

# Transmigrated into a Grandpa, Embracing the Laid-Back Life

## Chapter 25: is done.

[ 1,735 words ]

The facade of Qingshi Town's County School office was modest, with two stone lions so weathered by wind and rain their features were barely discernible, exuding an air of aged authority.

Zhao Rui stood at the entrance, his palms sweating with nervousness. He tugged at Su Ming's sleeve, his voice trembling: "Su Ming, I... my legs feel like jelly. This is the County School, the place that oversees all the scholars in our entire town."

Su Ming patted the back of his hand, signaling him to relax. His expression was calm, but only he knew that beneath that calm was the result of half an hour of mental preparation from his master, Lin Yu.

Lin Yu's voice sounded lazily in Su Ming's mind, "Disciple, remember, rules are rigid but people are flexible. If he handles things smoothly, we respond with smiles. If he puts on airs and tries to control us, don't panic. We have a contingency plan."

"What contingency plan?" Su Ming asked mentally.

Lin Yu played coy, "You'll find out when the time comes."

The two entered the County School office, greeted by the musty scent of old ink and decaying wood. The main hall was dimly lit, with only a minor official dozing behind a glossy, oil-shined counter.

"Esteemed... esteemed sir." Zhao Rui mustered his courage, his voice as faint as a mosquito's hum.

The minor official's eyelids twitched as he slowly raised his head, revealing a sharp-featured, weasel-like face. It was none other than Clerk Qian.

He glanced at the two of them, took in their faded coarse clothing, and didn't bother to conceal the disdain in his eyes.

"What do you want?" His voice was drawn out, dripping with impatience.

"Sir, we're here to register our examination credentials." Su Ming respectfully presented the recommendation letter written by Teacher Zhou along with both of their household registration documents.

Clerk Qian didn't even lift his eyelids, using two fingers to pinch the papers as if they were something filthy.

He gave them a cursory glance, then slapped the documents back onto the counter.

"Not compliant with regulations."

Zhao Rui's face instantly turned pale.

"S-sir, what's not compliant? These were personally written by Teacher Zhou, and they bear his seal..."

"Teacher Zhou?" Clerk Qian sneered, picking at his teeth with a fingernail, "Even Teacher Zhou can't break the County School's rules. This guarantor's seal is blurry and unclear. And these household registration documents—the paper is crude, the handwriting is practically fading. How can these be filed?"

Everything he said was pure nonsense, nitpicking flaws where none existed. The seal was perfectly clear, and the documents were legitimately issued by the village.

Su Ming's heart sank. He knew trouble had arrived.

"Then... may I ask, sir, how should we go about rectifying this?" Su Ming suppressed his anger and asked in a low voice.

"How to rectify it?" Clerk Qian acted as if he'd heard the biggest joke. He looked up, pointing his chin at Su Ming, "Go back, have Teacher Zhou re-stamp it using the County School's official inkpad. Then have your Village Chief countersign the household registration documents to verify your identities. Come back after you've done that!"

Hearing this, Zhao Rui grew anxious: "Sir, it takes nearly a full day's walk to get from Qingshui Village to town! If we have to go back and forth like this, we'll miss the registration deadline!"

"That's your problem, what does it have to do with me?" Clerk Qian waved his hand impatiently, as if shooing flies, "Next! Don't block the way here!"

Zhao Rui trembled with rage, wanting to argue further, but Su Ming grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

Su Ming shook his head at him.

"See that, disciple? Classic delay tactic." Lin Yu's voice turned cold, "He's not following the rules; he's targeting us. If there's no one behind this, I'll kick my own soul around like a ball."

"What do we do then, Master?" Su Ming clenched his fists inside his sleeves.

"Initiate Plan B." Lin Yu's voice regained its composure, even carrying a hint of leisurely amusement, "Remember that box I told you to bring?"

Su Ming's heart stirred.

"Don't argue with him, and don't show any fear." Lin Yu directed, "Just place that rosewood box on the counter. Do it slowly, steadily. Then open it, saying you need to check your writing tools to make sure they weren't damaged on the bumpy road."

Su Ming took a deep breath and followed the instructions.

Without saying a word, he silently placed the heavy rosewood box onto the counter.

"Thud."

A dull sound, not loud, but it made Clerk Qian's eyelids jump.

He frowned, looking displeased at Su Ming: "What are you doing? I told you to leave, can't you understand plain speech? Take your junk away!"

Su Ming ignored him, simply extending his slender fingers to slowly unlatch the box's brass clasp.

"Click."

The lid lifted slightly, revealing the bright yellow silk lining inside. That silk seemed to glow with its own light in the dim hall, dazzling Clerk Qian's eyes.

"This student merely wished to check whether the writing tools gifted by Young Master Zhou were bumped or damaged during the journey."

Su Ming's voice wasn't loud, his tone flat, but the three words "Young Master Zhou" struck Clerk Qian's heart like a heavy hammer.

Clerk Qian froze mid-action.

Young Master Zhou? Which Young Master Zhou?

His gaze was involuntarily drawn over.

Su Ming's fingers continued their movement, fully opening the box lid.

Instantly, a serene fragrance of ink mixed with the scent of precious wood permeated the air. The "Layered Peaks Amidst Clouds" Duan Inkstone lay quietly on the silk, its stone texture warm and smooth, carving exquisite, emitting a subtle, restrained glow under the light. Beside it, the pair of Wolf Hair Brushes had shafts made of high-quality mottled bamboo with natural patterns, the brush tips upright and full, clearly extraordinary items.

Even more critical was the extremely small, seal-script character branded on the inner lid of the rosewood box.

Others might not recognize it, but Clerk Qian, having worked in the County School for over a decade, identified it at a glance!

It was Zhou Wenhai's personal mark!

Clerk Qian's mind buzzed as if stung by a hornet.

He abruptly looked up, reassessing Su Ming before him.

This youth was plainly dressed, with delicate features, his expression calm as an ancient well. Yet this seemingly ordinary country boy held in his hands an item gifted by the Zhou family's eldest young master, Zhou Yulin!

A thought exploded in Clerk Qian's mind: Could this poor boy be an honored guest of Young Master Zhou Yulin? Or... perhaps a lesser-known relative of the Zhou family?

Connecting this to yesterday's instructions from Second Master of Zhou Family, Zhou Kang, cold sweat instantly broke out on his back.

The Zhou family's deities were fighting amongst themselves; if a mere mortal like him got involved and picked the wrong side, he'd be lucky to survive with his life!

Zhou Kang was indeed the Zhou family's second master, but Zhou Yulin was the future family head! The Zhou family's prodigal son!

Offending Zhou Kang would, at worst, cut off some unofficial income streams. But if he offended someone valued by Zhou Yulin...

Clerk Qian's face turned even paler than Zhao Rui's had moments before.

The flesh on his face contorted as he desperately tried to form a smile uglier than crying, his voice beginning to tremble.

"Aiyah! This... this young master, please forgive my poor eyesight! Getting old, my vision is blurry!"

As he spoke, he frantically snatched the two documents back from the counter, bringing them close to his eyes, pretending to examine them carefully.

"Aiyo! Upon closer inspection, this seal is stamped with such force it shows through the paper, perfectly clear! And these documents, while the paper is simple, it shows durability, perfectly matching our scholarly ethos of plainness and lack of ostentation! Good! Very good!"

His face-changing speed was faster than flipping a book.

Zhao Rui, standing to the side, was completely dumbfounded, his mouth agape, unable to utter a single word.

"Ahem," Clerk Qian cleared his throat, his attitude now as humble as if he'd become a different person, "A misunderstanding, all a misunderstanding! I'll process things for you two right away! Immediately!"

He picked up a brush, dipped it fully in ink, and swiftly wrote Su Ming and Zhao Rui's names in the register. Then he took out two brand-new wooden examination tokens, meticulously writing the information in small regular script, stamped them with the County School office's official seal, and presented them with both hands.

"Young masters, these are your examination registration tokens, please keep them safe. For the Child Scholar examination next spring, make sure not to be late."

Su Ming silently put away the wooden box, accepted the tokens, and handed one to the still-stunned Zhao Rui.

He gave a calm nod to Clerk Qian.

"Thank you, sir."

"Not at all, not at all! It was my failure to recognize importance, delaying your important matters. I hope, young master... you might put in a good word for me in front of Young Master Zhou." Clerk Qian bowed obsequiously, his face covered in fawning smiles.

Su Ming said nothing more, pulling the still bewildered Zhao Rui as he turned and walked out of the County School office.

Only when the warm sunlight fell on them again did Zhao Rui finally let out a long breath. He looked at Su Ming, his expression as complex as if he were seeing a monster.

"Su Ming... just now... what was that all about?"

Before Su Ming could answer, Lin Yu's triumphant voice sounded in his mind.

"See that, disciple? That's called 'a fox borrowing the tiger's fierceness.' We didn't spend a single copper coin, yet the Zhou family's reputation handled things for us. Low cost, fast results, no side effects."

Lin Yu's soul crossed his legs inside the ring: "When dealing with these petty officials who treat people differently based on status, if you reason with them, they quote rules at you. If you quote rules at them, they act shamelessly. Only when you reveal a backing harder than their master's will they kneel down and reason with you properly."

"Is this the wisdom of survival you spoke of, Master?" Su Ming asked mentally, looking at the examination token in his hand, his emotions surging.

"No," Lin Yu corrected, "This isn't called wisdom, it's called risk management. Zhou Kang is our risk, Zhou Yulin is our hedging tool. Remember, never place your hopes on others' goodwill. Learn to utilize every resource available to build your own safety barriers."

"Today's lesson is more useful than reading Sage's Books for ten years. Congratulations, disciple, you've advanced another step in your cultivation of the Way of Survival."

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## **Chapter 26: Retreat First, This Place Is Not Worth Staying For Long**

[ 1,030 words ]

Warm sunlight dispelled the chill in the County School office, yet Zhao Rui felt cold all over, as if he had just been fished out of an icy cavern.

He clutched the smooth wooden examination plaque, his palm drenched in cold sweat.

"Su Ming... that... that Qian fellow... how did he just..." Zhao Rui stammered, his mind tangled like a mess of thread that couldn't be straightened out.

One moment he was throwing his weight around, shooing them away like flies; the next he was bowing and scraping, practically kneeling to call them father. The change happened faster than mountain weather.

Su Ming tucked his own examination plaque into his chest, his movements neither hurried nor slow.

"Because of that box." His voice was calm, as if discussing something unrelated to himself.

"The box?" Zhao Rui lowered his head, glanced at the rosewood box Su Ming was holding again, his eyes filled with confusion and awe.

"He recognized it belonged to the Zhou family's eldest young master." Su Ming explained concisely.

Zhao Rui's mouth formed an "O" shape. He seemed to understand, yet felt even more confused.

"Disciple, don't explain too much to him, let him figure it out himself." Lin Yu's voice sounded in Su Ming's mind, carrying a tone of cunning calculation. "The person who gave us trouble earlier was almost certainly acting under the instructions of Zhao Rui's uncle-by-marriage, Zhou Kang."

"Since Zhou Kang would resort to such despicable methods, we can't rule out follow-up moves." Lin Yu's analysis continued. "The minor official in the government office was intimidated by us using Zhou Yulin's name, and Zhou Kang will soon know about it. A cornered dog will jump over the wall. If he becomes enraged and secretly hires some thugs to give us an 'accidental death,' that wouldn't be fun at all."

"Disciple, my advice is to immediately initiate 'strategic retreat.' This place is enemy territory, not suitable for staying long. First go to the medicine shop to inquire about the spirit grass source, then go to the book stall to buy some books."

"Yes, Master," Su Ming replied silently in his heart.

He turned to Zhao Rui and said, "Zhao Rui, we won't go to the Zhou Residence first. After finishing our business, we'll return directly to the village."

"Ah? Not... not going?" Zhao Rui was stunned.

"What would we do there? Wait for your uncle to personally come and chase us out?" Su Ming retorted.

Zhao Rui's face turned red then pale, unable to utter a single word. The humiliation on the road and the danger just now intertwined, completely breaking his spirit.

"Let's go, first take care of some proper business." Su Ming didn't look at him again, taking the lead to stride forward.

Su Ming led Zhao Rui and, relying on memory, accurately found the medicine shop called "Hui Chun Hall."

The medicine shop was quiet, with only a young clerk wearing a gray short jacket dozing off at the counter, drool nearly dripping onto the account book.

Su Ming gently tapped the counter.

"Tap, tap."

The clerk jolted awake, suddenly lifting his head and sleepily wiping the corner of his mouth.

"Cu... customer, need medicine?" When he saw Su Ming and Zhao Rui's shabby attire, the enthusiasm in his eyes quickly cooled, returning to his lazy posture.

"Brother, asking about something." Su Ming took out two copper coins from his chest, subtly pushing them toward the clerk's hand. "I want to buy some hei jie cao, do you know which village you get this grass from? If it's nearby, I can go cut it myself and save some money."

His approach was completely that of a calculating country youth.

The clerk's gaze fell on the two copper coins, his eyes lighting up slightly. He inconspicuously swept them with his sleeve, and the coins disappeared.

Having taken the money, his attitude improved somewhat.

"Hei jie cao?" He curled his lip, pulling open the bottom drawer of a row of medicine cabinets behind him, which was messily piled with dried grass.

"This stuff isn't valuable, who would specifically remember where it came from?" The clerk casually grabbed a handful and threw it on the counter. "It was all collected years ago when the shopkeeper followed traveling merchants to villages, gathered here and there. It's already been processed, who knows which remote mountain corner it came from."

He examined Su Ming again: "If you want to cut it yourself, just go to any hillside outside the city, why bother asking?"

Su Ming's heart sank. The lead was broken.

"Master..."

"Expected." Lin Yu was quite calm. "This kind of low-grade medicine shop has terrible information management. However, we got one key piece of information—'years ago.' This indicates that spiritual energy node might have existed many years ago, just very weak, or possibly even dried up already."

"No matter, this is called eliminating wrong answers. At least we know we can't get results following the medicine shop lead in the short term. Make a note of it for later. Let's go, to the book stall to get our papermaking formula."

"Thank you, brother."

Su Ming expressed thanks, pulling Zhao Rui to turn and leave.

The clerk watched their retreating figures, weighed the two copper coins in his sleeve, sneered, then lay back on the counter to continue his sweet autumn dreams.

West city corner, old locust tree.

The dense shade cast by this towering ancient locust tree separated the street's noise and summer's heat, spreading a patch of coolness on the ground. Under the tree shade, several straw mat book stalls were arranged as usual.

Su Ming led the still somewhat dazed Zhao Rui closer, his gaze habitually scanning toward the usual sitting spot behind the book stall—last time, it was a middle-aged man with weathered features and thick knuckles silently guarding these handwritten books.

However this time, the figure squatting beside the straw mat, carefully wiping a book cover with a half-dry linen cloth, made Su Ming slightly start.

"Him?" Su Ming's heart stirred. Wasn't this young man before him precisely that aloof figure from Wenbao Zhai who was scolded by the clerk yet still left with his spine straight? Although it was just a brief glance at the time, that calm yet resilient temperament left a clear impression on Su Ming. Back then he thought it was just a poor scholar who couldn't afford books, never expected...

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## Chapter 27: Xu Qing

[ 1,011 words ]

The young man heard footsteps and looked up. When he saw the newcomers were Su Ming and Zhao Rui, a faint trace of surprise flickered through his eyes, which were usually as calm as deep pools. He clearly recognized them too, especially Su Ming—from the entrance of Wenbao Zhai. His face remained expressionless, but he gave a very slight nod toward Su Ming as a form of greeting. For Zhao Rui standing beside him, he merely glanced over before refocusing on the book in his hands.

"Master, it's him! The one from Wenbao Zhai..." Su Ming said inwardly to Lin Yu.

"Oh? That kid protecting the books?" Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of amusement and understanding. "Interesting. Him being here... it seems the man you saw at this book stall last time was most likely his father. The Wenbao Zhai assistant chased him away, probably because he wanted to copy books there. Tsk, this book stall is his actual 'territory.' Disciple, opportunity has arrived, have a good chat!" Lin Yu's thinking was extremely sharp, instantly connecting the two events and pointing out the key details.

Su Ming's mind suddenly cleared. So that was it! No wonder he was chased out of Wenbao Zhai—he must have been copying books there.

"I came to look at books." Su Ming suppressed his thoughts and walked to the book stall, also nodding toward Xu Qing.

"Mm, feel free." Xu Qing's voice remained cool, but seemed slightly less tense than at Wenbao Zhai's entrance.

Zhao Rui stood to the side, looking at the spread of yellowed old books and unconsciously frowned. In his past understanding, books should be brand new and crisp like those in Wenbao Zhai, not casually laid out on a grass mat like this.

Su Ming naturally squatted down, his gaze roaming through the book piles. The books here were more varied than at Wenbao Zhai and much cheaper. He picked up an elegantly handwritten "Qingzhou Local Records" and selected another book about basic arithmetic called "Simple Explanations of the Nine Chapters."

"Disciple, ask him." Lin Yu's voice carried encouragement. "Establishing effective communication is the first step in developing connections. Start with this book stall."

Su Ming picked up "Qingzhou Local Records" and looked at Xu Qing: "Are all the books here copied by you alone?" His tone carried genuine curiosity rather than doubt.

Xu Qing paused in wiping a book cover and looked up at Su Ming. Seemingly surprised by the question, or perhaps because Su Ming was the only one who had spoken up for him at Wenbao Zhai, he remained silent for a moment before answering: "Not all. Some I copied, some were handwritten by classmates from the County School who had nowhere to sell them, so they consign them here with my father." Though his voice remained flat, there was a slight explanatory quality to it now.

"County School students?" Zhao Rui couldn't help interjecting nearby, his tone carrying a subtle complex emotion—envy? Or some kind of disappointment?

Xu Qing glanced at Zhao Rui but didn't respond, tacitly confirming it.

"I see." Su Ming nodded understandingly.

"See that, disciple." Lin Yu's voice held some excitement. "This is a ready-made, highly potential information node! He doesn't just sell books—more importantly, he connects to those impoverished County School students who copy books to make a living, who thirst for knowledge but have empty purses! This channel is far more valuable than a simple book stall. This person, think long-term, is worth deepening ties with!"

"How much for these two?" Su Ming handed over his selected books.

Xu Qing took the books and glanced at them: "Local Records, forty coins, Simple Explanations of the Nine Chapters, fifty coins, total ninety coins." The price remained far lower than Wenbao Zhai.

Su Ming promptly counted out ninety coins from his robe and handed them over. Xu Qing took them, carefully counted them, and put them away. He looked at Su Ming, a barely noticeable recognition appearing in his eyes. This youth before him, dressed just as roughly, didn't focus solely on imperial examination stepping stones like many educated people in town. The books he chose—one on local geography, one on practical arithmetic—both revealed a pragmatic and broad-minded approach.

"You bought these for the imperial exams?" Xu Qing surprisingly took the initiative to ask, his tone carrying some inquiry.

Su Ming put the books into his bundle and said frankly: "Studying isn't just for exams."

The same words once again came from Su Ming's mouth.

Zhao Rui standing nearby felt as if something had struck his heart, leaving him feeling stuffy and somewhat confused.

Xu Qing's eyes, however, suddenly brightened. He looked at Su Ming, remained silent for a moment, then suddenly said: "You... if you come to town often, you can come here to read books. Just reading without buying is fine too." He said this quickly, then slightly lowered his gaze to the book in his hands, seeming unaccustomed to actively offering such kindness.

This was almost the greatest generosity a poor scholar could offer.

"Thank you!" Su Ming clasped his hands respectfully and gave his name: "I'm Su Ming, from Su Family Village."

"Xu Qing." The youth briefly responded with his own name.

These simple two lines of dialogue, without extra politeness, silently built a bridge between the two.

"Success! Excellent!" Lin Yu praised in Su Ming's mind. "Initial interpersonal node successfully anchored! Ninety coins bought two practical books, but more importantly, using 'studying isn't just for exams' opened the door to this aloof youth's heart, and earned a precious 'knowledge access' permission. This investment shows foresight, with long-term returns!"

"Alright, disciple, the primary and secondary objectives of this trip have been achieved, with additional substantial gains. Zhou Kang remains a hidden danger, it's not wise to linger here, time to go home."

"We should go home."

Su Ming nodded, clasped his hands toward Xu Qing, then turned and walked toward the city gate with Zhao Rui, who still seemed somewhat dazed.

Xu Qing watched their retreating figures until the two disappeared around the street corner, then squatted down again and continued wiping his precious old books. Only this time, the corners of his mouth seemed to hold a very faint smile.

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[ 2,162 words ]

Su Ming and Zhao Rui walked along the cobblestone-paved street.

The book stall and that aloof youth named Xu Qing faded into the distance with the flow of people.

Zhao Rui remained somewhat absent-minded, like a puppet whose soul had been extracted, mechanically following Su Ming's footsteps.

Two sentences echoed repeatedly in his mind.

One was what Xu Qing had said: "Some were handwritten by classmates from the County School who had nowhere to sell them, so they consigned them at my father's stall."

The other was what Su Ming had said: "Studying isn't just for examinations."

Students from the County School actually needed to copy books to earn a few coins?

Studying wasn't just for examinations? Then what was it for? Zhao Rui's worldview had been completely overturned and thrown into chaos by these two statements.

"Good job, disciple." Lin Yu's lazy voice broke the tranquility in Su Ming's mind, "The initial interpersonal anchor point has been established. That kid named Xu Qing is a potential stock worth long-term investment."

Su Ming mentally acknowledged with an "mm" sound, his footsteps never pausing.

"But..." Lin Yu's tone shifted, "Establishing external connections alone isn't enough. Fortresses are most easily breached from within. Our 'base area' also needs proper maintenance."

"Base area?" Su Ming was somewhat puzzled.

"Your home, and your Teacher Zhou." Lin Yu's voice carried a calculating tone, "Whose effort made it possible for you to come to the County School for registration today?"

"Teacher Zhou." Su Ming immediately answered.

"Exactly. How much travel money do you have left after saving on accommodation and meals this time?" Lin Yu guided patiently.

Su Ming quietly touched the money pouch in his robe and calculated mentally: "Ninety coins spent on books, eight hundred fifty coins remaining."

"Over eight hundred coins! A fortune!" Lin Yu's voice exclaimed exaggeratedly, then turned serious again, "But, disciple, money is just lumps of copper when held in your hand. Spending it wisely, on what truly matters, and next time you come to Qingshi Town, you'll probably have received the first payment from papermaking!"

Lin Yu's internal monologue was quite different: "Oh my, my little ancestor, I can't sleep peacefully with over eight hundred coins on you. What if you get robbed on the road, or you get hot-headed and pick a fight? Who would I complain to then? Quickly convert it into 'fixed assets,' and specifically 'human relationship assets' that generate long-term benefits—this is the safest investment!"

Su Ming stopped walking, glanced back at the still dazed Zhao Rui, and pulled him under a relatively quiet eave by the street.

"Master, what do you mean?"

"I mean we need to go shopping." Lin Yu's voice carried an air of strategic command, "This is called 'human relationship investment,' an extremely important aspect of the

'Way of Survival.' Spend small money to accomplish big things, use minimal cost to maintain the most crucial relationship network, ensuring you live comfortably and securely in the village—this is more important than anything!"

"Then... what should we buy?" Su Ming was completely clueless about these matters.

"Follow my instructions." Lin Yu cleared his throat and began issuing orders.

"First, Teacher Zhou. He's your guide into the scholarly world and a major support for your future in the village. We can't neglect him. Go to a pastry shop and buy a respectable box of pastries. Then go to a general store and buy two liang of leaf tea. Nothing too expensive, just enough to show sincerity. This is called 'respecting teachers and valuing principles.'"

"Second, your father. He enjoys his pipe tobacco. Go to a tobacco shop and buy him a pack of the best tobacco shreds. Let him show off to his old friends while smoking, saying 'My third son bought this for me in town.' This is called 'filial piety,' and it will make him more determined to support you."

"Third, your mother and your eldest sister-in-law. Women are the most practical. Go to a cloth shop and buy two chi of durable blue cloth, dark-colored and stain-resistant. Let your mother make an apron or your sister-in-law sew sleeve covers—both would be good. This is called 'thoughtfulness.'"

"Fourth, your eldest brother. As head of the household, he carries great pressure. Let's buy something substantial—go to the butcher and get two jin of pork belly, so he can satisfy his cravings and add some richness to his meals."

"Finally, your second brother." Lin Yu's voice paused, taking on a solemn tone, "He was willing to risk his life for you—that's life-and-death friendship. Ordinary gifts would seem distant. You need to be thoughtful. I noticed the blade of his firewood knife is chipped. Go to the blacksmith and buy him a high-quality whetstone. Tell him that good steel should be used for the blade's edge—a sharpened knife makes chopping wood and hunting easier and safer."

After Lin Yu finished speaking, Su Ming's mind had already painted vivid pictures.

His father holding new tobacco shreds, showing a rare smile in the sunset. His mother and sister-in-law holding new fabric, complaining about wasting money but with joy shining in their eyes. His eldest and second brothers eating delicious pork belly, their mouths glistening with oil.

That weight felt much heavier than the nine hundred coins themselves.

"Alright, Master, I've remembered everything." Su Ming nodded firmly.

He turned and saw Zhao Rui staring at him blankly.

"Zhao Rui, I need to buy some things for my family. What about you?" Su Ming initiated the conversation.

"I..." Zhao Rui opened his mouth, his face showing confusion and embarrassment, "My... my father doesn't lack anything..."

"Your father is the Village Chief, so naturally he lacks nothing. But what you bring back yourself is different from what your father buys, isn't it?" Su Ming imitated Lin Yu's tone, speaking a rather philosophical sentence.

Zhao Rui was struck speechless by these words, his face turning red as he lowered his head.

"Come on, let's go look together." Su Ming didn't say more, pulling him toward the bustling East Market of the town.

The East Market was filled with noisy crowds—hawkers' cries, bargaining voices, and children's laughter mingling together, creating a vibrant atmosphere of daily life.

This lively energy helped Zhao Rui regain some awareness.

Following Lin Yu's instructions, Su Ming first found a pastry shop.

The shop assistant glanced at two boys in coarse clothing and barely lifted his eyelids.

"What do you want?"

"Excuse me, I'd like to look at the hibiscus cakes over there." Su Ming pointed to an exquisitely packaged box of pastries on the counter.

The assistant glanced sideways at him: "Thirty coins per box, no bargaining."

"Disciple, don't buy that." Lin Yu's voice interjected, "Flashy but impractical, good-looking but not tasty. Ask if they have freshly baked date paste cakes, wrapped in oil paper instead. Affordable, generous portions, and good flavor. We're giving gifts, not packaging."

Su Ming followed the advice: "Shopkeeper, do you have loose date paste cakes? Freshly baked ones."

The assistant finally looked properly at Su Ming. Seeing he spoke clearly, unlike ordinary village children, his attitude improved slightly: "Yes, ten coins per jin. How much do you want?"

"Two jin."

The assistant quickly wrapped two large packages in oil paper and handed them over. Su Ming paid twenty coins and carefully placed the pastries in his cloth bag.

Zhao Rui watched from the side, his expression complex. When he previously came to town, his mother always bought him the most expensive hibiscus cakes, which he'd reluctantly nibble at.

Next came the tea shop, tobacco shop, and butcher shop.

At each stop, Su Ming first listened to Lin Yu's analysis in his mind, then spoke calmly. He didn't say much, but always asked pertinent questions, neither showing timidity nor appearing like an easy target.

When buying meat, he specifically asked the butcher to select good pork belly with balanced fat and lean portions, and sweetly complimented, "Master, your knife skills are really sharp!" The butcher, pleased, even threw in a small piece of bone marrow.

Zhao Rui followed behind like a shadow. Watching Su Ming skillfully interact with various shop owners, his heart felt like a mixed spice jar had been overturned.

He realized he had never truly known this village boy before.

The Su Ming he previously saw was just a quiet, somewhat stubborn bookworm.

But today, he witnessed Su Ming's principled arguments at Wenbao Zhai's entrance, his respect for poor scholars like Xu Qing, and now his shrewdness and attentiveness while shopping for his family.

There was something about him that Zhao Rui couldn't quite describe—a seriousness and engagement with life.

Finally, they arrived at the cloth shop.

The shop owner was a shrewd woman with darting eyes who enthusiastically approached when she saw Su Ming and Zhao Rui.

"Young gentlemen, what fabric would you like? For your mothers or sisters?"

"Shopkeeper, I'd like to look at that blue homespun cloth, the durable kind." Su Ming said.

The woman immediately guided them to a row of fabrics: "Young sir has good taste. This blue cloth is most wear-resistant, perfect for fieldwork. Fifteen coins per chi."

"Fifteen coins?" Su Ming frowned—this was higher than he expected.

"Disciple, watch her eyes." Lin Yu reminded, "Her pupils are darting around—the price is inflated. This cloth is twelve coins at most. Bargain with her!"

Su Ming took a deep breath, imitating how his father usually shopped. He reached out to touch the fabric, then examined it against the light.

"Shopkeeper, your fabric is good, but the color... is too dark. We farming folks aren't too particular, actually. If it were ten coins per chi, I'd take three chi."

"Oh dear, young sir, you drive too hard a bargain!" the woman exclaimed, "I'd lose money at ten coins! Fourteen coins at most!"

"I just came from the butcher—the best pork belly was only fifteen coins per jin." Su Ming said unhurriedly, "Your fabric shouldn't be more expensive than meat, should it? Eleven coins, that's my final offer. I'll buy from you if you agree."

Zhao Rui watched in stunned silence.

He had never imagined shopping could involve such back-and-forth negotiation.

Seeing Su Ming's "take it or I'll leave" attitude, and glancing at Zhao Rui who clearly came from a wealthy family, the woman gritted her teeth: "Alright, alright, you win! Twelve coins, my lowest! Consider it making friends with you, young sir!"

"Deal." Su Ming promptly took out his copper coins.

Three chi of fabric cost thirty-six coins.

Leaving the cloth shop, Su Ming felt sweat on his back.

"Master, I..."

"Excellent work!" Lin Yu praised generously, "Reminds me of my younger days! Remember, when navigating the world, the 'Way of Survival' means not spending an extra coin where you should save, and not blinking at spending a hundred taels where you should spend. This is using good steel for the blade's edge!"

Su Ming exhaled deeply, feeling he had learned another valuable skill.

They finally found a blacksmith shop at a street corner.

The "clang-clang" of hammering and the wave of heat made Zhao Rui instinctively step back.

But Su Ming walked in.

A bare-chested muscular man was hammering a piece of red-hot iron, sparks flying everywhere.

"Master, pardon the interruption." Su Ming spoke only after the man finished a strike, "I'd like to buy a whetstone."

The blacksmith set down his hammer, wiped sweat with a cloth hanging around his neck, and asked in a deep voice: "For what kind of knife?"

"A firewood knife, and a skinning knife for hunting."

The blacksmith glanced at Su Ming, then picked a grayish-blue rectangular stone from a pile in the corner: "This one, blue sandstone. Fine texture, produces slurry quickly, sharpens blades to be sharp and durable. Fifty coins, fixed price."

Su Ming picked up the whetstone—it felt heavy in his hand, with a smooth surface and detectable fine granular texture.

"Disciple, this is the one." Lin Yu said, "This blacksmith is honest—he didn't overcharge. This stone will last your second brother ten years."

"Good, I'll take this one." Su Ming paid and carefully wrapped the whetstone.

With this, the shopping was complete.

Su Ming calculated: pastries twenty coins, tea fifteen coins, tobacco shreds twenty coins, pork thirty coins, fabric thirty-six coins, whetstone fifty coins—total spent one hundred seventy-one coins.

The money pouch felt slightly lighter, but the cloth bag was stuffed full.

As they left the blacksmith shop, Zhao Rui suddenly stopped and said quietly: "Su Ming, you... wait for me a moment."

Then, red-faced, he turned and ran back into the pastry shop they had visited earlier.

Moments later, he ran out carrying a box of hibiscus cakes exquisitely packaged in fine paper, his face showing unnatural embarrassment.

Su Ming looked at him and smiled.

Neither spoke further as they walked side by side toward the city gate.

The setting sun stretched their shadows long behind them.

"Disciple, how was today's harvest?" Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of laughter on their return journey.

"I learned a lot." Su Ming said sincerely.

"Remember, we're not spending money—we're spending human connections, bonds." Lin Yu summarized, "Every gift you give weaves a safety net for you in places you can't see. It lets you study peacefully in the village, eases your parents' worries, and deepens your brothers' affection. This net is stronger than any armor. This is the essence of the 'Way of Survival'—acting subtly, nourishing silently like spring rain."

Su Ming tightened his grip on the cloth bag containing the gifts. That weight now felt incredibly solid and reassuring.

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

## Chapter 29: Sales Channels

[ 1,521 words ]

The last traces of sunset were swallowed by the western mountains, the sky rapidly shifting from orange-red to indigo.

The outline of Qingshi Town grew blurred behind them, with only a few scattered lights resembling beans accidentally spilled by distant households.

The dirt road back to the village was rugged and uneven, the ruts pressed into it by ox carts during the day appearing like deep scars in the twilight.

Zhao Rui walked somewhat awkwardly, holding the hibiscus cakes packaged in their exquisite paper box.

The box had sharp, defined edges, unlike Su Ming's bundle wrapped in coarse cloth that could be casually slung over a shoulder. He alternated between tucking it under his arm and cradling it in his arms, finding no comfortable way to carry it, looking rather discomfited.

"Su Ming." He finally couldn't resist speaking, his voice sounding abrupt in the quiet wilderness.

"Hmm?" Su Ming responded, turning his head to look at him.

"You... you bought all those things, spent so much money." Zhao Rui's tone was complex as he looked at the bulging cloth bag on Su Ming's shoulder. "Why didn't you buy anything for yourself? Even just a candied hawthorn stick would have been something."

In his simple understanding, going out should always involve bringing back something for oneself as a memento.

"What belongs to my family, belongs to me." Su Ming's reply was simple, almost blurted out.

Lin Yu snorted lightly in Su Ming's mind, his internal monologue rich enough to stage an entire opera: "Well now, not bad, my disciple! Your awareness is quite high! Those words are spoken with such collectivist spirit! You've truly grasped the essence of my 'Way of Survival' principle of 'shared risks, shared benefits'! By binding your family to your chariot, your safety factor increases exponentially!"

Zhao Rui was stumped by these words.

Holding the hibiscus cakes in his arms, the delicate aroma of the pastries now seemed somewhat bland and uninteresting.

He thought of his own father, that Village Chief who always wore a stern face. What would his father say when he brought back this box of the town's most expensive pastries? Most likely, he would frown and say "wasting money," and that would be the end of it.

What belongs to my family, belongs to me?

Zhao Rui chewed on this phrase, feeling as if something was stuck in his heart, making him feel stifled and uncomfortable.

"Disciple, ignore him." Lin Yu's voice sounded lazily. "This kid is going through a phase of worldview reconstruction, his mind is a complete mess like a pot of congee. He won't comprehend anything you say to him right now. Let him ponder it himself. Let's talk about some serious business."

"What serious business?" Su Ming asked, slowing his pace to wait for Zhao Rui who had fallen behind.

"The papermaking matter." Lin Yu's tone turned serious. "You didn't think that grand vision of 'making the entire village prosperous' I painted for you could be achieved just by shouting slogans, did you?"

"Of course not."

"Good. For a plan to succeed, there are three key points: technology, production, and sales. Technology, we have me, no problem. Production, we'll get the whole village involved, plenty of manpower. Now, the most crucial link has arrived – sales."

Lin Yu patiently instructed: "Once we produce our paper, who do we sell it to?"

Su Ming thought for a moment and said, "The bookshops in town? Or general stores?"

"Foolish!" Lin Yu criticized without mercy. "That's practically throwing a newly hatched chick directly into a weasel's den! You, a poor kid from the village, go to those merchants who eat people without spitting out the bones with a brand new, low-cost product? What do you think they will do?"

Su Ming's mind immediately conjured images of the shrewd or arrogant faces of the shop assistants in town.

"They would push our price to the absolute minimum, interrogate us about our papermaking formula, and even... might even send people to steal it!" Su Ming quickly grasped the key issues.

"The boy is teachable!" Lin Yu praised. "Correct! Before we have sufficient strength to protect our own interests, rashly contacting those major channels is seeking our own destruction! This violates the fundamental principle of our 'Way of Survival' – safety first!"

Lin Yu's internal monologue became even more active: "Just kidding, if I let you, kid, go compete with those old foxes, what if you got tricked into revealing information, or simply got kidnapped? Where would I find another host as easy to use as you? Do I still want to sleep my five-hundred-year peaceful sleep or not!"

"Then... then what should we do?" Su Ming felt somewhat troubled.

He felt like he was guarding a gold mountain but couldn't find a safe path to dig it out and sell it.

"That's why your vision is still too narrow, kid." Lin Yu's tone carried a hint of strategic pride. "Who said selling things must involve finding merchants? What we need to find are 'end users'! And specifically, the kind of end users who need us the most and won't pose a threat to us."

"End users?" Su Ming was unfamiliar with this term.

"The people who actually use the paper!" Lin Yu explained. "Think about it, who did we meet in town today?"

Instantly, a lean and stubborn figure flashed through Su Ming's mind.

"Xu Qing!"

"Bingo!" Lin Yu seemed to snap his fingers. "Him! Think about his situation. He copies books himself, and his fellow County School students also copy books. What do they need the most?"

"Paper!" Su Ming's eyes lit up.

"Exactly! Large quantities of cheap paper!" Lin Yu's voice was excited. "The paper from Wenbao Zhai is ridiculously expensive. These poor students have to pinch every copper coin until it screams. The grass paper we produce, even if it's rough, is a hundred times better than the repeatedly soaked, washed waste paper they use now where the characters almost blur into blobs! For them, our paper would be like sending charcoal in snowy weather!"

Su Ming's heartbeat began to accelerate.

He seemed to see a clear path unfolding before his eyes.

"We sell the paper to Xu Qing, we can set the price much lower than the market rate. He can use it himself and also help us sell it to other poor students at the County School. This way, we get a stable and safe sales channel!"

"Most importantly," Lin Yu added, "Xu Qing himself is a person of proud integrity, with high self-esteem. Doing business with him is an exchange between scholars; we don't have to worry about being cheated or robbed. Behind him is a large group of poor students. This group is our perfect 'seed users'!"

"This is called what? This is called 'targeted marketing'! Selling the most suitable product, through the safest channel, to the people who need it most! We earn money, gain goodwill, and avoid attracting the greed of jackals and wolves. Three benefits with one action, perfect!"

Su Ming was completely ignited by the blueprint his master painted. He wished he could run home right now and immediately start cutting bamboo to make paper.

However, Lin Yu's voice poured cold water over his head like a bucket.

"However..." he changed his tone, "don't celebrate too early."

"What's wrong, Master?"

"Think about it, Xu Qing and the others are, ultimately, a group of poor students." Lin Yu's tone became calm and objective. "How much money can they possibly have? Even if our paper is cheap, how much can they afford to buy? Relying on them might earn your family some pocket money, but if you want to support the entire village's

papermaking workshop and let everyone get a taste of the meaty broth, their purchasing power is a mere drop in the bucket."

The flame that had just risen was instantly suppressed by more than half.

Su Ming fell silent.

Indeed, Xu Qing hesitated even when buying a book. Those County School classmates relied on copying books to supplement their family income. How much spare money could they possibly have to buy paper?

"Then... then why are we going to such great lengths to get the whole village involved if..."

"Silly boy, you must eat rice one mouthful at a time, and walk the road one step at a time." Lin Yu said with some annoyance. "The Xu Qing connection isn't our only sales route, but it is our best 'stepping stone' and 'safe harbor!'"

"Stepping stone?"

"Yes! Think about it, once our paper, through Xu Qing, spreads among the poor students of the County School, its reputation will be established. By then, naturally, real big buyers will come sniffing around. At that time, we will have mature technology, stable production capacity, and the word-of-mouth from our first batch of users. We will have the leverage to negotiate prices and terms with them!"

Lin Yu's voice became profound: "Remember, disciple. 'Surviving cautiously' isn't about not doing things; it's about making every step steady and minimizing all foreseeable risks. Approaching Xu Qing first is the opening move in our grand plan. This move doesn't seek profit, but stability!"

Su Ming let out a long sigh, the fog in his heart completely blown away.

He understood.

His master's every plan placed "safety" as the top priority. Seek stability first, then victory.

Just then, Zhao Rui, who had been silent all along, suddenly spoke: "Su Ming."

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## Chapter 30: Don't Go Into That Temple!

[ 1,936 words ]

Night fell like an ink stick slowly saturating water, silently staining through the last trace of rosy glow at the horizon.

The mountain path became rugged and indistinct, and the friendly chirping of insects from the daytime now carried a somewhat mournful tone.

"Su Ming... how... how much further?" Zhao Rui's voice was clearly breathless, the box of hibiscus cakes in his hand almost crushed out of shape by his grip.

His legs felt like they were filled with lead, each step lifting sending protests of soreness and numbness from his thighs.

Su Ming's condition was slightly better, but the heavy cloth bundle also weighed down on his shoulders, making them ache.

He glanced back at Zhao Rui's pale face and slowed his pace. "Almost there. Once we cross that mountain ahead, we should be about halfway. We'll find a place to rest soon."

"Disciple, letting your little friend suffer a bit more is beneficial." Lin Yu's voice sounded in Su Ming's mind, carrying a hint of laziness. "Jade must be carved to become a vessel. The shocks this kid has received these past few days are more than he's had in the past year. His temperament is being reshaped. Let him walk more at night, temper his character. He might even become a useful helper in the future."

Su Ming acknowledged in his heart but said nothing aloud.

He knew his master was right. The experiences of these past few days were a vivid lesson for both Zhao Rui and himself.

Suddenly, Zhao Rui seemed to have discovered something. He stopped, pointing at a dark silhouette in the mountain hollow ahead, his voice brimming with barely suppressed excitement.

"Su Ming! Look! Over there! Is that a temple? And there's firelight!"

Su Ming followed his pointing finger. Indeed, under the deep night sky, the outline of a dilapidated temple was faintly visible. More noticeable was a faint, warm, orange-yellow flicker of firelight escaping from a broken window of the temple, gently swaying in the night breeze.

"Great! It must be traveling merchants or pilgrims resting inside! Let's hurry over. At least we can find shelter from the wind, maybe even beg for some hot water!" Zhao Rui's fatigue vanished instantly, as if he had come back to life, grabbing Su Ming's arm to pull him that way.

Just as Su Ming was about to step forward, alarm bells blared in his mind.

"Halt!"

Lin Yu's voice, for the first time, was so serious, carrying an unquestionable chill.

"Master?" Su Ming's foot froze mid-step, rooted to the spot.

"Disciple, what is the first principle of my 'Way of Survival True Scripture'? Recite it."

"Safety first, think thrice before acting, anything unusual must harbor evil." Su Ming answered swiftly in his mind.

"Good!" Lin Yu's voice softened slightly but remained grave. "Now, use this principle to analyze the current situation."

Lin Yu's inner thoughts were a raging storm.

"Oh my god! This is deadly! Desolate mountains, ancient temple, midnight, ghostly fire! Isn't this the standard plot of 'exit the newbie village, turn right, straight to the mass graves'? Is this Zhao kid afraid he's lived too long? Beg for hot water? More like water from the Yellow Springs! My pension plan can't have just paid the down payment and then get cut off!"

Su Ming took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down and begin the analysis.

"This place is remote, not an official road. Ordinary merchants wouldn't come here. The temple is dilapidated, clearly long abandoned, making the presence of pilgrims even less likely. So, that firelight..."

"That firelight is the biggest problem!" Lin Yu took over, his voice exuding the steadiness of an old hand. "Disciple, think. If they were decent folk, lighting a fire in this wilderness, would they make it big and bright, both for warmth and to scare off beasts? But look at that firelight. Small, weak, hidden inside the temple, flickering, as if afraid of being discovered. What does that mean?"

A chill ran down Su Ming's spine. "It means the people inside don't want to be discovered! They are not good people!"

"A teachable student!" Lin Yu praised. "Either debt-dodging gamblers, fugitives chased by the authorities, or at worst, highway robbers who kill for money! Two half-grown kids

like us, carrying big and small bags, walking up there would be like two little fat sheep delivering themselves to the door!"

After this analysis, a cold sweat broke out on Su Ming's back.

That point of orange-yellow firelight no longer seemed warm in his eyes. Instead, it looked like the single eye of a beast opening in the darkness, full of greed and malice.

"Zhao Rui, wait!" Su Ming grabbed Zhao Rui, who had already taken a few steps.

"What now? If we don't hurry, they'll be asleep!" Zhao Rui turned back impatiently.

"That place, we cannot go." Su Ming's tone was calm but carried a firm resolve.

"Why?!" Zhao Rui's volume jumped an octave, his face full of disbelief. "Su Ming, have you gone stupid from walking at night? There's a building and you don't want to stay? You'd rather drink the wind outside? I'm exhausted!"

"Think carefully," Su Ming began to guide him, mimicking Lin Yu's logic. "The temple is so broken, clearly no one lives there. Why would someone light a fire inside for no reason? And that fire is so small, don't you find it strange?"

Zhao Rui was stunned. He had only been happy earlier and hadn't considered any of this.

Prompted by Su Ming, he too felt an indescribable eeriness emanating from that flickering light.

"What if... what if they are bad people?" Su Ming lowered his voice. "We just came back from town today, carrying things with us. If they target us..."

Zhao Rui's face instantly turned pale as a sheet.

He thought of Clerk Qian's vicious face at the County School office, of the possible traps his uncle-in-law Zhou Kang might have set. If the town was that dangerous, this remote wilderness was even more hopeless, where cries to heaven and earth would go unanswered.

A gust of night wind blew past, rolling up a few fallen leaves, making a rustling sound as if something was watching from the shadows.

Zhao Rui shivered, instinctively moving closer to Su Ming.

"Then... then what do we do?" His voice carried a tremor.

"Go around." Su Ming said decisively. "We'll keep our distance, cut through that grove over there. It's a longer walk, but it's safe."

"O-okay!" Zhao Rui didn't object this time, nodding like a chick pecking at rice.

"That's more like it." Lin Yu said approvingly in Su Ming's mind. "Problems that can be solved with words, never use force. Crises that can be solved with feet, never get close. This is called 'strategic risk avoidance,' one of the core mysteries of the Way of Survival."

Without further hesitation, Su Ming led Zhao Rui, turning away from the mountain path and plunging into the adjacent woods.

The path through the woods was even harder. Underfoot was a thick layer of rotting leaves, soft and spongy, making each step uncertain. Tree shadows loomed, the moonlight cut into fragments, casting countless shifting black patches on the ground.

Zhao Rui was too scared to breathe heavily, sticking close behind Su Ming, glancing back now and then, afraid something was following them.

They walked with their heads down for the time it takes an incense stick to burn, panting with exhaustion.

"Sh-should we have gone around by now?" Zhao Rui leaned against a tree, gasping for breath.

Su Ming also stopped to catch his breath, looking up to get his bearings.

But when he pushed aside a bush in front of him, his entire body froze.

Not far ahead, in the mountain hollow, the dark silhouette of that dilapidated temple still stood quietly.

That point of orange-yellow firelight, visible through the swaying branches, was aimed right at them, like a mocking eye.

"How... how is this possible?" Zhao Rui's voice cracked. "Weren't we walking forward? How are we back?!"

"Don't panic. It's too dark, maybe we circled in the woods." Su Ming forced himself to sound calm, but his own heart sank.

"Disciple, the situation is wrong." Lin Yu's voice also lost its usual laziness. "I sense an extremely faint energy fluctuation, very similar to a certain kind of... mind-befuddling formation. To put it plainly, you might have encountered a 'ghost wall.'"

"Ghost wall?" Su Ming's heart skipped a beat.

"Don't be afraid. These low-level maze formations usually just trap people, with little killing power. But its very existence means there is definitely something strange in that broken temple!" Lin Yu's inner monologue was scrolling rapidly. "We're done for! I knew it! Horror movie laws don't lie! Great, we've switched from 'active suicide' mode to 'passive containment' mode! What the hell is being raised in that temple?"

"Let's... let's try again!" Su Ming gritted his teeth, pulling up the nearly paralyzed Zhao Rui, choosing a different direction, and setting off again with heads down.

This time, he deliberately used a stone to mark the trees they passed.

However, half an hour later, when they stopped, utterly exhausted, the trunk bearing his mark appeared right before their eyes.

And not far away, that dilapidated temple still clung to their line of sight like a persistent maggot, a lingering ghost.

"Ah—!"

Zhao Rui finally broke down. He plopped down on the ground, his face devoid of color, lips trembling as he pointed at the temple, unable to form complete sentences.

"G-ghost... there's a ghost! Su Ming! We're haunted! By the ghost in that temple!"

Fear, like icy vines, instantly wrapped around their hearts.

The surrounding woods seemed to come alive, every shadow like a monster baring its fangs, the wind turning into a mournful wail.

A chill also ran down Su Ming's spine, but he knew he couldn't panic.

If he panicked, it would truly be over.

"Master! What do we do?" He cried out urgently in his heart.

"Calm down! Disciple, the more critical the moment, the calmer you must be!" Lin Yu's voice was like a stabilizing pillar. "Panic solves nothing. It only accelerates your physical exhaustion and plunges you into deeper despair. You are my disciple, Lin Yu's disciple, the future inheritor of the Way of Survival. A mere ghost wall, why panic!"

Lin Yu's inner thoughts: I'm panicking! I'm panicking! I'm just a wisp of a remnant soul, forget fighting, I can't even see what a ghost looks like! Disciple, you must hold on, you are my only hope!

Scolded by his master, Su Ming shuddered violently, his mind clearing a bit.

He took deep breaths, forcing himself not to look at that heart-palpitating temple, and began carefully observing their surroundings.

"Master, is there a way to break this formation?"

"A way... theoretically, yes." Lin Yu pondered. "All things have their formation core. Find the core, destroy it, and the formation dissolves. But the problem is, my soul power is weak now, my perception range limited. I simply can't find where the core is."

He paused, his tone becoming exceptionally heavy.

"Moreover, such maze formations usually have one characteristic."

"What characteristic?"

"It continuously drains the stamina and mental energy of those trapped. When you are utterly exhausted and your mental defenses collapse, that's when the master of the formation... comes out to 'harvest.'" Lin Yu's voice echoed eerily.

"So, disciple, we now face a choice."

"Either, we keep circling in these woods until we die of exhaustion or fright."

"Or..."

Lin Yu didn't finish, but Su Ming already understood.

He raised his head, his gaze piercing through the layers of tree shadows, landing once more on that dilapidated temple exuding an ominous aura in the night.

That sole flicker of firelight was like a fatal lure, yet also the only possible exit.

The wind grew colder.

Su Ming clenched his fists, nails digging deep into his palms.

He looked at Zhao Rui, slumped on the ground and starting to sob quietly, then looked at that temple that seemed impossible to escape.

There was no way back.

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[ 1,740 words ]

Dead silence.

Apart from Zhao Rui's barely suppressed sobbing, the entire forest was filled only with the mournful wail of wind through the treetops.

The sound was like countless wronged souls whispering, worming into the ears and pouring bone-chilling cold directly into the marrow.

Fear's invisible hand clenched Su Ming's heart tightly, each beat heavy and laborious. He stared fixedly at that dilapidated temple; that flickering orange-yellow firelight brought not a shred of warmth. Instead, it was like a hellish guiding lantern, emanating a fatal allure.

We're done.

This thought uncontrollably surfaced.

Just as he was almost swallowed by despair, a voice sounded in his mind, calm as a stone dropped into an icy lake, instantly shattering the thin ice of panic.

"Disciple, there's no time to hesitate."

It was Master!

Lin Yu's voice carried not a trace of panic, yet held an unprecedented seriousness.

"This maze formation is draining your vital essence, energy, and spirit. Look at Zhao Rui, he's almost at his limit. If we delay any longer, even without any ghosts, you'll be exhausted to death right here."

Su Ming whipped his head around to look at Zhao Rui, who was slumped on the ground, hugging his knees and trembling violently. His face was as pale as paper, his lips were blue, his eyes were unfocused—clearly, his mind was on the verge of collapse.

"Master..." Su Ming's voice was hoarse and dry.

"This master... has one method, perhaps worth a try." Lin Yu's voice paused, as if weighing his words. "But, it's extremely perilous!"

Lin Yu's inner world was currently far from being as still as an ancient well; it was more like a pot of boiling lava, bubbling wildly with complaints.

"Damn it, we're going for it! My five-hundred-year slacker life was peaceful and uneventful. How come I run into this kind of newbie village final boss scenario just after taking on a disciple? This isn't scientific! This goes against the Way of Survival spirit!"

"But this feeling... this pure, sinister aura... For others, it's deadly poison, but for this wisp of a remnant soul like me, it's practically a perfect tonic! Even if it might be laced with arsenic, it smells so good!"

"Gamble! Fortune lies within danger! Bah, survival lies within danger! If we keep passively draining like this, the bit of spiritual energy gathered by the spirit gathering array won't even be enough to fill the gaps of this ghost wall! My soul body will degrade from 'semi-transparent' back to 'almost invisible'! My pension fund can't have its payments cut off!"

He quickly suppressed these chaotic thoughts, reassembling a profound and unfathomable tone.

"Disciple, listen carefully." Lin Yu's voice was steady as a mountain. "This master is a remnant soul, formless and immaterial. I am most sensitive to the yin souls and ghostly entities of this world."

This half-truth, half-falsehood immediately captured Su Ming's full attention.

"That thing inside the temple, the aura it emits, is precisely the source of this maze formation. It laid down this formation to trap passing living beings, like penning livestock, waiting for the prey to become exhausted and mentally defenseless before emerging to slowly feast."

Lin Yu's description made Su Ming envision a picture of a spider spinning a web, quietly waiting for moths.

And they were the two moths that had already crashed into the web.

"Then... Master, what do you mean?" Su Ming held his breath.

"Take away the firewood from under the cauldron!" Lin Yu's voice was resolute. "Since there's no retreat, then we strike directly at the heart! This master will personally go and meet the source of this formation!"

Su Ming's eyes instantly lit up, as if grasping the last lifeline. "Master, you can deal with it?"

"Hmph." Lin Yu let out a meaningful snort, appearing full of confidence.

Inner thoughts: "Deal with what? I don't even have a physical body, how am I supposed to deal with it? My plan is: you tank at the front, I'll follow behind and secretly siphon mana, take a sip and run! This is called 'strategic resource theft!'"

"However," Lin Yu changed tack, "this master's soul body is currently weak, confined by this ring's seal, unable to stray too far from you. More importantly, if I approach such a place of evil alone, the clash of yin energy would likely scatter my soul to the winds on the spot."

The hope that had just ignited in Su Ming was doused with another bucket of cold water.

"Therefore, this method requires your cooperation." Lin Yu finally revealed the core.

"Me?" Su Ming pointed at himself, his face full of astonishment.

"Correct." Lin Yu's tone brooked no argument. "You are a living person, possessing yang energy. This yang energy is like scorching flames to that evil entity, but for me, it is the best protection. What you need to do is walk to the front of that temple's door, use your own yang energy to cover for me. This master has a secret method to infiltrate the temple and strike directly at its vital point!"

Su Ming was completely dumbfounded.

Go... go to the temple door?

Wasn't that actively putting their heads under the executioner's blade?

He instinctively retorted, "Master! Didn't you say safety first, think thrice when encountering matters, and that anything abnormal must involve demons? Us actively delivering ourselves... this..."

This completely violated the "True Scripture of the Way of Survival" that Master had taught!

"Foolish!" Lin Yu's low shout jolted Su Ming.

"The core of the Way of Survival is seeking life, not waiting for death! When all escape routes are blocked, and the only path to survival lies within the tiger's mouth, we must learn to pull the tiger's teeth!"

"Right now, we are trapped here—this is a 'desperate situation.' Waiting for death is a 'dead end.' This master's plan seems perilous, but it uses the smallest cost to seize that sliver of hope—this is 'breaking the deadlock!' This is the supreme realm of the Way of Survival—'seeking life through death!' Do you understand?"

Lin Yu inwardly complained: "Damn, I'm a genius! I can spin such ridiculous nonsense into something so stirring and moving! What a waste of talent not becoming a pyramid scheme leader!"

His words made Su Ming's blood surge with excitement, yet also filled him with fear and trepidation.

He looked at the dilapidated temple crouching in the darkness like a giant beast, then at Zhao Rui beside him, who was already losing his mind.

Master was right.

Waiting meant death.

Taking a gamble might offer a chance to live.

Moreover, Master was a remnant soul whose life was connected to his own; he would never joke about his own survival.

This risk had to be taken!

"Master, I understand!" Su Ming gritted his teeth. The fear in his eyes faded, replaced by the determination of a youth. "What should this disciple do?"

"Good! Worthy of being Mysterious Dust Master's disciple!" Lin Yu praised. "Your temperament is not bad. Listen, first find a way to calm Zhao Rui down. His crying and shouting will alert the thing in the temple. Then, adjust your breathing, eliminate distracting thoughts, and walk step by step, at a steady pace, towards the temple door."

"Remember, your steps must be firm, your gaze must be steady, silently recite foolish things like 'Heaven and Earth possess righteous energy' in your heart... uh, envision the scorching sun at its zenith, imagine yourself as a walking flame. The stronger your yang energy, the stronger the protection for this master, and the greater our chances of success!"

Inner thoughts: "Don't you dare chicken out, good disciple! Your yang energy is my bulletproof vest! If you chicken out, these old bones of mine will be directly exposed to enemy fire!"

Su Ming took a deep breath and nodded.

He turned around, walked up to Zhao Rui, crouched down, and shook his shoulders firmly.

"Zhao Rui! Stop crying! If you want to live, listen to me!"

Zhao Rui's crying abruptly stopped at his shout, only staring at him blankly.

"Listen," Su Ming's tone was authoritative, carrying an unprecedented sense of command. "We must go to that temple now. You follow behind me. No matter what you see or hear, you are not to make a sound, not to run around! Grab my clothes tightly, you take one step for every step I take! Understood?"

Perhaps infected by Su Ming's calm demeanor, or perhaps because the instinct for survival overpowered fear, Zhao Rui nodded as if bewitched.

Su Ming pulled him up, positioning him half a step behind.

He closed his eyes and, following Master's instructions, visualized in his mind the blazing sun of a summer afternoon in his own courtyard.

The scorching sensation of sunlight on his skin, the sticky feeling of sweat trickling down his back, the steaming heat waves in the air...

A warmth seemed to truly rise from his Dantian, flowing through his limbs and entire body.

He opened his eyes and took the first step.

"Thud."

The sound of footsteps was terrifyingly clear in the dead silence of the forest.

He no longer detoured, but walked straight towards the dilapidated temple emanating an ominous aura.

The mist in the forest seemed to thin slightly, the path ahead becoming clearer.

The dilapidated temple continuously enlarged in his vision.

He could see the peeling wall plaster, the collapsed eaves, and the two stone lions at the entrance, eroded by wind and rain into blurred, unrecognizable forms.

The closer they got, the more piercing the cold in the air became, mixed with a faint, cloyingly sweet and fishy stench, like old cosmetics blended with rotting flesh.

Zhao Rui behind him trembled like a sieve in the wind, his teeth chattering, but he bit his lip hard, his fingers clutching Su Ming's clothes so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

Ten zhang.

Five zhang.

Three zhang.

Su Ming finally came to a stop, only a few steps away from the temple door.

The old, dilapidated temple door, its red lacquer long since peeled away, was slightly ajar.

The orange-yellow firelight seeped precisely through that crack, casting mottled light and shadow on a small patch of ground before the door.

The wind stopped.

The insect chirps also vanished.

The entire world seemed to consist only of him and this eerie, broken temple.

"Master?" Su Ming called out in his heart.

"Very good, disciple, stand firm, don't move!" Lin Yu's voice held a trace of suppressed excitement. "Now! Watch your master!"

Before the words fully faded, Su Ming felt a slight chill on the fingertip wearing the ring.

A shadow he could not see, a wisp of nothingness, drifted silently out of the ring like a puff of blue smoke. Sheltered by the yang energy of Su Ming's body, it shot like lightning through the crack in the door and vanished into the deep darkness within the temple.

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

## Chapter 32: A Cheat Skill?

[ 1,379 words ]

As he stepped inside—no, as his soul form drifted in—Lin Yu felt like he had fallen into a vat of stinky salted fish that had been left to ferment for three hundred years.

That sickly sweet, fishy stench hit him head-on, so thick it almost made his wispy, insubstantial soul sneeze.

Lin Yu grumbled inwardly, "Holy crap! This smell is way too overpowering! It's like a biochemical weapon!"

The inside of the temple was even more dilapidated than it looked from outside.

Cobwebs hung thick as quilts from the collapsed beams and corners, coated in dust and the corpses of unknown tiny insects.

The statue in the center had collapsed on one side, its clay face so eroded it was unrecognizable, leaving only one hollow eye staring toward the doorway with a mixture of pity and eerie menace.

That faint orange glow came from a broken lantern on the offering table before the statue.

The lantern's paper shade was painted with a distorted image of a beautiful woman, whose smile seemed to shift between charming and sinister as the flame flickered.

The lamp oil was clearly no ordinary substance—it burned without smoke, producing only that cloying, fishy-sweet scent strong enough to drive a soul right out of its body.

And beside the lantern, something hovered.

It was a mass of pure, twisted darkness, like a lump of ink carelessly kneaded, vaguely suggesting a humanoid shape yet constantly writhing and changing form.

"Click... click-click..."

A grinding, teeth-gnashing sound emanated from the black mass, brimming with greed and hunger for flesh and blood.

Its "gaze" was fixed intently on the temple doorway, locked onto Su Ming's body, which radiated tempting, vibrant yang energy.

Lin Yu thought, "Alright, case closed. Judging by the look, this is either a vengeful female ghost or some mountain spirit or wild monster. Taste is terrible, interior design gets a negative score, user experience zero! Let's wrap this up quick—my soul is about to get marinated in this stench!"

Lin Yu silently hid in the shadow of a relatively intact pillar behind the door, disguising himself as an ordinary patch of darkness.

His plan was simple.

If the enemy doesn't move, I don't move.

If the enemy moves... well, I'll see how my disciple reacts first!

Just then, the black mass seemed to lose patience.

It was no longer content with absorbing the stray wisps of life energy—it wanted a feast!

The black shadow suddenly shuddered, transforming into a sharp, black wind that silently slipped through the door crack, shooting straight for Su Ming's face!

Its speed was terrifyingly fast!

Su Ming's pupils contracted sharply. All he saw was a black mass rushing toward him. Instinct made him want to retreat, but his feet felt as if they were filled with lead, unable to move!

At this critical moment!

Lin Yu had no time to think, and no room to worry about maintaining his lofty demeanor.

If he didn't act now, his freshly acquired retirement plan would be scrapped on the spot!

"Hum—!"

The ring on Su Ming's finger suddenly erupted with a circle of deep, dark light!

Another phantom shadow charged toward Su Ming!

It was no longer the outline of an ethereal, immortal elder.

Instead, it was a much more solid soul form!

Across the surface of this soul form, countless intricate, ancient sealing patterns, like thorns, appeared. Between these patterns, six eerie crimson lines flowed slowly as if alive, emitting a heart-palpitating aura of fierce, baleful energy!

At this moment, Lin Yu didn't resemble a celestial being at all—he looked more like an ultimate demonic fiend that had crawled out from the deepest depths of hell!

"Master?!"

Su Ming saw the suddenly appearing, oppressive, terrifying soul form and cried out in shock.

The black shadow's "click-click" laughter cut off abruptly, replaced by a piercing shriek!

It felt a fear rooted in the very hierarchy of life!

This thing that had suddenly appeared before it was a terrifying existence it could not comprehend at all!

It wanted to retreat!

But Lin Yu had already pounced!

No flashy spells, no intricate techniques—only the most primitive, most savage tearing!

Lin Yu's soul form collided with the black shadow in an instant!

"Riiip—!"

It sounded like two pieces of ragged cloth tearing at each other.

The black shadow shrieked, countless streams of frigid energy transforming into sharp claws that raked viciously across Lin Yu's soul form.

An excruciating, soul-rending pain instantly flooded Lin Yu's consciousness!

Lin Yu thought inwardly, "It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts! Damn it! This hurts worse than having my soul scorched by the sun! This bastard has armor-piercing effects!"

At the same time, Su Ming, who was already horrified to the extreme, shuddered violently.

An equally soul-tearing pain exploded without warning from his chest. He let out a scream, his knees buckling, and he fell heavily to the ground.

"Argh!"

"Master..." Su Ming curled up on the ground, body convulsing. He felt as if his soul were being pulled apart by countless hands, about to be torn to shreds at any moment.

He finally understood viscerally what his master meant by "extremely perilous"!

Lin Yu's situation was even worse.

After all, he was just a wisp of a remnant soul, while the other was an old ghost with deep cultivation and abundant yin energy.

After a few exchanges, Lin Yu's soul form was torn so badly it flickered unsteadily, on the verge of dispersing.

Seeing this, the black shadow let out a triumphant shriek, its attacks growing even more frenzied!

Lin Yu grumbled inwardly, "No good! Can't hold on! Five hundred years of cultivation about to be destroyed! I can't die! My retirement life! My lazy, carefree existence! I haven't even seen my disciple provide for me in my old age yet!"

At this life-or-death moment, an instinct from the deepest part of his soul was completely awakened by this agony and despair!

It was a feeling... of hunger!

A ravenous hunger for the frigid energy before him!

This thing, though toxic, seemed... edible?

And highly nourishing at that!

Let's gamble!

"Come to me, you bastard!"

Lin Yu let out a beast-like roar in his heart.

His soul form no longer maintained a human shape. It abruptly contracted, then erupted violently!

A dark vortex appeared out of thin air!

The vortex's center was an abyss-like darkness, while its edges swirled with those six ominous crimson lines. The sealing thorns flickered faintly, emitting a terrifying suction force that seemed capable of devouring everything!

The black shadow, which had been swaggering triumphantly, suddenly froze.

It felt that irresistible pulling force, as if its entire soul form were about to be dragged in and crushed!

Fear drowned its greed.

It let out an extremely shrill scream, turning to flee back into the depths of the temple.

But it was too late!

The vortex's suction force suddenly increased tenfold!

"No—!"

The black shadow only had time for one despairing howl before it was violently yanked back. Its massive soul form was stretched, twisted, and torn into the purest fragments of yin energy mid-air, then, like countless rivers flowing into the sea, completely devoured by the dark vortex!

The entire process lasted no more than a snap of the fingers.

"Burp..."

Lin Yu's soul form regained its outline, only now it was several times more solid than before—even somewhat... bloated.

He let out a belch. A stream of refined yin energy rampaged through his soul form, making him feel dizzy and stuffed.

Lin Yu thought inwardly, "Oh boy... I overate... This feels like someone who's starved for three days suddenly downing ten bowls of braised pork belly—so greasy it's sickening... But damn, it feels good!"

As the black shadow was devoured, the eerie lantern inside the temple went "puff," its flame extinguishing.

The chilling cold and mist that had enveloped the entire forest rapidly dissolved.

The wind began to blow again, and the chirping of insects in the woods resumed.

Above the sky, a few sparse, bright stars became clearly visible.

The dilapidated temple now looked like nothing more than an ordinary, run-down shrine, devoid of any eeriness.

Su Ming gasped for breath, his entire body drenched in cold sweat, collapsed on the ground unable to move. Zhao Rui had even fainted.

Still shaken, he looked at his finger.

The archaic ring rested there quietly, as if everything that had just happened was merely an illusion.

"Master..." He mustered all his strength to call out weakly in his heart, "Are... are you alright?"

The ring's glow dimmed. Lin Yu's aura became extremely faint and chaotic. He only managed to transmit one last message: "Disciple... leave quickly... this place is not safe to linger... your master needs to enter deep sleep... to digest..." before falling completely silent.

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

## - Chapter 33: Awakening

### Chapter 33: Awakening

[ 1,803 words ]

The excruciating pain of being torn apart deep within Su Ming's soul was slowly fading, transforming into a bone-deep ache and exhaustion. He lay sprawled on the ground like a fish thrown ashore, without even the strength to lift a finger.

"Master..."

He called out weakly in his heart, but the only response was the ring's icy coldness and dead silence.

Master had fallen into a deep slumber.

This thought instantly seized his heart with a wave of immense panic.

He turned his head and saw Zhao Rui lying unconscious not far away, limp as a pile of mud.

Can't stay here!

This thought lashed at his weary nerves like a whip.

"Zhao Rui! Wake up!" Su Ming crawled over using both hands and feet, pushing and shaking him with all his might.

Zhao Rui's body was soft and limp, showing no reaction.

"Wake up!" Su Ming grew anxious and, not caring about anything else, raised his hand and gave Zhao Rui a resounding slap.

"Smack!"

The crisp sound was particularly piercing in the silent woods.

"Ugh..." Zhao Rui let out a pained groan, his eyelids fluttering a few times before he finally slowly regained consciousness.

His gaze was dazed, staring blankly at the night sky for a long while before finally focusing on Su Ming's anxious face.

"Su... Su Ming?" His voice was dry and hoarse, "I... what happened to me? My head hurts so much..."

The tide of memories suddenly flooded in.

The dilapidated temple, the twisted beauty lantern, and that indescribable, terrifying black shadow that came rushing at them!

"Ghost! There's a ghost!" Zhao Rui abruptly sat up, letting out a shrill scream, scrambling backward on his hands and feet, all color draining from his face.

"Shut up!" Su Ming roared in a low voice, carrying an authority he himself hadn't realized he possessed, "Do you want to attract something else? Get up, we need to leave here right now!"

Zhao Rui was stunned by his shout. Seeing Su Ming's equally pale but exceptionally determined face, that hysterical fear was forcibly suppressed a bit, leaving only uncontrollable trembling.

Su Ming struggled to stand up, his calves trembling. He grabbed the still-shaking Zhao Rui, dragged him, and stumbled desperately along the path they came from.

He didn't dare look back, always feeling that in the darkness of that ruined temple, countless eyes were still watching their backs.

The cloth bag on his back swung constantly as he ran, the contents inside colliding with each other. He heard something fall to the ground, but he couldn't care less.

The two of them scrambled and stumbled, falling who knows how many times, until they completely ran out of the woods and saw the vague outline of the village in the distance. Only then did they both collapse from exhaustion, plopping down into the grass by the roadside, gasping for breath.

The relief of surviving a disaster, mixed with boundless exhaustion, swept over their entire bodies.

Early the next morning, when the first ray of sunlight shone on his face, Su Ming finally woke up.

He and Zhao Rui, covered in mud and dew, looked like two little beggars.

Supporting each other, they limped back to the village.

"Isn't that the Su family's third boy and the Village Chief's kid?"

Widow Li, washing clothes at the village entrance, sharp-eyed, was the first to spot them. Her voice immediately rose, "Oh my heavens, you two, did you fall into some ravine? How did you end up in such a state!"

That shout was like lighting a fuse.

Soon, Mrs. Chen rushed out from home, checking for any injuries. Su Shan followed closely behind, his face ashen, lips tightly pursed, still clutching the newly bought tobacco pipe in his hand, but the deep worry in his eyes couldn't be hidden.

Eldest Brother Su Feng and his wife Wang Chuntao, Second Brother Su Yang, also gathered around.

Zhao Rui was also taken away by his family who had heard the news. His father's face turned as dark as the bottom of a pot when he saw his son in that state.

Inside the Su family's main hall, the atmosphere was oppressive.

Mrs. Chen was still wiping tears, while Su Shan sat silently in the main seat, smoking his pipe one puff after another. Smoke swirled, obscuring his expression.

"Speak! What on earth happened!" Su Shan finally spoke, his voice seeming to rumble from his chest.

Su Ming hung his head, not knowing how to explain.

Say they encountered a ghost, and then an old grandpa residing in a ring saved them?

If he said that, his parents would surely think he'd lost his mind.

"We... we came back from town late, wanted to take a shortcut back, and got lost... in the woods." Su Ming spoke vaguely, "Then it got dark, it seemed like... we were chased by wild dogs, got scared and ran around, accidentally fell down a small slope..."

This explanation was full of holes, but at the moment, it was the only excuse he could think of.

At this point, Su Ming remembered something and hurriedly began carefully taking things out of that tattered cloth bag. He first took out the crushed and misshapen oil paper package and handed it to his mother and sister-in-law, his face somewhat embarrassed, "Mother, sister-in-law, these are... the date paste cakes I bought for you... wanted to give you something sweet, but now they're all... And here's the blue homespun cloth."

Mrs. Chen took the misshapen pastries. Looking at her son's guilty expression, her eyes reddened again, but she forced a smile, "Silly child, why buy these... Mother knows you have a good heart. These cakes... still smell fragrant!"

Next, Su Ming took out the small cloth bag containing the tobacco shreds and handed it to his father. The edges of the bag were also smudged with some mud.

"Father, the tobacco shreds I bought for you... the stall owner said it was the best..." His voice grew smaller and smaller.

Su Shan took the small cloth bag. His rough fingers rubbed the bag's fine texture and the mud stains, remaining silent for quite a while. He untied the string at the bag's opening, lowered his head, and took a deep sniff. The rich, mellow aroma of tobacco instantly dispelled the last trace of severity between his brows.

He didn't speak, just knocked the tobacco pipe bowl against the sole of his shoe, then carefully pinched a bit of the golden tobacco shreds, filled the pipe, lit it, and took a deep drag. Amidst the swirling smoke, he vaguely grunted "Hmm," but the slight upward curve of his lips was seen by everyone.

Finally, Su Ming solemnly picked up the heavy, thickly cloth-wrapped bluestone whetstone and handed it to Second Brother Su Yang.

"Second Brother, this is for you. I saw your firewood knife is old. This... sharpens quickly."

Su Yang took the heavy stone. It felt cool and solid in his hand. He lifted the thick cloth and saw the bluish-gray, fine-textured stone surface. His eyes immediately lit up. He was a practical person, not one for fancy words. He just kept rubbing the stone's surface, nodding heavily, "Good stone! Third Brother, good! This is good!" Joy overflowed from his expression.

Su Ming's heart sank. That two jin of pork belly was probably lost during the escape.

"Eldest Brother, the meat I bought for you is lost. I..."

"It's fine!" Eldest Brother Su Feng interrupted him with a frown, "It's good that you're safe. If things are lost, they're lost."

Mrs. Chen looked at the dirty cloth, complaining with her mouth about "wasting money," but her eyes reddened again.

A storm finally slowly subsided amidst the family's complex emotions of heartache and relief.

Life seemed to return to its original track.

Su Ming continued reading, practicing calligraphy, meditating, and "body tempering" every day, occasionally helping with household chores.

But only he himself knew that his world had already been turned upside down.

Every day, he would call out dozens, even hundreds of times in his heart.

"Master?"

"Master, are you awake?"

"Master, are you alright?"

The ring showed no reaction.

That ancient ring just sat quietly on his finger, cold to the touch, like an utterly ordinary, lifeless object.

One day, two days...

One week, two weeks...

Time passed bit by bit. Panic and anxiety gradually gave way to an even more terrifying emotion—doubt.

Could it be... that everything that night was just an illusion?

Had he, in extreme fear and exhaustion, imagined an all-powerful master to save himself?

That heart-wrenching pain might have just been from the impact of falling down the slope?

Once this thought arose, it grew wildly in his heart like vines.

He began to scrutinize everything he had experienced.

"Reading isn't just for exams"—was that his own sudden realization?

"Human relationships and worldly wisdom are the strongest armor"—was that also something he came up with?

Going to buy those gifts, haggling with the shop owner woman—were they all just subconscious actions on his part?

The more he thought about it, the more absurd it seemed. The more he thought, the more panicked he felt.

If Master was fake, then everything he had done during this time was nothing but a joke, right? A clown talking to himself?

He stroked the ring, feeling not hope, but a heavy sense of mockery.

A month passed.

Su Ming was almost in despair.

He no longer called out every day, only occasionally asking out of habit in the quiet of the night, then falling asleep with a heavy sense of loss.

He poured more energy into studying, as if only this could fill the emptiness in his heart, keep him from thinking about that master who might not even exist.

This night, a light drizzle fell outside the window.

Su Ming, under the dim oil lamp, was troubled by the annotation of an obscure character. He had searched through all the books at hand but couldn't figure it out. A wave of irritation surged in him.

He slammed the book shut with a "thump," rubbing his temples in frustration.

His gaze involuntarily fell on the ring on his finger again.

Suddenly, a wave of sudden dizziness hit him, making his vision go dark, almost causing him to collapse.

Immediately after, a voice so faint it was almost inaudible, yet utterly familiar, sounded deep in his mind.

"Burp..." A satisfied, drawn-out belch.

Su Ming's entire body froze instantly.

He even thought he was hallucinating.

Lin Yu: "Holy crap... slept like the dead... This nap, feels like my soul body gained a whole layer of fat. No, image, gotta maintain the image of a lofty master... Where's my cheap disciple?"

A slightly ethereal but still trying-to-sound-profound voice slowly rang out:

"Disciple... your master... is fine now."

Su Ming's body trembled violently.

He abruptly extended his left hand, staring fixedly at the ring.

The cold ring now emitted a faint, almost imperceptible warmth, like a heart that had been still for a long time, beginning a weak beat again.

Not an illusion!

It was real!

Master was real!

Over a month of fear, self-doubt, disappointment, and despair all transformed into a scalding torrent at this moment, washing away all his pretense.

The young man's eyes immediately reddened.

His voice trembling, choked with tears, he shouted ecstatically in his heart:

"Master! You... you're finally awake!"

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## **Chapter 34: This Thing Has Side Effects Too**

[ 1,675 words ]

Su Ming's voice trembled in the silent night, carrying a month's worth of pent-up grievance and wild joy.

"Master! You... you're finally awake!"

Bean-sized tears could no longer be held back, rolling down the youth's cheeks and falling onto the old book pages, smudging a small patch of ink.

Lin Yu secretly complained, "Hey, hey, hey, don't cry! You crying like this makes me seem like a heartless scoundrel who abandoned the lonely and widowed... no, a heartless master! My image! My lofty demeanor is about to collapse!"

Lin Yu's soul body frantically "steadied itself" inside the ring and cleared his (non-existent) throat.

He tried his best to make his voice sound ancient and unrippled, carrying a trace of weariness and vicissitude from just waking from deep meditation.

"Foolish child, with such an unstable state of mind, how can you seek the Great Dao?"

The voice sounded directly in Su Ming's mind, gentle yet carrying a hint of reproach, yet it was like the warmest flame, instantly dispelling all the coldness and terror in Su Ming's heart.

"Disciple... disciple just..." Su Ming was incoherent, crying and laughing like a fool.

"Your master is unharmed," Lin Yu said lightly, while simultaneously beginning to rapidly inspect the changes in himself.

This one "look" startled even himself.

Lin Yu secretly exclaimed, "Holy crap! Is this me?"

Originally, that ethereal, translucent soul body had now solidified several times over! Although it was still an illusory shadow, its outline was clear, no longer looking like it would scatter with a gust of wind. He could even faintly see a layer of faint, flowing ghostly light shimmering on the surface of the soul body.

He felt like he had gone from a refugee starving for five hundred years to a three-hundred-pound strongman after one meal, his entire being brimming with a sense of power.

With a slight stir of his thoughts.

"Swish!"

His perception abruptly extended outward, instantly breaking through the confines of the small room.

He "saw" the rain-soaked bluestone slabs in the courtyard, the spider hiding from the rain under the eaves, and in his eldest brother Su Feng's room next door, the slight frown on his sister-in-law Wang Chuntao's brow as she slept.

Further out, he could even "hear" the uneasy clucking of the old hen in Widow Li's house at the village entrance.

The range had expanded at least tenfold!

And... the perception had become much more refined.

He could clearly "smell" the faint scent emanating from the pine-soot ink stick on Su Ming's desk. Though weak, it was real.

He could also "feel" the vigorous, sun-like Yang energy radiating from Su Ming's body, continuously nourishing his own form and repairing the hidden injuries left from that night.

Lin Yu secretly gloated, "Struck gold! A bloody windfall! Just devouring a little ghost, and the effect is comparable to a super invincible 'I Love One Stick' brand ten-complete great tonic pill! This deal... is worth it!"

An unprecedented sense of satisfaction and power surged from the depths of his soul body.

Right at that moment, a thought popped up without warning.

That kid's Yang energy... smells so good...

If I could get a little closer, take a whiff... the taste would surely be wonderful...

Lin Yu's soul body shuddered violently!

Lin Yu internally: "Wait! What was I just thinking?! Sucking from my disciple? Am I crazy?! That's my pension fund! My long-term meal ticket! How could I have such a beastly thought!"

A wave of icy cold instantly extinguished that self-satisfaction.

He was horrified to discover that his emotions seemed to have become somewhat... unstable.

That pure Yin energy originating from the shadow, though greatly nourishing, was also like a sugar-coated cannonball. Beneath the sugar coating, it contained the most pure resentment, greed, and madness of that ghost creature before its death!

He forced himself to shift his attention, focusing his mind on Su Ming.

"Your mind has been in turmoil this past month," Lin Yu slowly spoke.

Su Ming's body stiffened. He lowered his head, his face full of guilt. "Disciple... disciple thought Master you..."

"Thought my soul had scattered to the winds?" Lin Yu's tone betrayed neither joy nor anger. "So you gave up on yourself, even neglecting the most basic meditation?"

"Disciple wouldn't dare!" Su Ming thudded to his knees, his forehead pressed against the cold ground. "Disciple was just... just panicked and confused, unable to calm my mind..."

Lin Yu muttered internally, "Alright, alright, I know you're loyal, get up already, the floor is cold. I'm not completely dead yet. But come to think of it, this kid is quite devoted. Good, didn't save him for nothing."

Lin Yu grumbled in his heart, but his mouth continued to maintain the lofty master persona. "Panic and confusion are the greatest obstacles on the path of cultivation. Do you know why the ghost in the temple that day was defeated?"

Su Ming was taken aback, raising his head. "Because it... was no match for Master's divine might?"

"Wrong!" Lin Yu firmly denied.

Internally: "Nonsense! Of course it's because I ate it! But can I say that? No! Must package it, turn it into a teaching case!"

"It was defeated by greed, destroyed by loss of control," Lin Yu's voice was distant and profound, as if expounding some fundamental truth of heaven and earth. "It was devoured by its own desires, lost its original heart, thus appearing strong on the outside but hollow within, and utterly vulnerable."

As he spoke, he tried to activate that newly acquired power.

Threads of Yin-cold energy seeped out from the ring. In Su Ming's "vision," that blurry old man's illusory shadow seemed clearer than before, the contours of his facial features faintly visible.

This was the ability stripped from that shadow—illusion!

Lin Yu thought to himself, "Hey, not bad! The props for fooling my disciple have been upgraded, high-definition remastered version!"

Su Ming looked at that master's illusory shadow, more solid than ever, his eyes filled with awe and worship.

Master truly is an immortal among men!

Just as Lin Yu was feeling satisfied with his new ability, a "boom" sounded in his mind as a fragment of memory not belonging to him exploded!

It was a dark room. A woman with a pretty face was facing a mirror, using a sharp pair of scissors to, little by little... cut open her own throat!

In the mirror, her face wore a bizarre, satisfied smile.

Blood gushed out, staining her wedding dress crimson!

A towering wave of resentment and violence, like a breached flood, instantly assaulted Lin Yu's soul body!

Kill!

Kill the living person before me!

Devour his flesh and blood!

Seize his Yang energy!

"Urgh..."

Lin Yu's soul body twisted violently. That "lofty master" illusion he had painstakingly maintained instantly disintegrated, reverting to a churning mass of black energy!

A bone-chilling, piercing killing intent abruptly emanated from the ring!

"Master?!"

Su Ming was horrified, his face losing color!

He felt an unprecedented malice, like countless icy needles, viciously stabbing into his soul!

This malice was even more pure, even more terrifying, than the ghost creature in the broken temple that night!

He felt as if he had fallen into an ice cellar, the blood in his entire body seeming to freeze solid.

"Get out!"

Lin Yu let out a silent roar deep within his consciousness!

Lin Yu: "Damn it! Get the hell out! This is my territory! The retirement home I worked so hard to find, how can I let you, a wandering ghost, run wild here!"

He used all the willpower honed over five hundred years, desperately guarding his original heart.

That instinct for survival, that obsession with a "slacker life," transformed into the sturdiest embankment at this moment, resisting the onslaught of that maddened will!

On the ring, those six blood-red patterns suddenly brightened. An even more ferocious, more ancient aura erupted, as if a monarch had been provoked, forcibly suppressing that foreign violent will.

The icy killing intent swirling around the ring receded like a tide.

Everything returned to calm.

Su Ming gasped for breath in large gulps, his whole body already soaked in cold sweat. He looked at the ring on his finger with shock and uncertainty. The terror of that moment just now made his heart still pound wildly.

"Disciple..."

Lin Yu's voice sounded again, only this time, it was filled with unconcealable weakness and exhaustion.

"Your master... needs to rest quietly a while longer... You... remember what I just said... guard your original heart..."

Lin Yu: "Damn... almost capsized... the side effects of this thing are too fierce! No, can't eat any more! At least until I find an 'antidote' or 'digest' it, absolutely must not touch this kind of thing again! The risk is too high, seriously affecting my retirement quality of life!"

Lin Yu now had only one thought.

This power was poison, a deadly toxin that could scatter his soul to the winds!

He must find a way to expel the "toxins" within it, or completely digest and assimilate it.

Otherwise, he would sooner or later become a monster that only knew how to devour and kill.

That was not the transmigrated life he wanted!

"Disciple... obeys!" Su Ming suppressed the shock and doubt in his heart, respectfully responding.

Although he didn't know what had just happened, he could sense that Master had paid a great price to suppress something.

"Go to sleep," Lin Yu's voice was almost inaudible. "Starting tomorrow, your cultivation will have an additional subject."

After speaking, Lin Yu's aura completely sank into silence. No matter how Su Ming called out, there was no further response.

Su Ming knelt in place for a long time before slowly rising.

He blew out the oil lamp, lay down on the cold bed board, eyes wide open, without a trace of sleepiness.

The terrifying aura Master had leaked in that instant, that insane killing intent that didn't belong to Master, and Master's last meaningful words kept echoing in his mind.

He faintly sensed that the master he had apprenticed himself to harbored secrets deeper and more dangerous than the ghost in the mountains.

And at this moment, deep within the ring.

Lin Yu's soul body was curled into a ball, mobilizing all his mental energy to wage a difficult struggle against those violent memory fragments and greedy thoughts.

Lin Yu: "Heart-cleansing mantra... Tao Te Ching... Prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony... anything is fine, come and suppress it! I don't want to become a madman! My goal is the stars and the sea... no, it's a stable retirement!"

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## Chapter 35: A New Required Course

[ 1,687 words ]

Su Ming stood bare-chested in the center of the courtyard, repeating that simple punching motion over and over again.

Sweat trickled down his lean back, reflecting fragmented light under the moonlight.

A week had passed.

His master had fallen into a deep slumber, completely silent for an entire week.

The shock and terror of that night had, after seven days of settling, transformed into another, deeper emotion—a reverence for the unknown and a bitter hatred for his own weakness.

Every day, aside from reviewing his studies, he spent all his time on "body tempering" and "meditation."

Each punch he threw was more powerful than the day before.

Each session of meditation was more focused than the last.

He was pushing himself, using physical exhaustion to suppress the anxiety in his heart.

He dared not stop. He feared that if he paused, the terrifying killing intent that had leaked from his master that night would resurface in his mind, shattering his courage and resolve. Su Ming exhaled a turbid breath, retracted his fist, and prepared to return to his room.

Right at that moment, a hoarse voice, tinged with extreme exhaustion, abruptly sounded in his mind.

"Kid, not sleeping in the middle of the night, who are you putting on this monkey show for?"

Su Ming's body jolted violently, ecstasy instantly washing away all his fatigue and anxiety.

"Master! You're awake!"

Lin Yu thought to himself: \*Finally got that madwoman's resentment bound up tight... Damn it, building a prison in my own mind, I'm truly a genius. Just these side effects... feels like I've got a ticking time bomb in my soul, could blow up my retirement home at any moment.\*

Lin Yu's voice still sounded weak, but much more stable than before.

"Mhm." He responded lightly, maintaining the most basic reserve of a lofty master.

"Master, your condition..." Su Ming asked urgently, his voice full of concern.

"It's nothing. Just a remnant of a heart demon, already refined and purified by your master." Lin Yu said dismissively.

Lin Yu thought to himself: \*Refined my foot! Just tied it up with sealing strips and stuffed it in a corner! This thing is now a high-purity source of mental pollution, can't even touch it!\*

Hearing this, the weight in Su Ming's heart finally eased considerably.

But he hesitated for a moment, then asked the question that had troubled him all week: "Master, that night... was that also caused by that heart demon remnant?"

He asked very carefully, afraid of touching upon his master's secrets.

There was a moment of silence from the ring.

Lin Yu complained internally: \*Oh, the kid's gotten smarter, knows how to fish for information indirectly now. That's fine, it's time he learned some things, otherwise how's he going to be my golden bodyguard and mobile power bank later.\*

"Yes, and no." Lin Yu's voice became profound. "Disciple, do you know that what you and I encountered that night was no ordinary mountain ghost?"

Su Ming's expression turned solemn, and he respectfully stood straight with his hands at his sides. "This disciple is dull, please enlighten me, Master."

"That thing is called a 'Wailing Woman Lantern'." Lin Yu explained slowly. This information was pieced together bit by bit over seven whole days from those chaotic memory fragments.

"It uses the soul of a wronged, pregnant woman who died as the main ingredient, supplemented by seven types of extreme yin objects, refined within a specially crafted lantern. It is fed daily with the vital essence of living people and takes a hundred years to fully form. Once formed, its malevolence is unmatched, capable of corrupting a person's soul and stealing their lifespan."

Su Ming felt his scalp go numb and chills run down his back.

He had never imagined there could be such a sinister and bizarre object in this world.

"This lantern has an owner." Lin Yu dropped an even more shocking piece of news.

"An owner?"

"Correct. The person who refined this lantern has grand ambitions. Placing it in that dilapidated temple, using the mountain's earth vein's yin energy to nourish it, clearly indicates he was cultivating it as a future magical treasure. By destroying it, we have severed a hundred years of that person's effort."

Lin Yu thought to himself: \*More than just severing effort, it's like stealing the pig he'd been fattening up for the New Year's feast. This grudge is a big one.\*

Su Ming's heart sank. He thought of a terrifying possibility: "Then... will that lantern refiner..."

"He will." Lin Yu confirmed his suspicion. "Such an evil object is connected to its owner's soul during the refining process. The lantern is extinguished; he already knows. What's more troublesome is..."

Lin Yu's tone became unprecedentedly grave.

"Although your master devoured the resentful spirit within the lantern, resolving the immediate crisis, I have also been tainted by its karma. A tracking mark has been placed... on us."

"A tracking mark?!" Su Ming's face turned deathly pale, and he subconsciously touched the ring on his finger.

"That mark is extremely subtle. If I hadn't nearly been counter-devoured this time, even I would have had difficulty detecting it. It's like a faint odor in the air, indistinguishable to ordinary people, but to its owner, it's as conspicuous as a lighthouse in the night."

Lin Yu thought to himself: \*We're screwed. Thought we just killed a wild monster and looted some gear, turns out we demolished someone's tower and got a permanent debuff slapped on us. Great. Retirement plan just switched from 'peaceful retirement' mode straight to 'life on the run' mode.\*

A massive sense of crisis, like a dark cloud, enveloped Su Ming's heart.

He was no longer that ignorant mountain village youth. He clearly understood that a person capable of refining an evil object like the "Wailing Woman Lantern" was absolutely not someone a farm boy like him could contend with.

Even his immensely capable master seemed deeply wary of this.

"Master, then what should we do?" Su Ming's voice carried a slight tremble.

"What should we do?" Lin Yu snorted coldly. "When soldiers arrive, we use generals to block them; when water comes, we use earth to contain it. If he comes, then let him come!"

Lin Yu thought to himself: \*Run! Of course run! Pack up the valuables and run! But can't say that to the disciple. Need to motivate him, make him stronger, so he can carry me when we run later!\*

"However," Lin Yu's tone shifted, "waiting idly for death is not our way. You must become stronger. Strong enough to protect yourself, strong enough to make that petty scoundrel dare not come knocking easily!"

Fighting spirit reignited in Su Ming's eyes. He nodded heavily. "This disciple understands!"

"You understand nothing!" Lin Yu mercilessly shot him down. "You can't even find the shadow of the enemy, wouldn't recognize him if he stood right in front of you. How can you talk about self-protection?"

Su Ming's face instantly flushed red.

"Therefore, starting today, a mandatory subject is being added to your cultivation."

"Please instruct me, Master!"

"Recognizing demons, discerning ghosts, knowing fiends, guarding against evil!" Lin Yu said, enunciating each word clearly. "I will teach you how to distinguish the types, habits, and weaknesses of these yin and evil beings. What you need to learn is not just how to fight them, but how to avoid them, how to hide yourself!"

Lin Yu continued, "Within the memory fragments of that resentful spirit, there is an incomplete cultivation method called the 'Dark Spring Heart Sutra,' which is precisely a method for cultivating sinister soul power. This method is malicious, but its understanding of yin energy has some merits. I will extract the essence, discard the dross, and refine a method for concealing your aura to teach you."

"Your yang energy is like honey to these things—extremely alluring. The first thing you must learn is to seal that honey jar tight!"

Lin Yu thought to himself: \*And also don't let other stray dogs catch the scent and come compete with me for resources.\*

Su Ming's heart burned with fervor.

This was what he wanted!

This was true cultivation!

Not just studying to understand principles, but possessing the power to protect himself and his family!

"Additionally," Lin Yu's voice took on a playful note, "there are some interesting things in that resentful spirit's memories. For example, why it was suppressed in that temple. That temple, a hundred years ago, seems to have been the site of a minor immortal sect. It seems there are still some things left unplundered within the mountain's belly."

Su Ming's breath hitched.

An immortal sect ruin?

"However, that place is now a land of great misfortune. Occupied by the Wailing Woman Lantern for a century, its yin energy soars to the heavens, and who knows what other things have spawned there. With your current strength, going there is just delivering yourself as a meal." Lin Yu promptly poured cold water on his excitement.

Lin Yu thought to himself: \*First draw him a picture of the pie, keep him hooked. When he's strong enough, we'll go treasure hunting, and he can be my prospecting engineer. Perfect.\*

Su Ming clenched his fists tightly, engraving this information firmly in his mind.

Become stronger!

He had never craved strength as much as he did now!

"Alright, enough idle talk." Lin Yu's voice returned to seriousness. "Now, sit cross-legged, calm your mind, and focus your spirit. I will impart to you the first layer of the 'Aura Concealment Art.' Remember, this method emphasizes 'concealment,' not 'combat.' The highest good is like water; great wisdom appears foolish. A true expert is one whose existence the enemy can never discover!"

"Yes, Master!"

Suppressing the turbulent thoughts in his heart, Su Ming obeyed and sat down properly in the courtyard, closing his eyes.

The cool moonlight bathed him. On the young man's face, childishness was visibly fading, replaced by a resilience and solemnity beyond his years.

Deep within the ring, Lin Yu watched this scene and nodded with satisfaction.

Lin Yu thought to himself: \*The boy is teachable, truly teachable... Now his motivation is sufficient. The efficiency difference between passive cultivation and active cultivation is like night and day. My golden bodyguard training plan is officially launched!\*

However, deep within his soul, in that corner sealed layer upon layer, a barely perceptible wisp of black energy trembled slightly in response to the fluctuations of Su Ming's yang energy.

Like a starved beast imprisoned in a cage, catching the scent of food outside its bars.

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

## Chapter 36: Breath Suppression Technique

[ 1,691 words ]

The night wind passed through the small courtyard, lifting a few withered leaves that spun in circles on the ground.

Su Ming sat cross-legged on the smooth, worn bluestone in the yard, his eyes closed, his breathing steady, yet his mind was like a pot of boiling water, difficult to calm.

His master was going to teach him real immortal techniques.

"Disciple, concentrate your spirit, calm your energy."

Lin Yu's voice echoed in his mind, carrying a hint of hoarseness from having just woken up, yet it rang like a massive bell, instantly suppressing Su Ming's chaotic thoughts.

"Yes, Master." Su Ming took a deep breath, striving to sink his excitement and anticipation deep into his heart.

"What I will teach you today is called the 'Aura Concealment Art'. This method is not for offense, not for slaughter, but solely for the concept of 'concealment'," Lin Yu's voice was matter-of-fact, devoid of any discernible emotion. "You must remember, when walking in the world, the enemies you can see are never as terrifying as the enemies you cannot see. Making yourself disappear among the masses, like a drop of water merging into the ocean, is the path to self-preservation and longevity."

Lin Yu thought to himself: "Lesson one: On the Self-Cultivation of an Actor. How to disguise a dazzling protagonist as an utterly ordinary extra. Master this lesson, and living until the grand finale isn't just a dream!"

Su Ming felt a chill in his heart, etching the principle of 'concealment' firmly into his mind.

"The essence of the 'Aura Concealment Art' is not to have you cultivate some sinister, evil energy. That is not the righteous path and would also taint your foundation," Lin Yu continued to explain. "Its core is to have you learn to control yourself. Your yang energy, or rather, your 'vitality', is currently like an oil lamp without a lampshade, blazing fiercely in the dark night. To those hungry ghosts and evil spirits, you are more tempting than the sweetest flesh and blood."

Lin Yu thought to himself: "It's like being the biggest, reddest cherry on a Black Forest cake, complete with a flashing neon sign that says 'Come eat me!' This master's heart is weary."

"What you need to do is learn to put a lampshade on this lamp, or even learn to temporarily retract the flame back into the wick, making it look like an extinguished lamp."

Su Ming nodded, somewhat understanding. The analogy was vivid, and he could grasp it.

"Then, the first step: perception." Lin Yu's voice became ethereal. "Forget the spiritual energy you perceive during your usual meditation, and forget the flow of blood in your body. Go and feel something more fundamental... your 'warmth'."

"Warmth?" Su Ming was taken aback.

"Yes, warmth. You are alive, so your body is warm. This warmth is the most superficial manifestation of your yang energy. Now, close your eyes, sink your heart, and go feel it. It envelops your internal organs, flows through your limbs and bones, emanates from every pore of your body, forming an invisible halo. Go find it, feel it."

Lin Yu thought to himself: "Quick, use your middle school biology knowledge! Feel what metabolism is! What heat dissipation is! Don't think of it as something so mystical; just think of yourself as a large hot water bottle!"

Su Ming followed the instructions.

He discarded all distracting thoughts, completely immersing his mind into his own body.

At first, he could only feel the beating of his heart, the rush of his blood, and the coolness brought by the breeze on his skin.

Where was the 'warmth'?

He was confused. This thing was invisible, intangible, even more elusive than the spiritual energy in the air.

Time passed bit by bit, and fine sweat beaded on Su Ming's forehead. The more he tried to find it, the more untraceable that 'warmth' became.

"Master, I..." He felt somewhat discouraged.

"You're impatient." Lin Yu interrupted him flatly. "Let me ask you, on a winter day when your hands and feet are icy cold, what do you crave the most?"

Su Ming answered without hesitation: "A brazier of charcoal, or... a bowl of hot soup."

"When you approach the charcoal brazier, do you see the firelight first, or feel the warmth first?"

"It's... the warmth." Su Ming pondered thoughtfully.

"Exactly." Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of guidance. "You don't need to 'see' it, because you are already within it. What you need to do is 'comprehend' it. Like a fish comprehends the existence of water. Relax, don't chase it, don't grab for it, just stay still quietly, and let that feeling of warmth... tell you of its existence on its own."

Lin Yu thought to himself: "Finally getting it. This kid's comprehension is decent, just a bit stubborn. But that's normal; who doesn't have a newbie phase? Back when I first learned to use Office, it took me half a day just to figure out how to merge cells..."

Hearing his master's pointer, Su Ming's mind suddenly cleared.

He stopped deliberately searching, instead emptying his entire mind, as if waiting for dawn in the dark night.

Gradually, he sensed a 'feeling' different from body temperature.

It was a very subtle 'field', brimming with vitality, spreading from the deepest part of his body. It was like a thin gauze enveloping him, warm and comfortable. When the night wind blew, it was this layer of 'warm gauze' that was touched first, and only then did his skin feel the coolness.

"I... I feel it..." Su Ming's voice trembled with delight.

"Good." Lin Yu praised. "Now, the second step: control. Imagine a thin layer of white mist rising from the surface of a river at dawn. This layer of mist is the yang energy you emit. And what you need to do is use your will to condense this mist back into a dewdrop, hiding it back under a blade of grass."

Su Ming immediately began to try.

He transformed his mind into an invisible hand, wanting to gather that warm 'mist'.

But the 'mist' was incredibly slippery, offering no purchase. As soon as his will moved, that warm field instead 'whooshed' outward in expansion, then abruptly contracted back.

A sensation of alternating heat and cold instantly spread throughout his body. Su Ming shivered, nearly jolting out of his meditative state.

Lin Yu thought to himself: "Whoa there! Steady! Steady! What are you trying to do? Play thermal expansion and contraction with your body? Don't short-circuit your own meridians! I said condense, not compress! This is delicate work!"

"Master, it... it won't listen to me." Su Ming's face flushed red with effort.

"You're using 'force', not 'intent'," Lin Yu's voice grew a bit sharper. "You're thinking of grabbing it, commanding it. But it is part of you; how can you wrestle with yourself? You need to guide, not force. Like a shepherd guiding sheep back to the pen, not a butcher brandishing a knife."

Su Ming stopped, carefully pondering his master's words.

Guide, not force...

He suddenly thought of a question, one that had troubled him for several days.

"Master," he cautiously began, "forgive my impertinence, but what kind of ghostly entity was that Wailing Woman Lantern from that night? How powerful must its master be? Can we... really avoid it?"

This question weighed on his heart like a stone. The unknown was the most terrifying.

There was a moment of silence within the ring.

Lin Yu thought to himself: "Here it comes, finally asking the key question. Without analyzing the enemy situation clearly, even I, this gold-standard bodyguard, can't work with peace of mind. It's time to give him a crash course on the types of monsters in the newbie village, and by the way, outline the cultivation realms for him."

"Since you've asked, I will explain a thing or two to you." Lin Yu's voice returned to calm. "Know yourself and know your enemy, and you will never be defeated. Before speaking of ghostly entities, you must first understand the cultivation realms of us humans."

"We cultivators absorb the spiritual energy of heaven and earth, temper our bodies, and defy the heavens. The path is long and arduous, divided into five major realms. From low to high, they are Qi Refining, Foundation Establishment, Golden Core, Nascent Soul, and Spirit Transformation. Each realm is further divided into four stages: early, middle, late, and perfection. You have not even stepped onto the threshold yet; you are still in the preparatory stage of drawing in qi and tempering the body." (Secretly grumbling: "Although I didn't read many novels in my previous life, I do know there are realms like Tribulation Transcendence later on. Unfortunately, the previous owner of this ring was too low-level to inquire about more information.")

Su Ming's mind shook, firmly memorizing these realm names.

Lin Yu continued: "And the ghostly entities between heaven and earth also have distinctions of strength and weakness; their realms can often be analogized to those of our human cultivators. When an ordinary person dies with lingering obsession, they become a 'wandering soul'. They fear light and dread yang energy; a gust of wind can

scatter them. They are not worth worrying about; the yang energy of an ordinary, robust man is enough to disperse them."

"If a wandering soul encounters an opportunity, absorbs yin energy, or devours other lonely spirits, it can solidify its soul body and transform into a 'vengeful ghost'. Vengeful ghosts already have the ability to harm people, confuse minds, and absorb yang energy. The yang energy of ordinary people is a great tonic in their eyes. That mountain ruin temple, if not for the Wailing Woman Lantern, would likely be infested with such entities. Their strength is roughly equivalent to our human Qi Refining stage cultivators."

"Above vengeful ghosts, if they can develop spiritual intelligence, understand cultivation methods, gather yin energy into a core, and condense a 'ghost core', they can be called 'ghost generals'. A ghost general is no longer afraid of ordinary scorching sun, can command hundreds of ghosts, and bring calamity to an entire region. Their strength is already comparable to the Golden Core or even Nascent Soul realm among human cultivators."

Su Ming listened, his heart pounding with fear.

Golden Core, Nascent Soul! To him, those were already legendary land immortals capable of moving mountains and overturning seas! Ghosts could actually become that powerful?

"Then... then what about the Wailing Woman Lantern?"

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## Chapter 37: Mastered

[ 1,625 words ]

"The Wailing Woman Lantern is an artificially refined evil object. It takes the soul of a pregnant woman who died with a grievance as its main component, its ferocity and venomous resentment far exceeding that of ordinary vengeful ghosts. After being nourished by a hundred years of earth vein yin energy, its power has already reached the peak of the 'vengeful ghost' level. It was just one step away from spontaneously condensing a core and transforming into a 'ghost general'," Lin Yu explained. "You could say it was a 'quasi-ghost general' that hadn't fully formed yet."

Lin Yu thought to himself, "A premium, pay-to-win baby that was just about to achieve divine success, and I swallowed it in one gulp. That grudge is indeed not small."

Su Ming drew in a sharp, cold breath.

If a mere "quasi-ghost general" was so terrifying, what about its master?

"As for its master..." Lin Yu's tone carried a trace of... disdain?

"Judging from the residual memories of the vengeful soul, the person who refined this lantern probably isn't that high in cultivation himself. If he were truly a mighty figure in the ghost path, why would he need to place this lantern in this remote, impoverished countryside, relying on earth vein energy to nourish it for a hundred years? Clearly, he lacks resources and can only use this slow, grinding method to refine his treasure."

"Your master infers that this person is at most someone about to enter the 'Golden Core' realm, or perhaps even has an unstable foundation. He regarded the Wailing Woman Lantern as the foundation of his future path. Now that it's destroyed, he will definitely fly into a rage, but it won't be easy for him to find us."

Lin Yu mused internally, "Translation: The opponent is a broke entrepreneur. The only prototype of his potential hit product, which he painstakingly saved up for, got hacked by us. He's definitely so angry he's smashing pots and pans to raise funds right now, but it will still take some time for him to trace us across servers. So, we still have a chance... to run away! Ah, no, I mean to cultivate!"

After hearing his master's analysis, the heavy stone in Su Ming's heart eased slightly.

The enemy was powerful, but not unreachable or impossible to resist. His master was knowledgeable and his analysis was logical and thorough, calming Su Ming's originally panicked heart.

"Thank you, Master, for clearing up my doubts. This disciple understands."

"Good that you understand." Lin Yu's voice turned serious again. "Now, you know the enemy exists. Then you should understand even more that for every bit of slacking you do now, you'll face an extra bit of danger in the future. Continue!"

"Yes!"

Su Ming nodded heavily and once again settled his mind and spirit.

This time, he didn't use force. Instead, he made his intention as gentle as water.

He imagined he wasn't gathering mist, but was in the early morning, gently blowing a breath towards a blade of dew-covered grass.

That breath wasn't meant to blow away the dew, but to make the surrounding moisture naturally gravitate towards it.

His mind and spirit were that gentle breeze.

Sure enough, the warm "Yang Energy Mist" no longer resisted. Like wanderers finding their home, they docilely, slowly converged towards the location of Su Ming's Dantian.

There was no fierce collision, no violent compression.

Everything happened naturally and smoothly.

Su Ming "saw" the "warm mist" that had been diffused around his body grow fainter and fainter. Deep within his Dantian, a "point of light" smaller than a grain of rice, emitting a soft warmth, gradually took shape.

As the last wisp of "warm mist" was gathered, the point of light brightened slightly, then concealed all its radiance, becoming simple and unadorned, as if it had always been there.

In that instant, Su Ming felt his entire body turn "cool."

Not a cold coolness, but a... refreshing, tranquil coolness. Like plunging headfirst into a clear, deep pool on a scorching summer day.

That vibrant, feverish aura on his body had vanished.

At this moment, if he didn't open his eyes or breathe, he was like a stone in the courtyard, a silent plant.

"Flutter, flutter—"

A moth that had been circling him for half the day seemed to suddenly lose its target. It hovered confusedly in the air for a couple of circles, then flew towards the lamplight of another household in the distance.

Lin Yu was secretly delighted, "Success! Success! The Stealth Module V1.0 is officially online! The effect is good, it even fooled a small animal! The first solid step of my Gold Medal Bodyguard Training Plan! Congratulations, congratulations!"

Lin Yu was overjoyed inside, but his voice remained as calm as an ancient well. "Not bad, you've finally found the way. This is the first layer of the Aura Concealment Art: Concealing Qi and Returning to the Origin."

"From now on, you must practice day and night, making this technique your instinct. True concealment isn't a spell you deliberately cast, but a habit in your every move. You must achieve this state while eating, walking, and sleeping. Only then can you deceive true observers."

"This disciple understands!" Su Ming suppressed his excitement and responded firmly.

He could feel that this sense of control over his own power was far more satisfying than the satisfaction from throwing a hundred or a thousand punches.

This was true cultivation!

"However..." Lin Yu's tone shifted. "This technique can only conceal your vitality, fooling the instinctive perception of ghosts and evil spirits. If the lantern refiner has special tracking secret arts, he might still find clues. So, you must not be careless."

"Yes, Master."

Su Ming nodded and continued to stabilize the realm he had just grasped.

He immersed himself in this wondrous state, feeling as if all his five senses had become sharper.

After his own "warm light" was completely concealed, everything in the outside world seemed to become more "distinct."

He could "hear" the sleep-talking from his neighbors farther away, could "smell" the earthy scent of earthworms turning over deep in the soil.

And it was at this moment that he suddenly sensed something unusual.

A cold, profound chill, as if from the deepest underworld, transmitted from the ring finger on his right hand.

This chill wasn't unfamiliar to him, but it had never been this clear before.

Previously, his master's ring had always felt warm and smooth, as if carrying the temperature of his master's soul. But now that he had completely concealed his own Yang energy, this ring seemed to have shed a layer of disguise, revealing its most primitive, most ancient visage.

It was a pure "silence" that devoured all light and heat.

A thought stirred in Su Ming's heart, and he curiously sent a wisp of his mind and spirit to probe it.

"Don't move!"

Lin Yu's reprimand was like a thunderclap, exploding in Su Ming's mind with unprecedented severity and a trace of... barely perceptible tension.

Su Ming's mind and spirit jerked back abruptly, somewhat at a loss. "Master?"

Within the ring, Lin Yu fell into a brief silence.

Lin Yu thought frantically to himself, "Careless! Forgot about this! This kid's Yang energy is usually like a little sun, neutralizing the ring's own fierce, baleful aura and also suppressing that 'basement prisoner' of mine firmly. Now he turned off the sun, so my old, broken house is showing its true colors! If this kid senses that crazy woman's resentment, what will happen to my lofty master image?!"

After a good while, Lin Yu finally spoke slowly, his voice sounding somewhat weary.

"Disciple, that ring is an ancient, wondrous object. It is itself a... pocket dimension. Your master merely resides within it. When you conceal your Yang energy, it's like clearing away the clouds to see the sun, revealing a glimpse of its true nature."

"This object has a spirit, and it also has its own ferocity. With your current mind and spirit, you absolutely must not recklessly probe it. Otherwise, if it counterattacks, at best your mind will be damaged, at worst your soul will be sucked into it, doomed for eternity."

Lin Yu's words, half-truth and half-falsehood, successfully made Su Ming abandon the idea.

He looked back with fear at the plain, unremarkable black iron ring on his finger. Under the moonlight, the six faint blood-colored patterns on it seemed to come alive, like six closed eyes.

"This disciple... was wrong."

"Good that you know you were wrong." Lin Yu's voice softened. "Focus on your practice. Remember, curiosity killed the cat, and it can also kill a cultivator who doesn't know the immensity of heaven and earth. Some doors, before you have the strength to kick them open, it's best not to even look at them too much."

"Yes, this disciple respectfully follows Master's teachings."

Su Ming replied respectfully, then gathered his mind and spirit, no longer dwelling on the ring's strangeness, and wholeheartedly contemplated the changes brought by the Aura Concealment Art.

Moonlight like water filled the small courtyard.

The youth sat cross-legged, his figure somewhat blurred under the moonlight, as if he might merge into the night at any moment.

Deep within the ring, Lin Yu's soul quietly breathed a sigh of relief.

Lin Yu thought to himself, "That was close, close. Managed to bluff my way through. Looks like I need to speed up the plan. The stronger this kid gets, the more curious he becomes. He'll discover the problem sooner or later. Need to make him stronger quickly, and then... find a safer, bigger house, and move out of this haunted place ASAP!"

However, in the deepest part of his soul, in that corner where he had exhausted his efforts to set up layer upon layer of seals.

The clump of black energy representing the core resentment of the "Wailing Woman Lantern," tied up like a zongzi, trembled violently the moment Su Ming concealed his Yang energy.

Like a starved beast imprisoned for countless years, it opened its hungry and mad eyes for the first time within its dark cage.

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## Chapter 38: A Real Pro in This Field

[ 1,511 words ]

The night grew even deeper.

Su Ming remained seated cross-legged on that bluestone slab, but he felt the entire world had become different.

After he completely withdrew that warm "yang energy" within him back into the depths of his Dantian, he was like a person walking from a noisy marketplace into a silent mountain forest.

In the past, his own life aura was the first filter through which he perceived the world, constantly radiating outward and constantly interfering with his reception of the external environment.

Now, that filter had disappeared.

He could "hear" a cricket in the corner of the courtyard wall tirelessly rubbing its wings, every beat of that sound distinctly discernible. He could "smell" the scent of moist water

vapor from the distant mountain stream carried on the gentle breeze. He could even "feel" the coolness, accumulated over years, deep within the bluestone beneath his feet, slowly creeping up his body strand by strand.

This sensation was too novel, too powerful.

Was this the world of cultivators?

He immersed himself in this entirely new experience for a long time, but then a thought uncontrollably surfaced.

It was too fast.

Everything happened too fast. From Master beginning to explain the Aura Concealment Art, to him mastering "Concealing Qi and Returning to Origin," it took barely an hour. This was completely different from the immortal techniques he imagined, which would require months or even years of arduous cultivation just to get started.

This defied common sense.

He was no heaven-defying prodigy; he had that much self-awareness.

"Master," Su Ming called out softly in his heart.

"Hmm?" Lin Yu's voice sounded somewhat lazy, carrying a trace of satisfaction.

Lin Yu thought to himself: "Not bad, not bad, the boy is teachable. Picking it up this fast saved me so much breath. Next, I just need him to permanently weld this state onto himself, and I can sleep soundly. The first step for a gold-standard bodyguard, secured!"

"Disciple has something he doesn't understand," Su Ming organized his words and cautiously asked, "I feel... I feel the process of learning this Aura Concealment Art was a bit strange. It didn't feel like I was struggling to learn it, more like... it drilled into my brain on its own. I was just following an already existing template and replicating it."

Inside the ring, Lin Yu's voice abruptly stopped.

(Inner thoughts: "Holy crap?!")

Lin Yu's soul trembled violently, almost jumping out of his "meditation" state.

This kid sensed it? Was his comprehension ability this ridiculously off the charts?

Lin Yu quickly reviewed the teaching process just now. He truly had just been desperately thinking about every detail of the Aura Concealment Art in his mind, from how to perceive yang energy, to how to guide it, to how to condense it into that "point" in

the Dantian. He repeatedly rehearsed the entire process in his own mind, terrified of saying one wrong word and causing his precious disciple to cultivate his energy incorrectly.

His only thought at the time was: "Aiya, this thing can only be grasped intuitively, not explained. If only I could just stuff my thoughts directly into his brain..."

Wait!

Could it be... it really got stuffed in?

Lin Yu's soul fell into a strange state of stunned stupor.

Lin Yu thought to himself: "Damn, I have this function? Divine sense transmission? Isn't that the exclusive skill of big shots in novels? How would a corporate slave who died from overtime have this? Is it a buy-one-get-one-free perk from transmigrating? Or is it that this ring itself is a divine sense signal amplifier, and I accidentally turned on a personal hotspot and sent out the technique data packet?"

He felt he had discovered an incredible ability.

This was simply a teaching artifact! No longer needing to waste breath explaining what "energy sense" or "focusing intent on the Dantian" meant. Just package, send, and let the disciple download and experience it himself!

Lin Yu thought to himself: "No, no, gotta stay calm. Can't let the disciple think it's too easy. Need to package it, need to reflect the master's painstaking effort and profound mystery. Otherwise, he'll be asking me for 'technique data packets' every day in the future. Where would I get them for him? My soul isn't exactly wealthy to begin with. What if this thing consumes mana?"

In an instant, countless thoughts flashed through Lin Yu's mind.

"Ahem."

A light cough sounded in Su Ming's mind, interrupting his train of thought. Lin Yu's voice regained its profound tone, carrying a touch of the vicissitudes of someone who had been through it all.

"Disciple, do you know what 'divine sense transmission' is?"

"Disciple does not know," Su Ming answered honestly.

"Hmm. This is a method used by ancient cultivators. Using one's own soul as a medium, they directly imprint the essence of a technique and the insights of energy circulation

into the consciousness sea of the recipient," Lin Yu said slowly, his tone flat, as if discussing a trivial matter.

Lin Yu thought to himself: "Learning and selling on the spot, that's the term! Sounds high-end!"

"This method may seem swift, but it is actually extremely perilous. First, it consumes a tremendous amount of the caster's soul power. Unless one's soul body is highly condensed, a single use is enough to severely damage their vitality."

Lin Yu thought to himself: "First, slap a weakness debuff on myself, indicating I worked hard, so don't push your luck."

"Second, the requirements for the recipient are also extremely stringent. If the recipient's will is not firm and their soul is weak, their consciousness sea will be instantly overwhelmed by the massive influx of information, leading to foolishness at best, or having their souls scattered to the winds at worst."

Lin Yu thought to himself: "Then give you a high hat, explaining it's not that I'm awesome, but that you have exceptional talent, which is why it succeeded. This way, you feel good, and I stay safe."

"Observing you these past days, meditating daily, honing your mind, your soul has already far surpassed your peers, exceptionally resilient. That is why I dared to take this risk, employ this dangerous method, to help you take the first step into the gate," Lin Yu's voice carried a perfectly measured touch of "satisfaction." "Fortunately, you did not disappoint me."

Su Ming listened, his heart and mind profoundly stirred.

So that was it!

So Master, to help him enter the gate quickly, actually went so far as to expend his soul power to perform such a perilous ancient secret technique for him!

And his ability to withstand it was also due to his unrelenting hard work these past days.

For a moment, Su Ming's heart was filled with gratitude, lingering fear, and a spark of excitement from being recognized.

"Master..." his voice was somewhat dry, "Disciple... has troubled you."

"It's nothing," Lin Yu said lightly. "You and I, master and disciple, are essentially one. Your safety is my safety. Now that you have learned 'concealment,' I can also sleep a little more soundly."

Lin Yu thought to himself: "Right, pension insurance, gotta be attentive! You're safe, then I can relax and lie flat... ahem, I mean, peacefully contemplate the great Dao of heaven and earth."

"However," Lin Yu's tone shifted, becoming serious, "divine sense transmission is, after all, an external force. You have only received the method of 'how to do it,' but lack the comprehension of 'why it is so.' What you must do now is to completely internalize this method, making it your instinct."

"Please instruct me, Master."

"Stand up."

Su Ming complied and stood up, his body still maintaining that "silent" state.

"Walk around the courtyard."

Su Ming took steps, slowly pacing in the small courtyard. He was amazed to discover that when he entered this state, his footsteps almost vanished. As his soles touched the ground, the force was dissipated in a marvelous way, not stirring a speck of dust.

"Go, lift that water bucket over there," Lin Yu directed.

Su Ming walked to the corner of the wall and bent down to lift the half-full bucket of water.

Subconsciously, he was about to use the strength of his waist and abdomen, but at the very moment he exerted force, that dormant "point of light" in his Dantian stirred slightly. A more refined, more condensed power surged from there, following a path he had never experienced before, instantly spreading throughout his limbs and entire body.

He felt he didn't use much strength, yet the heavy wooden bucket was lifted effortlessly, the entire process flowing with unbelievable smoothness.

Lin Yu thought to himself: "Hey, not bad! Comes with an energy-saving mode? This Aura Concealment Art isn't just a stealth module, it also comes with ergonomic optimization? Buy one get one free, a bloody bargain!"

"Did you feel it?" Lin Yu asked.

"I felt it," Su Ming's eyes sparkled. "Strength... seems to have become more obedient."

"This is the true wonder of 'Concealing Qi and Returning to Origin,'" Lin Yu explained. "Concealment is not dead silence, but gathering all scattered power back to one place. When you need it, this power can erupt instantly in the most efficient, most concealed

manner. A true assassin does not hide themselves only at the moment they strike. With every breath, every heartbeat, they are preparing for that one strike."

"Disciple understands!" Su Ming was sincerely convinced.

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## Chapter 39: Junk or Treasure

[ 1,705 words ]

Su Ming carried the water bucket, pacing back and forth in the courtyard, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, sometimes squatting, sometimes standing up. He gradually immersed himself in this feeling of extreme control over his body, never tiring of it.

After playing around for a good while, he finally set the bucket down. The curiosity in his heart ultimately overpowered his fascination with his newfound strength.

He rubbed his hands together, feeling a bit embarrassed as he asked in his mind, "Master, you old... you said earlier that this ring itself is a pocket dimension?"

Lin Yu thought to himself, "Here it comes, here it comes, the regular program. I knew this kid couldn't hold back."

Lin Yu sighed, adopting a tone of helplessness that seemed to say, "Why is this child so interested in these external material things?" "So what if it is?"

"Then... then inside that pocket dimension... are there... lots of treasures?" Su Ming's voice was filled with a young person's yearning for treasure.

Lin Yu thought to himself, "Treasures? The real treasures are all in my head! Apart from a pile of junk left behind who knows how many years ago, this ring contains nothing but a resentment bomb that could explode at any moment. Which one do you want?"

"Hmph." Lin Yu snorted coldly. "Shortsighted! What constitutes a treasure? Divine weapons and sharp blades will eventually be damaged one day; miraculous elixirs and medicines also have their time of depletion. Only one's own personal strength is the true, eternal, indestructible treasure! You haven't even stepped through the gate of cultivation yet, and you're already thinking about these side paths and crooked ways. How will you ever ascend to the Great Dao in the future?"

This scolding immediately made Su Ming's face flush red.

"Disciple... disciple understands his mistake."

"Forget it." Seeing that the reprimand had been sufficient, Lin Yu's tone softened again. "Your curiosity is a natural human tendency. This master will let you broaden your horizons, lest you become confused and led astray by the trivial tricks of the outside world in the future."

As soon as he finished speaking, Su Ming's vision suddenly blurred.

He seemed to "see" a gray, hazy space, not large, about the size of a few rooms. Within the space, a few items floated scattered about—exactly those things Lin Yu had inventoried earlier.

"Look carefully." Lin Yu's voice seemed to become the narration for this space.

One image was magnified. It showed several dull, almost spirit energy-depleted stones.

"These are low-grade spirit stones, the common currency of the cultivation world. They can also be used directly for cultivation. They contain pure spirit energy, incomparable to the mixed, impure energy freely floating between heaven and earth." Lin Yu paused, his tone carrying obvious disdain. "However, these few... their spirit energy is almost completely exhausted, not even enough to stuff between your teeth. For you to use them, you probably wouldn't even hear a sound."

Lin Yu thought to himself, "Poor! Really dirt poor! The previous owner was too stingy, leaving behind an inheritance not even worth looking at."

The scene shifted, revealing a broken sword. Only half of the blade and an ancient, simple hilt remained, covered in rust and faintly exuding a heart-palpitating, baleful aura.

"This sword carries an extremely heavy baleful aura. It is a great object of misfortune." Lin Yu's voice turned serious. "Never mind you, even a cultivator with some achievements might have their mind eroded by the baleful aura if they touch it carelessly. Pass! This thing is just for looking at, don't even think about touching it."

Lin Yu thought to himself, "A murder weapon, absolutely a murder weapon! Su Ming's little body would fall seriously ill from just one touch. Must hide it well, in case he digs it out someday to use as a fire poker."

Finally, the scene settled on the three quietly resting jade slips.

"These are inheritance jade slips, recording techniques and knowledge." Lin Yu's voice held a trace of gravity. "Two of them are protected by powerful restrictions. Even this

master currently lacks the power to open them. The remaining one records a cultivation method called the 'Greenwood Longevity Art'."

Lin Yu thought to himself, "Encrypted files, can't open them! Infuriating! The only one that can be viewed is an advanced product that needs a beginner's tutorial, but the disciple is starting from an illiterate foundation. Don't dare teach it recklessly!"

"This cultivation method is balanced and peaceful, originally an excellent foundational technique. But..." Lin Yu's tone shifted. "The very beginning requires drawing energy into the body, visualizing green wood, communicating with the Essence of Yi Wood... The crucial points within are such that a tiny deviation leads to a huge error. You currently can't even recognize all the characters yet, and your mind is not settled. If you attempt to cultivate it forcefully without a protector to guide you, the consequences would be unthinkable."

The vision before his eyes vanished, and Su Ming's mind returned to his body.

He no longer held the slightest bit of contempt in his heart. Instead, he was filled with awe.

Spirit stones with depleted energy, a baleful broken sword, mysterious yet unreachable jade slips... These things that his master spoke of as if they were "junk" or "dangerous"—any single one contained worlds and power beyond his imagination.

"Did you see?" Lin Yu's voice drifted over leisurely. "These things, for you right now, are either useless or harmful. Your only path is to be down-to-earth, first study books to understand principles, and lay a solid foundation. Wait until you later enter a sect, have a guide, have a solid foundation, and broadened horizons. Only then might these things become usable for you."

"Disciple... has been taught!" Su Ming bowed deeply, a gesture from the heart.

His master not only taught him techniques but was also teaching him the principles of cultivation, always putting his safety first.

"Mmm, it's late at night. Go back and rest. Remember, starting today, whether walking, staying, sitting, or lying down, you must always maintain the 'Concealing Qi and Returning to Origin' state. When you can make it as natural as your breathing and heartbeat, only then will the 'Aura Concealment Art' be considered to have truly reached minor mastery."

"Yes, Master."

Su Ming respectfully acknowledged, then turned and walked toward his small hut.

He deliberately slowed his pace, savoring the feeling of power being held within and his body being light. The moonlight stretched his shadow long, yet his footsteps falling on the ground truly only stirred a light breeze, with not the slightest sound audible.

...

The next day, just as dawn was breaking.

Su Ming awoke from his meditative state. He had not slept last night but had sat in meditation the entire night.

Maintaining the 'Aura Concealment Art' all night had not tired him. Instead, he felt full of energy, refreshed and clear-headed. The small "point of light" in his Dantian also seemed to have solidified a little more.

He pushed open the door. The cool morning air, carrying moisture, greeted him.

In the courtyard, his second brother Su Yang, bare-chested, was swinging an axe, grunting and puffing as he chopped firewood. Beads of sweat covered his bronze skin, glistening in the morning light. His solid muscles rippled with each movement, full of a sense of power.

Su Ming walked up behind him, watching quietly, his footsteps as light as a cat's.

Su Yang finished splitting a log, straightened up, took a breath, wiped the sweat off with his arm, and turned to grab another one.

As he turned, he saw Su Ming standing there silently.

"Good heavens, mother!"

Su Yang was so startled he jumped back violently, even swinging the axe in his hand up. Only after clearly seeing it was Su Ming did he let out a long sigh of relief. Laughing and crying at the same time, he scolded, "You brat! Are you a cat? Walking without a single sound! Want to scare your brother to death so you can get more of the inheritance, is that it?"

Although he scolded with his mouth, there was not a trace of blame in his eyes, only affection for his younger brother and a hint of curiosity.

Seeing his second brother's flustered yet deliberately fierce appearance, Su Ming couldn't help but curve the corners of his mouth into a smile. He knew his second brother was just playing around with him; it had always been like this between them.

"Brother, let me help you." Su Ming walked forward and, without waiting for Su Yang's reply, easily picked up two large bundles of chopped firewood from the ground—a weight that would require Su Yang to use seventy or eighty percent of his strength to lift.

"Hey!" Su Yang's attention was indeed immediately captured. He looked Su Ming up and down in surprise, forgetting all about being scared just now. "You kid, what have you been eating these past few days? Your strength has grown! These bundles of firewood aren't light!"

He stretched out his big hand, habitually wanting to ruffle Su Ming's hair, just like when they were kids.

Su Ming instinctively wanted to dodge, but seeing his second brother's hearty smile and the concern in his eyes, he stopped his movement, allowing that big hand covered in sweat and wood chips to messily ruffle his hair a couple of times.

The sensation was a bit rough, yet exceptionally warm.

"Studying is studying, but you also need to take care of your body. Don't learn from those frail, bookish Xiucai who can't even tie up a chicken." Su Yang withdrew his hand, placed it on his hip, and instructed with an air of mature authority. "If there's any heavy work, wait for your brother to come back and do it, you hear?"

"I know, brother." Su Ming nodded, feeling warmth in his heart. He carried the firewood, turned, and walked toward the kitchen, his steps still light and quiet.

Su Yang watched his younger brother's back, which seemed straighter than usual, smacked his lips, and felt that this kid was somehow a bit different, but couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"Looks like studying more really is useful? Even his aura is different?" He scratched his head, gave a simple laugh, stopped overthinking it, and raised his axe again.

The rhythmic sound of chopping firewood once again filled the courtyard, intertwining with Su Ming's light yet steady footsteps, merging into this tranquil, vibrant morning light.

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## Chapter 40: First Step to Turning Bamboo into Gold

[ 1,336 words ]

In the kitchen, Mrs. Chen was adding water to the pot, preparing to cook a pot of thin porridge. Wang Chuntao was beside her, cutting the remaining half of the black wheat bun from last night into small cubes, planning to soak them in the porridge so the family's breakfast would be more filling.

Su Ming neatly stacked two large bundles of firewood beside the stove. The entire process was silent, with only the dull thud of the firewood making contact with the ground.

He straightened up, patted the wood chips from his hands, looked at the busy backs of his mother and sister-in-law, then glanced at his second brother who was still sweating profusely in the courtyard. An unprecedented sense of solidity rose within him.

He was no longer that youth who could only hide behind his brothers, helplessly accepting the futures they bought with their blood and sweat.

Now, he had his own strength, his own secret weapon that could hold up a piece of the sky for this family.

"Disciple." Lin Yu's lazy voice sounded in his mind, carrying a hint of a nasal tone as if he'd just woken up. "Your master has calculated, and that trip to town, plus everything after returning, has already delayed our 'Family Poverty Alleviation and Prosperity Building' Phase One Plan for quite some time."

Lin Yu thought to himself, "My heavens, he finally remembers the main task! If we don't start making money soon, when will my pension plan ever launch? Watching him perform these warm family dramas every day, when will we ever leave this village and embark on the path of cultivation!"

The corner of Su Ming's mouth twitched slightly. His master's words made it sound like he himself knew how to make paper.

He didn't argue, only respectfully responded in his mind, "This disciple is dull-witted. Please, Master, instruct me."

"Hmm, a student worthy of teaching." Lin Yu cleared his throat, adopting the posture of a lofty expert. "Originally, your master intended to guide you in technical breakthroughs immediately upon your return from town. Although it's a bit late now, it's still not too late."

"The matter of papermaking may seem simple, but in reality, it contains profound mysteries. Genuine ancient bamboo paper has a complex production process that takes an extremely long time."

Lin Yu's voice became serious, like an experienced master craftsman imparting a secret art.

"The first step is called 'cutting and retting bamboo.' You need to take tender bamboo from the current year's growth, chop it into sections several feet long, and throw them into a pond to soak. For a short period, it takes tens of days; for a long period, several months. Use the power of microorganisms in the water to make it initially rot and soften. This is 'retting.'"

"The second step, 'pounding and washing.' Retrieve the retted bamboo, place it on a stone slab, and repeatedly pound it with a wooden mallet to disperse its fibers. Then rinse it with clean water to wash away the green outer skin and impurities."

"The third step, 'steaming and boiling.' This is the key among keys. You need to place the pounded and washed bamboo material, along with sufficient amounts of plant ash water or lime water, into a large pot and steam-boil it over a gentle fire for several days and nights. The power of the alkaline water can completely break down the lignin and gum in the bamboo, leaving only the purest fibers."

"Once the bamboo material is cooked into a pot of mushy paste, you can proceed to the final step, 'forming the sheet and drying.' Dilute the paper pulp with water, gently dip a specially made bamboo screen into the pulp vat, lift up a thin layer, filter out the water, then press and dry it before paper can be formed."

Listening to this description in his mind, Su Ming was deeply shocked.

He had never imagined that a thin sheet of paper required such a complex and lengthy process. Cutting bamboo, soaking, pounding, steaming and boiling... Just hearing it made it sound like a massive and arduous project.

"Master, this... how much time would this take?" Su Ming couldn't help but ask. "By the time we make the paper, I'm afraid the opportunity will have long passed."

Lin Yu thought to himself, "Good question! If we really followed that full process, by the time you pass the Xiucai exam, our first batch of paper would probably still be soaking in the pond! So, theory must be connected with practice. We need to create a 'streamlined version!'"

"Heh, what your master described is the method for producing tribute-grade Xuan paper fit for imperial use." Lin Yu chuckled lightly, his tone carrying a hint of 'you're still too young.' "For our initial venture, we should naturally adapt to our limited conditions and forge a new path."

"Right now, we're not trying to create some masterpiece paper to be passed down through generations. We need to produce a finished product as quickly as possible to verify the feasibility of this method, to let your stubborn old father see with his own eyes how the bamboo from the back mountain can turn into gleaming copper coins!"

"Therefore, our method must be fast and direct!"

"That 'retting bamboo' step is too slow. We'll skip it entirely! Go straight to 'pounding and washing'! Use brute force to pound the tender bamboo to a pulp!"

"That 'steaming and boiling' step, boiling for several days and nights isn't realistic. We'll just increase the alkali content and boil it fiercely for a single day! The effect might be poorer, but as long as it breaks down the fibers, that's enough!"

"As for 'forming the sheet,' without a fine bamboo screen, we'll try using your family's broken rice sieve! Without a dedicated drying room, we'll stick it to a wooden board and dry it in the sun!"

"Disciple, you must remember." Lin Yu's tone became meaningful. "What we're making now isn't paper; it's 'confidence'! It's a 'sample' that can make your father, and the whole village, see hope! It might be as rough as tree bark, as yellow as mud, but as long as it can be called 'paper,' we will have succeeded in the first step!"

Su Ming's heart was completely ignited by his master's words.

Yes, a sample!

He didn't need to achieve perfection in one step. He just needed evidence that could shatter his father's entrenched beliefs!

He took a deep breath and clenched his fists.

...

During breakfast, the family sat around the low dining table.

The thin porridge in the pot was so clear you could see your reflection. A few pieces of chopped black wheat bun cubes floated and sank in the porridge. This was the most ordinary breakfast in the Su household.

Su Yang held his bowl, slurping the porridge with gusto. He had worked all morning and was already starving.

Su Shan silently smoked his pipe tobacco. The swirling smoke obscured his weathered face even more. At the dining table, he was always the one who spoke the least.

Mrs. Chen and Wang Chuntao sipped their porridge in small mouthfuls, occasionally whispering a few words about daily life.

The atmosphere was quiet and oppressive.

Su Ming held his bowl but hadn't taken a bite for a long time. He mentally rehearsed the script his master had taught him over and over, his palms slightly sweaty.

"Father."

He finally spoke. His voice wasn't loud, but it was like a stone thrown into a calm pond. Everyone's movements stopped, and their gazes instantly focused on him.

Su Shan lifted his eyelids and glanced at him through the smoke. He didn't speak, only using his eyes to signal him to continue.

"Father, I want... I want to try making paper." Su Ming's voice was a bit dry, but he still mustered the courage to say it.

"Pfft— Cough, cough, cough!"

Su Yang, who was drinking his porridge, failed to swallow a mouthful and sprayed it out. He choked until his face turned red, pounding his chest while looking at his younger brother with disbelief.

"Little Ming, you... what did you say? Making paper?"

Mrs. Chen and Wang Chuntao also wore expressions of utter astonishment.

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

## Chapter 41: Papermaking

[ 2,135 words ]

"Xiao Ming, have you gone mad from all that reading?" Mrs. Chen put down her bowl, looking at him with concern. "Making paper is work for the big workshops in the city, it's the skilled craftsmen's livelihood. How could we farmers know how to do that?"

Su Shan still didn't speak, but the motion of smoking his pipe paused. He looked at Su Ming, his turbid eyes revealing a scrutinizing gaze.

Su Ming ignored the others' astonishment. His gaze was fixed directly on his father. He knew that in this household, only if his father nodded could things possibly proceed.

"Father, I'm not talking nonsense." Su Ming forced himself to calm down. "Last time I went to town, while browsing an old book in that bookshop, I found a damaged page tucked inside. On it... on it was recorded a simple method for making paper."

He had rehearsed this excuse countless times in his mind. No evidence, perfectly reasonable. A book-loving child discovering something strange and curious in an old book was nothing out of the ordinary.

"A recipe from an old book?" Su Yang finally caught his breath, his eyes gleaming with curiosity. "Really? What did it say?"

"It said to use tender bamboo from the back hill, pound it to a pulp, then soak it in water boiled from our cooking stove's wood ash. It needs to soak for many days, then be boiled again to make paper pulp, and only then can paper be made." Su Ming explained, half-truthfully, according to Lin Yu's simplified version, deliberately emphasizing the need for longer processing time.

"Nonsense!"

Su Shan finally spoke, his voice low and powerful. He knocked his pipe heavily against the table leg, making the bowls and chopsticks jump.

"Has all that reading addled your brain? You take a few scribbled, ghostly words seriously? If making paper were that easy, would paper in town still be so expensive? Wouldn't everyone in the world go to the back hill to cut bamboo and get rich? And it needs to soak for several days? Where would we find that kind of idle time!"

His words were like a bucket of cold water, dousing the flame Su Ming had just ignited.

"Your proper business is to study your lessons diligently and prepare for the County School entrance exam! Don't spend all day thinking about these unrealistic, far-fetched things!" Su Shan's voice carried an unquestionable sternness.

Su Ming's heart sank. He had expected his father to oppose it, but not so decisively.

"Father!" Su Yang couldn't help but speak up for his younger brother. "Xiao Ming just wants to give it a try, why are you so angry? The bamboo on the back hill is free anyway, and the wood ash from the stove is readily available. Even if it doesn't work, we haven't lost anything, right? We can always squeeze out some time!"

"What do you know!" Su Shan glared at Su Yang. "Full of energy with nowhere to use it all day! With that time, it's better to hoe two more rows of weeds in the field or cut two more bundles of firewood on the mountain! Soaking for several days?"

The atmosphere in the courtyard instantly dropped to freezing point.

Su Ming clenched his fists, his nails digging deeply into his palms. He knew that if he gave up today, this opportunity might be lost forever.

He took a deep breath, raised his head, met his father's stern gaze, and said word by word, "Father, last time you bought me those few sheets of hemp paper, it cost a hundred wen, right?"

Su Shan was stunned, seemingly not expecting him to bring this up.

"That hundred wen, Second Brother chased a wild boar in the mountains for a day and a night before he could trade it for that money." Su Ming's voice wasn't loud, but it clearly reached everyone's ears.

Su Yang's expression also became complicated.

"Father, I don't want to use money my brothers risked their lives for to buy such expensive paper anymore." Su Ming's eyes were slightly red, but his tone was exceptionally firm.

"That recipe might be fake, or someone might have written it carelessly. But, just like Second Brother said, what do we lose by trying? The bamboo grows wild in the mountains for free. The wood ash is burned in the stove for free. All we're investing is a bit of effort and a few days' time."

"If we succeed, even if the paper we make is just the lowest quality straw paper, only good for wrapping things, or... or for use as toilet paper, it can still be sold for money! Then the paper I need for studying won't cost the family any more money! My brothers won't have to work so hard for me anymore!"

"If we fail," Su Ming paused, looking into his father's eyes, "then I'll completely give up on this idea, study diligently, and never mention it again!"

After his speech, the entire courtyard fell silent.

Mrs. Chen looked at her youngest son, her eyes moist. She didn't understand anything about papermaking; she only knew that her son had grown up, knew to care for his brothers, and cared for this family.

Su Yang, even more excited, stood up, walked to Su Ming's side, and patted his shoulder heavily. "Father! Just let Xiao Ming try! I'll help him! All the heavy work, I'll do it! Xiao Ming doesn't need to lift a finger! Even if it doesn't work, just think of it as me keeping my little brother company while he tinkers with something new!"

Su Shan fell silent.

He lowered his head, refilled his pipe with tobacco shreds, lit it with a flint, and took a hard, deep drag.

Thick smoke completely enveloped his face; no one could see his expression.

After a long while, he finally took the pipe from his lips, exhaled a long smoke ring, and said in a hoarse voice, "Seven days."

"Starting tomorrow, I'll give you seven days. You two brothers, tinker in the corner of the backyard. Don't get in the way of proper work."

"If after seven days, I don't see this 'paper' you're talking about, no one is allowed to mention this matter ever again."

After speaking, he stood up, put his hands behind his back, hunched his body, and walked out of the courtyard, heading towards the field ridge.

Su Ming and Su Yang exchanged a glance, both seeing wild joy in each other's eyes!

Success!

"That's great, Xiao Ming!" Su Yang excitedly hugged Su Ming, almost squeezing the breath out of him. "Let's go cut bamboo right now!"

Su Ming was shaken until dizzy, but he smiled brilliantly.

Lin Yu thought to himself, "Done! Step one, 'project approval' passed! The timeline was even extended to a week! This kid, not bad, didn't waste all my talking. Knows how to play the emotional card, knows how to calculate costs, knows how to make a military pledge. Hmm, has the flavor of my project proposals back in the day. The student is teachable, the student is teachable indeed!"

Lin Yu, in Su Ming's mind, contentedly "stroked" his non-existent beard.

...

Action followed words immediately.

Su Yang shouldered the firewood knife, Su Ming carried a worn-out bamboo basket, and the two brothers quietly headed straight for the back hill.

The bamboo grove on the back hill was communal land for the village. Usually, if any family needed bamboo to make a fence or weave a basket, they would come here to cut. The bamboo grew fast and thick, seemingly inexhaustible.

"Xiao Ming, what kind of bamboo does that book say to use? Old or tender?" Su Yang asked as they walked, full of enthusiasm.

"Tender, newly grown bamboo from this year is best." Su Ming answered. This was what his mentor had specifically instructed. Tender bamboo had finer fibers, less woodiness, and was easier to process.

The two quickly found a patch of newly sprouted bamboo. The bamboo stalks were only as thick as a wrist, lush and green. Su Yang raised his knife and brought it down. With a "crack," a tender bamboo stalk fell. He was quick and nimble; in no time, he had cut over a dozen stalks, cutting them into sections about a person's height.

"Is that enough? I can cut more if it's not!" Su Yang wiped his sweat, his face full of smiles.

"Enough, enough, Second Brother. Let's try with this first."

Each brother dragged several bamboo stalks. Taking advantage of the afternoon when most villagers were either in the fields or resting, they quietly returned home and moved everything directly to the corner of the backyard.

For the next few days, the corner of the Su family's backyard became the brothers' secret workshop.

On the first day, the brothers found a large stone slab and two wooden mallets, laboriously pounding all the bamboo into loose fibers. The "thump thump" sounds of pounding were masked by the backyard's high wall and the rustling of bamboo leaves in the wind, not attracting outside attention.

On the second day, Su Ming directed Su Yang to stuff the pounded bamboo fibers into a large wooden bucket, weigh them down with stones, then fill it with strong alkaline water boiled from wood ash, covering it with a wooden plank to soak. A faint, slightly sour, rotting smell similar to composting fertilizer began to permeate the air, but confined to the backyard corner, mixed with the scents of earth and vegetation, it wasn't too conspicuous. Occasionally, neighbors passing behind the house just assumed the Su family was making ordinary farm compost.

On the third and fourth days, the wooden bucket just sat there soaking quietly, occasionally bubbling. Su Yang would curiously lift the cover to look every day; the color of the bamboo fibers inside gradually deepened and turned yellow. Su Ming strictly followed his "mentor's" instructions, patiently waiting. During these days, the brothers went to the fields and cut firewood as usual, not arousing any suspicion.

On the fifth day, Su Ming felt the soaking was about right. The brothers then fished out the bamboo material, which had turned deep brown and felt soft and mushy to the touch. They rinsed it repeatedly with clean water, trying to remove as much of the alkaline liquid and impurities as possible. The wastewater from rinsing was directly poured onto the vegetable plot in the backyard, leaving no trace.

On the sixth day, the brothers set up the largest iron pot in the backyard corner. The washed bamboo material was poured into the pot, water was added, and it was simmered over low heat for an entire day until the bamboo material completely

dissolved into a pot of yellowish-brown, viscous paper pulp paste. The faint steam and the smell of boiling plants dissipated with the wind, not attracting any inquiry.

The seventh day, evening. The setting sun dyed the sky a shade of orange-red.

The paper pulp, after settling and being rinsed again, was placed in a wooden basin. Su Yang was carefully scooping something out of a wooden basin using a sieve with a hole in it. And Su Ming was using his hands to spread out what Su Yang scooped, bit by bit, flattening it on a door plank.

It was a thin, wet, yellowish-brown layer of fibers.

Su Shan returned at this moment. Pushing open the courtyard gate, he didn't hear the usual noise, only seeing Mrs. Chen busy in the kitchen and Wang Chuntao sewing under the eaves. He paused, as if remembering something, and silently walked around to the backyard.

He saw the mess in the corner at a glance, and his two sons who looked like mud-covered monkeys.

He stood there, not speaking, just watching quietly.

"Father, you're back." Su Yang saw his father and called out nervously.

Su Ming also looked up, his face smeared with paper pulp, but his eyes were astonishingly bright.

"Father, this is paper pulp. Spread it flat, let it dry, and it becomes paper." He pointed at the few palm-sized, uneven, mud-colored wet paper membranes on the door plank.

The courtyard was very quiet, only the faint sound of the evening wind rustling through leaves. No onlookers, no mocking laughter.

Su Shan seemed not to notice the surrounding silence. He just stared fixedly at the yellowish-brown thing on the door plank. He extended a rough finger and gently touched the wet "mud cake."

His fingertip felt a peculiar, soft yet resilient texture of interwoven fibers.

He slowly withdrew his hand, walked into the house without a word, brought out his pipe tobacco pouch, squatted in the corner of the courtyard, and smoked one puff after another, his eyes never leaving that door plank.

The sun slowly set behind the mountain. The moisture on the door plank gradually evaporated in the evening breeze. The few yellowish-brown "mud cakes" dried, hardened, their color becoming lighter, turning into an earthy yellow.

When the last bit of afterglow disappeared, Su Shan stood up. He walked to the door plank and carefully used his fingernail to peel off one piece of the "paper" that had completely dried.

"Rip—"

A soft sound.

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

## Chapter 42: It's a pity he's a bit too old.

[ 1,340 words ]

That rough, thick, perforated, earthen-yellow piece of hard paper was completely peeled off.

Su Shan held it up to his eyes, examining it against the dimming daylight.

The courtyard remained quiet, only a few distant barks of dogs could be heard.

After a long while, he, staring at the paper in his palm, a kind of unprecedented brilliance erupted in his muddy eyes!

He suddenly raised his head, his gaze sharp as lightning, shooting towards Su Ming, his voice hoarse, squeezed out from between his teeth:

"Xiao Ming... tell your father the truth."

"This recipe... where on earth did you get it?!"

Su Shan's voice sounded like two stones grinding together, each word hammering onto Su Ming's heart.

The courtyard was deathly silent.

The evening breeze blew past, carrying the fresh scent of soil and vegetation from the fields, yet it couldn't disperse the solidified, tense air in this corner.

Su Yang looked at his father, then at his younger brother, not daring to even breathe heavily. He had never seen his father with such a look in his eyes. It wasn't the usual

sternness, but a mixture of shock, suspicion, and a sharp glint he couldn't quite understand.

Mrs. Chen and Wang Chuntao also sensed something unusual in the backyard and quietly walked to the doorway, not daring to get closer.

"Here it comes, the ultimate pressure test!" Lin Yu's voice rang in Su Ming's mind, tinged with the excitement of someone enjoying the show without worrying about the trouble. "Disciple, steady! Remember the script we rehearsed! Your expression must be innocent, your eyes sincere, your tone carrying a hint of that 'I'm not entirely sure but that's how it is' kind of confusion! The Oscar is yours for the taking with this performance!"

Su Ming took a deep breath, forcibly suppressing his heart that was pounding like a drum.

He met his father's gaze that seemed almost capable of seeing right through him, clenched his fists, letting the stinging pain in his palms keep him alert.

"Dad... I..." he began, his voice carrying the slight tremor expected of a young boy, yet not panicked. "Everything I said is true."

"That recipe, I really found it in that bookshop in town."

Su Shan didn't speak, just stared at him, the embers in his pipe flickering, reflecting in his unfathomable pupils.

Su Ming knew simple repetition wouldn't pass muster. He had to fill in the details, use countless seemingly real details to construct a lie that couldn't be disproven.

"In the very back of that bookshop, in the corner by the wall, there was a pile of unwanted old books, covered in dust, some with their covers rotting away. The shopkeeper said those books were thirty wen each, pick any you like."

"I was rummaging through that pile of books. There was one without a cover, its pages yellowed and brittle, crumbling at a touch. When I opened it, a folded piece of paper fell out from between the pages."

As he spoke, he recalled the details Lin Yu had taught him.

"That piece of paper was even more worn than the jute paper we buy, its color similar to... similar to the dried paper on this door panel. The writing on it was in charcoal, very faded. I was just curious at the time, thought the material of the paper was strange, so I took a closer look."

"It had some little figures drawn on it, cutting bamboo, smashing things, boiling in a big pot... I couldn't even read all the characters, so I guessed and pieced things together, remembering a few key words, like 'tender bamboo', 'plant ash', 'pounding', 'retting and boiling'..."

Hearing this, Su Yang couldn't help but interject: "Yes, yes, yes! Dad, that's exactly how Xiao Ming has been directing me these past few days! First cut tender bamboo, then smash it with the wooden mallet, then soak it in plant ash water!"

Su Yang's corroboration made Su Ming's account even more credible.

The sharpness in Su Shan's eyes slowly receded somewhat, but his suspicion did not dissipate. He was a farmer who had dug his livelihood from the earth his whole life. He believed in sweat, he believed in the land, he did not believe in such windfalls.

"Which book?" he asked hoarsely.

"Don't know the name, Dad. That book didn't even have a cover, the handwriting inside was mostly blurred too, seemed like some kind of travelogue or miscellany." Su Ming's reply was flawless, an answer that left no evidence to trace.

Su Shan fell silent.

He turned the rough, earthen-yellow paper scrap over and over in his hand.

The paper was uneven in thickness, its surface so rough it could scrape off a layer of skin, with tiny holes and lumps of undispersed bamboo fiber.

But it was indeed a piece of "paper."

It could bear ink and brush, it could record words, it could turn intangible thoughts into something tangible, something that could be passed on.

He knew his youngest son had always loved pondering strange and unusual things since he was little. Finding some odd recipe left by predecessors in a worthless, tattered old book... this matter... sounded bizarre, yet seemed to have a sliver of possibility.

Most crucially, a thirteen-year-old child, no matter how clever, how could he possibly fabricate a method for making paper out of thin air? This was the proprietary skill that the big workshops in the city relied on for their survival!

Thinking of this, the shock and suspicion in Su Shan's heart began to be rapidly replaced by another, heavier, colder emotion.

It was fear.

He abruptly stood up, grabbing both Su Ming and Su Yang.

"Come, inside to talk!"

His voice was very low, but his movements were urgent, as if wolves were chasing him from behind.

Once inside, he immediately closed the door with a "creak" and bolted it.

Under the dim oil lamp, Su Shan's weathered face appeared exceptionally grave. He scanned his family—his wife Mrs. Chen, his eldest son Su Feng and his wife, his second son Su Yang—and finally his gaze settled on his youngest son, Su Ming.

"What happened today," he said, word by word, his voice pressed as if squeezed from his throat, "from now on, not a single word of it is to be spoken to anyone outside! Act as if it never happened! Those things in the backyard, burn them tomorrow morning! Bury them!"

"Dad! Why?!" Su Yang was frantic. "We finally managed to make it..."

"Shut up!" Su Shan growled in a low voice, making Su Yang shrink his neck in fright.

"Do you know what this is?" Su Shan raised the piece of paper in his hand. "This is something that can cost our whole family our lives!"

He panted heavily, as if he had been working a bellows for a long time.

"Don't you understand the principle that 'a man's wealth is his own ruin'? A recipe like this that can turn worthless bamboo into money, if outsiders find out, do you think our family will ever have a peaceful day again?"

"The Village Chief in the village, the rich people in town, aren't they all seemingly amiable, yet their hands are darker than anyone's? If they knew we had this skill, would they politely come to discuss it with us, or would they sneak into our house in the middle of the night, steal the recipe, and then throw our whole family, young and old, down a well?"

Su Shan's words were like a basin of ice water, pouring down from head to toe, making everyone shiver.

The excitement on Su Yang's face instantly faded, replaced by belated fear. Mrs. Chen was even more frightened, her face pale, tightly clutching Wang Chuntao's hand.

Su Ming's heart also sank. His father's reaction was even more intense than he had anticipated. He had considered risks, but his father was thinking of the catastrophe of extermination.

"Not bad, not bad," Lin Yu's voice sounded again, carrying a note of shrewd approval. "Your father's political awareness is quite good. Not blinded by profit, thinking about risk control and crisis management first thing. He's a qualified seedling for the 'Way of Survival', it's just a pity he's a bit old, otherwise he wouldn't be bad to recruit as a protector."

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

[ 1,134 words ]

Su Ming knew the time had come.

He raised his head, looking at his terrified family, looking at his father who was plunged into immense anxiety.

"Father, you are right."

His calm voice sounded exceptionally clear in the oppressive room.

"This formula is a hot potato. If our family keeps it to ourselves, disaster will inevitably be drawn to us sooner or later. So..."

He paused, meeting his father's gaze, and spoke the words he had long calculated in his heart.

"So, we cannot keep it to ourselves."

Su Shan was stunned. "Not keep it? Then what do you intend to do? Give it away?"

"Not give it away." Su Ming shook his head. "Father, think, in this village, whose word carries the most weight? Who least wants the village to fall into chaos?"

Su Shan answered almost without thinking. "The Village Chief."

The Village Chief, the head of the village. Though his official rank wasn't high, within this small patch of land, he was the sky. Village taxes, corvée labor, disputes—all were decided by him. More importantly, only if the village remained stable would his position be secure.

"Right, the Village Chief." Su Ming's eyes sparkled under the oil lamp. "Father, we will present this formula to the village!"

"What?!"

This time, not only Su Yang, but even the previously silent Su Feng cried out in shock.

"Xiao Ming, are you crazy? Our family's hard-earned treasure, given freely to the village?" Su Yang couldn't comprehend it.

"Not for free!" Su Ming emphasized his tone. "This is called 'technology shares'!"

This term was taught to him by Lin Yu, and he had learned it perfectly.

Seeing his family's bewildered expressions, he switched to a more common way of speaking.

"Father, Eldest Brother, Second Brother, think about it. The formula is our family's. How to make it, only we know. We take out the formula, saying it's so the whole village can live a better life. Who wouldn't give us a thumbs-up for that reputation?"

"We go find the Village Chief, hand the formula over for him to lead. Let him take charge, organize the village's manpower, and establish a village-run papermaking workshop."

"When the time comes, the Village Chief acts as the general manager. He has connections, prestige. If any local ruffians from the town come looking for trouble, he'll be the one to handle it. This is called making him shoulder the risk."

"The uncles and elders in the village have strength but nowhere to earn hard-earned coppers. We give them a path, let them chop bamboo, make paper pulp, and receive solid copper coins every day. What will they think of our family? Living Bodhisattvas!"

Su Ming's words were like pushing open a window in a dark room.

The shock and doubt in Su Shan's eyes gradually gave way to deep contemplation. He released his tightly gripped tobacco pipe, leaning forward slightly, clearly captivated by his son's words.

"Then... what about our family?" Su Feng couldn't help but ask. "Our family provides the formula, the technique. What do we get?"

"We sit back and share the profits." Su Ming stated decisively.

"Share profits?"

"Yes!" Su Ming held up three fingers. "Our family, as the owners of the formula, as the only ones who understand the technique, don't need to do any manual labor. For every hundred wen the workshop sells, our family takes thirty wen! Not a single percent less!"

Thirty wen!

Thirty percent!

This number made everyone in the room gasp sharply.

This was practically... getting something for nothing!

"Will... will this work?" Mrs. Chen asked worriedly. "Will the Village Chief and the villagers agree? We do nothing and take thirty percent. It's too much."

"Not too much!" Su Ming immediately refuted. He and Lin Yu had rehearsed these arguments countless times. "Mother, think, without our family's formula, bamboo is just bamboo, plant ash is just garbage, not worth a single wen. It's us who turned these worthless things into paper that can be sold! We provided the pot that allows the whole village to eat meat. Taking thirty percent of the broth is perfectly justified!"

He looked at his father and continued. "The Village Chief shoulders the risk, manages everything inside and out. He takes twenty percent. That's his rightful management fee. The remaining fifty percent is distributed among all the villagers who contribute labor. This distribution, no one can find fault with it! Who dares say our Su family is greedy?"

Lin Yu was applauding wildly in Su Ming's mind.

"Brilliant! Absolutely brilliant! Disciple, with your eloquence, it's a waste of talent not to go into multi-level marketing! Transferring risk to authority, distributing benefits to the masses, keeping the core technology firmly in your own hands! You've truly grasped the essence of my 'Way of Survival'! Your master is very pleased, very pleased indeed!"

Su Ming ignored his master's antics. He watched his father nervously, awaiting the final verdict.

Su Shan's breathing became heavy.

His head, imprisoned by yellow earth and sweat for a lifetime, was now operating at an unprecedented speed.

He could almost see the scene.

A village-run workshop, built under the Village Chief's command.

The village idlers and laborers all had work, happily receiving wages every day. When they saw his family, they would bow and scrape, calling them "Gods of Wealth."

And his Su family needed to do nothing. They only needed his son Su Ming to occasionally "guide" the technique, and gleaming copper coins would flow continuously into their pockets.

Most importantly, this enormous secret was no longer shouldered by his Su family alone.

The entire village would shoulder it!

Anyone who dared to try and steal the formula would be making an enemy of the entire Su Family Village! The Village Chief would be the first to refuse!

This... this was practically turning a treasure that could invite fatal disaster into an impregnable fortress of protection!

How could his usually bookish, frail youngest son come up with such a thorough, such a shrewd plan?

Could reading books really open one's mind so much?

Su Shan couldn't understand, but he knew this method was feasible!

He raised his head. A light, unprecedented in its intensity, burst forth from his turbid eyes. He looked at Su Ming as if looking at a stranger.

After a long while, he knocked the tobacco ash from his pipe onto the ground and straightened up again.

His back, bent for a lifetime, seemed to straighten a little at this moment.

"Good."

He said only one word.

Then he looked at Su Feng and Su Yang, then at Mrs. Chen and Wang Chuntao.

"Household matters, continue as usual. Keep your mouths tightly shut. If anyone leaks even half a word, they are no longer a member of my Su family!"

Finally, his gaze returned to Su Ming. His tone carried a gravity even he himself hadn't noticed before.

"Xiao Ming, tomorrow morning, before dawn, you come with me."

"Where to, Father?" Su Ming asked, already knowing the answer.

Su Shan took a deep breath, as if wanting to exhale decades of poverty and repression all at once.

"To the Village Chief's house!"

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

[ 1,536 words ]

Just after the fifth watch, the sky was still a murky bluish-gray.

Thick fog covered the entire Su Family Village. Beyond five paces, human figures were indistinct, leaving only a few scattered rooster crows piercing through the mist, sounding especially distant.

Su Shan didn't light a lamp. By the faint light seeping through the window, he carefully fastened his short jacket, which had been starched until it was whitish and had the fewest patches. His movements weren't fast, but they were steady.

Su Ming was already fully dressed, standing quietly in the shadows by the doorway.

"Let's go." Su Shan's voice wasn't loud, but it carried a determined, deliberate weight.

Father and son, one after the other, melted into the morning fog. The mist hit their faces with a damp, cold scent of earth and vegetation. Su Shan's back was ahead, his steps heavy, each one measured as if with a ruler, no longer the slightly weary stride of his usual trips to the fields.

Su Ming followed behind, communicating with his master in his mind.

"Master, I'm a bit nervous."

"Nervous is good," Lin Yu's voice held a trace of lazy amusement. "It means your mind is clear, knowing this matter concerns life and limb. Don't be afraid, follow the plan we rehearsed last night. Remember, your father is the ballast stone, you are the pole-man. He steadies the boat, you find the right direction to set the pole."

"My father... he seems different today." Su Ming looked at his father's back, straighter than usual by a few degrees.

"Hmph, even a clay figurine has a bit of earth's temper. Your father just doesn't like to fight, not that he lacks substance. This is how he is when he's carrying something heavy in his heart."

Village Chief Zhao Dequan's house was in the eastern part of the village, with blue brick walls and a courtyard nearly twice the size of the Su family's. Su Shan stopped at the courtyard gate, pondered for a moment, then raised his hand and knocked three times

on the sturdy wooden door—not too lightly, not too heavily. The sound was clear, showing neither impatience nor timidity.

"Who is it? Knocking before the sky's even fully light." A bleary-eyed woman pulled open the door; it was the Village Chief's wife.

"Sister-in-law, sorry to disturb your early morning. I'm Su Shan. There's an urgent matter, I'd like to ask Brother Dequan to help deliberate on it." Su Shan gave a slight nod, his tone calm, his face showing no extra expression.

The woman looked the father and son up and down. Seeing they were damp with morning dew but their expressions were composed and serious, not like they were panicked or had caused trouble, she stepped aside to let them into the courtyard.

"Wait in the main room, he'll be right out."

The main room was brighter than the Su family's. In the center was a cleanly wiped Eight Immortals table with four long benches. A faded New Year's painting of the Gods of Wealth was pasted on the wall. The air held a faint scent of tobacco.

Zhao Dequan shuffled out from the inner room in cloth shoes, draped in an outer coat. He was in his forties, not tall in stature, but his back was straight, a neat short beard on his chin, his eyes holding their usual shrewdness. Seeing the Su father and son, he was somewhat surprised, but didn't show much on his face.

"Shanzi? So early, what's the matter?" He walked to the table, casually picking up a coarse ceramic teacup.

Su Shan didn't reply immediately. He walked to the table and gently placed the tobacco pipe he had been clutching in his hand onto the table with a soft \*thump\*. He looked up at Zhao Dequan, his gaze steady.

"Brother Dequan," he began, his voice not loud, but each word clear, "I've run into a matter, too big, my family can't shoulder it alone, my mind can't untangle it. You're the backbone of our whole village, I must ask you to help judge it."

His words were steady, and heavy, like a weighty stone thrown into calm water.

Zhao Dequan's hand holding the teacup stopped. He narrowed his eyes, carefully examining Su Shan's expression. That weathered face held no fear, only a heavy, solemn resolve. This made him shed some of his casualness.

"What matter could make you, Su Shan, utter the words 'can't shoulder it'?" He put down the teacup, leaning forward slightly.

Su Shan didn't answer directly. Instead, he turned his head and gestured to Su Ming. "Xiao Ming, show the thing to your Uncle Zhao."

Su Ming took out the palm-sized, coarse-textured piece of paper from his robe, smoothed it flat, placed it on the Eight Immortals table, and pushed it toward Zhao Dequan.

Su Shan extended a rough finger, tapping the paper scrap, but his gaze remained fixed on Zhao Dequan. "Brother Dequan, you've seen much of the world, please take a look. Tell us, this thing, in the hands of us farming folk, is it truly food that can keep people alive, or... a root of disaster that can take lives?"

Zhao Dequan's brows completely furrowed. He picked up the paper scrap. The rough texture and unique resilience transmitted through his fingertips made his expression change slightly. He carefully examined the grain, brought it close to his nose to smell it, even following an old habit, pinched a tiny corner, put it in his mouth to chew, then spat it out.

"This... is paper?" He looked up sharply, his eyes sweeping back and forth between Su Shan and Su Ming. "Shanzi, you father and son, what kind of play are you performing?"

"Master, my turn," Su Ming silently recited in his mind.

"Uncle Zhao," Su Ming stepped forward half a pace, standing at his father's side, his tone respectful yet unafraid, "This thing wasn't bought from outside, nor given by someone else. I found an ancient recipe in an old book about miscellaneous studies, saying you could try to make paper using the tender bamboo from the back mountain and the plant ash from the stove hearth."

He paused, meeting Zhao Dequan's scrutinizing gaze, and continued clearly, "I was young and reckless, so I actually tried tinkering with it for a few days. My skill is crude, the technique is far off, I only barely managed to produce this rough, crude thing. But it... it truly worked."

"What?!"

The paper scrap in Zhao Dequan's hand trembled violently. He abruptly stood up, eyes wide, his body leaning forward in shock, grabbing Su Ming's arm. "What did you say? Made from bamboo? This... you made this?!"

His grip was strong. Su Ming felt a slight pain, but didn't struggle, just nodded affirmatively.

Zhao Dequan's breathing instantly became heavy. He was the Village Chief, he had been to the town, seen the government offices. He knew all too well the value of paper! That was silver! It was the dignity of scholars! It was wealth that could flow!

Using the bamboo covering the mountains? Using the ash left over from burning firewood?

If this was true... that stretch of green on the back mountain of Su Family Village instantly transformed into a dazzling mountain of gold and silver in his eyes!

The immense impact made his mind buzz, but the caution cultivated from years of handling village affairs immediately suppressed the wild joy. He slowly sat back down, his eyes becoming unfathomably deep, staring intently at Su Ming as if trying to see right through him.

"Boy, words spoken are nails hammered. Do you know the consequences of toying with the Village Chief over such a serious matter?"

Su Shan now took half a step forward, his broad shoulders slightly blocking Su Ming. He looked at Zhao Dequan, his voice still deliberate, yet carrying an undeniable seriousness. "Brother Dequan, you know what kind of man I, Su Shan, am. I wouldn't bring a baseless matter before you. Precisely because this matter is truly too big, big enough to overturn the heavens, and my single household simply cannot bear it, I must come to you to make this major decision."

Su Ming knew the critical moment had arrived. He had to pierce the most vital joint.

"Uncle Zhao," he took over from his father, his tone even more grave, "What my father says is true. The moment this thing was made, my father and I were first stunned, then terrified."

He looked directly into Zhao Dequan's sharp, probing eyes, each word dropping like a hammer in the quiet main room. "This recipe is a mountain of gold, it can keep countless people alive; but it's also a basin of red-hot charcoal! Whoever holds it can be burned to ashes! With the meager foundation of our Su family, we simply cannot keep this treasure hidden. If even a hint of the news leaks out, what awaits us won't be fortune, but likely a calamitous disaster that will destroy our family and take our lives!"

"So, my father pondered it all night. Before dawn, he brought me here."

"This fortune, our family cannot swallow it alone. This disaster, we cannot shoulder it alone either. After much thought, the only way is to place it in your hands, for you, the head of the household, to take charge. That is its only proper path, and also the possible... lifeline for our entire village!"

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

## Chapter 45: An Appetite Bigger Than the Sky

[ 2,048 words ]

The air in the main room seemed to have solidified.

The morning mist outside the window hadn't dispersed yet, and the light filtering in was gray and murky, casting an indistinct shadow on everyone's face in the room.

Only that piece of rough yellow paper lying quietly on the table seemed like the still center of a vortex capable of swallowing everything.

Zhao Dequan did not sit down.

He paced back and forth in the small open space with his hands clasped behind his back. His cloth shoes made almost no sound on the compacted earth floor, yet with each of his footsteps, Su Shan's heartbeat thumped heavily against his chest, once, then again.

Su Shan's hand, without him realizing, had once again gripped the tobacco pipe on the table, his knuckles turning white from the force. He had never been this nervous in his entire life, not even when facing the county yamen's tax collectors.

Su Ming stood ramrod straight, breathing slowly and deliberately, his eyes fixed on the tip of his nose, his mind focused inward.

"Steady, disciple." Lin Yu's voice rang in his mind, carrying a hint of leisurely observation. "Don't be intimidated by this old fox's aura. Right now, his mind is more chaotic than yours. Half of him sees a gold mountain, the other half sees a pit of fire. He's weighing whether he has the capability to hold this bowl of rice. Every step he takes is a calculation of gain and loss."

Su Ming understood in his heart. His master was right. Whoever spoke first now would lose the upper hand.

Zhao Dequan paced about seven or eight times back and forth before finally stopping.

He didn't look at the Su father and son; his gaze remained fixed on the piece of paper on the table, as if trying to bore a hole through it with his stare.

"This method," he spoke, his voice hoarse as if rubbed by sandpaper, "is it easy for others to learn?"

This was the first question, striking directly at the core.

Su Shan's heart leaped into his throat.

Su Ming took a step forward and replied respectfully, "Uncle Zhao, it's not easy. That old book I found mentioned this is called 'Heavenly Craft and the Creation of Things.' It looks simple, but in reality, each step is intricately linked. When to cut the bamboo, what heat to use for boiling, how to filter the plant ash, what proportion to dilute the filtered lye, and finally how to scoop and form the paper pulp—every step has its intricacies. If you're off by even a hair, what comes out won't be paper, but a puddle of mud. I was just a blind cat stumbling upon a dead mouse; it took me dozens of attempts to barely produce this one passable sheet."

His words were nine parts truth and one part fabrication, packaging all the chemical principles Lin Yu had taught into the mysterious and profound "ancient method intricacies."

"Well said!" Lin Yu praised. "Keep the key information vague, exaggerate the technical barriers! Let him know this technology is our family's unique secret skill, something others can't steal or learn! You are the indispensable pillar of this workshop!"

Zhao Dequan turned around, his sharp eyes finally looking directly at Su Ming. "Kid, you've thought this through thoroughly."

He walked to the table and began tapping his fingers lightly on its surface, producing a "tock, tock" sound.

"Second question. If we really do this, how many people, how much money, and how much land will we need?"

This was assessing feasibility.

Su Ming felt a wave of relief in his heart, knowing the other party was already interested. He immediately answered, his speech not fast but clear and logical, obviously the result of deep prior consideration.

"Answering Uncle Zhao, the money, the initial investment isn't large. Mainly, we need to build a few sheds, construct a few large stoves and lime pits. Our village has plenty of strong laborers and masons; it won't cost many copper coins. For land, that barren riverside area is most suitable, convenient for fetching water and doesn't occupy good farmland. For people, cutting bamboo, burning lime, pounding paper pulp—these are all labor-intensive tasks. The uncles, brothers, and idle men in the village can all do it; we can pay them daily wages."

With each sentence he spoke, Zhao Dequan's eyes grew brighter.

Not occupying good land, using the village's idle labor force, the startup cost shockingly low. This business seemed tailor-made for Su Family Village!

Zhao Dequan's breathing noticeably grew heavier. He stared at Su Ming, his gaze no longer scrutinizing a half-grown child, but examining a treasure capable of turning stone into gold.

He remained silent for a moment before finally asking the most crucial question.

"So, you father and son... how exactly do you want to do this?"

As these words left his mouth, the atmosphere in the room instantly tightened again.

Su Shan looked at his son.

Su Ming took a deep breath. He knew success or failure hinged on this moment.

"Uncle Zhao," his voice grew steady, devoid of any adolescent timidity, "this formula belongs to my Su family. But this immense fortune, my Su family dare not and cannot swallow it alone."

He paused, looking sincerely at Zhao Dequan, and spoke word by word, "So my idea is, this can't be just the Su family's business. It must be the business of 'Su Family Village!'"

The three words "Su Family Village" struck Zhao Dequan's heart like a heavy hammer.

He jolted violently, an incredulous light bursting forth in his eyes.

Su Ming didn't give him much time to think, pressing his advantage while the iron was hot, laying out the plan he had long since memorized.

"You are the backbone of our village. This matter must be spearheaded by you! You will be the face, organizing the manpower, handling official matters. In the future, if any fool dares to cause trouble, you'll be the one to deal with it. This is called the stabilizing pillar. The workshop's net profit—you get a twenty percent share!"

Zhao Dequan's fingers stopped moving.

Twenty percent! Without contributing anything, just based on his status and prestige, he gets twenty percent!

"The uncles and brothers in the village who contribute labor shouldn't toil for nothing. Cutting bamboo, carrying water, tending fires, pounding pulp—pay them according to their work, daily wages. Besides that, from the remaining net profit of the workshop, take out another fifty percent to distribute among all the fellow villagers who participate in the workshop's work! Year-end dividends based on work contribution!"

Zhao Dequan's Adam's apple bobbed up and down, his eyes becoming incredibly complex. He understood now. Su Ming was trying to tie the entire village's interests to this venture!

"And what about my Su family?" Su Ming straightened his chest, his voice not loud but carrying an undeniable confidence. "My family provides the formula. I am responsible for teaching everyone this paper-making craft exactly as it is, ensuring the workshop can be established and produce paper that can be sold for money. Our family gets thirty percent of the profit."

Thirty percent!

Doing nothing, just based on a formula, moving their lips, they want to take thirty percent? This appetite is bigger than the sky!

Zhao Dequan narrowed his eyes. The temperature in the room seemed to drop instantly.

He stared at Su Ming for a long time before slowly speaking, his tone carrying a dangerous edge. "Thirty percent? Kid, do you know how much thirty percent is? I, as the Village Chief, bearing immense responsibility, only get twenty percent. The entire village, over a hundred people working themselves to the bone, only split fifty percent. Your Su family, just moving your lips, wants to take thirty percent?"

Pressure, like a mountain, pressed down.

Sweat beaded on Su Shan's forehead. He instinctively wanted to say, "That's too much, we can take less."

"Hold firm, disciple! This is a negotiation! You retreat one step, he'll advance ten! This thirty percent is the value of the technology, not a single coin less!" Lin Yu's voice shouted sternly in his mind.

Su Ming clenched his fists, his fingernails digging deep into his palms. He met Zhao Dequan's gaze without retreating.

"Uncle Zhao, you can't calculate it that way."

"Without my family's formula, the bamboo on the back mountain will forever remain just bamboo, worthless."

"It is my family that provides this pot that can turn bamboo into gleaming silver! We provide the opportunity for the entire village to get a taste of meat soup! We take thirty percent, leaving the remaining seventy percent entirely for the village, for you! Isn't that fair?"

He took a step forward, his voice suddenly rising. "Furthermore, I am the only one who understands this technology! Once the workshop is up and running, how do we improve the paper's quality? How do we increase production? What do we do if defective or waste products appear in the future? All of that falls on me! My thirty percent is payment for the technology, payment for peace of mind! Tell me, should this money be taken or not?"

His words, resounding and forceful, left Zhao Dequan speechless.

Yes, the technology was the core! Without Su Ming, this "Technical Director," all of this was a mirage!

Su Shan stared dumbfounded at his younger son, mouth slightly agape, his face full of shock. Was this still his son, who usually only knew to bury his head in books and was somewhat shy around people? These words, this boldness—he could probably say them even to the county magistrate!

Zhao Dequan's chest heaved violently.

His shrewd, calculating mind raced.

Twenty percent management shares, thirty percent technology shares, fifty percent labor shares.

This distribution plan, on the surface, seemed to give the Su family the lion's share, but in reality, he, Zhao Dequan, was the biggest winner! Not only did he gain twenty percent profit out of thin air, more importantly, he turned the entire village into his "supporters" and firmly controlled the Su family, this treasure holding the core technology, in his grasp!

This political achievement, this prestige, this tangible benefit...

This was immense wealth falling from the heavens!

Having thought through all the connections, the last trace of doubt in his heart vanished, replaced by an uncontrollable surge of wild joy and excitement!

**\*SLAM!\***

A loud crash echoed as Zhao Dequan slammed his palm heavily onto the Eight Immortals table, causing the teacups on it to jump.

Su Shan was startled by this, his whole body trembling.

"Good!" Zhao Dequan's eyes widened, his face erupting into a booming laugh that pierced through the house, startling the old hen in the yard into frantic clucking. "Good! What a great 'business of Su Family Village'! What a great 'technology shares'!"

He grabbed Su Shan's shoulders and shook them vigorously, his face flushed. "Shanzi! You, Su Shan, quiet and unassuming, actually raised such a fine son! Courageous! Strategic! I, Zhao Dequan, am impressed!"

As the laughter subsided, his face instantly regained the Village Chief's stern authority.

He swept his gaze around the room, sharp as a knife, passing over Su Shan's face before finally settling on Su Ming.

"This matter is settled!"

"But, let's be clear from the start!" His voice suddenly turned icy. "From today, until the first sheet of paper from the workshop is sold and turned into money, this matter is known only to heaven, earth, you, and me! If anyone dares to leak even half a word, no matter who it is, they become my, Zhao Dequan's, mortal enemy! The public enemy of our entire Su Family Village!"

"Shanzi, Xiao Ming, do you understand?!"

These words, spoken by him as the Village Chief, carried weight heavier than Mount Tai.

It was no longer just the Su family's secret; it was an iron law established by the core power of the entire Su Family Village.

Su Shan nodded heavily, his voice hoarse. "Understood!"

Su Ming also bowed respectfully. "Your nephew understands!"

Zhao Dequan looked at Su Ming, his eyes filled with appreciation and a trace of barely perceptible wariness.

This thirteen-year-old youth could no longer be viewed with the eyes one uses for a child.

He waved his hand, his tone brooking no argument.

"Go back. Starting tomorrow, do what you normally do, don't let anyone notice anything unusual. I'll handle the rest!"

Father and son walked out of Zhao Dequan's gate. The morning mist had mostly dissipated, golden sunlight piercing through the clouds, coating the entire Su Family Village in a layer of warm light.

Su Shan walked ahead. The back that had been perpetually hunched under the weight of life now stood straight and tall.

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

## Chapter 46: Blood Oath

[ 1,516 words ]

The night was as dark as ink. The village had long since extinguished its lights, leaving only a few scattered barks that sounded especially clear in the silence.

The main hall of Zhao Dequan's house, however, was unusually lit by an oil lamp, its dim, yellowish light seeping through the paper window.

Shadows flickered inside. Besides Su Shan and Su Ming, father and son, there were five others. Three were the clan elders of the Su, Zhao, and Wang surnames in the village, their hair and beards white, their expressions solemn. The other two were Zhao Dequan's nephews from his own family, Zhao Dazhuang and Zhao Eryong, around thirty years old, with sturdy builds, standing to Zhao Dequan's left and right like door gods.

The air was so thick it was suffocating.

Zhao Dequan was not sitting. Clutching the piece of coarse paper Su Ming had made, he paced back and forth in the not-so-spacious main hall. His footsteps were heavy, each step seeming to land on the very heartstrings of those present. Su Shan hung his head low, staring at his old cloth shoes where his toes peeked through. With each step Zhao Dequan took closer, his gaunt shoulders involuntarily tightened a fraction more.

"See that? That's the old fox for you." Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind, carrying its usual lazy mockery. "Knowing a single plank can't support a bridge, he swiftly roped in the most influential old-timers in the village. Once they're on the boat, there's no getting off. Shared interests, shared risks. If this ever comes to light in the future, it'll be the disaster of the entire Su Family Village's core, not just Zhao Dequan's fault alone. Your father's little schemes are as transparent as paper in front of him."

Zhao Dequan finally stopped walking.

He slapped the piece of coarse yellowish paper onto the Eight Immortals table with a soft 'thwack'. The sound wasn't loud, but it startled everyone's hearts. His gaze was like a knife tempered with ice, slowly sweeping over every face present.

"Three great-uncles, two worthy nephews, Shanzi."

His voice was low, yet each word was clear, hammering into the silent air.

"The reason I've troubled you all to come here in the dead of night is precisely for this object on the table."

The three clan elders' murky gazes all focused on that unremarkable piece of yellow paper, filled with doubt and scrutiny.

"Su Shan's third son, Su Ming, by chance, obtained a fragmentary recipe from an old, tattered book. Using those unwanted young bamboos from the back mountain, he actually managed to concoct this thing."

Zhao Dequan's words were concise, without embellishment.

"Paper! Paper that can be written on to record things!"

"Buzz—"

It was as if a thunderclap had exploded beside the elders' ears. Their withered hands trembled violently, their eyes suddenly widening, staring fixedly at that piece of paper as if trying to see through it. Their deep wrinkles were filled with utter disbelief.

"De... Dequan, is this... is this true?" The Su clan elder's voice trembled. His bony finger pointed at the paper, almost touching it before jerking back sharply, as if it were a hot potato.

"This... this really came from bamboo? I've lived over sixty years, never heard of such a marvel!" The Wang clan elder leaned forward, his murky eyes erupting with a terrifying gleam.

Zhao Dequan didn't answer, only turned his gaze to Su Ming. "Xiao Ming, repeat what you told me this afternoon for these great-uncles. Make it clear."

Su Ming stepped forward, bowed deeply to the three clan elders with proper etiquette.

Then, he recounted the story he had already memorized, steady and clear. From how he accidentally obtained the fragmentary recipe, to the numerous failed attempts, until

the final success, and then to the immense wealth and catastrophic disaster hidden within it.

Finally, his voice, though not loud, was exceptionally firm as he laid out the distribution plan for that "Su Family Village business".

"...Our Su family provides the recipe and the technique, taking thirty percent of the profit. Uncle Dequan and the three clan elders will oversee the core, steer the ship, set the rules, and quell disturbances, taking twenty percent as silent partners. The remaining fifty percent will be distributed among the fellow villagers who contribute labor, according to their work."

As his words fell, the hall was so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

Only the occasional faint "crackle" of the oil lamp's wick breaking.

The shock on the three clan elders' faces had transformed into complete horror. They looked at each other, each seeing a stormy sea of shock in the other's eyes. Pulling the entire village into a business? And rewarding based on merit? This child's thinking is simply... appalling!

Zhao Dequan watched their reactions coldly, the corner of his mouth lifting almost imperceptibly.

He cleared his throat heavily, shattering the dead silence. His voice was grave and solemn, delivering the final, decisive blow for this earth-shattering plan.

"Three great-uncles, Xiao Ming's words are my, Zhao Dequan's, meaning."

"This object is a heaven-sent cornucopia for the descendants of our Su Family Village to turn our lives around and establish ourselves! However, it is also something that can invite a bloody disaster!"

His tone suddenly rose sharply, his gaze sharp as a hawk's, scraping over each person's doubtful, unsettled face.

"If even a whisper of this leaks, forget about getting rich. I fear our Su Family Village could face the danger of a nest overturned in an instant! By then, everyone present here will be the village's eternal sinners!"

The murderously cold words made the clan elders shudder all over, the last trace of color draining from their faces. With the earth already at their necks, they understood all too well the bloodiness behind the eight words: "A common man's only crime is possessing a treasure."

"Therefore, if we proceed with this, your mouths must be sealed shut with molten iron! Your hearts must be weighed down with giant boulders!"

Zhao Dequan suddenly drew a gleaming dagger from the small of his back. With a sharp "clang!", he drove it fiercely into the tabletop. The blade vibrated, emitting a low hum, casting his face in a cold, severe light.

"Today, right here, right now! We shall swear a blood oath!"

He grabbed a coarse pottery wine bowl from the table, broke the clay seal on a jar of strong liquor, and poured it full with a gurgle.

Then, he pulled out the dagger and, without hesitation, drew it across the thumb of his left hand.

Crimson blood beads immediately welled up, dripping down, rapidly spreading in the clear liquor like a bizarre, blooming flower.

"I, Zhao Dequan, swear to heaven today!"

He lifted the wine bowl with both hands, his voice like muffled thunder, vibrating within the cramped space.

"If a single word of the papermaking secret leaks from my mouth, may I be struck dead by heavenly lightning, torn apart by five horses! May I not be buried in the ancestral graves after death, my soul scattered to the winds, never to be reincarnated for all eternity! May my descendants, men become thieves, women become prostitutes, generation after generation of base and lowly status!"

The venomous oath was utterly ruthless, each word piercing the heart, sending chills down everyone's spine and cold sweat trickling down.

"Your turn!" Zhao Dequan's gaze was like a torch, pressing upon the three clan elders.

The three elders' faces were deathly pale, their breathing rapid. Exchanging glances, they saw the resolve within them. From the moment they stepped into this room and heard Zhao Dequan lay out the plan, there had been no way back.

"This old man... is in!" The Su clan elder gritted his teeth, reached out a trembling hand, took the dagger, and drew it harshly across his bony, age-spotted finger.

"Count me in!"

"Me too!"

The Wang and Zhao clan elders also gritted their teeth and followed suit.

Blood, drop by drop, merged into the wine, dyeing the bowl of strong liquor an unsettling pale red.

It was Su Shan's turn. He looked at that bowl of blood wine, his hands shaking terribly. A lifetime of honest simplicity, when had he ever witnessed such a scene?

Su Ming quietly reached out, steadying his father's arm. He could feel the stiffness and faint trembling beneath that thin arm.

Su Shan looked up, met his son's gaze for a moment, then met Zhao Dequan's icy, unyielding stare. He took the dagger, closed his eyes, and drew it forcefully across his own rough fingertip.

Blood dripped into the bowl.

Zhao Dazhuang and Zhao Eryong didn't even blink, cleanly slicing their fingers and squeezing out blood.

A bowl of wine, infused with the blood of seven men.

"Drink!"

Zhao Dequan barked the command, leading the way by lifting the large bowl and drinking deeply.

The others also picked up the wine bowls distributed to them, pouring the spicy liquid mixed with blood and oaths down their throats.

The fiery heat and faint metallic taste intertwined, burning a path down, as if hammering a heavy brand directly into their very organs.

After drinking the blood wine, everyone looked up. Their eyes now held a touch more ferocity and the connection of co-conspirators.

From this moment on, the seven of them were truly grasshoppers tied to the same rope, sharing glory and disgrace, rising and falling together.

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[ 2,023 words ]

"Good!" Zhao Dequan slammed the empty bowl heavily onto the table.

"From this moment on, this matter stops with the seven of us! Heaven knows, earth knows!"

He spoke with extreme speed, his reasoning clear, and began assigning tasks.

"Three esteemed elders, keeping the village stable depends entirely on you venerable gentlemen. Starting tomorrow, spread the word that I, Zhao Dequan, intend to lead the establishment of a 'bamboo ware workshop' on the riverbank, weaving some bamboo baskets and crates for sale, to give the villagers an extra source of income. This matter is perfectly reasonable, no one will suspect a thing."

"Dazhuang, Eryong!"

"Here, Uncle Dequan!" The two men straightened their chests and responded like soldiers.

"At first light tomorrow, you two immediately take trustworthy clansmen to the most remote section of the riverbank east of the village and mark out the boundary for me! Remember, be discreet! Surround the area tightly with bamboo and thatch grass, don't even let a stray dog in! Also, you two hurry to town and quietly buy up all the large iron pots and stone mortars you can find! I'll provide the silver!"

"Yes!"

Finally, his gaze fell upon Su Shan and his son.

"Shanzi, Xiao Ming. The heaviest burden rests on your father and son's shoulders. Starting tomorrow, you two will be the 'master craftsmen' of this workshop! How to proceed, who and what you need, report directly to me! I have only one demand!"

He paused, his gaze burning, enunciating each word clearly: "Within one month, I want to see paper that can be exchanged for copper coins!"

The night grew deeper. Su Shan and his son returned home in silence.

The soft thud of the courtyard gate closing shut out the outside world. Without a word, Su Shan squatted by the stone mill in the corner of the yard, pulled out his pipe, his hands trembling as he stuffed in the tobacco shreds, striking the flint several times before it ignited. He took a fierce drag, the pungent smoke filling his lungs, seeming to reclaim a shred of his soul. The pipe bowl glowed bright then dim, illuminating his deeply lined face, now heavy with gloom.

Su Ming stood quietly behind him. As the night wind blew, he was startled to realize the inner garment on his back was already soaked through with cold sweat, clinging icily to his skin.

His heart still pounded wildly in his chest, not just for the grand endeavor about to unfold, but for a weighty, almost back-breaking responsibility that had already firmly bound itself to him.

...

Zhao Dequan acted with thunderous speed and decisive action.

The very next day, news about the Village Chief wanting to organize the villagers to open a "bamboo ware workshop" spread through the village like the wind. The villagers were initially skeptical, but seeing the three highly respected clan elders all step forward to corroborate it, speaking with much anticipation about the matter, their doubts gradually dissipated, turning instead to discussions about how much tangible benefit this workshop could bring them.

At the same time, Zhao Dazhuang and Zhao Eryong, leading over a dozen sturdy clansmen, appeared on that long-abandoned stretch of riverbank east of the village. These men were all carefully selected by Zhao Dequan and the clan elders for their tight-lipped reliability. They felled bamboo and moved earth, working with fiery enthusiasm. In just two or three days, several crude but sufficiently spacious work sheds sprang up from the ground. The perimeter was further enclosed with a fence nearly twice a man's height made of sharpened bamboo poles and thick thatch grass, leaving only one narrow entrance-exit point, guarded day and night in shifts by Zhao clansmen. Ordinary people couldn't possibly peek inside to see what was happening.

A few more days later, several large iron pots requiring two men to embrace, along with over a dozen heavy, coarse stone mortars, were quietly transported in by ox-cart.

A rudimentary, secretive factory had quietly taken shape on this desolate bank.

Su Ming and Su Yang became the most special presences in this workshop.

Su Ming was the "technical supervisor," responsible for guiding the process flow.

Su Yang was the "foreman," leading everyone in the practical operations.

The first batch of over a dozen selected villagers only knew they were here to work and earn some hard-earned money. As for the specific nature of the work, strict orders from above forbade inquiry, and they dared not ask.

Everything seemed to be progressing secretly and in an orderly fashion.

Felling tender bamboo from the current year, cutting it into foot-long sections, repeatedly pounding it into loose bamboo fibers with heavy wooden mallets... These tasks, while labor-intensive, weren't particularly difficult.

Inside the work sheds, the "thump, thump" sound of pounding continued day and night, like a vigorous drumbeat for this secretive enterprise.

Several days later, the pounded bamboo fibers were thrown into newly built lime pits to soak and ret in the prepared strong alkaline water.

A unique odor, a mix of rotting bamboo and alkaline pungency, began to permeate the workshop area.

Everything seemed no different from Su Ming's earlier small-scale trial.

The anticipation in everyone's hearts gradually grew.

Zhao Dequan came almost every day, hands clasped behind his back as he inspected, watching the color of the bamboo material in the pits grow darker day by day. A hint of a barely perceptible smile even appeared on his usually stern face.

Another seven or eight days passed. Su Ming estimated the retting was about done.

At his command, everyone fished out the now softened and rotten bamboo material, carried it to the river, and repeatedly rinsed it with clear river water, trying their best to wash away the alkaline liquid and impurities.

The final step, also the most crucial step—steaming and boiling into pulp.

A giant iron pot had long been set up on a newly built earthen stove. The rinsed bamboo material was poured into it, and water was added.

"Light the fire!" Su Yang's booming voice echoed in the workshop.

Dry firewood was fed into the stove chamber. Flames instantly leaped up, greedily licking the blackened bottom of the pot.

Everyone gathered around the stove and pot, craning their necks, their gazes burning, tension and anticipation interwoven on every face. What churned in that pot seemed not like murky yellow bamboo material, but molten, gleaming gold.

"Hey? Something's not right!" a man squatting by the stove mouth, responsible for adding firewood, suddenly cried out. "Why is this pot bubbling and boiling fiercely in some spots, but lifeless and still in others?"

Hearing this, Su Yang took a swift stride to the side of the pot, peering intently.

Indeed! Due to the pot's massive size, the heat distribution was extremely uneven. The pulp directly above the stove's heart was boiling violently, foam churning, while the

areas near the edges of the pot were merely lukewarm, the bamboo material settled at the bottom, showing no reaction.

"Quick! Get wooden poles! Stir! Stir hard!" Su Yang urgently shouted.

Two men nearby immediately grabbed the prepared long wooden poles and thrust them into the pot, stirring with all their might.

But the retted bamboo material was exceptionally viscous, offering great resistance. The poles sank deep into it, stirring was extremely strenuous, and it was utterly impossible to stir evenly. The pot of paste was inconsistent in thickness, mottled in color. The situation was clearly about to spiral out of control.

Zhao Dequan hurried over upon hearing the news. Seeing this scene, his face instantly darkened like water. His gaze swept towards Su Ming. "Xiao Ming, what's going on here?"

Su Ming's brow had long been tightly furrowed. He too hadn't anticipated that the method successful in small-scale trials would encounter such problems when scaled up.

"Master?" He urgently called out in his heart.

Lin Yu's voice carried undisguised disdain. "Isn't it obvious? The pot is big, the bottom thick, the fire only burns the center of the pot, heat distribution is uneven! The manpower stirring isn't enough, the force insufficient, purely a waste of effort! Furthermore, the plant ash water you used for your small-scale tinkering before was carefully filtered. This time, with large-batch retting, the concentration is bound to have deviations. The alkaline water ratio is simply wrong!"

"What should we do?"

"What can we do? Reduce the fire! Add people! As for the alkaline water concentration... I'll teach you a rustic method. Next time, put a fresh egg into the ash water, see how much of it floats, and you can estimate roughly. Tsk, I have to point out everything for you, how clumsy!"

Su Ming felt slightly reassured.

Pretending to carefully circle the large pot twice, he scooped up a little paper pulp with a long-handled wooden ladle to examine it closely, then suddenly slapped his forehead, acting as if he had a sudden realization.

"Uncle Zhao! Everyone! I understand now!" he shouted, immediately drawing everyone's attention.

"What is it?" Zhao Dequan asked urgently.

Su Ming's tone was resolute. "The fire needs to be gentle, even, it needs to heat slowly, absolutely cannot be rushed! And this pulp needs to be stirred non-stop, to ensure even heating, only then can the bamboo fibers be completely broken down to achieve good paper pulp!"

He then pointed to the unused alkaline water pit beside them.

"And this ash water needs to be tested for its concentration using the 'egg floatation method'! Take a fresh egg and place it in the ash water. Observe how much of it floats to determine if the concentration is suitable!"

This seemingly mysterious explanation, mixed with unfamiliar terms like "egg floatation method," left the group of simple farmers dumbfounded. Though they didn't understand the principle, they immediately felt it was profound and esoteric, surely some incredible secret ancient method.

Zhao Dequan was half-convinced, half-doubting. "Will that really work?"

"This method seems simplest, yet is most difficult! Heat control, stirring force, concentration—none can be lacking!" Su Ming stated with conviction.

However, the atmosphere in the workshop inevitably grew tense.

"Can a pot of mushy mess really turn into something special?"

Murmurs of complaint and questioning quietly spread among the crowd. The movements of several men noticeably slowed, their faces filled with slackness and doubt.

Zhao Dequan's face was like iron. His gaze swept over the crowd, his heart sinking continuously. He knew well that once morale scattered, this workshop that had just been set up could collapse and vanish in an instant!

Just as morale was wavering, a furious roar suddenly erupted. "Shut the hell up, all of you!" Su Yang slammed the wooden pole in his hand heavily onto the ground with a dull "thud," drowning out all other noises.

He yanked off his short jacket, already soaked through with sweat, his eyes wide as he scanned each of the men whispering among themselves. "The method Third Son speaks of is the iron rule! Everyone listen to him! Whoever dares utter half a word of gossip again, don't blame my fists for not recognizing you!"

With that, he said no more, dragged over a sturdy wooden stump, and stepped onto it with one foot.

He grabbed that wooden pole, took a deep breath of the scorching, hot air, thrust the pole fiercely into the pot of scalding, viscous, nearly solidified paper pulp, and with all his might, began to stir violently!

"Shuanzi! Reduce the fire! Take out most of it!" he roared through gritted teeth, battling the stubborn pot of pulp.

"Tiedan! You damn fool, standing there dumbstruck waiting for a feast? Come here! Take over for me! Take turns stirring! No one is allowed to stop! No one rests!"

The men who had originally felt like giving up, looking at the bare-chested figure struggling fiercely amidst the swirling steam, expressions of shame appeared on their faces one after another.

"Brother Yang! I'll do it!"

"And me!"

Zhao Dazhuang and Zhao Eryong were the first to react. Blood surging, they roared, grabbed wooden poles, leaped onto the high ground beside the stove, stood shoulder to shoulder with Su Yang, thrust the poles deep into the pulp, and stirred with all their might.

The strength of one person might be insignificant, but three, four, five... more and more people were infected by this fierce, relentless momentum and joined in.

That pot of originally dead, gloomy paper pulp finally began to rotate—difficultly, slowly at first, then gradually more smoothly—forming a huge, whirlpool-like vortex.

Su Ming stood quietly to the side, silently watching his Second Brother's life-and-death struggle.

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## Chapter 48: Opening up sales channels

[ 1,373 words ]

A wave of heat, carrying the strange odor of lye and fermented bamboo, rushed over, making people dizzy and nauseous.

That large cauldron was like a greedy giant beast, the thick, churning slurry within its belly its very guts.

Su Yang gritted his teeth, pouring all the strength in his body into his arms, then transmitting it through that heavy wooden pole into the pot of seemingly congealed paste.

"Huff... huff..."

Beast-like gasps escaped his throat. Every stir felt like dragging a heavy demon up from hell.

Zhao Dazhuang and Zhao Eryong weren't faring much better. They took turns, joining several other men whose fighting spirit had been roused, stubbornly wrestling with this pot of bamboo pulp.

The wooden poles stirred the slurry, producing muffled sounds of "gurgle... plop," slow yet resolute.

That massive vortex, under the life-or-death efforts of everyone, finally began to rotate steadily.

Su Ming stood a little further away, his gaze tightly locked onto the figure of his Second Brother, Su Yang.

Lin Yu chuckled softly. "Brute force alone isn't enough. The timing is about right."

Su Ming immediately understood. He stepped forward and raised his voice. "Second Brother! Uncles and brothers! The timing is right! You can rest now!"

Su Yang and the others heard this as if it were heavenly music. They almost simultaneously let go of the wooden poles in their hands, collapsing to the ground one by one like fish out of water, gasping for air in great heaves.

The next step in the process was paper forming.

This was delicate work, requiring patience and skillful hands. Su Ming took charge personally. Holding a wooden frame strung with a fine bamboo screen, he dipped it into the slightly cooled paper pulp, gave it a gentle shake and a sweep, then lifted it steadily.

A thin, damp, unevenly colored yellowish-brown layer of fibers evenly adhered to the bamboo screen.

He carefully flipped the screen over, laying it onto a flat wooden board, then gently peeled it away.

A damp, coarse, even slightly tattered-edged piece of paper was born.

The workshop fell deathly silent.

Everyone's gaze was fixed on that thin, damp, ugly thing.

One of the men, who had just been half-dead from exhaustion, struggled to get up, craned his neck, rubbed his eyes in disbelief, and stammered, "This... this is... paper?"

No one answered him.

Because everyone was stunned by the sight before them.

Those worthless, abundant tender bamboo shoots from the mountains, after being pounded, fermented, and steamed and boiled, had actually transformed into paper that could be written on!

This was even more incredible than the ghost stories passed around the countryside!

"It's done..." Su Shan was the first to regain his senses. His lips trembled as he stretched out his hands, calloused and cracked, wanting to touch it, but stopped mid-air as if it were some sacred creation.

"It's done! It's really done!"

Someone shouted first, and the long-suppressed excitement erupted instantly like a mountain torrent.

"Hahaha! My goodness! Bamboo really can turn into paper!"

"We made it! We made it!"

The men forgot their exhaustion, jumping up one after another, pounding each other's shoulders, laughing and shouting like a bunch of madmen.

Zhao Dequan happened to walk into the workshop at that moment, hands clasped behind his back.

He saw the damp paper on the wooden board and the ecstatic faces of the men at a glance. He didn't smile, his face still wearing that inscrutable, authoritative expression, but a distinct flame burned fiercely within his shrewd eyes.

He walked to the wooden board, crouched down, reached out a finger, and gently, carefully, rubbed the edge of the damp paper.

Feeling the coarse yet resilient texture of the fibers.

"Shut up, all of you!" he said without looking up, his voice not loud but like a heavy hammer, instantly smashing all the clamor to pieces.

The workshop fell silent again, not a sound to be heard.

Zhao Dequan slowly stood up, his gaze sharp as a knife, sweeping over every face.

"Remember! From today on, if any of you dares to let a single word slip, don't blame Zhao Dequan for not caring about fellow villagers! I'll have you thrown in the river!"

A chill ran through everyone's hearts. The wild joy on their faces quickly faded, replaced by deep awe and fear.

"Xiao Ming." Zhao Dequan turned to Su Ming. "How long does this thing need to dry?"

"It needs to be pressed to remove water, then each sheet pasted onto a heated wall for baking. Fastest, one day; slowest, two days."

"Good!" Zhao Dequan waved a hand decisively. "Su Yang! You take some men and build that wall immediately! Su Ming, you're responsible for teaching them how to press and bake! In three days, I want to see dry paper we can take to town to sell!"

...

Three days passed in the blink of an eye.

Under Su Ming's guidance, the first batch of nearly a thousand sheets of bamboo paper was finally fresh out of the oven.

These papers were far from exquisite. Their color was a dull, earthy yellow, the surface was coarse, and one could even see tiny bamboo fibers that hadn't completely dissolved. But they had one huge advantage—they were thick and tough!

Zhao Dequan took one sheet, pulled it hard with both hands. The paper only stretched and deformed, making a "crack" sound, but did not tear.

"Good! Good!" Zhao Dequan's eyes shone with a brilliant light as he said "good" twice.

He carefully selected the best-looking hundred or so sheets from this batch and wrapped them meticulously in oilcloth.

"Dazhuang, Eryong, guard this place well! No one is to come near!"

"Shanzi, Xiao Ming, you two, father and son, come with me."

Zhao Dequan didn't bring anyone else, only calling Su Shan and his son. He personally drove the ox cart, taking advantage of the dim, pre-dawn light, heading straight for Qingshi Town.

Lin Yu commented in Su Ming's mind, "See that, disciple? This is the way of an old fox. Core technology must be kept in his own hands, and sales channels must be personally established. Bringing you is so you, the 'technical supervisor,' can answer questions at critical moments. Bringing your father is to let this honest man witness with his own eyes how this immense wealth comes about, so he'll be utterly devoted from now on."

Su Ming remained silent but mentally noted down everything his master said.

Arriving at Qingshi Town, Zhao Dequan habitually started driving the ox cart towards the general goods market area. Su Ming suddenly spoke up, "Uncle Zhao, wait."

"Hmm?" Zhao Dequan reined in the ox and looked back, puzzled.

Su Ming took a deep breath, his gaze firm as he looked towards the direction of the County School. "Uncle Zhao, we... should go to the Xu family bookstall first."

Zhao Dequan's brow furrowed slightly, clearly somewhat unconvinced. "Old Xu? How much can his little stall take? Thirty, fifty sheets at most. Better to go to the general goods market first; the volume there is larger."

"Uncle Zhao," Su Ming's tone was sincere yet insistent, "the bookstall might not take a large quantity, but its significance is extraordinary. Think about it. Xu Qing is a County School student; his classmates are also scholars. If our paper gains their approval, it means we've established a reputation within the scholar community. This is a long-term business."

He paused, then continued, "Moreover, Mr. Xu is an upright person. Dealing with scholars is always better than haggling with those shrewd merchants. Although our paper is sturdy and durable, it's ultimately coarse. Using it for scholars to write on better reflects its value than selling it to general stores for wrapping things or pasting windows."

Zhao Dequan narrowed his eyes, his fingers unconsciously tapping the cart shaft, clearly weighing the pros and cons.

Seeing this, Su Ming added more fuel to the fire. "Uncle Zhao, as long as Xu Qing and the others use it and say it's good, are we afraid big buyers won't come knocking in the future? We need to establish this reputation first!"

Su Shan, who had been silent all along, also cautiously spoke up, "Brother Zhao, Third Son makes sense... The approval of scholars is precious indeed."

Zhao Dequan's gaze lingered on Su Ming's determined young face for a moment. Suddenly, he laughed heartily and turned the ox cart around. "Fine! I'll listen to you this once, kid! Let's go meet that Old Mr. Xu first!"

The ox cart creaked as it turned, heading towards the County School.

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## Chapter 49: Money's Path

[ 1,196 words ]

The alley near the County School was noticeably quieter. Xu Qing's father's stall remained simple—just a few books, several inkstones, and some worn brushes—and business was slow. He was holding an old book, lost in concentration.

Zhao Dequan straightened his collar, making an effort to look like an honest, plain farmer instead of a shrewd businessman. He bent slightly at the waist, wearing a sincere smile tinged with a hint of reverence.

"Mr. Xu, I am the Village Chief of Su Family Village."

Old Xu lifted his head and looked at the unfamiliar farmer and the father-and-son behind him with some puzzlement.

Zhao Dequan carefully took out the one hundred sheets of the best-quality bamboo paper from the oilcloth bundle and presented them with both hands. "Old Mr. Xu, sorry to trouble you. This is a local paper our village worked on ourselves, made from the bamboo in the back mountain... very crude, really. I wouldn't dare to dirty your eyes with it."

Then his tone shifted, becoming more earnest. "But our Third Son—this boy here," he pulled Su Ming forward, "he met your young master in town and came back saying Mr. Xu is learned and upright, a model for Qingshi Town's scholars! He also said you sit here selling books out of pity for poor students..."

Su Ming stepped forward at the right moment and bowed respectfully. "Old Sir Xu, junior Su Ming. Although this paper is rough, it is thick and durable, not easy to tear. I thought—there must be many industrious but poor students at the County School like Brother Xu Qing. They copy books and practice calligraphy, which costs them a lot. If

you don't mind, could you sell it for us? The price is negotiable. We only hope to give poor students another option, and to earn our village a little money for oil and salt."

Old Xu took the stack of paper and examined it carefully. The sheets were indeed coarse and yellowed, nothing like the snowy white xuan paper on his stall. But he pinched a corner with his finger and pulled hard; a flash of surprise crossed his eyes—the paper's toughness was unexpectedly good.

He thought of his son studying by the dim oil lamp late into the night, and of students forced to practice on sand trays because paper was too expensive. His heart softened.

"This paper...indeed plain," Old Xu said slowly, "but the texture is sturdy, and the price must be very cheap. For everyday copying and rough calculations, it will do."

He looked up, his gaze passing over Zhao Dequan's hopeful face and settling on Su Ming's clear, intelligent eyes, before he sighed. "Ah, if we had this earlier, Qing wouldn't have had to copy books into the late hours over a few sheets. Fine, old man will try selling it for you. How much a sheet?"

Zhao Dequan hurriedly replied, "You name the price. If it helps those students, we can earn less!"

Old Xu pondered for a moment. "The worst grass paper at Wenbao Zhai costs two copper coins. Though this is coarse, it is tough—three copper coins a sheet. I won't add my fee; I'll sell at original price just to make things easier for the students."

"Deal! Deal! Thank you, Old Sir! You're a living Bodhisattva!" Zhao Dequan was overjoyed and kept kowtowing. The price exceeded his expectations, and more importantly, it opened a rare channel.

In the end, Old Xu kept two hundred sheets, tucking them away carefully. Zhao Dequan took the heavy six hundred copper coins and felt as if the money itself smelled faintly of ink.

After leaving Old Xu, Zhao Dequan's smile grew even more genuine. He patted Su Ming's shoulder. "Third Son, you've got a sharp mind! This route you chose is right!"

They then loaded the ox cart and rode through the main street, turning into a narrow, crowded alley thick with fishy and sweat smells, until they reached the general store.

The shopkeeper still had that indifferent air. Zhao Dequan was brimming with confidence this time, but he kept on the same humble smile and presented the paper.

"Brother, business booming, hey."

“Get out of here, Zhao Village Chief. What are you trying to trick me with this time?” The shopkeeper took the paper, frowning as he examined it. “What is this? Yellow and shabby, so rough you could scrub yourself with it.”

“Brother, don’t say that.” Zhao Dequan chuckled. “This is the real deal! Thick, with great toughness! Wrap things, patch windows, or even use it when you need to relieve yourself—far better than those flimsy grass papers! And it’s cheap! Wenbao Zhai’s worst grass paper is two copper coins; mine, I’ll give you two copper coins a sheet! You sell it for three, make a whole coin profit!”

The shopkeeper skeptically tore at it with force—it didn’t rip. His eyes lit up immediately. A one-coin margin! That was more than he earned selling daily odds and ends!

“Give me three hundred first!”

Then, with the same pitch and the same price, they sold two hundred more sheets to a shop that specialized in needles, thread, and sewing supplies.

The oilcloth bundle on the ox cart that had been bulging was now completely flattened.

And in Zhao Dequan’s arms, there was a heavy money bag. Inside were not only the neat six hundred copper coins from Old Xu, but also one thousand loose copper coins from the general and sewing shops.

On the way back to the village, Zhao Dequan was in high spirits, even humming off-key. He glanced at the silent Su Ming. “Third Son, you did us a favor today. Old Xu’s channel—brilliant! Sold goods, made money, and earned a name, all steady.”

Su Ming smiled faintly and said nothing. In his mind, Lin Yu would be quietly proud, saying: “Disciple, well done! This is what we call ‘differentiated marketing’ and ‘market segmentation’! Sell the right product in the safest way to those who need it most. Old Xu is a long-term investment, the general store is quick cash—cover both and both hands grow strong! Zhao Dequan understands straight away.”

...

Back at the village workshop, the scene of dividing the money was no different from before.

That pile of black, gleaming copper coins still made hands feel hot and hearts tremble.

But when Zhao Dequan placed the small extra silver ingot (from Old Xu’s exchanged money) into the portion due to the Su family, every man’s gaze toward Su Shan and his son carried more than the usual respect; it held solid conviction.

Su Shan took the heavy cloth bundle, smelling of ink and copper, his hand still trembling.

But there was something else mixed into that tremor—a different quality—a proven value, and a weighty hope that needed protecting.

At the Su family dinner table, the fried eggs were still oily, and the buns still plump and white.

Su Shan tapped his pipe, pushed the heavier cloth bundle toward Su Ming, and his tone was more decisive than before.

“Third Son, keep this money safe.”

“How our family walks the road from now on, you must think more. Think farther, farther than today.”

Su Ming clutched the bundle. The silver ingot’s edge still dug into his palm, but he held it steady.

He felt not only his family’s wager, but a heavy trust and a responsibility to guard.

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## Chapter 50: Right and Wrong

[ 1,269 words ]

The only tavern in Su Family Village was less of a tavern and more just the main room of Limping Wang's house at the east end of the village.

Two greasy square tables, a few long benches, and a wine jar half a person tall in the corner, emitting the distinctive sour smell of cheap, watered-down wine.

In the past, this place only saw a bit of life during the slack farming seasons or festival times.

But these past few days, as soon as dusk fell, Limping Wang's main room was packed.

"Limping Wang, another bowl!" A man with a flushed face slammed his coarse porcelain bowl heavily on the table.

"Coming right up!" Limping Wang's legs weren't agile, but his face was beaming with joy, his movements scooping the wine noticeably more deft than usual.

The man was Zhao Eryong, someone who usually would sniff a bowl of rice soup for ages before drinking it. Yet these past few days, he'd had wine with every meal, a barely containable smugness radiating from the corners of his eyes and brows.

Sitting opposite him was Su Yang.

Su Yang wasn't drinking. A small plate of stir-fried peanuts sat before him. He picked them up one by one, chewing them slowly and carefully, listening to the commotion around him.

"Brother Eryong, what exactly are you guys tinkering with in that workshop?" A man thin as a monkey sidled up, a smile plastered on his face. "Look at you, glowing with health, struck it rich, huh?"

Zhao Eryong let out a boozy belch, glancing at him sideways. "The Village Chief said, don't ask what you shouldn't."

"Hey, we're just curious," the monkey-thin man rubbed his hands together. "We're all from the same village. If there's good fortune, bring your brothers along too."

"Right, right. We see you guys leaving before dawn and coming back after dark every day, all secretive-like," someone immediately chimed in from the side.

"Look at Su Yang, and Zhao Dazhuang's family, and a few others. They've been seeing meat in their pots every meal these days. My wife has been grumbling about it for days."

Sour remarks, mixed with undisguised jealousy, spread through the small main room.

Su Yang put a peanut into his mouth, chewing it with a loud crunch, remaining silent the whole time.

He remembered Third Son's advice: "Second Brother, keep your mouth shut and your mind steady. The more others ask, the less you should say."

Zhao Eryong, buoyed by the crowd's flattery, was just about to brag a little when he suddenly caught sight of Su Yang's calm face. The words on the tip of his tongue were swallowed back.

He remembered Zhao Dequan's expressionless face and the warning, "Anyone who leaks a single word gets thrown straight into the river." A cold sweat instantly broke out on his back.

"Drink your damn wine!" Zhao Eryong shoved his bowl away, roaring gruffly. "If you want to make money, farm your land properly! Stop eyeing other people's pots all day!"

His roar stunned the crowd. They shrank back resentfully, but the probing and unwillingness in their eyes only grew more intense.

In a corner, a figure hunched in the shadows, almost merging with the darkness.

It was the village loafer, Su Lai.

He wasn't drinking, nor was he eating peanuts. A pair of shifty eyes were fixed intently on Zhao Eryong and Su Yang, taking in every word of everyone's conversation.

His fingernails were caked with black grime. His eyes flickered, and a sneer no one noticed curled at the corner of his mouth.

...

When Su Ming returned from town, he happened to run into Zhao Rui at the village entrance.

Zhao Rui was still wearing that half-new, half-old scholar's robe, holding a scroll of books. Seeing Su Ming, his gaze was somewhat complex—a trace of familiarity born from their shared brush with death, mixed with a lingering awkwardness.

"Su Ming, back?" He stopped, his tone somewhat milder than before.

Su Ming, holding the newly purchased writing materials in his arms, nodded. "Mm."

"I heard... you've been helping my father with the accounts lately?" Zhao Rui's tone held inquiry, but not the mockery of before. The experience in the broken temple that night was like an invisible thread that had briefly bound them together. Though not strong, it couldn't be completely ignored either.

Su Ming stopped walking, looking at him calmly. "The Village Chief thinks highly of me, letting me help with the calculations."

"Calculations?" Zhao Rui pursed his lips, seeming to want to say something, but in the end only said, "My father is a man of many rules. You... be careful." The words actually carried a hint of goodwill.

Su Ming gave a slight nod. "Thanks for the reminder."

Zhao Rui seemed to have completed some sort of task, letting out a relieved sigh. He couldn't help but lower his voice and ask, "That... the workshop business, is it really that

important? My mother says the atmosphere at home has been very tense these past few days."

Su Ming's gaze swept over Zhao Rui's curious face, his tone still flat. "We just do as the Village Chief instructs. The rest is not for us to ask about."

Looking at Su Ming's utterly unyielding demeanor, and remembering his abnormal calm that night, that indescribable feeling rose in Zhao Rui's heart again. He waved a hand. "Fine, I was just asking casually. You... take care." With that, he turned and walked away, scroll in hand.

Su Ming watched his retreating back for a moment, then hugged his things and headed home.

Lin Yu: "Relationship subtly improved, downgraded from 'actively picking fights' to 'probing inquiries,' consistent with interpersonal changes after shared traumatic experiences. Disciple handled it appropriately. Continue maintaining the 'harmless and useless' persona."

With the first "huge sum" of money he earned himself, Su Ming bought a bag of fine rice for the family, a new tobacco pipe for his father, two feet of cotton cloth for his mother to make new clothes, and a new pair of straw sandals for each of his two older brothers.

He spent almost all the remaining money on writing materials.

Paper, ink, brushes, and a full jar of clear oil that could keep the lamp lit until dawn.

That night, in the Su family's earthen house, that small oil lamp burned brighter than ever before.

Su Shan puffed on his new tobacco pipe, \*ba-da ba-da\*. Amidst the swirling smoke, he looked at his youngest son studying earnestly under the lamp. A hint of pride flickered in his muddled eyes.

Mrs. Su Chen sat to the side, stitching shoe soles. The smile on her lips never faded.

Late into the night.

Su Ming blew out the oil lamp and lay on the bed, but his mind sank into that ancient ring.

In the courtyard, the chirping of insects rose and fell, like a symphony of summer night.

"Master."

"Hm." Lin Yu's voice carried a touch of laziness. "Disciple, your cultivation of the Aura Concealment Art must not be neglected. You have only initially grasped the gathering of Yang Energy. You are still far from the true meaning of 'concealment.'"

Following the instruction, Su Ming began circulating the \*Aura Concealment Art\* in his mind.

That familiar "warmth" surfaced again. This time, guiding it felt much smoother than before. The warm "mist" slowly contracted inward, condensing without dispersing, clinging to the surface of his body like an invisible, form-fitting garment.

"Good." Lin Yu's voice held a trace of satisfaction. "The Aura Concealment Art is the foundation, your guarantee for survival. But just knowing how to hide is not enough. True concealment is not becoming an unmoving rock, but becoming a drop of water that can blend into any stream."

"Then what should this disciple do?"

"Starting today, this master will teach you the method of refining the spirit." Lin Yu's voice grew serious.

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