son?" he asked, his tone flat yet exuding a condescending aloofness.

"Yes, Uncle, I am Zhao Rui." Zhao Rui hurriedly bowed in greeting, appearing ill at ease.

"Hmm." Zhou Kang grunted from his nose. "I heard from your aunt that you received a recommendation from that old Xiucui in your village, and you've come to register for the Child Scholar exam?"

"Yes, Teacher Zhou said..."

Zhou Kang cut him off without any courtesy, a trace of contempt curling his lips. "Studying for the imperial examinations relies on family scholarly tradition and guidance from renowned teachers. What real accomplishment can possibly come from studying in the rustic countryside?"

His words made Zhao Rui's face alternate between red and white. He couldn't utter a single word in response.

Finally, Zhou Kang's gaze, like a bestowed favor, fell upon Su Ming.

"You too?"

"Yes, this student is Su Ming. Greetings, Sir." Su Ming imitated the manner he'd learned at the schoolhouse, bowing and performing a salute.

"Su Ming?" Zhou Kang looked him up and down. Seeing his faded old clothes and patched shoes, the disdain in his eyes intensified. "Another mud-legged peasant, dreaming the daydream of a carp leaping through the Dragon Gate."

He waved his sleeve dismissively and said to Zhao Chunlan, "Alright, take them to stay in that empty room next to the woodshed in the backyard. Don't let them wander around the front areas. They might offend important guests and embarrass me."

Having said that, he turned and went back into the house, as if looking at them for a moment longer would dirty his eyes.

Zhao Chunlan's face was full of embarrassment and humiliation, but she didn't dare offer the slightest rebuttal. She forced a smile and said to Old Qian, "Old Qian, you've worked hard. This is for the cart... you... you should head back first."

She fished several dozen copper coins from her sleeve and handed them over. Old Qian, as if granted a pardon, took the money and fled the troubled situation as if escaping.

Finally, Zhao Chunlan led Su Ming and Zhao Rui to a low, small building in the corner of the backyard.

The room was tiny, right next to the woodshed. A damp, musty smell assailed their nostrils. Inside was only a bare wooden plank bed and a table missing a leg.

"You... just make do here for now," Zhao Chunlan said, her eyes darting around, unable to meet theirs. "Don't wander around. If you need anything... just tell me."

Having said that, she hurried away, as if staying there a moment longer was torture.

Inside the room, a deathly silence fell.

Zhao Rui stood dumbfounded, looking at this room that was barely better than his family's pigsty. Recalling his uncle-in-law's scornful gaze and his aunt's evasive attitude, all his fantasies and pride were shattered to pieces in that moment.

BANG!

He violently kicked the broken table, sending it crashing to the ground.

"Why! Why!" he roared in a low voice, like a wounded beast. "My father is the Village Chief! My aunt is the Second Madam of the Zhou family! How dare they... how dare they treat us like this!"

Su Ming didn't speak.

He silently walked over, righted the broken table, then took a few of the hard, dry black wheat buns from his small bundle and placed them on the table.

Then, he began to clean the room.

He used his old clothes as a rag to wipe the dust off the wooden plank bed and swept away the cobwebs in the corners.

He didn't work quickly, but he was very thorough.

As if this wasn't a dilapidated room next to a woodshed, but his own home.

After his outburst, Zhao Rui had exhausted his energy. He slumped to the ground dejectedly, watching Su Ming's busy back with a complex look in his eyes.

He couldn't understand why Su Ming could be so calm.

Robbed by mountain bandits, he was calm. Humiliated by the Zhou family, he was still this calm.

Didn't he feel any anger or humiliation at all?

Night fell.

A servant brought their dinner: two coarse porcelain bowls containing half a bowl of thin porridge and a lump of pickled vegetable.

Zhao Rui glanced at it and turned his head away.

Su Ming, however, picked up a bowl and began drinking it in small sips. He even used his tongue to meticulously clean every last grain of rice from the bottom of the bowl.

"Psychological Fortitude Course, Lecture One: Cognitive Reframing," Lin Yu's voice sounded in Su Ming's mind. "When the external environment cannot be changed, change your definition of the environment. This is not a prison cell; it's the 'Qingshi Town Strategic Development Base.' This bed is not a wooden plank; it's a 'Cultivation Platform.' This bowl of porridge is not slop; it's 'Basic Energy Supplement.'"

"See? Doesn't it feel much better when you call it that?"

After finishing the porridge, Su Ming neatly placed the bowl and chopsticks aside.

He looked out the window. The town's lights were brighter than the stars in the sky.

He sat for a long time before finally turning his head and speaking to Zhao Rui, who had remained silent the whole time.

These were the first words he had spoken to him since entering the Zhou Residence.

"Zhao Rui, tomorrow, I want to go take a look at the bookshop in town."

Zhao Rui's head snapped up, as if he hadn't heard correctly.

"Bookshop? To look at what?"

Su Ming's gaze was very calm, like the water in the ancient well at the village entrance.

"Teacher Zhou said that when we get to town, we should read more books to broaden our horizons."

Zhao Rui was stunned.

He looked at Su Ming, at those eyes that seemed especially bright under the dim oil lamp, and suddenly felt as if he had never truly known the person before him.

"Alright... alright," he nodded, as if compelled by some unseen force.

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Chapter 19: Can a scholar's affairs be called spending money?

[1,619 words]

The sky had brightened.

Not the kind of awakening brought by rooster crows and dog barks in the village, but a listless light that filtered through the gaps in the window paper, having been strained once by the high courtyard walls.

Zhao Rui hadn't slept all night, lying awake on the cold wooden plank bed like a fish thrown ashore.

His uncle's contemptuous words, the servants' mocking faces, and that bowl of watery porridge worse than pig slop—they pricked him like needles all over, making him utterly uncomfortable.

Su Ming was already up, practicing a strange set of fist movements in the corner of the courtyard with meticulous precision.

The movements were very slow, very clumsy, like elderly villagers stretching their joints.

Zhao Rui couldn't understand it, finding it only ridiculous, but looking at Su Ming's calm face, he couldn't bring himself to laugh.

That face held no anger, no humiliation, only a kind of focus completely unfamiliar to him.

"You... you're really going to the bookshop?" Zhao Rui finally couldn't help speaking, his voice dry and hoarse.

Su Ming finished his fist movements, exhaling a long puff of white breath, and nodded: "Yes."

"...I'll go with you." Zhao Rui climbed off the bed plank, his voice as small as a mosquito's buzz.

He didn't know why he wanted to tag along either—perhaps simply because he couldn't stand this suffocating courtyard anymore, couldn't bear facing his shattered pride alone.

The streets of Qingshi Town awakened in the early morning like a giant beast yawning.

Early-rising shopkeepers removed their door panels, assistants splashed water to sweep the streets, steamers from bun shops emitted white heat, mingling with the aromas of meat and dough, making people's stomachs growl with craving.

Zhao Rui kept his head down, instinctively wanting to hide his face in his collar.

He felt like everyone on the street was watching him, looking at his shabby clothes, the bruises on his face.

But Su Ming walked steadily.

His gaze didn't linger excessively on the dazzling array of goods, but rather absorbed everything around him like a sponge.

The location of the carriage house, the prices at the grain and oil shop, the patrol routes of the street guards...

"Disciple, see that?" Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind, like an experienced tour guide. "That cloth shop on the left displays fine cotton and silk fabrics, indicating many wealthy households in town. But the pawnshop on the right has a queue outside, meaning there are even more poor people."

"This is a typical feudal society model with clear class division. Our goal is to climb from the exploited class to the exploiting class as quickly as possible... no, to become self-sufficient independent individuals who aren't exploited by anyone."

"Remember, the prosperity is theirs, the dangers are theirs too. We're just passing through."

The two wound through the streets, following the route Su Ming had memorized yesterday, until they found the town's largest bookshop—Wenbao Zhai.

The shopfront was made of black lacquered wood, exuding a solemn air.

A shopkeeper wearing a long gown with a mustache shaped like the character "eight" was lazily dusting the counter with a feather duster.

He lifted his eyelids, saw Su Ming and Zhao Rui entering, and his brows furrowed almost imperceptibly.

Especially when he saw Zhao Rui's wretched state, the disdain in his eyes nearly overflowed.

"You can look at books, but wash your hands before touching them." The shopkeeper's voice was neither warm nor cold. "Don't dirty the books—you couldn't afford to replace any here."

Zhao Rui's face flushed crimson instantly, his fists clenching, but he didn't dare lash out like he used to.

Su Ming, however, acted as if he hadn't heard. He walked to the wall, washed his hands meticulously in a water basin, dried them with his own clothes, and only then approached the bookshelves.

"Good, disciple, your 'Way of Survival' mindset has improved further," Lin Yu praised. "Enduring humiliation to preserve strength offers the highest return on emotional investment. Getting angry at irrelevant people wastes nothing but saliva and yields no benefits."

Wenbao Zhai had many books, rows of shelves reaching the ceiling, the air filled with the scent of ink and the unique smell of old paper.

Su Ming took a deep breath.

This smell was more fragrant than meat buns.

He didn't look at the prominently displayed "Classics Collection Explanations" or "Key Points of Policy Essays"—those books used premium materials and clearly cost a fortune.

He went straight to the innermost corner, where some yellowed old books and miscellaneous texts were piled.

He pulled one out, squatted in the corner, and began reading as if no one else was around.

Zhao Rui stood in place, not knowing where to put his hands and feet.

The shopkeeper's contempt, the strange looks from other scholars in the bookshop—all made him feel prickly discomfort.

Seeing Su Ming squatting on the ground reading with relish like a true bookworm, a sudden inexplicable anger rose in his heart.

But this fire couldn't quite ignite.

He could only imitate Su Ming, find a corner, pick up a book, and pretend to read.

Time passed bit by bit.

Su Ming became completely immersed in the world of books.

He read broadly—geographical records, biographies, even some agriculture-related texts.

This knowledge opened windows for him, showing him the vast world beyond Su Family Village.

"Disciple, just reading isn't enough—you need to leave evidence," Lin Yu's voice chimed in timely. "Go, buy two books."

Su Ming replied mentally: "Master, money... we need to spend carefully."

"Foolish!" Lin Yu's voice turned serious. "Can this be called spending? This is strategic investment! Let me ask you, where will our papermaking formula come from in the future? You can't say you dreamed it up at night, can you?"

Su Ming froze.

"You'll say you found it in an insignificant miscellaneous book! Untraceable! What is this called? This is building an 'intellectual property firewall'! Spending a few dozen coins to buy a flawless excuse, avoiding endless future troubles—is this deal worthwhile or not?"

"Moreover, we're staying at the Zhou family's place, saving a large sum on inn expenses. That money should be used where it's most needed! Knowledge is our sharpest blade right now! Go, find one book about regional customs and another about farming techniques. The older and cheaper, the better!"

Su Ming's mind suddenly brightened.

He stood up and began searching through the pile of old books.

Just as he reached for a heavily damaged "Essential Farming Techniques" buried at the very bottom, another hand reached for it too.

It was a very clean hand, with slender fingers and distinct knuckles.

Su Ming looked up and saw a youth.

The youth appeared about fourteen or fifteen, wearing faded blue cloth clothes. Though the material was ordinary, they were cleanly laundered without a single wrinkle.

He had a lean face, tightly pressed lips, and eyes like deep pool water—unusually serene for someone his age.

Seeing Su Ming, he paused briefly, then silently withdrew his hand.

Su Ming noticed the youth had a small book box at his feet. The box was open, containing not valuable books but a stack of neatly cut rough paper and a simple set of writing implements.

He had actually been here reading while copying texts.

Those who copied books here were either from poor families who couldn't afford books, or possessed extraordinary dedication to scholarship.

Su Ming felt an inexplicable closeness toward him.

He took out the "Essential Farming Techniques" and offered it: "You read it first."

The youth shook his head, his voice cool yet clear: "No need, I've finished reading. You take it."

After speaking, he packed his small book box and turned toward another bookshelf.

Su Ming watched his retreating figure, then found another book with a faded cover titled "Records of Southern Border Wonders." Holding both books, he approached the counter.

"Shopkeeper, how much for these two?"

The mustached shopkeeper took the books, flipped through them lazily, and snorted through his nose: "Sixty coins, not one less."

Sixty coins.

This was almost half a month's living expenses for the Su family.

Su Ming reached into his clothes, touching the heavy string of copper coins.

The coins still carried the warmth and sweat of his eldest and second brothers.

His hand trembled slightly.

Zhao Rui, watching nearby, felt mixed emotions.

Su Ming took a deep breath, carefully counted out sixty copper coins from the string, and placed them on the counter.

"Here."

The shopkeeper took the money, pushed the two shabby books toward him, and paid no further attention. The shopkeeper's eyes shifted to the youth and said: "Surname Xu, get out."

Su Ming carefully stored the books in his small bundle as if holding two rare treasures.

He turned and left the bookshop.

The youth who had been copying also came out. He looked at Su Ming, hesitated for a moment, then spoke up.

"Books in Qingshi Town are expensive," the youth said. "Under the old locust tree at the west city corner, there's a bookstall. His books are all handwritten copies—half the price."

After speaking, he said no more, nodded slightly to Su Ming and Zhao Rui, shouldered his small book box, and walked straight away.

Su Ming watched his retreating figure, silently memorizing the words "west city corner, old locust tree, bookstall."

"Disciple, see? This is also a smart person," Lin Yu remarked with feeling. "He knows how to use information to exchange for a potential favor. If such people aren't enemies, you can try befriending them. On the 'Way of Survival,' having one more friend means one more information channel, one more layer of safety."

Stepping out of Wenbao Zhai, the outside sunlight was somewhat dazzling.

Zhao Rui remained silent until they had walked quite far before he asked in a low voice.

"You... why did you buy those two shabby books? They're useless for the exams."

Su Ming's steps didn't stop. Looking at the bustling crowd ahead, his voice was soft yet clear.

"Reading isn't just for exams."

Zhao Rui's footsteps halted abruptly.

He looked at Su Ming's back—that fellow villager he'd always seen as somewhat dull and slow—and in that moment, he seemed both unfamiliar and somehow taller.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 20: Gift-giving is an art

[1,762 words]

The midday meal was still delivered by a servant to the door of that dilapidated house, then set down like throwing away garbage before they left.

Two coarse porcelain bowls. This time, the contents were slightly more "abundant" than last night's thin porridge.

It was half a bowl of coarse rice, the grains dry and hard, topped with a few wilted pickled vegetables.

Zhao Rui stared at that bowl of rice, his expression shifting several times, before he finally picked it up and fiercely shoveled the food into his mouth with chopsticks, chewing as if he had a grudge against someone.

He was hungry.

Dignity was no match for hunger.

Su Ming still ate quietly and seriously, as if savoring some rare delicacy.

"Second lesson in Cognitive Restructuring: Sublimation of Suffering." Lin Yu's voice sounded lazily in Su Ming's mind. "Disciple, you must imagine this bowl of rice as a whetstone. Every chew is sharpening your character. Every swallow is consuming humiliation, transforming it into motivation for your progress."

"See? Thinking like this, don't you feel like you're engaged in a great cultivation practice? Even the pickled vegetables become Zen-like."

Su Ming ignored his master's nonsense, simply eating every last grain of rice in his bowl clean.

After finishing the meal, Zhao Rui slammed his bowl heavily onto the broken table and spoke in a muffled voice: "My aunt came secretly this morning."

Su Ming looked up at him.

"She... she gave me some money." Zhao Rui pulled out two strings of copper coins from his chest, probably about two hundred wen. He placed the money on the table, his eyes avoiding contact. "She said we should be smart when we go to register at the County School. It would be best... best to buy uncle a gift to calm his anger."

His voice grew quieter as he spoke.

Just yesterday he thought his uncle was detestable, but today he already had to think about how to please him.

"Buy what?" Zhao Rui scratched his hair irritably. "At the best 'Drunken Immortal Pavilion' in town, a single jar of good wine costs one tael of silver! With our meager money, we can't even afford the wine jar!"

Su Ming looked at the copper coins on the table without speaking.

"Master, this is an opportunity, but also a trap," he said to Lin Yu in his mind.

"Correct." Lin Yu's tone was unusually serious. "Gift-giving is a skilled craft. Done right, it's a stepping stone; done wrong, it's dirty water thrown on your own face. Your companion here is clearly an amateur."

"Disciple, let me ask you, what are we most lacking right now?"

"Money, resources, a stable cultivation environment," Su Ming answered.

"Wrong!" Lin Yu firmly rejected this. "What we're most lacking is 'information'! Information about the Zhou family, about Qingshi Town, about that upcoming Child Scholar examination!"

"Zhao Rui wants to use these two hundred wen to buy Zhou Kang's 'favor'—that's a classic case of barking up the wrong tree. Someone like Zhou Kang, who looks down on everyone, if you give him something worth two hundred wen, he'll only think you're even poorer and more unsophisticated. Even if you gave him something worth two hundred taels of silver and he accepted it, he might not think any better of you."

Su Ming listened quietly.

"So our target can't be him." Lin Yu's voice carried a confident, strategic tone. "He's just a Record Keeper for the second branch. Above him are the main branch, and the Zhou family head, that County School Director Zhou Wenhai. Zhou Kang is just a minor gatekeeper; we don't need to waste our ammunition on him."

"Then this gift..."

"We'll give a gift, but not to him." Lin Yu chuckled. "Disciple, I'll teach you a move called 'Catering to Preferences, Precision Strike'. We need to make these two hundred wen produce the effect of two thousand wen!"

Su Ming looked at Zhao Rui and spoke: "Buying wine is inappropriate."

Zhao Rui was taken aback, then asked irritably: "Then what do you suggest we buy? Scholar's four treasures? That's even more expensive! A decent inkstick alone could feed us for a month!"

"We won't buy expensive things, only the right things." Su Ming imitated Lin Yu's tone, his voice calm. "Let's not rush to buy anything yet. First, we'll gather information."

"Gather what information?"

"Find out what your uncle Zhou Kang, and the Zhou family head Zhou Wenhai, usually like." Su Ming's thinking became clearer. "For example, what tea they prefer to drink, what books they read, or... what troubles they might have."

Zhao Rui's mouth hung open as he stared at Su Ming as if looking at a monster.

He had never imagined that giving a gift could involve so many twists and turns.

"This... how do we find that out?"

"Go to the place that copying youth mentioned yesterday." Su Ming stood up. "West corner of the city, old locust tree, Xu's bookstall. There are many people and loose tongues there, plus plenty of scholars. We might hear something. Also, we can check if the books there are really cheap."

He looked at Zhao Rui and added: "The money your aunt gave shouldn't be wasted."

Zhao Rui was completely baffled by his words, but eventually found himself nodding inexplicably: "Alright, I'll listen to you."

The west corner of the city was indeed much quieter than the main street.

A massive old locust tree spread like an open umbrella. In its shade, a white-haired old man had laid out a blue cloth on the ground with several dozen books scattered on it.

Most books were handwritten copies, with yellowed pages and crude binding.

This was the bookstall of the one surnamed Xu.

Already three or four plainly dressed scholars were squatting on the ground, intently flipping through books.

When Su Ming and Zhao Rui approached, Old Xu just lifted his eyelids before lowering his head again to doze off, seemingly unconcerned about anyone stealing his books.

Su Ming squatted down and picked up a handwritten copy of "Qingshi County Records".

"Well done, disciple." Lin Yu praised. "To strike precisely, you must first understand the 'user profile'. These county records are Qingshi Town's 'product manual'."

Su Ming flipped through quickly—his purpose wasn't to memorize, but to find useful information.

Zhao Rui imitated him, picking up a book and randomly flipping through it, but his eyes kept glancing at several scholars nearby who were talking in low voices.

They heard a tall, thin man say: "Have you heard? Director Zhou has been in a bad mood lately."

Another square-faced man responded: "What else could it be? It's about his precious son Zhou Yulin. Young Master Zhou is about to take the academy examination, but he just can't produce an enlightened essay for the 'Investigation of Things' subject."

"Investigation of Things?" The tall, thin man curled his lip. "That thing is vague and elusive—who can explain it clearly? Director Zhou himself is an expert in this field, and even he can't teach it well. What hope do the rest of us have?"

"Shh, keep your voice down. Don't let anyone hear."

Though their voices were soft, every word clearly reached Su Ming's ears.

Su Ming's finger, which had been turning pages, paused slightly.

"Director Zhou, Zhou Wenhai. Son, Zhou Yulin. Trouble, 'Investigation of Things' subject."

He silently noted this in his mind.

Lin Yu's voice became excited: "Here it comes! Here comes our opportunity! This is our 'market demand'! Disciple, that 'Essential Farming Techniques' book you bought yesterday is now our only ammunition!"

Su Ming's heart stirred.

"Essential Farming Techniques" discussed agricultural matters—how to breed seeds, how to compost, how to distinguish seasonal periods.

What did this have to do with "Investigation of Things"?

"Fool!" Lin Yu sounded exasperated. "What is 'Investigation of Things'? Investigating things to extend knowledge! It's about exploring the principles of things! While others research lofty topics like wind, rain, thunder, lightning, and celestial movements, we'll take the opposite approach!"

"We'll start from the most humble 'farming activities'! For example, why do seeds sprout faster after soaking in warm water? Why do different soils produce different crops? Doesn't this count as Investigation of Things? It absolutely does!"

"While others are drawing pies in the sky, we'll dig for gold from the earth! This is called 'differentiated competition'! Understand?"

Su Ming's breathing became slightly rapid.

He understood.

He put down the county records and continued searching through the bookstall.

Finally, he spent two wen to buy the cheapest handwritten copy available—"Miscellaneous Discussions on Plants and Trees" that explained plant identification.

Zhao Rui watched dumbfounded: "You're buying this?"

Su Ming nodded, carefully storing the book away.

"Let's go buy the gift," Su Ming said.

As the two left the bookstall, Zhao Rui couldn't help asking: "What exactly are we going to buy?"

Instead of answering directly, Su Ming led him into a general store.

He walked around the shop, then finally his gaze settled on a bundle of seemingly ordinary hemp rope and some of the cheapest coarse pottery jars.

"Master, will this work?" Su Ming asked in his mind.

"It will work! It will work perfectly! Disciple, you've already grasped the essence of 'Way of Survival' gift-giving!" Lin Yu's voice was full of satisfaction. "Remember, the gift itself isn't important—what matters is the 'story' and 'pretext' it carries!"

Su Ming spent ten wen to buy a small bundle of hemp rope and two palm-sized coarse pottery jars.

Zhao Rui was completely stunned.

"Su Ming, are you... are you sick? We're going to give these things as gifts? My uncle will definitely chase us out!"

"These aren't for your uncle." Su Ming said calmly. "These are our 'bait' for Director Zhou."

Looking at the thoroughly confused Zhao Rui, he patiently explained for the first time.

"We're insignificant people with weak voices. Wanting to see Director Zhou is harder than climbing to heaven. If we directly give gifts, he won't accept them. So we need to create an opportunity to meet him and make him interested in us."

"I just learned that Director Zhou's son is struggling with 'Investigation of Things'. And that 'Essential Farming Techniques' book I bought yesterday happens to contain some unusual methods about crop growth."

Su Ming pointed to the pottery jars in his hand and the newly purchased "Miscellaneous Discussions on Plants and Trees".

"We'll use these jars to try growing something in the courtyard. Then use the methods recorded in this book to make some special fertilizer. When the time comes, we just need to let this matter 'accidentally' reach Director Zhou's ears."

"A poor boy from the countryside, not studying the classics, but tinkering with plants in the courtyard, and actually achieving some results. Do you think Director Zhou, who's worried about his son, might become a little curious about us?"

Zhao Rui listened blankly, his mind completely empty.

He felt like he was listening to fantasy.

Yet he also felt that every word Su Ming spoke carried a strange magical power that made it impossible to refute.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 21: This is called differentiated competition

[2,009 words]

Zhao Rui looked at the bundle of coarse hemp rope and two ugly clay pots on the table, feeling like his brain couldn't process what he was seeing.

He opened his mouth, wanting to say something, but found he couldn't utter a single word.

He was certain Su Ming had gone completely mad.

Being robbed by mountain bandits, then humiliated by the Zhou family—this series of blows had finally driven the usually quiet youth over the edge.

"Su Ming, you..." Zhao Rui's voice came out dry and strained, "We... we're really going to use these?"

"Mhm." Su Ming responded briefly, already carrying the clay pots to the corner of the courtyard.

That corner was piled with old fallen leaves and mud. He brushed aside the surface layer of loose soil with his hands, revealing the relatively moist earth beneath.

"Disciple, pay attention to your technique, make it look professional." Lin Yu's voice echoed in Su Ming's mind, like a director coaching actors on set, "Don't dig like you're unearthing sweet potatoes—there should be a sense of ceremony. You're not playing with mud right now, you're constructing a 'micro-ecological circulation system'."

Su Ming's hands paused briefly, then he followed Lin Yu's guidance, making his movements slow and methodical.

He first laid a layer of small stones at the bottom of the clay pots, then carefully filled them with soil. When they were half-full, he gently compacted the earth with his fingers.

Zhao Rui just stared blankly.

He watched as Su Ming carefully picked out three shriveled beans from that precious bundle he guarded so closely.

These were the last remaining provisions they had brought from the village.

Su Ming pressed the beans one by one into three different clay pots, then covered them with a thin layer of soil.

Throughout the entire process, his expression remained intensely focused, as if he were carving a priceless work of art.

"He's mad, completely mad." Zhao Rui slumped weakly onto the bed board, covering his face with his hands.

Lin Yu continued his on-site instruction, "Disciple, remember, from now on, this isn't called planting beans—this is called 'Investigating Things to Extend Knowledge: Comparative Examination of Plant Growth.' The pot on the left, watered daily, is called the 'Natural Way Group.' The middle pot, using the hemp rope you bought to draw water for continuous moisture, is the 'External Intervention Group.' The right pot, not watered initially, left to struggle on its own, is the 'Adversity Survival Group.'"

"Listen to those names, that commanding presence! Old scholars like Director Zhou eat this stuff up! What is this called? This is called professionalism!"

Hearing his master's twisted logic, the corner of Su Ming's mouth twitched involuntarily, but his hands never stopped moving.

After arranging everything properly, the three crude clay pots stood side by side in the corner, looking both pitifully shabby and strangely peculiar.

Just then, the courtyard gate creaked open a crack.

Zhao Chunlan poked her head in, and upon seeing the two youths in the courtyard, forced a strained smile onto her face.

She carried a small cloth bundle, quickly entered, and shoved it into Zhao Rui's hands.

"Rui'er, these are a few steamed buns to fill your stomachs for now." She lowered her voice, her eyes filled with worry and apology, "Your uncle... that's just how his temper is, please don't take it to heart."

Her gaze fell upon the three strange clay pots in the corner, and she froze for a moment.

"What... what is this?"

Zhao Rui's face instantly flushed bright red, wishing he could find a hole to crawl into.

But Su Ming straightened up at that moment, calmly meeting Zhao Chunlan's gaze as he bowed respectfully.

"Aunt, this student is merely conducting some academic inquiry."

"Academic inquiry?" Zhao Chunlan looked even more confused.

"Yes." Su Ming's voice remained steady and unhurried, as if reciting a thoroughly memorized text, "This student happened to read some miscellaneous texts and saw the saying: 'One leaf can reveal autumn's arrival, one tree can show the forest's nature.' All things that grow follow their own principles. Therefore, emulating the ancient sages, I use the subtle changes in plant growth to glimpse the great way of Investigating Things."

His speech was half-classical, half-vernacular, entirely composed of the explanations Lin Yu had taught him last night.

Zhao Chunlan didn't understand a single word of it, but she caught the terms "academic inquiry," "Investigating Things," and "great way."

Looking at this youth in tattered clothes yet standing straight-backed, at those clear, bright eyes that remained undimmed despite adversity, she suddenly felt a strange sense of awe.

Though she didn't understand, she felt that this seemed... impressive.

"Good... good... you... just focus on your studies." Zhao Chunlan stammered, offered a few more words of advice, then hurried away.

After she left, Zhao Rui jumped up abruptly.

"Su Ming! What nonsense were you spouting to Aunt! What great way! What Investigating Things! It's just planting beans!"

"Matters of scholars," Su Ming looked at him, enunciating each word clearly, "how can they be called merely planting beans?"

Zhao Rui was left speechless, completely stumped.

In the Zhou family dining hall, the atmosphere was somewhat oppressive.

Family head Zhou Wenhai sat at the main seat, his face dark as water. Nearly fifty years old with temples slightly graying, he wore a scholar's robe that was impeccably clean, his brow carrying natural authority.

The youth beside him was his only son, Zhou Yulin, who currently kept his head bowed, not even daring to touch his chopsticks.

Zhou Kang of the Second Branch sat in a lower seat. Seeing his elder brother and nephew's expressions, his eyes shifted as he decided to lighten the mood with some casual conversation.

"Elder Brother, speaking of which, there's recently been an 'Investigating Things' master appearing in our backyard." He began with a hint of sarcastic amusement.

Zhou Wenhai lifted his eyelids slightly but said nothing.

Zhou Kang continued on his own, "It's my wife's worthless nephew and a companion he brought along. That companion is called Su Ming, also recommended by Teacher Zhou. This kid, who knows what nonsense he read in some wild text, has started planting beans in broken clay pots in the courtyard, even grandly calling it 'glimpsing the great way of Investigating Things!' It's absolutely laughable!"

He had expected his elder brother to chuckle dismissively or scold it as "mischief."

But Zhou Wenhai's reaction completely defied his expectations.

"What did you say?" Zhou Wenhai set down his chopsticks, his gaze sharp as he stared at him, "The person who recommended him was Teacher Zhou from Su Family Village?"

"Y... yes." Zhou Kang felt unnerved under his stare, "That old fellow who spent his whole life studying only to achieve the Xiucai degree."

"Silence!" Zhou Wenhai's low roar, though not loud, made Zhou Kang tremble, "Teacher Zhou has been like half a mentor to me! He is upright in character and solid in scholarship, absolutely not the frivolous person you describe!"

Zhou Kang's face instantly paled. He never imagined his elder brother would get so angry over a rural old Xiucai.

Zhou Wenhai ignored him, turning instead to his despondent son.

"Yulin, you tell me, what is Investigating Things?"

Zhou Yulin stood up and answered respectfully, "Replying to Father, Investigating Things to Extend Knowledge means exhaustively studying the principles of things to seek the acquisition of knowledge."

"Well said." Zhou Wenhai nodded, then asked, "Then do you know where the principles lie?"

"The principles are in books, in the classics of the sages."

"Wrong!" Zhou Wenhai slammed the table abruptly, "The principles are in all things between heaven and earth! You spend all day clinging to old texts, delving into profound discussions of wind, thunder, and stars, yet you can't explain why a blade of grass grows or why a drop of water freezes! Your essays have splendid rhetoric but no foundation whatsoever! This is the reason you cannot make a breakthrough!"

His words made Zhou Yulin blush with shame, his head bowing even lower.

Zhou Wenhai took a deep breath, suppressing the anger in his heart, and looked back at Zhou Kang.

"You just said, that youth named Su Ming, what is he doing?" His tone had become extremely serious.

Zhou Kang broke out in a cold sweat, not daring to show any further disrespect as he stammeringly repeated exactly what his wife had described—Su Ming's explanations about the "Natural Way Group," "External Intervention Group," and so on.

With every sentence he spoke, Zhou Wenhai's eyes grew brighter.

By the time he finished, Zhou Wenhai's face was full of shock and... a hint of excitement.

"Comparative... examination?" Zhou Wenhai murmured to himself, "Using the natural way, human effort, and adversity as guides to examine their principles... Excellent! What a magnificent 'one leaf can reveal autumn'! This youth is extraordinary! To have such insight!"

He stood up abruptly and began pacing back and forth in the hall.

"Teacher Zhou... Teacher Zhou indeed didn't misjudge his person! This examination method, seemingly simple and unadorned, goes straight to the heart of Investigating Things! The great way is supremely simple! Why didn't I think of it! Why didn't I think of it!"

Zhou Kang and Zhou Yulin were both utterly dumbfounded.

In their eyes, this absurd "bean planting" had become, in the family head's words, a "great way" that "goes straight to the heart of Investigating Things"?

Zhou Wenhai stopped pacing, his burning gaze fixed on his son.

"Yulin!"

"Your son is here!"

"Aren't you troubled by your Investigating Things essay? The opportunity has arrived!" Zhou Wenhai pointed toward the door, "Go! Go to the backyard! See for yourself! No, not just see—go to learn! Go seek instruction from that Su Ming!"

"What?" Zhou Yulin and Zhou Kang exclaimed simultaneously.

Have the Zhou family's eldest young master, the County School Director's son, go seek instruction from a poor country boy living next to the woodshed?

If this got out, what would become of the Zhou family's dignity?

"Father, this... this is absolutely unacceptable!" Zhou Yulin said urgently, "He's just a country village child! Perhaps he's merely picking up others' scraps, accidentally spouting a couple lines of twisted logic! How can I..."

"Fool!" Zhou Wenhai roared angrily, "The accomplished are teachers—what does status matter! If you still cling to these prejudices about family background, your imperial examination path ends here!"

Looking at his son's face, filled with reluctance and humiliation, his tone softened slightly.

"Your father isn't telling you to acknowledge him as your master. Just go, go ask, go look, go record. See exactly how he does it and how he thinks. If he truly has genuine talent and learning, what's wrong with lowering yourself to befriend him? If he's just a fame-seeking fraud, you'll see through his façade and report back to me, settling this matter once and for all."

Zhou Yulin bit his lip, his heart in turmoil.

Finally, under his father's unwavering gaze, he yielded.

"Yes... your son obeys."

...

In the backyard, inside that dilapidated room.

Su Ming sat before the three-legged table, using the dim light to read the newly purchased "Essential Farming Techniques."

Zhao Rui tossed and turned on the bed board, sighing repeatedly.

"It's over, it's over, my aunt definitely thinks we're madmen. Tomorrow, my uncle will probably throw us out."

Su Ming ignored him, his entire mind immersed in the book and Lin Yu's teachings.

"Disciple, see? This is called an 'information gap.' Your companion only sees bean planting, while we see a shortcut leading straight before Director Zhou. Remember, knowledge itself is worthless—only knowledge that solves problems has value."

Just then, the courtyard gate was gently pushed open.

The person entering wasn't a meal-delivering servant, nor was it the apologetic-looking Zhao Chunlan.

It was a youth wearing clean blue robes, with delicate features, yet whose expression carried a mix of arrogance and reluctance.

Behind the youth followed a stern-faced old servant in gray clothes.

Seeing the newcomer, Zhao Rui sprang up from the bed board, his mouth agape.

He recognized this youth—it was the Zhou family's eldest young master, Zhou Yulin!

Su Ming also looked up. He set down his book and calmly looked at the two unexpected guests at the door.

The air in the courtyard seemed to freeze at that moment.

Zhou Yulin's gaze immediately fell upon the three ugly clay pots in the corner.

His eyes held curiosity, scrutiny, disdain, and a hint of... anticipation that he himself was unwilling to acknowledge.

He cleared his throat, trying to make his voice sound steady and detached, devoid of any emotion.

"You, are you Su Ming?"

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Chapter 22: How can the affairs of scholars be called deception?

[1,715 words]

Zhou Yulin's voice carried a trace of deliberate maturity put on by a young man, but his trailing tone couldn't hide that condescending scrutiny.

The gray-clad old servant behind him stood like an emotionless stone statue, his gaze sweeping indifferently across this shabby room. His eyes lingered on Su Ming and Zhao Rui for less than a breath before lowering again, as if looking any longer would be a waste.

Zhao Rui was already too frightened to make a sound. He instinctively shrank back, not knowing where to put his hands and feet.

This was the Zhou family's prized son, the County School Director's only heir, someone all the scholars in Qingshi Town had to look up to.

Yet Su Ming merely gently closed the book in his hand, placed it by the table, then stood up and looked back at the other party without servility or arrogance.

"I am Su Ming."

His voice was very calm, as if stating the most ordinary fact.

This composed attitude instead made the barrage of questions Zhou Yulin had prepared get stuck in his throat. He had anticipated the other might panic and lose composure, might flatter and fawn—he just hadn't expected such straightforwardness.

"My father heard that you are here investigating the Way of Investigation of Things?" Zhou Yulin's gaze finally fell on the three plain-looking clay pots in the corner.

Dirt, beans, hemp rope.

No matter how you looked at it, it reeked of country bumpkin poverty and nonsense.

If not for his father's solemn admonishment, he would never have set foot in such a filthy place.

Lin Yu's voice sounded leisurely in Su Ming's mind, "Disciple, steady. Right now he's here to verify, his heart is more uncertain than yours. Remember, you're not planting beans, you're expounding the ultimate principles of heaven and earth. Bring out the energy you used reciting your script yesterday, your eyes should be ethereal, your

speech pace slowed, make him feel every word you say contains profound meaning he can't comprehend."

Su-Actor-Ming took a deep breath, silently recited his master's teachings in his heart, and a perfectly measured trace of indifference appeared on his face.

"I dare not claim such." He shook his head slightly, pointing to the three clay pots. "I'm merely emulating the ancient sages, conducting some shallow examinations."

"Examinations?" Zhou Yulin frowned. He'd heard this term from his father, but coming from a country youth's mouth, it felt somewhat strange.

"Exactly." Su Ming stepped forward, slowly walking to the clay pots. Seeing this, Zhao Rui hurriedly followed, like a nervous attendant.

"Young Master Zhou, please look." Su Ming pointed to the leftmost pot. "This pot, I call it the 'Natural Way Group.' Planted with beans, watered daily only according to the four seasons' rhythms, normal watering, left to grow without any human interference. This is following heaven's way, observing its natural state."

His voice was neither hurried nor slow, carrying a peculiar rhythmic quality.

Zhou Yulin's gaze slowly shifted from initial contempt to focused attention.

Su Ming then pointed to the middle pot using hemp rope to draw water: "This pot, I call it the 'External Intervention Group.' Using hemp rope to draw water, emulating the ancients' 'siphon method,' keeping the root soil constantly moist. This is human intervention, observing the variables."

Finally, his finger landed on the rightmost pot that looked dry and withered.

"And this pot, I call it the 'Adversity Survival Group.' After planting, no water is given for three days, observing whether it has any survival strategies in desperate circumstances."

The courtyard fell extremely quiet for a moment, only the rustle of wind through the old locust tree leaves.

Zhao Rui's mouth hung open. Yesterday he thought Su Ming was crazy, but today hearing this "group by group" explanation, though he still didn't understand, for some reason it felt... really impressive.

Zhou Yulin was completely stunned.

Heaven's Way, human effort, adversity.

Following heaven, variables, strategies.

He understood all these terms—they were in the sage's books. But he'd never imagined these profound concepts could be so intuitively presented using three shabby clay pots and a few beans.

Was this... this was what his father called "the great Way is supremely simple"?

The Investigation of Things essays he'd been struggling with always tried to start from grand themes like wind, rain, thunder, lightning, celestial trajectories, but always felt hollow and hard to put into words.

Yet this shabbily dressed youth before him had dug out a whole new world from the humblest dirt and seeds beneath his feet.

"You... why are you doing this?" Zhou Yulin's voice unconsciously carried a tremor.

"The Great Learning says: The extension of knowledge lies in the investigation of things. When things are investigated, knowledge is extended." Su Ming raised his head, looking at him with clear eyes. "I am dull-witted, unable to comprehend the great principles of heaven, earth, wind, and thunder, so I can only observe the growth of each plant and tree, the changes of flourishing and withering, to glimpse a trace of the 'principle' behind all things."

"How a bean breaks through soil is principle. Why a leaf faces the sun is principle. How a root seeks water is also principle. The convergence of these myriad minute principles might help us... gaze upon the great Way."

These words exploded like thunder in Zhou Yulin's mind!

He stood rigidly in place, his face alternating between pale and flushed, his eyes full of shock and shame.

Yes!

Principle exists within all things!

Why had he always abandoned the near for the distant, aiming too high, yet failing to see the reality beneath his feet?

His father was right to scold him—all those books he'd read had gone to the dogs!

"Masterful! Truly masterful!" Lin Yu cheered excitedly in Su Ming's mind. "Disciple, not bad! This performance, master gives you full marks! Look at that kid, his soul is practically hooked! This is called dimensional reduction strike! Using our simple materialist worldview to strike his vague idealist metaphysics!"

Su Ming remained expressionless on the surface, but thought inwardly: "Master, isn't this called deception?"

"Nonsense!" Lin Yu declared righteously. "How can matters of scholars be called deception? This is 'conceptual reshaping' and 'intellectual enlightenment'! We are helping a lost lamb find the correct scientific research method!"

Zhou Yulin took a deep breath, suppressing the turmoil in his heart. He stepped forward and actually bowed solemnly to Su Ming.

"Brother Su, Yulin has been enlightened."

This address of "Brother Su" made Zhao Rui's eyes nearly pop out.

Su Ming calmly accepted this bow, sidestepping half a step to avoid facing it directly, and returned the courtesy: "Young Master Zhou flatters me. I am merely picking up others' crumbs, engaging in armchair strategy."

"No, this is not armchair strategy!" Zhou Yulin's eyes became fervent. "Brother Su's method strikes directly at the core! Yulin... Yulin wants to know, what results will these three examinations yield later?"

He wanted to know too much!

He seemed to see a shocking Investigation of Things essay slowly sprouting within these three ugly clay pots.

The opportunity had arrived.

Su Ming's heart stirred, but a trace of difficulty and regret appeared on his face.

"To be honest, my companion and I are only staying here temporarily, waiting for County School registration. Counting the days, we can linger here at most five or six more days before leaving this place."

He sighed, his gaze sweeping over the three clay pots.

"Plant growth is not the work of a single morning. To observe the entire process and see the final results, I'm afraid... I won't have that opportunity."

As these words came out, the fervor on Zhou Yulin's face instantly froze, turning into extreme disappointment and anxiety.

What?

He'd just seen a glimmer of dawn, and the guide was about to leave?

This couldn't be!

"Master, the timing is about right." Su Ming said inwardly.

"Mm, perfectly measured." Lin Yu lazily affirmed. "Disciple, remember master's words. Giving someone a fish is not as good as teaching them to fish. But sometimes, just showing them how to use the fishing rod without giving them bait works better. We don't know this Zhou Wenhai's character—what if he's narrow-minded? If you hand over everything, he gets the benefits, then turns around and cuts off you, the 'source'—wouldn't that be unjust?"

"Adding legs to a snake is a major taboo. We just need him to know you have something, and it's good stuff—that's enough. Let him itch for it himself, come begging himself, then we can take the initiative."

Su-Deep Strategist-Ming deeply agreed.

Looking at Zhou Yulin's anxious face, he said sincerely: "Actually, this method is quite crude. If Young Master Zhou is interested, you could easily try it yourself. The Way of Investigation of Things values personal practice, not hearsay. What I can see, if you apply yourself, you can certainly see too. You might even see deeper 'principles' that I cannot see."

These words were both modest, flattered the other, and kicked the "ball" back.

Hearing this, Zhou Yulin's anxiety slightly eased, replaced by a strong impulse.

Right!

Why can't I do it myself?

If Brother Su can think of it, can't I, Zhou Yulin, think of it too?

Looking into Su Ming's clear, candid eyes, the last trace of doubt and arrogance in his heart dissipated.

This person had broad-minded integrity and extraordinary insight—definitely not someone chasing fame and reputation.

"Brother Su's words are deafening." Zhou Yulin bowed again. "Today's guidance, Yulin will remember in my heart. When I return and report to my father, I will certainly visit again."

After speaking, he took another deep look at the three clay pots, as if wanting to carve their images into his heart, then turned and quickly left with the gray-clad old servant who hadn't spoken a single word from start to finish.

Only when their figures disappeared beyond the courtyard gate did Zhao Rui, like a deflated ball, suddenly collapse sitting on the ground.

"Oh my mother..." he gasped, looking at Su Ming as if seeing a monster. "Su Ming... you... what kind of person are you? You actually... convinced the Zhou family's eldest young master?"

"I said nothing," Su-Mystic-Ming calmly walked back to the table, picking up the "Essential Farming Techniques" book again, saying lightly, "I was merely discussing scholarship with him."

"Discussing scholarship..." Zhao Rui murmured to himself, feeling his worldview had suffered a violent impact.

So, studying could be done like this?

So, gift-giving could be done like this?

Looking at the remaining hundred-plus copper coins on the table, then at the three clay pots in the corner that cost only a few coins, he felt for the first time that Su Ming, this companion, was truly unfathomable.

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Chapter 23: This isn't stealing, it's academic borrowing

[1,664 words]

The oppressive atmosphere in the Zhou family dining hall was instantly ignited by Zhou Yulin's return.

He practically charged inside, his face bearing a mix of excitement, shock, and fervor, completely lacking the steadiness expected of a young master from an established family.

"Father!"

Zhou Wenhai was holding a teacup. Seeing his son in such a state, his brows furrowed slightly. "What matter has you so flustered? This is utterly unbecoming!"

Zhou Kang, who had been sitting awkwardly to the side unsure whether to leave or stay, also looked up curiously.

Zhou Yulin paid no heed to his father's scolding. He rushed to the table in a few quick strides, his breathing somewhat unsteady from running so urgently.

"Father! That Su Ming... he... he is absolutely no ordinary person!"

Zhou Wenhai's hand, holding the teacup, paused mid-air. His sharp gaze settled on his son.

"Explain in detail."

"Yes!" Zhou Yulin took a deep breath, trying to calm himself, and recounted everything he had seen and heard in the backyard exactly as it happened.

Imitating Su Ming's tone, he named the three ugly clay pots the "Natural Way Group," the "External Intervention Group," and the "Adversity Survival Group."

He quoted Su Ming's statement about "peering into the principles of the minute to gaze upon the Great Way."

With each sentence he spoke, the gravity on Zhou Wenhai's face deepened.

Meanwhile, Zhou Kang's face beside them turned from pale to green, then from green to purple, as if he had been publicly slapped back and forth over a dozen times, his cheeks burning with shame.

The very jokes he had used to mock Su Ming earlier were now, spoken from his own nephew's mouth, becoming profound insights containing supreme wisdom.

This was simply absurd!

"...And that's what happened." After finishing, Zhou Yulin looked at his father with blazing eyes. "Father, I presume to ask, could I also set aside a plot in our backyard to emulate Brother Su's method, establishing these three groups for verification? Observing and recording day and night, within half a month, my Investigation of Things essay will surely achieve a breakthrough in understanding!"

He expected his father to readily agree, perhaps even praise him extensively.

Crack!

A sharp sound rang out.

Zhou Wenhai slammed the teacup heavily onto the table. Tea splashed out, leaving a few dark stains on his meticulously kept scholar's robe.

"Foolish!"

Zhou Wenhai's voice wasn't loud, but it struck Zhou Yulin's heart like a heavy hammer.

Zhou Yulin was stunned. "Father, I..."

"I ask you," Zhou Wenhai stared at him, his gaze cold and sharp as ice, "who created this verification method?"

"It's... it's Su Ming, Brother Su," Zhou Yulin answered instinctively.

"Since you know it was obtained through another's diligent thought, you wish to take it for your own use without his permission? What difference is there between you and a roof-sneaking gentleman or a street-side thief?!"

Zhou Wenhai's voice suddenly rose sharply: "My son, Zhou Wenhai's son, the prized child of the Zhou family, is your way of scholarship to take without asking?!"

Whoosh—Zhou Yulin's face instantly flushed a purplish-red, shame and grievance twisting together within him.

"Father, this... this can't be considered stealing!" he argued urgently. "The path of learning is inherently about mutual verification and borrowing from each other. Since Brother Su's method is for investigating things, it belongs to the world as a public tool, I..."

"Silence!" Zhou Wenhai stood up abruptly, pointing at his son's nose. "Borrowing? You don't even say a word, secretly imitating behind his back, and you call that borrowing? That's plagiarism! The most despised conduct for a scholar! If you engage in such underhandedness today, tomorrow you'll entertain crooked ideas in the examination hall! Where have all your studies of the sage's books gone?!"

He paced back and forth in the hall, furious, his chest heaving violently.

Zhou Yulin was thoroughly scolded, hanging his head, fists clenched so tightly his nails nearly dug into his palms, his heart filled with resentment.

He didn't understand. Why was a clear shortcut to success seen by his father as such a despicable, unorthodox path?

Just as the father and son were locked in a stalemate, the atmosphere so thick it felt about to drip with tension, a gentle voice came from behind the beaded curtain, like a spring breeze melting frost.

"Master, what has provoked such great anger? Be careful not to harm your health."

Before the words faded, a woman dressed in an elegant long gown, with a gentle face and a refined, serene demeanor, gracefully stepped out. She was Zhou Yulin's mother, Zhou Wenhai's wife, Lady Liu.

Lady Liu immediately sensed the discord in the hall. She first soothingly patted her husband's arm, then glanced at her son's flushed face with concern.

"Lin'er, speak properly with your father. What is all this about?"

Seeing his mother, Zhou Yulin seemed to find his anchor. He recounted the whole story from beginning to end again, his tone full of grievance.

Lady Liu listened quietly, an understanding expression appearing on her face.

She didn't directly comment on who was right or wrong, but instead said softly to Zhou Wenhai, "Husband, Lin'er is also acting out of eagerness for his studies. Calm your anger first."

She paused, then shifted her tone. "In my humble opinion, this matter might not be as simple as Lin'er thinks, nor as despicable as you say, husband."

Zhou Wenhai looked at his wife, the fire in his eyes subsiding slightly.

Lady Liu continued, "From what Lin'er says, that young master Su, though young, possesses extraordinary insight and, more importantly, a broad mind. Since he could explain this method fully in front of Lin'er, it shows he is not someone who hoards his knowledge."

"Our Zhou family is a scholarly family; we value etiquette above all. For Lin'er to imitate directly was indeed improper. But why can't we try a different approach?"

Her voice was gentle, yet each word was clear: "Husband, why not have Lin'er prepare a modest gift and visit him personally tomorrow morning under the pretext of seeking guidance? Honestly state our intention, saying we greatly admire his 'method for investigating things through verification' and wish to learn a little from it, to see if he agrees."

"If he agrees, we owe him a favor and will treat him well in the future. If he doesn't, that is his right, and we will desist without pestering. This way, we neither lose the dignity of our Zhou family nor thwart Lin'er's sincere desire to learn. Wouldn't that achieve both goals?"

These words gradually smoothed the furrow in Zhou Wenhai's brow.

Observing the change in her husband's expression, Lady Liu gently added, "Husband, think about it. Could someone who devised such a marvelous method be an ordinary village child? Teacher Zhou recommended him; there must be a deeper meaning. Today, if we set aside our pride, interact with him respectfully, and forge a positive connection, for Lin'er's future... perhaps it could be a tremendous opportunity?"

The word "opportunity" acted like a key, finally unlocking the lock named "principle" in Zhou Wenhai's heart.

Yes.

He himself was a scholar and understood one truth better than anyone: true knowledge is more precious than any gold or treasure. A youth with such uniquely clear thinking, his value far exceeded just one essay on Investigating Things.

Forming a connection, rather than simply taking.

That was the superior strategy.

Zhou Wenhai let out a long sigh. The tense atmosphere in the hall dissipated along with it.

He sat down again, looking at Zhou Yulin, his gaze having returned to its usual calm and authority.

"Your mother is right. I... was being narrow-minded." He frankly admitted his own bias, then his tone shifted, becoming extremely serious. "I was also worried you would seek quick success and take a crooked path."

"Your son recognizes his mistake." Seeing his father's attitude soften, Zhou Yulin quickly bowed in acknowledgment.

"Recognizing your mistake is good." Zhou Wenhai nodded. "Tomorrow morning, you will go to the backyard yourself."

He pondered for a moment, then made a decision.

"From my study, take that 'Layered Peaks Amidst Clouds' Duan inkstone, paired with that pair of wolf hair brushes made by the Li family of Huizhou. Take them together."

Both Zhou Yulin and Lady Liu were startled.

That Duan inkstone was Zhou Wenhai's beloved possession; he usually hesitated to use it frequently himself.

"Father, this... isn't this gift too heavy?" Zhou Yulin asked hesitantly.

"Not heavy!" Zhou Wenhai stated decisively. "Knowledge is priceless! We are going to seek guidance, not to bestow charity. A heavy gift shows our sincerity. Remember, when you see Su Ming tomorrow, your posture must be even lower than today, your words even more earnest than today. You must make him understand that our Zhou family genuinely admires his scholarship, not that we merely covet his method."

"Your son... your son understands!" Zhou Yulin's heart settled greatly. His face regained its brightness, and he nodded firmly.

As this family meeting, triggered by "planting beans," moved towards a satisfactory conclusion, no one noticed that Zhou Kang, the head of the second branch who had been like a transparent presence from start to finish, had already silently withdrawn from the dining hall.

He walked into the shadows under the corridor. The evening breeze blew past, bringing a touch of coolness, but it couldn't disperse the humiliation and jealous fire in his heart.

His face contorted in the dim light, appearing particularly vicious.

His elder brother's reprimand, his nephew's admiration, the trouble his wife brought back... each and every incident pierced his heart like needles.

Why?

Some poor brat who crawled out from who knows which forgotten corner, with a few broken clay pots and some twisted reasoning, becomes the "extraordinary youth" in his elder brother's mouth, the "Brother Su" whom his nephew must treat with formal courtesy?

And they want the Zhou family to take out a treasured Duan inkstone as a gift of respect?

Lady Liu immediately sensed the discord in the hall. She first soothingly patted her husband's arm, then glanced at her son's flushed face with heartache.

A sinister thought, like a venomous snake, slithered out from the darkest corner of his heart.

He tightened the fist hidden in his sleeve, his knuckles turning white.

He couldn't let that kid step on his, Zhou Kang's, dignity so easily and rise swiftly to success.

Absolutely not!

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Chapter 24: Receiving Gifts

[1,821 words]

The next morning, as daylight first pierced through the dilapidated window lattice, casting mottled shadows on the ground.

Zhao Rui was holding a broken bowl, squatting in the corner, staring dazedly at the three clay pots while muttering under his breath.

"Natural Way Group... External Intervention Group... Adversity Survival Group..."

Each time he recited one, he scratched his head, feeling like all the books he'd read over the past decade had been fed to the yellow dog at the village entrance.

Meanwhile, Su Ming was under the old locust tree in the courtyard, slowly and steadily practicing a set of fist techniques. This routine was something Lin Yu had concocted based on ergonomics, blending the health exercises of elderly gentlemen from parks in his previous life with some basic combat stances, randomly naming it the "Body Refining Foundation Building Exercise."

The movements weren't fast, but every stretch, every exertion of force, engaged all the tendons, bones, and muscles throughout Su Ming's body. Sweat trickled down his refined cheeks, dripping onto the yellow earth beneath his feet, creating small dark patches.

"Disciple, tighten your core, sink your energy to the dantian! You're not practicing fist techniques, you're kneading dough! So soft and floppy, what kind of appearance is that!" Lin Yu was conducting his routine supervision inside Su Ming's mind, "Remember, what we're pursuing isn't lethal power, it's endurance! If you can't win a fight, you've got to be able to outrun them!"

Just then, light footsteps sounded at the courtyard gate.

Zhao Rui jolted, whipping his head around to see Zhou Yulin standing at the entrance with the gray-clothed elderly servant.

Unlike yesterday's scrutinizing gaze, today Zhou Yulin's expression carried clear respect mixed with a trace of barely noticeable nervousness. The elderly servant behind him held an exquisite rosewood box in his hands.

Zhao Rui was so startled he nearly dropped the bowl in his hand, quickly standing up and rubbing the corners of his clothes awkwardly.

Su Ming concluded his fist stance, regulated his breathing, wiped his sweat with the cloth towel hanging around his neck, and calmly looked at the visitors.

"Young Master Zhou, good morning."

"Brother Su." Zhou Yulin quickly stepped forward, cupping his hands respectfully toward Su Ming, "Hearing your words yesterday was more enlightening than reading for ten years. After returning, I couldn't sleep all night, repeatedly pondering, and increasingly felt that Brother Su's method of Investigation of Things is truly a golden key to unlocking the doors of wisdom."

He spoke with utmost sincerity, his eyes sparkling with the light of inquiry.

"Today I'm presuming to disturb you again because I have a request to make."

As he spoke, he turned sideways, and the gray-clothed elderly servant immediately stepped forward, presenting the rosewood box in his hands.

"My father heard of Brother Su's profound insights and also praised them endlessly. This is a small token of my father's esteem, and I must ask Brother Su to accept it. I boldly wish to seek instruction from Brother Su on the essence of this 'verification method,' would that be possible?"

When the wooden box opened, a serene fragrance of ink and wood instantly filled the air.

Inside the box lay bright yellow silk, upon which rested an inkstone with warm hues carved with layered mountain peaks, accompanied by two wolf hair brushes with smooth shafts and upright tips.

Zhao Rui's eyes instantly bulged.

Though he couldn't recognize quality, just looking at the stone quality of the inkstone and the carving craftsmanship of the wooden box, he knew this thing was so expensive that even selling himself wouldn't cover the cost.

Su Ming's heart also leaped violently, but his expression remained unchanged.

He glanced at the valuable Duan Inkstone, then shook his head and gently pushed the box back.

"Young Master Zhou, this is too valuable, this student absolutely cannot accept it." His tone was very sincere, "Investigation of Things to extend knowledge is the common

pursuit of all scholars. This student's occasional insights are merely fortunate coincidences, how could I profit from them. If you're interested, we can explore them together."

These words made Zhou Yulin admire him even more.

Look at this! What breadth of mind! What moral character!

Treating gold and silver as dirt, valuing only knowledge. Father was right, this person is no ordinary talent!

"Brother Su, you're mistaken!" Zhou Yulin firmly pushed the box back again, "Though knowledge is a public tool, Brother Su's wisdom is unique. This gift isn't a transaction, it's my Zhou family's respect for Brother Su's scholarship! If Brother Su doesn't accept it, you're looking down on my Zhou family, looking down on my heart for seeking knowledge!"

With him putting it so strongly, any further refusal from Su Ming would seem hypocritical.

"Steady, disciple, he's using rhetoric to pressure you into compliance." Lin Yu calmed down and began tactical guidance, "Don't panic, first show a troubled expression, then reluctantly accept. Remember, make him feel that you're accepting not because of the item's value, but because of his 'sincerity.' This is called control! Keep the initiative firmly in your hands!"

Following instructions, Su Ming showed a troubled expression on his face, pondered for a moment, then let out a long sigh.

"Since Young Master Zhou has put it this way, if this student continues to refuse, it would seem petty." He extended both hands and solemnly accepted the wooden box.

He handed the box to the dumbstruck Zhao Rui beside him, instructing him to keep it safe.

Zhao Rui held the heavy wooden box, feeling like he wasn't holding an inkstone but a mountain, so heavy his hands trembled slightly.

Seeing Su Ming accept the gift, Zhou Yulin was overjoyed, his smile becoming much more genuine.

"Thank you, Brother Su, for obliging me!"

"No need for formal instruction." Su Ming waved his hand, leading him to the three clay pots, "This method actually doesn't have much mystery, its value lies in persistence and recording."

Pointing at the clay pots, he elaborated some more detailed thoughts.

"For example, this 'Natural Way Group,' we shouldn't just observe when it sprouts and when it grows leaves, but also record daily sunlight duration, whether the weather is cloudy or clear. These are all part of the 'Natural Way.'"

"And this 'External Intervention Group,' we used the siphon method, but regarding the amount of water, is one drop more causing waterlogging, or one drop less causing drought? The 'measure' within this is the 'principle' that 'human effort' needs to explore."

"As for this 'Adversity Survival Group,' it still hasn't sprouted today, but has its seed already died? Or is it gathering strength, waiting for an opportunity? This is the mystery of 'adaptation.'"

Su Ming didn't speak quickly, but each sentence seemed to open a new window for Zhou Yulin, allowing him to see an unprecedented microcosm composed of countless details.

Zhou Yulin listened as if intoxicated, nodding frequently, extraordinary light shining in his eyes.

Their discussion lasted for half an hour.

It wasn't until the sun was high in the sky that Zhou Yulin reluctantly took his leave. Before departing, he repeatedly requested to visit often for guidance in the future.

After seeing off Zhou Yulin, Zhao Rui finally let out a long breath. He looked at Su Ming, his expression extremely complex.

"Su Ming... I used to think studying was just memorizing books, but today I learned that studying... can be done like this." He shook the heavy wooden box in his hand, "This... what do we do with this thing?"

"Keep it safe." Su Ming's expression returned to calm, as if the person who had been authoritatively directing the world wasn't him, "This is our 'travel funds.'"

He turned to look in the direction of the town, his gaze profound.

"Let's go, to register at the County School. After handling official business, we can focus on 'Investigation of Things' with peace of mind."

...

At the Qingshi Town County School office, the minor official responsible for student record registration was surnamed Qian, with a pointed mouth and monkey cheeks, his eyes constantly darting around in their sockets, exuding an air of shrewdness.

Zhou Kang had come specifically to find him.

He didn't use the main entrance but entered through the backyard, meeting Clerk Qian in a secluded tearoom.

When Clerk Qian saw it was the Second Master of the Zhou family, he immediately bowed and scraped as he welcomed him, personally brewing premium tea.

"Second Master, what brings you here today? If there's anything, you could have just sent someone with instructions."

Zhou Kang picked up the teacup, leisurely skimmed off the foam, didn't drink it, but placed the cup on the table with a light click.

"Old Qian, you've been working at the County School for over ten years now, right?"

"Thanks to your blessings, Second Master, just scraping by." Clerk Qian smiled until the wrinkles on his face piled up.

"Hmm." Zhou Kang nodded, asking as if casually, "I heard Teacher Zhou recommended two country children this year to register for the Child Scholar examination?"

Clerk Qian's heart skipped a beat, knowing the main topic had arrived.

"That's correct. The documents just arrived yesterday, one named Su Ming, the other Zhao Rui."

"Su Ming..." Zhou Kang repeated the name, a cold smile curling at the corner of his mouth, "I've heard about this child. Quite clever, but... his family background isn't very clean."

He lowered his voice, speaking mysteriously, "I heard that his family, in earlier years, had sticky fingers, stole things in the village. Though it didn't blow up, everyone in the village knows about it. Tell me, what kind of place is our County School? It's a sacred ground for selecting pillars for the court! Moral character is the foremost requirement."

Cold sweat instantly broke out on Clerk Qian's back.

How could he not understand the implication in Zhou Kang's words.

"This... what should be done?" He pretended to be troubled, "What about Teacher Zhou..."

"The old teacher is kind-hearted and easily deceived by superficial appearances." Zhou Kang sighed, putting on a pained expression, "We juniors need to screen properly for him, can't let his lifelong reputation be tarnished by a boy with moral flaws."

He patted Clerk Qian's shoulder, "You're a smart person, you know what to do. The matter doesn't need to be handled too harshly, and don't offend the teacher. Just say... their documents are incomplete, or their guarantor's qualifications are questionable, make them go back to rectify it. After going back and forth like this a few times, when their travel funds run out, they'll naturally retreat from difficulty. This way, we preserve the teacher's dignity and protect our County School's reputation, don't you think that makes sense?"

Clerk Qian immediately understood perfectly, nodding repeatedly like pounding garlic.

"Second Master is absolutely right! Second Master's insight is brilliant! Rest assured, this matter is in my hands, I'll handle it perfectly, definitely won't cause any trouble for you or the teacher!"

Zhou Kang smiled with satisfaction.

He stood up, straightened his robes, as if he had just come for tea and nothing had happened.

This was exactly the outcome he wanted.

He wanted to make sure that boy named Su Ming couldn't even touch the County School's front gate!

Thinking he could climb up by stepping on Zhou Kang's face?

Dream on!

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