

Transmigrated into a Grandpa, Embracing the Laid-Back Life

c 51

[1,108 words]

"Refining the Spirit?" Su Ming's heart stirred.

"Correct. The fundamental essence of a human lies in essence, energy, and spirit. The tempering of your body you are doing now is refining essence; drawing energy into the body is refining energy; and this Refining the Spirit is tempering your soul, your will, your perception."

Lin Yu's voice became ethereal: "A strong spirit leads to a firm will. A firm will leads to keen perception, photographic memory, and a mind as clear as a mirror. In battle, it allows you to foresee the enemy's moves. In cultivation, it doubles the results with half the effort."

(Inner thoughts: "Finally, we've reached my area of expertise—the mystical packaging class! Packaging modern meditation, concentration training, and sensory enhancement into the grand-sounding 'Refining the Spirit' method. I give myself a hundred points for this move!")

"Master, teach me!" Su Ming became excited.

"Don't rush." Lin Yu said leisurely, "The methods of Refining the Spirit are numerous and complex, but they all share the same core. Today, I will only teach you the first step—'Listening to Sounds' and 'Observing the Flame'."

He paused, then continued, "Right now, calm your heart and listen."

Su Ming immediately obeyed, pricking up his ears.

He could hear the faint snores coming from his parents' room, and the rustling of leaves as the night wind blew through the old locust tree outside the courtyard.

"Not enough." Lin Yu said lightly, "These sounds are too close, too noisy. Forget them. Listen for sounds that are farther away, more subtle. Listen... to the cricket chirping under the eaves of Limping Wang's house at the east end of the village. Its left third antenna just twitched."

Su Ming was stunned.

The east end of the village? That was separated from his house by seven or eight households, at least half a li away!

Hear a cricket's antenna? How is that possible?

(Inner thoughts: "Hehe, exaggeration, understand exaggeration? First set a small goal, like listening to a hundred million of them... ahem, first set an impossible goal to maximize the stimulation of his potential. This is called expectation management!")

"Focus your spirit. Don't listen with your ears, use your will to 'capture' it." Lin Yu guided, "Your spiritual sense is like an invisible net. Cast it out, covering the entire village. Then, on this net, search for the faintest vibration."

Su Ming took a deep breath, dismissed distracting thoughts, and tried to disperse his mental energy outward.

At first, his mind was a cacophony.

The sound of wind, the barking of dogs, the drunken sleep-talking of villagers in the distance... countless sounds mixed together like a pot of boiling porridge.

He simply couldn't distinguish any specific sound.

"Master, it's too chaotic."

"Then learn to find order within the chaos." Lin Yu's voice held not a trace of emotion, "On the battlefield, amidst thousands of troops and horses, can you fail to hear the enemy general's command just because the sounds are chaotic? Calm your heart. Filter out those useless noises. Keep only what you want."

Gritting his teeth, Su Ming tried again and again.

He imagined his will as a sieve, trying to sift out those "big" sounds, leaving behind the "small" ones.

Time passed bit by bit. Fine beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. The intense mental concentration brought waves of fatigue and dizziness.

He didn't know how long it had been. Just as he was about to give up, the cacophony of sounds in his mind suddenly seemed to be smoothed over by an invisible hand, gradually calming down.

In the ensuing silence, an extremely faint "chirp" abruptly jumped out.

The sound was so clear, as if it were right by his ear.

He could even "see" it—in the darkness under the eaves, a glossy black cricket was vibrating its wings, its two long antennae gently swaying in the air.

"I... heard it." Su Ming's voice trembled with disbelief.

"Good." Lin Yu praised, "This is 'Listening to Sounds'. Next is 'Observing the Flame'."

He had Su Ming relight the oil lamp.

"Look at it."

Su Ming opened his eyes, his gaze focusing on the bean-sized flame.

"What do you see?"

"A flickering flame, yellow, with a reddish top."

"Wrong." Lin Yu calmly negated, "What you see is merely the surface. You need to see its 'birth' and 'extinction'. Every instant, old lamp oil is vaporized, burned, turning into light and heat; meanwhile, new lamp oil climbs up the wick to replenish it. This is an unceasing cycle."

"You must use your will to feel the temperature of the flame, to 'see' clearly the tremor of every strand of light, to understand why it shines and why it dances. Immerse your mind completely into this bean-sized flame, until you feel... you have also become this flame."

(Inner thoughts: "Come, young man, feel the charm of micro-physics! Energy conversion, matter combustion, how wonderful! Much more interesting than memorizing those 'zhi hu zhe ye', right?")

Su Ming stared at the candle flame.

Gradually, in his eyes, that flame began to grow larger, clearer.

He saw the faint blue color in the flame's inner layer, saw each subtle sway of the outer flame caused by air currents.

He could almost feel that scorching temperature, not through his skin, but through his spirit.

In his world, only this one ball of light remained.

When Su Ming snapped out of that wondrous state, the sky outside the window was already turning pale with the dawn.

He only felt mentally exhausted, but his mind was unprecedentedly clear.

He picked up a copy of the Analects from the table and randomly opened a page.

Passages that in the past required reciting three to five times to memorize firmly, now, with just one glance, the words seemed to be branded, deeply engraved into his mind.

He closed his eyes. Every character appeared vividly and clearly.

He turned to the next page, looked again, memorized again.

A quarter of an hour later, he had memorized the entire chapter, word for word, without a single mistake!

"Master! This..." Su Ming was so overjoyed he almost jumped up.

"The effects of Refining the Spirit have only just begun." Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of amusement, "The Four Books and Five Classics are dry and dull. Finish memorizing them sooner, and your master can have some peace and quiet sooner too."

(Inner thoughts: "My goodness, finally I don't have to listen to these 'zhi hu zhe ye' anymore! For a soul from the 21st century, listening to this stuff every day is pure mental torture! Quick, disciple, use your photographic memory, hurry up and get all this nonsense sorted out.")

However, Su Ming took his master's "disdain" as motivation. He clenched his fist, his heart filled with unprecedented drive.

He not only wanted to earn money to give his family a good life.

He also wanted to use this extraordinary memory to cram all knowledge into his mind.

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Chapter 52: Undercurrents in the Deep Winter

[1,619 words]

The deep winter had arrived.

The north wind was like a whetted blade, scraping across the bare treetops, emitting mournful howls. The end of the year was approaching, yet Su Family Village was permeated with an oppressive atmosphere unlike any previous year.

The papermaking workshop at the village center, however, was bustling with activity. Its scale had doubled compared to three months ago. The newly built chimney spewed white steam all day long, and the smell of alkali water and bamboo pulp was so thick it enveloped most of the village, as if soaking the entire settlement in a kind of metallic-tinged vitality. As the year-end approached, the volume of goods shipped out had multiplied.

The over twenty newly hired men made the workshop shed feel cramped and overcrowded. They worked diligently, their clothes soaked with sweat, but their eyes lacked the reverence of the earliest batch of workers, replaced instead by poorly concealed calculation and ambition.

Su Ming walked through the workshop shed, carrying a stack of freshly calculated account books. Several of the new villagers huddled together, whispering in low voices. When they saw him pass by, they immediately fell silent, their gazes falling upon him in unison, as if weighing a valuable object. Su Ming's expression remained unchanged as he walked past with steady steps.

Lin Yu spoke lazily in his mind, "Disciple, see that? This is human nature. The first batch of people got to eat meat, and they were grateful. This second batch came smelling the meat. They'll only complain about getting too little, and might even wonder why they aren't the ones dividing up the pot of meat." His voice held a trace of weariness that was hard to detect. During this period, he had been desperately suppressing that latent Ghost Lantern power, and now he had finally achieved considerable success, able to relax a little.

"This disciple understands," Su Ming responded in his heart.

"Good that you understand. Don't meddle in matters that aren't your concern," Lin Yu advised. "Since Village Chief Zhao Dequan dares to hire so openly, he has his own methods. We just need to watch and wait."

When the account books were delivered to Zhao Dequan, he was leisurely polishing his ever-present pipe with a soft cloth. With the New Year approaching, he was dressed more formally than usual, his dark cotton robe starched and impeccable.

"Uncle Zhao, these are the accounts up to the twentieth day of the twelfth lunar month. A total of thirty-eight thousand sheets of paper were produced. As you instructed, fifteen thousand were sold piecemeal, and the remainder have been stored in the warehouse, waiting for the merchants to collect them after spring arrives," Su Ming reported.

Zhao Dequan gave a noncommittal "Hmm," took the account books, but didn't open them, casually setting them aside instead. He lifted his eyelids, his gaze pausing on Su Ming's face. Those deep-set eyes seemed capable of seeing through a person's heart. "There's been... quite a bit of idle talk in the village lately, hasn't there?"

Su Ming's heart tightened slightly. He replied, "There have been some discussions. Mostly about the workshop."

"Hmph, more than just discussions," Zhao Dequan snorted coldly, tapping his pipe against the corner of the table with deliberate force, producing a dull thud. "Some people have stretched their hands too far, and their hearts have grown too wild."

Su Ming recalled earlier at the village entrance, catching a glimpse of Su Lai huddled furtively with a few of the new villagers. They had scattered immediately upon seeing him approach. Su Lai's triangular eyes had been gleaming with malicious intent, like a venomous snake hiding in the shadows.

He hesitated for a moment, then spoke up, "Uncle Zhao, I saw Su Lai earlier..."

"No need to say more," Zhao Dequan interrupted with a wave of his hand, his tone flat yet bone-chillingly cold. "A stray dog that only knows how to scurry in the gutters, can it really overturn the heavens? The more he jumps around, the faster he'll die."

He picked up his pipe again, slowly packing it with tobacco shreds. His movements were steady, without a trace of agitation. "You're still young. Don't concern yourself with these matters. Your duty is to study the Sage's Books well, keep the accounts clear, and provide technical guidance. As for other matters, even if the sky falls, I'll be the one holding it up."

Su Ming acknowledged the instruction and left.

The cold wind hit his face, making him shiver, but the unease in his heart did not dissipate. The festive atmosphere of the New Year seemed unable to dispel the oppressive feeling of an impending storm.

At night, the small earthen house of the Su family exceptionally lit two oil lamps. The dim, yellowish halos added a touch of warmth to this impoverished home.

One lamp was in the main room, where Mrs. Su Chen was using the light to hurriedly sew new clothes for the family. She hummed a tuneless little ditty, and the movement of her needle and thread carried the anticipation of the approaching New Year—the simplest happiness of ordinary folk.

The other lamp was in Su Ming's room. The dim, yellowish halo illuminated his delicate profile, making its contours distinct. A book lay open before him, but his mind was no longer on its pages.

"Master, can Uncle Zhao... really suppress those people?" Su Ming asked in his heart. "The village is like a pot of boiling water right now. I'm afraid the lid will be forced off sooner or later."

"And if it is forced off, what does that have to do with you?" Lin Yu's tone was teasing. "Have you truly come to see yourself as the savior of Su Family Village?"

Su Ming was at a loss for words. "I..."

"Disciple, this master asks you, what has allowed Zhao Dequan to sit firmly in his position?"

Su Ming pondered for a moment before answering, "It's his prestige, and also... profit."

"Correct, it's profit," Lin Yu's voice turned more serious. "He can gather people's hearts with profit, and naturally, he also has harsher methods to deal with those who are restless. This is his ship, carrying the wealth and status of his Zhao family. He fears this ship capsizing more than anyone."

Su Ming fell silent.

"Therefore, what you need to learn is not to help him steer the ship, nor is it to think about patching it up," Lin Yu spoke word by word, imprinting them into Su Ming's mind like a seal. "What you need to learn is to find yourself a plank that can keep you afloat before this ship capsizes."

Su Ming closed his eyes and concentrated, thinking no more. Following the method taught by his master in the Aura Concealment Art, he gradually slowed his breathing, sinking his mind into the faint point of light within his body's dantian. Then, he extended his perception outward like a spider's web.

He tried to imagine himself as a drop of water, merging into the earthen bed beneath him; transforming into a wisp of smoke, dissipating into the air of the room.

He didn't know how much time had passed when a mysterious sensation surfaced.

He "heard."

Not with his ears, but a direct perception originating from his mind.

He "heard" the steady, long snores of his father, Su Shan, next door. They carried the rhythm of an old ox pulling a cart, as if he could feel the rise and fall of the airflow within his father's lungs.

He "heard" the faint, rustling sound of his mother threading a needle in the main room. He could even "feel" the slight resistance as the needle tip pierced the cotton cloth and the subtle friction of the fabric fibers.

He slowly spread his "web" further.

In the courtyard, the old yellow dog was curled up asleep in its kennel, its tail twitching unconsciously. Even the whimpering sounds from its dreams were clearly audible.

In Widow Li's house to the east, her son was mumbling incoherently in his sleep. The words were unclear, but they carried the childish nasal tone of a child.

At this moment, the entire Su Family Village seemed to transform into a world woven from countless subtle sounds and breaths, presenting itself clearly and three-dimensionally in his mind.

It was then that a furtive figure collided with his "web."

The footsteps were extremely light, deliberately slowed, each step landing in the shadows at the base of walls, avoiding the moonlight, like a rat moving at night.

It was Su Lai!

Su Ming's mind tightened.

He "saw" Su Lai creeping close to the wall like a gecko, sneaking all the way to the corner behind the workshop where waste materials were piled—indeed the most poorly guarded spot.

Su Lai stopped, looking around in all directions. Then, he pulled something from his bosom.

It was a fire starter.

He wanted to set a fire!

Just as Su Ming was about to act, he suddenly sensed another presence. Two burly men silently emerged from the shadows. Their movements were crisp and efficient. One covered Su Lai's mouth and twisted his arms behind his back, while the other swiftly snatched the fire starter away. The entire process took no more than a breath. Su Lai couldn't even utter a single whimper before being dragged into deeper darkness, vanishing without another sound.

A gust of cold wind swept by, stirring up a few dry leaves, as if nothing had ever happened. Only a faint trace of blood lingered in the air for an instant before disappearing.

Su Ming slowly opened his eyes, a chill running down his spine. He knew that Su Lai, that "stray dog," had already vanished without a trace. Zhao Dequan's methods were far more decisive, and far more ruthless, than he had imagined.

Beneath the festive joy of the New Year, the undercurrents in Su Family Village had never ceased. Instead, they grew more turbulent and unfathomable.

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Chapter 53: Killing the Chicken to Warn the Monkey

[1,324 words]

The snow fell without a sound.

Overnight, Su Family Village was wrapped in a thick layer of white. Roof eaves, withered branches, and field ridges—all their sharp edges were smoothed away. The world between heaven and earth was utterly silent, as if even sound had been swallowed up by this heavy snow.

Su Lai was like a cough in this snowy weather, arriving abruptly and then disappearing without a trace.

No one mentioned him. No one asked about him.

When villagers passed by the tightly closed wooden gate of his house with their heads lowered, they would unconsciously quicken their pace, as if some monster that devoured gazes lurked behind that door. His wife, who usually loved to curse and shout at the village entrance, had also fallen silent, staying behind closed doors all day long.

Su Lai, along with his malicious, triangular eyes, had been cleanly and decisively carved out of Su Family Village's memory.

This collective amnesia was more chilling to the heart than any hoarse, screaming invective.

Inside the workshop, the smell of caustic soda and paper pulp mingled with the warmth of the furnace fire, creating a world apart from the one outside.

Su Ming walked past rows of men toiling with their heads down, carrying a batch of newly produced straw paper samples.

The atmosphere had changed.

Those faces that just a few days ago were gathered together, eyes flickering, whispering and calculating something, now all looked like eggplants beaten by frost. They worked harder than ever before, their hands moving swiftly, yet each had become a silent gourd. Apart from the clatter of tools colliding, not a single word of idle chat could be heard.

A newly arrived man accidentally knocked over a bucket of clean water. The loud "clatter" of the wooden bucket rolling echoed with particular harshness in the workshop shed.

Instantly, everyone stopped their work. Dozens of pairs of eyes, like startled birds, shot towards him. The man's face turned deathly pale from fright, and he stood frozen on the spot, at a complete loss. Only when the foreman came over, cursing and shouting for him to clean it up quickly, did everyone seem to snap out of it. They silently lowered their heads again, but the force in their hands grew even heavier.

"See that?" Lin Yu's voice sounded in Su Ming's mind, carrying a hint of a lazy drawl. "Fear is the best bridle. More effective than money, less troublesome than reason."

(Inner thoughts: "Classic workplace PUA... no, it's classic gangster management. That old fellow Zhao Dequan, what a waste of talent not joining a gang.")

Su Ming remained silent and delivered the samples to Zhao Dequan's room.

Zhao Dequan was sitting by the charcoal brazier, still idly rubbing that glossy, oil-shined pipe tobacco holder in his hand. He seemed more leisurely than usual, just gazing at the snowy scenery outside the window, his eyes distant, lost in thought.

"Uncle Zhao, the paper samples are ready," Su Ming said, handing over the paper.

Zhao Dequan grunted an acknowledgment, took the paper, merely rubbed it with his fingertip, and then set it aside without even a careful look.

He raised his eyes to look at Su Ming. Those eyes, which always seemed somewhat turbid, were now frighteningly clear.

"The village has been very quiet lately," he said. It wasn't a question, but a statement.

"Yes, the New Year is almost here. Everyone is busy," Su Ming replied in a low voice.

A vague, ambiguous smile tugged at the corner of Zhao Dequan's mouth. He tapped out the pipe ashes unhurriedly and said, "Quiet is good. When people are quiet, their minds become clear, and their hands and feet become nimble. This work can then be done for a long time."

His voice wasn't loud, but it was like a cold stone thrown into Su Ming's heart.

Su Ming withdrew. The cold wind blew, and only then did he realize that a thin layer of sweat had seeped onto his back at some point.

Walking on the way home, the festive New Year atmosphere finally seemed to have broken through that invisible layer of oppression, stubbornly poking its head out.

Brand new red paper-cuttings were pasted on the windows of every household. The bright colors stood out starkly against the backdrop of white snow. From the eastern end of the village came the distinctive squeals of the New Year's pig being slaughtered, mixed with the cheers of children.

Everything looked no different from previous years.

But Su Ming felt that the red this year was a bit too glaring. The liveliness this year also felt hollow.

The smiles on people's faces seemed like masks hung up, polite yet distant. When neighbors met, their conversations were limited to the weather and the harvest. Mid-sentence, there would always be an unconscious pause, as if weighing which words shouldn't be spoken.

Under the old locust tree in the center of the village, Su Ming saw Zhao Dequan.

He was standing there casually, hands clasped behind his back, looking up at the snow piled on the withered branches. He did nothing. He said nothing. Yet everyone passing by him would unconsciously slow their steps, bow slightly, and respectfully call out, "Village Chief, sir."

That reverence came from the marrow of their bones.

"Master, the village... it's as if nothing happened, yet it feels like everything has changed," Su Ming whispered in his heart. "Su Lai is like a stone thrown into a pond, not even leaving a ripple."

"Who says it left no ripple?" Lin Yu's voice held a touch of mockery. "The 'quietness' you tread upon, see with your eyes, and hear with your ears—that's the biggest ripple."

He paused, his voice gaining a trace of cold severity. "This is called 'killing the chicken to scare the monkey.' That chicken was named Su Lai. Now, all the monkeys in the village have quieted down. Zhao Dequan didn't use a knife, yet he carved an invisible knife into everyone's heart. Masterful, my disciple. This is the real method."

Su Ming fell silent.

He remembered the words his master had said—"find yourself a plank that can keep you afloat."

Only now did he truly understand that this ship named Su Family Village was far more complex than he had imagined. The captain, Zhao Dequan, was also far colder than he appeared. On this ship, any disobedient sailor could be thrown into the sea on some windless, waveless night, without a sound.

And he, Su Ming, did not want to be the one thrown overboard.

Returning home, a rich aroma of meat greeted him.

Inside the small earthen house, it was warm and cozy.

Mrs. Su Chen was humming a little tune, bustling by the stove. A large pot of pork stewed in the pot, something the family had gritted their teeth to buy specially for the New Year. His father, Su Shan, was sitting on the threshold, unusually not working, puffing on his pipe tobacco with a satisfied smile on his face.

Eldest Brother Su Feng and his wife, Wang Chuntao, were also there, helping their mother. The family was rarely gathered together like this, chatting and laughing.

"Ming'er, you're back! Quick, wash your hands, we can eat soon!" Mrs. Su Chen's smile grew even brighter when she saw him.

"Third Brother, smell that, isn't it fragrant? Mother has brought out all her best cooking skills!" Sister-in-law Wang Chuntao teased cheerfully.

This warm, genuine, earthly aura instantly dispelled the chill Su Ming had brought back from the village.

He looked at the simple, genuine smiles on the faces of his parents, brother, and sister-in-law. They knew nothing of the undercurrents in the village, immersed only in the joy of the approaching New Year.

This fragile warmth was like a single candle flame in a snowstorm, needing someone to protect it with all their might.

Su Ming suddenly felt that merely finding a plank to keep him afloat might... not be enough.

What he wanted was to build a ship of his own.

A ship sturdy enough to carry his cherished family safely across any turbulent undercurrents.

Once this thought took root, it was like a maddening vine, instantly entwining his entire heart.

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Chapter 54: Village Chief Zhao's Red Envelope, Burning Hot!

[1,871 words]

New Year's Eve.

Outside, the north wind whipped up snowflakes, battering against the window paper with a dry rustling sound.

Inside, an oil lamp was turned up to its brightest, its dim yellow halo making the small earthen main room feel warm and cozy.

In the stove, firewood crackled and popped, and the rich aroma of stewed meat from the pot aggressively seeped into every corner of the house. This was the most sumptuous New Year's Eve dinner the Su family had enjoyed in over a decade.

"Slow down, there's more in the pot!"

Mrs. Su Chen chided with her words, but her chopsticks never stopped moving, precisely picking up a piece of perfectly marbled meat and placing it into Su Ming's bowl. Looking at her three sons, her face blossomed into a wide smile.

Eldest Brother Su Feng buried his head in his food, the corners of his mouth glistening with grease. Sister-in-law Wang Chuntao, however, was more talkative. Chewing on meat, she chattered animatedly, "Mother, this New Year celebration of ours is even more comfortable than a landlord's family! It's all thanks to Little Uncle and Uncle Dequan's care."

"Yes, we owe it to the workshop's blessings." Su Shan, a man who had been silent most of his life, also, for the first time ever, raised his wine bowl. His cloudy eyes reflected the firelight as he actively clinked bowls with his eldest son.

"Father, don't drink too much." Second Brother Su Yang added more vegetables to his father's plate, then turned to Su Ming, lowering his voice, "You kid, why are you as quiet as a gourd today?"

Su Ming stirred the rice in his bowl. The rich meaty aroma seemed unable to dispel a thread of chill in his heart.

He smiled, "It's nothing. I just feel... it's really good."

It truly was good.

His mother's nagging, his father's rare smile, his eldest brother's simple honesty, his sister-in-law's straightforward cheerfulness, his second brother's concern. All of this was like the warm lamplight in the room—real, yet fragile.

However, his "Listening to Sounds" technique could not be turned off.

Amidst the backdrop of this joyous laughter, he could "hear" the deathly silence behind the perpetually closed wooden door of Su Lai's house deep in the village. No crying, no cursing, not even the faintest echo of wind passing through.

That silence was more unsettling than any sound.

"Disciple, thinking about that stray dog?" Lin Yu's voice lazily sounded in his mind.

Su Ming's heart tightened.

"The world of mortals is like this. Where there is light, the shadows are only deeper." Lin Yu's tone carried a hint of amusement. "What you see now is the light. That stray dog and the deathly silence in his home are the shadows."

(Inner thoughts: "Sigh, it's New Year's Eve, can't we just enjoy the meal properly? Must you be so profound? This braised pork smells amazing, too bad I can only smell it. In the old days... forget it, in the old days I was also working overtime eating instant noodles. Compared to that, being a ghost doesn't seem so bad after all?")

Looking at the white hairs at his parents' temples, at the wrinkles on their faces that had smoothed out slightly due to their improved circumstances, something deep in Su Ming's heart was profoundly touched.

He clenched his fist under the table.

What he wanted to protect was precisely this small, fragile light before him.

"Master," he whispered in his heart, "I understand. Power isn't just for keeping oneself alive."

"Oh?" Lin Yu seemed somewhat interested. "Then what is it for?"

"So that those who want to live, can live well."

Lin Yu was silent for a moment before leisurely saying, "That's quite an ambition. However, the road must be walked step by step. First, finish this meal properly. Then you'll have the strength to take the next step."

Su Ming took a deep breath, temporarily suppressing those distracting thoughts and unease. He raised his head and gave his mother a brilliant smile, "Mother, it's really delicious! I want another bowl!"

The wind and snow outside seemed to lessen a little.

The first day of the Lunar New Year, just as dawn was breaking.

Before the cooking smoke from every household had even risen, the village gong was struck, its *dang-dang* sound carrying far in the crisp, cold air.

"Come out, everyone! Come out! Village Chief Uncle is handing out red envelopes at the workshop entrance!"

The village's half-grown children shouted at the top of their lungs, going from house to house.

The Su family also stepped out.

On the newly cleared workshop square, a dense, dark mass of people had already gathered. Almost everyone from the village, men and women, young and old, was present.

In the center of the square, two large iron pots were set up, boiling with steaming hot meat broth, its aroma filling the air.

Zhao Dequan stood on a makeshift wooden platform, wearing a brand new deep blue silk-faced cotton robe. Behind him stood the two burly men Su Ming had secretly "seen" before. The two stood like iron pagodas, their eyes coldly sweeping over everyone below the stage.

The villagers huddled together, whispering to each other, their faces a mixture of anticipation, awe, and unease.

Su Ming noticed that in the crowd, the men newly recruited into the workshop stood furthest back, each with their heads bowed like quails. The shrewdness and ambition written on their faces just days ago had completely vanished, replaced only by obedience.

"Fellow villagers!" Zhao Dequan cleared his throat, his voice loud and clear, "Happy New Year!"

A sparse, scattered response came from below the stage.

"I know, everyone worked hard last year." Zhao Dequan wore a genial smile on his face. "Our Su Family Village, generation after generation with our faces to the earth and backs to the sky, has never held our heads as high as we have this year!"

He paused, raising his volume, "Who do we owe this to? To everyone working together! Therefore, on behalf of the workshop, I, Zhao Dequan, am giving everyone a red envelope to share in the festive spirit!"

As he spoke, he waved his hand.

The burly men behind him carried out two heavy wooden trays piled high with strings of coins wrapped in red paper.

"For all the old hands in the workshop, three hundred copper coins each! Newcomers, one hundred copper coins each! Those not working in the workshop, every household also gets a share, fifty copper coins! For good luck!"

The crowd instantly erupted into commotion.

Three hundred copper coins! That was nearly half a month's wages for a strong laborer!

"Thank you, Village Chief Uncle!"

"Village Chief Uncle is truly a Living Bodhisattva!"

For a moment, flattery and words of gratitude rose and fell, instantly dispersing the previously oppressive atmosphere.

The villagers lined up, stepping forward one by one to receive their money. Genuine joy beamed on every face.

Zhao Dequan watched all this with a smile. When the red envelopes were mostly distributed, he raised his hand again, signaling for everyone to quiet down.

"The money is a small matter." His voice grew serious, his smile fading. "What I want to talk about today is rules!"

The square instantly fell silent.

"It wasn't easy for our Su Family Village to reach today. What I hate most are those ingrates who eat the meat from the bowl, then curse the provider after putting it down, and even want to smash everyone else's rice bowl!"

His gaze swept over everyone below the stage like a knife, lingering especially long on the group of new workers.

"Some people have stretched their hands too far and their hearts are too wild. They always feel they got less than their share of the workshop's meat. But they never consider that without this workshop, you wouldn't even get a sip of broth!"

A cold wind blew past, swirling up snow powder from the ground. Everyone felt a chill rise from the soles of their feet.

"I, Zhao Dequan, will say this clearly. If anyone dares to play tricks behind the scenes, ruining the village's good fortune, don't blame me, Zhao Dequan, for being ruthless!" He pointed towards the direction of the village's east end not far away. "Su Lai is the example set before you! Where is he now? I tell you, he colluded with outsiders, tried to burn down the workshop, and I sent him to the county jail! He'll never come out in this lifetime!"

Boom!

A wave of suppressed gasps rose from the crowd.

Su Lai was sent to jail?

Su Ming's heart, however, was icy cold. He knew Zhao Dequan was lying. After that night, Su Lai's presence had completely vanished. It definitely wasn't as simple as being sent to jail.

This was a "story" told to everyone, a warning of "killing the chicken to scare the monkey."

"See that, disciple?" Lin Yu's voice chimed in appropriately. "After giving the carrot, the big stick must follow. First, tie people together with benefits, then use fear to knock out the troublemakers. This Zhao Dequan is quite skilled at playing power games."

(Inner thoughts: "Tsk tsk, this acting talent is wasted not going to film school. 'Sent to the county jail'? Trying to fool ghosts? Oh, I am a ghost... well, you can't fool me either. But the effect is really good. Look at those troublemakers, their faces have gone pale.")

Su Ming looked at the faces of the villagers below.

He saw gratitude, he saw awe, and beneath that gratitude and awe, he saw deep, profound fear.

Zhao Dequan was no longer just the Village Chief who needed to navigate between villagers and the government.

He had become the king of Su Family Village.

"Alright, it's the New Year, let's not talk about such depressing things." Zhao Dequan's expression softened again, as if the severity from moments ago was just an illusion. "Everyone, go get a bowl of meat broth to warm yourselves! When spring comes, the big merchants from the south will arrive. They're clamoring for our paper! When that time comes, everyone's share of the profits will only be greater!"

The word "merchants" was like a new seed planted in every villager's heart.

It represented more money, a better life.

The Su family also received their red envelopes. Su Shan and Mrs. Su Chen held the several heavy strings of copper coins, their hands trembling slightly.

Su Ming tucked his share of the red envelope into his robe. The copper coins wrapped in red paper felt somewhat burning hot to the touch.

It wasn't a kindness.

It was a shackle.

The crowd gradually dispersed, each holding bowls of meat broth, returning home with faces showing both satisfaction and complex emotions.

Su Ming walked at the very back. He turned and took one last look.

On the high platform, Zhao Dequan stood with his hands behind his back, looking down over the entire village. The two burly men still stood behind him like door gods.

A gust of wind blew, making Zhao Dequan's robe flutter and snap loudly.

Su Ming saw that at the easternmost end of the village, in front of the tightly closed courtyard gate of Su Lai's house, his wife was kneeling in the snow, silently kowtowing in the direction of Zhao Dequan.

Once, then again.

Her face held no tears, only an ashen, numb expression.

Su Ming withdrew his gaze, silently tightening his grip on the burning hot red envelope tucked inside his robe.

This New Year had ultimately not been spent in peace.

Would the so-called "big merchants" bring more wealth, or an even greater storm?

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Chapter 55: The House Is About to Collapse

[1,459 words]

The festive atmosphere of the New Year was like a piece of window paper pierced by a cold gust of wind; on the surface, it still held a semblance of celebration, but its warmth had long since vanished. The ice and snow melted, revealing the dark brown mud beneath. A single step sank into its soft, sticky muck, clinging to shoes. The air was a mix of earthy dampness, the lingering scent of last year's withered grass, and a faint, almost imperceptible sour, rotting odor of alkaline-soaked materials drifting from the direction of the workshop.

The workshop in Su Family Village started belching smoke earlier than usual this year, its chimney spewing pale gray plumes day and night. The once-clear rhythmic chants and pounding sounds were no longer crisp; they seemed drained of their spirit by the damp, cold air, thudding dully against people's hearts, carrying far into the distance.

Everything was different. Even the old locust tree at the village entrance seemed to sprout buds later this spring. Its branches, black and stark, pointed accusingly at the sky, exuding an indescribable desolation.

Su Ming stood on the uneven stone threshold of his family's courtyard gate, gazing at the lingering dust and smoke swirling above the distant workshop. It looked like a grimy rag, impossible to wipe clean. On the village paths, villagers carrying tools hurried along with bowed heads, their spines bent as if weighed down by something. The lazy, idle look they used to have while squatting against walls and gossiping was gone, replaced by a weary, sluggish demeanor, as if tightly reined by invisible ropes. The dark circles under their eyes were heavier than those from staying up late during the New Year celebrations. When they encountered Zhao Dequan's two burly, hawk-eyed confidants, their backs would instinctively bend a little more, their faces squeezing out careful, almost fawning smiles, mumbling vague greetings.

That kind of smile made one's heart ache with a sour bitterness, more choking than swallowing cold water.

The Su Lai family was like a spatter of hot oil on a stove—a brief sizzle, then wiped away with a rag, leaving no trace. His wife had kowtowed in the snow for three days, the bruises on her forehead not yet faded. On the morning of the fourth day, she too vanished. In hushed whispers, some villagers speculated she had thrown herself into

the deep pond behind the village; others said she had run mad into the old forest and been eaten by wolves. Their voices were low, their eyes evasive, not daring to delve deeper.

No one mentioned the matter openly anymore, as if this household had never existed in Su Family Village.

Su Ming's "Listening to Sounds" technique grew more proficient by the day. The grumbles lodged in the villagers' throats, the tremors hidden in their hearts, even the anxieties that made them toss and turn at night, causing their bed boards to creak—all these subtle threads escaped his perception, weaving into an invisible, heavy net that hung oppressively over the village.

"...Another ten coppers docked, they said the material waste was high. Heaven knows whose pocket it went into..."

"...Manager Zhao's glare is like a knife scraping flesh. The back of my neck still feels cold..."

"...Endure it, just endure it a little longer. When spring comes and those big merchants from the south arrive, we'll get our share of the profits. Then it'll be better, it'll be fine..."

Desire and fear twisted into a thick rope, tethered to the heart of every person. The other end was firmly gripped in Zhao Dequan's hand. He didn't need to pull hard; a mere twitch of his finger could make people suffocate, yet they still had to force a smile.

"Disciple, smell that?" Lin Yu's voice abruptly cut through Su Ming's gloomy thoughts.

"Smell what, Master?" Su Ming gathered his focus, temporarily blocking out the cacophony of sounds.

"The smell of early spring." Lin Yu's tone was leisurely, yet it seemed to hide a hook. "The earth's energy is warming, the frozen ground is thawing. All the things that huddled through winter, whether burrowing in the earth or hiding in hearts, are about to poke their heads out."

(Inner thoughts: "Good grief, the resentment in this village is practically condensing into water. If it builds up any more, it might just ignite. Zhao Dequan plays the carrot-and-stick game well, but he can't stop the firewood piling up underneath. It just needs a single spark. This hornet's nest shouldn't be poked, but it's best to stay far away.")

"Master means, all things are sprouting and growing?" Su Ming sniffed the air. The wind did carry a hint of the fresh scent of budding grass and trees, but more prominent was the familiar, stifling heaviness.

"Sprouting and growing?" Lin Yu scoffed, his voice tinged with a worldly cynicism. "What's beneath that growth? Hunger. Starving beasts, the first thing they do upon waking is look for food, regardless of whether it's fodder or the leg meat of their own kind. Hearts suppressed all winter are the same. The longer they're pent up, the more violently they'll rebound. This village looks quiet, but it's a hornet's nest about to wake. It seems fine, but one poke and it'll explode."

Su Ming pressed his lips tightly together, his fingernails unconsciously digging into the rough wooden doorframe.

He understood. The peace Zhao Dequan bought with red envelopes and meaty soups couldn't fill empty bellies, let alone satiate the greedy beast deep within people's hearts. When the grand promises made by those "big merchants" were exposed as empty, or when Zhao Dequan loosened his grip on that rope even slightly, the current stagnant calm could capsize in an instant, drowning who knows how many people.

"And what about you?" Lin Yu shifted the topic, as if asking casually. "When do you plan to jump out of this shallow puddle, you little mudskipper? You can't just wait for the water to dry up and end up in the pot, can you?"

Su Ming curled his fingers, lowered his head, and looked at the cloth shoes his mother had newly made for him. The tips were stained with a bit of mud. His voice was somewhat muffled. "My family is all here. I... I have to watch over them."

"I know." Lin Yu cut him off, his tone lacking its usual teasing, replaced by a rare seriousness. "That's why you need to become even stronger. Strong enough to carve out another deep pond for them, one with flowing, living water teeming with fish and shrimp. Not trapped together in this lowland that will inevitably dry up, waiting for the rain to stop, waiting for others to scoop it dry, until we're all left staring wide-eyed, waiting for death."

(Inner thoughts: "Little ancestor, hurry up and move! If we dawdle any longer, both of us are going to be buried here with them! My old house is about to collapse!")

Just as he spoke, deep within Lin Yu's Soul Body, the spirit-concentrating array inscribed upon the ring's origin—the very thing sustaining his existence—emitted an extremely faint, almost inaudible, crisp sound without any warning.

Crack.

The sound was as light as grinding teeth in one's sleep, yet it pierced through Lin Yu's facade of composure like an ice spike, startling his soul flame into a violent flicker. The air of profound mastery he'd been maintaining instantly evaporated.

(Inner thoughts: "What the hell was that?! The foundation of my old home is loosening?! Don't scare me like this!")

All his "focus" instantly withdrew from the external world, locking dead onto the deepest part of the ring's space.

That ancient, complex spirit-concentrating array, his last hope, was still slowly rotating, like an old man struggling to breathe, laboriously drawing in the pitifully thin spiritual energy from the outside world and converting it into the meager sustenance that nourished his remnant soul.

But right at the formation core, a crack finer than a hair yet hideously vicious clung there like a cold, venomous snake, silently flicking its tongue.

With each arduous rotation of the array, the spiritual light around the crack flickered violently, painfully, its glow dimming, teetering on the brink, as if the next cycle would cause it to shatter completely, severing all life force!

A chill originating from the very essence of his soul, the most profound kind of cold, froze Lin Yu's thoughts nearly to a halt. His Soul Body felt as if it were about to congeal into ice.

This spirit-concentrating array was his life! It was the foundation upon which he had clung to existence for five hundred years! Without the trickle of spiritual energy it constantly provided, his remnant soul, which should have dissipated long ago, wouldn't just fail to recover; he'd struggle to even stay conscious. In just a few days, he'd be assimilated by the world, dispersing into nothingness without leaving a trace!

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[1,468 words]

"How could this be..."

His consciousness frantically swept over every detail of the formation patterns, like the most precise probe, instantly locking onto the source of the crack—an extremely faint yet viciously poisonous aura of resentment and filth, filled with hatred and curses, clung stubbornly to the most fragile part of the formation's structure like the most tenacious grime, continuously eroding and corrupting it.

It was the residual poison from that Wailing Woman Lantern!

Although he had used every means to seal and suppress that main soul, trapping it deep within his consciousness, during the process of devouring and refining it, he was ultimately inevitably contaminated by that trace of the most fundamental, most pure

resentment and baleful energy. It had seeped in like a virus, even polluting this foundational Spirit Gathering Array!

This venomous resentment was like gangrene clinging to the bone, slowly yet unshakably destroying it, and worse, it was continuously absorbing the Spirit Gathering Array's own power to strengthen itself.

Even more dire, the shaking and weakening of the Spirit Gathering Array had severely affected the stability of the entire ring's internal space. The six bloody patterns on the inner wall, formed from the intense resentment and essence-blood condensed at the moment of the previous host's death, were now glowing with an eerie light. Like sharks that had caught the scent of blood, they faintly resonated with the crack, restless and stirring. Their power, filled with ferocious balefulness and ill omen, was seeping in strand by strand, taking advantage of the situation to accelerate the final collapse of this life-saving array!

(Inner thoughts: "This is utterly screwed! When it rains, it pours! The house is about to collapse, and there are termites living in the load-bearing walls! This damn ring is completely uninhabitable now! If I don't move out soon, I'll be buried alive! Not even a chance for reincarnation!")

Lin Yu's inner world was in utter turmoil, a tempest of shock and waves, but the voice transmitted to Su Ming's mind forcefully suppressed all panic and despair, leaving only a deliberately amplified, heavy and solemn gravity.

"Disciple."

"Your disciple is here." Su Ming keenly sensed that his Master's tone was different from usual; there seemed to be something in that voice that was being intensely suppressed.

"This Master asks you," Lin Yu's voice slowed, each word seeming to have been deeply considered, "Do you wish... to go and see beyond the mountains? To see what kind of world this vast land truly is?"

Su Ming was taken aback, completely pulled away from the village's troubles.

Beyond the mountains?

This thought had occasionally surfaced in his mind like bubbles from the water's depths, but he had never dared to dwell on it, always feeling it was a distant and hazy dream. The village elders often said over tea that beyond the mountains were county towns, prefectural cities, with high city walls, countless blue-brick and tile-roofed houses, bustling streets with endless traffic, and tales of those immortal masters from operas who could summon wind and rain, soar through the skies, and dive into the earth.

But he had never thought of going now. He was only just fourteen. His family's situation had just begun to improve. His parents and elder brother were all by his side. Leaving his hometown sounded like a fantasy.

"Master, why bring this up so suddenly?" he asked, puzzled, feeling deep down that his Master was exceptionally different today.

"The time is approaching." Lin Yu's voice grew heavy and slow, carrying an unquestionable certainty, as if stating an established fact. "You should know that the path of cultivation is like rowing a boat against the current; if you do not advance, you will retreat. The crucial barriers are none other than the four elements: Wealth, Companions, Methods, and Land. None can be easily lacking."

"Wealth is the sustenance for cultivation; without wealth, one cannot nurture the Dao. Companions are fellow practitioners for mutual support; walking alone easily leads one astray. Methods are the fundamental inheritance; without methods, one is like a blind man feeling an elephant. Land is the blessed land, the pocket dimension; without land, one is like duckweed without roots."

"Now, although you have just glimpsed the threshold, received the Aura Concealment Art, and your temperament has been tempered to a degree of steadiness, this place—" Lin Yu's voice deliberately paused here, emphasizing his tone, "Su Family Village, has become a deadlock, shackling your hands and feet."

"First, the spiritual energy here is thin and barren. For your cultivation, it is truly like trying to put out a cartload of burning firewood with a cup of water. You should have sensed it recently. Is the meager spiritual energy you absorb daily gradually feeling insufficient, unable to support the consumption of Refining the Spirit and tempering the body?"

Su Ming fell silent, instinctively looking inward at that faint glimmer in his Dantian. His Master's words precisely pinpointed the vague unease and confusion in his heart. Indeed, he felt his body was like a container almost full yet always lacking that final bit, becoming increasingly "hungry" for the thin spiritual energy of heaven and earth around him.

"Second," Lin Yu continued his analysis, his voice as calm as if discussing something unrelated to himself, "the hearts of the villagers are restless, undercurrents surge, interests are entangled, and killing intent lies hidden. Remaining long in such a quagmire and whirlpool is not only unbeneficial for cultivation but also easily entangles one in mundane trivialities, wearing down one's upward ambition and wasting precious time. You have witnessed with your own eyes the schemes and methods of Zhao Dequan. This is absolutely not a place for long-term residence."

(Inner thoughts: "Listen to reason, kid! This lousy place has nothing! The spiritual energy is so thin it's a joke, and there's a pile of messy affairs and rotten human

relations! If you stay any longer, forget about your cultivation increasing, you'll be lucky to maintain what little you have now! The issue with Zhao Dequan will explode sooner or later, and when it does, you won't be able to leave even if you want to!")

Su Ming pressed his lips together. His Master's analysis was clear and logical, every point hitting the mark. He could feel the invisible crisis tightening around him like a net. But...

"Father and Mother, they..." Su Ming's throat tightened, the words that followed stuck in his throat. He couldn't imagine the expressions on his parents' weathered faces, which had just begun to hope for better days, if he proposed traveling far. In this land where people were deeply attached to their native soil, a son traveling far with an uncertain future was almost equivalent to a living separation. How worried and anxious it would make his elderly parents.

"Foolish!" Lin Yu's tone suddenly sharpened, like a stern warning blow to the head. "Do you want them to keep you tied to their apron strings forever, watching with fear and anxiety as you flounder and struggle for survival in this ever-deepening quagmire? Or do you want one day for them to stand tall and straight, receiving the respect of their fellow villagers, simply because their son is an extraordinary person, bringing glory to the family?"

"True filial piety is not about morning and evening greetings, being inseparable from their side, but about becoming their true pillar of support! Only by becoming a towering tree that can shelter them from wind and rain can you protect their safety and security. If you are just a vine that can only cling to others, when the storm comes, you yourself will be hard-pressed to survive, so how can you talk about protecting your family?"

Word by word, like heavy drumbeats, cold and hard, they struck Su Ming's heart, shaking his very soul. That hesitation born of familial affection was almost smashed to pieces.

Yes...

If he stayed here, could he truly protect his family? Facing the increasingly inscrutable and controlling Zhao Dequan, he still needed to tread carefully, as if walking on thin ice. If that evil cultivator who refined the Wailing Woman Lantern one day truly followed that bizarre tracking mark to his door, what could he do with his meager skills? Wouldn't that just bring greater disaster directly to his family's doorstep, implicating them in the calamity?

Seeing Su Ming's spirit violently shaken, the struggle on his face growing more intense, Lin Yu's tone subtly softened, even deliberately tinged with a trace of imperceptible weariness and helplessness.

"Furthermore, this Master... *sigh*... am ultimately just a remnant soul, in a very peculiar state. Many of the more profound and mysterious methods are not that I am unwilling to teach them to you, but rather, they truly cannot be performed without the assistance of specific external spiritual materials. Within a hundred miles of this place, the mountains and wilderness are barren; the required items simply cannot be found. Even the cleverest housewife can't cook without rice."

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Chapter 57: Reasons

[1,273 words]

Lin Yu sighed, his voice growing even heavier. "Moreover, the karmic debt and evil retribution of that 'Wailing Woman Lantern' hang over us like a sword suspended above our heads, a constant threat. As long as its tracking mark remains unremoved for a single day, we will not have a day of peace. To completely resolve this calamity, holing up here is not the answer. We must venture out to find methods specifically designed to counter such evil entities, or... attain a level of cultivation power far surpassing that of the mastermind behind it. If we stubbornly confine ourselves here, how is it any different from sitting and waiting for the axe to fall, willingly offering our necks to the blade?"

(Inner thoughts: "Can't reveal everything, might scare the kid, but gotta lay on the hardship a bit, otherwise he won't budge! If this damn array truly collapses completely, we're both finished! That's a solid enough reason, right? Wake up already!")

Su Ming abruptly lifted his head. The last traces of hesitation and attachment in his eyes were completely severed, transforming into a resolute determination to charge forward. His master's words had peeled away the mist of sentimentality, laying bare the cold, hard reality before him.

His master was right. Staying was cowardice, was shortsightedness, was drawing a circle on the ground to imprison oneself!

Only by stepping out, by venturing into the wider world, to seek opportunities, to become strong enough, could he truly sever the roots of all trouble, could he genuinely, thoroughly protect those he wished to protect!

"Master," Su Ming took a deep breath, as if pressing all distracting thoughts deep into his heart. His voice was not loud, yet it was exceptionally firm, landing with a weighty thud. "This disciple understands."

He raised his gaze, looking past the low earthen wall towards his own familiar three-room earthen house, from which wisps of cooking smoke curled. It was as if he could smell the steaming aroma of the rice porridge his mother was simmering, could hear the steady, dull thuds of his father chopping firewood in the corner of the yard.

All of this was so warm it made his nose tingle, yet so fragile it made his heart clench.

"What should this disciple do?" he asked, the hesitation now gone from his tone.

"Not so fast." Lin Yu's voice returned to its calm steadiness, as if the heavy conversation just now, touching upon life, death, and the future, had been nothing more than a routine exchange. "A long journey is no small matter. How can one simply leave without a word, causing only worry and longing for one's parents? We need to plan carefully, have a safe and thorough strategy."

(Inner thoughts: "Finally got it! That effort wasn't wasted. Next is figuring out how to send you off smoothly and legitimately, and also settling your family affairs properly so you have no worries holding you back. Otherwise, you'll be too distracted on the road, unable to cultivate in peace.")

"First and foremost, we need a proper, convincing justification." Lin Yu began his meticulous "planning," his voice tinged with a flavor of shrewd calculation.

"Justification?" Su Ming was slightly puzzled.

"Correct." Lin Yu affirmed. "A justification that makes your parents, makes the whole village feel honored, that makes them eager for you to go, even proud of you. This way, you can leave with peace of mind, and they can wait at home with reassurance."

His tone carried a hint of understanding laughter as he pointed out, "For example... traveling to study, visiting renowned masters, seeking scholarly honors. This is the proper, glorious path that brings honor to one's ancestors."

"Travel to study? Seek scholarly honors?" Su Ming's eyes suddenly brightened, as if clouds had parted to reveal the sun!

"How could you forget? You are a scholar." Lin Yu reminded him. "You are the only scholarly seed in this Su Family Village. Think carefully. If you could advance in your studies, even if you only obtained the Xiucai degree, how much glory would that bring to your parents? How much prestige would it add to the face of Su Family Village? Even Zhao Dequan, a mere Village Chief, would have to show some respect when meeting a Xiucai who holds an official degree!"

As these words fell, Su Ming felt his vision suddenly clear, all his thoughts instantly connecting!

Right!

Studying! The Imperial Examinations!

This justification was proper, upright, and honorable! His parents had always taken pride in his studies, deeply believing that all other pursuits are inferior, only studying is supreme. If it was for the sake of advancing his education and seeking scholarly honors, no matter how reluctant they were, they would surely understand the greater principle and would definitely not forcefully stop him.

Furthermore, once he truly held an official degree, he would have an official status, protected by the laws of the court. Even Zhao Dequan would have to weigh the consequences before daring to move against the Su family again! This was not just a pass to leave home; it was a tangible, real-life protective talisman!

"Master's foresight is profound! This disciple was foolish, failing to think of this!" Su Ming was sincerely convinced, offering heartfelt praise.

(Inner thoughts: "Of course. Even if you haven't eaten pork, you've seen pigs run... Sigh, old matters from a past life, no need to mention them.")

"The effectiveness of the plan remains to be seen." Lin Yu's tone returned to its usual indifference, as if he had merely mentioned it in passing. "This matter requires meticulous arrangement; it cannot be rushed. What you need to do now is to make the posture of 'wholeheartedly devoted to study' and 'determined to achieve scholarly honors' utterly convincing and deeply ingrained in people's minds."

"This disciple understands!" Su Ming responded heavily, the gloom in his heart completely dispelled. A clear, challenging path forward had already unfolded before his eyes.

He took one last look at the still-bustling workshop in the distance. The dust and smoke that had once felt oppressive to him now held a different meaning in his eyes. It was no longer an invisible shackle, but the starting point from which he was about to embark, a point he must surpass.

He turned and walked towards his home with steady, firm steps, his back exuding a decisiveness that belied his age.

Deep within the ring, Lin Yu watched the young man's gradually firming and upright back and finally secretly released a breath he didn't physically possess.

(Inner thoughts: "First step, finally dragged this stubborn mule out of the mud pit! Next, need to carefully figure out how to get a more substantial travel fund, how to leave a safe and secure allowance for the family, and also think about how to plant a soft thorn for that old fox Zhao Dequan, so he doesn't dare to move against the Su family lightly...")

Sigh, being a master is like being both a father and a mother, worrying oneself sick. My dream retirement life is more tiring than going to work.")

However, he failed to notice.

Deep within the very core of his Soul Body, in that dark corner tightly bound and sealed by layer upon layer of powerful restraints.

That violently churning, tightly bound mass of resentful soul black energy—with every unstable, tearing throb of the Spirit Gathering Array—the surface of those shimmering, ghostly light sealing runes would, imperceptibly and extremely briefly, dim by a fraction.

It was as if the loosening foundation of that old house on the verge of collapse also allowed the terrifying evil ghost imprisoned in the deepest depths beneath the earth, amidst endless resentment and darkness, to faintly glimpse a sliver of light hinting at a chance to break its cage. The cracks were quietly widening.

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Chapter 58: Must Go Out

[1,201 words]

Night was as black as ink, wrapping the Su family's small courtyard tightly. In the main room, a dim rapeseed oil lamp cast long shadows of the household on the mottled earthen wall, flickering unsteadily.

The dishes had long since been cleared from the table, yet no one rose to leave.

The air carried an unusual hush, oppressive enough to make it hard to breathe. Mrs. Chen's eyes were rimmed red, she kept wiping at the corners with her sleeve. Eldest Brother Su Feng and his wife Wang Chuntao kept their heads down, lost in thought. Second Brother Su Yang sat close to Su Ming, their shoulders nearly touching, like a silent wall.

Su Shan sat in the head seat, taking one drag after another of pipe tobacco. The ember in the pipe glowed and dimmed, illuminating the ravines on his face, his expression murky and unreadable. The strong scent of smoke mixed with the after-warmth of the meal, composing the entire atmosphere of the Su family's main room at that moment.

It was Su Ming who broke the silence.

He stood, walked to the center of the room, and before his parents, solemnly and deeply bowed in a formal salute.

“Father, Mother.”

His voice was clear, but carried a faint, barely noticeable tremor.

Mrs. Chen could no longer hold back her tears; they fell in a soft stream. “Child, what are you doing...?”

Su Shan knocked his pipe against something, and finally spoke; his voice was rough as if sandpaper had been rubbed over it: “Say what you have to say, or spit it out! Stand up straight!”

He paused mid-knock, his murky eyes lifting from behind the smoke to look at his youngest son.

Su Ming straightened, his gaze clear as he met his father’s eyes: “Father, Mother, Teacher Zhou at our village school is very learned, and I have learned nearly everything he can teach. I have thought this through carefully. I want to go to the County School to study, maybe even go to the prefectural city to seek schooling.”

“I want to take the imperial examinations.”

Those six words landed like a stone thrown into a still pond, instantly stirring thousands of ripples.

“What? To the prefectural city?” Wang Chuntao cried out in alarm, then realized she had spoken too loudly and quickly covered her mouth.

Su Feng lifted his head, his face full of astonishment: “Little brother, this... this is not something to joke about. From here to the prefectural city takes several days on foot, you won’t know anyone there...”

“Xiao Ming!” Mrs. Chen could no longer sit still. She hurried to his side and grabbed his arm, tearful-eyed. “Have you been listening to people outside and gone daft? Why leave a good home to go so far? You’re so young, your mother worries!”

Su Ming took his mother’s rough hand in his and could clearly feel it trembling. His heart twisted, but he forced himself to continue.

“Mother, I’m not acting on a whim. At the village school, the teacher has taught me nearly everything he can. If I stay, I’ll just be stuck, wasting time. I want to see a bigger world, visit better teachers. Only then can I possibly obtain a degree and bring honor to our family.”

He recited the set of arguments Lin Yu had taught him, using his most sincere tone, word by word.

“To take the imperial examinations... to take the imperial examinations...” Mrs. Chen murmured. For a peasant woman like her, the phrase was both sacred and distant. Of course she wanted her son to succeed, but the thought of him traveling far filled her pride with tidal waves of worry.

“Too easy to say!” Su Shan inhaled deeply again, smoke puffing out of his nostrils. “Do you know how much it costs to go to the prefectural city? Food, lodging, brushes, ink, paper, inkstone — which of those is free? Do you think official rank is like the cabbages in the field that you can just pick up?”

“Don’t worry about money, Father.” Su Yang suddenly said in a muffled voice. “Our paper-making brought in some money. At least let Xiao Ming try!”

Su Ming looked gratefully at his second brother.

He drew in a deep breath, then looked at his father again, his eyes filled with an unprecedented firmness: “Father, do you remember how things used to be for our family?”

Su Shan’s movement froze.

“Eldest Brother’s marriage drained the household. When I wanted to buy a few sheets of paper to study, Second Brother had to risk his life going up the mountain. For a year, we rarely had meat. Mother and Sister-in-law’s clothes were patches on top of patches.”

“Now, life is a bit better. But how did it happen? Because we learned how to make paper!”

“But the paper-making method was something I came across in a book by chance. What does that prove? It proves studying is useful! Books not only hold the sages’ teachings, they contain ways to make our family eat and dress warmly!”

“If I go out now, it’s not to seek comfort, it’s to learn more skills! If I can pass as a xiucai, even just a xiucai, our family will never have to bow to Village Chief Zhao again! I’ll be able to stand tall when meeting the county magistrate!”

“Then who would dare bully the Su family? That is real security!”

His words fell like a hammer, resonating through the small main room.

Everyone was stunned. They had never seen their youngest son like this; the usual naive tone was gone, replaced by a moving sense of responsibility and foresight.

The pipe in Su Shan's hand had gone out without anyone noticing. His murky eyes stared hard at Su Ming, as if trying to see through him.

After a long while, he slammed the cold pipe down on the table, stood up, and wordlessly walked out the door.

"Father!" Mrs. Chen called anxiously.

Su Shan didn't look back, leaving only a stiff sentence behind.

"You chose your path, then even if you crawl, finish walking it!"

With that he disappeared into the night beyond the doorway.

Silence filled the room.

A few seconds later, Su Yang suddenly slapped his thigh and let out an excited low roar: "It's done! Father agreed!"

Mrs. Chen's tears flowed again as she hugged Su Ming tightly, choking as she said, "My son has grown up... grown up..."

Su Ming's eyes were wet too. He gently patted his mother's back, feeling a huge weight lift from his chest.

(Inner thought: Nice! That combination punch was logical and moving. First calculate finances, then play the heart card, finally paint the big promise of "pass the exams, whole family turns their luck around." Teachable child, teachable child!)

Lin Yu in the ring "nodded" with satisfaction, having finally gotten this kid out of the beginner village in his first successful step.

...

Over the next few days, the Su household was filled with a strange mix of excitement and melancholy.

Mrs. Chen and Wang Chuntao began preparing Su Ming's travel bundle, sewing new clothes stitch by stitch, repeatedly frying long-lasting dried cakes for provisions. Su Feng and Su Yang worked harder than ever; one hunted in the mountains, the other labored in the fields, trying to save more for the family before their brother left.

Su Ming shut himself in a corner of the backyard.

He called Su Yang over alone.

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[1,249 words]

"Second Brother, come over here."

In the corner of the backyard, the large cauldron was still set up, with a pile of processed bamboo materials stacked beside it. This was where the two brothers had started their paper-making journey.

"Xiao Ming, what's this about, so mysterious?" Su Yang wiped his sweat, asking curiously.

Su Ming didn't answer directly. Instead, he picked up a bundle of already pounded bamboo fibers and pointed at the large wooden barrel beside it. "Second Brother, let me ask you, why must the bamboo fibers be soaked in the plant ash water for a full three days?"

"Uh..." Su Yang was stumped. "Didn't you say that? That's what the recipe in the book said."

"Then why, when boiling the pulp, must the heat start high and then turn low, simmering slowly without rushing?"

"This... didn't you say that too?" Su Yang was even more confused.

Su Ming smiled and pulled out a piece of paper from his robe. This paper was made from the best quality he had produced himself, densely covered with symbols and characters.

"Second Brother, what I taught you before was just the method of paper-making. But I didn't tell you why we do it this way."

He handed the paper to Su Yang. "This contains the complete paper-making technique I saw in that old book."

Su Yang took the paper, looking utterly bewildered. He couldn't recognize all the characters, let alone those strange diagrams.

"Xiao Ming, you..."

"Second Brother, I'm going on a long journey, who knows when I'll return. This craft is the foundation of our Su family. I must leave it behind, complete and intact."

Su Ming's expression turned extremely serious.

"Soaking is to use the alkaline water from the plant ash to corrode the useless lignin in the bamboo, leaving only the purest fibers. If the time is too short, the soaking is incomplete, and the paper becomes brittle. If too long, the fibers rot, and the paper loses its toughness."

"Boiling the pulp is to further separate and soften the fibers. If the fire is too strong, it's easy to scorch, ruining the pulp. If too weak, it won't cook properly, and the fibers won't become pulp."

"And about paper forming... I only taught you to use a broken sieve before. Actually, the real useful tool is called a 'paper mold,' woven from fine bamboo strips and horsetail hair. Paper formed with that comes out even in thickness..."

Su Ming explained the complete, improved paper-making process taught by Lin Yu to Su Yang without reservation, breaking down every detail from the principles to the specific operations, making it as clear as possible.

He explained meticulously, and Su Yang listened attentively.

From raw material selection, alkaline water ratio, soaking duration, boiling heat control, to how to make a proper paper-forming mold, how to press out the water, how to perform the final "paper drying"... A complete paper-making process far surpassing the level of ordinary small workshops of this era unfolded clearly between the two brothers through their questions and answers.

The more Su Yang listened, the more astonished he became, feeling the paper in his hand grow heavier by the thousand catties. Only now did he understand that what they had produced before was merely the most superficial layer of this craft!

"Xiao Ming... you... why didn't you tell me earlier..." Su Yang's voice was somewhat hoarse.

"Because the timing wasn't right." Su Ming looked into his second brother's eyes. "This craft is our family's heirloom, but also a potential death warrant. Revealing it earlier would only invite disaster. Now that I'm leaving, I must pass on this livelihood-sustaining skill to you. Second Brother, remember this: the complete craft must not be known by a fourth person! Even Father, Mother, and Eldest Brother should only know that we can make it better than before. There's no need to explain it this thoroughly."

Su Yang nodded heavily. He wasn't a fool and instantly understood the stakes involved.

"Don't worry!" He carefully folded the paper and tucked it close to his chest, as if carrying a monumental secret. "As long as I have breath in me, I will never let this

recipe leak out! I will take good care of Father and Mother, guard this home, and wait for you... wait for you to pass the imperial examinations and return with honor!"

Su Ming smiled and patted his second brother's shoulder.

Lin Yu muttered to himself, "Hmm, the severance package and technology transfer are settled. Giving them a sustainable gold-egg-laying goose is much safer than leaving a pile of dead money. This way, the Su family's economic foundation is secure. That old fox Zhao Dequan will have to think twice before trying to manipulate them. My disciple finally shows some strategic vision."

Inside the ring, Lin Yu gave Su Ming's performance high praise.

"Master," Su Ming called out in his mind.

"What is it?"

"Why are we taking the imperial examination path? With your abilities, teaching me a couple of magical techniques would be faster than a decade of hard study, wouldn't it?" This had been Su Ming's lingering doubt.

Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of leisurely amusement. "Silly boy, what do you think cultivation is? Fighting, killing, indulging in personal vendettas? That's just storybook tales."

"True cultivation is contending with heaven, contending with earth, contending with others, and most of all, contending with yourself! Every step is like treading on thin ice. With your current meager skills, thrown out there, you wouldn't even make a splash."

"The imperial examinations are the best 'shield.'"

"Think about it. A scholar with an official title is protected by the dynasty's fortune. Ordinary demons, ghosts, evil cultivators, and the like wouldn't dare to easily taint such a person, or they would suffer the backlash of that fortune. That's the first layer of protection."

"Secondly, once you hold an official position, even if it's just a minor clerk, you gain the qualification to access local county records, prefecture records, even internal court archives. Do you think all those strange tales and legends are baseless? Many traces of ancient cultivators, their hidden dwellings, strange occurrences, are recorded as 'anomalies' in these old documents. This is our 'map' for seeking opportunities!"

"Thirdly, and most importantly. This path allows you to access the true upper echelons of this world. Do you think those high-ranking officials, nobles, princes, and generals really have no extraordinary individuals or immortal practitioners by their side? When

you stand high enough, you'll naturally see vistas ordinary people never witness in their lifetime and access the circles we wish to enter."

"This is called 'cultivation within the mundane world.' Using the mortal realm as a springboard, the dynasty as a ladder, advancing steadily and securely. Compared to those wandering cultivators who practice bitterly in the mountains and forests, constantly getting chased down for their treasures, how much safer is this? A hundred times over, at least!"

(Inner thoughts: "Just kidding, I don't have the ability to directly teach you cultivation either! We definitely need to get you an identity that can access the cultivation circles first, then plan the next steps.")

Su Ming listened, his mind stirred, feeling as if a grand and magnificent scroll was unfurling before his eyes. So, the path of cultivation could involve such intricate and far-reaching planning!

"Your disciple has been enlightened," he said sincerely.

However, just as Su Ming was planning for the future and the Su family was fully preparing for his distant journey, an uninvited guest disrupted this peace.

That afternoon, while Su Ming was helping chop firewood in the yard, a familiar, robust cough came from outside the courtyard gate.

"Ahem! Brother Su Shan, are you home?"

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Chapter 60: Work Handover

[1,257 words]

Su Ming stacked the last batch of split firewood neatly and heard footsteps approaching from outside the courtyard gate, along with a somewhat awkward greeting.

"Su Ming."

Su Ming turned his head and saw Zhao Dequan with a beaming smile, and Zhao Rui trailing behind him with a face full of reluctance.

Zhao Dequan's laughter was booming and hearty, while Zhao Rui, following him, wore an expression of utter unwillingness.

Su Shan hurriedly wiped his hands on his clothes and went forward to greet them. "Village Chief, sir, what brings you here today? Please, come inside and sit. Chuntao, go pour some water!"

"Ah, don't trouble yourself!" Zhao Dequan waved his large hand, stopping Wang Chuntao who was about to head to the kitchen.

Zhao Dequan's gaze swept around the courtyard, from the drying vegetables to the firewood pile in the corner, and finally, landed precisely on that corner of the backyard.

There, a large pot, a stone mill, and wooden barrels were all arranged, with a few scraps of failed paper from experiments tossed beside them.

The afternoon sunlight was just right. One of the palm-sized paper scraps was flipped over by the wind, and its surface actually shimmered with a delicate, warm, and smooth luster.

That sheen was worlds apart from the rough, yellowish, even grass-fiber-laden paper produced in the workshop.

Zhao Dequan's steps paused for a moment, his eyes lingering on that scrap of paper for a full two breaths.

("Disciple, he saw the paper scrap you left behind from experimenting with the improved formula!")

Lin Yu's voice instantly exploded in Su Ming's mind, carrying a sense of urgency that reveled in watching the drama unfold.

("This old fox's eyes are sharper than an eagle's! He's definitely wondering in his heart why you're hiding such good stuff and not bringing it to the workshop. Steady, don't panic, don't panic even if the sky falls! The more flustered you are, the more he'll think you're up to something!")

Su Ming's heart gave a violent thump, but his expression remained unchanged. He just silently stepped to Su Yang's side, lowered his eyelids, and assumed the respectful posture of a junior listening attentively.

Zhao Dequan withdrew his gaze, his face still wearing a genial smile as if he had merely glanced casually a moment ago.

He looked at Su Shan, but his words were directed at Su Ming. "I heard Xiao Ming is going to study in town? That's wonderful! Our Su Family Village hasn't produced a proper scholar going to the County School in many years!"

Su Shan gave an honest smile, rubbing his hands together. "The child is just fooling around, insisting on going out to see the world."

"How is that fooling around?" Zhao Dequan's face turned stern. "Matters of scholars, can they be called fooling around? This is called ambition!"

He shifted the topic, asking seemingly casually, "However, with Xiao Ming leaving, our village's paper-making workshop won't run into any major problems, will it? After all, the formula was something you found, and you've been overseeing the work in the workshop. You're the backbone. What are we to do if you leave?"

Here it comes!

Su Ming's heart tightened.

("See? The fox's tail is showing," Lin Yu snorted. "This is both a warning and a probe. Disciple, use the script we rehearsed! Shift the blame... ahem, shift all the credit to your Second Brother!")

Before Su Shan could speak, Su Ming stepped forward, bowed, and replied, "Uncle Zhao, you jest. I'm just someone who reads books all day, what do I know about craftsmanship? All the intricacies of paper-making were figured out by my Second Brother through trial after trial. He's skillful with his hands, and a steady person, soaking in the workshop every day. He knows far better than I do when to add firewood and what color indicates the pulp is ready."

He scratched his head, revealing a hint of a young man's shyness. "Actually, everything I know, Second Brother knows. What I don't know, he's already figured out by now. With me gone and Second Brother in charge, the workshop will only run better than before. Moreover, my brother recently pulled me along to try and figure out if we could make even better paper at home. You can see the scraps of my brother's newly made paper over there, but we haven't pinpointed the exact reason for the improvement yet, so we haven't mentioned it to the village."

These words were flawlessly delivered, both elevating Su Yang and completely absolving himself, perfectly crafting the image of a bookworm who "only provides theory, knows nothing of practice."

Hearing his younger brother praise him like this, Su Yang's face flushed slightly red, and he quickly waved his hands. "No, no, it was all Xiao Ming who taught me..."

"Look at this, just look!" Zhao Dequan pointed at the Su brothers and laughed heartily at Su Shan. "Shanzi, your two sons, one has the brains, the other is willing to put in the effort, and both are so humble. You truly are blessed!"

Zhao Dequan nodded, the smile on his face growing even brighter as he cut straight to the main point. "Shanzi, Xiao Ming, I heard yesterday that Xiao Ming is going to study in town. I thought about it all night and decided I must support this!"

He shifted his tone, sighed, and pulled Zhao Rui from behind him forward. "My boy here, ever since going with Xiao Ming to town for the exam last time, seems to have changed when he came back. He knows to study hard now, and he's learned some fear. That's a good thing. But with his half-baked skills, I'm really not at ease letting him go to the County School by himself."

Being criticized by his father in front of everyone, Zhao Rui felt embarrassed and muttered, "Dad, I can manage..."

"Manage my foot!" Zhao Dequan glared, then switched back to a helpless tone as he addressed Su Shan. "See? That's his attitude. So, I was thinking, when Xiao Ming goes to town, he could take this useless thing along. They took the exam together, so they've shared hardship. Studying together, they can look out for each other, and I'd feel more at ease."

This time, Zhao Rui just awkwardly turned his head away and muttered quietly, "Who needs him to look out for me..." But the resistance in his tone was noticeably weaker, more an issue of a young man's pride.

"Shut your mouth!" Zhao Dequan turned and roared, scaring Zhao Rui into swallowing the rest of his words.

Zhao Dequan resumed his kindly demeanor, patted Su Ming on the shoulder, and said earnestly, "Xiao Ming, don't judge A Rui by his current behavior. He's not a bad kid, just spoiled. The town academy is a mixed bag. With his temperament, I'm afraid he'll be deceived or led astray. You're different. You're steady, sensible. With you by his side to watch over him and guide him, I'm at ease!"

With such high praise bestowed upon him, it was difficult for Su Ming to refuse.

Su Ming understood clearly. Zhao Dequan's move was partly to let Zhao Rui follow the "enlightened" Su Ming and catch some "scholarly aura." More deeply, it was probably to use his son to keep tabs on and observe him, ensuring the core "secret formula" of the paper-making technique wouldn't be compromised by his departure.

He stepped forward, his tone sincere. "With Uncle Zhao's trust, I dare not decline. Brother Zhao Rui has become much steadier after this experience, and his academic foundation is solid. Studying together, we can spar and motivate each other."

"Good! Good! With your word, I am at ease!" Zhao Dequan nodded with satisfaction.

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Chapter 61: This money is a hot potato

[1,345 words]

Zhao Dequan seemed to feel that a mere verbal "entrustment" was insufficient. He made another move that left the entire Su family utterly dumbfounded.

He pulled a heavy cloth bundle from his bosom and, without any room for refusal, stuffed it into Su Shan's hands.

"Shanzi, I know. Going to town to study, expenses for food, clothing, daily necessities, writing brushes, ink, paper, and inkstones—which one isn't a cost? Your family's situation has just started to ease up a bit, and this is precisely the time you need money."

Su Shan was startled by the heavy, solid feel in his hand, trembling slightly. The contents of the cloth bundle clinked together, producing a clear, pleasant metallic sound.

"This... this is..."

Zhao Dequan pressed down on Su Shan's hand, which was trying to push the bundle back. His voice lowered, yet filled with an irresistible force.

"This is twenty taels of silver."

"You take it. Consider it as me, Old Zhao, no, consider it as the workshop's profits advanced to your family! For Xiao Ming's travel expenses!"

"Twenty taels!"

Mrs. Chen gasped sharply, the needlework in her hands falling to the ground.

Wang Chuntao's eyes instantly widened into perfect circles.

Twenty taels of silver! For a farming family like the Su family, that was an unimaginable fortune! Even scrimping and saving for a lifetime, they might not necessarily save up that much!

Su Shan's hand jerked back as if scalded by a hot coal: "This won't do! Village Chief, sir, this absolutely won't do! It's too much! We cannot accept it!"

"Take it!" Zhao Dequan's grip tightened even more, his expression serious. "Shanzi, listen to me! This money isn't just for you, Su Shan! This is an investment in the future scholar of our Su Family Village!"

His voice suddenly rose, carrying the unique authority and persuasive power of a village chief.

"If Xiao Ming makes something of himself, if he passes the imperial examinations and earns a scholarly honor, that will be the face of our entire Su Family Village! The glory of our whole village! What does this bit of money count for?"

"If you don't accept it today, you're looking down on me, Zhao Dequan! You're thinking our village's workshop can't even earn back twenty taels of silver! You don't want Xiao Ming to study properly!"

One big accusation after another was heaped upon Su Shan, pressing down on him until he could barely breathe.

He was a simple, honest farmer. How could he be a match for a shrewd person like Zhao Dequan? He held that bag of silver, utterly at a loss, his face flushing red. He looked toward his youngest son as if seeking help.

Su Ming knew that this money had to be accepted today.

He stepped forward and bowed deeply to Zhao Dequan.

"Uncle Zhao's great kindness, this junior will remember in his heart. This sum of money, our family will accept it. Please rest assured. Once in town, I will definitely urge Zhao Rui to apply himself to his studies and will not fail to live up to your expectations. This money will certainly be used for proper purposes like writing brushes, ink, paper, and inkstones. In the future, when the workshop distributes profits, our family's first share will be used to repay you."

His words were neither subservient nor arrogant. He accepted the money, clarified it as a "loan," and incidentally took on the responsibility of supervising Zhao Rui, giving Zhao Dequan a perfect way out.

"Hahaha! Good! Good lad!" Having achieved all his objectives, Zhao Dequan felt immensely pleased. He patted Su Ming's shoulder vigorously. "With your word, I am

completely at ease! Alright, we won't delay you any longer. My son and I will head back first! Xiao Ming, come to my house and let me know the day before you depart!"

With that, he dragged Zhao Rui, who still wore a face full of displeasure, and walked away with his hands clasped behind his back, perfectly content.

In the courtyard, only the Su family remained, along with that heavy bag of silver that seemed to still carry warmth.

"Heavens above..." Mrs. Chen walked over, her hand trembling as she touched the cloth bundle. Tears streamed down her face again. "Twenty taels... our family has twenty taels of silver..."

Su Yang was also flushed with excitement. He threw an arm around Su Ming's neck. "Xiao Ming! Did you hear that! Twenty taels! Now, forget about going to town, even going to the prefectural city, the travel expenses would be more than enough!"

Only Su Shan did not smile.

He slowly walked to the stone stool in the courtyard and sat down. He placed the cloth bundle on his lap and untied the string.

With a clinking sound.

Twenty ingots of silver, emitting an alluring sheen, lay quietly on the coarse cloth, dazzling to the eyes.

Su Shan picked up one ingot, held it in his palm, and weighed it.

After a long while, he finally looked up at Su Ming, his voice hoarse as he asked, "Xiao Ming, tell your father the truth. This money... is it very hot to hold?"

A warm current flowed through Su Ming's heart.

His father, though not eloquent, possessed the simplest survival wisdom. He could see that accepting this money wasn't that straightforward.

Su Ming nodded and said, "Father, it is a bit hot to hold. But our family needs this money right now."

He squatted in front of his father, looking into those bloodshot eyes, and said earnestly, "With this money, when I go out to study, the family won't have to tighten its belt anymore. Mother and sister-in-law can add a new piece of clothing. My brothers can also catch their breath. More importantly, with Zhao Rui by our side, Village Chief Zhao will guard that workshop more preciously than his own eyeballs. In the short term, no one will dare to have designs on us."

Su Shan listened silently. After a long time, he finally let out a long sigh, rewrapped the silver, and handed it to Mrs. Chen.

"Put it away. Prepare Xiao Ming's... outfit for the journey."

...

At night, Su Ming lay in bed, utterly sleepless.

"Master."

"Hmm?" Lin Yu responded lazily.

"You said, has Zhao Dequan completely seen through my true situation?"

"Seen through? Not necessarily," Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of amusement. "At most, he's grown suspicious. He thinks this kid isn't as simple as he appears on the surface, that you're hiding some secret. His move today was testing the waters. Giving money, sending his son, tying you and him to the same boat. If the boat capsizes, no one can escape."

"This is called risk-sharing. From an investment perspective, his deal isn't a loss."

Su Ming fell silent. He felt like a fish caught in a net. Though temporarily safe, he had lost a measure of freedom.

"Disciple, don't overthink it." Lin Yu seemed to sense his mood.

"Remember, what is the first principle of the 'Survival' strategy I taught you?"

"Safety first, reduce risks?"

"Correct! Zhao Dequan's maneuver, while bringing you trouble, has indeed provided an insurance policy for your family and for yourself. The village chief of a village is the local emperor of this area spanning dozens of miles. With his protection, at least until you pass the imperial examinations, those local ruffians and petty scoundrels won't dare to easily cause trouble for your family."

"As for that troublemaker named Zhao Rui..." Lin Yu's voice paused for a moment, then he chuckled.

"He is a whetstone delivered right to your doorstep. A touchstone to test the results of your cultivation in the 'Way of Survival'."

"What you need to learn is how to keep him as far away from you as possible without angering him or offending his father. How to use him without being dragged down by him. How to let him cause trouble, yet have the blame ultimately not fall on your head."

"This area of study is far more useful than all those grand principles in your Four Books and Five Classics."

Listening to his master's "heretical theories," the knot of worry in Su Ming's heart actually dissipated quite a bit. He even felt somewhat torn between laughter and tears.

"This disciple... has received the teaching."

"Mmm, a teachable pupil." Lin Yu said with satisfaction, then added another sentence.

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Chapter 62: Leaving Home

[1,273 words]

The day before Su Ming was set to depart, he made a special trip to the schoolhouse at the east end of the village.

Teacher Zhou was sitting under the old locust tree in the courtyard, holding a yellowed book in his hands, completely absorbed. Hearing the footsteps, he looked up, a hint of a smile appearing in his muddled eyes.

"You've come."

"Teacher." Su Ming bowed respectfully.

Teacher Zhou put down the book and gestured for Su Ming to sit on the small stone stool opposite him. He examined the youth before him—wearing clean, starched old cloth clothes, his posture straight, the childishness between his brows and eyes having faded somewhat, replaced by a touch of steadiness.

"Going to town?"

"Yes, I depart tomorrow. I've come specifically to bid you farewell."

Teacher Zhou nodded, his gaze distant, as if seeing his own youthful shadow through Su Ming.

"Good, very good. When a young eagle grows up, it must always leave the nest to see how high the sky is." He sighed, a touch of desolation in his voice. "The world outside is much bigger than this Su Family Village, and far more complex. People's hearts are harder to fathom than the beasts in the mountains."

He stood up, walked into the room filled with the scent of ink, and returned moments later holding a small inkstone. The edges of the inkstone were worn, clearly showing its age.

"This 'Pine Grain Inkstone' has been with me for half my life. It's not considered a particularly fine item, but its stone is dense and firm, and it grinds ink quickly. Take it with you. A scholar's writing brush is like a soldier's sword and spear on the battlefield; keeping it sharpened is never a bad thing."

Su Ming received it with both hands. The inkstone felt warm and smooth to the touch, still carrying the teacher's body heat.

"Teacher, this is too valuable."

"Take it." Teacher Zhou waved his hand, his expression brooking no refusal. "This old bones of mine won't last many more years. If you truly have the heart, in the future, if you pass the imperial examinations and gain scholarly honor, come back and repair this dilapidated courtyard for me. That would make it worthwhile."

A warmth surged in Su Ming's heart. He nodded heavily and carefully put the inkstone away.

"Your teachings, Teacher, this student will not dare forget."

"Go on." Teacher Zhou's voice returned to its usual flatness. "Remember, you must study, but don't become a fool from studying. In any situation, observe more, think more, speak less. Protecting yourself is more important than anything."

Su Ming bowed deeply once more, then turned and left.

(Inner thoughts: "Huh, this old gentleman is pretty decent.")

Lin Yu issued an approving comment from within the ring.

The next day, as the sky was just beginning to lighten.

Lanterns were already lit in the Su family courtyard.

Mrs. Chen, her eyes rimmed red, was stuffing things into Su Ming's bundle over and over again.

"These flatbreads are for the road, eat them when you're hungry. Take this padded jacket, it gets cold in the morning and evening... Once you get to town, don't be stingy with spending money. If you run out of money, send a message back with someone, your mother will figure something out..."

She chattered on and on, as if trying to convey a lifetime's worth of instructions in this single morning.

Wang Chuntao brought over a bowl of steaming hot egg noodles and shoved it into Su Ming's hands. "Little Uncle, eat quickly, it'll warm you up."

Su Yang patted Su Ming's shoulder, saying nothing, but hung a newly made, sturdy water skin on his belt.

Su Shan squatted on the threshold, puffing on his pipe tobacco one mouthful after another. The smoke curled and drifted, obscuring his expression. Only after Su Ming finished the noodles did he stand up, knocking the pipe bowl against the sole of his shoe.

"Once you're away from home, don't cause trouble, but don't be afraid of trouble either. If someone bullies you..." He paused, his voice hoarse. "...avoid them. If it really comes to it, just come home."

Su Ming nodded heavily. "Father, I'll remember."

Just as the family fell silent, Zhao Dequan's voice came from outside the courtyard gate.

"Shanzi, is Xiao Ming ready?"

Zhao Dequan led Zhao Rui inside. Zhao Rui was also carrying a brand new, large book box on his back, his eyes similarly red-rimmed. Clearly, he too had just gone through a solemn farewell.

The Zhao family's farewell ceremony was evidently far more elaborate than the Su family's. Zhao Rui's mother followed behind, carrying a food box, stuffing things into Zhao Rui's arms nonstop.

"Rui'er, this is your favorite braised pork knuckle, eat it on the road! This bundle has a few newly made clothes, and forty taels of silver. Spend it carefully..."

Zhao Rui wore an impatient expression but didn't push her away.

Zhao Dequan ignored his wife's tearful sniffing. He walked up to Su Ming and patted his shoulder. "Xiao Ming, once you get to town, I'm entrusting Zhao Rui to your care."

"Uncle Zhao, don't worry."

The mule cart was already waiting at the village entrance—still Old Qian's familiar, creaking mule cart.

The moment of parting had finally arrived.

Mrs. Chen held Su Ming's hand, tears finally overflowing. Su Ming grasped his mother's hand in return and said softly, "Mother, I'll be back after a while."

He turned around, not daring to look into his mother's eyes anymore, and strode towards the village entrance.

Zhao Rui also broke free from his mother's embrace, keeping his head down as he followed behind.

Behind them stood the figures of their families, lingering for a long time, and that heavy, weighty concern.

The mule cart once again set out on the dirt road full of stones.

The atmosphere inside the carriage was even more stifling than last time. Zhao Rui huddled in the corner, hugging his new book box, not saying a word. The previous experience had clearly left him with significant shadows.

Su Ming still chose to walk alongside the cart.

"Disciple, how does it feel?" Lin Yu's voice sounded lazily.

"What feeling?"

"The feeling of parting. Well? Do you feel the weight on your shoulders has increased, your heart filled with strength, wishing you could immediately pass the imperial exams as the top scholar and bring honor to your ancestors?"

Su Ming was silent for a moment, then shook his head. "I just feel that I cannot disappoint them."

(Inner thoughts: "Not bad, not bad. Not swept away by inspirational talk. Clear goals, stable emotions. A promising seedling for doing great things... oh no, a promising seedling for living a long life.")

This time, Old Qian deliberately took a detour.

Old Qian waved his whip, speaking with lingering fear. "We'll take a dozen or so extra li of mountain road, detouring from the north. That path is harder to travel, but it's said to be peaceful."

Inside the cart, Zhao Rui visibly shuddered upon hearing the words "mountain hollow".

Su Ming nodded, indicating his understanding. As he walked, he immersed himself in the cultivation of the Aura Concealment Art.

He no longer needed to deliberately search for that "warm sensation". With a single thought, he could clearly perceive the dispersion of his own Yang Energy. He attempted to guide this warm current, making it no longer wantonly billow out like a mist, but instead gently, tenderly, draw inward and condense.

This process was more difficult than imagined.

It was like trying to gather a handful of fine sand with your palms; apply a little too much force, and the sand would slip through your fingers. He could only use the gentlest of intentions, like a spring breeze skimming the water's surface, guiding that layer of warm "field" to slowly settle, press close to his skin, and merge into his flesh and blood.

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

Chapter 63: Enemies Meet on a Narrow Road

[1,477 words]

The mule cart jolted even more violently along the rugged mountain path, its wheels grinding over gravel, emitting a teeth-grating creak.

This so-called "Peaceful Road" was a hundred times harder to travel than the official highway from last time. The path was narrow, flanked by dense, impenetrable woods. Withered, yellow branches stretched toward the sky like ghostly claws, making it difficult for sunlight to pierce through.

Inside the cart, Zhao Rui was tossed about until he felt dizzy and nauseous, his face pale, yet he uncharacteristically didn't utter a single complaint. He just clutched his book chest tightly, his ears perked up, listening intently to every sound outside, like a frightened rabbit.

Su Ming still walked beside the cart. His breathing was steady and deep, each step landing on the soft, decaying leaves with almost no sound. His mind was completely immersed in comprehending the Aura Concealment Art.

That faint glimmer in his Dantian no longer needed to be deliberately sought; it was like a small lamp within his body, moving with his thoughts. He was trying to control the light of this lamp, causing the warm flow of Yang Energy that originally diffused around his body to slowly contract inward, like a receding tide, clinging tightly to his own skin.

This process was extremely mentally taxing, requiring utmost concentration.

A long while later, Su Ming slowly withdrew from this state of feeling.

"Disciple, how does it feel? Do you feel your own presence diminishing, almost turning into a tree by the roadside?" Lin Yu's voice rang in his mind, carrying a hint of examination.

"Still far from it," Su Ming responded inwardly. "This energy flow is still too scattered, like smoke that can't be grasped."

"Good, you know your limits. Keep practicing. Only when you can condense this living person's Yang Energy to be roughly like a stone will you barely be considered to have passed the first lesson of my 'Way of Survival'."

Su Ming stopped dividing his attention, pouring all his focus into controlling his breath.

His perception, sharpened by this intense concentration, became exceptionally keen. He could "hear" the different whistling sounds of the wind passing through the forest, "smell" the earthy scent of earthworms turning over beneath the soil, and "feel" the muscles of a startled wild rabbit tensing up in the distance.

Just as the mule cart rounded a mountain ridge, Su Ming's footsteps suddenly halted.

Into his "net," an inharmonious discordant note had intruded.

Not the sound of wind, not the roar of a beast.

But a very regular, deliberately suppressed sound of footsteps. One, two, three... at least five people. There were also the faint sounds of metal rubbing against leather, and... a faint, mixed scent of human odor, sweat, and cheap liquor.

This aura was very familiar to him.

"Master!" Su Ming cried out urgently in his mind.

"Northwest direction, about two hundred paces! Five people, they're the bandits from last time. Drive the cart behind the rocks in the gully to the right!" Lin Yu's voice reached Su Ming's mind at the same moment he called out.

A cold sweat instantly broke out on Su Ming's back.

He abruptly reached out, pressing a hand against the mule cart's shaft.

"Stop!"

His voice wasn't loud, but it carried an undeniable calmness.

"What's wrong?" Old Qian was startled, instinctively pulling on the reins.

Zhao Rui inside the cart immediately stuck his head out, asking nervously, "What happened? Su Ming, is something wrong?"

Su Ming didn't answer. He tilted his head to listen, his clear eyes fixed intently on the dense woods to the northwest. After a moment, he lowered his voice, speaking as quickly as possible, "Uncle Qian, drive the cart behind those rocks in the gully over there! Quick! Don't make a sound!"

Old Qian and Zhao Rui's faces instantly turned pale as sheets.

The experience from last time flooded their minds. Old Qian's hands trembled like a sieve, but his survival instinct made him comply immediately. Shaking uncontrollably, he drove the mule, moving the cart off the small path and hiding it behind a cluster of huge rocks.

"Get down! Get down and lie flat!" Su Ming hissed in a low voice. He was the first to jump off the mule cart, pulling the still somewhat dazed Zhao Rui to hide in a crevice between the rocks and a thicket of thorns, pressing him firmly to the ground.

Zhao Rui trembled all over, his teeth chattering audibly. He wanted to say something, but was stopped by Su Ming's icy gaze. That look said: If you want to live, shut up.

Zhao Rui immediately clamped a hand tightly over his own mouth, his eyes wide with terror.

Old Qian also scrambled over, crawling and stumbling. The three of them, plus one mule, held their breath, huddled in the narrow rock crevice, their hearts pounding wildly.

Old Qian gently stroked the mule's neck. The equally restless mule, sensing its owner's reassurance, slowly calmed down.

Soon, the sound of footsteps grew from far to near.

"Damn it! This godforsaken place is really fucking hard to walk!" a coarse, grating voice cursed angrily.

"Shut up!" another gloomy voice rang out. It was the scar-faced man. "Keep your eyes peeled, all of you! Don't miss the government soldiers if they're nearby!"

Hearing this voice from behind the rock, Zhao Rui's body stiffened violently, fear nearly suffocating him.

He stared fixedly at Su Ming's profile.

Su Ming lay flat on the ground, motionless, his cheek pressed against the cold earth, eyes slightly closed, as if he had merged with the surrounding soil and rocks. That composure was worlds apart from the terror Zhao Rui felt at that moment.

Summoning strength from somewhere, Zhao Rui imitated Su Ming, burying his face in the fallen leaves, desperately suppressing the sobs in his throat.

The figures of five mountain bandits appeared on the small path, each holding gleaming weapons. They scanned their surroundings vigilantly, their gazes sharp as hawks.

One of the bandits walked near the rocks where they were hiding, stopped, and undid his belt.

"I'm taking a piss."

A stream of warm liquid splashed against tree roots not far away, making a sizzling sound.

The hearts of Su Ming and the other two rose to their throats. Zhao Rui could even smell the pungent odor of urine, his stomach churning violently.

The scar-faced man urged impatiently, "Hurry up! Stop dawdling!"

The urinating bandit pulled up his pants, muttering, "Bad luck!"

As he turned, he kicked a stone. The stone rolled over with a clatter, stopping right in front of Su Ming's fingertips.

Su Ming's body remained utterly still; even his eyelids didn't flutter.

The bandits walked away, cursing and grumbling, their footsteps gradually fading into the woods in the other direction.

A long silence ensued.

No one knew how much time passed. Only when birdsong resumed in the forest did Old Qian become the first to collapse limply to the ground, as if all his bones had been pulled out, panting heavily.

"Gone... are they gone?"

Su Ming slowly raised his head, listened intently for a moment, then nodded gently. "Gone."

Only then did Zhao Rui remove the hand covering his mouth, collapsing onto the ground as if drained of all strength, the clothes on his back soaked through with cold sweat. He looked up at Su Ming, his expression incredibly complex. There was relief at having survived a disaster, lingering fear that wouldn't dissipate, but more than anything, a kind of dependence and trust he couldn't quite articulate himself.

Old Qian stood up shakily, walked over to Su Ming, his lips trembling. "Xiao Ming... you... how did you know they were coming?"

Su Ming stood up, brushed the dust off his clothes, and calmly offered an excuse he had already prepared. "When I was little, I went hunting in the mountains with Second Brother and learned a bit about listening to the wind to determine positions. Just now, the sound of the wind was wrong; it didn't sound like it came from the woods."

This explanation was half-truth, half-lie, but it was enough to get by.

Old Qian nodded, not fully understanding, but his gaze at Su Ming was filled with awe.

"Crisis averted. 'Way of Survival' practical lesson two, passed with full marks!" Lin Yu let out a long sigh of relief. "Disciple, your on-the-spot reaction and crisis management skills already possess ten percent of your master's style. Good, good."

Zhao Rui also got up. He walked over to Su Ming, opened his mouth, wanting to say something, but not a single word came out. Finally, he just lowered his head and mumbled two barely audible words.

"...Thanks."

Su Ming glanced at him but said nothing.

For the rest of the journey, no one dared to be the slightest bit negligent.

By evening, the outline of a majestic city wall finally appeared on the horizon, and the three of them could finally let their hearts settle completely.

The official road paved with bluestone, the coming and going of pedestrians, the bustling clamor of traffic... all these worldly, mundane aspects of human life felt incredibly warm and safe at that moment.

They had finally arrived again, at Qingshi Town.

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

Chapter 64: Not Going to the Zhou Family

[1,322 words]

The mule cart entered the gates of Qingshi Town, plunging headlong into a bustling, colorful painting.

The clamor of voices, the rumbling of cart wheels, the cries of street vendors, all mixed with the aroma of food and the musky smell of livestock, rushed toward them.

This thick, earthy atmosphere of daily life washed away the last lingering traces of the cold and fear from the mountains and forests.

Old Qian drove the cart, skillfully navigating familiar paths to bring them to the town center's mule and horse market, where they settled the remaining fare.

"Xiao Ming, thanks to you, this old man's life was pretty much snatched back from the jaws of death." Old Qian clutched the copper coins, his hand still trembling, his gaze at Su Ming filled with gratitude and lingering fear. "If you ever need anything in the future, just send word. As long as I'm still in town, Old Qian will come running whenever you call."

Su Ming nodded. "Take care on the road, Old Qian."

Old Qian drove the empty cart away, leaving only Su Ming and Zhao Rui standing there with their respective luggage.

Zhao Rui let out a long sigh of relief. The deathly pallor of one who has just escaped disaster rapidly faded from his face, replaced by the arrogance and impatience of someone returning to a familiar environment.

He patted the dust off his clothes, frowning. "Finally made it. Su Ming, come on, let's go to my aunt's house. You helped that Zhou Yulin so much last time, they definitely won't make us stay in that awful place from last time again."

Su Ming picked up his bundle but didn't move his feet.

"We're not staying at the Zhou family's," he said, his voice very calm.

"Why not?" Zhao Rui's volume immediately shot up. "If we don't stay at my aunt's, where will we stay? Sleep on the street? Let me tell you, the inns in town are ridiculously expensive!"

"Disciple, well done! Absolutely must not go!" Lin Yu's voice rang in Su Ming's mind, carrying an unprecedented seriousness. "That old scoundrel Zhou Kang is brimming with malice. Last time at the County School office, he was already trying to trip you up. Now you want to deliver yourself to his doorstep? Tired of living? That's not moving into a relative's house; that's moving into a wolf's den! His house is full of prying eyes and loose tongues. How would you cultivate the Aura Concealment Art? How would you hide your secrets? Remember, one of the core tenets of the Way of Survival is to stay far away from all potential sources of threat!"

Su Ming ignored Zhao Rui's bluster, simply asking calmly in return, "Have you forgotten what happened at the County School office?"

Zhao Rui's face instantly flushed a deep, purplish red.

Of course he hadn't forgotten. That look of being treated like garbage, and that Registrar Qian's shift from arrogance to obsequiousness, were still vivid in his mind.

"That... that was because my uncle didn't know we were coming! If he knew, he definitely wouldn't have acted like that!" Zhao Rui stubbornly defended, though his voice grew much smaller.

"We're here to study, not to live under someone else's roof." Su Ming hoisted his bundle and started walking. "Finding an inn to stay at is quieter and will save us a lot of unnecessary trouble."

Zhao Rui watched Su Ming's retreating back, then looked at the bustling crowd around him. A strange sense of panic surged within him again. The experience in the mountains and forests made him completely unwilling to act alone right now.

Gritting his teeth, he could only pick up his book box with reluctance and hurry to catch up.

"Fine, an inn it is! Don't come crying to me about the price when you see it!"

Su Ming led the way, not heading toward the bustling main street, but turning into a relatively secluded alley.

They passed an inn that looked clean and bright, with tall horses tethered out front. Su Ming didn't even bat an eyelid.

Zhao Rui watched with longing eyes, wanting to speak up several times, but Su Ming's silent, resolute back kept him from doing so.

Finally, deep in the alley, Su Ming stopped in front of a shop with a narrow front. The four characters "Fu An Inn" on the signboard were somewhat peeling.

A shop assistant dressed in a simple short jacket was dozing with his head on the counter. Hearing movement, he lazily looked up.

"Staying the night?"

"Yes. The cheapest room, how much per night?" Su Ming asked.

The assistant looked them up and down—one in coarse cloth clothes, the other in slightly better material but travel-worn—then curled his lip and held up three fingers.

"Thirty wen."

"What? Thirty wen!" Zhao Rui knew prices were high but hadn't expected them to be this much higher than he'd imagined. His family's money didn't grow on trees either. "This dump, thirty wen for one night? That's enough to buy a used book!"

Su Ming acted as if he hadn't heard the protest. He fished out thirty copper coins from his robe, carefully counted them, and placed them on the counter.

"One room."

The assistant took the money and tossed over a wooden token. "Second floor, the room at the end."

With that, he put his head down and went back to sleep.

Zhao Rui was so angry he stomped his foot, but there was nothing he could do. He could only follow Su Ming up the creaking stairs to the second floor.

The room was indeed small, just enough for one bed, one table, and one chair. The furnishings were simple, but the room was bright and clean. The floor and bedding were indeed tidy, without the expected musty dampness. Pushing open the window, they could see clothes drying in the backyard, carrying a faint, clean scent of soapberries.

"Is... is this place even fit for human habitation?" Zhao Rui threw his book box on the floor, his face full of disgust. "Even the quilt feels damp!"

Su Ming ignored him. He placed his bundle on the table, took out his waterskin for a drink, then began organizing his things. His movements were neither hurried nor slow, exuding a calmness that seemed out of place in this environment.

Zhao Rui complained for a while, but seeing Su Ming persistently ignore him, he also found it boring. He plopped down on the bed, which emitted a groan of protest under his weight.

He looked at Su Ming, a jumble of conflicting feelings in his heart. This youth, younger than himself, could sense danger early in the mountains, was so experienced at finding lodging in town, and didn't even blink when paying—it was as if everything was part of his plan.

It made Zhao Rui feel both trust and a strong sense of irritation.

Night fell. Faint noises of revelry drifted in from outside the inn, but inside the room, only a dim rapeseed oil lamp was lit.

Su Ming poured all his money onto the bed.

Twenty gleaming white silver ingots, plus the few taels of silver his family had given him, and some leftover copper coins from last time.

Under the lamplight, the silver ingots emitted a cold, alluring glow.

Su Ming picked up one ingot, feeling its weight in his palm.

Zhao Rui, leaning against the headboard, saw this and snorted disdainfully. He fished out a bulging money pouch from his own robe and dumped it onto the bed.

With a clattering sound, the silver inside was double Su Ming's amount.

"My dad gave me forty taels," Zhao Rui said, as if showing off. "He said studying in town has big expenses, and I shouldn't suffer. We don't need to stay in this dump at all. We could go to the best 'Yuelai Inn' in the east city; it's only a hundred wen a day!" As if he hadn't been the one complaining about thirty wen being expensive earlier.

Su Ming didn't look at him. He just gathered his own money and put it away, leaving only one broken silver tael and a few dozen copper coins out.

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- Chapter 65: Intelligence for the Examinations

Chapter 65: Intelligence for the Examinations

[1,221 words]

"That money has to cover both of us in town, everything we eat and wear, plus the tuition gifts for the County School, and we need to buy ink, brushes, paper, and inkstones. Forty taels sounds like a lot, but once you really spend it, it won't last more than a few months," Su Ming said calmly.

"Pupil, this prodigal fool is exactly the negative example for you," Lin Yu activated teaching mode in Su Ming's mind, "Remember, cash flow at all times is the fundamental guarantee for surviving. Money can't do everything, but without money you can do absolutely nothing. Your father is right: this money is hot to the touch, so spend it on the sharp edge. Every single coin must serve our ultimate goal — to survive safely."

"Also, I'll warn you one more time." Lin Yu's tone grew serious. "We are new here, our foundation is not firm, and our strength is weak. Stay away from any place that might trigger uncontrolled risks! Anything that looks like a 'chance' or 'opportunity,' don't touch it! That ruined temple last time was a warning. Until you can punch a cow dead with one blow, behave yourself like an ordinary scholar. Do you understand?"

"I understand, master," Su Ming answered in his heart.

He raised his head and looked at Zhao Rui, then spoke earnestly: "Starting tomorrow, our daily expenses cannot exceed fifty wen, including rent."

"What?" Zhao Rui jumped up. "Fifty wen? Subtract thirty wen for rent and there's only twenty wen left? What can you do with that? Not even enough for two meat buns! I'm not doing it!"

"Then figure it out yourself." Su Ming finished speaking and ignored him, sitting cross-legged on the bed and closing his eyes.

He had to seize every moment to cultivate the Aura Concealment Art.

Zhao Rui glared at Su Ming's complete indifference, furious and itching to act, but helpless. He couldn't really go out alone. In the end, he could only lie down angrily and pull the blanket over his head.

Early the next morning, just as dawn began to pale the sky, Su Ming opened his eyes.

He nudged the still-murmuring Zhao Rui awake.

"Get up, we're going out."

"Where to so early..." Zhao Rui rubbed his sleepy eyes, reluctant.

"To buy books."

Fifteen minutes later, the two of them stood beneath the towering ancient locust tree at the west corner of the city.

Morning mist still clung to the air, but the bookstall was already set up. The thin figure crouched beside the straw mat, arranging books.

"Xu Qing." Su Ming walked up and greeted him.

Xu Qing looked up, and when he saw Su Ming his calm eyes flashed a gentle smile.

"Coming to deliver paper?" Xu Qing had already known which of the visits were Su Ming's since the time they sold paper to his father. When they first opened a sales channel, Su Ming had come to town three times; on one of those occasions it had been Xu Qing who was guarding the stall.

His gaze then fell on Zhao Rui standing behind Su Ming. Zhao Rui wore a brand-new thin cotton long shirt; though he tried to look humble, the picky impatience in his eyes couldn't be hidden.

The smile on Xu Qing's face faded. He only nodded politely at Zhao Rui and then stopped looking at him.

"I'm here to buy a few books to prepare for the County School's examination," Su Ming naturally crouched down and began scanning through the stacks.

Zhao Rui stood aside, bored, looking around with no interest in the yellowing old books.

"The County School assessments start in a month," Xu Qing said softly as he helped Su Ming find books. "Many scholars in town are nervous. Wenbao Zhai's Essays and Commentaries has gone up in price again." Xu Qing instantly understood Su Ming's purpose in coming.

"I don't need that." Su Ming shook his head and picked out a book explaining basic policy-essay composition, *The Basics of Policy Essays*.

He paid, then casually asked, "Has the price of paper gone up in town recently?"

Xu Qing paused and sighed. "Yes. I heard there was a great flood down south and the merchant routes that transport paper were cut off. Good xuan paper is nearly as expensive as meat now. My cost to copy books has risen a lot; life is getting harder."

He spoke while glancing at the ink on his fingertips, his expression dim.

An opportunity presented itself.

Su Ming lowered his voice and leaned in a little. "Brother Xu, if... I had a kind of paper, better than the usual grass paper, would you want some?" Before leaving home, he had told his second brother to improve the quality of the paper just a bit: one purpose was to stabilize popular sentiment and avoid villagers' resentment that might lead to trouble, the other was to give the village some influence. Lin Yu had complained a lot about this, fearing Su Yang would use Su Ming's secret methods to make paper capable of bringing ruin to the whole Su Family Village. So Lin Yu had insisted that Su Ming keep the paper from Su Yang not too good, and repeatedly warned Su Yang about the consequences until he relented.

Xu Qing suddenly looked up, a flash of sharp light in his eyes. "Really?"

For a family who lived by copying books, paper was their lifeblood. Cheap yet high-quality paper meant higher profit and stronger competitiveness. The Su Family Village's paper was already much better than the common grass paper on the market; if it could be improved further it might rival inexpensive xuan paper.

"I can't guarantee it," Su Ming said cautiously. "It's still a trial. If it works, you'll be the first to see it."

"Good!" Xu Qing nodded heavily, showing rare excitement. "Su Ming, if you really pull this off, I'll owe you a huge favor!"

Zhao Rui impatiently prodded from the side, "Hey, are you done? It's just a few sheets of paper, why all the mystery? Hurry up, I'm starving!"

Xu Qing's expression chilled instantly.

He ignored Zhao Rui and instead looked at Su Ming, speaking quickly and covertly in a lower voice: "The County School assessment, the first part is an oral memorization test; that depends entirely on sheer effort. The second part, the policy essay, is the most critical. The chief examiner is Professor Liu from the County School. He values practicality and detests empty talk. Let me give you this County Records of Qingzhou, read more about farmland, water conservancy, and taxes."

"Thank you, Brother Xu!" Su Ming cupped his hands respectfully.

He knew how many crucial bits of information his second brother's new paper could unlock.

"Excellent! Pupil, see?" Lin Yu praised inside Su Ming's mind. "This is called arbitraging the information gap! That idiot is still thinking about where to get breakfast; you've already secured the first stepping stone to the County School. This Xu Qing is someone worth befriending!"

Su Ming pulled the still-complaining Zhao Rui and turned to leave.

Xu Qing watched their backs, his expression complex. He picked up a piece of coarse cloth and continued wiping book covers, but his thoughts had already drifted far away.

Su Ming... what kind of person is he, really?

He wasn't like those scholars who only studied the Sage's Books, nor like the opportunists obsessed with fame and rank. There was a calm practicality in him that far exceeded his age.

Perhaps he truly could make that kind of paper.

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Chapter 66: Good News? No, Bad News

[1,206 words]

The morning at Fu An Inn began with a loud sneeze from the next room.

Su Ming sat cross-legged on the bed, slowly exhaled a breath of stale air, and finished a night of practicing the Aura Concealment Art.

On the table sat their breakfast: two rock-hard wheat cakes and a small dish of pickled vegetables.

"Our family dog eats better than we do."

Zhao Rui lay listlessly over the table, prodding a wheat cake with his chopsticks, his face the picture of utter despair.

Ever since Su Ming set their daily spending limit at fifty wen, his standard of living had plummeted from the clouds into the mud.

“Save it. That dish of pickles has to last three days.” Su Ming split a wheat cake and chewed expressionlessly.

“Three days?” Zhao Rui’s wail changed tone, “Su Ming, are you trying to starve me to death so you can swallow the forty taels of silver my father gave me?”

Su Ming didn’t even lift an eyelid. He opened the County Records of Qingzhou that Xu Qing had gifted him and read with interest.

“Disciple, ignore him.” Lin Yu’s voice sounded in Su Ming’s head, lazily just awake, “These greenhouse flowers need a hailstorm of reality to know what human hardship really is.”

(internal aside, amused: “But really, those wheat cakes do look rock-hard. Back in my day when I ate instant noodles, at least there was a little sausage.”)

At that moment, downstairs the inn assistant’s impatient shout came: “Room at the end of the second floor, here’s a letter for you!” On their second day staying here, Su Ming had asked Old Qian to help send a message home to let the family know they were safe.

A letter?

Su Ming’s heart stirred.

He hurried downstairs. A man in a short jacket, dust covering him, handed an envelope to the assistant. The man was from Su Family Village, occasionally driving a cart to town to sell mountain goods.

“Su Shan’s kid? Your second brother asked me to bring it.” The man grinned when he saw Su Ming, showing a mouth of yellowed teeth.

Su Ming took the letter and passed over a few copper coins. “Thanks, uncle. Have a bowl of hot tea.”

Back in the room, Zhao Rui immediately crowded in, poking his head over curiously.

The envelope was made from the coarsest grass paper, the handwriting crooked, carrying a familiar feel.

Su Ming opened the letter and skimmed it quickly.

It was written by his second brother, Su Yang.

The content was simple, yet made Su Ming's heart skip a beat.

The letter said a big merchant from the south named Chen had come to the village. That merchant saw their improved new paper, made a decision on the spot, bought up all the workshop's stock, and paid in shining silver!

The village exploded with excitement; everyone received a large sum of money. Zhao Dequan decided on the spot to expand the workshop so more people could be employed.

At the end of the letter, Su Yang wrote in a tone that was both excited and slightly uneasy: "Third brother, our family has money now! Mother and Father told me to tell you not to be stingy in town, buy whatever you want! But... it seems word of our paper-making got out; even the county clerk sent someone to ask about it..."

"What does it say?" Zhao Rui couldn't help asking.

Su Ming folded the letter silently and tucked it into his chest.

"Nothing much, just a family safety report."

"Hah, stingy." Zhao Rui snorted.

Su Ming didn't answer. He stared quietly out the window.

The letter in his chest brought no warmth; instead it felt like a red-hot branding iron.

"Master..."

"I see it." Lin Yu's voice was more serious than ever, "Trouble's here, disciple. Big trouble."

"A tall tree in the forest invites the wind to break it. Possessing a treasure invites blame, unchanged through the ages."

"That Zhao Dequan was too naive. He thinks this is a blessing? He's setting the whole Su Family Village on the fire! A remote mountain village suddenly producing low-cost paper comparable to xuan paper—people of weight don't see it as a technical breakthrough, they see it as a greasy chunk of meat!"

(internal: "Damn, damn, Plan A of 'play it safe and develop quietly' has failed, forcibly into Plan B of 'survive by jumping into the tiger's mouth.' I hate Plan B the most! Too many variables, too risky!")

Su Ming drew a deep breath and suppressed the turmoil in his chest.

He stood, grabbed his bundle. "Let's go out."

"Where to? Fu Lai Restaurant?" Zhao Rui immediately perked up.

"To Xu Qing's place."

...

"Brother Xu."

Xu Qing looked up and, seeing Su Ming, twitched the corner of his mouth.

"There's something definite now." Su Ming lowered his voice, "My second brother sent a letter. The new paper has been trial-produced. The next batch should be delivered to town."

Xu Qing's hand tightened on his pen. A burst of joy lit his eyes. "Really?!"

"Mm." Su Ming nodded. "When it comes, I'll be the first to bring some to you."

"Su Ming, thank you!" Xu Qing said solemnly; he understood how weighty those words were. This wasn't just paper—it was the foundation for him and his father's livelihood.

Zhao Rui yawned impatiently by their side, uninterested in their secretive conversation.

After leaving the bookstall, Zhao Rui finally couldn't hold back. He grabbed Su Ming's sleeve and was almost pleading: "Su Ming, I beg you, let's go eat one meal, just one. I'm dying of hunger! I know a teahouse called Tian Xiang Pavilion; their crab roe buns are unmatched!"

Su Ming looked at his pitiful expression and remembered the burning letter in his chest.

Maybe, in the busiest place in town, he could hear something different.

"Just this once."

"Great!"

Tian Xiang Pavilion was Qingshi Town's most upscale teahouse, with carved beams and painted rafters; patrons were almost all wealthy.

Su Ming and Zhao Rui, wearing half-worn scholar shirts, looked completely out of place at the entrance.

A waiter gave them a sidelong glance. If not for the fact that Zhao Rui's thin cotton garment looked of slightly better quality, they would likely have been shown the door.

They were led to a small table in a corner of the main hall.

Zhao Rui excitedly ordered a basket of crab roe buns and a pot of top-grade Longjing tea, then behaved like Liu Laolao entering the Grand View Garden, looking around at everything.

Su Ming remained composed, but his ears quietly pricked up as he unobtrusively activated the Listening to Sounds technique.

The surrounding clamor was filtered; some intentionally lowered voices came through clearly.

“Have you heard? Second Master of the Zhou family has hooked up with the county captain.”

“Which Zhou family?”

“Which other? Zhou Yulin’s. That second uncle of his, Zhou Kang, is not someone to be trifled with.”

Su Ming’s heart sank slightly.

Just then, a voice from the neighboring table carried a mix of frivolity and arrogance—loud enough that half the hall could hear.

“What lousy paper, really worth making such a fuss over? It’s just some country bumpkin nonsense. How could it compare to the ‘Jade Xuan’ we bring from the prefectural seat?”

The speaker was a young master in a dark blue patterned silk jacket, pale-faced but with a cruel glint in his eyes. He was surrounded by well-dressed attendants who chimed in.

“Master Wei speaks the truth! Those country rubes can barely read a few characters, and now they claim to make paper?”

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

[1,302 words]

"I heard that paper is only slightly better than grass paper, all hype and nothing more!"

Young Master Wei?

Su Ming's gaze swept over the jade pendant hanging from the man's waist, carved with the character "Wei".

Zhao Rui's face flushed red in an instant.

Looking down on the villagers himself was one thing, but being publicly mocked as a "country bumpkin" by someone from the town was another matter entirely.

He slammed the table and stood up abruptly. "Who are you calling a bumpkin?!"

This shout instantly silenced the entire main hall.

All eyes focused on this corner.

That Young Master Wei clearly hadn't expected anyone to dare contradict him to his face. He was stunned for a moment, then the corner of his mouth curled into a mocking sneer.

"Oh, so there's one here who's in a hurry to claim the title?" He looked Zhao Rui up and down, his gaze as if looking at a yapping mongrel. "What, did I hit a nerve?"

"You!" Zhao Rui trembled with rage, pointing at the other, but couldn't utter a complete sentence.

Su Ming immediately stood up, placing a hand on Zhao Rui's shoulder and forcibly pressing him back into his seat.

He cupped his hands towards Young Master Wei, neither servile nor overbearing. "Young master, my friend is young and has a fiery temper. Please do not take offense."

As he spoke, he quietly activated the Aura Concealment Art, reducing his own presence to the minimum, as if he were merely an insignificant shadow.

Young Master Wei's gaze shifted from the furious Zhao Rui to Su Ming's calm face.

He narrowed his eyes slightly.

"You at least know how to speak properly." His gaze swept over Su Ming, finally settling on his faded, coarse cloth gown. The contempt in his eyes grew thicker.

Humiliation.

Barefaced humiliation.

Zhao Rui's eyes instantly reddened, as if he was about to pounce and fight to the death.

Su Ming's hand pressing on him increased its force, his knuckles turning white.

"Master, what do we do?" Su Ming asked rapidly in his mind.

"Endure!" Lin Yu's voice was as cold as ice. "He's deliberately trying to provoke you! If you start a fight here, you'll definitely be the ones who suffer! Who is he? Clearly someone with some influence in the town! Who are you? Two students with no background or roots! Endure it, find an opportunity and leave!"

Su Ming took a deep breath, his face still maintaining its calm.

"Young master's lesson is correct. We will leave now and not disturb your enjoyment."

As he spoke, he took out a few dozen copper coins from his robe, placed them on the table, and pulled Zhao Rui up to leave.

"Halt!" Young Master Wei's voice came from behind them. "Did I say you could leave?"

Young Master Wei's voice was like a cold whip, lashing through the stagnant air.

Su Ming's footsteps halted. Zhao Rui, whose arm he was pulling, stood rigid, panting heavily, his eyes completely bloodshot.

The gaze of everyone in Tian Xiang Pavilion was focused on this corner, weaving an invisible net of onlookers, schadenfreude, and indifference.

Young Master Wei unhurriedly picked up his teacup, blew on the floating tea leaves, his eyelids drooping, not looking at them.

"You contradict me and think you can just walk away? Since when did this Qingshi Town allow country folk to come and go as they please?" His voice wasn't loud, but each word carried a sting. "Come here, kowtow, and apologize. If I'm in a good mood, I might just let you off."

Zhao Rui's nails dug into his palms. Kowtow? His father was the Village Chief! He could strut around Su Family Village as he pleased! When had he ever suffered such humiliation?

Su Ming's hand on his arm tightened even more. He could feel the trembling of Zhao Rui's body. It wasn't fear; it was anger and humiliation scorching his reason.

"Endure it, disciple! A little impatience spoils great plans! We have to swallow this loss for now!" Lin Yu's voice was urgent.

Just as Su Ming was rapidly weighing in his mind whether to tear the facade completely or submit temporarily, a clear, gentle voice sounded from the staircase.

"Brother Wei, such a temper. Who has offended you?"

Everyone looked towards the sound. Zhou Yulin was walking down the stairs, dressed in a moon-white gown, his face wearing his usual, slightly aloof gentle smile. A young page boy followed behind him.

Seeing Zhou Yulin, the arrogance on Young Master Wei's face receded somewhat, but his tone still wasn't exactly polite. "So it's Brother Yulin. It's nothing. Just teaching two country boys who don't know the rules, lest they sully the grounds of Tian Xiang Pavilion."

Zhou Yulin's gaze swept over Su Ming and Zhao Rui, lingering on Su Ming's face for a moment with a hint of surprise, then looked back at Young Master Wei and smiled. "I'm afraid Brother Wei is mistaken. This Zhao Rui is a relative from my second uncle's side. If we count it, he should call me cousin."

As his words fell, a few faint intakes of breath sounded in the main hall.

Young Master Wei's expression changed slightly. A relative of the Zhou family? Even if he'd heard they were just poor relatives, when you beat a dog, you still have to consider its master's face.

Without waiting for his reaction, Zhou Yulin looked at Su Ming, his tone becoming even more earnest. "As for this Brother Su Ming, he helped me greatly some time ago and gave me quite some inspiration in my studies. He is a friend of mine, Zhou Yulin."

He enunciated the word "friend" clearly.

Young Master Wei's face completely fell. Zhou Yulin personally stepping in, pointing out one as a relative and the other as a "friend", carried a completely different weight. For the sake of a momentary verbal victory, it wasn't worth truly clashing with the Zhou family's direct heir.

He gave a dry laugh twice, taking the offered way out. "Oh? So they are Brother Zhou's relatives and friend? Truly, the floodwaters have rushed into the Dragon King's temple. Since Brother Zhou has spoken, let it be." He waved his hand, as if shooing away flies. "You may go."

His attitude remained disdainful, but he had ultimately stepped aside.

Zhao Rui, dragged by Su Ming, almost stumbled to the ground.

Su Ming cupped his hands solemnly towards Zhou Yulin. "Thank you, Brother Zhou, for resolving the situation."

Zhou Yulin gave a slight nod, his smile faint. "It was a small effort. Brother Su, if you have time, you are welcome to visit my home."

Su Ming thanked him again, said no more, and pulled the dazed Zhao Rui, quickly leaving Tian Xiang Pavilion.

Only after walking out of that bustling street and merging into the noisy crowds of the West District did Zhao Rui suddenly shake off Su Ming's hand. His face alternated between green and white. He stewed for a long moment, then spat fiercely.

"Damn it! What a piece of trash! Flaunting his family's stinking money!"

Su Ming didn't speak, just walked silently. The sunlight shone on him, but couldn't dispel that icy feeling of humiliation. Power. In this world, without power, even quietly eating a meal was a luxury.

"Thanks have been given, pleasantries have been heard. Disciple, time to think about serious matters." Lin Yu's voice broke the silence, carrying a kind of cold, hard reality.

"Zhou Yulin stepped forward today. Three parts were for that thin thread of family sentiment, seven parts were for your 'help'."

Su Ming acknowledged with a mental *hmm*.

"That bastard surnamed Wei, though his mouth stinks, was right about one thing—your paper is now a piece of fat meat, its aroma has already wafted out." Lin Yu's voice became extremely serious.

"That idiot Zhao Dequan, expanding the workshop? Hiring more hands? He's afraid your Su Family Village won't die fast enough! Right now, it's probably not just the county magistrate's advisor. Anyone in Qingshi Town with any connections has their eyes fixed on Su Family Village."

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Chapter 68: Driving the Tiger to Swallow the Wolf

[1,266 words]

Lin Yu's voice was icy cold. "Zhao Dequan thinks he's the king of the village, but in the eyes of those people, he's not even worth a fart. The entire Su Family Village is just a pigsty waiting to be slaughtered."

(Inner thoughts: "Sigh, how did the news suddenly spread? Could someone be stirring the pot? Logically, making some grass paper shouldn't draw this much targeting. That merchant was contacted earlier, it was just Zhao Dequan using his connections in town. I originally thought this Zhao Dequan had a brain, but I didn't expect him to be so stupid. Tried to guard against a thousand things, never expected to still capsize. Can only take one step at a time now. If it really comes to the worst, I'll have to convince my disciple to slip away quietly.")

Su Ming's heart sank bit by bit.

He had considered danger, but hadn't imagined it was already this close.

"Then what should I do?" Su Ming's voice was somewhat dry. "Run away with my parents and Second Brother? Where could we even run to?"

"Run?" Lin Yu snorted. "You can run, but can your parents keep up? Once you leave Su Family Village, you'll be rootless duckweed, scattered by the slightest breeze. You'd die even faster then."

(Inner thoughts: "Sigh, dragging a whole family along is just troublesome. If it were just me, I'd have long since holed up in some deep mountain old forest.")

"We can't just sit and wait for death either!" Su Ming's fists clenched tightly under the table.

"Of course not." Lin Yu's voice carried a trace of cunning, like an old fox. "Disciple, drive the wolf to chase the tiger."

Su Ming abruptly lifted his head, a flash of light in his eyes.

"The Zhou family?"

"The pupil can be taught indeed." Lin Yu praised. "The Zhou family is the biggest tiger in Qingshi Town. Why did Zhou Yulin help you today? He placed a small bet of favor on you, gambling that you might provide a return in the future?"

Su Ming fell silent. He recalled Zhou Yulin's gentle yet distant gaze and understood in his heart.

"But why would the Zhou family, for the sake of our tiny Su Family Village, offend so many forces in town?" Su Ming asked the most crucial question.

"Good question." Lin Yu's voice held a smile. "Of course they wouldn't now. Because you're not qualified enough. What are you now? A somewhat clever country boy. The Zhou family has seen plenty of people like you; they're not valuable."

"So, what you need to do is make yourself 'valuable'."

"How do I become valuable?"

"Go and pass the Xiucai exam." Lin Yu's tone became offhand.

"Xiucai?" Su Ming was stunned.

"Yes, Xiucai." Lin Yu explained. "In this dynasty, a Xiucai holds scholarly honor. They don't have to kneel before the county magistrate, are exempt from taxes and corvée labor, and ordinary people cannot bully them at will. It's not just a status; it's a protective talisman."

"If you go find Zhou Wenhai now and say you hope he can invest in the paper-making workshop, there's a high chance he'll refuse you. But if you approach him wearing the scholarly honor of a Xiucai, telling him you have a way to benefit his family, how do you think he'll treat you?"

"He'll see you as a 'talent' worth recruiting, a 'friend' he can speak with as an equal!"

"At that time, when you bring up the matter of Su Family Village, it won't be you begging for his help, but a collaboration. You provide the technique, he provides protection. He just needs to move his lips to make those jackals, wolves, tigers, and leopards dare not stretch out their claws. And what he gains is a workshop that can continuously produce cheap, good paper, and the favor of a young Xiucai with boundless prospects."

"In this deal, would Zhou Wenhai lose?"

These words were like a sudden enlightenment, making Su Ming's vision clear and open.

"I understand." Su Ming let out a long sigh, the pent-up frustration in his chest completely swept away.

He turned his head and looked at Zhao Rui, who was still hanging his head in dejection.

"Zhao Rui."

Zhao Rui lifted his head, his eyes blank.

"That man surnamed Wei, do you know what his family does?" Su Ming asked.

Zhao Rui was stunned for a moment, answering subconsciously, "I... I heard he's the biggest cloth merchant in town, has some relative connection with the County Lieutenant."

"Cloth merchant..." Su Ming nodded, committing this information to heart.

Su Ming returned to the inn and carefully took out the "County Records of Qingzhou" that Xu Qing had given him from the worn-out bundle, along with a few books on classics, meanings, and policy essays he had bought from the bookstall.

He neatly arranged the books on the table, then sat down, picked up one book, and began reading word by word under the light of dusk.

His movements were slow, steady, as if everything outside had nothing to do with him.

One month's time flowed away like water through one's fingers.

In the room at the far end of the second floor of Fu An Inn, Su Ming and Zhao Rui lived two completely different lives.

Su Ming's life was as regular as a precise clock.

Before dawn, he would sit cross-legged on the bed, circulating the "Aura Concealment Art". The energy within his body flowed like a gentle stream through his meridians, slowly washing over every inch of his body. His entire aura also became increasingly restrained. Sometimes, when he sat motionless, even the shop assistant dozing at the counter who came upstairs to deliver water would be startled by this figure standing motionless in the shadows.

"Disciple, not bad, not bad, quite reminiscent of your master in my younger days." Lin Yu expressed approval from within the ring. "Now when you walk on the road, even dogs can't be bothered to look at you twice. This shows your aura has successfully merged with the environment, reaching the primary realm of 'harmony between man and nature'. Keep working hard, strive to achieve the perfected realm of 'Extra A' soon."

During the day, Su Ming would hold the "County Records of Qingzhou" gifted by Xu Qing and a few basic classics and meanings, reading them the entire day. He read extremely slowly and meticulously, as if he wasn't reading books, but plowing a field with his eyes, planting every single character into his brain.

Zhao Rui's life, on the other hand, was a complete mess.

For the first few days, he still pretended with his book box, but his true colors emerged within days. He either complained the bed boards were too hard, or the food was too plain. Su Ming unwaveringly enforced the daily budget of fifty copper coins: thirty for the room, twenty for meals. These twenty coins were only enough for the two of them to eat

two bowls of plain, watery Yangchun noodles at the noodle stall at the alley entrance, maybe with an egg added at most.

"Su Ming! Noodles again! I feel like I'm about to turn into a noodle myself!" Zhao Rui slammed his chopsticks on the table, his face full of indignation. "My father gave me forty taels of silver, not for me to come to town to cultivate immortality!"

Su Ming didn't even lift his eyelids, leisurely finishing the last bite of noodles in his own bowl, then taking Zhao Rui's untouched bowl over.

"If you're not eating it, that just saves tomorrow morning's meal money."

Zhao Rui's protests were drowned out by Su Ming's calm yet resolute actions. After several attempts, he learned to behave, though his face remained as long as the signboard at the inn's entrance all day long.

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

[1,225 words]

The day before the exam, the side hall of the Zhou Residence.

The side hall smelled of aged wood and old scrolls. Zhou Kang held a cup of hot tea, blew away the foam, his eyelids drooping as he listened to the house steward who stood bowed before him.

The steward was the gate attendant, quick with his tongue and tasked with recognizing visitors.

"Second Young Master, I went to the west market this morning and saw two people, they looked terribly familiar." The steward rubbed his hands, a cautious expression on his face. "I looked closely and—hey—aren't they the two country kids who came to petition Second Madam before the New Year? Zhao Rui from Su Family Village, and that quiet one, Su Ming."

Zhou Kang's sipping motion froze. He lifted his eyelid a sliver, revealing murky but shrewd eyes beneath.

"Them? They're back for what? The exam?" Zhou Kang set the cup down, the porcelain bottom knocking against the yellow rosewood side table with a crisp sound. He leaned forward slightly, and the laziness that had coated his face vanished, replaced by the single-minded focus of a hound catching a scent. "With just them? Zhao Rui's an empty-headed fool, how could he possibly pass the County School exam?"

The steward dared not speak, only giving a few nervous chuckles.

Zhou Kang's fingers tapped the table unconsciously, making a soft "tok, tok" sound.

Su Ming... that kid did have a certain edge, enough to make someone as proud as Yu Lin lower himself. But Zhao Rui? He was just a pile of useless mud.

Suddenly, the tapping stopped.

A cold smile slowly crawled up the corner of Zhou Kang's mouth.

He thought of Zhao Rui's father, the Village Chief of Su Family Village, Zhao Dequan. That kowtowing expression, that eagerness to grovel and throw everything on the table to curry favor with the Zhou family, was still vivid in his mind. Zhou Kang clearly saw what lurked in that man's eyes—ambition, the desire to climb onto the Zhou family's high branch through his son and then lord it over the countryside.

Now, that useless son was coming to take the County School exam? Staying in that shabby inn? Of course, Zhao Dequan must have instructed him. Afraid of being refused at Zhou's door, he decided to act first and report later, hoping his son might luck into success and then flatter Zhou Kang in person?

Fools!

Zhou Kang snorted inwardly.

But the foolishness was perfect.

There was no way Zhao Rui could pass on his own merits. If Zhou Kang did nothing, Zhao Dequan's move would be a dead play and he'd have needlessly offended him.

But what if... Zhou Kang "helped" a little?

It wouldn't take much force, not even his personal appearance—just slip a vague favor to Professor Liu, let Zhao Rui's name barely hang at the end of the list...

Then that "favor" would tie Zhao Dequan to him. Whether his son could stay at the County School, whether he might rise at all in the future, would be gripped tightly in Zhou Kang's palm.

By then, the paper workshop in Su Family Village that made daily profit by the cartful... would Zhao Dequan still hide a share? Dare he not split some with Zhou Kang?

At the thought, Zhou Kang felt completely at ease. Even the noisy cicadas outside sounded far more pleasant.

He looked at the steward and his tone softened a little. "Mm, you did well. Good eye. Go to the accounting office and draw fifty wen, tell them it's a reward from me."

The steward's joy was palpable. He thanked him repeatedly, bowed, and backed out.

The side hall was left with Zhou Kang alone. He lifted his tea, took a slow sip; the warm brew soothed his throat.

He gazed out the window as if he could already see Zhao Dequan's fearful yet grateful face, and the steady stream of wealth, funneled bit by bit through his son's fragile thread, flowing into his pockets.

"Zhao Dequan, Zhao Dequan," he murmured, his voice full of the amusement of a cat playing with a mouse, "you sent your son right into my hands."

This idle move might yield unexpected returns.

He set the cup down, smoothed his robe, and began planning how to open that barely noticeable channel with the starchy Professor Liu.

Finally, the day of the County School exam arrived.

That day, Qingshi Town's air was thick with nervous ink fragrance.

Crowds thronged the County School gates. Hundreds of students from villages and towns gathered, their faces solemn, eyes carrying both hope and anxiety for the future.

Zhao Rui's legs trembled and went weak, his face deathly pale as he clutched Su Ming's arm, palms slick with cold sweat.

"Su Ming, I... I feel like I've forgotten everything. What should I do? My head is full of noodles, each one swaying..."

Su Ming pulled his arm free and patted his shoulder.

"Go in."

The exam hall was the County School's main lecture hall. Rows of separate desks were neatly arranged; the atmosphere was solemn. Several invigilators in black paced expressionlessly, their gazes sharp as hawks.

On the raised platform sat the two chief examiners.

The man in the center was Zhou Wenhai. Dressed in a dark Confucian robe, his face was stern and his gaze swept the hall with an inherent, unspoken authority.

Su Ming felt Zhou Wenhai's eyes rest on him for a moment, carrying scrutiny and inquiry.

"Disciple, steady yourself," Lin Yu reminded him. "That 'comparison verification method' of yours probably piqued his curiosity more than anything. He is more curious than anything else about you right now. Don't show weakness—if you remain calm, he'll think you are profoundly skilled."

Su Ming lowered his eyelids, adjusted his breathing, and calmed himself like a deep well.

The first test: memorizing and transcribing scripture.

The invigilator read the first half of a passage aloud in a booming voice. Candidates had to write down the second half and the linked sentences within the allotted time.

"'A gentleman attends to the root; when the root is established, the way arises'..."

The invigilator's voice echoed in the spacious hall.

Su Ming dipped his pen in ink and allowed it to fall upon the paper with flowing strokes. These scriptures were long since burnt into his memory; writing them down was instinct.

Beside him, Zhao Rui was like an ant on a hot pan. He scratched at his head and fidgeted, the pen hovering, pressing down then striking through. His face flushed crimson and a fine sheen of sweat covered his forehead.

Time passed bit by bit. From his seat on the platform, Zhou Wenhai took in the scene below. He noticed Zhao Rui's distress and barely furrowed his brow. Then his gaze returned to Su Ming.

That youth had maintained his posture from beginning to end, spine straight, expression focused, pen confident—no trace of panic.

As if this exam, which would determine the fate of so many, were nothing more than ordinary copying practice to him.

A hint of approval flashed in Zhou Wenhai's eyes.

One hour later, the bell rang and the first test ended.

Invigilators collected the papers and candidates were allowed a short break in the courtyard.

When Zhao Rui stepped out of the hall, he collapsed against a pillar, looking utterly defeated.

"It's over... completely over... There were three questions I couldn't write a single character for..."

Su Ming handed him a water pouch.

"Get ready for the next exam."

At that moment, a few well-dressed town students walked over. One of them spotted Su Ming and Zhao Rui and exaggerated his surprise.

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

Chapter 70: is a sure thing.

[1,457 words]

"Hey, isn't that the Zhou family's... relative? So, how did the exam go? Did you completely disgrace Director Zhou's reputation?"

Another person chimed in, "He's a relative of the Zhou family, after all. He probably got the inside scoop long ago. Something like scripture memorization and transcription is probably child's play for him, right?"

They sneered with mocking laughter, their eyes full of contempt.

Zhao Rui's face instantly flushed a deep purplish-red, a mixture of shame and anger. His lips trembled, but he couldn't utter a single word in rebuttal.

Su Ming turned around and calmly looked at those few students.

"In the examination hall, everyone relies on their own ability. Outside the hall, excessive talk is pointless."

His voice wasn't loud, but it was like a bucket of cold water, dousing the arrogance of those few. Looking into Su Ming's clear and utterly unperturbed eyes, they felt inexplicably unnerved and slunk away awkwardly.

Zhao Rui stared blankly at Su Ming's back, a tumult of mixed emotions churning in his heart.

The second exam: policy discussion.

Zhou Wenhai stepped aside, replaced by an elderly man with graying hair and beard and a gentle demeanor. He was Professor Liu of the County School.

Professor Liu walked to the front of the platform, his gaze sweeping gently over the crowd, his voice resonant:

"Today's policy discussion topic will not discuss classical meanings or literary flair. It asks only one thing—'Discussing solutions for summer floods and autumn droughts in the five southern townships of Qingzhou.'"

As soon as the topic was announced, the hall erupted in a wave of astonished murmurs.

Most of the students were dumbfounded. They had prepared for grand, abstract topics like "The Way of the Ruler" or "Benevolent Governance and Loving the People." Who would care about flood and drought disasters in some rural backwater?

Instantly, cries of despair rose. Many racked their brains but could only write empty statements like "The ruler should cultivate virtuous governance to move Heaven."

Zhao Rui's face turned ashen. He didn't even know where the five southern townships of Qingzhou were, let alone anything about summer floods and autumn droughts.

However, when Su Ming heard this topic, he inwardly let out a long sigh of relief.

He raised his head and looked at Professor Liu on the platform, a trace of a smile appearing in his eyes.

This exam question... it was practically tailor-made for him.

Xu Qing, I owe you one for this.

"Disciple, what are you waiting for? It's an open-book exam!" Lin Yu's voice grew excited. "Take the stuff from that County Records of Qingzhou, mix it with the farming experience your dad has been drilling into you for over a decade, mash it all together, and shove it in their faces! Let them see what real wisdom from the laboring masses looks like!"

Su Ming smiled.

He picked up his brush, almost without any hesitation.

Ink gathered at the tip of the brush, then transformed into lines of clear, forceful small regular script.

He didn't use any flowery rhetoric, getting straight to the heart of the problem from the very beginning—"The calamity of floods and droughts is not a natural disaster, but actually a disaster caused by neglected water conservancy."

Next, he cited records from the County Records of Qingzhou, analyzing in detail the topography, landforms, and river courses of the five southern townships. He pointed out that the main local rivers suffered from silted-up channels and poorly maintained, aged dikes, which were the root cause of disastrous flooding whenever heavy summer rains occurred.

Then, his writing took a turn, and he began proposing concrete solutions.

"First, dredging silt and reinforcing dikes should be undertaken. It is appropriate to conscript laborers during the winter slack season to deepen river channels, use the excavated silt to reinforce the banks on both sides, and extensively plant soil-stabilizing trees along the shores..."

"Second, new canals should be dug to divert water. At higher elevations, new diversion channels should be excavated to channel excess floodwater during the rainy season into low-lying wasteland, transforming water damage into water benefit. This can create water storage ponds for use during autumn droughts..."

"Third, adapt measures to local conditions. Rice can be planted during flood-prone periods; drought-tolerant crops like sorghum and beans can be switched to during dry periods. The government should exempt taxes for three years to encourage farmers to change crops..."

He wrote fluently, nearly a thousand characters. Every suggestion was well-reasoned and supported, specific down to which river should be dredged how, which location was suitable for building a pond, and he even provided preliminary estimates for the wages and food standards for conscripted laborers.

This essay didn't read like a student's policy discussion; it more closely resembled a detailed administrative report written by an experienced old official.

As he wrote the final character, the bell signaling the end of the exam precisely rang.

The next day. A side office in the County School.

Professor Liu sat alone before his desk. A stack of exam papers piled beside him was so high it seemed about to topple.

Outside the window, the sun was scorching, cicadas screeching, tearing at the air. He picked up a cup of long-cold tea broth, took a gulp, the astringency bitter on the back of his tongue. His fingertips pinched a paper from the stack, his gaze sweeping over it.

"The sage rules with effortless ease, and the world naturally finds peace..." He snorted, fingers applying force, flicking that paper aside onto a pile of discarded papers. The paper pile grew taller by one.

He picked up another. "Cultivate virtuous governance, move Heaven's heart..." He shook his head, wrist flicking, the paper floating down to land by his feet.

"Empty talk... nothing but empty talk!" A low growl rolled from his throat, like a trapped beast. He had read Sage's Books his whole life, taught students for decades, and in the end, these youngsters only had eyes for the clouds in the sky, blind to the mud and muck on the field ridges beneath their feet.

He took a breath, suppressing the irritable fire in his heart, his fingers reaching for the next paper. The paper surface was coarse, but the ink strokes carried a forceful presence.

"The calamity of floods and droughts is not a natural disaster, but actually a disaster caused by neglected water conservancy."

Professor Liu's hand, holding the teacup, paused in mid-air.

He set the tea bowl down, its base thudding against the wooden desk with a solid *dong*. He pulled that paper close, leaning forward, his nose almost brushing the ink.

His gaze devoured each line. Dredging silt, reinforcing dikes, digging canals, diverting water, changing crops, tax exemption... item by item, framework by framework, numbers and methods, solid as rammed earth.

His breathing tightened, fingers unconsciously tapping the desk in rhythm with his heartbeat.

"Dredging silt... using mud to reinforce dikes... planting soil-stabilizing trees... digging canals to channel water... storing water in ponds... exempting taxes for three years..."

His lips moved silently, reciting those phrases. This wasn't an essay; it was a prescription! A potent, aggressive prescription for that chronic ailment afflicting the five southern townships!

He abruptly flipped to the front of the paper, searching for the name.

Su Ming.

"Good!" A short, forceful sound burst from his throat. He grabbed the vermilion brush, its tip loaded with crimson ink, and heavily circled the top of the paper, the ink almost bleeding through. Next to it, he wrote two characters in critique—

"Top Grade!"

Just then, an academic supervisor silently approached him and whispered in a low voice, "Professor Liu, Second Young Master Zhou sent word through someone. He mentioned his nephew Zhao Rui also participated in this assessment and hopes you... will show him some extra consideration."

Professor Liu's brow instantly furrowed into a deep knot, the joy on his face vanishing completely.

What he detested most was precisely this kind of favor-seeking.

His face cold, he rummaged through the pile of papers resembling waste paper and fished out Zhao Rui's.

After just one glance, his expression grew even more unpleasant.

The entire text was filled with statements like "If we desire favorable weather, the ruler must be diligent in governance and love the people." It was devoid of substance, logically chaotic, and even had several wrong characters.

"Extra consideration? How?!" Professor Liu's anger flared. He almost wanted to directly mark this paper as "unqualified."

But in the end, he still had to consider the Zhou family's reputation. Zhou Wenhai was also watching from the side.

He took a deep breath, forcing that anger down.

He lifted his brush and, with great reluctance, wrote the two characters "Low Middle" at the end of that paper, then tossed it into the pile for the lowest grade.

After doing all this, as if having touched something filthy, he picked up Su Ming's paper and read it once more. Only then did the gloom on his face gradually disperse, replaced once again by an appreciative smile.

He must meet this young man named Su Ming.

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

Chapter 71: Drags the Zhou Family Down

[1,420 words]

The wooden stairs of the inn creaked and groaned with every step, each one sounding like a pained moan.

Zhao Rui was practically hanging off Su Ming's body, less walking and more being dragged back. His face was paler than the grass paper handed out during the exam, and he kept muttering the same phrase over and over.

"It's over, it's all over... That policy discussion... I wrote 'The sovereign should practice virtuous governance'... My father is definitely going to break my legs..."

Su Ming tossed him onto the hard bed board, which protested with a groan of its own under the weight.

He poured a bowl of cold water, took a sip himself first, then pushed it toward Zhao Rui.

"Have some water."

Zhao Rui didn't take it, just stared at Su Ming with a look like he was seeing a monster.

"How are you not worried at all? What did you write for your policy discussion? Don't tell me you wrote about virtuous governance too?"

Su Ming didn't answer. He walked to the window and pushed open the rickety wooden frame. The afternoon sunlight, mixed with the clamor of the street market, flooded in, carrying the smell of dust and heat waves.

He needed a moment of quiet.

"Disciple." Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind, tinged with a hint of mockery, "Ignore that kid. His father has probably already paved the way for him. Otherwise, why would he let his precious son come take the exam with you? Zhou Kang is likely pinching his nose right now, delivering favors to Professor Liu. Squeaking onto the list at the very bottom shouldn't be a problem."

Su Ming's heart stirred. "Master, you mean..."

"Unless something unexpected happens," Lin Yu lazily yawned, "your classmate here is about to become the prime example of 'getting close to people with a hundred million' in the County School. As for you, that policy discussion essay was practically copying the answer onto the examiner's face. That kid Xu Qing did you an enormous favor."

Su Ming fell silent. He had flipped through that copy of the *County Records of Qingzhou* no less than a hundred times. The hydrology and geography of the five

southern townships were already carved into his mind. Professor Liu setting this question did indeed feel like he had highlighted the key points for Su Ming in advance.

"So that means, the scholarly honor of Xiucan..." Su Ming's breathing grew slightly rapid.

"It's secured." Lin Yu's tone was casual, yet carried an undeniable certainty. "Your master has calculated. Not only is it secured, but your ranking won't be low either. Now, we can officially launch Plan B."

Su Ming's fist clenched quietly within his sleeve.

"Master, I understand." Suppressing the excitement in his heart, he turned around and spoke to Zhao Rui, who was lying like a corpse on the bed. "You rest first. I'm going out for a bit."

He needed to write letters, but he couldn't let Zhao Rui see. So, he took his ink, brush, paper, and inkstone and went to another inn to rent a room.

Inside the inn room, Su Ming closed the door.

He spread out the ink, brush, paper, and inkstone he had gotten on credit from Xu Qing on the table, his movements steady.

"Master, why didn't you let me write home before? With such a big incident happening in the village, my parents must be worried sick." This was something Su Ming had been holding back.

"Worried?" Lin Yu snorted. "What's the use of being worried? Disciple, you must remember, before you have the ability to solve a problem, transmitting anxiety itself is the biggest problem."

Inner thoughts: "Nonsense! Before, I wasn't sure you could pass the exam! If you had failed, the two of us would have had to flee overnight. The bit of soul power in my ring can't withstand that kind of strain. Writing a letter? That would be telling the enemy our escape route!"

"Your master asks you, if you had failed this exam, what should we have done?" Lin Yu's voice turned serious.

Su Ming answered without hesitation. "According to your contingency plan, leave the city overnight, take my family far away to another land, and live under assumed names."

"Correct. So what would writing that letter home have accomplished, besides making your parents share your fear and anxiety? Have them pack their bags early, waiting to be discovered by those hungry wolves and wiped out in one go?"

Lin Yu patiently guided him. "But now it's different. You are about to possess the 'Xiucal' protective talisman. Although this thing isn't particularly sturdy, within this tiny patch of land that is Qingshi Town, it can at least transform you from a fat sheep waiting to be slaughtered into a horned goat. If a wolf wants to eat you, it'll have to consider whether its teeth might get broken."

"Therefore, this letter can only be written now. It is no longer a death warrant transmitting panic, but a stabilizing pill for morale, a... declaration of war delivered with a blade."

Su Ming took a deep breath, picked up the brush, and dipped it fully into the thick ink.

"Master, please instruct."

"Prepare two letters." Lin Yu's thinking was crystal clear. "One is written to your Second Brother, Su Yang, for him to pass on to Zhao Dequan. This one is the 'public letter.' It must discuss strategy, discuss survival."

"The other is a 'private letter' meant only for your Second Brother's eyes. It must discuss bottom lines, discuss escape routes."

Su Ming nodded, focusing intently as he listened.

"On the public letter, first report that you are safe and sound, then say the exam result is ninety percent certain. Give them a stabilizing pill first."

"Then, you must use the harshest possible wording to warn Zhao Dequan! Tell him that the merchant surnamed Chen he attracted before, and the decision to expand the workshop, are tantamount to placing the entire Su Family Village on a fire to roast! The county yamen clerk's inquiry is not some honor; it's the butcher estimating how fat the pig is before the cleaver falls!"

Su Ming's brush tip paused on the paper. An ink blot spread, like a drop of thick blood.

"What should we do then?"

"Make him immediately stop all expansion plans!" Lin Yu's voice carried a chill. "Not only should he not expand, he can even find an excuse—like insufficient raw materials, technical bottlenecks—to temporarily reduce production, even shut down for half a month! Lower the heat! To the outside world, just claim that the previous paper was accidentally produced, its quality extremely unstable. In short, he must cry poverty, show weakness!"

Inner thoughts: "Playing dead is one of the core mysteries of the Way of Survival. As long as I die fast enough, danger can't catch up."

"Second, spend money to avert disaster. Have Zhao Dequan proactively consider giving away twenty percent of the dry shares in advance. One portion, through Zhao Chunlan—that is, Zhao Rui's paternal aunt—should be given to Zhou Kang. The pretext? Say it's to thank Second Young Master Zhou for his care regarding Zhao Rui's studies in town. The other portion, find a way to deliver it to that Clerk Sun at the county yamen. The pretext is the same: thanking the official for his guidance of the village's younger generation."

"Master," Su Ming's voice lowered, carrying a trace of barely perceptible cold severity, "Give it to Zhou Kang? That man is insatiably greedy and narrow-minded. Giving him money, wouldn't that be like making a pact with a tiger? If he thinks we are weak and easy to bully, he'll only become more aggressive, demanding endlessly."

"Disciple, you are still too young." Lin Yu laughed. "People like Zhou Wenhai, who pride themselves on being upright, value reputation and follow rules. Getting him to tear his face off with other forces in town for our little bit of profit would be very difficult. Unless you can bring him benefits far exceeding the risks. He is our first choice, but he cannot be the only choice."

"But Zhou Kang is different. He's greedy, has no bottom line, but precisely because of that, he's easier to control. Giving him money isn't to ask him for a favor; it's to buy a 'tiger skin.' Make him feel the paper-making workshop in Su Family Village is an industry under his protection. In the future, if any clueless people try to reach out their hands, he himself will jump out first to bite them. This is called driving away wolves by chasing a tiger. We aren't giving gifts to Zhou Kang to beg him to show mercy; we're dragging him into the water."

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[2,643 words]

"This..."

A flash of understanding crossed Su Ming's eyes, but was immediately covered by worry. "But what if his appetite is too big, and he thinks one share isn't enough, and instead demands even more directly..."

"That's why it's 'dry shares!'" Lin Yu cut him off. "Only dividends, no involvement in operations. Moreover, it must be delivered through Zhao Chunlan. Zhou Kang cares about his reputation and is self-important; he won't bargain directly with his own wife. He will only hint, and Zhao Dequan just needs to play dumb and deliver the money on time. This is called feeding the wolf meat but not letting it near the sheep pen."

"As for Clerk Sun, that's the 'rule money' fed to the government. Let him know we understand how things work. In the future, if there's any news, he might, for the sake of the silver, leak a hint in advance. This is called spending money to buy an informant."

Su Ming fell silent for a moment, his eyes flickering, clearly digesting Lin Yu's words at high speed. Finally, he nodded heavily, his brush no longer hesitating as he wrote down this strategy in detail.

"Third, technical secrecy. Have him completely separate the core paper-making processes, such as pulping, ingredient mixing, and paper lifting. Have the most reliable families in the village, like your Su family and the Zhao clan elders, each master one step. Establish a blood oath that no one is allowed to pry into the other steps. This way, even if someone is captured, they can't spill the complete formula."

"Finally, prepare a way out. Have Zhao Dequan secretly convert the silver earned by the workshop into grain and ready cash, and hide it in several locations. Prepare for unforeseen circumstances."

Su Ming wrote furiously, recording Lin Yu's words without missing a single character. Every word of this letter felt heavy, concerning the lives of the entire village.

After finishing the official letter, he changed to a new sheet of paper.

"Master, what about the private letter?"

"The private letter is simple." Lin Yu's tone softened. "Tell your second brother, if... I mean if, things reach the worst point, he should not care about anything—the workshop, silver, or land—they can all be abandoned."

"The first thing is to immediately take your entire family, along with those core notebooks on paper-making from our home, and run! Run to the place I specified for you in the letter, and wait for me to find you."

"Tell him, as long as people are alive and the technology remains, making a comeback is as easy as turning over a hand. If the workshop is gone, it can be rebuilt; if the village is gone... as long as family is together, anywhere can be home."

The tip of Su Ming's brush trembled slightly.

He could imagine how shocked and heavy-hearted his second brother, Su Yang, would be upon reading this letter.

He wrote slowly, pouring complex emotions into every character. He even drew a small mark at the end of the letter using the agreed-upon secret code. It was a symbol he and his second brother had agreed upon in their childhood, representing "highest alert."

After finishing the two letters, Su Ming felt utterly drained, fine beads of sweat appearing on his forehead.

He carefully folded the letters and sealed them in an envelope. Then, he folded the private letter into a tiny square and tucked it into a hidden layer within the official letter.

After doing all this, he let out a long sigh.

Everything that could be done, had been done.

The rest depended on fate, and on Zhao Dequan's resolve.

Early the next morning, Su Ming found the familiar porter.

He gave an extra ten copper coins and solemnly instructed, "Uncle, this letter is extremely urgent. You must deliver it personally into the hands of my second brother, Su Yang."

The porter weighed the coins in his hand and grinned. "Don't worry, young Su. I guarantee it will be delivered."

After sending off the letter, Su Ming's heart felt as if a heavy stone had been lifted, yet another one remained suspended.

The next few days were a long and anxious wait.

After his initial despair, Zhao Rui returned to his usual slovenly demeanor. His greatest daily pleasure was dragging Su Ming to the liveliest tea house in town to listen to storytelling, claiming it was to "relax his mind," but actually because he couldn't stand the bland food at the inn.

Su Ming did not refuse.

He needed to go to crowded places to listen for news from the outside.

In the tea house, the storyteller was at the most exciting part of his tale. With a slap of the gavel, the room erupted in cheers.

Zhao Rui grabbed a crab roe bun, eating with grease all over his mouth, mumbling indistinctly, "Su Ming, do you think... my dad will really break my leg?"

Su Ming's ears, however, caught the whispers from a neighboring table where several silk-robed merchants were sitting.

"Have you heard? The County Lieutenant is a bit short on funds lately and is looking everywhere for ways to make money."

"Who doesn't know that the Wei Family Cloth Store is the County Lieutenant's money bag. That Young Master Wei has been getting more and more arrogant recently."

Su Ming's gaze sharpened.

Young Master Wei... that young man who mocked them in the tea house.

It seemed the waters of Qingshi Town were even murkier than he had imagined.

Just then, a person dressed in Zhou family servant attire hurried into the tea house and walked straight to Su Ming's table.

"Are you Su Ming, Young Master Su?"

Su Ming put down his teacup. "I am."

The servant bowed. "My eldest young master requests your presence."

Zhou Yulin?

Su Ming and Zhao Rui exchanged a glance, both seeing surprise in each other's eyes.

The study in the Zhou Residence still carried that elegant scent of ink.

Zhou Yulin, dressed in a moon-white robe, seemed more composed than before. He personally poured a cup of tea for Su Ming, the rising steam blurring his gentle features.

"Brother Su, I trust you have been well since we last met."

"You are too kind, Brother Zhou." Su Ming picked up the teacup but did not drink.

Zhou Yulin smiled and got straight to the point. "Tomorrow, the County School will post the results."

Su Ming's heart skipped a beat.

"My father and Professor Liu jointly reviewed the policy discussion papers from this examination." Zhou Yulin looked at Su Ming, a strange light in his eyes. "My father said he hasn't seen an essay in many years... that so accurately targets current ills while being so bold and pragmatic."

He paused, then said word by word, "Brother Su, congratulations. For this County School assessment, you are... the top scorer."

Top scorer!

First place!

Even with Su Ming's steady temperament, hearing these two words made his mind go blank with a "buzz."

"Master..."

"Calm, calm! Standard procedure, all within your master's calculations!" Lin Yu's voice rang in his mind, carrying barely suppressed pride. "See? This is the power of knowledge! Your policy discussion essay was a dimensional strike against those fools who only know classical phrases!"

Lin Yu was both happy and worried. "Top scorer! This gives us more leverage in negotiations! Ah! But will this make us stand out too much and attract unwanted attention?"

Su Ming forcibly suppressed his surging emotions and cupped his hands towards Zhou Yulin. "Thank you for informing me, Brother Zhou. This is merely luck, entirely due to the favor of Professor Liu and Director Zhou."

His calmness and humility deepened the appreciation in Zhou Yulin's eyes.

"Brother Su is too modest. Fine essays are born of nature, occasionally captured by a skilled hand. Your talent deserves this honor." Zhou Yulin waved his hand, his expression turning serious. "The reason for inviting Brother Su today, besides offering early congratulations, is another matter. My father... wishes to see you."

Su Ming's heart tightened sharply, but his expression remained unchanged. "May I ask why the Director wishes to summon me?"

Zhou Yulin smiled slightly, but the smile seemed somewhat meaningful. "Brother Su need not be nervous. My father merely read your essay, felt moved, and wishes to have a chat with you."

"A chat"?

Su Ming's fingertips turned slightly cold. Zhou Wenhai wanting to see him was definitely not just to discuss scholarship!

Was it because he scored first? Or because... Zhou Kang had already noticed something, or, Zhou Wenhai had heard rumors about the Su Family Village paper-making workshop?

Lin Yu's voice rang rapidly in his mind. "Disciple! The main event is here! Remember, listen more, speak less. Before you understand Zhou Wenhai's intentions, do not easily

reveal our cards! Especially details about the workshop and our plans—not a single word!"

His inner thoughts: "This is terrible! Just finished dealing with the junior, and now the senior is personally entering the fray? Isn't this pace a bit too fast?!"

Su Ming took a deep breath and drank the now slightly cool tea in one gulp.

He raised his head, his gaze already restored to clarity and calmness.

"In that case, I dare not keep the Director waiting. Please lead the way, Brother Zhou."

Su Ming followed behind Zhou Yulin, walking steadily along the corridor leading to Zhou Wenhai's study. The bluestone path was cold, but his heart was even calmer than the stone.

"Disciple, listen carefully. Time is short. Zhou Wenhai is ten times more difficult to deal with than his son. His meeting with you is definitely not just to praise your essay." Lin Yu's voice rang rapidly in his mind, carrying an unprecedented seriousness.

"He must have already heard rumors, about Su Family Village, about paper-making. He might even have had Zhou Kang whispering in his ear or poisoning his mind. Even if he is solely devoted to the Sage's Books and hasn't heard the rumors, this meeting is also our chance to break the deadlock!"

Su Ming kept his eyes forward, silently responding in his heart. "Master, how should we respond?"

"Remember the strategy we analyzed? Now, use the first plan—drive the tiger to devour the wolf! This is the superior strategy, the one with the highest risk but also the greatest reward." Lin Yu spoke rapidly. "But you must never mention benefits directly; that's too vulgar and would make him look down on you. It needs packaging, packaged into something he cannot refuse!"

"How do we do that specifically?"

"Present a plan, not present profit!" Lin Yu said decisively. "In your capacity as the 'top scorer,' under the pretext of 'grateful for cultivation, willing to offer strategies for the hometown.' Frame the paper-making technique as a benevolent policy, a 'good governance measure to enrich the village and benefit the people!'"

"Benevolent policy?" Su Ming's heart stirred.

"Exactly!" Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of excitement from a successful calculation.

"Suggest that the County School or the local government take the lead, attaching Zhou Wenhai's name to it, and establish an 'officially supervised, privately operated' workshop

in Su Family Village. As for profits, part would subsidize the County School, part would be used for local public welfare, and the rest would go to the villagers. As for the Zhou family's 'management fee' or 'sponsorship fee,' they can come up with any name; naturally, they get a share, and a large one at that! The key is, the core technology must remain firmly in the hands of our own people. He only needs to collect money and lend his name!"

"Will this... really work?" Su Ming felt this move was quite bold.

"Hmph, for Zhou Wenhai, this is a pie falling from the sky! He gains a clean reputation, receives tangible benefits, and can genuinely produce an achievement, shutting up fools like Zhou Kang who only know how to grab money! Once his name is attached, if the Wei family, the County Lieutenant, or even Zhou Kang tries to reach out again, they'd be slapping Zhou Wenhai's face! This is called leveraging influence!" Lin Yu analyzed thoroughly. "Of course, this is the most ideal situation. If this old fox's appetite is too big or he's overly lofty, we have a backup plan."

"Backup plan?"

"Bluff! Golden cicada sheds its shell!" Lin Yu sneered. "If he hesitates or wants to swallow everything, you should appropriately show a bit of 'helplessness': some foreign merchants have already heard rumors and are willing to pay a high price to buy the technology, or have invited Su Family Village to relocate entirely to another place to set up a factory. The bonds of hometown affection are deep, it's hard to leave one's native soil, you find it truly difficult to decide, and so on... Put some pressure on him!"

"What if he remains unmoved, or even tries to use force?" Su Ming thought of the worst possibility.

"Then immediately activate the fourth plan, secret diversion!" Lin Yu's tone turned cold. "Hint that the technology cannot be easily replicated; away from Su Family Village's unique conditions and the people's hearts, it's just worthless paper. At worst, we can temporarily stop production and secretly relocate. Zhou Wenhai would get nothing and would have to bear the bad reputation of driving away talent and destroying good governance for nothing! He's a smart man; he'll calculate this cost."

"I understand, Master." Su Ming took a deep breath, running Lin Yu's words through his mind over and over again. How to speak and act at each step, with Lin Yu adding several key details and possible responses.

"Remember, disciple." Lin Yu finally instructed. "No matter how he probes, not a single word about core technology or specific profit shares can be revealed! Only paint the big picture, talk about the overall situation, describe the benefits!"

At that moment, Zhou Yulin stopped before a carved wooden door and said softly, "Brother Su, my father is waiting inside."

Su Ming raised his head, his gaze as calm as still water, giving Zhou Yulin a slight nod. "Thank you, Brother Zhou."

He straightened his robe, tucking away the slight excitement from hearing about being top scorer and all the strategizing deep beneath the calm cultivated by the Aura Concealment Art.

"Brother Su need not be reserved. My father is just a bit stern by nature, but he has always respected those with true learning." Zhou Yulin turned his head slightly, offering gentle reassurance.

Su Ming nodded, saying nothing.

His heart was beating a bit fast, not from nervousness, but from a mix of excitement and vigilance.

"Master, will this line of reasoning really work?" he silently asked in his heart.

"What's there to fear!" Lin Yu's voice rang in his mind, carrying a tone of exasperation. "You are now the top scorer, a potential stock! The high-performing asset Zhou Wenhai loves to invest in! We're not going to beg him; we're delivering achievements and silver to him! You need to project the confidence of a project leader!"

Lin Yu's inner thoughts, however, were wailing: "Heavens, this is the County School Director, a proper official. This kid Su Ming is only fourteen. If he says the wrong thing, will he be dragged out and beaten with the board? My remnant soul can't take this fright!"

Su Ming took a deep breath, suppressing the chaotic thoughts in his mind.

He could sense that although Zhou Yulin's words were polite, the inherent composure and sense of distance that came with being from an established family was always present.

The study door was slightly ajar.

Zhou Yulin stepped forward and gently knocked three times.

"Father, Su Ming is here."

"Enter."

A steady voice came from inside the room, not loud, but seeming to carry weight, striking the heart.

Zhou Yulin pushed the door open and made a "please" gesture.

Su Ming stepped inside.

A strong scent of ink mixed with the smell of aged wood assailed him.

The study was more austere than he had imagined. There were no luxurious decorations. All four walls were floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, crammed full with countless scrolls and volumes. The only light source came from a carved wooden window. The afternoon sunlight slanted in, casting a beam of light in the air where tiny specks of dust could be seen dancing.

Behind the writing desk sat a middle-aged man wearing a dark Confucian robe.

He was Zhou Wenhai.

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Chapter 73: The Pie is Too Big, Director Zhou Nearly Chokes

[2,556 words]

Zhou Wenhai's face was lean, his gaze sharp, his nose bridge high and straight, and his lips pressed into a serious, thin line. He wasn't looking at Su Ming; his eyes were fixed on an open scroll of a book.

As long as he remained motionless, the atmosphere in the entire study solidified.

Su Ming felt as if he had walked into a fierce tiger's den. The tiger didn't even bother to look up at him, yet an invisible pressure already enveloped his entire body.

"Disciple, steady! This is him establishing dominance!" Lin Yu urgently reminded him. "The more he acts like this, the more it shows he values you. Don't panic, stick to what we rehearsed!"

Su Ming steadied his mind, stepped forward three paces, and bowed in greeting.

"This student, Su Ming, pays his respects to Director."

His voice was not loud, but his enunciation was clear, sounding exceptionally distinct in the quiet study.

Zhou Wenhai's gaze finally lifted from the book scroll and settled on Su Ming.

What kind of eyes were these?

Deep, calm, like an ancient well, bottomless. Yet they also seemed capable of piercing through a person's heart.

Su Ming felt completely transparent from the inside out.

"No need for such formalities." Zhou Wenhai spoke, his tone even. "Yulin, fetch a seat for Su Ming."

"Yes."

Zhou Yulin brought over a round stool and placed it to the side of the desk.

Su Ming did not sit down immediately. Instead, he cupped his hands in salute again. "Thank you, Director."

He sat down, his back ramrod straight.

A trace of imperceptible approval flashed in Zhou Wenhai's eyes.

Neither servile nor overbearing, understanding propriety and observing decorum.

"The 'Verification Method of the Investigation of Things' you taught Yulin, he has told me all about it." Zhou Wenhai's fingers lightly tapped on the desktop, producing a steady, soft sound. "Using minute principles to glimpse the wonder of the Great Way. This method is excellent. Yulin has benefited greatly from it. For this matter, I must thank you."

Su Ming immediately stood up. "You honor me too much, Director. This student merely picked up scraps from others, a shallow insight gained by chance. Being able to exchange ideas with Brother Zhou is this student's honor."

"Master, how was that?"

"Not bad, not bad. Standard business flattery, basic operation. Keep it up."

Zhou Wenhai made a noncommittal "hmm" sound, then continued, "Besides this matter, there is another reason for summoning you today. Your policy discussion essay from the county exam, Professor Liu has also reviewed it."

He paused, seemingly observing Su Ming's reaction.

Su Ming's heart tightened.

"Professor Liu said your essay is the most pragmatic and boldest piece he has seen in his decades of teaching." A ripple of emotion finally entered Zhou Wenhai's tone. "He very much wants to meet you and ask you: where did you learn those methods for dredging silt, reinforcing dikes, and digging channels to divert water?"

Here it comes!

Su Ming knew the main topic had arrived.

"To receive such undeserved praise from Professor Liu fills this student with trepidation. This student comes from a farming family. Since childhood, I have listened to my father and brothers discuss agricultural matters. I have also been fortunate enough to read a few miscellaneous books. I merely haphazardly combined hearsay with dead theories from books, lacking any proper structure. I have made a fool of myself before you and Professor Liu."

These words were flawlessly crafted, both explaining the source of his knowledge and presenting himself as extremely humble.

Zhou Wenhai stared fixedly at him, the scrutiny in his eyes growing more intense.

A fourteen-year-old village youth, facing him, the Director of the County School, possessing such steady composure, such meticulous speech.

This absolutely could not be explained by mere "chance."

The atmosphere in the study grew heavy and tense once more.

Zhou Yulin, standing to the side, even felt a trace of pressure. He wanted to speak to ease the tension but was stopped by a glance from his father.

Su Ming knew this was his final opportunity.

If he waited any longer, the initiative would completely fall into Zhou Wenhai's hands.

He took a deep breath, as if having made some kind of resolution, and suddenly stepped forward, offering Zhou Wenhai a deep bow.

"Director!"

This action of his was abrupt and resolute, causing both Zhou Wenhai and Zhou Yulin to be momentarily stunned.

"Today, this student has the audacity to come forward. Besides paying respects and thanking you and Professor Liu for your undeserved favor, I also have a proposal I wish to present to you!"

Zhou Wenhai's eyebrows rose slightly.

"Oh? Let's hear it."

"What this student wrote in the policy discussion was all empty talk on paper." Su Ming raised his head, his gaze blazing as he looked directly at Zhou Wenhai. "But in this student's village, there is a real, tangible industry that might verify the words in my essay and contribute bricks and tiles to your policy of 'enriching the village and benefiting the people!'"

He emphasized the four words "enriching the village and benefiting the people" heavily.

Zhou Wenhai's pupils contracted almost imperceptibly.

He immediately understood: this youth had come prepared today.

"What industry?"

"Paper-making!" Su Ming declared with force. "In this student's village, we have accidentally obtained a method for improving paper-making. It can use ordinary bamboo, wood, and straw as materials to produce high-quality, low-cost paper. A workshop has already been built, employing dozens of households from the entire village. Last month, it already yielded modest profits."

"Oh?" Zhou Wenhai's body leaned forward slightly—a sign he was genuinely becoming interested. "High quality and low cost? How does it compare to the grass paper on the market?"

"Superior!" Su Ming's tone was full of confidence. "The paper is equal to the lowest grade of xuan paper: tough, absorbing ink without bleeding."

Zhou Wenhai's gaze suddenly sharpened.

"If this method can be promoted, the farmers of the five southern townships will no longer need to worry about their livelihood after the autumn harvest. The bamboo and wood covering the mountains and fields can all be exchanged for gleaming silver ingots. If one township becomes wealthy, then five townships can become wealthy. If five townships become wealthy, then the granaries of the entire Qingshi County can be filled!"

Su Ming's voice grew increasingly impassioned.

"Disciple, take it easy, don't get too excited. Be careful not to over-promise!" Lin Yu nervously reminded him.

Su Ming did not stop.

He knew that when painting a grand vision, you had to paint it big, paint it complete, paint it enticing!

"This student is insignificant, and the village workshop is merely small-scale. Recently, it has already attracted covetous glances from various quarters in the town. I fear it will be difficult to sustain long-term, and may even bring bloody disaster to Su Family Village." He shifted his tone, appropriately revealing a hint of difficulty and earnestness.

"This student has the audacity to earnestly request Director to step forward!"

"I ask you, in the name of the County School, to incorporate this workshop as a pilot project for 'officially supervised, privately operated.' The workshop would still be managed by the villagers. This student is willing to offer the improvement method, with the County School sending personnel to oversee the accounts."

"The profits from the workshop, after deducting villagers' wages and costs, can be divided into three portions."

"One portion will be submitted to the County School for public use, to subsidize impoverished students and repair school buildings."

"One portion will be retained in the village as public funds, for building bridges, paving roads, and constructing water conservancy projects."

"The final portion will belong to the villagers, distributed as dividends based on labor and shares."

He finished speaking in one breath. The entire study was so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

Zhou Yulin was utterly dumbfounded.

His mouth agape, he stared blankly at Su Ming as if seeing this village youth for the first time.

What a grand vision this was!

And what an astonishing move!

He was actually going to... offer up a unique secret method that could generate mountains of gold, just like that?

Zhou Wenhai did not speak.

He simply looked quietly at Su Ming, storms and thunder raging in those deep eyes.

He had lived half a lifetime, experienced the vicissitudes of the official world, and seen countless extraordinary people and strange events.

But he had never seen a youth like Su Ming.

This was no longer mere intelligence; this was monstrous!

This plan was interlocking, plugging almost every loophole he could think of, and perfectly scratching his itch.

Reputation?

Secured! The government taking the lead, benefiting the local area—this was a monumental political achievement! If word reached the ears of the prefect or even the provincial governor, it would be a brilliant stroke of merit.

Benefits?

Also secured! The County School would gain advantages, and he, as the Director, would naturally rise with the tide. Moreover, the four words "overseeing the accounts" held immense potential for maneuvering. That so-called "management fee" could be taken completely justifiably.

Most crucially, he would hardly have to pay any cost!

He only needed to nod his head, move his lips, and he could directly corral a mature, golden-egg-laying hen into his own courtyard.

And Su Ming and Su Family Village would obtain what they needed most—protection.

A golden banner, sturdy enough to block all jackals, tigers, and leopards!

"What a splendid 'officially supervised, privately operated'..."

After a long while, Zhou Wenhai slowly uttered these words, his voice carrying a trace of complex emotion.

He looked at the still somewhat frail youth before him and, for the first time, placed him on an equal footing with himself.

This was not a junior coming to seek help.

This was an equal partner coming to negotiate.

"Aren't you afraid that I will swallow your formula, your workshop, whole in one gulp?" Zhou Wenhai suddenly asked, a hint of chilling coldness entering his tone.

The temperature in the study seemed to drop several degrees instantly.

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

He knew this was the final test.

"Disciple! Hold firm! We're betting that he's a respectable man who won't have too ugly an appetite!"

Su Ming raised his head, meeting Zhou Wenhai's gaze. A somewhat youthful but incredibly sincere smile appeared on his face.

"This student is not afraid."

"Why not?"

"Because this student believes that you, Director, are a true scholar." Su Ming said, word by word. "What you seek is to leave your name in history, to benefit a region. The profits of a mere workshop are not worthy of your attention."

"This student also believes that a living Su Ming, who will constantly think of new ideas, is more useful to you than a dead formula that can only make paper."

"In the future, if this student is fortunate enough to pass the imperial examinations and become an official, I will never forget the nurturing kindness you have shown me today."

These words were three parts flattery, three parts confidence, and four parts a naked display of value.

I am betting on your magnanimity.

At the same time, I am telling you that my future is worth your investment.

Zhou Wenhai smiled. His face, which had been taut the entire time, broke into a genuine, heartfelt smile.

"Good!"

He stood up and walked over to Su Ming. "You, this student, I, Zhou Wenhai, accept! This matter, I agree to!"

He let go of the hand supporting Su Ming and also let out a long sigh of relief.

Zhou Wenhai sat back down behind the desk, his posture now completely different.

Before, it had been scrutiny, intimidation. Now, it was the ease of an elder looking at an appreciated junior.

"You, child, have great courage and a meticulous mind." Zhou Wenhai's gaze rested on Su Ming's face, carrying a hint of amusement. "I just wonder, where exactly do all these ingenious ideas in your belly come from?"

Su Ming's heart tightened, knowing this was a probe.

He bowed, his expression composed. "In reply, Director: read ten thousand books, travel ten thousand miles. This student has no opportunity to travel ten thousand miles, so I can only travel in spirit through books, observing and asking more in the countryside. Thinking too much always leads to some impractical wild fantasies."

"Wild fantasies?" Zhou Wenhai chuckled and shook his head. "If this is wild fantasy, then fifty percent of the scholars in the world wouldn't even know how to think."

He waved his hand, no longer pursuing the matter.

Everyone had their own secrets. Pushing too hard would be beneath him.

"It's getting late. You haven't eaten yet, have you?" Zhou Wenhai abruptly changed the subject.

Su Ming was taken aback and instinctively replied, "This student is not yet hungry."

"Not hungry, you still must eat." Zhou Wenhai stood up, his tone brooking no argument. "Today, you will have a simple meal here at home."

He looked at Zhou Wenhai's matter-of-fact expression and the equally stunned look on Zhou Yulin's face beside him.

Lin Yu cried out in his mind, "He's trying to tie you completely to the Zhou family's ship! One meal, one title, and tomorrow the whole of Qingshi Town will know that you, Su Ming, are his student, Zhou Wenhai!"

"Isn't that exactly what we wanted?" Su Ming responded inwardly.

"Yes, but it also means that from now on, your every move will represent the Zhou family's face! It will be much harder for you to remain a low-profile nobody and develop secretly!" Lin Yu wailed. "My grand undertaking of the Way of Survival! Cut down before it even began!"

Suppressing the turmoil in his heart, Su Ming offered Zhou Wenhai another deep bow.

"This student... obeys."

This single word "obeys" pleased Zhou Wenhai more than any previous words.

He nodded and led the way toward the door. "Yulin, go tell your mother to prepare an extra set of bowls and chopsticks. Tell her I've taken on a new student."

"Yes, Father!" Zhou Yulin's face was radiant with joy. He quickly walked to Su Ming's side, patted his shoulder, and said excitedly, "Junior Brother Su!"

This address of "Junior Brother Su" left Su Ming feeling somewhat dazed.

The changes of the world were truly marvelous.

The atmosphere in the dining hall became peculiar because of Su Ming's arrival once more.

Lady Liu had already received the news. A gentle, proper smile graced her face as she personally served dishes to Su Ming, inquiring warmly about his well-being. In her words, she already regarded him as a junior of the family.

Zhou Yulin was even more enthusiastic, constantly introducing dishes to Su Ming, clearly acting the part of a good senior brother.

Zhou Wenhai sat at the head of the table, speaking little, but whenever his gaze swept over Su Ming, it carried obvious appreciation.

This harmonious scene, however, felt like needles pricking the two people seated on the other side of the dining hall.

Zhou Kang and his wife, Zhao Chunlan, who was dressed up like a flower.

Zhou Kang's face was so gloomy it could drip water.

He couldn't understand it. Previously, he was just a poor kid lodging in the backyard. How had he, in the blink of an eye, become his elder brother's student?

This was even more absurd than that "Verification Method of the Investigation of Things"!

"Su Ming," Zhou Wenhai put down his chopsticks and spoke unhurriedly, "that policy discussion essay of yours, I have discussed it with Professor Liu."

The hall fell silent.

Everyone's gaze focused on him.

Zhou Kang even pricked up his ears. He wanted to hear what exactly this kid had written that could so enchant his elder brother.

"The thesis is lofty, the arguments solid. For someone your age to possess such insight is truly remarkable." Zhou Wenhai evaluated.

He paused, his gaze sweeping over the indignant Zhou Kang, and said mildly, "In this County School assessment, barring any unforeseen circumstances, you should be the top scorer."

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Chapter 74: Clinging to the Thick Thigh

[2,725 words]

Zhou Kang was completely beyond caring about decorum, his eyes wide as he stared at Su Ming as if looking at a monster.

"Eldest... Eldest Brother, you... what did you say? Top scorer? Him?"

He pointed at Su Ming, his finger trembling.

This country bumpkin, how old was he?

"Ahem!" Zhao Chunlan was also choking, her face flushed red as she coughed while looking at Su Ming with disbelief.

Zhou Wenhai's face darkened.

"Such undignified behavior, what kind of spectacle is this!"

The icy voice made Zhou Kang shiver, and he finally realized his impropriety. He hurriedly picked up a napkin to wipe his mouth, but those bloodshot eyes of his remained fixed on Su Ming, filled with shock, jealousy, and a trace of... fear.

Zhou Kang suddenly understood.

Eldest Brother was making an investment!

A fourteen-year-old County School top scorer, his future prospects were simply limitless!

At this moment, all his previous contempt, mockery, and disdain transformed into resounding slaps, striking his own face with brutal force.

The sting was searing.

Seeing this, Lady Liu quickly tried to smooth things over: "Oh my, look how excited Second Uncle is. This is a joyous occasion too. For Su Ming to achieve the top score brings glory to our Zhou family. Come, Su Ming, your teacher's wife toasts you with this cup."

She raised the fruit wine in her hand, smiling warmly.

Su Ming hastily stood up, picking up his own cup: "This student dares not accept such praise. It is entirely due to the guidance and support of my teacher and Professor Liu."

He drained the wine in his cup in one go, his posture kept extremely humble.

His calmness and modesty formed a stark contrast to Zhou Kang's loss of composure.

The look of satisfaction in Zhou Wenhai's eyes grew even deeper.

This meal, for Su Ming, tasted like chewing wax.

Although the dishes on the table were the most exquisite he had ever seen in his life, those few gazes that felt almost tangible made him feel as if sitting on pins and needles.

He finally waited until the dinner ended and immediately stood up to take his leave.

Zhou Wenhai nodded: "Yulin, escort your junior brother back."

"Yes, Father."

Zhou Yulin led Su Ming out of the dining hall, passing through the lantern-lit corridor.

The evening breeze dispersed the lingering smell of alcohol and the oppressive atmosphere from the dinner table, allowing Su Ming's taut nerves to relax.

"Junior Brother Su, please don't mind it, my second uncle... he's just like that," Zhou Yulin said with some apology.

"Senior Brother, you are too serious," Su Ming shook his head.

"From today onward, you are my father's student, and also my, Zhou Yulin's, junior brother," Zhou Yulin's tone became solemn. "In Qingshi Town, should any matter arise, you can always come to me."

He stopped walking and looked at Su Ming: "After the County School releases the results tomorrow, you can go and complete the enrollment paperwork. The County School has dedicated student dormitories. Though they are somewhat simple, they offer the advantage of quietness, and it will spare you from staying at the inn."

"Thank you for the arrangements, Senior Brother," Su Ming felt a warmth in his heart.

After seeing Su Ming to the main gate of the Zhou Residence and watching his figure disappear into the night, Zhou Yulin turned and went back inside.

He had just reached his room's doorway when a servant stopped him.

"Young Master, the Master asks you to come in."

Zhou Yulin understood and headed towards the study.

Zhou Wenhai was standing by the window, hands clasped behind his back, gazing at the night sky outside.

"Father."

"Yulin, why do you think I accepted Su Ming as my student today?" Zhou Wenhai did not turn around, his voice calm.

Zhou Yulin thought for a moment and replied: "Because his talent is outstanding. His policy discussion essay astonished everyone, and he is this year's top scorer, with a promising future. Father appreciates talent and is also forging a favorable connection for our Zhou family in advance."

"You are only half right," Zhou Wenhai turned around, his gaze profound.

"What I value is not his talent, nor that title of top scorer."

Zhou Yulin was stunned.

"What I value are the words he spoke when presenting the paper-making technique," Zhou Wenhai paced slowly. "He came to seek my protection. He clearly knows what he possesses, and he clearly knows what I need."

"He packaged a goose that lays golden eggs as a 'enrich the village and benefit the people' political achievement. He tied his own life and property to my, Zhou Wenhai's, official reputation and future prospects."

A strange light flickered in Zhou Wenhai's eyes: "This level of intellect, this strategic vision, this courage... these are not something an ordinary fourteen-year-old boy could possess. He is like a piece of uncut jade. He seems unremarkable now, but with a little polishing, he can reveal earth-shattering brilliance."

"What about the paper-making workshop..." Zhou Yulin was still somewhat puzzled.

"The workshop?" Zhou Wenhai laughed. "That bit of profit is beneath my notice. What I want is Su Ming's debt of gratitude! Today, I protect him under the name of teacher and student. If he soars to great heights in the future, this bond of goodwill will be the most precious asset of our Zhou family."

"Your second uncle only sees the petty profits before his eyes, so he will forever be stuck managing trivial matters within the inner household. You must learn to see the landscape ten, even twenty years from now."

"This Su Ming, you can develop a deep friendship with him, but do not try to control him. He is no ordinary creature confined to a pond. Having him as a friend is far better than having him as an enemy."

Zhou Yulin's heart was profoundly shaken. He bowed in acceptance of the teaching: "Your son... understands."

Meanwhile, Su Ming was walking back to the inn.

The night was deep, the streets sparsely populated, with only the lanterns of a few shops swaying in the wind.

Lin Yu's tone was full of anguish and frustration, "Disciple! Top scorer plus the Director's student! You are now like a firefly in the pitch-black night, impossible to hide! This seriously violates the core tenets of our 'Way of Survival!'"

"'Surviving' is not about hiding blindly," Su Ming's gaze seemed particularly bright in the night. "Sometimes, the greatest danger comes from the weakest position. We must first reach a relatively safe height before we can even talk about 'surviving'. Zhou Wenhai, this big tree, is our best protective talisman at this stage."

"You... you brat, now you're lecturing your master?" Lin Yu was speechless with anger, but then sighed, "Forget it, forget it. Being high-profile now is for the sake of longer-lasting low-profile later. This deal is risky, but the returns are indeed enormous."

"From now on, with Zhou Wenhai's protection, at least within this small territory of Qingshi County, no one will dare to move against you lightly. That Young Master Wei, and that Zhou Kang, will have to think twice."

"Disciple, remember, starting today, your new task is to be a good 'genius student'. Put all your energy on the surface, into studying. As for our own affairs, like cultivation, like the core technology of the workshop, hide them deeper, more secretly!"

"I understand, Master."

Su Ming pushed open the inn's creaky wooden door. A smell mixed with cheap lamp oil and damp wood assaulted his senses.

Zhao Rui was pacing anxiously in the room. As soon as he saw Su Ming, he immediately rushed over.

"How did it go? Why did Director Zhou want to see you? Did you meet my uncle? Did he scold me because I messed up the exam?"

He fired questions like a machine gun, his face written with anxiety.

Su Ming took off his outer garment and hung it on the back of the chair, his movements unhurried.

"Director Zhou wanted to chat with me about my essay, and because we talked well, he accepted me as his student. Your uncle didn't say anything," he poured a cup of water. "The results are posted tomorrow. Rest early."

Zhao Rui looked at Su Ming's calm face, his heart even more unsettled. This guy, how does he seem like nothing happened?

Su Ming ignored Zhao Rui's questioning and began meditating on his own.

The Aura Concealment Art slowly circulated, smoothing out the last ripple of emotion in his heart.

The next day, as dawn was just breaking, the long street in front of the County School was already packed with people.

Beneath the red wall where the results would be posted, candidates and their families craned their necks, the noise almost enough to lift the roofs off the entire street.

Zhao Rui was so nervous his palms were sweating. He kept standing on tiptoe to look inside, muttering under his breath, "Heaven bless, ancestors bless, I must make the list, I must make the list..."

Su Ming stood on the outskirts of the crowd, his expression serene.

The Aura Concealment Art naturally isolated him from the surrounding anxiety, as if he were an onlooker detached from the affair.

"It's out! It's out!"

Someone shouted, and the crowd instantly erupted.

A huge red list was pasted onto the wall by two academic supervisors working together. The two bold, flowing black characters at the very top were particularly eye-catching.

Top Scorer!

"Top scorer... Su Ming!" a literate candidate read out loud, his voice full of shock. "Place of origin, Qingzhou, Qingshi Town, Su Family Village!"

"Su Ming? Who's that? Never heard of him!"

"Su Family Village? Isn't that the poorest mountain gully south of the town?"

Discussions erupted. Countless gazes filled with surprise, doubt, jealousy, and curiosity began searching through the crowd.

Zhao Rui froze completely. He stared dumbly at the name at the very top of the red list, then turned his head to look at the calm Su Ming beside him, his mouth agape enough to fit an egg.

"You... you..." He stammered for a long time, unable to get a word out.

"Look! The last name!" someone in the crowd shouted again.

Zhao Rui jolted, forgetting about Su Ming for the moment, desperately craning his neck to look at the bottom of the list. At the very end of the densely packed names, he finally found those two familiar characters.

Zhao Rui.

"I made it! I made it!"

An immense wave of ecstasy surged to the top of his head. Zhao Rui was so excited he almost jumped. He grabbed Su Ming's arm and shook it vigorously, "Su Ming! We both made it! I made it! Hahahaha!"

The people around them cast strange looks, some envious, some disdainful.

"Let's go," Su Ming patted his hand, turned, and squeezed his way out of the crowd.

Zhao Rui's excitement hadn't subsided. His face flushed, he followed behind, chattering nonstop: "Let's go, let's go! We must celebrate! Let's go to a restaurant! Order the most expensive wine and dishes! My treat today!"

"A bowl of Yangchun noodles," Su Ming's reply was simple and direct.

"What?" Zhao Rui's voice rose in pitch. "The top scorer eats Yangchun noodles? Aren't you afraid of being laughed at if word gets out?"

"Peace of mind is enough. Why care about the opinions of others?" Su Ming kept walking without stopping. "After eating, I still need to pay a visit to Professor Liu."

Zhao Rui was left speechless. Looking at Su Ming's back, he finally deflated and grumbled, "Fine, fine, you call the shots."

In the end, the two found a clean noodle stall by the roadside.

After the steaming hot noodles went down, Zhao Rui's heart, which had been floating in mid-air, finally settled. He looked at Su Ming, who was eating his noodles unhurriedly across from him, his expression complex.

There was a time when this silent, rustic village boy who followed behind him had already reached a height he needed to look up to.

After finishing their noodles, as soon as they reached the entrance of Fu An Inn, they saw several figures waiting anxiously in front of the door.

At the front was Village Chief Zhao Dequan. Beside him stood Su Ming's father, Su Shan, and his second brother, Su Yang. Their coarse cloth clothes were covered in dust, their faces bearing the weariness of a long journey and an awkwardness that seemed out of place in this town.

The inn's shop assistant was leaning against the doorframe, waving his hand impatiently.

"I already said no rooms! You country bumpkins, hurry up and leave. Don't block our business!"

Su Shan's lips moved as if he wanted to say something, but he lowered his head again under the assistant's disdainful gaze. Su Yang clenched his fists tightly, shielding his father behind him, his dark face full of anger.

Zhao Dequan was putting on an apologetic smile, about to slip a few more copper coins over.

"Dad! Second Brother!" Su Ming hurried over.

"Xiao Ming!" Su Yang saw him, his eyes lighting up, his tense body instantly relaxing.

Su Shan also looked up, a trace of relief showing in his cloudy eyes.

Zhao Dequan, seeing Su Ming return with his own son, quickly stepped forward: "You're finally back!"

The shop assistant, seeing Su Ming and Zhao Rui, softened his expression slightly but still curled his lip: "So they're your relatives? Should have said so earlier. But there are still no rooms. Figure it out yourselves."

Zhao Rui, already feeling high-spirited from passing the exam, now seeing his father and Su Ming's family treated with such contempt, felt a surge of anger rush to his head.

He stepped forward, straightened his back, and lifted his chin high.

"Say 'no rooms' one more time?" He pointed at the assistant's nose, his voice sharp and loud. "Open your dog eyes and see clearly! My father is the Village Chief! My uncle is the County School Director Zhou's own brother! I, Zhao Rui, am a newly admitted student of this year's County School!"

The assistant was stunned for a moment, then sneered: "A student? The one at the bottom of the list? What's so great about that?"

"You!" Zhao Rui's face flushed red with anger.

He took a deep breath, suddenly grabbed Su Ming from behind him, and shouted with all his might: "He's great! See him? Su Ming! Su Ming from Su Family Village! The top scorer of this year's County School grand examination! Director Zhou Wenhai himself personally accepted him as a disciple! Now tell me, do you have a room or not?!"

This shout was like a thunderclap from a clear sky.

The entire alley seemed to fall silent for an instant.

The mockery on the inn assistant's face instantly froze, his gaze shifting from disdain, to shock, to terror.

Top scorer?

Director Zhou's disciple?

He felt his calves trembling.

But even more shocked than him was Zhao Dequan.

He stared dumbly at Su Ming, his mind buzzing, almost thinking he had misheard.

After receiving the letter, he had rushed over overnight, pondering all the way. The strategies Su Ming wrote about in the letter were too bold, too risky. Giving away dry

shares, proactively showing weakness—it was practically putting one's neck under the enemy's blade.

He had planned to come and properly advise this overambitious young man after arriving, to make him behave properly and not indulge in wishful thinking.

But now...

Top scorer?

The weight of this word crashed down on his heart like a mountain, smashing all his doubts, contempt, and calculations to dust.

A fourteen-year-old top scorer!

What this meant, he understood better than anyone!

It meant Su Ming was no longer a junior who needed his protection, but a towering tree that Su Family Village, and even their entire Zhao family, would need to rely on!

Zhao Dequan's back, without him even realizing it, bent slightly.

When he looked at Su Ming again, the look in his eyes had completely changed. It was a complex light mixed with awe, excitement, and a trace of obsequiousness.

"Good... good! Good!" Zhao Dequan was so excited his lips trembled. He grabbed Su Ming's hand, "Su Ming, you... you truly are the prodigy of our Su Family Village!"

Su Yang and Su Shan also snapped out of their immense shock.

Su Yang's eyes instantly reddened. He slapped Su Ming's shoulder hard, too excited to speak, just repeating over and over, "Good lad! Good lad!"

Su Shan turned his back, using his rough, bark-like hand to secretly wipe the corner of his eye. He had spent his whole life facing the soil with his back to the sky, never imagining his son could achieve such distinction.

"We have rooms! We have rooms! Honored guests, please come inside!" The assistant finally reacted, his face blooming with a chrysanthemum-like smile as he bowed and scraped, ushering them in. "There happen to be two upper rooms available upstairs! This humble one will tidy them up for you gentlemen right away!"

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Chapter 75: The Full Story

[2,783 words]

"Master! Honored Masters! This lowly one failed to recognize the great mountain before him! The best room! The top-tier Tianzi room at Fu An Inn has been reserved for distinguished guests all along!"

The shop assistant bent his waist at nearly a ninety-degree angle, his facial muscles contorted. The speed of his change in attitude left Zhao Rui utterly dumbfounded.

Zhao Dequan's mind was reeling. Pulled along by the assistant, his steps felt unsteady as he muttered, "Top scorer... top scorer..." Su Shan and Su Yang, father and son, felt as if they were walking on clouds.

Su Ming supported his father, his expression calm, yet inwardly alert. The title of top scorer was proving more dangerous than he had imagined.

"Disciple, the tendency of human hearts to fawn on the powerful and curry favor with the noble, today you have tasted its first flavor." Lin Yu's voice sounded in Su Ming's mind, steady yet carrying a hint of warning. "This is a common worldly phenomenon, not surprising, yet one must be vigilant. Fame is a double-edged sword; it can protect, but it can also invite disaster. From now on, you must be even more cautious in your words and actions. Do not become addicted to such empty, superficial honor."

Lin Yu inwardly wailed, "Ah, I wanted to lie low and develop discreetly! Forget it, forget it! Since we can't hide, then we can only tearfully cling to this thickest thigh!"

The inn's two best rooms were located at the innermost end of the second floor. Pushing open the window, one could see a small half of Qingshi Town's street scene. The rooms were clean and tidy, the tables and chairs polished to a shine, the bedding carrying the scent of sunshine. It was a world apart from the small room they had stayed in for so long. The assistant brought hot tea and snacks, bowing and scraping as he retreated, earnestly instructing them to call if they needed anything.

The door closed, shutting out the noise. The atmosphere inside the room, however, felt somewhat stagnant. Su Shan stood awkwardly, unsure where to put his hands. Su Yang circled the room once, running his hand along the edge of the wooden bed frame, his eyes full of novelty and joy. He walked over to Su Ming, pressed down firmly on his shoulder, his voice trembling, "Third Son, you... you really..."

"Yes." Su Ming nodded.

"Good! That's great!" Su Yang's eyes reddened, so excited he could only repeat these two words.

Zhao Dequan finally snapped out of the immense shock. He plopped down on a chair and gulped down a large mouthful of tea. He looked at Su Ming, his gaze completely transformed.

He suddenly remembered the strategies in Su Ming's letter. Before, he thought they were the wild ideas of a young man, a fool's talk. But now, a fourteen-year-old top scorer, Zhou Wenhai's student... those strategies suddenly seemed perfectly reasonable, even unfathomably profound.

"Zhao Rui," Su Ming suddenly spoke, looking at the smug-faced Zhao Rui, "take my father and Second Brother to the next room. Let them wash up and rest their feet. I have a few words to say with Uncle Zhao." Zhao Rui was taken aback. Looking at Su Ming's calm eyes, the boastful words stuck in his throat. He responded, "Uncle Su, Brother Yang, come on, I'll take you next door." Though Su Shan and Su Yang didn't understand, they still followed Zhao Rui out.

The door closed again, leaving only Su Ming and Zhao Dequan in the room. Zhao Dequan's heart inexplicably tightened. He felt he wasn't facing a half-grown child, but a meticulous, far-sighted schemer, a person of higher status.

"Uncle Zhao, please sit." Su Ming personally refilled his tea. Zhao Dequan was overwhelmed by the favor and hurriedly stood up, "This won't do, this won't do."

"You are my elder." Su Ming pushed the teacup in front of him and sat down opposite. "You read what I wrote in the letter, right?"

"Read it, all of it." Zhao Dequan sat down, his back ramrod straight.

"So, what do you think?" Su Ming's gaze rested calmly on his face. Fine sweat beaded on Zhao Dequan's forehead. He opened his mouth, his voice dry, "Su Ming, you... your ideas are too bold. Giving away shares of the workshop, and to the Zhou family and the county yamen people... isn't that inviting the wolf into the house? How can we just give away what we worked so hard to create..."

"Uncle Zhao," Su Ming interrupted him, "then do you think, as we are now, Su Family Village can still protect the workshop?"

Zhao Dequan was left speechless.

"The county yamen clerk's inquiry is not a good sign." Su Ming's voice was soft, yet each word struck like a hammer. "Today it's the clerk, tomorrow it might be the County Lieutenant, the day after, it could be powerful families from the prefecture. We are the

sheep, the workshop is the fat meat. Surrounded by a pack of wolves, what do you think our fate will be?"

Zhao Dequan's face gradually paled.

"What we're giving away are not shares, they are a ransom for our lives." Su Ming continued. "They are buying a protective talisman. I have already become Director Zhou's student, and I have settled this matter with him."

He explained the "officially supervised, privately operated" plan in its entirety: how to place the workshop under the County School's name, how to distribute the profits, how Zhou Wenhai would gain both reputation and tangible benefits from it.

Zhao Dequan listened, his heart pounding with fear, his eyes growing wider and wider. He realized this plan was far more meticulous than he had imagined, practically flawless!

"By placing the workshop under the official government's name, anyone who wants to reach out for it in the future isn't just opposing Su Family Village, they are opposing Director Zhou, opposing the County School! Opposing the County School, would the scholars inside agree? In this Qingshi Town, who would have the guts?"

"Director Zhou gains political achievement and reputation, the County School gains money and supplies, our village gains protection. All three parties win. That's the kind of business that can last!"

"As for the dry shares given to Zhou Kang and Clerk Sun, that's another layer of insurance. Director Zhou is a respectable man. There are some things he can't personally handle, but someone like Zhou Kang, once he gets the money, will treat the workshop as his own property. If some fool tries to snatch it, he'll be the first to jump out and bite. This is called driving away wolves with tigers."

Zhao Dequan listened, cold sweat streaming down his back. He considered himself shrewd, but compared to Su Ming's interlocking schemes, his own thoughts were like a three-year-old's play. "But... but Director Zhou, would he really do this for us..." Zhao Dequan still found it hard to believe.

Su Ming smiled. He stood up, walked to the window, and looked down at the bustling street below. "Uncle Zhao, do you think Director Zhou values our little paper-making workshop?" Zhao Dequan was stunned.

"What he values, is me." Su Ming's voice was not loud, but filled with undeniable confidence. "A fourteen-year-old top scorer, a student who can provide him with the political achievement of 'enriching the village and benefiting the people.' His protection of me today is an investment in my future. As long as I achieve something in the future,

this bond of gratitude will be far more valuable than a few hundred or thousand taels of silver."

"I... I understand." Zhao Dequan let out a long sigh, as if a heavy burden had been lifted from his shoulders. He stood up and gave Su Ming a deep, formal bow.

"Su Ming, from now on, the village's affairs, no, the future of our Su Family Village, depends entirely on you! You say how we should proceed, and that's how we'll proceed!" This bow came from genuine respect and admiration.

Su Ming quickly supported him, "Uncle Zhao, this won't do. I am young and inexperienced. Village affairs still rely on you and the other uncles to make decisions. I am merely outside, helping to scout the path." His humility made Zhao Dequan even more moved. "Good, good child."

"Disciple, you handled this matter well." Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of praise, but more so a reminder. "Using strength against strength is a method your master often used in the early years. You have glimpsed its threshold. But remember, Zhou Wenhai is not an easy person to deal with. Today he values your potential. If in the future your progress falls short of expectations, or if you touch upon his fundamental interests, this relationship may not remain solid. Your own strength is the true foundation for standing firm."

"Master, I understand." Su Ming responded in his heart. "The current crisis is not yet resolved."

"Speak!" Zhao Dequan immediately said.

"That merchant Chen who came to the village to buy paper, what exactly is his background?" Su Ming's gaze turned sharp. "You didn't elaborate in your letter. How did he find you?" Mentioning this, Zhao Dequan's expression turned grave. He carefully recalled, "It was the shop on West Street in town that sells needles, thread, and sundries. The owner, Manager Wang, introduced him."

"Manager Wang?"

"Yes." Zhao Dequan nodded. "About ten days after we last sold our paper to the sundries stall before the New Year, he sent someone to the village with a message. Said there was a big merchant from the north passing through Qingshi Town. He saw the paper in his shop, thought it was good, and wanted to buy in large quantities. Asked if we had more."

"I was also a bit cautious at the time." Zhao Dequan frowned. "I specifically went to town to ask Manager Wang about that merchant's background. Manager Wang said he was just a traveling merchant passing through, surnamed Chen, driving several large carts, seemed to be transporting leather goods south. Because the tarpaulin on his cart was

torn, he wanted to buy some sturdy paper to patch it up, to block wind and rain. He also said that Merchant Chen seemed quite generous and probably wasn't a bad person."

"When I heard that, I thought it was an opportunity. Our paper, doing small business in town is fine, but to sell for a good price, we need to rely on these merchants traveling north and south."

"So you went to meet him?" Su Ming asked.

"Met him." Zhao Dequan sighed. "In the backyard of Manager Wang's shop. That Merchant Chen was around forty, with a shrewd face, speaking with a northern accent. He looked at our paper, was indeed very satisfied, didn't bargain much, ordered a thousand sheets, and paid the silver on the spot."

"What else did he ask?" Su Ming pressed.

"He asked how far our village was from town, if the mountain road was easy to travel. Also asked if we could keep making this paper consistently." Zhao Dequan recalled. "I said the village was in the southern mountain valley, the road wasn't good, and the paper was also accidentally made when burning, sometimes good, sometimes bad. I was still being cautious at the time, didn't dare tell the whole truth."

"He also said he travels from the north about every three or four months. Next time he passes by, if he still needs it, he would come directly to the village to find me. For convenience, he also wanted to set up a collection point in the village, specifically for buying paper."

Hearing this, Su Ming's eyes turned completely cold. Patching windows? Blocking wind and rain? What merchant would use bamboo paper, which is more expensive than grass paper, to patch a cart window? How big a hole would that be? And wanting to set up a point in the village? This wasn't any merchant; this was a scout probing the way! His so-called "buying paper" was precisely to ascertain Su Family Village's situation, confirm the paper workshop's location and output! And that Manager Wang who sold needles and thread, he was either a fool or an accomplice!

"The problem lies with this Merchant Chen." Su Ming stated decisively.

Zhao Dequan was shocked into a cold sweat. "You mean... he's after our formula?"

"Most likely." Su Ming nodded. "Behind him, there must be a major force." Zhao Dequan's face lost all color, feeling as if he had just walked along the edge of a cliff.

"Then... then what should we do?" His voice trembled.

"Proceed according to our plan." Su Ming's eyes regained their calm. "It's easy to enjoy the shade under a big tree. As long as we become Director Zhou's 'officially supervised,

privately operated' pilot project, no matter who is behind him, anyone wanting to move against us will have to think twice."

"Tomorrow morning, you return to the village with my father and the others. The first thing is to stop the workshop as I said in the letter! Tell outsiders that there's a problem with the raw materials, the technique is unstable, we can't make good paper anymore."

"Second, prepare two copies of the 'dry shares' contract. One for Zhou Kang, one for Clerk Sun. Once I complete the procedures at the County School here, send them over immediately. The gifts must be sent quickly, proactively, to make them think we are sensible."

"Third, and most important, the core technology must be held in the hands of the most reliable people. It absolutely must not be leaked!"

Zhao Dequan nodded repeatedly, like a chick pecking at rice, committing Su Ming's words to heart. "You and my father and the others stay at the inn for the night, rest well, and leave tomorrow." Su Ming finally instructed. "I leave the village affairs to you."

"Don't worry!" Zhao Dequan stood up, his gaze firm. "Su Ming, you focus on studying in town! With me in the village, there won't be any chaos!"

After seeing Zhao Dequan off, Su Ming went to the next room. Su Shan and Su Yang had already washed up and changed into clean clothes, but they still seemed restrained. Zhao Rui was animatedly boasting to Su Yang about his "heroic" performance at the examination. Su Shan sat to the side, silently smoking his pipe tobacco, smoke swirling, obscuring his expression. Seeing Su Ming enter, the room quieted down.

"Father, Second Brother." Su Ming walked over. Su Yang grabbed him, looking him up and down, unable to suppress the joy on his face, "Third Son, you finished talking with Uncle Zhao? You... you really got first place?"

"Yes." Su Ming nodded.

"Good! That's wonderful!" Su Yang was so excited he didn't know what to say. He looked back at Su Shan, "Father, did you hear? Third Son got first!" Su Shan tapped his pipe, raised his clouded eyes, and gave Su Ming a deep look. Finally, he only exhaled a thick cloud of smoke, his voice hoarse, "...Good." That single word carried more weight than any speech. A warm feeling surged in Su Ming's heart. Knowing his father was not good with words, this "good" contained all his pride and relief.

"Father, Second Brother, you've had a hard journey. Rest well here tonight. Tomorrow morning, return to the village with Uncle Zhao." Su Ming said.

"What about you?" Su Yang quickly asked.

"I won't be returning for now." Su Ming said. "Tomorrow I need to handle the County School enrollment documents."

"The County School has dormitories. I'll eat and live there. As the top scorer, my tuition is fully waived, and I get a monthly subsidy for writing materials." Su Ming said lightly, not wanting his family to worry, hiding the perilous struggles behind it.

Hearing this, Su Yang and Su Shan finally felt at ease. In their simple understanding, being able to study at a government-run school without spending money was already an immense blessing.

The night grew late.

Su Shan and Su Yang lay on the soft bed, tossing and turning, unable to sleep.

The bed was too soft, the blankets too clean, everything felt like a dream.

Su Ming sat cross-legged on his own bed, circulating the Aura Concealment Art to calm the turbulent emotions of the day.

This time, he had not only successfully tied Zhou Wenhai to his chariot but also extracted the crucial clue from Zhao Dequan.

That mysterious Merchant Chen hung over Su Family Village like a shadow. He needed to quickly improve his own strength, whether in worldly power and position, or... real power.

"Master," he silently recited in his heart, "I feel that relying on Zhou Wenhai alone might not be enough."

"Naturally not enough." Lin Yu's voice sounded lazily. "But for now, Zhou Wenhai is our best shield. What you need to do is make good use of this shield, seize every moment, and develop discreetly!"

Su Ming gathered his thoughts and slowly sank into cultivation.

Outside the window, the lights of Qingshi Town also extinguished one by one.

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

Chapter 76: The prestige at the top of the table must be earned by oneself.

[2,895 words]

The next day, at the entrance of Fu An Inn.

A few sparrows chirped noisily under the eaves, and wisps of white steam rose from the bun shop at the mouth of the alley.

Su Shan and Su Yang had changed into the new cotton clothes Su Ming had specially bought for them yesterday. Though the material was ordinary, the clothes were clean and crisp. However, their bodies, accustomed to years of labor, felt constrained by the new garments, making them thoroughly uncomfortable.

Su Ming held two large bundles in his hands, passing them to his father and second brother.

"Father, Second Brother, take these back with you."

Su Shan took the bundle; it was surprisingly heavy. He couldn't help but ask, "Third Son, what is this..."

"Nothing of great value." Su Ming smiled, his tone relaxed. "I bought a few lengths of fine cotton cloth for mother and sister-in-law. The weather is turning cool soon; they can make some new clothes. For father, I got two jugs of strong liquor from the town's old, reputable 'Liu's Distillery'—it has a mellow taste. For eldest brother, I brought a new pair of kneepads; they'll make his fieldwork more comfortable."

"Third Son, what about your own food, clothing, and expenses here in town..." Su Yang's face was full of worry.

"I am now a student of the County School, and the top scorer at that." Su Ming smiled, trying to keep his tone light. "I'll eat and live at the school. Not only do I not have to pay, I'll receive a monthly stipend. This money is useless for me here; it would only be a burden."

Zhao Dequan stood to the side, watching this scene, his heart filled with countless emotions. He stepped forward and clasped his hands respectfully toward Su Shan. "Brother Su, you can rest easy. Su Ming is now the Literary Star of our Qingshi Town, Director Zhou's disciple. Who would dare neglect him? As for matters in the village, leave them to me. I guarantee everything for Su Ming will be handled properly!"

Su Ming nodded to him.

"Then I'll trouble you, Uncle Zhao."

After seeing the three of them off, the morning breeze brushed his face, carrying a hint of chill.

Zhao Rui walked out of the inn yawning, rubbing his eyes. "Finally gone, so early in the morning. Su Ming, let's hurry to the County School! I need to get my student status confirmed quickly. When I go back to the village later, let's see who dares look down on me!"

Seeing his eager and impatient expression, Su Ming nodded and turned to walk in the direction of the County School.

The Qingshi County School was located in the east of the town. Its vermilion gates were guarded by stone lions, exuding an aura of solemnity and dignity.

On the spirit screen wall at the entrance, the four characters "Literary Brilliance Shoots to the Stars" were carved with vigorous, sweeping strokes. Seeing them made Zhao Rui's heart surge with emotion, and he subconsciously straightened his back.

The two walked through the main gate, crossed a courtyard planted with pine and cypress trees, and saw a room with a plaque reading "Hall of Scholarly Affairs". Several students, like them, had come to complete their enrollment paperwork and were standing somewhat awkwardly in a line outside the door.

The person in charge of registration was an academic supervisor with a goatee, surnamed Qian. His eyelids drooped, and when he looked at people, it always seemed like he was peering through a crack in a door. His face was practically stamped with the words "by the book."

When it was Zhao Rui's turn, he cleared his throat, handed over his exam admission slip and household registration proof, and lifted his chin high.

"I, Zhao Rui, am here to enroll."

Supervisor Qian didn't even lift his eyelids. He took the documents and glanced at them.

"Zhao Rui... thirty-sixth place, lowest grade." His voice wasn't loud, but it clearly reached everyone's ears nearby. "Dormitory, Room D, the easternmost one. Monthly tuition is two taels of silver. Writing materials to be self-provided. Go pay the fee over there first."

A few stifled, amused glances came from the other students nearby.

Zhao Rui's face flushed bright red instantly, as if he had been publicly slapped.

"I... my uncle's father-in-law is Director Zhou..."

"Even Director Zhou's students must follow the rules." Supervisor Qian cut him off, pushing the documents aside, a hint of impatience in his tone. "Next."

Face burning red, Zhao Rui took his documents and stood to the side, so embarrassed he could practically dig a hole through his soles with his toes.

Su Ming stepped forward and handed over his own documents.

"Su Ming, here to enroll."

His voice was very calm.

Supervisor Qian still wore that lazy expression. He picked up the documents, and when his gaze fell on the two characters "Su Ming," he showed no reaction. But when he saw the annotation "top scorer" written in red ink after the name, his drooping eyelids twitched violently.

His hand, holding the brush, stopped in mid-air.

"You... are Su Ming?" Supervisor Qian looked up, looking at someone properly for the first time.

He saw a young, calm face and a pair of clear, unfathomable eyes. There wasn't a trace of the arrogance of youthful success on this young man. Instead, he was as serene as an ancient well.

"It is I." Su Ming nodded.

Supervisor Qian's attitude instantly did a complete one-eighty. The impatience on his face vanished without a trace, replaced by a somewhat stiff smile.

He stood up and personally retrieved a brand new set of documents from the cabinet.

"So it's Top Scorer Su. My apologies, my apologies." He changed to a new brush, dipped it fully in ink, and began filling out the forms with an almost reverent demeanor. "According to the school's rules, the top scorer's enrollment is exempt from all tuition fees. As for the dormitory... Room A, the best one. A separate small courtyard, very quiet."

As he wrote, he looked up and smiled. "The school also allocates a monthly subsidy of two taels of silver for writing materials to the top scorer. You may withdraw it anytime. If you need anything, just give the order."

The surrounding students were all dumbfounded.

The change in attitude before and after was like two completely different people.

Zhao Rui was utterly stunned. He looked at Su Ming, then at the bowing and scraping Supervisor Qian, his heart a turmoil of mixed feelings. He had thought that with his uncle's father-in-law's connections, he could swagger through the County School. He never expected they wouldn't give him any face.

And Su Ming, merely with the title of "top scorer," had obtained everything he had dreamed of.

This was the difference.

Lin Yu's internal monologue was dramatic: "Hehe, satisfying! Although it goes against the spirit of the Way of Survival, it feels pretty good to be this high-profile once in a while. No, no, must stay steady! This is sugar-coated cannon fire! It'll corrupt my disciple's pure heart dedicated to the Way of Survival!"

After completing the procedures, Supervisor Qian personally escorted the two to the door, his smile never fading.

"Top Scorer Su, take care. We'll be colleagues from now on. Please look after me."

Only after they had walked quite a distance did Zhao Rui finally let out a long sigh, his face full of indignation.

"What an ass! Looking down on people! Su Ming, did you see his face? Pisses me off!"

"His attitude doesn't depend on who we are, but on what we can bring him, or... what we can't." Su Ming said calmly.

Zhao Rui was momentarily stunned, not fully understanding.

Su Ming didn't explain further. He was just about to go check out his dormitory first when he looked up and saw a familiar figure.

Under the dense shade of the towering ancient locust tree, Xu Qing stood holding a somewhat worn book box, reading. He wore a faded blue long gown, his figure slender but standing ramrod straight.

"Brother Xu." Su Ming called out.

"I guessed you'd come today. Congratulations." Xu Qing's voice was sincere. "The title of top scorer is well-deserved."

"Just luck." Su Ming looked at him. "Thanks to that copy of the 'County Records of Qingzhou' you lent me, Brother Xu."

"A book is just a book. The one who can see things in the book is the person." Xu Qing shook his head. He glanced at Zhao Rui behind Su Ming, nodded politely, and said no more.

Zhao Rui, still in a bad mood from the earlier incident, also nodded and wandered off by himself to look at the school rules posted on the wall.

"My second brother and the others came yesterday." Su Ming lowered his voice. "There's been a problem in the village. The ingredient ratios for the new paper have gone wrong. I'm afraid... we can't make it for the time being."

A flicker of disappointment passed through Xu Qing's eyes, but it quickly returned to calmness.

He looked at Su Ming and said seriously, "Not being able to make it might be a good thing."

Su Ming's heart stirred.

"I've been frequenting various bookshops around town these past few days." Xu Qing's voice dropped even lower. "I've heard paper prices in the south are still rising. Quite a few people have been asking if some new paper has come out of Qingshi Town."

His words confirmed Su Ming's suspicions.

That "Merchant Chen" was indeed just the tip of the iceberg.

"I understand." Su Ming nodded gravely. "Thank you for the warning, Brother Xu."

"Between you and me, thanks are unnecessary." A faint smile appeared on Xu Qing's face. "You are now Director Zhou's disciple. Your status is different from before. You must be even more careful in your actions. Some people may not dare move against you openly, but you must guard against their underhanded methods." After saying this in a hushed tone, Xu Qing turned to leave.

"Brother Xu!" Su Ming called out to stop him. "I should have access to the County School's library. If there are any books you'd like to read, you can make a list for me."

"Alright."

"Disciple, this person is worth befriending." Lin Yu's voice held a note of approval. "Charcoal sent in snowy weather is far better than flowers added to brocade. The goodwill he shows you... on our path of 'survival,' a friend like this is more precious than a hundred Zhou Wenhais."

"I understand, Master." Su Ming responded in his heart.

By the time he had settled into his dormitory, it was already afternoon.

Room A lived up to its reputation. It was indeed a separate small courtyard with a stone table, stone stools, and a well inside. The room was divided into inner and outer sections, with a study and bedroom fully equipped. It was even better than the best room at Fu An Inn.

Following the prior arrangement, Su Ming went to pay a visit to Professor Liu.

Professor Liu's residence was in a secluded courtyard in the deepest part of the County School. The courtyard had no precious flowers or plants, only a few vegetable plots and a melon trellis, full of a rustic, pastoral atmosphere.

An old servant led Su Ming to the study.

Professor Liu was wearing reading glasses, bent over a huge map, marking something with a red brush.

Hearing footsteps, he looked up. Seeing it was Su Ming, a gentle smile appeared on his face.

"You're here? Sit."

He pointed to a wooden stool nearby.

Su Ming respectfully bowed. "Your student, Su Ming, pays his respects to Professor Liu."

"No need for such formality." Professor Liu took off his glasses and rubbed the space between his eyebrows. "I've read your policy discussion essay more than three times. It's very well written."

He paused, his gaze becoming sharp.

"But, it's all just armchair strategizing."

Su Ming's heart tightened. He knew the real test had arrived.

"This student is willing to hear the details."

"You said that dredging silt and reinforcing embankments requires conscripting laborers." Professor Liu walked up to him, his gaze intense. "I ask you, where will these laborers come from? During the winter slack season, the common people also need to rest and recuperate, repair their farming tools, and prepare for the spring plowing. Once the government issues an order, will they willingly put down their own work and go dig river mud for you?"

"You said, digging channels to divert water, turning water hazards into benefits. I ask you again, how many people's fields would a new channel need to pass through? Zhang's family's land is taken, Li's family's ancestral graves need to be moved. How will you resolve the disputes that arise from this? And where will the money come from?"

"You said, switch to drought-resistant crops, with the government exempting taxes for three years. It sounds benevolent, but have you considered that Qingzhou's annual tax quota is fixed? If the five southern townships are exempted, who will make up the shortfall? Should the people of other townships pay more, or should the County Magistrate dig into his own pocket?"

Professor Liu fired three questions in a row, each striking a vital point.

These problems were far beyond what a student who only read the Sage's Books could answer.

A fine sweat broke out on Su Ming's forehead.

"Disciple, don't panic!" Lin Yu's voice sounded promptly. "He's not trying to make things difficult for you; he's testing you! Testing whether you're just a bookish nerd who talks big! Throw out the things we discussed earlier!"

Su Ming took a deep breath, looked up, and met Professor Liu's scrutinizing gaze.

"The issues the Professor raises are indeed the crux of the matter. When writing the essay, this student also thought about them, but the space on paper was limited, preventing a detailed discussion."

He stood up and walked over to the map.

"Regarding the laborers. This student believes they should not be conscripted by force, but enticed by benefit."

"Enticed by benefit?" Professor Liu raised an eyebrow.

"Yes." Su Ming's finger pointed to the location of the five southern townships on the map. "The five southern townships are the poorest. The common people often have little to do in winter. If the government steps in, using work as relief. For those participating in the water conservancy construction, provide two full meals a day and pay twenty copper coins as wages. I believe there would be no shortage of volunteers."

"Twenty copper coins per day?" Professor Liu frowned. "Repairing a river channel would require at least several thousand laborers over several months. That's not a small sum of money."

"The money doesn't have to come entirely from the government." Su Ming's speech wasn't fast, but it was clear and logical. "We can mobilize local gentry and wealthy households to donate. If this succeeds, the ones who benefit the most are those with the most land. The government can grant them some honorary titles, like plaques for 'Charity and Good Deeds,' or reduce a portion of their commercial taxes as encouragement."

"Furthermore, the dredged river mud is excellent fertilizer. It can be sold to farmers at a discounted price, which can also offset part of the expenses."

The scrutiny in Professor Liu's eyes gradually turned to surprise.

Using work as relief, mobilizing the gentry, selling river mud... These methods sounded unrefined, but they exuded a wisdom born of the soil, extremely pragmatic.

"What about the land occupation issue, then?" Professor Liu pressed.

"The land occupation issue is most difficult in the aspect of 'fairness.'" Su Ming said. "This student believes we can establish a 'Land Survey Council' composed of government representatives, gentry representatives, and villagers whose land is affected. How the land is measured, how its value is calculated, and how compensation is determined should all be discussed by the council jointly and announced publicly to demonstrate credibility."

"As for compensation, it doesn't necessarily have to be money. We can use newly reclaimed wasteland, or the fishing rights, irrigation rights of newly built ponds as exchange. In short, we must make the common people feel they are not at a disadvantage, but gaining an advantage."

Professor Liu fell completely silent.

He looked at the young man before him, his mind in turmoil.

This Su Ming, where did he look like a fourteen-year-old child? His calculations, his insight into human nature, were even more shrewd than those old clerks who had muddled along in the county office for decades!

"As for the tax revenue shortfall..." Su Ming smiled slightly. "Professor, this account shouldn't be calculated only for the immediate present."

"Oh? How so?"

"If the water conservancy project in Qingshi Town succeeds, eliminating flood and drought worries, grain production will inevitably increase. After the three-year tax exemption, the taxes the government can collect will probably be more than double what they are now. This is called 'casting a long line to catch a big fish.' And..."

Su Ming's gaze returned to the map, his eyes becoming profound.

"This student believes the greatest benefit of this matter isn't in money or grain."

"Then what is it in?" Professor Liu's curiosity was completely piqued.

Su Ming said word by word, "In the hearts of the people."

"Tens of thousands of laborers, finding warmth and sustenance because of the government's policy. Countless farming households, spared from displacement because of the government's policy. The government's prestige can then penetrate every inch of land, every household in Qingshi Town. In the future, when government decrees are implemented, they will naturally proceed smoothly. That is the wealth beyond price."

The study fell silent.

Professor Liu looked at Su Ming. A previously unseen brilliance erupted from his aged, somewhat cloudy eyes.

"Good! Well said, 'in the hearts of the people!'"

He slapped his thigh forcefully, the smile on his face could no longer be contained, brimming with appreciation and delight.

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

Chapter 77: This Damn Top Scholar Halo

[2,440 words]

Professor Liu was so agitated he paced back and forth in his study, his graying beard trembling with each step.

He clutched Su Ming's policy discussion essay as if holding some priceless treasure.

"Good! Excellent! In my lifetime of teaching, I've seen mountains of beautiful, ornate essays, but you are the first one who can take the principles down to the fields and villages, and make the calculations resonate in people's hearts!"

He suddenly stopped, turned to look at Su Ming, his eyes gleaming with intensity.

"I will personally transcribe a copy of this essay of yours, attach my own commentary, and submit it to the Magistrate of Anyuan County! No, I'll also send a copy to the Assistant Magistrate and the Chief Clerk! Money, grain, water conservancy—they are the true experts!"

Anyuan County was the direct superior authority over Qingshi Town.

Su Ming's heart skipped a beat.

He had originally thought this essay would at most cause some ripples within the County School. He never expected Professor Liu planned to take it directly to the highest levels of the county government.

Professor Liu seemed to see through his thoughts, letting out a hearty laugh and patting his shoulder.

"Don't be afraid, lad! If the sky falls, this old man will hold it up for you!"

He made a rare joke, winking. "If the Magistrate truly adopts this strategy and relieves Qingshi Town of its decades-long suffering, I will fight tooth and nail to get you the chief credit!"

A surge of warmth rose from the depths of Su Ming's heart.

This wasn't just the satisfaction of having his work appreciated; it was a solid, reassuring feeling of being valued and protected.

He bowed deeply. "This student is unworthy of such praise. It is all thanks to the professor's guidance!"

"Disciple, steady, steady!" Lin Yu's voice frantically warned in his mind. "Don't get fooled into limping by a few sweet words from this old man! Greater credit means greater risk! You're being roasted over the fire right now! This seriously violates our core principle of 'surviving is victory'!"

Lin Yu inwardly wailed, "It's over, it's over, there's no hiding now. Before, you were a firefly in the dark night; now you're the noon sun, visible even to the blind. My retirement life, my low-key development, all ruined!"

Su Ming responded in his heart, "Master, given the circumstances..."

"Circumstances, my foot! Quickly think of a way to retract it! Say you were young and ignorant, talking nonsense, it shouldn't be taken seriously! Or... or say you suddenly contracted a severe illness and were delirious!" Lin Yu started offering terrible ideas, then immediately refuted himself. "No, no, that would be even more suspicious... Forget

it, forget it. Sometimes, the higher you stand, the stronger the wind, but you can also see farther and be safer!"

Although his verbal wailing continued, Lin Yu's voice, besides worry, held a trace of barely detectable pride. After all, this essay also had a share of his "remote guidance" credit. But this emotion was immediately suppressed by his greater "survival" anxiety.

Leaving Professor Liu's quiet courtyard, Su Ming walked on the County School's bluestone path with mixed feelings. There was the exhilaration of recognition, hidden worries about the future, and his master's ongoing "Way of Survival lectures" in his mind.

The afternoon sun filtered through layers of overlapping leaves, casting dappled light and shadow.

This feeling was novel and carried a hint of unreality.

Passing through the moon gate and skirting a bamboo grove, the small courtyard of the Room A dormitory came into view.

The courtyard gate was slightly ajar.

Su Ming pushed the door open and immediately saw the scene inside.

Zhao Rui was kicking the leg of a stone table with the tip of his foot, a look of disgust on his face, muttering curses.

"What a dump! My Room D is practically like our village's woodshed! Smells moldy, and the window leaks wind! Why do you get a small courtyard with a well!"

Seeing Su Ming return, he immediately rushed over as if finding someone to vent to.

"Su Ming, this isn't fair! My uncle is, after all, Director Zhou's own brother. Is this how they treat me? Playing favorites isn't supposed to be this blatant!"

The courtyard was small but very clean. A grapevine grew against the east wall, its vines already covering half the wall. To the west was an ancient bluestone well, its mouth covered in moss, emitting faint threads of cool air.

The main room was divided into inner and outer sections. The outer room was a study, fully equipped with the Four Treasures of the Study, a row of bookshelves against the wall. The inner room was the bedroom, with brand-new bedding.

A place where one could study and cultivate in peace.

"Hey! I'm talking to you!" Seeing Su Ming ignore him, Zhao Rui grew even more displeased.

"Then what do you think would be fair?" Su Ming set down his teacup, looking at him calmly.

"At the very least... at least give me a Room C!" Zhao Rui declared righteously.

"And then?" Su Ming asked.

"Then... then waive my monthly tuition gifts! I'm also a relative of the Zhou family!"

"Zhao Rui, what rank did you get in the exam?"

Zhao Rui's face instantly flushed red, his voice weakening. "La... last place, so what? I still passed!"

"Prestige is earned by oneself, not given by others." Su Ming stood up and patted his shoulder. "If you're not convinced, next time get the top scorer title. Then forget Room A, even if you wanted to tear the County School's roof off, Supervisor Qian would just smile and hand you a ladder."

Zhao Rui was choked into speechlessness for a long moment, his face turning purplish.

He looked at Su Ming's calm profile, feeling both angry and annoyed, yet utterly unable to refute him.

Just then, a few light coughs sounded at the courtyard gate.

"Ahem, this must be the current top scorer, Su, I presume?"

A somewhat frivolous voice rang out.

Su Ming and Zhao Rui turned to look simultaneously.

Three students stood at the courtyard gate, all wearing more luxurious silk robes than ordinary students, jade pendants hanging from their waists, folding fans in hand, faces full of playful mockery.

The leader was a young man around twenty, with fair skin and slightly upturned eyes, exuding an air of arrogance.

His name was Li Wenbo, an old-timer at the County School. It was said his father was a classmate of the Chief Clerk of Anyuan County. He always looked down on others and had gathered a group of well-off students around him.

"That is correct." Su Ming neither humbled nor arrogant, cupped his hands in greeting.

Li Wenbo's gaze swept over Su Ming, a trace of disdain curling at the corner of his mouth.

"We've long heard of Top Scorer Su's great talent. An essay titled 'On Solving Summer Floods and Autumn Droughts in the Five Southern Townships of Qingzhou' that shook heaven and earth, earning even Professor Liu's unstinting praise. We, your fellow students, have come specifically to pay our respects."

His words said "pay respects," but his eyes were full of provocation.

A pointy-faced, monkey-like student beside him immediately chimed in. "Yes, we're all very curious. What kind of essay could let a... genius from a mountain gully take first place in one fell swoop."

He emphasized the words "mountain gully" heavily.

"Disciple, trouble's here." Lin Yu's voice drawled lazily. "See? This is the downside of fame."

Su Ming understood in his heart.

He pulled back Zhao Rui, who wanted to rush forward and argue, and revealed an apologetic smile.

"Please forgive my laughable state, senior brothers."

His words made Zhao Rui freeze. Li Wenbo and his two companions were also stunned.

This kid, why doesn't he follow the usual script? Not only is he not angry, but he's also lowering his own status?

Li Wenbo felt like a punch he'd put all his strength into had landed on cotton, an indescribably uncomfortable feeling.

"My friend and I just came from the countryside, still carrying a whiff of earth." Su Ming continued with a smile. "I'm afraid it might offend you senior brothers. This courtyard is also small, truly nothing good to offer as hospitality. How about another day, after I've cleaned up properly, I'll come pay my respects to you senior brothers?"

His words were extremely humble, leaving no openings.

He acknowledged his "country bumpkin" identity, issued a dismissal, and gave the other party a way out.

Li Wenbo's expression shifted. He had originally wanted to seize the opportunity to provoke Su Ming into a poetry contest to publicly shame him. Who knew the other party was as slippery as an eel, refusing to take the bait?

"Ahem, Top Scorer Su is indeed modest." Li Wenbo forced a dry laugh, fanning himself. "We didn't come for tea. We merely heard Top Scorer Su's policy discussion was excellent, so surely your classics, poetry, and verse must also be extraordinary. The weather is nice today, why don't we emulate the ancients, hold a poetry gathering, and befriend each other through literature?"

Here it comes.

This was their real purpose.

The policy discussion matter was settled; they couldn't shake it. But if they could outdo Su Ming in poetry, they could still trample the "top scorer" halo underfoot, proving he was just a scheming "craftsman," not a true "literary man."

Zhao Rui grew anxious. He knew Su Ming's limits. He'd read for a few days in the village, how could he compose poetry?

"Poetry contest? How vulgar!" Zhao Rui stiffened his neck and shouted.

"Oh?" Li Wenbo raised an eyebrow. "Then what, in this brother's opinion, is not vulgar?"

Su Ming pressed down on Zhao Rui's shoulder, looked at Li Wenbo, and smiled slightly.

"Senior Brother Li is right. However, this student's learning is shallow, my mind empty. I truly cannot produce any good poetry or verse. I fear I would spoil the refined mood of you senior brothers."

He openly admitted his incompetence.

"This..." Li Wenbo was stumped again. All the mocking words he had prepared were stuck in his throat.

If the other party directly admits defeat, how can you force him? Forcing further would make you look like a bully picking on the weak, lacking grace.

"Su Ming, you!" Zhao Rui was so angry he saw stars.

"Disciple, well done!" Lin Yu cheered loudly in Su Ming's mind. "This is called 'strategic surrender'! What's face worth? Can you eat it? Protecting your life and developing steadily is the true path! Arguing with these little brats wastes time, wastes energy, and risks exposing your strength. All harm, no benefit!"

Li Wenbo's face turned pale then flushed. He felt like a clown.

One of the students behind him couldn't hold back, sneering, "I thought the top scorer had some real skill. Turns out it's just a silver spear tip—good-looking but useless!"

"Silence!"

A clear, sharp shout came from outside the courtyard gate.

Everyone turned to see Zhou Yulin, dressed in white, walking in with a stern face.

His icy gaze swept over Li Wenbo and his two companions.

"Li Wenbo, what are you doing here?"

Seeing Zhou Yulin, Li Wenbo's expression instantly changed, his arrogance shrinking by half.

Zhou Yulin was Director Zhou's eldest son, holding an exceptional status within the County School, far beyond what someone like him, relying on convoluted connections, could compare to.

"Zhou... Senior Brother Zhou." Li Wenbo hurriedly cupped his hands, forcing a smile. "We... we came to pay our respects to Top Scorer Su, hoping to exchange some scholarly views with him."

"Exchange?" Zhou Yulin gave a cold laugh. "From what I saw, it looked more like bullying the weak with your numbers."

His gaze fell on Su Ming, carrying a hint of inquiry.

Su Ming nodded to him, indicating he was fine.

Understanding, Zhou Yulin turned back to Li Wenbo. "Junior Brother Su is a student personally accepted by my father, and also my junior brother. He just entered the County School, weary from travel, and needs quiet rest. If you truly wish to exchange views, I'll keep you company another day."

The weight of these words was significant.

Fine beads of sweat appeared on Li Wenbo's forehead.

Exchange views with Zhou Yulin? He didn't have the guts for that.

"N... no, we wouldn't dare. Senior Brother Zhou misunderstands. We'll leave right now, right now."

Li Wenbo led his men away in disgrace, not even daring to utter a parting remark.

Quiet returned to the courtyard.

Zhou Yulin walked straight up to Su Ming, apologetically saying, "Junior Brother Su, you were wronged. In this County School, there are always some self-important fellows."

"You overstate it, senior brother." Su Ming shook his head. "It was merely a war of words, nothing significant."

"Your temperament is good." Zhou Yulin nodded. "Not fighting over momentary gains. However, you must also remember, you are Father's student. Sometimes, yielding doesn't bring peace, it only makes the other party push further."

"Thank you, senior brother."

"No need for formalities between fellow disciples." Zhou Yulin glanced around the courtyard. "If you lack anything here, make a list, and I'll have someone bring it."

"No need, this place is very good."

Seeing his insistence, Zhou Yulin said no more. After explaining a few more school rules, he took his leave.

As soon as he was gone, Zhao Rui immediately crowded up, his face full of confusion and indignation.

"Su Ming! Why did you surrender just now? If Senior Brother Zhou hadn't come, wouldn't you have been laughed to death?"

Su Ming looked at him and said calmly, "A war of words, what does winning achieve? Will it make them lose flesh, or make me gain flesh?"

"Then... then you still can't let them bully you like that!"

"What they wanted to see was me getting angry and humiliated, arguing with them. I just didn't let them have their way." Su Ming walked to the well, drew up a bucket of water. Water splashed, icy cold.

"They are flies, buzzing around you. If you swat at them, you only dirty your own hand. The best method is to close the window and let them buzz outside."

Zhao Rui nodded, somewhat comprehending.

"Disciple, not bad, not bad, very teachable!" Lin Yu said approvingly. "You've already grasped the essence of my 'Way of Survival'! However, that Zhou kid's reminder also

makes sense. Constantly yielding won't do. We must learn to show a little tooth when necessary, let them know this cotton ball of ours has iron inside!"

Su Ming poured the water into a wooden basin and began wiping the study's desk and chairs.

Zhao Rui watched for a while, found it boring, complained a few more times about his own shabby Room D, then left dejectedly.

Finally, only Su Ming remained in the courtyard.

He let out a long sigh of relief, feeling the whole world had quieted down.

He cleaned the entire courtyard inside and out, familiarizing himself with every corner.

When he wiped the rim of the ancient well, he suddenly stopped.

His palm could clearly feel, from the well mouth, threads of cool air far more concentrated than elsewhere were seeping out.

This coolness carried a peculiar... vitality.

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

[2,443 words]

Su Ming's heart stirred, his five senses becoming exceptionally sharp.

He leaned over to look into the well.

The well was very deep, pitch black, with the bottom invisible. He could only see a small patch of sky reflected on the water's surface.

He reached his hand into the well opening. That cool, vibrant feeling of vitality became even more pronounced.

"Master, this well..."

"Hmm?" Lin Yu's voice also carried a trace of curiosity. "Interesting. It seems this well water contains an extremely faint trace of spiritual energy."

"Spiritual energy?" Su Ming's spirit lifted.

"Yes, spiritual energy. Although it's so thin it's almost negligible, it's much denser than anywhere else in this courtyard." Lin Yu pondered. "No wonder this Room A is the best dormitory. It's probably not because the house is good, but because of this well."

"Disciple, try putting your hand in the water."

Following his master's words, Su Ming untied the wooden bucket from the well rope and slowly dipped his hand into the cold well water.

A cool sensation traveled from his fingertips, entering his meridians. It was indescribably comfortable.

Although that spiritual energy was so weak it was almost impossible to capture, the Aura Concealment Art was like a hungry beast smelling blood. It began spontaneously, greedily absorbing these faint, wispy strands of spiritual energy.

"Indeed!" Lin Yu also became excited. "This well probably connects to a tiny underground water vein, and that water vein just happens to pass through a place where spiritual energy gathers!"

"Although for a true cultivator, this amount of spiritual energy isn't even enough to fill the gaps between their teeth. But for a beginner like you, it's simply a heavenly blessing!"

"With this well, your cultivation speed for the Aura Concealment Art will increase by at least thirty percent! Moreover, drinking this well water long-term can subtly improve your physique!"

Su Ming's heart pounded wildly.

Truly, after searching far and wide with great difficulty, you find it effortlessly when you least expect it!

He had been worrying about lacking cultivation resources, yet he never expected such a treasure to be hidden right in his dormitory!

"Disciple, remember, this matter is known only to heaven, earth, you, and me! Absolutely must not let a third person know!" Lin Yu seriously warned. "From today onward, this well is our secret base! Outwardly, you must show a fanatical obsession with studying, putting all your energy on the surface. In secret, use this well water to cultivate fiercely for your master!"

"Yes, Master!"

Suppressing the wild joy in his heart, Su Ming calmly withdrew his hand.

He drew another bucket of water, carefully washed his face. The cool sensation seeped into his skin, sweeping away the fatigue accumulated over the past few days.

He thoroughly cleaned his new home, then went to the school's dining hall to collect his dinner.

The food was simple: one meat dish, one vegetable dish, one soup, with rice provided freely. Although the taste couldn't compare to the Zhou family's banquet, it was clean and hygienic.

After finishing the meal, the sky had completely darkened.

Night was as dark as ink, moonlight as pale as frost.

Su Ming declined invitations from several classmates who came to show goodwill for evening chats. He returned to his small courtyard and closed the gate.

He didn't light a lamp, instead going directly to the wellside, sitting cross-legged.

The Aura Concealment Art slowly circulated. He seemed to merge completely with the night.

Faint, wispy strands of cool spiritual energy rose from the well, inhaled into his body, flowing slowly along his meridians, nourishing his still-tender physique.

In the small courtyard of Room A, all was silent. Only the occasional ripples forming circles at the well opening shimmered with an ethereal glow under the moonlight.

Su Ming sat cross-legged by the well, eyes closed.

The Aura Concealment Art slowly circulated within his body, like a silent stream flowing through his limbs and bones. The faint strands of cool spiritual energy escaping from the well were greedily inhaled by him, becoming part of the stream, washing over his meridians.

These past few days, he attended lectures at the school during the day, discussing studies with classmates. At night, he closed his courtyard gate and tirelessly cultivated, relying on this treasure well.

He could clearly feel the changes in himself.

His five senses became increasingly sharp. At night, he could hear the night watchman's clapper sound from afar, could smell the fragrance of flowers from neighboring courtyards carried by the wind. His body also became much lighter. Running several laps around the County School in one breath only left him slightly winded.

The biggest change was still the Aura Concealment Art itself.

As the technique achieved minor mastery, he discovered that when walking on the road, if he wasn't deliberate, he was often overlooked. Several times, familiar students walked straight towards him, only startling when they got close, as if he hadn't existed moments before.

"Disciple, not bad, not bad." Lin Yu's lazy voice sounded in his mind. "This Aura Concealment Art can be considered mastered. The lower your presence, the longer you live. Remember, our goal is to be the stone by the roadside, not the uniquely shaped pine on the mountaintop."

Su Ming opened his eyes, exhaling a long, turbid breath.

The sense of fulfillment brought by cultivation gave him peace of mind.

In the following days, Su Ming's life formed a peculiar balance.

During the day, he was the most dazzling new star at the County School. His policy discussion essays were often publicly praised by Professor Liu, earning him a mixture of respect and envy from fellow students.

Under the night's cover, he was again the most inconspicuous shadow, silently absorbing the spiritual energy brought by that ancient well in his small courtyard.

Zhao Rui visited several times, each time full of grievances.

Sometimes complaining that the food in Room D was hard to swallow, other times lamenting that some academic supervisor had given him a disdainful look.

"Su Ming, when will this kind of life ever end!" Zhao Rui plopped down on a stone stool, his face full of worry. "I feel like I'll never pass the provincial exam in this lifetime."

Su Ming poured him a cup of well water.

"Then don't take it."

"Don't take it?" Zhao Rui jumped up. "If I don't, my father will definitely break my legs! Besides, if I don't pass the provincial exam, how can I become an official, how can I bring honor to my ancestors?"

Su Ming looked at him, speaking calmly. "Since you want to take it, talk less nonsense and read more books."

Zhao Rui was left speechless. He picked up the cup and drank the cold well water in one gulp, shivering.

"The water here really is delicious, sweeter than ours." He smacked his lips, circling the topic back again. "By the way, I heard Professor Liu is going to submit your policy discussion essay to the County Magistrate? When will there be news? If it really succeeds, you'll be the great hero of our Qingshi Town!"

His face was full of excitement, sharing in the glory.

Su Ming's heart also lifted slightly because of his words.

Yes, calculating the days, there should be a result by now.

However, what he waited for was a rejection document.

That afternoon, Su Ming was reviewing classics in his study when Professor Liu's old servant came looking for him, his expression somewhat grave.

"Top Scorer Su, the professor requests your presence."

Su Ming followed the old servant through the bamboo grove, arriving at that quiet courtyard.

Before even entering the study, he sensed an oppressive atmosphere.

Entering the study, he saw Professor Liu sitting stiffly before his desk, his face so gloomy it seemed water could drip from it. The desk usually covered with books and maps now held only a solitary document.

Seeing Su Ming enter, Professor Liu raised his eyes. His gaze was full of exhaustion and disappointment.

"Ah..."

A long sigh echoed in the quiet study.

Professor Liu didn't say much, merely pointing at the document on the desk with his finger.

It was an official document stamped with the bright red seal of the county government.

Su Ming stepped forward and picked up the document.

The core meaning was simple and clear: "The request is temporarily postponed, to be discussed later."

The reasons listed below made him feel as if he had fallen into an icy abyss.

"Government treasury is empty, unable to bear the cost."

"Conscripting laborers during winter leisure would likely disturb the people's peace."

"Occupying land and relocating graves easily causes incidents."

Every reason for rejection perfectly "confirmed" those difficult problems Professor Liu had raised when testing him initially.

But the county government's attitude wasn't to seek solutions, but to directly use these as excuses, pushing the entire matter aside.

The cold ink characters were like a basin of cold water poured over his head, instantly extinguishing the fire in Su Ming's heart.

His previously conceived plans—using work for relief, gentry donations, river silt sales, the Land Survey Council... all those intricately linked, clever calculations—appeared so pale and powerless before "temporarily postponed, to be discussed later."

They simply wouldn't give you a chance to implement anything.

"They didn't even read it carefully!"

Professor Liu's voice carried suppressed anger. He slammed a fist on the table, making the brushes in the brush holder jump.

"What empty treasury! The summer taxes collected after last autumn amounted to a full thirty thousand taels! Yet the county government's accounts only recorded less than twenty thousand taels! That missing ten thousand taels, who knows where they went! And now they tell me there's no money for water conservancy?"

"Disturb the people's peace? The people of Qingshi Town suffer floods or droughts every year. The people have long been unsettled! Giving them food to eat, giving them money to earn, would they be unwilling?"

"They're just afraid of trouble! Afraid of taking responsibility! Better to have one less matter than one more!"

The old professor trembled with anger. His usually gentle face was now flushed red, his eyes filled with deep helplessness.

Su Ming held that document, his hands and feet turning cold.

For the first time, he felt so directly that a seemingly perfect, nationally beneficial, people-benefiting plan was so utterly powerless before a rigid bureaucratic system and those invisible vested interests.

In his mind, Lin Yu's voice drifted up, carrying a trace of unsurprised mockery.

"See, disciple. This is why your master always tells you to 'survive' cautiously. You think you're on the first level, they're on the second, thinking about how to solve problems. Actually, they're not even on this dimension."

Lin Yu's internal monologue was now at full capacity: "Tsk tsk, young people, still too naive. Reasoning with these old foxes? They'll talk rules with you. Talking interests with them? They'll talk difficulties with you. Talking about the common people of the world with them? They'll tell you... next time, definitely! Unsolvable, purely unsolvable! But just right. Right now, disciple has obtained a top scorer identity, became Zhou Wenhai's student for the consequences of paper-making. If the policy discussion were implemented, who knows what karma it would attract, but it would definitely block some wealthy gentry's money-making paths."

Su Ming didn't speak, only silently placed that document back on the table.

Professor Liu vented for a while, gradually calming down.

Seeing Su Ming's dejected appearance, the anger in his eyes transformed into a trace of pity and guilt.

"Su Ming, today's matter, forgive my outburst."

He paused, his tone becoming earnest.

"You must also remember. In officialdom, doing things is difficult, accomplishing things is even harder. Having good strategies alone, without the authority to implement them or the means to maneuver, everything is empty talk."

"Your policy discussion, no matter how well written, is merely paper articles in their eyes. Disturbing their leisure means making enemies of them. Touching their silver is even more like taking their lives."

These words were more profound than any classics lesson at the County School.

Su Ming bowed respectfully. "This student... has been taught."

He truly had been taught.

This was the most vivid, yet also most brutal, lesson he had received since entering this world.

"But..."

Professor Liu's tone shifted, a glimmer of unyielding light rekindling in his eyes.

"Your policy discussion is not without value. At least, to me, it proves your ability, proves you're not just a bookworm who only knows classical phrases."

He picked up the rejected document, pointing at the words with his finger.

"Look here." Professor Liu's voice was very low. "The Assistant Magistrate, the Chief Clerk, the County Lieutenant. These esteemed officials didn't even leave a proper annotation, only drew a circle and wrote the character 'reviewed.' Do you know why?"

Su Ming focused his gaze, his heart stirring.

"They... simply don't care?"

"More than not caring." Professor Liu gave a cold laugh, the smile full of icy mockery. "They're waiting, waiting for the County Magistrate's attitude. If the County Magistrate says 'temporarily postpone,' they can't even be bothered to spend the effort to say one more word. This is called protecting oneself wisely, also called... accomplishing nothing."

"This document appears to be the County Magistrate's will alone, but in reality, it's the collective sentiment of the entire Anyuan County officialdom—don't bother me, don't give me extra work."

Professor Liu crumpled the document into a ball, casually tossing it into the paper basket in the corner. His movements were resolute, as if discarding a piece of garbage.

"So, Su Ming, remember." He turned, his old eyes fixed on Su Ming, unprecedentedly serious. "If you want to accomplish things, either you have the authority that forces them to listen, or you have the influence that compels them to comply. Other than that, all reasoning is empty talk."

"Today's matter is good for you." Professor Liu's tone softened. "It lets you see the depth of these waters earlier, preventing you from diving headfirst in the future, not knowing how you died. Moreover, it's not necessarily without any opportunity. All we can do now is wait. Wait for the County Magistrate to need this achievement, or wait for the next County Magistrate to see this policy discussion."

Lin Yu quipped: "Hear that, disciple? This old man is a sensible person! Translated: officialdom has risks, entering requires caution! Our 'Way of Survival' theory has gained another heavyweight supporter! Congratulations, congratulations!"

Su Ming took a deep breath, performing a grand, respectful bow to Professor Liu.

"This student understands."

This time, he truly understood.

Leaving Professor Liu's courtyard, it was already dusk.

The setting sun stretched his shadow very long, cast on the bluestone road, solitary and desolate.

He didn't return directly to his small courtyard, instead wandering aimlessly through the County School. The sound of reading aloud came from the classrooms. Students chased and played on the sports field. Everything was full of vibrant energy.

But all this seemed separated from him by an invisible membrane.

A sense of defeat surged like a tide, almost drowning him. For the first time, he discovered that the intelligence he took pride in, those calculations he thought were clever, were so fragile and laughable before real power.

"Master, am I very useless?" he asked softly.

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[2,560 words]

The ring fell silent for a moment.

"Disciple, your master asks you, a sapling growing on the edge of a cliff, what should it do?" Lin Yu's voice was very calm.

Su Ming was taken aback, instinctively replying, "Take root, strive to grow."

"And if the wind on the cliff is very strong, capable of snapping it at any moment?"

"Then... sink its roots deeper, grow sturdier, make itself able to withstand the wind."

"Exactly the principle." For the first time, Lin Yu's voice lacked its usual teasing tone, carrying instead a kind of serene power. "Right now, you are that sapling growing on the cliff's edge. The officialdom is that malevolent wind that can snap you at any moment. What you need to do now is not to compete with the wind over who is harder, but to close your door, sink your roots deep into this land, the deeper the better."

"Your policy discussion essay is the branch you wanted to extend. Now the wind is too strong, the branch was snapped off. It hurts, it's ugly. But as long as your roots remain, as long as you are still secretly growing, one day, you can grow into a towering tree. By then, forget a mere malevolent wind, even a raging storm, what can it do to you?"

Lin Yu secretly grumbled to himself, "Oh my goodness, to comfort this kid, I even pulled out my bottom-of-the-trunk soul-soothing chicken soup. Being a master is truly not easy, not only do I have to be a bodyguard, a teacher, but also moonlight as a psychological counselor. This wisp of a remnant soul, I've really worried myself sick over him!"

Su Ming stopped walking, standing under an ancient locust tree in the County School.

He raised his head, looking at the gnarled trunk and lush foliage. His master's words exploded in his mind like thunderclaps.

Yes.

Roots.

What were his roots?

The Aura Concealment Art, this body that was being quietly transformed by spiritual energy, and this unfathomable master in his mind.

These were the foundation of his existence and livelihood!

The policy discussion, the scholarly honor, these were merely external things. Only one's own strength was real and substantial, something no one could take away.

That sense of defeat that had almost swallowed him receded like an ebbing tide. In its place was an unprecedented clarity and resolve.

Su Ming turned around and strode towards the Jia-character courtyard.

His steps were steady, no longer carrying a trace of confusion.

Returning to the courtyard, the sky was already completely dark.

He didn't light a lamp, walking directly to the well, taking off his upper garment, drawing up a bucket of icy well water, and pouring it over his head from above.

The chill of the well water instantly enveloped his entire body, making him shiver. But what followed was a high degree of mental focus and clarity.

Su Ming sat down cross-legged, closing his eyes.

The Aura Concealment Art roared into operation, smoother and more urgent than ever before.

Su Ming seemed able to "see" wisps of cool spiritual energy seeping out from the well mouth, scrambling to drill into every pore of his, converging into his meridians, washing through his limbs and bones.

Just as Su Ming was cultivating diligently, within the ring, Lin Yu's soul body suddenly trembled.

Lin Yu immediately sank into internal vision.

That Spirit Gathering Array sustaining his existence was still operating with difficulty. But that hideous crack seemed... to have stopped expanding!

Not only that, the dim spiritual light around the crack had actually brightened by a sliver. The resentment and filth energy attached to it seemed to have been neutralized by something, becoming less active.

"It's the spiritual energy!" Lin Yu understood instantly.

Su Ming's day-and-night bitter cultivation these past few days had drawn a large amount of pure spiritual energy from this treasure well. This spiritual energy, using Su Ming's body as a transfer point, was partly absorbed by Su Ming, while another part nourished the ring!

And the spiritual energy transmitted to the ring through Su Ming's cultivation was purer than what the Spirit Gathering Array absorbed alone before. This pure spiritual energy was like good medicine, slowly repairing the Spirit Gathering Array eroded by resentment!

Although the repair speed was extremely slow, it was indeed improving! Moreover, Lin Yu seemed able to absorb this spiritual energy too.

Lin Yu thought to himself, "I can live again! Little ancestor, you are my savior! From today, drink this well water as much as you want, it's on me! If it's not enough, I'll figure out a way to dig more for you! You must work twice as hard for your master, see if you can repair this broken array sooner!"

At the same time, he couldn't help but wonder why the spiritual energy from the previous "landlords" was much more "abundant" than this rookie Su Ming's. Why didn't the Spirit Gathering Array convert their spiritual energy? Was it because the Spirit Gathering Array mutated with those six blood streaks after shattering? Or was it because this kid Su Ming was too much of a rookie to control the spiritual energy, causing it to be "stolen" by the ring?

Lin Yu was so excited he almost floated his soul body, but the voice transmitted to Su Ming's mind remained steady.

"Disciple, not bad, such progress in just a few days. But remember, guard against arrogance and impatience. The path of cultivation values persistence..."

Su Ming: "..."

Night receded, dawn's first light emerged.

Su Ming opened his eyes, a mouthful of turbid qi shot out like a white ribbon, dissipating in the cool morning air. The chill of the well water had long since retreated, a warm, flowing strength coursing through his limbs and bones.

A night of bitter cultivation had strengthened the qi sensation in his dantian by another fraction.

"Disciple, how do you feel?" Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of satisfaction.

"Spirit refreshed, unprecedentedly good." Su Ming stretched his muscles and bones, emitting soft cracking sounds.

"Naturally. Did you think drinking this spiritual well water was for nothing?" Lin Yu said smugly, "Last night your mind was agitated, coupled with defeat, it was the perfect opportunity for breaking and then establishing anew. The cultivation effect was twice the result for half the effort."

Lin Yu's mental abacus clicked loudly, "Hehe, the harder the disciple works, the faster my Spirit Gathering Array repairs. Go on, good disciple, for your master to linger on a few more years, absorb fiercely for your master!"

Su Ming stood up, finished washing up, and was just about to head to the dining hall when the courtyard gate was knocked.

The visitor was Zhao Rui, sporting two large dark circles under his eyes, his face full of utter despair.

"Su Ming, have you heard? Your policy discussion essay was rejected by the County Magistrate!" He shouted as soon as he entered, his voice full of indignation, "I heard people say the reason was the government treasury is empty! What a load of crap! Last month, Young Master Wei's family married off a daughter, just the banquet lasted three days! They have money for feasting and drinking, but no money to repair river embankments for the people?"

He was more agitated than Su Ming, the person involved.

Su Ming poured him a cup of the well water that had gone completely cold, saying nothing.

Zhao Rui took the water and drank it in one gulp, wiping his mouth, "How come you have no reaction at all? That was the top scorer's policy discussion! Just tossed into the wastepaper basket like that? Are these officials all blind?"

"Finished?" Su Ming asked.

"Huh?" Zhao Rui was stunned.

"If you're finished, go back and review your books." Su Ming picked up a scroll from the table and started reading on his own.

Zhao Rui looked at his calm profile, feeling like he'd punched cotton, half his pent-up anger instantly deflating. He opened his mouth, wanting to say something, but in the end could only mutter resentfully, "You, you're really a monster."

He left, crestfallen.

Su Ming's gaze lifted from the scroll, watching Zhao Rui's retreating back, his eyes calm.

Angry? Of course.

Disappointed? That too.

But these emotions, washed over by that bucket of icy well water and a night of cultivation last night, had long been scoured away and refined. What remained was only a clearer understanding.

Just then, the courtyard gate was knocked again.

This time, standing at the door was a servant from the Zhou residence, expression respectful.

"Top Scorer Su, Director Zhou requests your presence."

Su Ming's heart stirred. What was coming had finally arrived.

Stepping into Zhou Wenhai's study again, the atmosphere was completely different from the previous two times.

Gone was the intimidating pressure of the first meeting, and the solemnity of the master-disciple ceremony. Zhou Wenhai sat behind the desk, holding not a scroll, but a set of exquisite tea utensils, leisurely warming the cups.

The air was filled with a faint aroma of tea.

"Here? Sit." Zhou Wenhai pointed to the chair opposite.

Su Ming bowed and took his seat, his back still straight.

Zhou Wenhai pushed a cup of freshly brewed hot tea towards him. The tea liquor was clear yellow, its fragrance pure and cool.

"Try it, pre-rain Longjing."

"Thank you, teacher." Su Ming picked up the teacup but did not drink.

Zhou Wenhai glanced at him, put down the teapot, and slowly began, "The matter of your policy discussion, Professor Liu has told me everything."

His tone was very flat, as if discussing an insignificant trivial matter.

"Do you feel very disappointed, very angry?"

Su Ming was silent for a moment before replying, "This student... is just somewhat puzzled."

"Puzzled?" Zhou Wenhai smiled, a smile carrying a bit of self-mockery and the weariness of someone who had been through it all. "What's there to be puzzled about? Being content with the status quo, not seeking merit, but avoiding blame, is the normal state of being an official."

He picked up his own teacup, blowing on the steam.

"You think what you presented is a good plan benefiting the country and people. In their eyes, what you presented is endless trouble. Surveying, land acquisition, allocating manpower, managing funds and grain... which task doesn't consume mental energy? Which task doesn't offend people?"

"Do it well, the credit is the County Magistrate's. Something goes wrong, the blame falls on the people executing below. If it were you, would you be willing?"

These words were even more blunt and exposed than Professor Liu's.

Su Ming's heart sank.

"This student... thought too simply."

"It's not that you're simple, it's that you're not used to it yet." Zhou Wenhai took a sip of tea, his gaze distant, as if piercing through the study walls, seeing somewhere far away.

He suddenly said softly, "Back in the capital, for a sum of funds to repair palace walls, the Ministry of Revenue and the Ministry of Works could bicker for three years. A memorial, from submission to receiving a reply, going through the processes of the Six Ministries, would take forever. I've seen far more absurd reasons than this."

The capital?

Su Ming's heart shook violently.

Lin Yu's voice also exploded in his mind, "Disciple! Pay attention! This old guy is revealing his background! The capital! He's just a County School Director, how would he know the details of Six Ministries bickering in the capital? And he says it so casually and lightly!"

Lin Yu's soul body flickered with excitement, "Something's off, this Zhou Wenhai is definitely not right! He's not a simple local snake, he's probably retired from that dragon's pool and tiger's den of the capital! Goodness, this big tree of yours is even thicker and sturdier than your master imagined!"

Zhou Wenhai seemed to have just mentioned it in passing. After speaking, he put down his teacup, his gaze returning to Su Ming.

"So, having a policy discussion rejected is nothing. For you, it's actually a good thing."

"It lets you see in advance how deep these waters are, so you don't dive in headfirst, get tangled by weeds before you even see the direction."

He looked at Su Ming, his eyes becoming sharp.

"No matter how well you write an essay, it's still just an essay. What you need to learn is how to make your essay become words others have to listen to, things others have to do."

"This student will remember the teacher's instruction." Su Ming stood up, bowing deeply.

"Sit." Zhou Wenhai waved his hand, "Empty talk is useless. Your policy discussion, although rejected, I think your other idea is worth trying."

He changed the subject.

"That 'officially supervised, privately operated' paper-making workshop."

Su Ming's heart skipped a beat.

"You kid, you draw a big promise, and your guts are big enough too. Daring to drag the County School into the water, using it as a backer for your little workshop." Zhou Wenhai's tone carried a hint of amusement.

"This matter, I plan to arrange. From today, the Su Family Village paper-making workshop will be the County School's first pilot project under 'officially supervised, privately operated.'"

He took out a document already drafted from a drawer, stamped with the County School's official seal.

"On my side, I'll send an accountant named Wang. Nominally to oversee the accounts, actually, to keep an eye on things for the County School, and for me." Zhou Wenhai handed the document to Su Ming, "Just have him submit the County School's share of 'public funds' on time every month. As for other things, have him look less, ask less, interfere less."

The meaning couldn't be clearer.

This was giving Su Ming reassurance. What Zhou Wenhai wanted was the reputation, the political achievement of this "officially supervised, privately operated" model, and Su Ming's favor. As for the little bit of silver in the workshop, he didn't care for it and couldn't be bothered to reach for it.

"Those flies in town who smell blood and want to pounce, with the County School's banner blocking them, they should behave a bit more."

Su Ming took that weighty document, a hundred emotions swirling in his heart.

The failure of his policy discussion had shown him the cold, ruthless nature of power.

And Zhou Wenhai's current move showed him another side of power—protection.

"Thank you, teacher, for making this possible!"

"Don't thank me." Zhou Wenhai stood up, walking to the window, hands behind his back, "I'm investing. What I'm investing in is not your workshop, but your future, Su Ming."

"Don't let me down."

Leaving the Zhou residence, Su Ming had an extra document in his hand and an extra person by his side.

Accountant Wang was around forty, slightly plump, with a kind face, always wearing a beaming smile, like the Maitreya Buddha in a temple.

But those small eyes of his occasionally flashed with a shrewd light.

"Top Scorer Su, I'll be in your care from now on." Accountant Wang cupped his hands towards Su Ming, his posture very humble.

"Mr. Wang, you're too kind. I'll have to trouble you from now on." Su Ming returned the courtesy.

He knew this was someone sent by Zhou Wenhai, both a supervisor and a liaison officer.

Su Ming handed the already written letter, along with that document stamped with the official seal, to Accountant Wang.

"Mr. Wang, this is the village address and some arrangements. After you arrive, give this letter to Village Chief Zhao Dequan. He will understand."

"Of course, of course." Accountant Wang took the letter, carefully placing it in his robe, "Top Scorer Su, rest assured. Wang understands."

The two parted at the street corner. Accountant Wang hired a carriage and headed directly south towards Su Family Village.

Su Ming stood in place, watching the carriage disappear around the corner, letting out a long sigh.

The chess piece had been placed.

Next, it was up to the village on how to respond.

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

Chapter 80: The Dust Settles, Crisis in Su Family Village Temporarily Resolved

[2,861 words]

Su Family Village.

An unfamiliar carriage rolled up dust and stopped at the village entrance, immediately causing a stir. For this impoverished, isolated mountain village, a four-wheeled carriage

was a rare sight that only wealthy families in the town could possibly own. And any outsider could bring opportunity, or herald trouble.

Villagers working in the fields straightened their backs, women picking vegetables at their doorsteps stopped their hands, even children chasing and playing halted their steps, all looking curiously and with a touch of wariness toward that imposing carriage.

Upon hearing the news, Zhao Dequan's heart sank heavily. His first thought was: Trouble has arrived! Is it from those in town who are jealous of the paper-making workshop, or people behind that mysterious Merchant Chen? He jogged to the village entrance, forcing a cautious and humble smile onto his face, though his heart felt like a tightly drawn bowstring.

The carriage curtain was lifted, and a decently dressed, kindly-faced, slightly plump middle-aged man stepped down.

Zhao Dequan hurried forward to greet him, probing, "Sir, you are... looking for someone?"

The middle-aged man sized up the lean man before him, glanced at the nervous, plainly dressed villagers behind him, and maintained his gentle smile, not directly stating his purpose.

"May I ask, who is Zhao Dequan, Village Chief Zhao?"

"That's me, that's me." Zhao Dequan grew even more nervous inside.

Only then did the middle-aged man take a letter and a document stamped with a bright red official seal from his robe.

"I am surnamed Wang, entrusted by someone to deliver this letter and this document to Village Chief Zhao. You will understand upon reading them."

He handed over the letter from Su Ming and the official document.

Zhao Dequan took them. When he saw the bright red seal of the County School, his hands trembled slightly, and his hanging heart finally settled completely to the ground.

It's done!

It's really done!

He opened the letter and quickly scanned it. In the letter, Su Ming used concise language to clearly arrange the follow-up plan.

Reduce production, show weakness, share profits, maintain secrecy.

The sudden news momentarily stunned Zhao Dequan, followed by wild joy! So it wasn't trouble, but a massive backer actively coming to their doorstep!

The caution and humility on his face were instantly replaced by excitement and awe. He was about to bow deeply to Mr. Wang, his voice trembling uncontrollably, "So... so it's Mr. Wang from the County School! Ah! This old man is blind! I didn't know such an honored guest had arrived, my neglect! My neglect! You must be tired from the journey, so tired!"

The villagers behind him, though not fully understanding the specific meaning of the document, vaguely sensed from words like "County School," "official seal," and the Village Chief's suddenly respectful attitude that a big shot had arrived, and it was a tremendous piece of good news! Their gazes toward the carriage instantly shifted from wariness to curiosity and awe.

Only then did Mr. Wang smile and gesture to stop the bow, "Village Chief Zhao, no need for such courtesy. I am here on orders from Director Zhou to handle the workshop handover matters. Let's just follow official procedures."

Zhao Dequan carefully folded the letter paper and bowed deeply to Accountant Wang.

"Mr. Wang, I understand everything. You must be weary from the journey, please come rest in the village. We have prepared simple tea and humble fare."

Accountant Wang waved his hand with a smile, "No need for a meal. Director Zhou instructed to handle official business officially, without disturbing the village. I'll go check the workshop accounts first."

Zhao Dequan hurriedly led him toward the workshop.

The paper-making workshop in Su Family Village was more... rudimentary than Accountant Wang had imagined.

A few half-open thatched sheds, several large lime pits, and a row of wooden racks for drying paper were all there was.

The air was filled with a strange odor mixing lime and wet paper pulp.

In the workshop, only a dozen or so villagers were working, their movements listless, the whole scene looking desolate and quiet, far from the image of making a fortune daily he had envisioned.

Following prior instructions, Su Yang handed over a "specially prepared" account book.

Accountant Wang took the account book and casually flipped through a few pages.

The accounts were kept very simply, with income and expenditure clear at a glance. However, the daily output and profits were pitifully small.

"Recently... business hasn't been good?" Accountant Wang asked seemingly casually.

Zhao Dequan immediately "perfectly appropriately" showed a worried expression and sighed, "Ah, Mr. Wang, you don't know. Our little workshop relies entirely on that method Su Ming came up with by tinkering. It was good for a few days earlier, but once the news spread, several families in town grew jealous. They sent people to threaten us and demand the formula. How can our small arms twist the big legs? We had no choice but to stop for now, reduce output, to avoid bringing great disaster upon ourselves."

Zhao Dequan's words were half-truths, half-fabrications, sounding perfectly reasonable.

Accountant Wang nodded and didn't ask further.

His purpose for this trip wasn't to audit accounts in the first place.

Accountant Wang closed the account book and smiled, "It's fine. From today onward, this place bears the County School's nameplate. Those people likely won't dare act recklessly anymore. You just focus on running it well."

After inspecting the area, he prepared to take his leave.

Zhao Dequan hurriedly stuffed a pre-prepared, heavy cloth bag into his hand.

"Mr. Wang, this is a small token of respect from the workshop for the County School this month. It's not much, but please forward it on our behalf. Also, this bit is for your tea money. I sincerely hope you won't refuse."

Accountant Wang weighed the bag in his hand, the smile on his face becoming more genuine.

"Village Chief Zhao, you're too courteous." He said verbally, but his hand didn't push it away, "Since that's the case, I'll accept it graciously. Rest assured, I will report truthfully to Director Zhou."

Accountant Wang accepted the silver, boarded the carriage, and drove off under the awed gazes of the villagers.

After seeing off Accountant Wang, Zhao Dequan stood at the village entrance, watching the dust raised by the carriage gradually settle, his heart filled with mixed emotions. He touched the heavy document stamped with the County School's great seal in his robe, feeling as if in a dream.

A few days ago, he had been carrying another equally heavy, yet entirely different thing—two dry share contracts—running around with similar anxiety.

That was right after Su Ming had settled in at the County School and sent back a letter and contract samples with someone. The letter explained clearly: one copy for Clerk Sun in town, one copy for Second Young Master Zhou Kang of the Zhou residence.

He delivered Clerk Sun's copy one evening, timing it for when the clerk finished his duties, waiting in the quiet alley behind the county yamen's back gate.

Clerk Sun pretended ignorance while knowing full well, speaking in official jargon, but when his shrewd eyes scanned the contract and saw the words "half-percent dividend, paid quarterly" and the bright red village public seal, the smile on his face became a bit more genuine. He casually tucked the contract into his sleeve, only vaguely saying, "Village Chief Zhao, you're thoughtful. We're all working for the community. This clerk will naturally consider giving appropriate care," before walking off with his hands behind his back.

Zhao Dequan knew the first hurdle of "the King of Hell is easy to meet, but his little devils are hard to deal with" had been opened with silver.

Delivering the contract to Zhou Kang made his heart drum even louder. He steeled himself and went to the Zhou family's detached residence, only to be thoroughly snubbed as expected. Zhou Kang wore a long face, didn't even glance at the contract, his words dripping with sarcasm, complaining the dry share portion was too small, like tossing scraps to a beggar.

Zhao Dequan smiled apologetically at the time, but remembered Su Ming's instructions. Bowing deeply, he spoke with extreme humility, yet carefully embedded key phrases like "Director Zhou," "County School pilot project," "when the workshop scales up in the future, the tide lifts all boats" into his speech.

Listening, Zhou Kang's impatience gradually turned to suspicion and uncertainty. He stared fixedly at Zhao Dequan, as if trying to see from his face whether this was a threat or the truth.

Finally, as if thinking of something, he snorted coldly, grabbed the contract with extreme impatience, glanced at the words "half-percent dividend, paid quarterly," disgustedly threw it on the table, and spat out a single word from between his teeth: "Get out."

Zhao Dequan felt as if granted amnesty, hurriedly retreated, his back breaking out in a cold sweat. He knew Zhou Kang had tacitly consented, but had also noted down this humiliation. Yet, they had temporarily bought a protective talisman with silver.

Now, with the County School's official document in hand, looking back, Zhao Dequan more deeply appreciated the danger and brilliance of Su Ming's move. Without the

"officially supervised, privately operated" status from the County School pressing down, would Zhou Kang have been content with just those dry shares? He would have likely pounced long ago to devour the workshop whole.

He didn't dare delay, immediately taking Su Shan, carrying the pre-prepared first "dividend" silver calculated according to the contract terms, and rushed to town again without stopping. This time, he carried an extra bit of confidence in his robe—that County School document.

The first stop was a small official office in the west of town where Clerk Sun handled public affairs.

Clerk Sun was bent over his desk writing something. Seeing Zhao Dequan and Su Shan, his brow subconsciously furrowed, his tone carrying its usual impatience, "You again? What is it? Speak quickly, I'm busy here."

Zhao Dequan put on an apologetic smile, stepped forward, and unobtrusively placed a money pouch containing three taels of silver on the corner of the desk, slightly covering it with a document.

"Clerk Sun, nothing else, just came to report good news to you." Zhao Dequan lowered his voice, his face wearing just the right amount of respect and flattery, "Thanks to your blessing, the official document for our village's little workshop to become 'officially supervised, privately operated' by the County School arrived today. As per the contract agreement, this is the workshop's dry share dividend for this quarter. This is... a small token of our regard. The workshop just started, times are tough, it's not much, please don't disdain it. We'll still need to rely on your care in the future."

Clerk Sun extended two fingers, extremely naturally flicking the money pouch into a drawer, his movements smooth as if practiced countless times.

"Mmm, noted." Clerk Sun's tone softened considerably, even taking on a hint of "encouragement," "Since it's a pilot project personally designated by Director Zhou, then do it well, don't cause any trouble. On the town's side, if there's any movement, I will naturally... mmm, handle it appropriately."

"Yes! Yes! Thank you, Clerk Sun! Thank you, Clerk Sun!" Zhao Dequan repeatedly expressed gratitude, pulling Su Shan as they bowed and retreated.

Zhou Kang was already fuming inside because his eldest brother had turned that broken workshop into some "pilot project." When he saw Zhao Dequan and Su Shan arriving with gifts again, he didn't even give them a decent look.

"What is it?" He sat in his master's chair, holding a teacup, not even bothering to lift his eyelids.

Zhao Dequan smiled apologetically, placing an exquisite wooden box containing three taels of silver on the table, his movements somewhat more composed than last time.

"Second Young Master, as per the contract agreement, this is the workshop's dry share dividend for this quarter. According to the regulations above, we must deliver it to you on time."

Zhou Kang glanced sideways at the wooden box. Hearing the number "three taels," and thinking of his elder brother's actions, his anger flared. He snorted coldly, "Now you know to follow the rules?"

Zhao Dequan didn't get angry either, just bent his waist even lower, but his tone remained steady, "Second Young Master, please calm your anger. It's a small business, just starting, and these are troubled times, truly difficult. Fortunately, it now bears the County School's nameplate, with Director Zhou personally overseeing it. He sent Accountant Wang to audit the accounts, saying all future income and expenditure must be reported monthly."

He spoke as if to himself, yet also as if for Zhou Kang to hear, "Director Zhou said this 'officially supervised, privately operated' pilot is the first of its kind, must be done properly. In the future, when the workshop's path smooths out and its scale expands, the profits will naturally... hehe, the tide lifts all boats, the tide lifts all boats."

These words precisely pinched Zhou Kang's vital point. His hand holding the teacup froze mid-air.

Elder brother personally sent someone to manage the accounts? And "must be done properly"?

Even he, foolish as he was, understood this workshop couldn't be touched now. At least not openly! If he caused trouble now for the immediate profit of a few taels, ruining the "political achievement" his elder brother valued, the consequences...

Zhou Kang's face turned green then white, his fingers gripping the teacup turning pale. Finally, he spat out a few words through clenched teeth, "Understood. Leave the things. You may go."

Zhao Dequan and Su Shan exchanged a glance, the heavy stone in their hearts finally dropping. They bowed and retreated outside the door.

Only after walking out of the Zhou family's detached residence did Su Shan finally let out a long breath, the clothes on his back soaked through.

"Brother Dequan, this... really worked?"

"It worked!" Zhao Dequan's back truly straightened much more this time, his face showing unrestrained joy and admiration, "Xiao Ming's move is called using force against force! With Director Zhou, that great deity, standing guard, even if Zhou Kang is greedy, he has to swallow this anger! From now on, we'll just follow the contract, on the surface, no one owes anyone anything!"

He looked toward the town's direction, his heart filled with emotion. That silent, reticent mountain village youth had truly become a great tree capable of sheltering the entire village from wind and rain.

Night fell, in Su Ming's small courtyard.

He had just finished a round of cultivation when Zhao Rui rushed in like a gust of wind.

"Su Ming! My dad and your dad just came to the County School gate area to deliver a letter. They didn't call us because they were in a hurry to travel back. This is the letter my dad gave me for you!"

Zhao Rui stretched his neck nearby, his face full of curiosity and... a trace of barely noticeable envy and sourness.

Su Ming unfolded the letter, quickly read it, and a faint smile appeared on his face.

Everything was proceeding according to plan.

"My dad wrote you a letter? What's it about? Why didn't he write to me?" He fired off questions like a string of firecrackers, his tone carrying a bit of displeasure and grievance at being ignored. His dad came all the way to the County School and only brought a letter for Su Ming, didn't even see his own son?

Su Ming put away the letter paper, "Nothing major. Just that the workshop and home are both fine, telling us to focus on our studies." He didn't elaborate on the details about the County School document, Zhou Kang, or Clerk Sun. Some things, the less Zhao Rui knew, the better.

Hearing "nothing's wrong," Zhao Rui visibly relaxed, but hearing the four words "focus on your studies" seemed to poke a sore spot. Then he found an excuse and left the courtyard somewhat resentfully.

The courtyard grew quiet again.

Su Ming walked to the well, drew up a bucket of water, and leisurely washed his hands.

The cool well water flowing over his fingertips completely calmed his chaotic thoughts.

"Disciple, not bad. You're already playing these worldly power games quite skillfully." Lin Yu's voice sounded.

"All thanks to Master's excellent teaching." Su Ming replied calmly.

"Less flattery." Lin Yu snorted, "Remember, these are just techniques, external things. Your own strength is the true principle, the foundation. This well is your root. Don't get carried away by this small victory before your eyes."

Su Ming nodded. He raised his head, looking at the crescent moon reflected in the well.

The moonlight was cold and clear, the water surface deep and dark.

The matter of paper-making could finally be considered temporarily concluded.

Borrowing the great tree of Zhou Wenhai, using the name of "officially supervised, privately operated," they had finally covered up this hot potato.

Although hidden dangers weren't completely eliminated—Zhou Kang, Clerk Sun, and even that mysterious "Merchant Chen" could still become future troubles—at least, for now, it was temporarily framed within a relatively safe set of rules.

His gaze could finally break free from the invisible shackles of the mountain village behind him, leap over the blue-tiled roofs and flying eaves of the County School, and cast itself toward that vast, boundless unknown world.

Cultivation, and the bizarre and fantastical world of immortal cultivation Master spoke of... All of this converged into a brand-new journey, slowly unfolding before his eyes.

In this world, the only thing one can truly rely on is oneself.

He lifted the wooden bucket and poured another full bucket of ice-cold well water over his head.

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

Chapter 81: The Provincial Exam? You Gotta Be Kidding

[2,540 words]

In Courtyard Jia, all was silent.

Su Ming stood bare-chested, his muscle lines beginning to show their outline under the moonlight. He lifted the wooden bucket, and cold well water poured over his head from above, jolting his entire body with a shiver, every inch of his skin instantly tensing.

Su Ming sat cross-legged beside the well, closing his eyes as the "Aura Concealment Art" automatically circulated.

The cool spiritual energy dissipating from the well mouth seemed drawn by some invisible force, transforming into streams barely visible to the naked eye, scrambling to rush into his body.

Within his Dantian, that faint sensation of qi, like a candle flame in the wind, grew bit by bit under the nourishment of the spiritual energy, becoming stable and bright.

Although the crack on the Spirit Gathering Array still existed, the spiritual light around it was no longer dim; it even faintly showed signs of repair.

Lin Yu was overjoyed in his heart: "Suck it in! Suck it in hard for your master! You just focus on cultivating diligently, your master I... ahem, your master's safety depends entirely on you! Go for it, my good disciple!"

Verbally, however, his voice remained as unruffled as ever: "Disciple, not bad. Only with a mind as still as water can it contain a hundred rivers. This mental state of yours is very suitable for cultivation."

Days flowed by slowly in this strange rhythm of movement and stillness.

The summer cicadas' chirping grew from sparse to noisy, then gradually fell silent. The locust trees in the County School turned a deep green, casting dense, mottled shadows on the ground.

During the day, Su Ming was the most eye-catching presence in the County School.

But at night, after washing away the day's dust, this dazzling top scorer became the most inconspicuous shadow in Courtyard Jia.

Besides diligently cultivating by the well, Su Ming spent most of his spare time immersed in the County School's library.

The library was one of the oldest buildings in the County School, with two-story flying eaves and a wooden structure, emitting a unique scent that mixed aged books and timber.

The manager of the library was an old man surnamed Sun. He spent his days slumped over the counter napping, his frame dry and thin as if a gust of wind could blow him over, his presence even lower than Su Ming who practiced the "Aura Concealment Art."

Every time Su Ming entered, he would just cup his hands in salute to him, then plunge headfirst into the sea of books.

The books he read were varied.

From orthodox classics, histories, philosophies, and literary collections, to neglected local county records, geographical accounts of mountains and rivers, and collections of strange tales, he browsed them all one by one.

Relying on the memory far surpassing ordinary people brought by meditation, Su Ming could almost read ten lines at a glance and remember everything after seeing it once.

He was like a dry sponge, frantically absorbing information about this world.

"Master, still haven't found anything." At night, Su Ming spoke to Lin Yu in his mind, "All records about 'immortals' and 'gods' are vague and unclear, either attributed to ancient myths or dismissed as nonsense from ignorant country folk. Even the character for 'qi' mostly refers to solar terms or moral integrity, having nothing to do with cultivation."

"Normal." Lin Yu replied lazily, "If methods for cultivating immortality could be casually found in a county library, then this immortality would be far too worthless. This indicates two things."

"First, there is a huge chasm between mortals and cultivators; information is completely isolated. Second, the cultivators in this world are either extremely few in number or act with extreme discretion and secrecy."

Lin Yu mentally added: "Whichever it is, it's good news for us! The fewer enemies, the better; the deeper they hide, the better! Best if you're the only cultivator in the world, and we can just close our doors and cultivate in peace ourselves!"

"But disciple, have you noticed something interesting?" Lin Yu abruptly changed the subject.

"What?"

"Those county records and miscellaneous tales mention 'spirits,' 'fox demons,' and 'mountain ghosts' far more often than 'immortals.' And most have clear times, locations, and even constable investigation records."

Su Ming's heart stirred.

He recalled an old book called "Qingshi Records of Strange Tales" which recorded that thirty years ago, a woodcutter encountered a tiger in the northern mountains of the county town. That tiger actually spoke human words, scaring the woodcutter out of his wits. Later, the county office sent people to hunt it down, but only found a few huge claw marks in the mountains, with no further trace.

At the time, he had dismissed it as a supernatural story and laughed it off.

"Master, you mean..."

"Immortal traces are hard to find, but demon traces can be followed." Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of patient guidance, "Sometimes, to find the wolf, you have to first follow the sheep's footprints."

This discovery made Su Ming adjust his direction. He no longer stubbornly searched for direct terms like "immortal gates" or "Daoist methods," instead systematically organizing the clues within those supernatural tales and miscellaneous records.

One afternoon, Su Ming came to the library again.

As soon as he stepped inside, that familiar scent of aged books washed over him. Sunlight filtered through the carved wooden windows, pulling beams of light through the air, countless tiny dust motes dancing within them.

Manager Sun was still slumped over the counter, emitting soft snores.

Su Ming walked quietly to the remote corner on the second floor, where various county records and miscellaneous journals were stored.

The autumn wind gradually rose, yellowing the leaves of the parasol trees in the County School.

In Zhou Wenhai's study, the fragrance of tea wafted.

He looked at the two students opposite him, a satisfied smile on his face. One was his biological son Zhou Yulin, who had shed some of his youthful immaturity, becoming increasingly steady. The other was Su Ming, the top scorer he had personally selected, his sharpness now internalized, but his gaze growing ever more profound.

"Su Ming, it has been nearly half a year since you entered the school. Your progress in classical interpretation and policy discussions has been substantial." Zhou Wenhai set down his teacup, speaking unhurriedly.

"In one more month, it will be the triennial Provincial Examination. I have already registered both of you at the Prefectural School."

He looked at the two of them, his tone turning solemn: "I intend for both of you to go to Anyuan Prefecture together to participate in this Provincial Examination."

Zhou Yulin's face instantly lit up with excitement.

The Provincial Examination!

That was the first hurdle for all scholars to leap over the dragon gate! Once you passed, you became a Provincial Graduate, gaining the qualification to become an official. Your status and position would be worlds apart from before!

"Thank you, Father!" He stood up excitedly, bowing deeply to Zhou Wenhai.

He turned his head, vigorously patting Su Ming's shoulder, the joy in his eyes impossible to hide: "Junior Brother Su! Excellent! With your talent, you're sure to make a stunning impression in this Provincial Examination, bringing glory to our Qingshi County School!"

In an instant, two gazes focused on Su Ming.

Zhou Wenhai's expectation, Zhou Yulin's eagerness, all felt like invisible pressure enveloping him.

Su Ming's heart sank.

He lowered his eyelids, concealing the turmoil within, and bowed in salute: "Teacher, Senior Brother... regarding this matter, could you allow this student... to consider it for a moment?"

The atmosphere in the study instantly froze.

The smile on Zhou Yulin's face stiffened. He couldn't believe his ears.

What an immense honor this was! Su Ming actually wanted to "consider" it?

Zhou Wenhai's brows also furrowed imperceptibly. He didn't speak, just quietly looked at Su Ming, waiting for his explanation.

Returning to Courtyard Jia, Su Ming closed the courtyard gate, his expression grave.

"Master, what do you think?"

"We absolutely cannot go now!" Lin Yu's voice was filled with resistance.

His internal monologue was already in turmoil: "Provincial Examination? Go to the prefectural city? Are you kidding me! My Spirit Gathering Array just started showing

some improvement, I'm relying entirely on this well to stay alive! If you leave, won't I just shut down on the spot? No! Absolutely not! Besides, you're only fourteen! A fourteen-year-old Provincial Graduate? What are you trying to do? Trying to reach for the heavens? Believe me, tomorrow the eyes of the entire world will be fixed on you, stripping you bare from the inside out! The Way of Survival! What is the spirit of our Way of Survival? It's quietly amassing wealth! Not beating gongs and drums to march to your death!"

Lin Yu's Soul Body fluctuated violently from the agitation.

He took a deep "breath," forcibly calming himself down, and spoke in a tone that was earnest, profound, and full of wisdom.

"Ahem. Disciple, regarding this matter, your master believes the timing is not yet right."

"Why?" Su Ming asked, though he already had the answer in his heart.

"First, your foundation is still shallow." Lin Yu began analyzing seriously, "Although you've begun mastering the 'Aura Concealment Art,' the qi sensation in your Dantian is still like a firefly's light, unable to withstand a single blow. This spiritual well is your only cultivation resource at present. Once you leave, it would be no different than a fish leaving water; your cultivation would come to a complete halt."

"Second, a tree that stands out in the forest will be destroyed by the wind." Lin Yu's voice turned serious, "You becoming the top scorer at fourteen was already earth-shattering. If you then become a Provincial Graduate at fourteen, you will no longer be a 'genius,' but a 'monstrosity.' At that time, what will be directed at you won't just be admiration and envy, but countless suspicions, investigations, and even murderous intent. All your secrets, including your master's existence, could be exposed in broad daylight."

"Have you forgotten your master's true interpretation of the Way of Survival? Build high walls, amass vast provisions, and slowly claim the throne. Your walls aren't even built yet, your provisions aren't stored up, and you want to go claim the throne? This is the path to certain death!"

Su Ming fell silent.

His master's words coincided perfectly with his own inner thoughts.

He recalled that policy discussion essay rejected by the County Magistrate, and Professor Liu's teachings about authority and methods.

Could the status of a Provincial Graduate really change anything?

It seemed it could not.

In the face of real power, a young Provincial Graduate without a foundation was merely a more conspicuous, more easily crushed pawn.

He needed time.

Time to cultivate, to accumulate true strength. Time to investigate, one by one, the clues within those supernatural tales and miscellaneous records.

"I understand, Master." Su Ming raised his head, his gaze unprecedentedly firm, "I know what to do."

The next day, Su Ming came alone to Zhou Wenhai's study once more.

"Teacher." He bowed in salute.

"Have you decided?" Zhou Wenhai was practicing calligraphy and didn't look up.

"Yes." Su Ming's voice was clear and steady, "This student earnestly requests the teacher to permit this student... to withdraw from this Provincial Examination."

Zhou Yulin happened to be entering from outside and, hearing these words, the book scroll in his hand fell to the ground with a "thud."

"Junior Brother Su! You... have you gone mad?!" He rushed in, his face full of shock and confusion, "This is the Provincial Examination! The opportunity countless scholars dream of, why would you give it up?"

Su Ming didn't look at him, just bowed once more to Zhou Wenhai.

"This student knows his own talent is shallow and learning limited; becoming the top scorer in the county exam was truly a stroke of luck. In the half-year since entering the school, the more I study the classics, the more I feel my foundation is unstable, my learning superficial. If I were to take the exam with such shallow knowledge, it would only bring humiliation upon myself and, more importantly, disgrace the teacher's reputation."

"This student boldly requests the teacher grant me three more years. This student is willing to devote myself to diligent study within the County School, solidifying my foundation and deepening my learning. Only after three years, when I go to the examination hall, will I not fail the teacher's nurturing kindness."

His words were spoken with utmost sincerity, and his reasons were impeccably proper, leaving no room for criticism.

Zhou Yulin listened, dumbfounded. He wanted to refute, but found that every sentence Su Ming spoke was the "correct principle" for a scholar; he simply had no grounds to argue.

Zhou Wenhai finally stopped writing.

He raised his head, those deep eyes quietly looking at Su Ming for a long time.

The air in the study seemed to solidify.

Zhou Yulin was so nervous he even forgot to breathe, fearing his father would fly into a rage.

After a long while, a profound, inscrutable smile suddenly appeared on Zhou Wenhai's serious face.

He didn't get angry; instead, he slowly nodded.

"A young person should not contend with the wind."

He said softly, his voice betraying no emotion.

"Knowing when to advance and retreat, understanding how to conceal one's abilities. Good, very good."

Zhou Wenhai stood up, walked to Su Ming, and reached out to help him up.

"Since your mind is made up, your teacher grants your request." He patted Su Ming's shoulder, "Studying is like building a tall tower; the foundation is indeed the first priority. That you possess this kind of steady temperament, unmoved by empty fame... your teacher is... very pleased."

Zhou Yulin was completely stunned.

Not only was Father not angry, he actually... praised him?

The heavy stone hanging in Su Ming's heart finally dropped. He knew his gamble had paid off.

"Thank you, Teacher, for your understanding."

"Go on." Zhou Wenhai waved his hand, "Yulin, you stay. I have some matters to discuss with you."

Su Ming bowed and took his leave. As he passed Zhou Yulin, the look in Zhou Yulin's eyes was as if he were looking at a monster.

After Su Ming left, Zhou Wenhai sat down again. He looked at his son, who was still in shock, and asked lightly, "Yulin, do you feel that your junior brother's actions are incomprehensible?"

"This child... truly does not understand." Zhou Yulin answered honestly, "Why would he reject such a great opportunity to make a name for himself?"

"Make a name for himself?" Zhou Wenhai gave a cold laugh, "You only see the fame, but you don't see the abyss behind that reputation."

He picked up his teacup, his gaze becoming distant.

"Your junior brother sees farther than you, and thinks deeper than you. He understands very clearly that what he lacks now is not fame, but time. He is like a sapling that just broke through the soil; what he needs most is not to be admired by thousands, but to quietly take root and absorb nutrients."

"Today, he gave up the empty title of Provincial Graduate, gaining in exchange three years of undisturbed growth. This transaction, he made it, and very shrewdly."

Zhou Wenhai looked out the window at the ancient locust tree yellowed by the autumn wind, his voice carrying a trace of complex emotion.

"If your father had possessed such resolve back then... perhaps today, I would not be in this small Qingshi County."

Zhou Wenhai's final words were spoken extremely softly, and Zhou Yulin didn't quite catch them, but he was still shaken to his core by his father's words.

For the first time, he realized how vast the gap was between himself and that junior brother from the countryside.

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Chapter 82: A Glimmer of Inspiration, A Choice on the Path

[2,608 words]

Su Ming walked out of the study and let out a long, deep breath.

The autumn sunlight shone on his body, warm and pleasant.

Lin Yu's voice echoed in his mind, carrying a trace of barely noticeable fatigue and gravity. "Disciple, this Zhou Wenhai is a man of deep scheming. Before him, we must be even more cautious. His agreement to let you stay is both a sign of his regard and, undoubtedly, a way to keep you under close observation."

"He agreed, didn't he?" Su Ming's mood, however, was quite relaxed.

"He did agree, but the way he looked at you was like an old farmer looking at a cabbage that grows gold ingots—satisfied yet calculating!" Lin Yu grumbled. "Anyway, for these three years, we're safe. For your master's sake, hurry up and drain that well dry!"

With the storm having passed, Su Ming's life returned to peace, becoming even more focused than before.

Zhou Yulin left for the prefectural city in October. With one less person frequently seeking him out at the County School, Su Ming enjoyed the quiet, throwing his entire body and mind into cultivation and study.

The sensation of Qi within Su Ming's body, nourished by the spiritual well water, had grown from a flickering flame into a gentle, warm glow. He could even guide this energy to flow slowly through his meridians. Wherever it passed, a tingling, numbing sensation spread, bringing an indescribable comfort.

After mastering the Aura Concealment Art, his five senses became increasingly sharp. During meditation, he could even clearly "hear" the footsteps of the night watchman patrolling outside the courtyard and "smell" the aroma of food wafting from the neighboring compound.

He began attempting to gather that energy at his fingertip.

This was an incredibly difficult process. That energy was as slippery as a loach; the slightest lapse in concentration would cause it to disperse into his limbs and bones.

For several nights in a row, he ended in failure.

On a snowy night, after countless failed attempts, he finally succeeded. Using his powerful mental will to gently envelop the mass of energy, he guided it to his fingertip.

Su Ming slowly opened his eyes and extended the index finger of his right hand.

There, on his fingertip, a faint white light, the size of a grain of rice, quietly ignited in the pitch-black snowy night.

Though weak, its glow was unwavering.

"Master, I..."

"Shh." Lin Yu's voice carried an unprecedented gravity. "Don't move. Don't let it disperse. Feel it. Remember this sensation. This is... your first wisp of... spiritual energy."

The snowy night was silent, all things hushed.

Su Ming stared blankly at his fingertip. That tiny, rice-sized point of white light was a color that had never before appeared in his life. It was not the warm yellow of candlelight, nor the cool clarity of moonlight. It was a pure, self-originating radiance, as if the most distant yet brightest star in the night sky had been plucked and placed upon his fingertip.

"Pfft."

A soft sound, like the bursting of a tiny bubble. The light point on his fingertip flickered violently for an instant before extinguishing completely.

His fingertip returned to its normal skin tone. The warm, connected feeling that had pulsed with his bloodline vanished without a trace. In its place, a hollowed-out weakness spread from the depths of his Dantian, making him feel as if he had run ten miles of mountain road, with weariness seeping into the very marrow of his bones.

"Master!" Su Ming's voice held a thread of panic and thick disappointment. "It... it's gone!"

Lin Yu's voice drawled lazily in his mind. "Gone is gone. Did you want to frame it and hang it on the wall?"

Su Ming was momentarily speechless, then muttered, "That's not what I meant, disciple. It's just... I wanted it to stay a little longer."

"Remember this feeling. This is the seed of your first wisp of spiritual energy. But you must also understand, this is only the beginning. Without a subsequent method, this state is difficult to solidify, ultimately just a moon reflected in water, a flower in a mirror."

Lin Yu stretched comfortably inside the ring.

Su Ming carefully pondered his master's words, and the disappointment in his heart was indeed soothed considerably. Yes, he had been too impatient. On the path of cultivation, one misstep leads to many. Being able to condense the first wisp of spiritual energy was already a tremendous fortune. How could he demand to reach the heavens in a single step?

"Disciple understands the teaching," he replied respectfully.

"Mmm." Lin Yu responded with satisfaction. "That's enough for tonight. Your spiritual energy has just been born, and your soul has consumed not a little. Rest well. Remember the feeling from just now. Continue tomorrow."

In the following days, Su Ming fell into a cycle of pain and joy.

Every night, he would sit in meditation by the well, repeating the process of condensing spiritual energy. But that wisp of spiritual energy was like a mischievous child, coming and going without any discernible pattern.

Sometimes, after sitting in bitter meditation the entire night, there would be no movement within his Dantian, as if everything before had been but a dream.

Sometimes, the moment he entered meditation, that point of light would appear obediently at his fingertip in response to his thought. But the instant he tried to do something with it, even just make it linger for one more breath, it would ruthlessly extinguish with a "pfft," taking with it a large portion of his vital energy and spirit.

"Master, it ran away again!"

"Master, this time it lasted for three breaths!"

"Master, today I seemed to be able to make it shine a little brighter... Ah, it's gone again."

Lin Yu, who had initially been patient and used various grand principles like "the Dao follows nature" to guide him, eventually switched to a semi-dormant mode, letting Su Ming figure things out on his own.

In truth, Lin Yu was even more anxious than Su Ming.

Taking advantage of the time while Su Ming was outside "repeatedly failing and fighting, repeatedly fighting and failing," Lin Yu's Soul Body sank deep into the ring, beginning the most serious strategic planning session of his five-hundred-year transmigration.

Before him lay two paths.

The first path: his "gaze" fell upon the three jade slips within the space. One of them recorded the Greenwood Longevity Art.

This thing was right in his own home, within easy reach.

He hadn't dared to give it to Su Ming before because Su Ming barely knew a few big characters and had not a shred of spiritual energy, making it impossible to activate the jade slip, let alone comprehend its profound cultivation formulas.

But now it was different.

Su Ming had spent over half a year immersed in the County School's library tower. The books he had read far exceeded what Lin Yu had read in two lifetimes combined. His comprehension ability was already worlds apart from before. Most crucially, he could now condense spiritual energy! Even if it was just a wisp, even if it was extremely unstable, it was ultimately the "key" to activating the jade slip!

As long as he could successfully inject that wisp of spiritual energy into the jade slip, he could read its contents.

This seemed to be the safest, and indeed the only, choice available at the moment.

Yet Lin Yu still felt uneasy.

The enormous hidden danger lay in this: Lin Yu himself knew nothing about this world's cultivation system! He had transmigrated as a remnant soul. His only "experience" came from the chaotic, evil memory fragments obtained when devouring the Wailing Woman Lantern, which were completely incompatible with, and might even conflict with, the orthodox Greenwood Longevity Art. He didn't understand the crucial points within the cultivation method and couldn't discern whether Su Ming's energy flow during cultivation was right or wrong. If Su Ming made a misstep, the light consequence would be damaged meridians; the severe consequence would be Qi deviation. And he, as the master, might not be able to tell at all, let alone offer guidance and correction. This was no different from letting one blind man teach another to walk a tightrope.

On the path of cultivation, there was no chance for a do-over.

Lin Yu shifted his gaze to the second path.

The path leading to that dilapidated temple where the "Wailing Woman Lantern" was buried.

Lin Yu closed his "eyes." The memory fragments from that night surfaced again. From the resentful spirit's memories, he knew that dilapidated temple was the ruins of a minor immortal sect, and something was hidden within the mountain's belly. The master of that resentful spirit had placed the Wailing Woman Lantern there, clearly taking advantage of the location's earth vein Yin energy.

Perhaps within that mountain belly lay some cultivation insights left behind by predecessors.

Moreover, after this period of "digestion," Lin Yu was pleasantly surprised to discover that the Wailing Woman Lantern's most refined Yin energy had been completely absorbed by him, transformed into nourishment to strengthen his Soul Body. As for those resentful, insane memory fragments and the so-called "tracking mark," he had

used a newly comprehended technique to package and compress them into a walnut-sized black sphere, tossed into a corner of the ring's space, where they could no longer stir up even the slightest trouble.

He could sense that the fellow who had refined the Wailing Woman Lantern was very, very far from here, so distant that the faint, barely-there connection could almost be ignored.

Going treasure hunting seemed like a decent choice. High risk, high reward.

This path carried extremely high risk. That place was sinister and eerie, a location arranged by an evil cultivator. Who knew what residual traps or evil entities remained? Taking the initiative to go there was equivalent to putting oneself in danger.

But the sole hope and basis also lay here: he possessed partial memory fragments from the Wailing Woman Lantern. Within these chaotic memories, there was a vague indication that deep within that lair, something seemed to be hidden—perhaps some legacy or resource left by that evil cultivator, different from the Greenwood Longevity Art.

Though these memories were fragmented, they were, aside from the jade slip, his only bit of "advanced information" in this world.

More importantly, Su Ming's previous long-term meditation practice had forged mental perception and a calm disposition far surpassing ordinary people. This might not be an absolute guarantee for survival in combat, but in detecting danger, avoiding traps, and noticing subtle anomalies, it might be more useful than a half-baked offensive technique.

But this thought only lasted three seconds before Lin Yu himself snuffed it out.

What a joke! Go explore a place marked as a "zone of great calamity"? That place had been occupied by the Wailing Woman Lantern for over a hundred years. Who knew what strange and bizarre things had bred there besides Yin energy? What if some centuries-old zombie popped out, or some great demon lord was sleeping underground? His little disciple going over there wouldn't even be enough to fill the gaps between their teeth.

The first principle of the Way of Survival: never actively explore the red danger zones on the map!

This path? Pass!

"Tough situation..." Lin Yu's Soul Body sat cross-legged, putting on the appearance of a master deep in thought, though in reality, he was so worried he felt like tearing out his non-existent hair.

Not long after, a letter from Anyuan Prefectural City arrived at the A-rank courtyard.

It was from Zhou Yulin.

In the letter, with flying brushstrokes, Zhou Yulin described the grand occasion of the Provincial Examination and the bustle and prosperity of the prefectural city. He had passed the exam without any suspense and had been taken as a disciple by a great Confucian scholar at the Prefectural School. He had decided to stay in the prefectural city to continue his studies.

At the end of the letter, he wrote in a somewhat emotional tone: "Junior Brother Su, Father writes often, saying you immerse your heart in learning, far surpassing me. At first, I was somewhat unconvinced, but now I understand your... aspiration. Three years from now, we shall meet again in the capital. Your foolish elder brother awaits good news quietly."

After reading the letter, Su Ming silently folded it, his face showing neither sorrow nor joy.

"Master, what do you think the 'aspiration' he mentions in his letter refers to?"

"He refers to you topping the metropolitan examination, achieving a golden name on the placard. But your master knows your aspiration is immortality and eternal life." Lin Yu answered lazily. "Different paths do not make for common plans. He walks his broad, smooth road; you cultivate your single-plank bridge. Quite fine."

"Quite fine." Su Ming nodded, putting away the letter.

His life, from the moment he became a disciple, had turned onto a completely different path.

"Disciple."

Right then, Lin Yu's voice suddenly turned serious.

"Hmm?"

"You have been condensing spiritual energy for three months now. Repeated failures. Do you know why?"

Su Ming replied solemnly, "Disciple's disposition is impure, too eager for quick success."

Lin Yu scolded without mercy, "If your disposition is impure, kid, then there aren't many honest people left in this world. The reason you fail is because you lack one thing."

"Please, Master, instruct."

"A cultivation method!" Lin Yu enunciated each word. "Right now, you are like a strong man possessing immense strength, yet only knows how to swing his fists wildly. Every time you condense spiritual energy, you are forcibly squeezing your vital energy and spirit, achieving half the result with double the effort, and damaging your foundation in the process. You need a cultivation method to teach you how to breathe, how to guide, how to truly make the heaven and earth's spiritual energy your own."

Su Ming's mind shook, his breathing quickening slightly.

A cultivation method! He had waited for these two words for far too long!

"Then... Master..."

"Your master does have one here." Lin Yu's tone became profound and mysterious. "However, this method is no ordinary matter. Your master needs to observe you for a while longer, to see if your disposition is truly capable of mastering it."

In reality, Lin Yu wanted to use this final period to take the opening three hundred characters of the Greenwood Longevity Art, break them apart, grind them to pieces, think of a hundred possible errors that could appear, and formulate a hundred corresponding solutions.

He wanted to ensure absolute safety.

"Disciple understands!" Su Ming suppressed the excitement in his heart and nodded heavily.

Lin Yu responded with a satisfied "Mmm," then changed Su Ming's cultivation plan.

"From today onward, set aside the matter of condensing spiritual energy for now. Your cultivation focus has only one task—meditation!"

"Meditation?" Su Ming was somewhat puzzled.

"Correct." Lin Yu explained. "Your soul is the 'vessel' that carries everything. If the vessel is not strong, how can it hold rivers, lakes, and seas? During this period, your soul has been excessively depleted, showing signs of emptiness. You must replenish it, and moreover, make it stronger, more resilient!"

"Your Aura Concealment Art has reached great completion; your five senses and six perceptions far surpass ordinary people. Next, you must use meditation to nourish your 'soul!'"

Lin Yu's voice carried a strange allure.

Su Ming had no more doubts. He immediately sat down cross-legged and began his brand-new cultivation.

Days flew by in the monotony of meditation.

A month later, his perception range had expanded to encompass the entire A-rank courtyard area. He could "hear" the student in the neighboring courtyard, the quiet and reserved one, murmuring and reciting scriptures over and over in the dead of night.

This feeling was as if he possessed invisible eyes and ears, freely roaming every corner of the County School.

And his soul, in this daily expansion and perception, became solidified, powerful, far beyond what it was in the past. The mass of Qi sensation in his Dantian, though not deliberately cultivated, also became increasingly gentle and substantial under the strengthening of his soul.

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Chapter 83: Determined to Take the Risk

[1,416 words]

In the small courtyard designated as Jia, Su Ming sat cross-legged by the well as usual, his eyes tightly closed.

He was no longer attempting to condense that spark of spiritual light.

Following his master's instructions, he had done only one thing for the past month—meditation.

His soul was like a spider web stretched to its limit, radiating outwards in all directions from his body as the center.

He could "see" the snowflakes falling on the eaves, piling up, and then quietly sliding off.

He could "hear" Manager Sun turning over in his sleep a hundred meters away in the library, letting out a contented sleep-talk murmur.

He could even "smell" the savory aroma emanating from the winter-cured bacon in the kitchen.

His soul was unprecedentedly solid and powerful.

The sense of qi in his Dantian, nurtured by this invisible force, had also grown increasingly dense, like a warm, smooth piece of jade quietly suspended within.

Everything was developing in a positive direction.

However, Lin Yu inside the ring was almost worried to the point of going bald.

His Soul Body paced back and forth in the gray, hazy space. Before him was the jade slip recording the "Greenwood Longevity Art."

No! Absolutely not!

Lin Yu's Soul Body stomped its foot fiercely.

This thing was a ticking time bomb! It started right off with drawing energy into the body, visualizing the Greenwood, and communicating with the Essence of Yi Wood.

Visualization? Visualize my ass!

He, this master, understood nothing about this world's cultivation system. If Su Ming's energy flow went astray, he wouldn't even be able to tell.

This wasn't teaching the Way; this was suicide!

If his disciple had an accident, seven blood streaks would instantly form, and he'd probably be instantly done for. There was nothing more foolish in the world than this!

Lin Yu waved his hand irritably, and the illusion of the jade slip instantly dissipated.

His "gaze" turned to another corner of the space.

There, quietly lying, was a black sphere the size of a walnut. Its surface was smooth, yet it emanated a heart-palpating sense of resentment and madness.

It was precisely the compressed remnant filth of the "Wailing Woman Lantern."

Lin Yu's Soul Body floated over, extended a "hand," and cautiously touched the black sphere.

In an instant, countless chaotic memory fragments flooded his mind again.

The gloomy, dilapidated temple, the damp ground, and deep within the mountain, that faint, barely perceptible, chilling aura, completely different from that of the Wailing Woman Lantern.

Go? Or not go?

Lin Yu's Soul Body was caught in a fierce internal struggle.

If he went, that ghostly place had been occupied by the Wailing Woman Lantern for over a hundred years, steeped in Yin energy. Who knew what other demons and monsters had been nurtured there? His own battle-useless remnant soul, dragging along a disciple who had just barely touched the threshold of cultivation, would be delivering themselves on a platter.

First Principle of the True Interpretation of the Way of Survival: Never proactively provoke unknown dangers!

But if he didn't go... if he didn't go, he could only grit his teeth and teach Su Ming that "Greenwood Longevity Art."

How was that any different from gambling with their lives?

Lin Yu felt his Soul Body was about to split in two.

On one side was a high-risk, high-reward exploration. On the other was a gamble with even higher risk and unknown returns.

Weighing the lesser of two evils...

Damn it!

Lin Yu gritted his teeth fiercely.

Let's risk it! Wealth is found in danger!

Rather than watching his disciple deviate from the proper path and go berserk right under his nose, it was better to venture into that dilapidated temple!

At least he held the memory fragments of the Wailing Woman Lantern, equivalent to having half a map. The owner of that lantern placed it there definitely not just to nurture ghosts. That place absolutely had something strange about it!

Besides, worst case, he'd just risk his old life. He'd already devoured the Wailing Woman Lantern; what else was there to be afraid of?

Having made up his mind, Lin Yu's entire soul felt lighter.

He cleared his throat, adjusted his posture, and instantly transformed back into that transcendent, unfathomable master with an immortal aura and a demeanor as still as an ancient well.

"Disciple."

Lin Yu's voice, carrying a hint of perfectly measured seriousness, echoed in Su Ming's mind.

Su Ming withdrew from his deep meditation, slowly opening his eyes. "Master."

"You have been meditating for over a month. Your soul is stable, and your foundation is established. It is time for this master to impart to you the true method of cultivation."

Su Ming's mind shook, and his breath hitched for a moment.

It's here!

He had waited for this day for far too long!

"Please, Master, impart the method!" He suppressed the wild joy in his heart, yet his voice remained steady.

"Hmm." Lin Yu pondered for a moment, as if organizing his words. "However, before imparting the method, there is something this master must explain to you."

"This master holds two cultivation methods."

Su Ming held his breath and concentrated, listening carefully.

"The first is a wood-attributed method called the 'Greenwood Longevity Art.' It is balanced and peaceful, most suitable for solidifying one's foundation."

Su Ming's eyes lit up.

"But," Lin Yu's tone shifted, becoming extremely grave, "this method places extremely high demands on comprehension. The crucial points within it—a minute deviation leads to a massive error. Although you are intelligent, you have no protector. Once you take a wrong step, the light consequence would be shattered meridians; the severe consequence would be souls scattered to the winds, beyond all redemption."

The joy instantly drained from Su Ming's face, leaving his heart icy cold.

He did not doubt the truth of his master's words in the slightest.

"What about the second one, Master?"

"The second is the method this master cultivated in the past." Lin Yu's voice became distant. "This method is immensely powerful, but it requires the aid of many external objects and is bound to this master's soul. If you cultivate it, you will become connected to this master's energy aura. In the future, you will inevitably be implicated by this master's karma, for good or ill, unpredictable."

Lin Yu nodded furiously in his heart.

Yes, yes, that's right! My method is called the 'Lazy Fish Lie-Flat Art.' The prerequisite for cultivating it is finding a good disciple. You can't learn it!

Su Ming fell silent.

He understood the implied meaning behind his master's words.

The first path was self-study, but the risk was extremely high, almost a nine-deaths-one-life gamble.

The second path seemed to have the master as a guide, but it meant shouldering the immense, unknown karma on his master's person. He would never forget the terrifying killing intent that had leaked from his master that night. The secret hidden behind it was absolutely beyond his imagination.

"Master, is there truly no third path?" Su Ming asked, his voice strained.

"There is."

Lin Yu seemed to have been waiting for this very question.

"Disciple, do you still remember that dilapidated temple from that night?"

Su Ming's pupils contracted. "I remember."

"The owner of the Wailing Woman Lantern placed that evil object there because he valued the earth vein's Yin energy of that location. And according to what this master gleaned from the resentful spirit's memories, that dilapidated temple is very likely the ruins of an ancient immortal sect."

Immortal sect ruins!

These four words exploded in Su Ming's mind like a thunderclap!

"You mean..."

"Precisely." Lin Yu affirmed his thought. "Within that mountain, it is highly likely that something left behind by that immortal sect is hidden. Perhaps a more foundational,

safer introductory cultivation method. Perhaps some spirit stones or elixirs. It might even be a protective magical artifact."

"Most importantly," Lin Yu emphasized his tone, "the spiritual energy of this well cannot last much longer. We must find a new source of spiritual energy. Otherwise, both you and I will sever this only path of cultivation."

Su Ming's heart began to beat violently.

He understood.

His master had laid out three paths before him, each leading to a completely different future.

The first was seeking his own death.

The second was deeply binding his fate with his master's, with an uncertain future, and it required external objects, which now seemed the most impossible to achieve.

The third was to take the initiative, to fight for a more stable, broader future!

He hesitated almost not at all.

"Master, let's go." Su Ming raised his head, his gaze blazing. "This disciple trusts your judgment."

"However," he added, "since that place is a land of ill omen, we must make absolutely thorough preparations."

Inside the ring, Lin Yu revealed a fatherly, gratified smile.

The boy is teachable! He knows to be cautious! My daily indoctrination of the Way of Survival hasn't been in vain!

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Chapter 84: Preparations for the Expedition

[1,799 words]

"Excellent." Lin Yu praised approvingly. "Your master was also thinking the same. That place has been shrouded in Yin energy for a hundred years; evil entities are sure to have bred there. From the resentful spirit's memories, I have compiled a list. Remember it and gather the items as soon as possible."

"Please instruct me, Master."

"First, black dog blood. The heart's blood from a living dog is best, three jin required. Black dogs possess the ultimate Yang essence; their blood can break through Yin-based filth and evil."

"Second, a rooster's throat bone. You need an old rooster, over three years old, one that crows daily. Take the 'human'-shaped cartilage from its throat, dry it in the sun, and grind it into powder. Roosters herald the dawn, sensing Yang energy to crow; their bones can suppress ghosts and demons."

"Third, aged glutinous rice. The older, the better, at least over ten years. Glutinous rice grows from the earth, nourished by Yang to mature. It can draw out corpse poison and counter stiffened evils."

"Fourth, peach wood nails. Seven of them, each three cun and three fen long. If you can find wood struck by lightning, that would be even better. Peach wood wards off evil, and thunder is the ultimate Yang force, the bane of Yin creatures."

Su Ming memorized each item, his expression grave.

Every single one of these things was bizarre; ordinary households would never have them prepared.

"And also..." Lin Yu's voice paused, seeming somewhat difficult to say.

"Fifth, the urine of a virgin boy. Collect the urine from a boy born during the Yang hour, over seven years old. Seal it in a freshly fired pottery jar."

Su Ming: "..."

His face visibly changed color, from white to red, then to purple, a spectacular display.

"Master... this one... what's its use?" He held back for a long moment before finally asking.

Lin Yu, barely suppressing his laughter, explained with a straight face: "A virgin boy's body retains its primal Yang energy, untainted. His urine is the transformed essence of that primal Yang, the purest and clearest. Splashed upon an evil entity, it can defile its physical form, greatly diminishing its cultivation. It is... a life-saving item for critical moments."

Su Ming took a deep breath, as if trying to press down all the shame filling his chest.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, his gaze had returned to calm.

"... I understand, disciple."

Watching Su Ming's expression of grim determination, Lin Yu almost laughed himself into a fit inside the ring.

This kid is too much fun!

...

Over the next few days, Su Ming's life became exceptionally busy.

During the day, he remained the quiet, studious top scorer, moving between the library and the schoolhouse.

But once school was out, he transformed into the most mysterious procurement agent in Bluestone County Town.

His first stop was the slaughterhouse in the western part of the city.

The pungent smell of blood and gore hit him. Several butchers, stripped to the waist, were dismembering a freshly slaughtered fat pig.

Su Ming pinched his nose and found the foreman, Butcher Wang.

"Uncle Wang."

"Well, if it isn't Top Scorer Su!" Butcher Wang, his hands greasy, grinned warmly upon seeing Su Ming. "What wind blows a scholar like you to my dirty place?"

Su Ming cupped his hands in a polite salute, his expression unchanged. "Uncle Wang, I wanted to ask you if there have been any black dogs recently?"

"Black dogs?" Butcher Wang was taken aback, then grew wary. "What does the top scorer want a black dog for? Their meat is sour and tough, not good to eat. And they have fierce temperaments, only good for guarding property."

Su Ming retrieved a small string of copper coins from his sleeve and subtly handed it over.

He spoke calmly: "Some days ago, I read a medical miscellany in the library. It recorded an ancient formula, saying that taking black dog heart's blood, combined with several medicinal herbs, to steep medicinal wine, can invigorate blood circulation, unblock

meridians, and strengthen bones and sinews. My father, in his youth hunting in the mountains, suffered some old injuries. On rainy, overcast days, the pain becomes unbearable. I was thinking of trying this remedy."

This explanation was perfectly reasonable, both clarifying his motive and conveying a sense of filial piety.

Butcher Wang weighed the copper coins in his hand, his wariness turning to understanding.

"So it's to treat the old master's injuries! That's wonderful!" He patted his chest. "Leave it to me! Zhang the Pockmarked's family in the east of the city happens to have a pure black wolfhound, fierce as anything. It even bit someone a couple of days ago. I'll go get it for you right now! I guarantee you'll get the freshest heart's blood!"

"I appreciate your trouble, Uncle Wang."

Having settled the most difficult item, the black dog blood, Su Ming went to the rice market.

He didn't go to the big rice shops. Instead, he specifically sought out secluded alleys, looking for farming households with their own stored grain.

"Auntie, I'd like to exchange for some glutinous rice," Su Ming said to an old woman sunning grain in her yard.

"Exchange for glutinous rice? Young man, what I have here is this year's new rice, fragrant!"

"No," Su Ming shook his head, pointing at a rice vat in the corner covered in thick dust. "I want that kind of old rice, the older the better."

The old woman looked at him as if he were an idiot.

Su Ming had no choice but to fabricate another story. He said he read in a book that aged glutinous rice ground into powder could be used to starch clothes, better than soapberries, making laundered garments crisp and clean.

In the end, he exchanged three jin of new rice for a small half-vat of aged glutinous rice that had been stored for who knows how many years, almost turned to stone.

As for the rooster's throat bone, he managed it at a market specializing in poultry. He paid a high price for a spirited old rooster with a blood-red comb, borrowed the vendor's knife, extracted the bone on the spot, and amidst the astonished gazes of the vendor and onlookers, strode away with that small piece of bone tucked away.

The peach wood nails were the most troublesome.

He visited every carpenter's shop in the city, but they only had ordinary peach wood.

Finally, Xu Qing helped him.

"Wood struck by lightning?" Xu Qing frowned after hearing Su Ming's request. "That's not easy to find. Ordinary wood struck by lightning would have long been burnt to charcoal. Only old wood with extremely strong Yang energy and hard texture can survive the thunderfire."

He pondered for a moment, then his eyes suddenly lit up.

"I think I know where there is some."

He took Su Ming to a dilapidated Taoist temple in the southern outskirts of the county town.

The temple had long been abandoned, the courtyard overgrown with weeds. Beside the ruins of the main hall, a huge locust tree lay fallen, half its trunk black as ink, precisely the mark of being struck by thunderfire.

"This was struck during a thunderstorm night two summers ago," Xu Qing pointed at the tree. "The commotion was huge at the time; half the county town heard it. After that, the rumors about this temple being haunted grew even more intense, and no one dared come anymore."

Looking at the half-charred trunk, Su Ming felt a surge of joy.

Although it wasn't peach wood, the locust tree belongs to Yin, yet it survived a heavenly thunder strike without being destroyed. The Yang-rigid energy contained within its heartwood was probably superior to ordinary peach wood!

The two of them exerted tremendous effort to obtain several pieces of wood from the iron-hard, charred trunk.

Back at the small courtyard, Su Ming carefully carved the wood into seven nails, each three cun and three fen long, each carrying a faint burnt smell and strange grain patterns.

Thus, only the last item on the list remained.

And the one that gave Su Ming the biggest headache.

Virgin boy's urine.

He, a fourteen-year-old top scorer, couldn't very well produce it himself...

Nor could he bring himself to ask the seven or eight-year-old children in the schoolhouse.

This matter remained deadlocked for two days.

One afternoon, as Su Ming was reading in his courtyard, the sound of a child's crying and fussing came from the neighboring yard.

It was the child of that taciturn scholar's family, just five years old this year, with a round, sturdy head.

He heard the scholar roar impatiently: "Stop crying! So what if you wet the bed! It's no big deal!"

Su Ming's eyes suddenly lit up.

He put down his book, walked to the wall, cleared his throat, and called out towards the neighbor: "Brother Li, are you there?"

A short while later, the scholar named Li Mo opened his courtyard gate, a trace of confusion on his face. "Top Scorer Su, is something the matter?"

Su Ming wore a warm smile on his face and held a small packet of pastries in his hand.

"Nothing important. I heard your son crying and came to check. Children are lively and active; wetting the bed is common. I have some newly bought pastries here for the child to try."

Li Mo was somewhat flattered and overwhelmed. He had a solitary personality and few friends in the County School. Su Ming was the first to actively show goodwill.

He hurriedly invited Su Ming inside.

Half an hour later, Su Ming walked out of the small courtyard, thoroughly satisfied.

In his hand, he now held a small pottery jar tightly wrapped in oil paper.

Inside the jar was a full container of... golden yellow, slightly warm liquid.

The Li family was tearfully grateful, facing the half packet of pastries and the small silver ingot Su Ming had left on the table. They simply thought this young top scorer was a kind-hearted eccentric who liked collecting strange things for his "studies."

Returning to his own small courtyard, Su Ming carefully placed the pottery jar on the ground.

He looked at this pile of "treasures" before him: a bucket of black dog blood emitting a fishy smell, a packet of aged glutinous rice, seven charred wooden nails, a small bag of rooster throat bone powder, and that jar of indescribably pungent virgin boy's urine.

The entire courtyard was permeated with an indescribably strange odor.

Su Ming let out a long sigh.

An unprecedented sense of absurdity, along with the tension and excitement of embarking on an unknown journey, surged in his heart simultaneously.

"Master, everything is prepared."

"Very good." Lin Yu's voice carried a satisfied smile. "Pack everything up properly. Once a heavy snow falls, we will set out."

He looked at Su Ming's young yet resolute face, his own heart swelling with heroic spirit.

To hell with the Way of Survival!

I'm done pretending, I'm laying my cards on the table!

Starting today, I am a tomb raiding captain... no, a Treasure-Seeking True Master!

"Are you ready, disciple?" Lin Yu's voice became deep and powerful. "Our first lesson is about to begin."

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

Chapter 85: Even a small mosquito is still meat

[3,021 words]

Three days later, the heavy snow arrived as expected.

Goose feather-like snowflakes drifted silently from the lead-gray sky, painting the entire Qingshi County in pristine white overnight.

Su Ming trudged along the official road leading out of the city, a bulging pack on his back, his steps sinking unevenly into the deep snow.

He had requested leave from the County School, citing a visit to a distant relative outside the city and a desire to find a quiet place to study. The steward believed him completely. This top scorer Su's diligence was well-known; the fact that he wanted to study even on such a snowy day was truly admirable.

Inside the pack, the black dog blood stored in a wine jar, the aged glutinous rice disguised as travel rations, and the wood struck by lightning nails hidden in the brush pouch all swayed gently with his steps. That jar of soul-shakingly pungent virgin boy's urine was wrapped in oilcloth seven or eight layers thick and stuffed at the very bottom, praying it wouldn't leak.

"Master, this snow... seems a bit off."

After walking ten li outside the city, Su Ming stopped. The white breath he exhaled instantly condensed into frost.

Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind, its usual laziness replaced by a touch of gravity. "What's off about it?"

"It's too quiet." Su Ming surveyed his surroundings.

In the woods beside the official road, one could usually hear a few bird calls or spot traces of rabbits or squirrels. But now, aside from snow, there was nothing. Even the chirping of insects had vanished. The entire world was as silent as a lifeless painting.

"Keep walking." Lin Yu offered no further explanation. "Focus your mind, circulate the Aura Concealment Art, don't let a single trace of your aura leak out."

Su Ming nodded, pulled his bamboo hat lower, and continued onward.

The closer he got to the direction of the dilapidated temple from his memory, the more bizarre the surrounding environment became.

The wind and snow seemed to consciously avoid that area. While everything around was covered in a blanket of white snow, the color of the mountain forest ahead appeared unusually deep and gloomy, as if splashed with dirty water.

Lin Yu fell completely silent.

This silence made Su Ming's heart palpitate more than any warning. He could feel his master's soul contracting to its limit, like a startled hedgehog entering its highest state of alert.

A cold, formless sense of being watched enveloped him from all directions.

It didn't come from any specific direction; it simply permeated the air, like countless invisible icy tentacles gently brushing against his skin, trying to worm their way into his mind.

Cold sweat instantly soaked Su Ming's back, but his steps didn't falter, his face maintaining that same placid, wooden expression.

Finally, the familiar outline of the dilapidated temple appeared deep within the mountain forest.

Unlike his panicked nighttime flight last time, the temple looked even more decrepit in daylight. The collapsed courtyard wall, the tilted main hall, resembled a dying giant beast crouching in the snow.

Strangely, despite the heavy snowfall, only a thin layer of snow covered the temple's roof. Most snowflakes melted the moment they touched the tiles, merging into dark streaks of water that dripped from the eaves.

It was as if the temple itself was constantly emitting some kind of ominous heat.

"Stop." Lin Yu's voice finally rang out, short and forceful.

Su Ming obeyed, halting about fifty paces from the temple's courtyard wall.

"Walk a circle around it, don't get close. Extend your perception to its maximum, tell me what you see and hear."

"Yes."

Su Ming took a deep breath, slightly closed his eyes, and pushed the Aura Concealment Art to its limit. His soul spread out towards the temple like quicksilver, soundless.

He began walking slowly around the temple, each step crunching loudly on the thick snow. In this deathly silent environment, the sound was especially jarring.

Soon, he noticed anomalies.

From the corner of his eye, he kept catching glimpses of a pale white hem of clothing flashing past a temple corner or behind a broken window lattice, or a blurry black shadow. But when he snapped his head around to look intently, there was nothing there, only mottled walls and the howling wind rushing through the hallways.

On the snowy ground appeared some chaotic, disorderly footprints.

The footprints were shallow, resembling neither human nor beast, twisted and bizarre, as if something had dragged its fingertips across the snow. These footprints circled the temple, eventually disappearing at the base of the wall, their destination unknown.

Within the wind's howl, mixed an extremely faint, high-pitched shriek.

At times it sounded like a woman's sobbing, weeping mournfully by his ear; at other times it sounded like someone was whispering something right against the back of his neck. The sound was intermittent, yet it hooked into his mind, constantly agitating his spirit.

In the air, that faint odor of rot and stale blood was even stronger than last time.

"Master, there are many things," Su Ming whispered in his mind. "They're watching us, but don't dare approach."

"Condensed filth, breeding mere 'wandering souls'," Lin Yu's voice held a trace of disdain, but Su Ming could hear the underlying tension. "A bunch of mindless, lonely ghosts drawn here by the Yin energy, becoming earthbound spirits. Not truly fearsome, but troublesome."

Su Ming didn't stop walking. As he moved, he inconspicuously pinched a bit of powder from his sleeve and quietly sprinkled it on the snow behind him.

It was a mixture of rooster's throat bone powder and aged glutinous rice.

As he walked, a not-very-obvious circle composed of white powder roughly encircled the temple.

The moment the circle closed, the prickling sense of being watched and the faint, almost-inaudible sobbing by his ear indeed weakened considerably.

Lin Yu nodded approvingly inside the ring. Not bad, this kid was becoming more and more like his former self, steady and composed!

"Enough," Lin Yu said. "Enter the temple."

Su Ming walked to the long-collapsed courtyard gate and looked at the pitch-black darkness of the temple's main hall, which resembled a giant maw waiting to devour anyone who entered.

Without the slightest hesitation, he stepped inside.

The moment he crossed the threshold, Su Ming felt as if he had passed through a layer of cold, viscous water.

The light before his eyes abruptly dimmed. A wave of bone-chilling, Yin-cold energy assaulted him, making him shiver uncontrollably. The temperature inside and outside the temple were like two different worlds.

There was almost no snow inside the temple. The ground was covered in a layer of black, sticky mud mixed with rotten fragments of prayer mats and wood.

The main hall's deity statue had long since collapsed, leaving only a lotus throne base crawling with filth. The altar table was empty, covered in thick dust. Several unknown black beetles lay dead upon it, frozen in their death throes.

The most eye-catching thing was the dark brown stain on the floor in the center of the hall.

The stain was twisted into a human shape. Its deepest parts even gleamed with a black light, as if it had seeped deep into the floor tiles. This was precisely the spot where the Wailing Woman Lantern had once entrenched itself, nearly costing him his life.

Even though the Wailing Woman Lantern had been eliminated, this stain still emitted an unbearably thick aura of resentment and ill omen.

Su Ming felt a stabbing pain in his soul just from glancing at it, as if countless needles were pricking him.

"The entrance is behind the deity statue," Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind, carrying urgency. "Judging from the memory fragments of the resentful soul, the mechanism should be on the lotus throne base. Hurry, don't linger here."

Just as Su Ming prepared to approach the lotus throne, that bizarre interference suddenly intensified!

"Ming'er... Second Brother is in so much pain... come help Second Brother..."

It was Second Brother Su Yang's voice! So clear, so full of agony, as if he were moaning right by Su Ming's ear.

"My son... why won't you listen to your mother... you insist on taking this risk..."

His mother's weeping voice, filled with despair and sorrow.

"Junior Brother Su, you've disappointed me so much. Forsaking a bright future to dabble in those mystical, superstitious things... your life is ruined!"

Zhou Yulin's mocking voice, laced with undisguised contempt and pity.

Various voices, real and fake, exploded directly in the depths of his mind, like a pot of boiling water churning his spirit into turmoil.

Simultaneously, from the corner of his eye, he saw the blurry black shadows in the dark corners of the hall begin to squirm and gather, becoming clearer and clearer.

A cold, slimy finger lightly touched the back of his neck without any warning!

Su Ming's hair stood on end. A chill shot up from his tailbone straight to the crown of his head!

He bit the tip of his tongue fiercely. The sharp pain instantly cleared his mind.

"Evil illusions, disturbing my spirit!"

Su Ming roared inwardly. He ignored the auditory hallucinations, and his mind instantly regained clarity. He strode purposefully to the lotus throne base and reached down to feel underneath it.

Soon, his fingers found a circle of unusually smooth grooves.

This was it!

He took a deep breath, grabbed the grooves with both hands, and with all his might, gave a sharp twist!

The lotus throne didn't budge.

"Huh?" Su Ming was stunned.

And at the very moment he exerted force, a sudden change occurred!

The human-shaped stain on the floor suddenly "came to life"!

Like a pool of viscous black oil, it silently rose from the ground, rapidly coalescing into a pitch-black humanoid figure with no facial features and twisted limbs. A wave of Yin-cold and resentment ten times stronger than before erupted violently!

The monster made no sound and showed no signs of physical attack. It merely lifted its "head," its hollow "face" aimed at Su Ming, then transformed into a black shadow and silently pounced!

This wasn't an attack on the physical body; this was a direct assault of Yin-evil erosion aimed at the soul!

If it hit him, Su Ming's soul would be instantly polluted and torn apart!

"Dammit! Triggered a trap!" Lin Yu almost jumped inside the ring. "Disciple! Quick! Use your Italian cannon... no, use your black dog blood!"

Su Ming, though startled, remained composed.

He was prepared!

Facing the oncoming black shadow, he didn't retreat. Instead, he stepped forward, his right hand moving like lightning. He tore off the leather pouch disguised as a wine skin hanging from his waist and, without a second thought, hurled the pungent-smelling liquid inside!

"Hiss—!"

The black dog blood traced a dark red arc through the air, splattering precisely onto the pitch-black humanoid figure.

It was like pouring a ladle of cold water into a pot of boiling oil!

A violent sizzling sound erupted. Thick plumes of black smoke, accompanied by a pungent, scorched stench, billowed from the monster's body!

"Aooo—!"

A soundless shriek that could vibrate the soul echoed throughout the main hall.

The pitch-black humanoid figure twisted and struggled violently. Under the onslaught of the black dog blood, its form rapidly melted and disintegrated like a wax statue corroded by strong acid. With a final "splat," it reverted to a pool of stain on the ground, though its color was noticeably duller than before.

"Nicely done!" Lin Yu praised loudly, then urgently reminded, "Don't just stand there! Yang-attributed items can only hurt it, not destroy it! This thing is born from the earth vein's Yin energy and the resentment of the dead. As long as this damned temple exists, it can't be killed! Use the wood struck by lightning nails, pin it down!"

Su Ming understood perfectly.

He pulled the seven charred wooden nails from his brush pouch, his figure darting forward to the side of the stain.

Without the slightest hesitation, he raised a nail and drove it down, forcefully embedding the first wood struck by lightning nail into the approximate location of the stain's "head"!

"Thud!"

The nail sank half an inch into the ground, and the earth actually emitted a dull thud, as if he'd struck a leather drum. The pool of stain squirmed violently, seemingly trying to coalesce again, but was firmly suppressed by the thunderous power contained within the nail.

Su Ming's hands didn't stop. Following his master's instructions, he drove the remaining six nails into the approximate locations of the stain's shoulders, heart, knees, and feet.

"Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!"

Six consecutive dull thuds. With each nail that fell, the stain's squirming weakened a fraction, and the resentment it emitted dissipated a trace.

The moment the seventh nail was driven in, a light "hum" resonated. An invisible barrier seemed to form between the seven nails, firmly sealing the stain within.

The suffocating Yin-cold atmosphere within the main hall cleared noticeably.

Success!

Not daring to delay, Su Ming returned to the lotus throne base, grabbed the grooves with both hands, and exerted force once more.

"Click."

A crisp mechanical turning sound rang out.

This time, the lotus throne moved as he turned it.

As the throne rotated half a circle, a floor tile behind the deity statue silently sank downward, revealing a dark staircase just wide enough for one person, leading underground.

A wave of spiritual energy, older, purer, but even colder than that inside the main hall, mixed with a long-sealed scent of decay, rushed out from the opening.

"Below is the true lair," Lin Yu's tone became extremely grave. "Disciple, remember, no matter what you see or hear, keep your mind guarded! Hold that precious little jar in your hand; it might be our lifesaver at the final moment!"

Su Ming nodded silently. From the very bottom of his pack, he pulled out the small pottery jar tightly wrapped in oilcloth.

Holding the jar in one hand and a spare wood struck by lightning nail in the other, he took a deep breath and stepped onto the staircase leading into the unknown.

The staircase wasn't long, about twenty or thirty steps.

Below was a small natural stone cavern, roughly the size of a bedroom, showing signs of artificial modification. Faint, twisted runes were carved on the cave walls, long since devoid of their spiritual light.

In the center of the cavern stood a simple stone platform.

There were no imagined skeletons, no ferocious monsters.

On the stone platform, only a few items lay isolated.

A palm-sized, gray cloth bag covered in cracks.

A jade slip, also dull in color and similarly covered in cracks.

And three fist-sized, grayish-white stones with pitted surfaces and no luster whatsoever.

Su Ming didn't approach immediately. He stood at the staircase entrance, observing carefully for a long while. Only after confirming there were no other traps did he cautiously walk over.

He didn't touch anything directly with his hands. Instead, he used the wood struck by lightning nail in his hand to gently nudge the gray cloth bag.

"It's a storage pouch," Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind, carrying a hint of regret. "The lowest grade kind, and its spiritual energy is almost depleted. The pouch body is damaged too. Probably can't hold much, and forcing its use might even cause spatial collapse."

Su Ming's heart sank halfway.

He used the nail to nudge the jade slip next.

"This is..." Lin Yu sensed for a moment, his voice tinged with hesitation and oddness. "It's a cultivation method jade slip, but the spiritual sense inside is severely fragmented. Seems to be an earth-attribute introductory cultivation method called the 'Thick Earth Art'."

An introductory cultivation method!

Su Ming's breath hitched, his eyes bursting with a gleam of delight!

"But..." Lin Yu's tone shifted. "This method only has the first three layers, and... its aura feels somewhat obscure, not like something from a reputable orthodox sect. Feels like it

was haphazardly modified, or is itself a common, mass-produced item circulated among wandering cultivators. Practicing it could easily lead to problems."

Su Ming's joy was instantly doused as if by a bucket of cold water.

Finally, he looked at the three grayish-white stones.

"Depleted spirit stones," Lin Yu's tone lost all interest. "The spiritual energy inside has been completely sucked dry. Not even worth using as firewood; they'd just take up space."

The fruits of their expedition lay before them.

A nearly broken storage pouch, a possibly problematic, incomplete cultivation method, three useless, depleted stones.

This was far from the immortal sect legacy treasures they had envisioned.

But... they finally had a cultivation method! Even if it was incomplete, problematic, it was better than nothing!

Not daring to linger, Su Ming quickly removed his outer garment, carefully wrapped the storage pouch and jade slip, and tucked them into his inner robe. He hesitated for a moment about the three depleted spirit stones, then stuffed them into his pocket as well.

Even a mosquito's flesh is still meat; he hadn't forgotten his master's teachings.

After finishing all this, he swiftly retreated from the cavern and returned to the main hall.

He didn't forget to retrieve the seven wood struck by lightning nails. When pulling them out, he noticed their color was much duller than before, clearly having consumed a significant amount of their spiritual nature while suppressing the stain.

Without the nails' suppression, the pool of stain began to slowly squirm again.

Su Ming didn't dare look back. He turned and ran.

He ran out of the dilapidated temple in one breath, out of that deathly silent mountain forest. Only when he could feel the wind and snow on his face again, only when he could see travelers on the distant official road, did he dare stop. Leaning against a large tree, he gasped for breath, panting heavily.

His entire body felt as if dragged out of water, almost completely drained.

He looked back. The dilapidated temple was already obscured by wind, snow, and the mountain forest, leaving only a faint outline.

Yet that bone-deep chill and fear still left his heart trembling with lingering fear.

The hard-won items tucked inside his robe now felt somewhat scalding to the touch.

"Dammit, this cursed place is even more sinister than I thought!" Lin Yu's voice, still shaken, sounded in his mind, carrying the relief of a narrow escape. "Thank goodness we were well-prepared, otherwise both of us would have been done for today, turned into fresh nourishment for that stain!"

He paused, his tone turning serious again.

"Hurry and leave! The farther from this place, the better! As for this 'Thick Earth Art'... I'll need to study it thoroughly when we get back, scrutinize it word by word! We absolutely must not jump out of the wolf's den only to fall into the tiger's mouth, cultivating some kind of problem!"

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Chapter 86: Broken Cultivation Technique

[2,754 words]

Dusk was dim. Su Ming dragged two legs heavy as if filled with lead, chilled to the bone, as he shuffled back into the small courtyard behind the County School. The clatter of carts and horses on the official road faded away, and the courtyard wall stood like a blurred boundary, completely severing him from that eerie, ruined temple he'd been at during the day.

He pushed open the courtyard gate, then quickly shut it and set the latch. The wooden latch clicked softly, its sound startlingly clear in the silence. Only now, after taut nerves all day, did he allow himself a little loosening—like that latch could truly lock something away, lock in the temple's piercing cold, its endless strangeness, and that damp, metallic stench of rot.

The old well in the yard steamed a faint, almost imperceptible white vapor. The surroundings were excessively quiet. This kind of quiet was different from the deathly stillness of a few hours earlier; it carried a human presence, a familiar safety—exactly the sanctuary Su Ming wanted most right now.

He walked to the well but didn't rush to draw water. He simply stood there, breathing deep, cold, clear air. He seemed intent on exhaling every bit of the nauseating smell left in his lungs, replacing it with the breath of the living.

The oil lamp was lit, banishing the darkness inside. He carefully placed the few things he had risked his life to retrieve on the table. They lay there quietly, yet weighed heavy—these were hope, or at least what he had convinced himself were.

A palm-sized cloth pouch, riddled with cracks, gray and dull without any sheen.

A similarly dull jade slip, its surface webbed with cracks.

And three dingy gray stones, ordinary enough to be picked up by the roadside.

This was the "immortal fate" he had fought to carry out of the ruined temple.

Su Ming first picked up the cloth pouch. In his hand it felt like weathered wood centuries old, coarse enough to prick; tiny fibers came away under his fingertips. He tried to draw the faint thread of energy from his dantian and slowly direct it toward the pouch's mouth.

But that strand of energy sank away like a cow into the sea; not the slightest response. The places on the pouch's mouth that should have held rune seals were now only vague, dim carvings, utterly devoid of spiritual essence, as if time and some force had ground them smooth. He could even see a warped mark on it—something like a flame, something like drifting cloud—and it had long since lost its spark, leaving only a broken outline.

"Tsk." Lin Yu's voice sounded faintly, "Don't waste your effort, disciple. This thing is just a lowest-grade storage pouch. Its spiritual power is exhausted, the seals ruined. It would leak even copper coins now, let alone spirit elixirs or artifacts."

Su Ming's mouth twitched. He set the "leaky purse" gently at the corner of the table; whatever remaining hope he had sank along with it.

He picked up one of the gray-white stones. It was cold and rough in his palm, lacking any jade-like warmth—more like a stubborn pebble plucked from a riverbed. He channeled his qi again, focusing his intent, trying to draw any trace of spiritual energy out of it.

The stone remained just a stone: no light, no heat. His qi wandered boredly through the meridians, then sulkily returned to his dantian, yielding nothing.

"Yep, standard worthless spirit stone. All the spiritual energy's dispersed clean as a dish after a dog's lick." Lin Yu's voice dripped disdain, as if looking at something filthy.

"Disciple, this is even more useless than a roadside rock. At least a plain stone doesn't lie to you. These three broken stones are utterly useless."

Silently, Su Ming pushed the three stones to the table corner to join the ruined cloth pouch.

His gaze finally settled on the jade slip, cracked everywhere. When his fingertip touched it, it felt neither metal nor jade, slightly cool. The cracks varied in depth, silently speaking of its long, damaged history.

"Careful! Don't touch it with that half-baked spiritual sense of yours!" Lin Yu's voice suddenly turned grave, steeped in an unusual tension. "This thing's as fragile as puff pastry now! If your spiritual sense grips it wrong, you could completely shatter whatever remnants of information are inside! Keep it safe, absolutely keep it safe! Wait until I recover some soul power, then we'll nibble at this bone slowly!"

"Yes, Master." Su Ming nodded respectfully, a chill running through him. He knew his master wasn't joking about this. He found the softest scrap of fine cotton and wrapped the jade slip layer upon layer until he felt certain it was secure, then tucked it close to his chest.

Only after he finished did an overwhelming fatigue seep from every bone, as if a thousand pounds had been lifted. He sat on the bench at the table, watched the lamp flame flicker, hearing his own heavy, slow breaths, and did not move for a long time.

Disappointed?

Of course he was, to some extent. When those "immortal fortunes" he'd pinned hopes on turned into a pile of trash, the letdown was undeniable.

But heavier than disappointment was a dense gratitude. Gratitude that he was still alive, still sitting here feeling the lamp's warmth and his tired body. Surviving the brink of death gave the word "alive" a deeper meaning, a new reverence.

"Disciple." Lin Yu's voice came again, with a trace of subtle concern.

"Present." Su Ming answered softly.

"Scared?"

Su Ming was silent a moment. The decayed corpse in the temple, the eerie blue light, the ghastly grimace of a dying spirit flashed through his mind. He nodded slowly: "Scared."

"Good. You should be." Lin Yu's tone recovered some vitality, heavy and grave. "Fear keeps you aware. Life is hard; cultivating immortality is harder. Remember the feeling today, remember that helplessness when your life wasn't under your control. That will be your greatest motivation to train like your life depends on it. And it'll be the alarm that keeps you clear-headed when tempted."

Su Ming drew in a deep breath, like he intended to breathe the fear into himself and turn it into resolve—a silent force to push him forward. He rose and walked to the well. Tonight he would use the bone-piercing well water to wash the darkness out of his skin, to scrub away the blood and the terror, to wash away the discomfort of the day.

In the days that followed, everything outwardly returned to how it had been.

Su Ming still moved between the school and the library, reading, practicing calligraphy, meditating. He became more diligent and composed than ever, like a sponge greedily soaking up books. He knew that until his master figured out the jade slip, his job was to strengthen his foundations—scholarship and that faint sense of qi—both would be capital for his later cultivation.

Lin Yu inside the ring fell into a deep "closed-door" state. Most of the time he stayed unnaturally quiet; only when Su Ming called occasionally did a tired, irritated reply come—an obvious sign the jade slip had consumed too much soul power.

All of Lin Yu's attention poured into that damaged jade slip.

He tried to read it directly, but every time his spiritual sense probed inside, it was assaulted by fragmented, scrambled, illogical technique information that left him dizzy. It felt like deciphering an alien manuscript that had been ripped to bits and haphazardly glued back together: each character was recognizable, but the sequence made no sense.

"Damn it! Which half-baked cultivator who graduated from some chicken-coop immortal academy wrote this gibberish? Nonsense! No beginning matches the end! Running the routine like this, if it doesn't lead to deviating and going berserk, I'd be surprised!" Lin Yu's soul trembled with anger inside the ring; he couldn't help but curse.

After several failed brute-force attempts, he changed strategy. He began comparing the fragments with the Greenwood Longevity Art, trying to side-by-side the basic operational principles of both techniques in hopes of finding commonality or a way to patch things. It was a colossal task: reconstruct damaged knowledge from memory fragments and hunt for faint connections.

"Earth's settling, wood's generation... they seem opposed but actually generate each other? No, no... this still doesn't match... damn it, which acupoint does this crucial instruction refer to? 'Three cun below the dantian, qi goes to Xuanji'—what the hell is that?"

Lin Yu spun in circles inside the ring, his soul flickering, lost in immense confusion. He realized his greatest obstacle wasn't the technique's fragmentation so much as his lack of precise knowledge of this world's cultivation system, especially the body's meridians and acupoints.

Time slipped away in that bitter training and bitter pondering.

The north wind grew colder day by day. The old pagoda tree in the courtyard had shed all its leaves, its knotted branches swaying in the chill. Winter approached, the year-end smelled faintly in the air.

One day, Su Ming received a letter from home. It had been brought by his second brother, Su Yang. The letter said everything at home was fine; since the paper-making workshop put up the County School plaque, no one dared to bother them, and business was stable.

At the letter's end, Su Yang's tilted handwriting said that when Su Ming passed as a xiucai the family was too poor to celebrate properly, and they felt they had wronged him. Now that the family was better off, they intended to use the New Year to give him and Zhao Rui a proper xiucai banquet and urged him to return home early.

Warmth flooded Su Ming's heart after reading it.

He and Zhao Rui asked the school for leave and set off for home.

The two left the County School together. On the road, Zhao Rui talked a lot, rattling off the New Year goods his family had prepared, what his mother had sewn for him—boasting about their wealth as if afraid Su Ming wouldn't know his family's status.

Su Ming mostly listened quietly, occasionally nodding in response, saying little.

Just as they reached the village entrance, the festive New Year energy hit them. Smoke rose from every rooftop, red spring couplets were pasted on doors, the air smelled of fried peanuts and meatballs. Children, wearing possibly not-new but clean cotton jackets, chased each other with sugared melon sticks and scattered little firecrackers, laughing and shouting without pause.

"Su Ming's back! Zhao Rui's back too!" an eagle-eyed villager called out, voice full of joy.

People quickly clustered around, greeting warmly and asking about the school. The villagers' looks at Su Ming were especially admiring and envious, as if he carried a glow.

"The Su top scorer is back!"

"The xiucai has returned!"

Su Ming greeted them politely with a gentle smile. Zhao Rui puffed out his chest, savoring the attention, smiling broadly.

Back in his familiar fenced courtyard, Su Ming found things tidier than before; the pile of firewood in the corner was fuller—clearly his family had prepared things for his return.

"Ming'er!" Mrs. Chen spotted him first, cried out in joy, hurried out of the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron, grabbed his arm and inspected him from head to toe; her eyes reddened with worry and tenderness.

"You're thinner—that's from studying too much and not eating properly!" She felt him over with worry, her voice full of concern.

"No, mother, the food at the school is good. I eat two big bowls every meal." Su Ming smiled to reassure her. His heart warmed; the home comfort instantly drove away the cold.

Su Shan came out from the house with a pipe in hand, his face still composed sternly, but his eyes paused on him and he gave a barely perceptible nod. "Hm, good you're back." Su Ming was used to that taciturn kind of care.

Eldest brother Su Feng and second brother Su Yang were in the yard arranging New Year goods. Seeing him home, Su Yang dropped what he was doing and strode over, slapping his shoulder hard with a grin: "Kid! Finally back! Mother and father mention you every day!"

Su Feng smiled in his simple way, his eyes bright with brotherly joy.

Wang Chuntao poked her head out of the kitchen and called out in a loud voice: "Young master's back? Perfect timing! We'll stew big bones tonight! Your mother's been wanting to make you something nourishing! Give you a proper warming up!"

That familiar, earthy clamor of care made the tension he'd held for months dissolve. Home's warmth—so tangible and precious—was the harbor he would always long for.

Dinner that night was noticeably more abundant than previous years: meat and even a small pot of wine. Mrs. Chen kept dishing for him, chattering about village news and the paper workshop's improvements; with the family's increased comfort, they wanted to celebrate properly and make up for the xiucai feast he'd missed.

"You and Zhao Rui will be celebrated together. Your Uncle Zhao has arranged it, right in front of the ancestral hall; we'll invite the whole village!" Su Shan took a sip of wine, then set his cup down with a tone that left no argument. "Our family isn't short on money now. We must put on the proper face, can't let people look down on us."

Su Ming felt his family's newfound financial ease straighten his parents' backs and give them more confidence in their words.

The make-up xiucai banquet was grand indeed. In the open ground before the ancestral hall, over a dozen large tables were set; nearly the whole village came. The air smelled of roasted meat and wine, voices rose in chaotic cheer; the atmosphere was exuberant.

Village Chief Zhao Dequan, cheeks flushed, wearing a neat satin jacket, held a wine cup and moved among the tables with a loud voice—clearly the evening's center, basking in the adulation.

"Fellow villagers, today is a joyous day for Su Family Village! Two of our own have become literary stars at once! Come, let us drink!"

The villagers roared approval, clinking cups amid the warm atmosphere.

Su Ming and Zhao Rui stood side by side as the guests paid their respects and offered congratulatory toasts.

Zhao Rui wore a brand-new brocade robe and a smug grin. He drank in the attention. But as more and more praise lavished on Su Ming, the hand holding his cup tightened involuntarily.

"Still, the Su top scorer is impressive! That's someone from the county!"

"Yes, yes. Su top scorer will surely become a provincial graduate, then a jinshi, a high official!"

"Su family, your ancestral grave must be smoking green—that's how you raise such a fine son!"

Su Ming smiled modestly, returning each greeting with calm courtesy.

Zhao Rui's smile stiffened. He leaned toward Su Ming and whispered, "Look at them, so... vulgar." Su Ming glanced at him but said nothing.

Instead he tapped cups lightly with Zhao Rui and said softly, "Everyone's goodwill is genuine—simple, kind." Then he drained his cup.

In the ring, Lin Yu's bored voice chimed in with a teasing tone, "Tsk tsk, disciple, your little friend's heart is about as narrow as a needle's eye. This banquet isn't about food—it's about vinegar and sourness. Human jealousy and vanity are really harder to see through than many training obstacles. Take heed."

Su Ming replied inwardly, "Master, aren't you studying the technique?"

"Tired of studying, so I'm airing out a bit and catching the human comedy," Lin Yu said mockingly. "Tsk, that roasted chicken looks good. It's a pity—I can smell it but cannot eat; that's the cruellest torture under heaven."

Suppressing a smile, Su Ming lifted his cup and finished it in one swallow for a table of villagers offering toasts.

Midway through the banquet, a cloth shop owner who had come from the town to congratulate them brought his cup to Zhao Dequan and loudly praised him: "Village Chief Zhao, congratulations! The paper from your Su Family Village in our Qingshi Town is—" He thumped his thumb up, grinning broadly, "—delicate and even. As for price... it's a bit bolder than the paper from the south! Makes people love and hate it in equal measure! Haha!"

Zhao Dequan kept his smile and laughed skillfully: "Shopkeeper Liu, you overpraise, you overpraise! All thanks to the County School, and thanks to everyone! Small profits with big sales, small profits with big sales!" He deftly steered the conversation elsewhere, yet Su Ming noted the fleeting glint that passed through his eyes.

The raucous banquet didn't wind down until the moon climbed high, ending amid scattered plates and the guests' warm intoxication.

A few days after the New Year, Su Ming and Zhao Rui rode the ox cart back to the County School.

The small courtyard was as quiet as ever; the pagoda tree's branches swayed softly in the cold breeze, making a rustling sound.

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

Chapter 87: The Path of Cultivation: One Step at a Time

[2,868 words]

Returning to the small courtyard at the County School, the festive atmosphere of the New Year seemed to be blocked out by the courtyard walls, quickly dissipating.

The wind blew through the bare branches of the locust tree, making a low, moaning sound, and it felt even colder than before the New Year.

Su Ming put his traveling bag back in the room, changed out of his new clothes, and put on the old, faded scholar's robe again. He felt like a drop of hot oil that had dripped into cold water—briefly boiling, then rapidly cooling, merging back into the whole.

He sat at his desk and spread out his books, but his mind wandered.

"Master, are you still studying that jade slip?" Su Ming asked softly in his heart.

It was quiet inside the ring, with no response.

Ever since before the New Year, his master had almost completely disappeared. Su Ming knew the old man was expending immense mental effort to decipher that damaged cultivation method and didn't dare disturb him lightly.

He sighed and forced himself to pull his attention back to the books.

The days passed one by one.

Life at the County School was monotonous and routine. He rose at the rooster's crow at dawn to recite the classics; listened to the teacher's lectures and studied policy discussions during the day; and reviewed his books by oil lamp or meditated in the courtyard at night.

Su Ming's Aura Concealment Art had become almost instinctive. Walking among crowds, he was like a drop of water merging into a river, utterly inconspicuous. Yet, his five senses had become increasingly sharp through meditation. In the deep quiet of the night, he could even hear the faint sound of crickets rubbing their wings in the corner and distinguish the scent of distiller's grains wafting from a distant tavern carried on the wind.

This clear perception of the outside world gave him a more wondrous understanding of his own existence.

One night, Su Ming sat cross-legged in the courtyard as usual.

The moonlight was cold, casting his long, slender shadow on the ground.

His mind was serene. The tiny spark of light within his Dantian was being gently nurtured, and his entire being was in an ethereal state.

Right then, an extremely hoarse voice, as if its owner hadn't had a drink of water in centuries, exploded in his mind.

"Got it! I finally got it!"

The voice carried a mix of ecstatic relief and a long-suppressed fury.

Su Ming's spirit shook, nearly jolting him out of his meditative state.

"Master!" he exclaimed in delight.

"Ahem..." Lin Yu quickly adjusted his tone, restoring that air of a transcendent master's calm and composure, as if the guy who had just cursed didn't exist at all. "Disciple, your master... has gained some insights during my seclusion."

Lin Yu's Soul Body drifted around inside the ring, like an unlucky fellow who'd just won the lottery but couldn't tell anyone.

He was going crazy.

For over a month, he felt he wasn't researching a cultivation method but conducting an inhumane archaeological excavation. The fragmented Thick Earth Art was practically a quantum mechanics thesis written in oracle bone script, and on top of that, it had been burned, waterlogged, and finally gnawed on by a dog.

It was topsy-turvy and logically chaotic.

He'd wanted to give up countless times, but remembering that Su Ming, his only seedling, was counting on him and that his own future pension was still uncertain, he could only grit his teeth and continue.

He mixed together the knowledge about Yin and evil soul power he'd scraped from the Wailing Woman Lantern's memories, the pitiful smattering of cultivation concepts he'd gleaned from novels in his mind, and the other, completely un-practicable Greenwood Longevity Art inside the ring as a reference.

Mixing the three together was like a big pot of stew. His daily work was picking out the edible parts from this chaotic mess and then reassembling them into a dish that could be swallowed.

Just moments ago, while deducing the most basic principle of the five elements' mutual overcoming—"wood overcomes earth"—a flash of inspiration struck his mind.

He imagined the heavy, condensed power of the Thick Earth Art as the earth, and the generative, growing energy of the Greenwood Longevity Art as a seed. How does a seed break through the soil? It needs the earth to bear it, but it also needs its own ability to break through and establish itself anew.

At that moment, the two seemingly unrelated cultivation method paths miraculously connected in his mind, forming the most basic cycle.

One used the Thick Earth Art as the foundation, taking its "virtuous bearing of all things" steadiness and inclusiveness; then used the Greenwood Longevity Art as the guide, taking its "endless vitality" vigor and resilience. The two combined actually formed a brand new, albeit elementary, yet extremely solid method for drawing in qi.

It worked! Although it was just a super-simplified, streamlined version, it was usable! Safe and with no side effects!

"Master, you... succeeded?" Su Ming's voice trembled with disbelief.

"Mhm." Lin Yu responded faintly, his tone steady, betraying no ripple of emotion.

He began speaking slowly, in a tone of imparting knowledge: "Your master compared the fragmented text with the Greenwood Longevity Art, discarding the dross and extracting the essence, and finally gained some insight. All methods return to the same origin; the great path shares the same source. Although the Thick Earth Art is incomplete, its concepts of 'bearing' and 'condensing' happen to form the foundation for 'generation' and 'growth'."

"Your master has merged the two and deduced a brand new foundational cultivation method for you. The first three layers of this method are balanced and peaceful, steady and sure-footed, most suitable for a beginner like you whose foundation is not yet solid."

Su Ming listened, his heart burning with fervor. The image of his master in his mind had now been elevated to that of a divine being.

A cultivation method so damaged it was utter nonsense, and another method with restrictions that made it impossible to practice—in the hands of the old master, they could actually be fused into a brand new method!

What heaven-shaking, earth-shattering skill was this!

"However," Lin Yu's tone shifted, not forgetting his traditional skill of dousing cold water, "you must remember clearly, what your master has deduced is only the first three layers, only reaching the early stage of Qi Refining. Its greatest function is to allow you to safely step onto the path of cultivation and temper a body and meridians capable of containing spiritual energy."

"Although the foundation of this method is steady, there is no path beyond it. When you gain a true immortal fate in the future, enter a sect, and obtain a more profound inheritance, you can switch to another method at any time. By then, with your solid foundation, you will only achieve twice the result with half the effort, with no hindrances whatsoever."

What Lin Yu was actually thinking was: This thing is just a beginner's driving tutorial, first teaching you how to shift gears and step on the gas, ensuring you don't drive the car into a ditch. As for whether you want to drive a Ferrari or a fighter jet later, that's your own business. Just don't jostle this old driver to death.

"Your disciple understands! Thank you, Master, for your grace of rebirth!" Su Ming was so excited he was about to kneel and kowtow.

"Alright, alright, none of these empty formalities." Lin Yu stopped him in time. "The path of cultivation is one obstacle after another. Having solved the cultivation method problem, a new challenge has arrived."

"Please instruct me, Master!" Su Ming immediately sat up straight and proper.

"The operation of a cultivation method requires guiding qi through the meridians and opening the acupoints. The pathway your master deduced avoids all dangerous points, but it demands extreme precision regarding the locations of certain key acupoints." Lin Yu's voice grew serious. "A minute deviation leads to a massive error. In a mild case, spiritual energy goes astray; in a severe case, meridians shatter, and one becomes a cripple."

"Your master is now but a remnant soul. My perception of the human body's structure is ultimately separated by a layer. I cannot guide you with spiritual sense like a true master would, nor precisely locate the points for you."

Su Ming's heart immediately tightened.

"Then... what should we do?"

Lin Yu said unhurriedly, "Your master does know the names of those acupoints, such as 'Qihai', 'Guanyuan', 'Shenque'... But just knowing the names is useless. You need to accurately find their locations within your body."

Listening to these unfamiliar terms, Su Ming frowned deeply.

He fell silent for a moment, and then a thought suddenly flashed through his mind.

"Master! Your disciple might have a solution!"

"Oh? Tell me about it." Lin Yu feigned curiosity.

Su Ming's eyes lit up as he said, "There is a Medical Officer Chen in our County School! He manages the school's pharmacy and is also responsible for treating sick students. A medical practitioner must be well-versed in the human body's meridians and acupoints! I'll go seek his advice!"

Inside the ring, Lin Yu nodded with satisfaction.

The boy is teachable! He's already learned to actively seek solutions instead of waiting for me to spoon-feed him. The self-cultivation of a gold-standard bodyguard has improved another notch.

Out loud, however, he said, "Mhm, this method might be worth a try. However, you need to think of a good pretext. Medical knowledge has always been passed down secretly.

As a scholar solely focused on the imperial exams, rashly inquiring about meridians and acupoints might arouse suspicion."

"Your disciple understands." Su Ming nodded firmly. "Your disciple will use... researching health preservation methods to regulate my family's health as a pretext to sound things out first."

"Approved." Lin Yu was concise.

Early the next morning, Su Ming deliberately got up extra early, tidied himself up neatly, then took a small package of dried bamboo shoots brought from home and knocked on the courtyard gate of the Medical Officer's residence in the County School's rear compound.

A medicine boy opened the door, looking at him with sleepy eyes.

"Top Scorer Su, you're here so early. Are you feeling unwell?"

"Not at all." Su Ming smiled gently. "I've come to pay a visit to Medical Officer Chen. I have some questions about health preservation I'd like to consult him about."

The medicine boy led him inside.

The Medical Officer's courtyard was filled with a strong aroma of medicinal herbs, which smelled bitter just by itself. Various medicinal materials were drying in the courtyard, and strings of air-dried herbs hung under the eaves.

A middle-aged man wearing a gray robe, with a goatee and a thin, clean-shaven face, was sitting in the front hall, carefully weighing herbs with a small scale.

This person was the County School's Medical Officer Chen.

"Medical Officer Chen." Su Ming stepped forward and respectfully bowed.

Medical Officer Chen lifted his eyelids, glanced at him, recognized him as the most famous Top Scorer Su in the school, and forced a professional smile onto his face.

"It's Top Scorer Su. Have a seat. What important matter brings you to see this old man?" His voice was neither hurried nor slow, carrying a calmness cultivated from years of working with medicinal herbs.

"You honor me too much." Su Ming placed the package of dried bamboo shoots by the table. "These are some mountain products from my student's home, a token of my respect. I've come to seek your advice on a matter."

Medical Officer Chen glanced at the dried bamboo shoots but said nothing, only replying, "Speak freely."

Su Ming carefully chose his words and began, "Medical Officer, sir, your student has long been studying at the school and often feels lacking in energy. I've heard that in the medical arts, there are health preservation methods like massaging acupoints and regulating qi and blood that can sharpen one's hearing and vision and invigorate the spirit. Your student is quite interested in this and wishes to learn some basic methods for my parents at home, to fulfill my filial duty in a small way."

These words were spoken flawlessly, stating his purpose while raising the banner of "filial piety."

After listening, Medical Officer Chen put down the small scale in his hand and took a sip of tea from his cup.

"Top Scorer Su, such filial devotion is truly rare." He said unhurriedly. "However, the path of health preservation is not achieved overnight. The acupoint massage you mentioned does exist. For example, for a headache, one can press the 'temple'; for stomach discomfort, one can moxibustion 'Zusanli'; for a restless mind, one can rub the 'Neiguan' point. These are all methods known even to women and children."

He mentioned a few of the most common acupoints and then stopped.

Su Ming listened quietly, waiting for him to continue.

However, there was no continuation.

Medical Officer Chen shifted his tone and said earnestly, "Top Scorer Su, you are a promising scholar with a bright future. Your main focus should be the sages' texts and scholarly honor in the examination halls. The medical arts are vast and profound, as boundless as the sea. One cannot even find the entrance without devoting a lifetime of effort. This old man advises you not to distract yourself with such 'minor skills' and delay your proper path of pursuing official rank."

He picked up his teacup, making a gesture of seeing a guest out.

"If you truly feel lacking in energy, this old man can prescribe a formula to calm the nerves and nourish the brain for you. Take it regularly."

Su Ming's heart sank.

He understood.

Medical Officer Chen was politely rejecting him. Not only was the other unwilling to teach him in depth, but he even viewed his inquiry about acupoints as neglecting his proper duties.

Those so-called barriers of inheritance were thicker and higher than he had imagined.

"Thank you for your guidance, Medical Officer, sir. Your student... has been taught." Su Ming stood up, bowed once more, his expression revealing neither joy nor anger.

He turned and walked out of the small courtyard. The morning sun shone on him, but he felt no warmth at all.

The medicine boy saw him to the gate, watched his retreating back, and muttered quietly, "Another one trying to steal knowledge... Medical Officer Chen's skills aren't that easy to learn."

Returning to his own small courtyard, Su Ming closed the door, and the calm on his face finally collapsed.

"Master, that path is blocked." His voice carried some dejection.

"Expected." Lin Yu's voice was quite calm. "Disciple, you must remember, in this world, any skill that allows one to establish oneself and make a living is someone else's means of livelihood. Why would they teach it to you for free?"

Lin Yu, however, was internally grumbling: This old fossil, his thinking is too rigid! Doesn't he understand knowledge payment? Start a training class! Wouldn't it be good to take my disciple, such a fine seedling, as a closed-door disciple and have him take care of you in your old age and handle your funeral? Really, no business sense at all!

Su Ming remained silent.

He leaned against the door panel, looking at the old locust tree in the courtyard.

"Then what should we... do?"

The cultivation method was right before his eyes, yet he couldn't practice it because of this final step. This feeling was even more torturous than having no method at all.

There was silence inside the ring for a moment.

Lin Yu seemed to be pondering as well.

After quite a while, he finally spoke, his voice carrying a determination to burn his boats.

"If the proper path doesn't work, then we'll take the side door."

Su Ming leaned against the door panel. The morning sunlight filtered through the window lattice, casting mottled patches of light at his feet, yet it couldn't dispel the gloom in his heart.

"Side door?" He repeated subconsciously, a trace of doubt rising in his heart.

"Correct." Lin Yu's voice held determination. "Since we can't learn from the living, then we'll look among the inanimate! Books are the oldest containers of knowledge."

"Books?" Su Ming was taken aback. "But Medical Officer Chen said..."

Lin Yu interrupted him, "What you're looking for isn't some profound medical theory or peerless secret formula, but merely the most basic, most common diagram of the human body's meridians and acupoints! Those secret manuals and proven formulas treasured and passed down through generations by major medical halls and families—those are naturally beyond our reach."

Lin Yu's voice gradually rose, carrying an excitement that was guiding: "This kind of thing might be considered crude and shallow, even possibly erroneous, in the eyes of true medical practitioners. But for us, as long as it can roughly mark the locations of those major acupoints, it's enough! Your master has his own ways to verify the rest!"

Su Ming's eyes lit up.

"Master, you mean..."

"Two places!" Lin Yu said decisively. "First, go find Xu Qing! His used book stall has all sorts of things from all walks of life. We might just stumble upon some unexpected treasure there, even if it's just an illustrated beginner's medical book!"

"Second, the County School's library! The ancients often recorded health preservation methods and strange tales in novels and notes. Perhaps there are fragments of information, or even simple diagrams!"

"Yes! Xu Qing! The library!" Su Ming abruptly straightened up. His dejection vanished, replaced by an urgency born of having a clear goal. "Your disciple will go right now!"

He almost immediately took action, pushing open the courtyard gate and walking out.

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

Chapter 88: What One Learns on Paper Remains Shallow

[1,626 words]

Su Ming almost ran out of the small courtyard.

The morning mist had not yet cleared, but the streets of Qingshi Town already carried the bustle of daily life. Breakfast vendors blew on their hands, tending steaming pots and pans.

He did not stop for a moment, cutting across most of the town until he reached the familiar old locust tree at the western corner.

Xu Qing was already there. He was squatting in front of a straw mat, carefully wiping a yellowed copy of the County Records of Qingzhou with a half-worn piece of burlap. He treated it with such seriousness, as if it were a priceless treasure.

“Brother Xu.” Su Ming stepped forward, his footsteps deliberately light.

Xu Qing looked up, saw Su Ming, rose, and brushed the dust from his sleeve. “Come for the policy discussion notes I promised last time?”

“Not entirely.” Su Ming shook his head, a trace of embarrassment on his face. “I came to ask for Brother Xu’s help. I want to find some medical books... about the human meridians and acupuncture points. Do you happen to have any?”

Xu Qing froze in place.

He looked at Su Ming with a hint of surprise, as if he could not understand why a top scorer would take an interest in medicine. He did not press the matter, however. He squatted back down and began searching through his pile of treasured old books.

“I do have some medical books,” Xu Qing said as he rifled through them, “but most are elementary rhymes like Soup Formulas and Materia Medica songs, meant to teach how to identify herbs or memorize prescriptions.”

His hand wandered among the stacks and soon produced several thin booklets, which he handed to Su Ming.

Su Ming accepted them and flipped through quickly. As Xu Qing had said, they were full of catchy verses, focusing far more on the properties and effects of herbs than on the structure of the human body.

“As for meridians and acupuncture points...” Xu Qing frowned slightly, seeming to strain his memory, “those are precious. True copies of the Ling Shu or Zhen Jing are treasures locked away in major medical houses, passed down internally but not shared with outsiders. You won’t see them in ordinary markets.”

He continued searching the far corner of his stall inside a wooden box for a long while, then carefully withdrew a piece of square-folded coarse yellow hemp paper.

“This is all I have.” He unfolded it. “I copied it years ago from a damaged ancient book. It’s called the Diagram of the Correct Human Hall.”

Su Ming’s gaze was immediately drawn to it.

It was a hand-drawn figure of the human body, rough lines and smeared ink. Several lines running through the body were marked in cinnabar, and tiny regular script annotated names like Hand-Taiyin Lung Meridian and Foot-Yangming Stomach Meridian.

A few acupuncture points were labeled — Zhongfu, Tianfu, Chize — but each was only indicated by a rough dot, with no notes on depth or specific functions.

The diagram was better than nothing.

“Su Ming.” Xu Qing looked at him earnestly. “This drawing is crude and many parts are blurred. It only shows general directions. If you truly want to learn medicine, this alone won’t do.”

Su Ming folded the drawing carefully and tucked it into his chest.

“Thank you, Brother Xu.” He looked at Xu Qing and said sincerely, “This will be very useful to me.”

He did not overexplain. Xu Qing did not ask further.

That was their unspoken understanding.

After saying goodbye to Xu Qing, Su Ming did not return to his courtyard. Instead, he turned and headed deeper into the County School.

Second stop, the library.

The library was an old three-story wooden building, perennially filled with a unique scent of paper and timber.

When Su Ming entered, Manager Sun was dozing behind the counter, his graying beard rising and falling with each breath.

“Manager Sun.” Su Ming lowered his voice and respectfully bowed.

Manager Sun lifted his eyelids, his cloudy eyes rolling as he recognized Su Ming, then slowly sat up a bit more.

“Ah, Top Scorer Su.” His voice was hoarse, laced with sleepy laziness. “Not here for county records chatter today? What else do you want to look at?”

“This student hopes to find books... concerning human meridians, or guides to health-preserving exercises.” Su Ming asked cautiously. “Do you have any in the stacks?”

A flicker of clarity and surprise crossed Manager Sun’s murky eyes.

He sized Su Ming up from head to toe, then slowly shook his head.

“Top Scorer Su, you’re young, newly titled, and should be pursuing classics and histories with vigor.” His tone carried the admonishment of an elder. “Why are you studying the amusements of old men who are soon to be buried? You mustn’t place the cart before the horse.”

The same old lecture.

Su Ming felt helpless but kept his expression composed, answering humbly.

“You misunderstand, sir. I only had some thoughts while reading lately and wish to broaden my knowledge. I would never neglect my main studies.”

Manager Sun stared at him for a long moment, trying to discern something from his face. Su Ming’s expression remained calm and clear, showing nothing unusual.

“Fine.” Manager Sun slowly rose, his stooped silhouette stretched long in the morning light. He fumbled under the counter for a large ring of rusted keys, which clinked as he moved.

“Follow me. Books of that sort, if they exist at all, are piled in the farthest corner of the miscellaneous collection. They’ve been gathering dust for decades without being touched.”

The so-called miscellaneous collection was actually a dim room under the library.

The iron key grated in the lock, emitting a teeth-chattering creak. A thick smell of mildew and dust, mixed with damp cold, rushed out.

Manager Sun did not enter; he pointed inside with his bony finger.

“Search on your own. What you find depends on your fate. Don’t linger; the lower rooms hold a cold that’s not good for scholars.”

With that, he tucked his hands into his sleeves and shuffled back upstairs to bask in the sun, leaving Su Ming alone with the dusty chamber.

Su Ming took a deep breath and lit the oil lamp he kept in the corner.

The pinprick of light only lit the three feet before him; beyond it lay dark, silent shelves. The bookcases leaned crookedly, filled with an unclassified jumble of badly damaged volumes, like a pile of silent, forgotten corpses.

He began a grueling search.

Dust coated his clothes and cheeks; his fingers were soon nicked by the rough pages, burning with pain.

He searched the entire afternoon.

He found many strange and curious works: treatises on feng shui, face-reading and fortune-telling manuals, a large number of fantastical strange-tales, and the grumbled notes of an embittered, unsuccessful literati.

He did find some books on medicine and health preservation.

One was a retired official’s Record of Pleasant Living. Su Ming opened it with hope, only to find pages devoted to maintaining a cheerful disposition, taking walks, and using food to regulate mood. For acupuncture points, it casually said, “When headaches strike, one may massage the temple to brighten the eyes,” and nothing more.

Another was titled A Treatise on Cultivation and Guiding Techniques — a dramatic title. Its contents were mystifying, filled with methods like swallowing saliva, clicking the teeth to gather spirit, and “guarding the ancestral orifice.” But what or where the “ancestral orifice” was, how large the dantian should be, none of that was explained; everything relied on personal revelation.

Lin Yu laughed silently in Su Ming’s ring.

Well, this was the ancient version of a health column and feel-good self-help — all correct-sounding but ultimately useless.

The only illustrated book was a volume with a rotted cover, The Shaolin Trauma Remedies.

Su Ming treated it like a treasure. It did contain crude human figures, but the labels were vague — “soft cartilage on the chest,” “three inches below the ribs,” “inside of the ankle” — and the instructions explained how to treat external bruises or set bones.

These were far from the precise, hair-fine meridian maps required for cultivation practice.

By the time Su Ming dragged his exhausted, dust-covered body out of the basement, the sunset had stained half the sky red.

Manager Sun leaned in a recliner, eyes half-closed, listening to the birds outside. Seeing Su Ming return empty-handed and dejected, he seemed unsurprised.

He did not mock him, but merely shook his head and sighed.

“Young man, do not chase loftier things than you can reach. What one learns on paper remains shallow.”

The words pierced Su Ming’s heart like a needle.

A knowledge barrier loomed like an invisible mountain across his path to cultivation, impossible to scale.

Back in his small courtyard, Su Ming shut the door and flung himself onto the cold planks of his bed, not even able to move a finger.

“Master...” His voice trembled with undisguised disappointment and fatigue. “Xu Qing only had that crude Diagram of the Correct Human Hall, and the library... had nothing truly useful.”

Silence settled in the room for a moment.

Lin Yu had already observed the entire search through Su Ming’s perceptions. The outcome did not surprise him. If such core knowledge were so easily obtained, then the “Way” of this world would be far too cheap.

“Disciple.” Lin Yu’s voice sounded, unusually calm, with a peculiar comforting undertone. “You have done very well. You have given everything you could.”

“But...”

“No buts.” Lin Yu cut him off. “That path is a dead end, as I expected. On the contrary, I should thank that old Manager Sun. One of his words enlightened me.”

Su Ming sat up from the bed, startled. “What did he say?”

“What one learns on paper remains shallow.” Lin Yu said slowly, his voice carrying a strange cadence. “Since we cannot find the path in books, we will change our method — we will verify the Way through the body itself!”

“Verify the Way... through the body?” Su Ming repeated, murmuring, not fully understanding the explosive implications behind those four words.

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

Chapter 89: Better to Practice on Your Own Body

[1,455 words]

"Not bad!" Lin Yu's voice suddenly became crisp and forceful, full of powerful confidence, "Although I am now only a remnant soul, unable to sweep your meridians with my spiritual sense so you can clearly view them, I can use a different method — I will guide your sense of qi, letting you use your own body to remember that one-and-only pathway!"

Su Ming felt his heart jolt violently, his breath halted.

"The human body itself is the most precise, most profound map!" Lin Yu's voice echoed in his mind. "When a certain acupoint is stimulated it will produce soreness, numbness, distension, or pain. When another point is touched it will trigger heat, coolness, chill, or flow. Your body will tell you! All I need to do is guide that faint sense of qi and make it run along the absolutely safe route I have deduced. At each crucial acupoint I will use a secret method to stimulate it, so you will imprint its exact location into your soul with the deepest bodily sensation!"

Those words struck like a thunderbolt in the night, instantly cutting through the fog in Su Ming's mind.

He trembled slightly from excitement.

"Master!" he blurted out, "When do we start?"

"No rush." Lin Yu's voice steadied, "Take out the Diagram of the Correct Human Hall you got from Xu Qing. Though rough, it at least marks the general path of the Twelve Principal Meridians. Memorize it first, commit the framework to your heart. Leave the rest to me."

Su Ming immediately fished the piece of coarse hemp paper from his bosom and, by the last thread of light filtering through the window, committed every character and every line to memory.

Night fell deep and silent.

Su Ming sat cross-legged in the courtyard, moonlight like water spilling over the yard.

He closed his eyes; the crude Diagram of the Correct Human Hall was already clearly imprinted in his mind.

"Ready, disciple?" Lin Yu's voice came at the right moment.

"Ready, Master!"

"Good. Calm your mind and draw out that thread of sensation from your Dantian." Lin Yu instructed, "Don't be afraid."

Su Ming obeyed. He carefully mobilized the faint glow in his Dantian, coaxing a barely perceptible, warm current out to wander aimlessly through his body.

"Hold it steady. Now, follow my command." Lin Yu's voice sharpened into intense focus. "Imagine your chest, from the midline outward about six cun. Yes, right there. That is Zhongfu, the starting point of the Hand-Taiyin Lung meridian."

Su Ming guided the warm current with thought, slowly moving it toward the position his master had described.

"Very good," Lin Yu praised, "Now keep it there. What comes next may feel...special. Endure it!"

No sooner had he spoken than Su Ming felt as if a cold, thin needle had jabbed suddenly into that spot on his chest!

"Ah!"

He inhaled sharply as the carefully gathered warm current instantly collapsed and scattered. A sharp sour-numb sensation rushed through his chest, nearly jolting him out of meditation.

"Idiot! Who told you to lose focus!" Lin Yu scolded without mercy. "I said endure it! If the qi disperses, gather it again! If you can't handle this little pain, what are you cultivating for — go home and farm!"

Su Ming's face drained of color. Gritting his teeth and ignoring the odd feeling in his chest, he settled his mind once more and recollected the scattered sensation.

But Lin Yu's inner feelings were far less calm than his words implied.

Oh my goodness, I think I went too hard that time. It's really hard to control the intensity of soul-force stimulation, like using chopsticks to pick up a fly. Nearly poked a hole in my disciple's lung. No, no, must be gentler.

The second time, when Su Ming again brought the sensation to that location, Lin Yu's movements were considerably softer.

This time the feeling was no longer a needle prick but like a drop of cold dew falling onto a red-hot iron plate with a faint sizzle.

An indescribable sour distension spread instantly from that point, making half his body tingle.

Prepared this time, Su Ming held his mind rock-solid and let the sensation circle and familiarize itself with that sour distension at the center.

"Remember it? This feeling!" Lin Yu barked. "This is Zhongfu! Now follow down the inner side of the arm about a palm's distance — there is Tianfu!"

Su Ming propelled the warm current by thought, slowly tracing the direction his master indicated.

On the Diagram of the Correct Human Hall that path was only a vague red line, but inside his body it was a dark unknown.

Failure, failure, more failure.

Sometimes the force was misjudged and the qi shattered.

Sometimes Su Ming's intent wavered and the warm flow lost momentum halfway.

Sometimes Lin Yu's soul-force stimulation missed by half a fen and produced not sour distension but a stabbing, burning pain.

In just one hour, fine beads of sweat dotted Su Ming's forehead and his back was soaked through. His face was pale, and he had bitten his lips until they bled.

This was more exhausting than a full day's work in the fields.

Lin Yu wasn't having an easy time either. This fine, meticulous operation consumed him greatly as a weak remnant soul. He felt like a burly man with an embroidery needle carving the Riverside Scene at Qingming on a single grain of rice.

My heavens, this job is not for the faint of heart. Had I known it'd be this troublesome, I should have tricked him into practicing Iron Head Skill instead.

After another failure, Su Ming's qi sensation was completely depleted and he swayed as if faint.

"Master... disciple... can't go on..."

"Trash!" Lin Yu's voice sounded weak but still severe. "You are only at the beginning! Twelve main acupoints on one meridian and you haven't even found the second! Get up, continue!"

Panting, Su Ming could sense the exhaustion in his master's voice. He knew his master was suffering more than he was.

He said nothing, only quietly ran the steps of the Aura Concealment Art to calm himself and recover his composure.

A moment later he opened his eyes again, the fatigue in them replaced by stubborn resolve.

"Again!"

This time, when the faint thread of qi reached his arm, Su Ming's concentration surpassed anything he'd felt before.

He no longer treated it as a mere task; he used his whole body to feel and remember.

"Right here!" Lin Yu's voice came at the perfect instant in his mind.

A gentle, precisely-timed stimulus arrived.

Boom!

Su Ming felt a tiny little firework explode at that point on his arm. A warm, tingly sensation flowed up the arm, resonating with the Zhongfu on his chest.

Connected!

The route he had groped through the darkness was, at that moment, linked by two bright points.

With the first success, the remainder of the process, though still difficult, flowed much more smoothly.

Chize, Kongzui, Lieque, Jingqu...

Each acupoint was imprinted into Su Ming by repeated failures and then precise stimulation, through the deepest physical sensations of pain, numbness, soreness, and distension.

When the qi finally reached the thumb-tip Shaoshang, Lin Yu's voice carried a trace of relief.

"Push through! Finish it!"

Su Ming's mind and thought united, the now somewhat strengthened warm current barreling without hesitation toward that final barrier.

Vzzz—

A faint humming sounded, not from the outside but directly in Su Ming's mind.

In that instant, from Zhongfu at the chest to Shaoshang at the fingertip, eleven lit acupoints seemed strung together by an invisible line, emitting a gentle glow.

The warm current traveled freely along that luminous channel and returned to the Dantian.

At the same time, from the ancient well in the courtyard, strands of imperceptible, cool spiritual energy — as if irresistibly attracted — surged toward Su Ming's body with unprecedented speed!

They followed the newly opened meridian route, were drawn in and refined, and finally transformed into a pure energy that poured into the Dantian.

The tiny speck of light in Su Ming's Dantian, originally the size of a grain of rice, flared up. Its volume visibly swelled and condensed. He felt his Dantian no longer as a point but as a small, warm "Sea of Qi."

His spirit power surged as well, and senses that had been only vaguely perceptible suddenly became incredibly clear.

He could "hear" outside the yard a late-returning beetle's six legs rustling across the ground.

He could "smell" the faint sourness of the neighbor's leftover soup starting to spoil.

He could "see" countless tiny dust motes floating in the moonlight.

The world had never been so clear, so vivid.

Qi Refining, first layer, stabilized!

Su Ming slowly opened his eyes.

His bright pupils seemed to hold a flowing galaxy. He looked at his hands, at the courtyard bathed in moonlight, and an unprecedented sense of mastery over his own power welled up inside him.

"Hmph." From the ring came Lin Yu's tired yet supremely satisfied chuckle. "Not completely inept after all."

Finally made it! My gold-medal bodyguard training plan: the foundation of stage one is finally laid!

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

[2,530 words]

Su Ming slowly opened his eyes.

The whole world was completely reconstructed within his perception.

In the courtyard corner, a late-returning black beetle, its six tiny segmented legs scraping the rough ground, produced an extremely faint "rustle," which registered clearly in his ears.

Under the moonlight, the air was no longer empty. Countless tiny dust motes drifted and spun slowly before his eyes.

He could even feel the cool spiritual energy wafting from the old well, circling him like a wanderer who had finally found a home.

This was the world of Qi Refining.

"Hmph." From inside the ring, Lin Yu's voice carried a just-right weariness and an inability to hide his satisfaction, "Finally, not completely hopeless."

Finally finished guiding this kid through the newbie stage! My golden-bodyguard-cum-mobile-power-bank has finally booted up! The retirement fund plan has taken a solid first step!

Su Ming stood and walked a few casual paces in the courtyard. The Aura Concealment Art moved with his intention, and his entire presence instantly quieted, as if he were a stone in the yard, a speechless blade of grass.

Lin Yu's soul body drifted inside the ring and gave a small "eh."

Strange, for a moment just now it felt like this kid's presence had totally vanished. His Aura Concealment Art combined with his own spiritual energy works even better than I imagined.

"Master." Su Ming returned to the room and closed the door.

The exhilaration and novelty from the breakthrough slowly faded, replaced by a deeper bewilderment rising in his chest.

He looked at his empty hands and asked softly, "The disciple has already stepped through the gate of cultivation, but... where does the road beyond the gate lead? I feel like a blind man who has touched the leg of an elephant yet does not know what the elephant truly looks like."

Lin Yu nearly burst out laughing inside the ring.

Good kid, learned to infer and now thinking about philosophy. Not bad, not bad, he has one percent of my old style. Knowing how to ask for directions is better than blindly running headfirst.

He cleared his throat and adopted the seasoned, world-weary tone of someone who had been through it: "Disciple, the fact you can ask that question means your mind has opened. You're no longer that foolish kid who only buries his head in practice."

"You think cultivation is what? Find a deep mountain forest, dig a cave-dwelling, then seclude for a thousand years and come out invincible?"

Su Ming said nothing. The novels he had read before had mostly been written that way.

"Wrong!" Lin Yu's voice was decisive, "That path leads to the fool's grave! The real world of cultivation is far more complex than you imagine, and far more... practical."

"Ordinary life and cultivation seem like two entirely separate worlds, but they coexist under the same heavens. They are like water and oil—immiscible—yet bottled together."

"This bottle is the rigid barrier of class and information."

Lin Yu's voice deepened, carrying the wisdom of someone who sees through affairs: "Think about it. If the methods to become an immortal were available to everyone, wouldn't the world already be in chaos? Would the emperor's dragon throne remain stable? Could the noble lanes of the old families keep their prestige?"

A chill ran through Su Ming. He thought of Zhou Wenhai, of Professor Liu, and of those teachings about power and methods.

"If you want to enter the circle of cultivation, there are two paths: first, let people of the immortal way come to you; second, you go to them. I can't help you much now. I've been trapped in this ring too long. A thousand years changes seas and mountains; the country I once heard of might not even exist."

"The real secrets might be hidden in a deep mountain cavern, or locked away in the highest halls of power, written in the oldest family genealogies, or kept in the emperor's private library." Lin Yu guided him patiently.

"A peasant's son could kneel at a sect's gate until he dies, but an immortal will barely glance. Yet if a high official who holds sway, or a renowned scholar openly shows even a hint of longing for longevity, believe me, 'immortal fate' will come knocking on their door."

Those words split the chaos in Su Ming's mind like a lightning bolt.

He grasped it at once.

What he lacked was never rare materials or peerless methods.

What he lacked was an identity — a qualification that would let him access the world's true secrets.

"So, disciple." Lin Yu's tone carried a concluding ring, "the imperial examinations are the only ladder you can climb right now."

"You are in the County School; what you see is only the sky at the bottom of a well. When you pass the provincial-level exam and become a Provincial Graduate, you can enter the prefectural city; when you pass the metropolitan exam and become a jinshi, you can stand in the court. The people you meet, the books you read, and the things you hear will be worlds apart."

Su Ming exhaled a long breath, and all the confusion and doubt in his chest cleared away.

He bowed deeply toward the ring.

"Disciple understands."

His gaze was clearer and firmer than ever.

From that night on, the top scorer Su Ming at Qingshi County School seemed changed, and yet seemed the same.

He still attended school on time, listened attentively, and showed respect to his teachers. Only now, he was no longer satisfied with the syllabus carved out by the scholars.

The County School library became his true home.

Manager Sun was surprised to find that this top scorer read at an inhuman speed. A thick Prefecture Records volume that would take others ten days or more, he could finish in an afternoon, and seemed to remember it all.

Stranger still, his reading tastes broadened.

Besides classics and histories, he became fascinated with dusty corners.

Records like Studies of Southern Strange Objects, Chronicles of Western Mountain Spirits, Biographies of Odd Figures from Former Dynasties, and The Geomancy Maps and Sayings of Daliang...

Those idle or banned books other students dismissed as distractions, he consumed avidly.

With memory and mental power far beyond ordinary people from his time in Qi Refining, he functioned like a tireless machine, feverishly scanning and organizing oceans of information.

He no longer merely hunted for the words "immortal" or "spirit."

He began to build an enormous database centered on times, places, and events.

"Year thirty-four of Yong'an, a tiger in the northern mountain spoke human words. The county lieutenant led three hundred men to surround it with no result, found huge claw prints three inches deep."

"First year of Kaiping, fishermen in the East Sea saw a dragon-shaped shadow in a storm, a hundred zhang long, scales glowing gold, vanishing into clouds. Next day three dragon scales were found on the shore, unbreakable."

"Seventh year of Jingtai, an odd person calling himself 'Cloud Wanderer' performed a rite atop Mount Tai, drew lightning to refine his body; thousands watched, then he drifted away, vanished without trace."

...

Two years slipped by quietly amid the rustle of pages and the cicadas' song in the courtyard.

Autumn wind rose again, yellowing the old locust tree in the Jia-designated Small Courtyard.

In Zhou Wenhai's study, Zhou Yulin wore a brand-new official robe, radiating vigor. Three years earlier he had passed the autumn provincial exam, last spring he ranked among the top three in the metropolitan examinations and, though he did not enter the Hanlin Academy, he was appointed outwardly to a neighboring county as an eighth-rank Assistant Magistrate.

"Junior Brother Su, I will take up my post soon. We will part, and I cannot say when we will see each other again." Zhou Yulin looked at the now tall and upright junior he had taught and felt many emotions.

These past two years, Su Ming's brilliance at the County School had no rival. Zhou Wenhai had almost taken him as his heir to the craft, pouring out all he knew. Everyone knew that in three years' provincial exam, Qingshi County's top scorer would surely be him.

"Senior Brother, may your path be bright. Travel safely." Su Ming bowed, his expression calm.

After Zhou Yulin left, Zhao Rui stood in the small yard sighing as he clutched his bundle.

"Su Ming, what do you think my father is thinking? He insists I go to the Prefectural School. With my ability, wouldn't I just be the bottom there?" Zhao Rui had grown taller over the two years, but his nature remained the same—lazy and inconsistent, making no progress in scholarship.

Su Ming merely smiled and said nothing.

Zhao Rui was off to the prefectural school, while Su Ming would stay at the County School. Because here was a "root" he could not leave.

At night, Su Ming sat cross-legged by the well.

His spiritual energy had filled considerably; the Qihai in his dantian rotated slowly, and at its center a light shone several times brighter than two years ago.

Qi Refining, second layer.

Over these two years he had almost drained every drop of spiritual energy from the well.

Yet he keenly sensed the well's recovery slowing. The well felt like a pasture overgrazed, moving toward exhaustion.

"Master, this cannot last long-term." Su Ming thought to himself.

"I told you so long ago." Lin Yu replied lazily, "This well is only enough for your newbie village. To level up, you must change maps. Don't worry, once you obtain your 'qualification,' there will be plenty of pocket dimensions and blessed lands for you to absorb from."

Su Ming suppressed his anxiety and sank his mind deeper.

There, a vast map composed of countless fragments of information was slowly taking shape.

In two years he had almost combed through every book with the character 'strange' in the library.

The result left him disappointed.

Official histories were evasive; all supernatural incidents were categorized as either 'auspicious signs' or 'calamities,' laden with political interpretations.

Unofficial histories were muddled with truth and fiction, full of exaggeration and speculation. He found over three hundred records mentioning "immortals," "demons," "spirits," and "monsters," but careful analysis showed most were mythic tales like those in Classic of Mountains and Seas, or isolated local events that could not form a coherent system.

As for organized cultivation forces, such as sects or old families, he could not even find a single clear name.

"Master, you were right." Su Ming said in the study to the pile of thick notes on the table, speaking to Lin Yu, "The world's core information is monopolized. Below a certain level, you don't even have the qualification to know."

"Now you realize? Not too late." Lin Yu's voice carried some relief, "Not finding them is the right outcome."

Still, it wasn't all fruitless.

That afternoon Su Ming went again to the ancient locust tree in the western city corner.

Xu Qing's used-book stall had grown larger than two years ago. He was still thin and quiet, but his brow held a bit more maturity.

The Su family's paper workshop in Su Family Village had improved under the officially supervised, privately operated model. No foolish person dared to cause trouble. Xu Qing's stall benefited from being an angel investor of the paper workshop and from his

connection to Su Ming, obtaining copied paper below market price; his family's situation had likewise improved.

"Brother Su, you are hunting for those strange things again?" Xu Qing watched Su Ming rummage through a pile of old books and shook his head with a smile.

In these two years, Su Ming had become his oddest customer, always choosing strange tales and absurd notes.

"Brother Xu, heard any fresh rumors lately?" Su Ming asked without looking up.

This had become their new tacit understanding.

Xu Qing's used-book stall was a local hub of information; merchants from all directions always left scraps of gossip.

"Fresh rumor?" Xu Qing thought, then lowered his voice, "There actually is one."

He leaned closer and said, "A while back a caravan escort driving southern goods said when their convoy passed by the southern Fengming Mountain, they encountered a strange thing."

Su Ming froze mid-action.

"They traveled three days, and each night they saw a valley deep in Fengming Mountain emitting seven-colored radiance, like a rainbow after rain but far brighter. The light wasn't glaring; it was very soft."

"The local guide turned pale and begged them not to approach, saying it was an 'immortal's residence' protected by a 'prismatic guardian.' Any mortal who enters would instantly turn to ash."

Su Ming's heart leapt.

Fengming Mountain! Seven-colored radiance! Immortal's residence!

Those words combined made his spiritual energy ripple uncontrollably.

"What happened next?" he asked, forcing down his excitement.

"What next? There was no next." Xu Qing shrugged, "The escort, after hearing the guide's warning, skirted the valley for dozens of li and fled before dawn. It became nothing more than tavern talk; nobody took it seriously."

Su Ming quietly memorized the place name.

He knew this might be the first real clue he had found in two years that could be truly related to immortals.

After leaving Xu Qing, Su Ming walked back to the County School.

"Master, Fengming Mountain..."

Lin Yu was silent in the ring for a moment, neither denying nor affirming, then let out a meaning-laden chuckle.

"Disciple, do you know why I often say that below a certain level you lack the qualification to know?"

"If that's truly an immortal residence and not some phosphorescent gas or swamp light, mortals who see its radiance feel awe and turn away, thus surviving. But a Qi Refining cultivator who has only just touched the threshold like you, if rashly entering, will fare worse than a mortal."

"Why?" Su Ming asked, puzzled.

"Because of rules." Lin Yu's voice grew stern, "High-level cultivators' dwellings or mysteries often do not exist in space as we usually perceive. They may be attached to the main world like a bubble on the water, but with their own entrance and laws."

"To mortals the seven-colored radiance seems anomalous, but to the cultivation world it might merely be an ordinary spatial ripple or leaked energy from an array. Its real entrance might require a specific time, a particular incantation, or even a designated 'token' or 'bloodline' to open."

"If you go now, it's like an ant crawling beside a treasure map. To you the map is just a smelly piece of paper — you cannot even understand that it is a map, let alone follow it. You will fumble around in that area pointlessly, and in the end you will either be crushed by a defensive array or... even worse, find nothing at all and waste your time."

"So, disciple, what you lack now is not a place but a 'key' and a 'manual.'"

"This 'key' might be the identity of a Provincial Graduate or jinshi, allowing you access to old families or imperial institutions that guard these secrets. That 'manual' is the systematic knowledge of cultivation, letting you understand the true meaning behind those 'wonders.'"

"Going to Fengming Mountain now with a mortal's mindset to solve a cultivation puzzle is destined to fail. Only when you acquire higher qualifications can you contact those who can decode these riddles and the knowledge behind them."

"Use this world's rules as the ladder to explore the other world — that is what the wise do. Blind force is the road to death."

"Until then, your most important task is the Provincial Examination in three months."

Su Ming returned to the Jia-designated Small Courtyard and shut the door.

He looked out the window, his gaze as if piercing a thousand mountains and rivers, resting on that distant Fengming Mountain.

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

[2,165 words]

In Zhou Wenhai's study, the scent of tea remained unchanged.

He looked at Su Ming before him, his gaze openly full of admiration. The boy sitting there had finished growing; he was a head taller than two years ago, his shoulders broader, all traces of awkward youth gone. He was steady now, like a stone that had lain motionless at the bottom of a river for a hundred years.

"Su Ming, you've been at the school for nearly three years." Zhou Wenhai pushed a cup of warm tea toward him, "In these three years, your progress has been clear to me. Whether in Classics or policy essays, you've already surpassed your peers by far. Your timing is ripe."

He paused, eyes burning as he stared at Su Ming.

"The provincial exam is near. I have already registered you. For the Yunshuo Prefecture autumn session, you must take part."

Zhou Wenhai's tone was not a suggestion; it carried an unequivocal certainty.

"With your talent, you will surely seize first place and win for our Qingshi County School a top scorer the county hasn't seen in decades!"

Top scorer.

First in the provincial exam.

Those three words meant supreme honor to any scholar.

Su Ming lowered his eyes, long lashes hiding all emotion. He did not reply at once. He lifted the teacup and felt its warmth.

“Teacher’s high expectations—this student is... unworthy,” he said slowly, his voice calm and even.

“You are not unworthy, you are fully deserving!” Zhou Wenhai waved his hand, his tone infused with strong confidence, “Go home and prepare well. Do not let your mind wander on trifles. I will be expecting good news.”

Stepping out of the study, the autumn sunlight touched him, but it brought little warmth.

Su Ming walked along the academy path at an even pace.

“Master,” he called in his heart.

Lin Yu’s soul body drifted excitedly in the ring.

Great! Finally leaving! The spiritual energy in this rotten well is like squeezing toothpaste—just a trickle a day!

“Disciple, what do you think of this?” On the surface, Lin Yu retained his usual composed, strategist’s tone.

“The teacher is right. Qingshi County no longer has what I need.” Su Ming answered bluntly.

He needed a bigger pond.

“Good, progress. You know how to assess the situation.” Lin Yu nodded approvingly, then his voice dropped a notch, “But Zhou Wenhai wanting you to go for the top scorer... that needs to be discussed.”

“What does Master mean?”

“Going for top scorer? To be a target?” Lin Yu mentally scoffed, though he spoke enigmatically, “Disciple, have you forgotten the first maxim of my Way of Survival?”

“A tall tree invites the wind,” Su Ming finished for him.

“Exactly!” Lin Yu’s voice carried the tone of a patient teacher, “You were the county’s top scorer at fourteen—you’re already a figure on the edge of public attention. Now you’re only sixteen. If at sixteen you become provincial top scorer, what do you think will happen?”

“Then all of Yunshuo Prefecture, and places even farther, will swarm over you like flies to blood. People will pry into your family background, your teacher’s lineage, what color pants you wore as a child—they’ll strip you bare. Do you think our current stature can withstand the intensity of that spotlight?”

Lin Yu thought: Give me a break. I finally raised this little ancestor into a decent portable power bank; I’m not sending him out to be a celebrity corpse! Keep low-key! Must be low-key!

Su Ming fell silent.

He remembered the policy essay rejected by the county magistrate, and Zhou Wenhai’s talk about the deep waters of officialdom.

“I understand.” Su Ming said, “For this provincial exam I will aim to pass it, not to seek fame.”

“Teachable child!” Lin Yu approved, “That’s called strategic concealment. Our goal is to obtain the provincial graduate status and the ticket into the prefectural city’s larger information platform. Rank does not matter. Middle is just right. You’ll still stand out a bit, but you won’t attract glaring attention. Like a hidden dragon among fish, quietly accumulating strength so no one notices you.”

“Once in the prefectural city, the mix of people is dangerous—far more perilous than Qingshi County. Your Aura Concealment Art is at the second level; it will be useful. Remember, restrain all your sharpness and present yourself as the most ordinary, most unremarkable exam candidate.”

“Disciple understands,” Su Ming replied inwardly.

The two reached a high degree of agreement on their Way of Survival strategy.

...

Under the ancient locust tree at the west city corner.

“Brother Xu, I came today to ask you something,” Su Ming got straight to the point. “Will you take this year’s provincial exam?”

Xu Qing’s eyes brightened for a moment, then dimmed. He shook his head.

“My family wants me to try. But the road to the prefectural city is distant, and the travel expenses are heavy. If I go, my father will be left to run the book stall alone; it would be too hard on him.” His words were full of concern.

“I will also take the provincial exam.” Su Ming looked at him, sincerity in his tone, “We can travel together, so there will be someone to look out for you. As for expenses, I have some spare funds and can lend you some for now. As for your uncle, we can ask classmates from the County School to help at the stall daily so the business won’t suffer.”

Su Ming had thought through every problem.

Xu Qing fell silent. He looked at Su Ming—the boy’s gaze was clear, without a trace of pity, only honest friendship and help.

He knew Su Ming did not pity him.

Over the past two years, Su Ming came often—officially to read, in truth to discuss scholarship. Xu Qing’s memory was broad, and he could quote obscure stories and facts at will. Su Ming had original insights on Classics and policy essays. They often talked for hours and had become close friends. Su Ming also knew Xu Qing’s talent was not inferior—only stifled by his family’s situation, like uncut jade buried under thick dust.

“All right.” Xu Qing did not hedge; he nodded decisively, “Expenses aren’t necessary—my family has saved a bit these past two years. But please, Brother Su, trouble your father.”

“No need to thank me between us,” Su Ming smiled.

...

Half a month later, a blue homespun-covered carriage slowly rolled out of Qingshi County’s south gate in the morning mist.

The driver had been hired temporarily; inside sat only Su Ming and Xu Qing.

Their baggage was simple: a few sets of spare clothes and two full trunks of books, ink, brushes, and paper.

As the carriage traveled the official road, Qingshi County’s outline gradually receded until it became a blurred black dot.

Xu Qing lifted the curtain once to glance outside, then returned to his seat and unrolled a copy of Yunshuo Local Studies to read quietly. That composure came from years spent with books.

Su Ming closed his eyes as if napping, but his Aura Concealment Art was engaged to the extreme, folding his aura in like a roadside pebble. At the same time, his strong mental awareness radiated from the carriage.

Within a hundred-meter radius, rustling grass, flying birds, and buzzing insects were all clearly mapped in his mind.

“Master, this feeling is strange,” he said.

“Nonsense. The spiritual perception at Qi Refining second level is more than enough as a personal radar,” Lin Yu said lazily. “Stay alert. On the official road, highway bandits and malevolent entities abound. Our goal is to arrive safely in the prefectural city, not play hero on the way.”

“Disciple understands.”

They rode in silence.

Seven days later, when the road widened and became more level and travelers increased, a grand, towering city finally appeared on the horizon.

Yunshuo Prefectural City.

The walls rose more than ten zhang high, built of massive dark-blue-black stone blocks, sprawling endlessly like a dragon coiled upon the earth. Banners fluttered and armored soldiers stood in ranks atop the walls; a heavy air of both deadly seriousness and prosperity washed over them.

Xu Qing closed his book and gazed at the city. The prefectural grandeur he had read about in books had become reality. A flash of awe passed through his eyes, but he quickly composed himself and quietly put the book away.

Su Ming felt it more directly.

In his mental senses, the whole Yunshuo Prefectural City resembled a vast, chaotic energy field. Countless ordinary, mixed, and faint auras converged into a maelstrom.

“My, so crowded. Thoughts everywhere, this place interferes with low-level cultivators’ perception,” Lin Yu’s voice warned in Su Ming’s mind. “Disciple, retract! Pull your spiritual perception in! Keep only a three-to-five zhang alert radius around you! Don’t flail about like a headless fly in a place like this. You’ll waste spirit, and you might unintentionally touch things you shouldn’t, or be seen as a provocation by certain beings.”

Su Ming complied, withdrawing his outward mental force and leaving only a thin layer of awareness at his body surface.

The carriage entered the city gate and was instantly swallowed by an even louder bustle.

The main street was wide, filled with traffic and surging crowds. Lining the road were packed shops—inns, teahouses, pawnshops, silk stores—countless signs and banners fluttered in the wind, dazzling the eye.

The air blended the scents of food, livestock, sewage from drains, and the sweat and cosmetics of thousands of people, creating the complex, vibrant aroma unique to a big city.

Xu Qing's eyes scanned the shop signs in quick, orderly motions, noting bookstores and the Wenbao Zhai's placards in particular; he seemed to memorize their locations for later moves.

Su Ming's face remained calm as he followed Xu Qing, eyes casually sweeping the surroundings.

"Let's find a place to stay first," Xu Qing told him.

He avoided the grand inns on the main street and led Su Ming into a quieter alley.

The alley held small inns and private residences.

After asking three or four places, they chose a modest inn called "Wenan Inn" mid-way down the alley.

The shop was small but clean. The owner, a lean middle-aged man, smiled upon seeing two scholarly-looking customers.

"You two are here for the exams, right?"

"Exactly." Xu Qing stepped forward and negotiated expertly.

He asked carefully about price, meals, hot water, and provisions for ink and brushes. After some bargaining, they secured a fairly spacious second-floor room with two meals included for eighty wen per day.

For the space-starved prefectural city, that was a fair price.

Su Ming watched and inwardly admired. Xu Qing's streetwise survival skills were something he lacked.

Their room was simply furnished: a wooden bed, a desk, two chairs, nothing more.

Xu Qing seemed content. He set down their luggage, checked the door and windows, tested the furniture's stability, and then exhaled.

“Brother Su, we finally have a foothold in this prefectural city,” he said, tired yet bright-eyed.

Su Ming nodded and walked to the window. He pushed it open.

Outside were dense green-tiled roofs, and the faint drums of the prefectural office in the distance.

“What are your plans next?” Su Ming asked.

“I’ll rest a day. Tomorrow I’ll visit the city bookstores.” Xu Qing’s eyes sparkled.

“Bookstores in the prefectural city conceal hidden talents. Not only can you buy books you can’t find in the county, they’re great for gathering intelligence. Who is on the exam panel this year, what literary tastes they prefer—this kind of information often passes through bookstore owners and old book customers’ chatter.”

That was Xu Qing’s strength—catching useful information from small details.

“I plan to check around the Prefectural School’s library tomorrow,” Su Ming said.

“The Prefectural School library?” Xu Qing was surprised. “That place isn’t easily entered unless you’re a student of the Prefectural School or recommended by a well-known scholar.”

“There are also bookstores and antique shops near the Prefectural School. Worth a look.” Xu Qing agreed. “We can act separately and share what we find in the evening.”

They split tasks clearly.

After settling, they ate simply and returned to their rooms.

Late at night, when the city fell silent, Su Ming sat cross-legged on his bed and slowly spread his mental awareness to cover the whole inn.

He ‘heard’ the crisp clack of the owner’s abacus downstairs as he tallied accounts.

He ‘heard’ an anxious exam candidate in the next room muttering Classics in his sleep.

He even ‘heard’ a mouse quietly nibbling wood on a beam.

“Master, my perception sinks in the prefectural city like wading through mud,” Su Ming said inwardly. He did not sense any clear cultivator auras, but the city’s sheer weight and noise pressed down on him.

“Normal.” Lin Yu’s voice came with understanding. “Large cities are full of people, with strong qi and messy thoughts that interfere. That’s good; it means the water here is

murky enough to hide in. Remember, without sufficient strength, watch more and move less. Our primary goal is the provincial exam.”

“Disciple understands.”

Su Ming withdrew his perception and focused inward.

The Qihai in his dantian rotated slowly, several times larger than two years ago.

He knew this small Qihai was his greatest capital in a vast and dangerous city.

The provincial exam in three months would be another turning point in his life.

What he needed to do was quietly secure the ticket to a higher platform without attracting anyone’s attention.

As for being top scorer?

Leave that to the geniuses who like standing in the spotlight.

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

Chapter 92: Lantai Secret Garden

[2,322 words]

Autumn deepened, and the old elm in the courtyard of the Wen'an Inn had already turned mostly golden.

Nearly two months had quietly passed since Su Ming and Xu Qing arrived at Yunshuo Prefectural City.

Xu Qing had returned.

He carried with him a smell mixed of old book pages and fresh ink.

"Brother Su, I'm back." His voice was a little hoarse, but his face could not hide his excitement.

He placed a scroll filled with dense writing on the table, poured himself a cup of cold tea, and drank it down in one gulp.

"Whew... this prefectural city really is a place where tigers hide among dragons."

Su Ming put down the book in his hand and looked up at him.

"Tell me about it."

"The 'Hanmo Study' in the east of the city, its owner is a retired official, the most well informed," Xu Qing's eyes sparkled in the lamplight, "he said the chief examiner for this provincial exam is Minister Wang, who retired and returned to his hometown. This man favors the Slender Gold calligraphy style, and in essays he prefers works with stern vigor."

"'Juwen Pavilion' in the south gathers scholars from various places. I heard the son of the Li family from Jinzhou Prefecture calls himself a 'little poetry sage', and words flow from his mouth like verse. There's also Zhang Sanlang from Heyang Prefecture, who writes in the official academy prose style with uncanny skill, and it's said he has already gained Minister Wang's favor."

"Then there's the west side of the city..." Xu Qing poured out, categorizing the intelligence he had gathered during this time, recounting it smoothly. From the examiner's tastes, to the backgrounds of popular candidates, to which stationery shop had the best wolf-hair brushes, to which inn had the most examinees — nothing was left unmentioned.

Within Yunshuo's complex web of information, he had stirred up ripples of his own.

Su Ming listened quietly; his strong mental power let him easily remember every detail and rapidly construct a relationship map in his mind.

"Master, Xu brother is a genius," Su Ming thought inwardly.

"Not a genius, a talent," Lin Yu lazily corrected, "a genius breaks rules, a talent uses rules to their advantage."

"By the way," Xu Qing seemed to remember something and took out a small slip of paper from his chest, "there's an interesting tidbit."

"That Minister Wang has an uncle, another retired high official. He dislikes calligraphy and painting, and is not fond of song or dance. His only hobby is collecting strange, oddly shaped stones. I heard his estate's back garden is full of 'curious stones' gathered from everywhere, and he's even given it a name — the Hundred Stones Garden."

Su Ming's fingers tightened slightly around his teacup.

Curious stones.

"For ordinary people that's an amusement. For us, it's a clue," Lin Yu's voice carried a trace of amusement, "a family with great power who can gather things from everywhere — the odds they slipped one or two spirit stones among those curios are far higher than you finding one on a riverbank."

"However," Lin Yu shifted tone, "don't get ideas. That place, even if there are no cultivators there, is not somewhere you can snoop into right now. Just make a note of it."

"Disciple understands." Su Ming suppressed the ripples in his heart and kept his face calm as still water.

"Brother Su, the literary gathering at Tingyu Pavilion will be held in three days. It's not small this time; supposedly most of the respected young talents in the prefectural city will attend," Xu Qing handed Su Ming an invitation, "Liu, the owner of Hanmo Study, highly recommends it and says it's a rare opportunity."

Su Ming took the invitation, his fingertips brushing the smooth paper. The accumulation of two months' information might find some verification at this gathering.

"Let's go together," Su Ming smiled, "just to see the world."

Three days later, Tingyu Pavilion.

This was not an ordinary tavern but a small building built on the heart of a lake, with upturned eaves and ornate beams, quite elegant.

One had to take a little boat to reach it.

When Su Ming and Xu Qing arrived, many people had already gathered inside.

Most were young scholars around twenty years old, each wearing well-tailored silk shirts, scholar's square headbands, jade pendants and scent pouches at their waists, grouped in threes and fives, chatting and laughing.

The air carried faint incense and the smell of ink.

Xu Qing wore a blue homespun long shirt washed nearly white; Su Ming was dressed in ordinary cotton robes. As soon as the two stepped into the pavilion, they were like two drops of clear water falling into boiling oil, instantly drawing many gazes.

Su Ming and Xu Qing paid those looks no mind; their attention was wholly taken by the pavilion's layout and surrounding environment.

The Aura Concealment Art reduced Su Ming's presence to a minimum; he was like an unnoticed apprentice bookboy beside Xu Qing.

"Tsk tsk, the feng shui here is quite good," Lin Yu's voice sounded in Su Ming's head, "built by the water, plenty of moisture. Though there isn't much spiritual energy, living here long can nourish the mortal body and mind. These scions of established families really know how to enjoy themselves."

A young noble in a deep-blue brocade robe was being surrounded by a circle of people.

He held a Xiangfei bamboo fan, his complexion fair, but his eyes carried a touch of arrogance.

"That's Wei Zi'ang, his father is the prefectural court's deputy magistrate," Xu Qing quietly introduced into Su Ming's ear.

At that moment, Wei Zi'ang was speaking grandly.

"...When it comes to places that hide vast collections, none compare to the Lantai Secret Garden in the capital. My cousin entered the Hanlin Academy last year and had the honor of seeing their catalog — it was vast as the sea!"

"I heard it doesn't just contain court records from prior dynasties, but countless rare volumes and unique editions. There are even..." Wei Zi'ang paused for effect, savoring the expectant looks of those around him.

He lowered his voice and spoke with a boastful air of mystery.

"Even the Forbidden Astronomical Institute's 'Investigations of Supernatural Things' is stored there! It records mountain spirits, ghosts, strange gods and other oddities. Of course, such banned books are only allowed to be viewed by Hanlin scholars. Ordinary people aren't even qualified to hear of them."

Su Ming's heart suddenly constricted.

Lantai Secret Garden! Investigations of Supernatural Things!

Those words detonated in his mind like thunder.

A powerful yearning almost burst from the depths of his chest.

He wanted to seize Wei Zi'ang at once and interrogate him.

"Calm down!" Lin Yu's voice was like a bucket of ice water dumped over his head, instantly dousing the flames in his heart, "Disciple, restrain your spirit! Look at you, your heartbeat's all over the place! Your spiritual energy almost leaked out!"

Su Ming snapped to attention and immediately tightened his mind, forcing himself to look away from Wei Zi'ang.

He turned his head and whispered to Xu Qing, "The tea and snacks in this pavilion smell pretty good."

His voice was neither too loud nor too soft, just enough for a few nearby people to hear, his tone matter-of-fact, as if he were merely joining the merriment and showing no interest in the earlier earth-shattering secret.

Xu Qing paused, then understood Su Ming's intention and nodded in agreement, "Mm, that's the scent of osmanthus cake."

Wei Zi'ang had originally wanted to enjoy watching the shocked or envious expressions of these two humble scholars, but saw them discussing food instead. He felt as if his punch had landed on cotton; bored, he snorted and turned away.

Su Ming raised a cup of tea and took a gentle sip; the warm liquid slid down his throat and smoothed his turbulent emotions.

Lantai Secret Garden.

He committed the name to memory.

It became a more concrete and firmer target on his path through the imperial examinations.

The proceedings at the literary gathering continued with the usual poetry and couplet composing.

Xu Qing did not hide his skill but did not show off either. He composed a seven-character regulated verse on autumn with proper tonal balance and distant imagery, drawing a few measured praises and managing to integrate himself into that circle.

Su Ming remained silent the whole time, merely grinding ink for Xu Qing as he composed, acting as the most dutiful bookboy.

No one paid him any further attention.

...

After returning from Tingyu Pavilion, Su Ming did not go elsewhere; he spent most of his time around the Prefectural School.

He avoided the bustling bookshops and instead chose the secluded alleys, observing the people and affairs around the school.

That afternoon he strolled slowly along the high wall of the prefectural school.

Autumn sunlight filtered through the old locust trees by the wall, casting mottled shadows on the ground.

Suddenly his steps stalled.

His spirit sense detected an unusual fluctuation.

The pulse was faint, cold, and entirely different from the chaotic atmosphere around it. It was neither the burning vigor of a martial cultivator nor the muddled presence of an ordinary person. Instead it resembled a tamed, exceedingly small stream, carrying a unique sense of order.

Su Ming's heart skipped a beat.

He traced that perception with his awareness.

Not far away, a young scholar in a faded blue long shirt was hugging several rolled books and walking out of the Prefectural School's side gate.

He looked two or three years older than Su Ming, thin in frame, his complexion a little pale, with a lingering melancholy written between his brows, giving him a reclusive air.

He walked slowly, as if absorbed in his own world, indifferent to everything around him.

The faint cold pulse had come from an inconspicuous black jade pendant hanging at his waist.

The material was ordinary, even somewhat rough, but on it were carved runes Su Ming could not read, runes whose energy flow he could nonetheless sense.

It was a magic implement!

Though of low grade, perhaps only an auxiliary tool for calming and focusing the mind, it was undeniably something from another realm.

Su Ming's breathing abruptly grew hurried.

This was the first time he had ever seen in reality someone who might be connected to the "immortal" world.

He instinctively wanted to step forward and ask.

"Stop!"

Lin Yu's scolding exploded in Su Ming's mind like thunder.

"What do you think you're doing? Charging up to ask, 'Fellow Daoist, where did you buy that magic implement'? Do you think this is the vegetable market?"

Lin Yu's voice seethed with exasperation.

"Have you stuffed the true meaning of my Way of Survival into your head until it's rotten? Unknown situation, do not act rashly! You don't even know who he is, his background, or his temperament, yet you dare approach him? What if he has a Golden Core ancestor behind him? What if he's a demon cultivator who slaughters without blinking? What if he mistakes you for a thief trying to rob his treasure and strikes first?"

That string of "what ifs" snapped Su Ming fully back to reason.

A fine cold sweat formed on his brow.

He had indeed been impulsive.

The excitement of finding a "kindred" had nearly made him forget that his greatest reliance was never bravery but caution.

"Master, I..."

"You what! Stand where you are, eyes on your nose, nose on your heart, pretend you saw nothing!" Lin Yu ordered, "Wait until he walks away!"

Su Ming drew a deep breath, forced himself to turn and pretend to study an ant nest at the base of the wall.

His heart was still pounding.

Only when that cold fleeting presence had disappeared around the corner did he slowly straighten.

"Master, disciple knows his mistake."

"Good that you know." Lin Yu's tone softened a little, carrying the tiredness that follows a lesson, "Disciple, remember this: in the world of cultivation, curiosity will kill cats, and will kill you too. Any long-lived cultivator is a top-level master of disguise and reconnaissance. Without absolute certainty, the best response is to ignore."

That night, Su Ming described the young scholar's appearance in detail to Xu Qing.

"Someone carrying a few rolls of old books coming out of the side gate of the prefectural school, pale-faced, lone and reclusive?"

Xu Qing thought briefly, "I think I know who you're talking about."

"Oh?"

"His name is Yan Zisu. He's from the Yan family of Yunshuo Prefecture," Xu Qing explained, "the Yan clan used to be a prominent, old gentry family. But that was a hundred years ago; they're fallen now. I heard their ancestors produced several 'fangshi' adept at painting, talismans, and divination, even once painting protective talismans for a prince in the previous dynasty, enjoying a brief period of prominence."

Fangshi!

Su Ming's heart rose again.

"Unfortunately, somehow the Yan family declined generation by generation. By Yan Zisu's time, relatives scattered and family wealth was exhausted. He's the only one left guarding the ancestral residence, maintaining a nominal status at the prefectural school and surviving on some ancestral property."

Xu Qing sighed, sympathy showing in his words.

"This person is reclusive and keeps to himself, always poring over some old books of uncertain origin. He shows no outstanding scholarship. His classmates at the prefectural school regard him as a weirdo."

Su Ming listened quietly.

Yan Zisu. A fallen fangshi family.

These fragments of information assembled a vague outline in his mind.

A lonely seeker guarding ancestral remnants but unable to inherit their glory.

Isn't this just another version of himself?

"Brother Su, why are you interested in this person?" Xu Qing asked curiously.

"Nothing special, I just happened to see him today and thought his temperament was a bit unusual," Su Ming replied casually.

He did not ask more.

The information was enough.

He knew Yan Zisu would be a long-term, quietly observed target in this prefectural city.

That night Su Ming sat cross-legged in bed, his mind unable to fully settle.

Lantai Secret Garden, Yan Zisu.

Two clues: one distant in the capital, hung above the court; the other close at hand, concealed among the common streets.

They both pointed to that mysterious world of cultivation.

"Master, I feel... the path is getting a bit clearer."

Lin Yu's voice was calm, "You may observe Yan Zisu, but you must never make contact."

Lin Yu shifted tone and grew lighter.

"Disciple, the most important thing right now is still the provincial examination in a month's time."

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

[2,487 words]

The autumn wind swirled withered leaves outside the high walls of the Prefectural School.

Su Ming walked at a steady, unhurried pace on the small path outside the school.

His gaze fell on the base of the wall, where an ant was struggling to drag half a withered, yellowed blade of grass, slipping again and again, only to bite down and try once more.

Yet Su Ming's spiritual sense was like an invisible net, enveloping the thin, receding figure a hundred paces ahead.

Yan Zisu.

Over the past half month, Su Ming had seen him over a dozen times.

Every time, Yan Zisu would emerge punctually from the Prefectural School's side gate, a few scrolls of yellowed ancient texts cradled in his arms, disappearing into the dilapidated old residential district in the western part of the city.

Yan Zisu never spoke with anyone, nor did he ever look around.

His world seemed to consist only of the books in his arms and the path beneath his feet.

"Master, this Yan Zisu doesn't seem to have any fluctuations of spiritual energy around him," Su Ming said inwardly.

His spiritual sense could clearly perceive the faint spiritual energy fluctuations emanating from the jade pendant at Yan Zisu's waist.

Yet, Yan Zisu's own body revealed not a trace of spiritual energy.

There were no signs of spiritual energy circulating within him. His vital energy and blood were even weaker than that of an ordinary person, completely unlike someone who had stepped onto the threshold of cultivation.

"A mortal, wearing a magical artifact?" Su Ming felt puzzled.

"What's so strange about that?" Lin Yu's lazy voice sounded, carrying a tone of having seen it all before. "The family has fallen into decline."

Lin Yu, however, was inwardly muttering: Thank goodness, it's just a family fallen on hard times. I thought cultivators were crawling all over this prefectural city.

"Fallen into decline?"

Lin Yu patiently explained, "This Yan Zisu most likely had one or two true cultivators among his ancestors who refined this jade pendant. Unfortunately, the inheritance was broken, the cultivation method lost. Later generations, left merely guarding the treasure, can only wear it as an ordinary antique."

"This pendant's spiritual energy is internalized and restrained. Its only use is probably to calm the mind and focus the spirit, keeping one warm in winter and cool in summer. For him, it's not much different from wearing a comfortable, ordinary piece of jade."

Su Ming understood instantly.

He recalled what Xu Qing had said: the Yan family had declined, its members scattered.

Perhaps, the true inheritance had already dissipated like smoke in the wind and rain of a hundred years.

Yan Zisu was just a man guarding his ancestors' relic.

Su Ming withdrew his spiritual sense.

Since it was just a misunderstanding, there was no need to continue observing.

He turned and walked towards the direction of Wenan Inn.

The waters of the prefectural city might run deep.

But at least, this small ripple before his eyes had already settled back into calmness.

...

For the next half month and more, Su Ming sank into complete quietude.

He and Xu Qing turned their inn room into a small study.

The various selections of Provincial Examination policy discussions and critiques of famous contemporary essays that Xu Qing had gathered from major bookstores piled up over half the table.

"Brother Su, look at this essay! Discussing the pros and cons of the 'Kai Zhong Fa' system, quoting classics and citing sources, progressing layer by layer, truly the work of a master!" Xu Qing pointed at an article, his eyes shining.

"Look here, he uses an allusion from the 'Salt and Iron Debates.' It seems ordinary, but it secretly aligns with Minister Wang's viewpoint from his early memorials. This ability to fathom the superior's intentions is absolutely brilliant!"

Xu Qing possessed an almost instinctive sharpness for these things.

Su Ming listened quietly, occasionally flipping through pages.

He focused more on reading those archives concerning Yunshuo Prefecture's water conservancy, agriculture, and military preparedness.

These dry numbers and records, tasteless as wax to others, appeared to him as vivid models.

The mental strength of the second level of Qi Refining allowed him to easily construct the entire operational framework of the prefectural city in his mind.

Where the granaries were, where the barracks were, which river channels were prone to siltation, which areas had the densest population.

These felt more "real" to him than any flowery, elegant essay.

"Disciple, what are you doing? Simulating a city?" Lin Yu asked curiously.

"Know yourself and know your enemy," Su Ming's reply was simple. "In case something happens, I'll know where to run."

Lin Yu almost laughed out loud inside the ring.

Good lad, teachable indeed! He truly grasps the essence of my Way of Survival! The fight hasn't even started, and he's already planning escape routes! Not bad, not bad, the student surpasses the master!

The day of the Provincial Examination drew steadily closer.

The entire Yunshuo Prefectural City was permeated by an intangible, tense atmosphere.

The scholars in the inn all wore grave expressions, their steps hurried, even their voices lowered by several degrees.

Only Su Ming and Xu Qing's room remained as calm as ever.

They ate when it was time to eat, studied when it was time to study.

Xu Qing's composure stemmed from the confidence accumulated through years of diligent study.

Su Ming's calmness, however, came from the fact that he never considered the "top scorer" position his goal.

...

On the day of the Provincial Examination, the sky was not yet light.

Outside the gates of the Examination Hall, a sea of people had already gathered.

The dark, dense crowd, like a surging tide, was firmly held back several zhang away by rows of soldiers holding long spears, their faces stern and cold.

The air was mixed with the chill of early morning and the white mist exhaled by countless people due to nervousness.

Su Ming and Xu Qing were wedged within the crowd, utterly inconspicuous.

All around were low prayers, nervous coughs, and the sounds of book boxes colliding. A scholar walking beside Xu Qing, perhaps too tense, accidentally dropped his examination basket. Ink, brushes, paper, and inkstones scattered across the ground. His face instantly turned ashen, eliciting several suppressed gasps and impatient shouts from the soldiers. Xu Qing silently helped him pick up the items. The scholar thanked him repeatedly, his voice trembling.

"You two, please present your examination plaques and household registration documents!" a yamen runner responsible for inspection boomed, his eyes sharply scanning them.

Xu Qing handed over the documents methodically.

The runner checked carefully, nodded, then looked at Su Ming.

Su Ming similarly handed over his documents.

The runner checked carefully, nodded, and waved them through.

Inside the Examination Hall, the atmosphere was stern and forbidding.

Rows upon rows of low, narrow examination cells were arranged as neatly as honeycombs, stretching as far as the eye could see.

Each cell was extremely cramped, barely large enough for one person. Inside were only two wooden planks: one served as a seat, the other as a desk; at night, placed together, they became a bed.

Su Ming was assigned to Cell Xuan Ninety-Five.

He walked in. A damp air, mixed with the smell of mildew and ink, assailed his face.

He didn't rush to sit down, but first inspected the cell.

Some parts of the wooden planks were already cracked, cobwebs clung to the corners.

He took out a dry cloth he had prepared from his bag and unhurriedly wiped the planks and walls clean.

Only then did he sit down, arranging his ink, brush, paper, and inkstone one by one.

The entire process was calm and composed, as if he hadn't come to take the fate-deciding Provincial Examination, but to review his lessons in a simple study.

"Boom—Boom—Boom—"

Three muffled drumbeats sounded, reverberating throughout the entire Examination Hall.

The examination had officially begun.

The examination papers were distributed.

The first session tested classical exegesis.

The question came from the "Book of Rites," standard and conventional.

Su Ming dipped his brush in ink, pondered briefly.

An extremely ingenious method for breaking into the topic instantly formed in his mind. If written out, it would surely astonish everyone, making the examiner's eyes light up.

But he merely ran through it in his mind, then decisively discarded it without hesitation.

He chose another approach, more reliable, but also more mediocre.

The essay's structure was balanced and steady.

The arguments were solid and reliable, absolutely error-free.

The language was plain and unadorned, without any flashy displays of skill.

He was like the most diligent craftsman, using the most standard mortise and tenon joints to build his essay. Not a trace of brilliance, yet no flaws that could be pointed out either.

Halfway through, he needed to cite an allusion.

Three choices simultaneously surfaced in his mind.

One from the "Zuo Zhuan," the most fitting and widely known.

One from the "Book of Han," slightly obscure, but capable of displaying erudition.

Another, from a long-lost Han dynasty miscellany he had dug out from the pile of old papers in the County School library, so obscure that using it would surely shock all the examiners.

Su Ming's brush tip hovered over the paper for a moment.

Then, he decisively chose the second one.

Using the allusion from the "Book of Han."

This would make him appear like a "diligent" student, not a "genius."

While writing swiftly, a strand of Su Ming's consciousness quietly spread out.

His spiritual sense covered the entire examination hall.

He "saw" Xu Qing sitting upright and proper in a "Di"-numbered cell not far away, writing as if divinely inspired.

He "saw" Wei Zi'ang, further away in a "Tian"-numbered cell, brimming with high spirits, his brush flying across the paper like a dragon, even a trace of self-satisfied smile on his face.

He "heard" the countless rapid or steady heartbeats of the examinees.

He "smelled" the increasingly thick scent of ink in the air, and faint traces of sweat seeping out due to nervousness.

Simultaneously, he also sensed the powerful auras within the examination grounds.

On the surrounding walls, patrolling soldiers, their internal vital energy and blood like blazing furnaces, hot and steady—martial artists who had trained their external skills to the extreme.

Deep within the Examination Hall, in the courtyard where the chief examiners resided, there were also several auras, some like ancient pines, others like unsheathed swords, clearly also martial arts masters of considerable cultivation.

All this was within his expectations.

The entire examination hall was like a sheep pen guarded by countless fierce beasts, its rules strict and severe.

But, there was no second cultivator aura like Yan Zisu's.

"Master, it seems it's safe," Su Ming said inwardly.

"Mhm, for mundane imperial examinations, cultivators generally disdain to participate. Even if there are, they're mostly small fry who've just entered the door, or down-and-out types like Yan Zisu. They can't stir up any waves," Lin Yu's voice was relaxed.

The first session ended the next day.

After submitting his paper, Su Ming took down both wooden planks used during the exam and fitted them together, laying them on the floor space of the cell. This was their "bed."

Su Ming took out the water and dry rations he had brought from his pack to replenish his energy. The second session was two days later. He had to wait in this place "where standing was insufficient to accommodate the body, and lying down was insufficient to stretch the legs."

The second session tested essays, judgments, and official documents. This placed extremely high demands on memory, logic, and format.

Within the cramped cells, candle flames flickered, illuminating the concentrated or anxious faces of the examinees.

The smell of ink in the air grew stronger, mixed with the odor of sweat and the greasy smell of cooled food. It was a tremendous test of memory and format. Some scholars already looked sallow from days of ordeal, their brushstrokes slowing.

Su Ming, however, relying on his powerful soul, wrote methodically, effortlessly handling various official document formats, his judgments written flawlessly.

For him, this was more like a test of patience and meticulousness. He had to consider more how to catch the examiner's eye without appearing too outstanding.

The third session, policy discussion, was the true main event.

The question involved the difficult problem of military grain and fodder transportation for the Yunshuo Prefecture border troops, precisely the area Su Ming had focused on in his usual studies.

This was exactly the subject Su Ming had secretly deduced multiple times in his daily life, combining geographical records and official government gazettes.

Su Ming instantly outlined a clear framework in his mind: the northern waterway silted up, the southern mountain roads treacherous, the transit granaries wasteful and inefficient...

But he still strictly controlled the sharpness of his expression. The essay was solid, insightful, but definitely not earth-shattering.

What ultimately landed on paper was solid data analysis, safe, absolutely error-free conventional suggestions—nothing more than dredging waterways, reinforcing roads, strengthening warehouse management, and the like.

The essay structure was rigorous, the arguments ample, sufficient to prove his deep understanding and pragmatic attitude towards the matter. But reading it through would only make one feel this young man was steady and hardworking, a talent, but would never elicit exclamations of genius.

Nine days, three sessions. For the vast majority of examinees, it was a dual torture of body and spirit.

The cramped cells, cold autumn nights, poor-quality food, and immense psychological pressure were enough to break a person's will.

Su Ming saw people vomiting during the exam, people unable to write due to nervousness, people sobbing quietly in the dead of night.

During the intervals between each session, he could see scholars being carried out of the Examination Hall on stretchers, either due to physical exhaustion or mental breakdown.

Su Ming, however, was like a rock in a rushing stream, always maintaining inner peace. His spiritual sense occasionally swept over the examination hall, able to "hear" countless rapid heartbeats, "smell" the increasingly heavy scent of exhaustion.

Yet, for Su Ming, these nine days were exceptionally "fulfilling." Not only did he perfectly complete the examination, but he also treated this experience as a special form of cultivation.

The "Aura Concealment Art" operated constantly, keeping his mind calm as water. The physique of the second level of Qi Refining made him indifferent to cold, heat, and fatigue. His powerful spiritual sense allowed him to be fully aware of the entire examination hall's dynamics.

When the drumbeat signaling the end of the final session sounded, Su Ming calmly put down his brush and carefully arranged his examination papers.

He walked out of his cell. The autumn sunlight fell on him, warm and gentle.

All around, crowds surged out like a tide, faces varied—ecstatic, dejected, numb.

Xu Qing waited for him not far away, his face showing unconcealable fatigue, but a glimmer of light deep in his eyes, clearly having performed well.

"Finally... it's over," Xu Qing let out a long sigh of relief.

"Mhm, it's over," Su Ming nodded.

His gaze swept over the noisy crowd, looking towards the depths of the Examination Hall. Nine days of ordeal were, to him, merely a small trial on the path of cultivation.

Su Ming had controlled everything with precision, like a masterful chess player, placing his pieces without regret, quietly awaiting the outcome.

Inside the Hall of Impartiality within the Examination Hall, the ink-written examination papers were being gathered. No one knew that among those thousands of papers, one from Cell Xuan Ninety-Five was quietly awaiting its fate with its impeccable "mediocrity" and deeply concealed solidity.

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

Chapter 94: This top scholar title, let whoever wants it be it.

[3,201 words]

The days after the Provincial Examination ended, the gates of the Examination Hall remained tightly shut, yet the clamor within the prefectural city never ceased.

At the Wenan Inn, examinees came and went. Some hired carriages overnight, fleeing the city that had shattered their dreams as if escaping a disaster. Others chose to stay, waiting for the verdict of fate amidst endless anxiety.

Su Ming and Xu Qing stayed.

Xu Qing still went out every day, but he no longer visited the bookshops. Instead, he stood at the street corner opposite the Examination Hall, gazing at the vermilion high walls like other scholars, often standing there for half a day. His face was etched with all the hopes and trepidation for the future harbored by a scholar from a humble background.

Su Ming, however, stayed completely inside the inn.

He spent most of his time each day sitting cross-legged on the bed, circulating the Greenwood Longevity Art. His spiritual sense spread out like quicksilver, silently covering the entire inn and even extending to the surrounding streets and alleys.

He "perceived" the chaotic aura formed by countless jumbled thoughts in this city, amidst the daytime clamor and the nighttime silence.

His heart, amidst this cacophony, grew even more tranquil.

"Disciple, your state of mind pleases this teacher greatly." Lin Yu's Soul Body sat inside the ring with his legs crossed, looking immensely satisfied.

"I was just thinking about what to do next if I fail this time." Su Ming's voice echoed in his mind.

"Fail?" Lin Yu almost fell off his illusory chair. "What nonsense! With the score-control strategy I personally guided you in, if you still manage to control yourself right off the list, then it can only mean you are exceptionally talented—a born unlucky star!"

Su Ming did not speak again.

He simply sank his spiritual sense into his Dantian, feeling the Qihai that had grown slightly larger than when he arrived. This was the true foundation of his existence.

...

On the day the results were posted, the sky was just beginning to brighten.

The entire Yunshuo Prefectural City seemed to be jolted awake from slumber by a basin of cold water, instantly boiling over.

Countless streams of people surged from all directions of the city toward the massive announcement wall in front of the Examination Hall.

"Brother Su, hurry! Hurry!" Xu Qing knocked on Su Ming's door before dawn, his voice trembling slightly with excitement and nervousness.

Su Ming finished washing up and changed into a clean set of blue homespun cloth robes.

By the time they squeezed their way to the imperial list, the area was already a sea of people, with not even a needle's gap to spare.

The air was thick with the heavy smell of sweat, face powder, and an odor named "anxiety."

"Make way! Make way!"

"Stop pushing! You're stepping on my foot!"

"Has the list been posted at the front?!"

The clamor of the crowd almost seemed capable of lifting the Examination Hall's roof.

Xu Qing was not tall and was jostled and shoved in the crowd. He desperately stood on tiptoe and craned his neck, but could only see countless bobbing heads. His hands were clenched tightly, his knuckles white from the force.

Su Ming stood behind him, his expression calm. Being half a head taller allowed him to see clearly over the crowd to the front. His spiritual sense had already spread out, imprinting every tiny ink character on the imperial list into his mind.

"Boom—"

A gong sounded, and the crowd instantly quieted for a moment.

A yamen runner walked onto the high platform, unrolled a bright yellow scroll, cleared his throat, and began calling out names in a drawn-out, emotionless tone.

"Great Prosperity Dynasty, Bingchen Examination Year, Yunshuo Prefecture Provincial Examination, List of Successful Provincial Graduates!"

"One hundred and twentieth place, Anhua County, Sun Decai!"

A suppressed, disbelieving gasp erupted from the crowd, followed by the loud, tearful sobs of a middle-aged man overcome with joy.

The yamen runner remained expressionless and continued reading.

"One hundred and nineteenth place, Prefectural City, Zhao..."

With each name called, a small commotion would erupt in the crowd, mingled with shouts of ecstasy and sighs of despair.

Xu Qing's breathing grew increasingly rapid. Fine beads of sweat appeared on his forehead, and his lips moved incessantly, as if silently reciting something.

More than half the names had been called, and still, neither his nor Su Ming's name had appeared.

Xu Qing's face gradually paled.

"...Seventy-third place, Qingshi County, Su Ming!"

When this name was called, Xu Qing jolted violently, turned his head, and stared at Su Ming in disbelief.

Su Ming merely gave him a slight nod, his face showing no ripple of emotion, as if that name were merely an insignificant symbol.

He quietly let out a sigh of relief.

Perfect.

Lin Yu inside the ring almost clapped and cheered.

Beautiful! This score-control technique is simply art! Perfectly nailed a middle-to-lower position, securing the Provincial Graduate status with absolute stability. I give this operation ninety-nine points, withholding one point to prevent you from getting arrogant!

The name-calling continued.

Xu Qing's heart was in his throat, his palms slick with cold sweat.

"...Tenth place, Heyang Prefecture, Zhang Jingxiu!"

"...Fifth place, Jinzhou Prefecture, Li Changgeng!"

When the top ten names were called, every breath in the crowd grew heavy. Everyone knew the main event had arrived.

"Fourth place..."

The yamen runner deliberately drew out his tone.

Xu Qing's body trembled slightly.

"Third place! Second Top Scorer! Qingshi County, Xu Qing!"

"Buzz—"

Xu Qing's mind instantly went blank.

He felt as if all the surrounding sounds vanished, the entire world reduced to just those few words echoing repeatedly in his ears.

Qingshi County, Xu Qing...

Second Top Scorer...

He passed!

And he was third place!

An immense, indescribable surge of wild joy, like a flash flood, instantly overwhelmed all his reason. He felt his vision darken, his body swayed, and he nearly collapsed.

Su Ming caught him with a steadying hand.

"Brother Xu, congratulations." Su Ming's voice, calm and firm, pulled him back from his daze.

Xu Qing snapped back to his senses, grabbed Su Ming's arm, his lips trembling, unable to utter a single word. His eyes instantly reddened, and two lines of scalding tears slid uncontrollably down his cheeks.

Ten years of arduous study under the lonely lamp by the bookstall, the ink-stained calluses on his fingertips, the white hairs at his father's temples... everything, in this moment, had found its reward.

All around, countless gazes of envy, jealousy, and astonishment fell upon him.

Qingshi County had actually produced two Provincial Graduates simultaneously, and one of them was the Second Top Scorer!

"Second place! Top Scorer in the Classics! Prefectural City, Qian Wenbo!"

"Top Provincial Scorer! Prefectural City, Wei Zi'ang!"

When the name "Wei Zi'ang" was shouted, the crowd completely erupted.

"Young Master Wei! It's Young Master Wei!"

"As expected of the Vice Magistrate's son! A seventeen-year-old Top Provincial Scorer, his future is boundless!"

In the crowd, Wei Zi'ang, surrounded by admirers, raised his chin with restrained pride amidst the chorus of congratulations, his face unable to conceal his high spirits. He basked in everyone's attention, like a king standing atop a mountain peak.

His gaze swept across the scene. When it landed on Xu Qing, who was also the center of attention, the corner of his mouth curled into a disdainful arc.

As for Su Ming, his gaze didn't linger for more than half a second.

In his world, an ordinary Provincial Graduate ranked in the seventies didn't even deserve to have his name remembered.

Su Ming accepted this disregard with equanimity.

This was precisely the result he desired.

...

That night.

"Brother Su," Xu Qing lowered his voice, a trace of confusion in his tone, "with your talent and learning, you absolutely should not be only seventy-third."

He knew perfectly well that Su Ming's insights into the classics and policy discussions far surpassed his own.

"Brother Xu, you jest." Su Ming's expression was serene. "Matters of the examination hall are always seventy percent talent and learning, thirty percent luck. My making the list was already fortunate. As for you, Brother Xu, your reputation matches your true worth; you have brought great honor to our Qingshi County."

He paused, looking into Xu Qing's eyes, and said earnestly, "Besides, the position of Top Provincial Scorer may not necessarily be a blessing. 'The outstanding tree in the forest is the first to be felled by the wind.' The more glorious Wei Zi'ang appears today, the more scrutiny and challenges he will face tomorrow. For people like us, staying in the middle of the pack is actually more comfortable."

Xu Qing was stunned.

Looking into Su Ming's eyes, calm as an ancient well, he suddenly felt as if he had never truly understood this friend.

He was still rejoicing or lamenting over his rank, while Su Ming had already stepped outside that circle, observing the entire situation from a higher vantage point.

This temperament, this perspective, were far beyond his own.

...

Three days later, the Deer Cry Banquet.

The banquet was held at the "Wentao Pavilion" in the prefectural yamen's rear garden, personally hosted by the Prefect of Yunshuo, to entertain all the newly minted Provincial Graduates of this session.

Wentao Pavilion was built facing a lake, with carved beams and painted rafters, upturned eaves and soaring corners. Inside the pavilion, lanterns and candles shone brightly, making it as bright as day. The floor was covered with thick Persian carpets, making footsteps silent. Maidservants dressed in uniform pink gauze dresses flitted about like butterflies among flowers, carrying trays of exquisite and magnificent dishes.

The air was filled with a mixture of the aroma of fine food, the mellow fragrance of good wine, and the scent of expensive incense.

Su Ming and Xu Qing were seated at a table in the middle.

As the Second Top Scorer, Xu Qing's seat was near the front, right next to several assistant officials of the prefectural yamen.

Su Ming, however, was placed at the very end of that same table.

The banquet began. The Prefect said a few words of official encouragement, and everyone raised their cups in unison.

Soon, the atmosphere grew lively.

Officials began leaving their seats, cups in hand, heading towards the "disciples" they favored.

Wei Zi'ang, Qian Wenbo, and Xu Qing, the top three, were surrounded by crowds.

"Nephew Xu, truly a young talent of exceptional ability!" Assistant Prefect Qian, his belly protruding, his face flushed, patted Xu Qing's shoulder. "This official had long heard that Qingshi County is a place of outstanding people, and seeing it today, the reputation is well-deserved! Come, drink this cup to the brim!"

Xu Qing, overwhelmed by the favor, hurriedly stood up to return the toast.

"Second Top Scorer Xu, this humble official is a professor at the Prefectural School. Your essays, I and several colleagues have read them. They are of strong character, with unique insights. Admirable, truly admirable!"

Xu Qing was surrounded by a crowd of enthusiastic officials and scholars, overwhelmed and unable to keep up, the smile on his face growing somewhat stiff.

On the other side, Su Ming's area was cold and quiet.

He enjoyed the peace, leisurely savoring the delicacies on the table.

The dishes at this Deer Cry Banquet were indeed far superior to the inn's communal fare. This "Squirrel Mandarin Fish" was sweet, sour, and savory, crispy on the outside and tender inside. That "Dongpo Pork Knuckle" was fatty but not greasy, melting in the mouth.

Su Ming's spiritual sense, like the most sensitive probe, captured useful information within the noisy banquet hall.

He "heard" two low-ranking officials whispering in a corner not far away.

"Old Li, have you heard? The capital hasn't been very peaceful lately." An official with a flushed face from drinking lowered his voice mysteriously.

"Shh! Brother Wang, careful with your words!" Another, slightly more sober official nervously glanced around. "Is this something you and I can discuss?"

"What's there to fear!" The official surnamed Wang took another gulp of wine, his courage growing. "My nephew who works at the Capital Military and Horse Department

wrote to me the day before yesterday. He said that half a month ago, the entire mansion of a certain Marquis in the northern city was surrounded by the Imperial Guard. Not even a fly could get out. I heard... it's related to some 'Iron Certificate of Immunity' from the previous dynasty, and it involves a noble inside the palace!"

"Iron Certificate of Immunity from the previous dynasty?" The official surnamed Li drew a sharp breath. "Heavens, these waters run too deep..."

"Exactly! So, you see, although us officials posted outside the capital have a lean life, at least it's stable. That place, the capital, one misstep and you're crushed to dust!"

Su Ming's chopsticks paused slightly.

"Disciple, did you hear that?" Lin Yu's voice also turned more serious. "The waters in the capital are deep. It seems other cultivators are active there, and the commotion isn't small. When we go there later, we'll have to sail slowly. No, we'll have to go underwater! Absolutely must not stick our heads out!"

Su Ming nodded, put a piece of pork knuckle into his mouth, and silently committed this information to memory.

Midway through the banquet, the Prefect, in high spirits, proposed that everyone compose impromptu poems on the theme of "Climbing High in Autumnn."

Wei Zi'ang naturally took the lead, stepping forward first. Holding a wine cup, he paced about, and after a short while, recited a seven-character regulated verse. The lines were ornate, the parallelism neat, the momentum majestic, drawing cheers from the entire hall.

Xu Qing followed with a poem of his own. His poetic style was clear and far-reaching, with a lingering artistic conception. Though not as grand in scale as Wei Zi'ang's, it possessed its own character and also won considerable praise.

When it came to the Provincial Graduates with lower rankings, the atmosphere became much more casual.

When an official's gaze fell upon Su Ming, he simply shook his head faintly.

"This student's talent is shallow and learning limited. I dare not disgrace myself before all the esteemed officials and fellow scholars."

His voice was not loud, but clear enough.

The official was taken aback for a moment, said nothing more, and turned to the next person.

Throughout the entire Deer Cry Banquet, Su Ming was like an invisible person. From start to finish, apart from eating and drinking, he hardly spoke a few words and was not remembered by anyone.

The banquet ended, and the crowd gradually dispersed.

Xu Qing had drunk quite a bit and was supported by two fellow townsmen. He was still indignant on Su Ming's behalf. "Brother Su, they... they look down on people too much!"

"Brother Xu, you've had too much to drink." Su Ming steadied him, saying calmly, "Being ignored and left alone, isn't that precisely the best kind of peace and quiet?"

He looked at the brilliantly lit prefectural yamen in the night, not a trace of longing in his eyes.

...

Back at the Wenan Inn, Su Ming and Xu Qing discussed their next steps.

"I plan to set off tomorrow and return to Qingshi County first." Xu Qing said. "Having passed the provincial exam, I must first go home and tell my father, to let the old man be happy. After settling affairs at home, I will then set off for the capital to prepare for next year's Metropolitan Examination."

"I had the same thought." Su Ming nodded. "Let's go back together."

"Good!"

Early the next morning, a plain blue homespun cloth carriage, just like the one they arrived in, slowly drove out of the eastern gate of Yunshuo Prefectural City.

The wheels rolled on, leaving the city's clamor and prosperity far behind.

Inside the carriage, Xu Qing leaned against the wall and, still suffering from the lingering effects of last night's drinking, soon fell into a deep sleep.

Su Ming closed his eyes, seemingly dozing, but his mind sank into the ring.

"Master, how should I explain things when I return to the County School?"

Zhou Wenhai had placed high hopes on him, expecting him to win first place and secure the Top Provincial Scorer position.

Now, he had only ranked seventy-third.

Lin Yu's voice sounded leisurely. "Thinking about how to deal with that old fellow Zhou Wenhai when you get back?"

Su Ming's mind stirred slightly. "Master sees clearly. This disciple is indeed pondering. My teacher had high expectations for the Top Provincial Scorer position. This result will likely disappoint him."

"Disappointed?" Lin Yu scoffed, with a tone of worldly insight and teasing. "If he is truly disappointed because of this, then this teacher's vision is merely so-so. However, as a teacher, face must be maintained. Regarding this matter, your master has long had a plan."

"Please instruct me, Master."

"Simple." Lin Yu's tone was as relaxed as discussing the weather. "After you return, don't explain anything. You only need to do one thing."

"What thing?"

"Take the initiative to plead guilty." Lin Yu uttered four words, then explained in detail. "As soon as you see Zhou Wenhai, before he even asks, you first bow and state that you have failed to live up to your teacher's high expectations, that you performed poorly in the examination hall, failed to achieve complete success, and that you are filled with apprehension."

Su Ming was slightly taken aback. "This... isn't that too passive?"

"Passive? This is the masterstroke of advancing by retreating! By taking the initiative to admit fault, lowering your posture to the minimum, you block more than half of his full load of questions and slight dissatisfaction. He, an elder, a teacher, can he possibly hound and interrogate a student who is already apprehensive and admitting fault? That would be too undignified."

"And then?"

"And then?" Lin Yu chuckled lightly. "Then you report to him clearly and methodically about your observations in the prefectural city, especially the dynamics of the official circles, the subtle reactions of various factions observed at the Deer Cry Banquet, and... the rumors you vaguely heard about the capital being unsettled. The key point is not what rank you achieved, but what you saw, what you thought about, and how much you grew through this trip to the prefectural city."

Lin Yu paused, his tone becoming profound. "You need to make him feel that his student is no longer a clueless youth who only knows how to study dead books, but someone who has begun to understand how to observe the winds, consider advance and retreat, and has developed his own judgment—a quasi-official. Which is more

worthy of cultivation: the empty fame of a Top Provincial Scorer, or a disciple who knows how to conceal his sharpness, understands advantages and disadvantages, and has a long-term vision? If Zhou Wenhai is a smart man, he will naturally know which is more important. He might even feel gratified, thinking you are more mature and more worthy of investment than he imagined."

After listening, Su Ming's mind suddenly cleared. Master's plan, seemingly simple, actually deeply understood human psychology and statecraft. Not only did it resolve potential reprimands, but it also transformed a "failure" into an opportunity to showcase personal growth.

"Master, after returning to the County School, this disciple will act according to your plan."

"Mmm." Lin Yu acknowledged, then his tone carried a hint of playful anticipation. "This teacher is quite curious to see what expression that old stickler Zhou Wenhai will have after hearing your 'self-criticism' and 'report.' Will he blow his beard and glare, or stroke his beard and smile? Heh heh."

Su Ming was helpless against his master's nature of enjoying the spectacle.

He looked out the window; the outline of Qingshi County was coming into view. He knew that, following his master's guidance, this return journey would not be about pleading guilty. Instead, it might become an opportunity to deepen his relationship with his teacher and gain more trust.

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Chapter 95: An Explanation for Zhou Wenhai

[2,921 words]

The carriage wheels rolled over the bluestone-paved road, emitting a familiar rumbling sound.

This sound announced their return to Qingshi County.

Before the carriage had even come to a complete stop at the town entrance, a clamorous din of gongs and drums forced its way into the compartment.

Su Ming and Xu Qing exchanged a glance, both seeing a flicker of surprise in the other's eyes.

Xu Qing was the first to lift the carriage curtain, and the sight before him made him freeze.

A crowd had gathered at the town entrance at some point, led by several men who looked like yamen runners energetically beating gongs and drums.

A crude yet eye-catching red cloth banner had been unfurled, its ink still fresh, boldly proclaiming: "Congratulations to Esteemed Masters Xu Qing and Su Ming of Qingshi Town for Passing the Bingchen Provincial Examination as Provincial Graduates!"

"The news travels fast!" Xu Qing murmured.

Su Ming's gaze swept over the crowd, spotting many familiar faces, their expressions beaming with shared pride and joy.

He understood perfectly well. Official courier routes were always swift; the joyous announcement of their success had likely raced back to Qingshi Town well ahead of their own homecoming journey.

"I see," Su Ming said with a slight smile, his tone still calm. "Brother Xu, you are the Second Top Scorer. Today's spotlight belongs to you. Go on, don't keep the folks waiting."

Xu Qing nodded, took a deep breath, straightened his back, and stepped down from the carriage.

The moment he stood firm, he was enveloped by the enthusiastic crowd. Congratulations and praises rose and fell around him. A village elder stepped forward, gripping his hand, his face flushed with excitement as he spoke of "bringing honor to the family" and "winning glory for our town."

While everyone's attention was focused on the undisputed star, the "Second Top Scorer," Su Ming silently slipped down from the carriage. He whispered a few words to the cart driver and prepared to leave quietly.

However, someone still noticed him.

Several townsfolk who had been surrounding Xu Qing turned their heads, their faces breaking into smiles as they greeted him. "Top Scorer Su... no, Provincial Graduate Su is back!" "Congratulations, Provincial Graduate Su!"

Their tone, compared to the fervor directed at Xu Qing, was noticeably more subdued, even carrying a hint of barely perceptible regret. After all, the gap between seventy-third place and the third-place "Second Top Scorer" was rather stark.

Su Ming paid this no mind, merely offering a humble, respectful bow in return. "Thank you, fellow villagers. It was merely luck, sheer luck."

He found Xu Qing amidst the crowd and said in a low voice, "Brother Xu, enjoy this moment of glory and have a good reunion with your father. I must first go pay my respects to my teacher. I will visit to offer my congratulations another day."

Xu Qing could see Su Ming's mind was made up. "Alright! Brother Su, we'll meet again soon! Please convey my regards to Teacher Zhou!"

Su Ming nodded, turned, and merged into the flow of people on the street, striding towards the direction of the County School.

The street was the same street. The shops lining both sides, the hawking vendors, the children laughing and playing—everything was just as it had been when he left.

His pace was not hurried, each step landing with exceptional steadiness.

"Master, I'm ready," he said in his heart.

"Ready?" Lin Yu's lazy voice sounded, carrying a hint of a test. "Remember, once you go in, you are a child who messed up his exam. You need to feel wronged, you need to be afraid, but above all, you must be sincere. The performance must be convincing!"

Lin Yu's Soul Body shifted to a more comfortable position inside the ring.

Heh heh, Oscar-worthy acting is about to commence. Let's see how this modern workplace PUA tactic... no, this 'victory through appearing pitiable' open strategy fares against an old fox of the ancient officialdom.

"Your disciple understands," Su Ming replied.

Before long, the familiar black-lacquered main gate of the Zhou Residence came into view. Compared to the commotion at the town entrance, it was much quieter here. However, a brand-new pair of red paper couplets had been conspicuously pasted on the lintel, bearing phrases like "Poetry and Books Passed Down Through Generations" and "Fragrant Laurels and Orchids," proclaiming the household's joy at producing a Provincial Graduate.

Just as Su Ming stepped onto the stone stairs, the familiar side gate he knew so well creaked open from the inside.

The old gatekeeper peeked out. Upon seeing it was Su Ming, his somewhat cloudy eyes instantly brightened, his face breaking into an unprecedented, obsequious smile as he practically rushed out to greet him.

"Oh my! Master Su is back!" The old man's bow was deeper than usual, his tone filled with reverence and flattery. "Please come in, please come in! The Master has been waiting for you in his study since early morning! He gave instructions that as soon as you arrived, you were to be shown straight in!"

This attitude was completely different from the gatekeeper Su Ming remembered, who had always maintained a somewhat formulaic politeness.

After passing the provincial examination, even with a low ranking, his status in the eyes of these servants had fundamentally changed, from a "promising student" to a genuine "Master."

Su Ming inwardly scoffed, but his expression remained unchanged. He merely nodded gently. "Thank you for your trouble, Uncle."

He passed through the courtyard, noticing that the occasional maid or servant passing under the covered walkways would stop, casting curious and respectful glances his way, softly greeting him with "Good day, Master Su." The entire Zhou Residence was permeated with a subtle, reverent atmosphere born from his success.

Su Ming walked through the familiar courtyard and arrived before the study he had visited countless times.

He did not knock immediately. Instead, he stood quietly for a moment, adjusting his breathing and heartbeat to a slightly hurried and uneasy rhythm.

Only then did he raise his hand and gently knock on the door.

Knock, knock, knock.

"Enter."

A low, authoritative voice came from within.

Su Ming pushed the door open and entered. A scent, a mix of aged books and high-quality ink, washed over him.

The study was, as always, elegantly tidy.

Zhou Wenhai, wearing a deep blue scholar's robe, stood with his back to the door before a large writing desk.

He did not turn around, focused solely on wielding the Wolf Hair Brush in his hand, its tip dancing across the snow-white xuan paper.

Su Ming's gaze fell on the paper.

It was the character for "Tranquility."

However, the final downward-right stroke was executed with such force it seemed to pierce the paper, sharp as a blade. It disrupted the character's overall balance and charm, revealing the writer's own profound inner turmoil.

Zhou Wenhai did not speak. In the study, only the soft *swish-swish* of the brush tip on paper could be heard.

The atmosphere was stifling, oppressive enough to choke one's breath.

Su Ming simply stood there quietly, head bowed, like a prisoner awaiting judgment.

A long time passed.

Finally, Zhou Wenhai completed the final stroke. He placed the brush heavily on the brush rest with a crisp *clink*.

He slowly turned around.

His face held no expression. His gaze settled on Su Ming, calm as a deep pool of water.

"You have returned."

Three words, devoid of any emotion, yet carrying more pressure than any stern reprimand.

He did not invite Su Ming to sit.

Su Ming knew the test had begun.

He did not raise his head. Instead, following Lin Yu's script, he took a step forward, bent at the waist, and performed a deep, ninety-degree bow, his salute reaching the ground.

His voice carried just the right amount of tremor and trepidation.

"Your student, Su Ming, has failed to live up to your esteemed expectations, Teacher!"

"In the examination hall, my performance was abnormal, my inspiration dried up. I merely placed seventy-third, bringing shame upon you and the County School!"

"Your student's heart is filled with immense fear and shame! I am too ashamed to face your nurturing! I have come specifically... to beg for your punishment, Teacher!"

The words were spoken with genuine feeling, overflowing with remorse and shame.

Zhou Wenhai had not anticipated this move from Su Ming at all.

He had prepared a bellyful of words: disappointed questioning, scolding for failing to meet expectations, confusion over why Su Ming had concealed his abilities.

But now, all these words were firmly blocked in his chest by Su Ming's preemptive, self-abasing plea for punishment.

He was a renowned Confucian scholar of many years, a respected and virtuous teacher. Facing a student who was already so "fearful" and contrite, what more could he say?

To scold him further would only make himself appear petty and lacking in magnanimity, obsessed with a mere ranking.

Zhou Wenhai was stunned.

Looking at Su Ming, who remained deeply bowed, not even daring to raise his head, the knot of frustration in his chest dissipated significantly without him even realizing it.

He let out a heavy sigh, his tone involuntarily softening.

"You... rise first."

He gestured to a chair nearby.

"Sit and speak."

Only then did Su Ming slowly straighten up, his face still wearing a look of shame. He obediently sat on the edge of the chair, only half-seated, maintaining a posture of respectful unease.

"Master is brilliant," Su Ming thought inwardly.

"A minor scene, a minor scene," Lin Yu hummed a little tune triumphantly inside the ring. "This is called striking the snake's vital spot, grasping the human heart. He values face? Then we give him all the face he could want first. If he still refuses to let it go after that, then it's his own lack of magnanimity."

Zhou Wenhai picked up his teacup, took a sip, seemingly organizing his thoughts.

"Matters in the examination hall are full of variables. Performing below one's usual standard is a common occurrence," he said, his tone having regained its usual steadiness. "I, your teacher... do not blame you."

Su Ming did not respond, nor did he offer a single word of explanation for himself.

He knew now was not the time for explanations.

He shifted the topic, as if hoping to make up for his "failure" by reporting his observations.

"Teacher, although this journey to the prefectural city ended in disappointment at the examination, your student did not return entirely empty-handed."

His voice had regained its composure, his thoughts clear and logical.

"Yunshuo Prefectural City is far more prosperous and complex than your student imagined. Prominent families stand like forests within the city, merchant guilds are entrenched, and various forces interlock like a dog's teeth, forming an invisible web. When your student first arrived, I felt dazzled and overwhelmed, like a frog at the bottom of a well seeing the vast ocean for the first time."

Zhou Wenhai's hand, holding the teacup, paused slightly. A flicker of interest appeared in his eyes.

This was precisely what he wanted to hear.

Su Ming continued, "For this Provincial Examination, the chief examiner, Minister Wang, served in the Ministry of Rites before retiring and values moral integrity above all. Your student observed that those who stood out in the prefectural literary gatherings, whose poetry and essays were particularly forceful and outstanding, mostly ranked high this time. The Top Scorer in the Classics, Qian Wenbo, his father is the Assistant Prefect of the prefectural yamen. The Top Provincial Scorer, Wei Zi'ang, is the son of a Vice Magistrate. This shows that within the examination arena, while the essay itself is important, connections and reputation are also indispensable aids."

This analysis had already transcended the scope of an ordinary student, possessing a cool, observer's insight.

Zhou Wenhai's eyebrows raised slightly. The disappointment in his eyes had been completely replaced by astonishment.

Su Ming did not pause. He knew the real main event was just beginning.

He leaned forward slightly, lowering his voice a few degrees, as if disclosing a secret.

"Teacher, at the Deer Cry Banquet, your student sat at the very last seat as a companion. During the banquet, I happened to overhear a casual conversation between two low-ranking officials. In their words, they mentioned that the capital... seems to have been rather unsettled lately."

"Oh?" Zhou Wenhai's gaze instantly turned sharp.

"They said... a marquis's mansion in the northern city was raided by the Imperial Guard. The cause seems to be related to an 'Iron Certificate of Immunity' left over from the previous dynasty, and it even implicated a certain noble personage within the palace."

"Iron Certificate of Immunity!"

The teacup in Zhou Wenhai's hand jerked violently. A few drops of scalding tea splashed onto the back of his hand, but he seemed not to notice.

His face instantly became extremely grave.

Su Ming took in his reaction and continued, unhurried, to add, "Your student is insignificant and of lowly status. I do not know the truth of this matter, and I dare not recklessly discuss court affairs. I merely speculate privately that if this is true, there will surely be great changes in the capital. With the court situation in turmoil, we scholars located in the provinces must likely be even more cautious in our words and actions."

Having said this, Su Ming lowered his head once more, delivering his concluding remarks.

"Your student is dull-witted. It was only after this experience that I truly began to understand that the path of the imperial examinations is far from being merely about writing essays on paper. It is also about human relationships and worldly wisdom, about the changing tides of the times, about weighing advantages and disadvantages."

"And only at this moment did your student begin to slightly comprehend the true meaning of the four characters you often taught: 'The gentleman is not a vessel.' A true scholar cannot merely be a 'vessel' for writing essays. One must also observe all directions, listen to all sources, understand the strategy of Concealing One's Edge and guarding one's simplicity, and clearly discern when to advance and when to retreat in the current situation."

"This low ranking, perhaps... is not entirely a bad thing. At the very least, it allowed your student to see the depth of these waters in advance, so as not to plunge recklessly into them in the future and be utterly destroyed."

A long silence fell in the study.

Zhou Wenhai stared fixedly at Su Ming, his expression complex to the extreme.

There was bewilderment, shock, scrutiny, and finally, all these emotions transformed into a heartfelt sense of gratification and admiration.

He had originally thought Su Ming was merely a youth of exceptional talent.

He had even worried this young man might become arrogant due to his talent, overly eager for quick success.

But he had never, ever expected.

One Provincial Examination, one journey to the prefectural city, could cause this sixteen-year-old youth to be completely reborn!

What he saw now was no longer a student preoccupied with gains and losses in ranking.

But someone who possessed a strategic view of the officialdom, understood the importance of concealing one's abilities for self-preservation, and could even sniff out political storms from the slightest clues... a quasi-official!

The empty title of a Top Provincial Scorer, compared to this temperament far exceeding his years, this insight into the current situation—what was it worth?

Utterly insignificant!

He had been the narrow-minded one!

He had only seen the trees, while this disciple had already seen the entire forest!

"Hah... Hahaha!"

Zhou Wenhai suddenly burst into laughter, the sound filled with exhilaration and relief.

He stood up, personally picked up the teapot from the desk, walked over to Su Ming, and filled his empty teacup with steaming, fragrant tea.

This gesture even took Su Ming somewhat by surprise.

"Sit properly, sit up straight!" Zhou Wenhai looked at Su Ming, his tone carrying an unprecedented gentleness and appreciation. "You... are good! Very good!"

He pushed the teacup towards Su Ming.

"That you can think on this level... I, your teacher, am greatly comforted!"

Zhou Wenhai sat back down, letting out a long sigh as if he had shed a thousand-pound burden.

"The ranking is no longer important. With such temperament and insight, what more could I, your teacher, ask for? Your future is bound to be limitless!"

Inside the ring, Lin Yu was almost rolling with laughter. Workplace wisdom honed over millennia, used against an ancient intellectual, was simply child's play!

"Done! Mission accomplished! See that, disciple? This is called dimensional reduction strike! That old man probably sees you as future prime minister material to cultivate now!"

Su Ming picked up the teacup, feeling its warmth in his palm, his heart also filled with myriad emotions.

His master's strategy was indeed unfathomable, bordering on the supernatural.

A crisis that could have potentially created a rift in the teacher-student relationship had been effortlessly resolved, and his own standing in his teacher's heart had even been elevated by more than a notch.

The two talked for a long while more.

This time, it was no longer a teacher testing a student, but more like an exchange between equals.

Zhou Wenhai asked many detailed questions about the customs, local conditions, and the ecology of scholars in the prefectural city. Su Ming answered them all fluently.

It wasn't until the setting sun dyed the window frames red that Su Ming finally rose to take his leave.

"Teacher, your student will take his leave now."

"Go ahead," Zhou Wenhai nodded, his face full of smiles. "Go home and see your family; you should let your parents share in the joy. You still have several months before the Metropolitan Examination in the capital this spring. Review your studies diligently, no need to be hasty."

Su Ming bowed respectfully, turned, and prepared to leave.

He reached the door, his hand about to touch the handle.

"Su Ming."

Zhou Wenhai's voice suddenly came from behind him.

Su Ming turned back.

He saw Zhou Wenhai standing in the light of the setting sun, his expression turning serious.

"Come see me once more before you depart for the capital."

His voice was not loud, but carried an undeniable gravity.

"I, your teacher... have something to give you."

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 96: The braised pork got cold

[2,859 words]

Leaving the Zhou Residence, the autumn wind blew, and only then did Su Ming feel a chill on his back.

That conversation with his teacher, seemingly calm and uneventful on the surface, had actually been extremely perilous. The mental energy it consumed was no less than writing a policy discussion essay in the examination hall.

"So, how was it, disciple? Was your teacher's tactic of retreating in order to advance effective?" Lin Yu's voice, tinged with laughter, rang out in his mind.

"Master's calculations are divine," Su Ming said sincerely, recalling Zhou Wenhai's solemn and earnest final instructions. A great weight lifted from his heart. With his teacher's full support, his journey to the capital would no longer be a solitary one.

"However, the matter back home isn't finished yet," Lin Yu shifted the topic, his tone carrying a hint of watching a spectacle. "That Village Chief Zhao in the village is no simple character. Now that you, the carp, have leaped over the dragon gate, in his eyes, you are an auspicious sign, but also a variable. Think about that paper-making workshop."

Su Ming's gaze sharpened. His master's reminder was apt. Zhao Dequan viewed the workshop as his exclusive domain. Now that Su Ming had returned as a Provincial

Graduate, in Zhao's eyes, it probably wasn't a glory but a threat that might come to snatch away benefits.

The last rays of the setting sun, like a warm bolt of orange silk, spread across the entire Su Family Village.

Cooking smoke curled up from the rooftops of every household, mingling with the fragrance of earth and vegetation, diffusing in the evening breeze.

Under the old locust tree at the village entrance stood several figures with their shadows stretched extremely long.

There was no clamorous gongs and drums, no glaring red silk. Only Mother Chen, standing on tiptoe again and again, craning her neck to look toward the end of the road.

Father Su Shan squatted under the tree, puffing on his pipe tobacco, the smoke swirling, obscuring his expression.

Eldest Brother Su Feng and Second Brother Su Yang stood side by side, their gazes likewise fixed on the far end of the small path, like two silent "gazing-husband stones."

When a small figure in blue finally appeared at the bend in the road, Mrs. Chen recognized him almost instantly.

She rushed forward with a speed that belied her age.

No crying, no questioning.

She grabbed Su Ming's arm, her bloodshot eyes scanning his face and body over and over, as if checking to see if he was missing any piece of flesh.

"Coming back is good enough..."

She repeated these four words, her voice hoarse, her eyes instantly reddening.

"Coming back is good enough..."

Su Shan walked over. His large, rough palm slapped Su Ming's shoulder heavily twice.

The force was heavy, carrying the strength of mountain rocks.

He stared at his son's face, which had grown considerably thinner, his lips moving slightly. In the end, he only managed to squeeze out two words from his throat.

"You've lost weight."

Su Feng stepped forward with a simple, honest smile, silently taking the simple luggage bundle from Su Ming's hands.

Su Yang strode forward, opened his arms, and gave Su Ming a solid bear hug, squeezing him tightly for a moment.

"Let's go, home!" He grinned, smiling like a child. "Mother made your favorite braised pork!"

Warmth, like the evening cooking smoke, tightly enveloped Su Ming.

This simple, unadorned warmth washed away all the noise and scheming of the prefectural city, finally relaxing the nerves that had been taut all along.

This place was his roots.

Lin Yu's Soul Body stretched lazily inside the ring.

Tsk, this familiar scent of everyday life still smells most comfortable. What fine wines and jade liquors of the Deer Cry Banquet could compare to the substance of this bowl of braised pork? Disciple, remember, this is your anchor point, so you won't forget who you are when you're drifting outside.

Just as the family stepped through the familiar courtyard gate, before the bowls and chopsticks could even be set on the table.

A hearty, almost gratingly cheerful laugh came from outside the door without warning.

"Hahaha! I wondered who had returned! So it's the Literary Star of our Su Family Village, Provincial Graduate Su returning in glory! Bringing honor to one's ancestors, bringing honor to one's ancestors!"

Before the words faded, the ruddy, beaming face of Village Chief Zhao Dequan appeared at the entrance.

Behind him followed three village elders, all dressed in respectable clothes, wearing standardized smiles on their faces.

This formation seemed as if they had timed it perfectly, waiting here specifically.

The smile on Mrs. Chen's face stiffened slightly. Su Shan silently straightened his posture, tucking his tobacco pipe back at his waist.

"Uncle Zhao, esteemed uncles." Su Ming stepped forward, neither subservient nor arrogant, and cupped his hands in a respectful salute.

"Aiyo, no need for that, no need for that!" Zhao Dequan quickly waved his hands, his face smiling like a blooming chrysanthemum. "You are a Provincial Graduate Master now. We country bumpkins don't deserve your courtesy!"

His mouth spoke polite words, but his eyes were darting over Su Ming.

"Provincial Graduate Su, you've really brought great honor to our Su Family Village, to our Qingshi Town this time!"

He slapped Su Ming's shoulder heavily, then shifted his tone.

"Although... well, regarding the ranking, there is a slight, tiny bit of regret. But it doesn't matter! A Provincial Graduate is still a Provincial Graduate, a Literary Star fallen from the heavens, truly remarkable!"

His words were cleverly spoken, first praising highly, then gently lowering, showing closeness while also highlighting the gap between that "seventy-third place" and the "Second Top Scorer."

Su Ming merely smiled and did not respond.

Seeing him unmoved, Zhao Dequan ushered everyone into the main room and sat down by the main seat as if it were his place.

He picked up the bowl of coarse tea Su Yang had just poured, blew on the floating foam, his gaze sweeping over the Su family's obviously renovated earthen houses before finally settling back on Su Ming.

"Su Ming, you are now a carp that has leaped over the dragon gate. It seems you are about to soar to great heights, going to the capital to become a high official."

He took a sip of tea, speaking slowly.

"Our village's little paper-making workshop, surely someone of your great stature wouldn't even glance at it."

He deliberately drew out his tone, his eyes becoming meaningful.

"Don't you worry! You just focus on taking your top scholar exams. This family business, I, your uncle, and these elders will watch over it firmly for you, and for the whole village! This is the rice bowl for over a hundred old and young mouths in our entire village!"

He emphasized the words "entire village" heavily.

These words were like invisible ropes, attempting to completely sever Su Ming's connection to the workshop under the banner of "the greater good of the entire village."

Here it comes, here it comes. The old fox's tea ceremony performance begins. First, he puts a tall hat on you, then cries poverty and hardship, and finally wraps it all up with the banner of morality, pocketing the workshop's control for himself. A whole set of combos, played really smoothly.

Lin Yu complained internally, "The dagger is drawn from the scroll! Disciple, if you completely tear up with Zhao Dequan over a workshop, it will cause your parents and brothers to find it difficult to take a single step in the village. The loss outweighs the gain."

"Disciple understands," Su Ming responded inwardly.

Zhao Dequan seemed to feel the timing wasn't quite right yet. He put down the tea bowl, his face revealing an extremely earnest and caring expression.

"In the future, you just focus on steadily climbing higher in the capital. If... I'm just saying if," he paused, his tone sounding especially considerate, "matters in the official circles, they're hard to predict. If one day things don't go smoothly, if you miss home, if you want to come back..."

He pointed in the direction of the workshop outside.

"There will always be a manager's position for you in our workshop! I, your uncle, will keep it for you!"

These words sounded like offering charcoal in snowy weather, but in reality, they were like removing the firewood from under the cauldron.

He was telling Su Ming: Your retreat path is now under my control.

The expressions of the Su family members all changed slightly.

Mrs. Chen's lips moved as if she wanted to say something, but Su Shan stopped her with a look.

Su Ming's face still wore that same humble, gentle smile.

He stood up, personally picked up the coarse ceramic teapot on the table, walked over to Zhao Dequan, and refilled his tea.

The scalding hot tea poured into the bowl, sending up curling steam.

"Uncle Zhao, your words are too serious."

His voice was very calm, like the surface of the old well in the courtyard.

"This junior was only able to luckily pass the provincial exam entirely due to my teacher's guidance and the support of the villagers. These three words, 'Literary Star,' this junior absolutely does not deserve."

He pushed the tea bowl in front of Zhao Dequan, his posture extremely deferential.

"As for the workshop," he shifted the topic, his gaze meeting Zhao Dequan's frankly, "just as Uncle Zhao said, this is the foundation of our Su Family Village, the rice bowl for the entire village."

He smiled slightly and said something that made Zhao Dequan's eyelids twitch.

"This junior's meager scholarly honor was earned through studying. My future thoughts will only be on the examination halls, in the books, with single-minded focus. I would never dare, for personal gain, to abandon the greater good of the entire village."

He bowed deeply once more to Zhao Dequan and the three elders.

"All matters concerning the workshop in the future shall be decided by Uncle Zhao and the esteemed elders. This junior is young, with shallow experience. I dare not speak recklessly and will absolutely have no objections."

These words were like a reassurance pill, hitting exactly what Zhao Dequan wanted.

He clearly, in front of everyone, renounced any management rights or say over the workshop.

The biggest stone in Zhao Dequan's heart finally landed.

The smile on his face instantly became much more sincere.

He was just about to utter a few polite words when he saw Su Ming straighten up, his face wearing a kind of aspiration for the future unique to youth.

"Of course," Su Ming's gaze looked beyond the door, as if seeing the distant capital, "if in the future, this junior can truly achieve some small success outside, I will certainly not forget that it was the land and water of my hometown that nurtured me."

"At that time, if I can do something for the elders and fellow villagers of my hometown, that would truly be this junior's good fortune."

These words were spoken with genuine feeling and were flawlessly crafted.

They expressed the sentiment of not forgetting one's roots and also, like a seed, gently planted an idea in the hearts of Zhao Dequan and the elders.

If I truly become successful, I won't forget my hometown, and naturally, I won't forget you all.

But the premise is, you also shouldn't push things to the extreme, making this "successful" person feel unhappy when returning home.

Zhao Dequan was a smart man. He understood.

He laughed heartily, stood up, and patted Su Ming's arm forcefully.

"Good! Good! With those words, I, your uncle, am reassured! The Su family producing an outstanding talent like you is the good fortune of our entire village!"

He exchanged a few more pleasantries, urged Su Ming to rest well, and then, with a satisfied smile, led the three elders away in farewell.

The courtyard returned to tranquility.

On the dinner table, the bowl of braised pork was stewed until glossy and shiny, its aroma tantalizing.

Mrs. Chen kept putting meat into Su Ming's bowl, muttering, "Eat more, look how thin you are. You definitely didn't eat well outside."

She absolutely did not mention any rankings or regrets.

In her eyes, her son returning safely was more important than anything.

Su Shan silently poured a bowl of wine, picked it up, and raised it toward Su Ming.

"Have a drink."

Su Ming picked up his bowl and clinked it with his father's. The pungent liquor went down his throat, burning a fiery path in his chest.

Su Shan put down the wine bowl, looked at his son, and slowly spoke, his voice hoarse.

"Your father knows you have your own ideas in your heart, your own great path to walk."

"Family matters, leave them to me, to your two brothers. You don't need to worry about anything."

This unconditional trust and support flowed through Su Ming's entire body like a warm current.

His eyes grew hot, and he nodded heavily.

"Father, I understand."

Late at night.

The family had already gone to sleep. In Su Ming's room, a single bean of lamplight still burned.

He called Second Brother Su Yang in alone and carefully closed the door.

Seeing his younger brother's solemn manner, Su Yang felt a bit uneasy.

"Third Son, what's the matter? So mysterious."

Su Ming didn't speak. He carefully took out a few sheets of paper from his personal travel bag.

These weren't the exquisite paper bought in the prefectural city, but the slightly rough bamboo paper produced by their own workshop.

On the paper, drawn with fine charcoal, were some diagrams Su Yang couldn't understand, with densely packed small characters annotated beside them.

"Second Brother, sit."

Su Ming spread the papers out on the table.

Under the lamplight, the diagram on the first sheet was clearly a flowchart, from the piling of bamboo material to the large stove for steaming and boiling, to the final paper pulp pool. Each step was connected with arrows, with strange terms like "segmented heating," "alkaline water circulation," and "waste heat utilization" annotated beside them.

"This is... an improved steaming and boiling method," Su Ming pointed at the diagram, explaining in a low voice. "Following this method can save half the firewood, and the pulp production speed can increase by thirty percent."

Su Yang's eyes instantly widened.

Su Ming pulled out the second sheet of paper.

There was no diagram, only a few lines of text, like a medicinal formula.

"There's a wild grass on the mountain called 'cow tendon grass.' Its leaves are very tough. Mash it, extract the juice, and add it to the paper pulp according to this ratio. The paper produced will have double the toughness and won't tear easily when wet."

Su Yang's breathing became heavy.

Su Ming finally took out the third sheet of paper.

"Those bits of pulp that can't be scooped up in the workshop, and the scrap paper edges from cutting, don't throw them away. Crush them again, press them into thick cardboard, and you can sell it to shops in town for packaging boxes. Or, make it into rougher, softer toilet paper. The price is cheap, but the volume is large. It's also a considerable source of income."

"Also, don't plant only grain on those few acres of slope land on the back mountain. I've drawn a diagram. We can try grafting some fruit trees we don't have here, like pears, like peaches. In three to five years, it will be another steady source of wealth."

Su Yang stared blankly at the three sheets of paper on the table, feeling they were heavier than gold.

Any one of these things, if taken out, would be enough for an ordinary family to live comfortably for a lifetime.

And his younger brother had placed them all in front of him so lightly and casually.

"Third Son, you..." Su Yang's voice trembled slightly.

"Second Brother," Su Ming interrupted him, his eyes becoming extremely solemn. "Keep these safe. Then, remember the three things I tell you."

Su Yang immediately sat up straight, his expression focused.

"First, proceed gradually, do not advance recklessly. First master this improved steaming and boiling method thoroughly. The others, wait until the time is ripe, then bring them out bit by bit. Remember, don't reveal everything at once. That will invite disaster."

"Second, the core technology must be kept firmly in our own family's hands. Memorize these formulas, then burn the papers. Besides you, at most, only Eldest Brother can know. Don't even tell Father and Mother. This is our family's true trump card."

Su Yang nodded heavily, carefully folding those papers and hiding them inside his clothes, close to his body.

"Third," Su Ming lowered his voice, almost to a whisper, "also the most important point."

He leaned close to Su Yang's ear and spoke word by word.

"Remember, Zhao Dequan is not to be trusted. If in the future, the family encounters a big trouble even he cannot solve, or... someone wants to deal our family a fatal blow."

"Don't worry about anything else. Immediately take Father, Mother, and Eldest Brother's family to Qingshi Town, to the County School's Zhou Wenhai."

"Just say that I, Su Ming, sent you. For my sake, he will definitely protect you and ensure your safety."

Su Yang's heart sank heavily.

He finally understood the deeper meaning behind his younger brother's arrangements.

This wasn't just planning a path to wealth for the family; it was also laying out a retreat path sufficient to protect the entire family's lives in a crisis.

Looking at this younger brother, several years his junior, whose shoulders were already carrying the future of the entire family, Su Yang's eyes grew hot. He couldn't speak.

He could only extend his calloused hands and grip Su Ming's shoulders tightly and firmly.

"Third Son, your second brother... has remembered it all."

Share to your friends

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

- Chapter 97: On the Eve of Departure

Chapter 97: On the Eve of Departure

[2,678 words]

The sky had not yet fully brightened, a thin layer of mist enveloped Su Family Village.

The air was clear and cold, carrying the moist scent of dew mixed with earth.

At the entrance of the Su family's small courtyard, the atmosphere of parting fermented in silence.

Mrs. Chen stood before her son, extending her hands covered in thin calluses, smoothing the collar of Su Ming's robe over and over again.

The collar of that blue homespun cloth long gown was already perfectly straight and neat as new, yet her fingertips stubbornly stroked over it.

"When you're away from home, eat your fill and dress warmly," she murmured softly, as if speaking to Su Ming, yet also as if speaking to herself.

She pulled out a small cloth pouch from her bosom, the pouch still carrying the warmth of her body.

Without allowing any argument, Mrs. Chen stuffed the pouch into the inner lining of Su Ming's undergarment, carefully patting it to ensure it was hidden securely.

"Don't lose it."

Su Ming felt the outline of the pouch; inside were some uneven, hard objects and the touch of a pair of thick shoe soles. He knew it was all the family's silver ingots, and the thick-soled cloth shoes his mother had stayed up several nights in a row to make.

His throat tightened a little, but he only nodded forcefully.

"Mother, I know."

Su Shan, who had been squatting by the courtyard gate, stood up, tucking the unlit pipe tobacco rod back into the cloth pouch behind his waist.

Without a word, he picked up Su Ming's not-very-heavy traveling bag, turned, and walked towards the direction of the village entrance.

In the morning mist, his back, usually somewhat hunched from the heavy burdens of life, now appeared exceptionally firm, like a silent wall, blocking all the wind and rain behind for his son.

Eldest Brother Su Feng and Second Brother Su Yang stood on either side of Su Ming.

Su Feng smiled with simple honesty, stuffing a bundle of dry rations wrapped in a clean cloth towel into Su Ming's hand; the bundle still carried the warmth of having just come off the stove.

Su Yang, meanwhile, gave Su Ming's shoulder a firm pat, leaned close to his ear, and spoke in a very low voice.

"Leave the family to me."

Four words, weighty as a thousand pounds.

Su Ming's eyes felt a little hot.

He took a deep breath of the cold, clear air, suppressing that surge of aching sorrow, then turned to his family with a reassuring smile.

"Father, Mother, Eldest Brother, Second Brother, you can see me off just here."

He took the traveling bag from his father's hand; it felt light in his grasp, yet his heart felt heavy.

"I'm going to the town to bid farewell to my teacher, then I'll go directly to the capital. You... should all go back now."

Mrs. Chen's lips moved slightly, but in the end, she didn't say anything more, only the rims of her eyes grew redder.

Su Shan stopped walking, turned back to look at his son once. Turbulent emotions swirled in those cloudy eyes, ultimately transforming into only a heavy nod.

Most of the fields along the road had already been harvested, leaving neat rice stubble. A few early-rising villagers were busy working in the fields. Seeing Su Ming, they all stopped their tasks, straightened up, and greeted him warmly.

"Provincial Graduate Su, heading out so early!"

"Su Ming, off to the capital, are you? Be careful on the road!"

Su Ming responded to each one, his steps never halting as he strode towards the dirt road leading to the world beyond the mountains.

Qingshi Town, the west city corner.

Xu Qing's family's book stall was busier than usual.

Several half-old camphorwood chests were lined up behind the stall. Xu Qing's father was directing two short-term laborers, carefully sorting stacks of books by category into the chests, wrapping them meticulously in oil paper to prevent moisture and insects.

Xu Qing wasn't participating in the packing. He stood to the side, holding a half-old ledger, using a charcoal pencil to swiftly record book titles and numbers, his expression focused.

His traveling bag was placed at his feet—a simple blue homespun cloth bundle, packed cleanly and neatly, revealing its owner's practical nature.

"Brother Su." Upon seeing Su Ming, Xu Qing immediately put down the ledger in his hand, a smile appearing on his face. He dusted off his hands, flipped the ledger to a certain page, and pointed it out to Su Ming.

"The carriage and horses have been hired as we previously discussed, from Old Chen's family at the west end of town. Old Chen has been running this route for over a decade; he knows the roads well and is a steady man. I personally went to inspect the carriage's condition yesterday; checked the axles, wheel hubs, everything is fine."

His voice was clear, bright, and steady, carrying a reassuring quality.

"The route is also finalized. We'll take the official road, passing through Luocheng and Xiangfan. This route avoids several places with treacherous mountain paths. Though it adds two or three days to the journey, the post stations and inns along the way are well-established, resupply is convenient, and it's the safest. This is the rough itinerary." He flipped another page. On it, a simple line drawing showed the route map, marking major towns and estimated camping spots.

Su Ming examined it carefully and nodded. Xu Qing had considered things very thoroughly.

"Brother Xu, how are the dry rations and medicinal herbs prepared?" Su Ming asked.

"I was just about to discuss this with you, Brother Su," Xu Qing said, reopening the ledger. "For dry rations, I've mainly prepared flatbreads and dried meat that store well. I've also prepared some easy-to-carry fried rice. For medicinal herbs, I've stocked up on some patchouli, dried tangerine peel, and mugwort for common ailments, plus a small bottle of wound medicine. Brother Su, do you think we need to add anything else?"

Su Ming thought for a moment. "Prepare some more salt and sugar; they can replenish energy at critical moments. Also, could you check with Old Chen again to confirm if his carriage can have an additional hidden lock installed? Being careful never hurts."

Xu Qing nodded, immediately noting it down in the ledger. "Alright, I'll go take care of that shortly. Brother Su's considerations are indeed thorough."

"I've troubled you, Brother Xu." He pulled out a small coin purse from his robe and handed it over. "This is the estimated travel expenses for our journey. Half is for carriage and horse fees, half for food, lodging, and miscellaneous expenses. Brother Xu, please manage it all."

Xu Qing didn't decline, accepting the purse straightforwardly, noting it in the ledger, then closing the book. "Brother Su trusts me; I will certainly not betray that trust."

The two exchanged a smile; everything was understood without words.

At this moment, Xu Qing's father looked up from the pile of books. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He wiped it with his sleeve and smiled at Su Ming.

"Provincial Graduate Su, be extra careful on the road." Xu Qing's father's words were plain. "Our Qing'er has read many books, but his experience being away from home is still somewhat lacking. The two of you traveling together, look out for each other more."

Su Ming bowed respectfully. "Uncle, please rest assured. Brother Xu and I will definitely support each other. You must also take good care of your health. These books... take your time sorting them; no need to overexert yourself."

Old Man Xu waved his hand, laughing. "I'm used to it, used to it. These books are my lifeblood; I wouldn't trust them to anyone else. You two focus on going to take your exams for scholarly honor; don't worry about matters at home."

"Brother Xu, I'll go to the County School first to bid farewell to several teachers and classmates," Su Ming said to Xu Qing.

"Alright," Xu Qing nodded. "I still need about half an hour to finish inventorying the books here. After that, I'll go purchase some more dry rations and common medicinal herbs for the road. Let's meet at the east gate of the town in the afternoon and depart on time."

"East gate in the afternoon, rain or shine."

"Hey, this kid really is reliable. Bringing him along will save a lot of worry on the road," Lin Yu commented in Su Ming's mind.

Su Ming replied mentally, "Master, between friends, trust is most valuable. Each has their own strengths."

Su Ming left the book stall and first went to a reputable blacksmith shop in town to collect several small, delicate throwing knives and a slender iron probe he had ordered a few days prior, concealing them on his person. This was on Lin Yu's instruction, to prepare some inconspicuous yet practical self-defense items.

Su Ming did not go directly to the Zhou Residence. Instead, he detoured to the depths of the County School, to that secluded small courtyard planted with several plots of green vegetables.

Professor Liu was wearing his reading glasses, squatting in the vegetable patch, carefully mounding soil around a cabbage plant. His movements were as focused as if he were grading a splendid essay.

Hearing footsteps, he looked up. Seeing it was Su Ming, a gentle smile appeared on his face.

"Leaving?"

"Yes, I've come specially to bid you farewell, Professor," Su Ming said respectfully, bowing.

Professor Liu stood up, dusted the soil off his hands, and pointed to the stone stool in the courtyard.

"Sit."

He didn't go back inside to wash his hands, just casually sat down opposite Su Ming.

"The capital is not like Qingshi Town," Professor Liu said, looking into Su Ming's eyes, speaking slowly. "That is the foot of the Son of Heaven, the vortex center of power. Every person you see there, even a soldier guarding the city gate, might have intricate connections behind them."

He paused, his tone turning serious.

"Your policy discussion essay about the floods in the five southern townships had good intentions, but it was too sharp, touching on sore spots for many people. Once you leave Qingshi Town, you must never mention it to anyone again. It's best to dispose of the draft as well."

"This student understands."

"When a tree stands out in the forest, the wind will surely break it. Your talent is a sharp sword, but also a flag that attracts wind and rain. Before you have enough strength to protect yourself, concealing one's edge is more important than brandishing the sword."

Professor Liu's words coincided perfectly with Lin Yu's "Way of Survival."

Su Ming felt a stir in his heart and bowed once more.

"Thank you for your instruction, Professor."

Professor Liu waved his hand, then pulled out an unsigned letter from his robe. The envelope was made of ordinary yellow deckle-edged paper, looking somewhat aged.

On it was only a line of small characters: "To the Capital, Mule and Horse Market, Fushun Teahouse, for Manager Zhang's personal attention."

The envelope was ordinary yellow deckle-edged paper, with only that one line of small characters.

"When you reach the capital, it will be an unfamiliar place. If you encounter difficulties you cannot solve yourself, or... if you feel you've reached a dead end, you can go here and find a teahouse manager surnamed Zhang." Professor Liu's tone was very flat, as if discussing a trivial matter.

Professor Liu's tone was flat.

"He is a distant nephew of my clan. He served as a cook in the army in his early years. He's fairly reliable. Give him the letter, and he might be able to provide you with some minor assistance."

Su Ming took that light, flimsy letter, yet his heart sank.

The weight of this letter was far heavier than a thousand pieces of gold.

"This old man knows what's up," Lin Yu's voice carried a note of approval. "He's giving you an inconspicuous little path. Disciple, keep it safe. Who knows, you might need to crawl out through this dog hole to save your life someday."

"This student thanks the Professor for his nurturing!" Su Ming solemnly tucked the letter securely against his person.

Professor Liu nodded, turning his gaze back to his vegetable patch.

"Go on. The soil in the capital is very hard, and also very fertile. Whether you can take root in that land depends on your own fortune."

Coming out of Professor Liu's courtyard, Su Ming's mood felt considerably lighter.

Coming out of Professor Liu's courtyard, Su Ming strolled towards the student dormitory area.

He didn't go to the A-ranked dormitories, but instead walked slowly through the ordinary dormitory area.

Most of the students he encountered along the way, whether acquainted or unfamiliar, would stop upon seeing him, actively cupping their hands in greeting.

"Senior Brother Su!"

"Brother Su, are you setting off?"

"Wishing Brother Su success in the capital exams and a place on the golden list!"

Their words were mostly filled with goodwill and respect.

Even though his ranking wasn't as high as Xu Qing's, the "Provincial Graduate" status itself was already enough to make these Xiucan still on their academic journey look up to him.

The status gap brought by scholarly honor was vividly apparent at this moment.

Su Ming returned each greeting with gentle courtesy, remaining as humble as ever.

"Thank you for your kind words." "The same to you all; I hope you all make great progress in your studies."

He specifically went to visit several classmates with whom he had some friendship and whose scholarship was solid, briefly bidding farewell and wishing each other well.

In the room of a classmate surnamed Wang, the other brought out his treasured tea to entertain him, speaking with considerable emotion. "Brother Su, with this journey, you are sure to achieve great things. I only hope that when you rise to prominence in the future, you won't forget us, your classmates from Qingshi Town."

Su Ming said, "Brother Wang, you exaggerate. How could I dare forget the friendship of classmates? If there is an opportunity in the future, we shall certainly gather again."

At another classmate's place, surnamed Li, the other was more concerned about the academic atmosphere and examiner preferences in the prefectural city. Su Ming shared some of his observations from the prefectural city, picking out the less critical ones to tell. The other listened, nodding repeatedly.

Walking to a corner of the dormitory area, he faintly heard suppressed discussion voices from inside.

"...That Su Ming, he just got a bit lucky, hanging onto the tail end of the list. How can he be compared with Second Top Scorer Xu?" One voice carried a hint of sourness.

"Quiet!" another voice immediately cut in. "A Provincial Graduate is a Provincial Graduate! How can we casually comment on that? Don't bring trouble upon yourself!"

The voices inside immediately dropped lower, becoming inaudible.

Su Ming's steps didn't pause, his expression unchanged, as if he had heard nothing.

"Hey, hear that?" Lin Yu laughed in his mind. "The prestige of the Provincial Graduate Lord is already showing. Even if they're sour inside, they still have to be respectful on the surface. This is the 'momentum' that status brings."

Su Ming responded calmly in his mind, "It's just empty fame. Their awe is for the 'Provincial Graduate' status, not for me, Su Ming, personally."

After walking a circuit through the dormitory area, having fulfilled the courtesy due to classmates, Su Ming turned and left without lingering further.

For those walking different paths, a nod of acquaintance was sufficient.

He arrived before the familiar black lacquered gate of the Zhou Residence.

This time, he didn't hesitate in the slightest, nor did he adjust his breathing.

He simply stood quietly, raised his hand, and gently knocked three times on the door knocker.

The door opened in response.

It was the same old gatekeeper. Seeing Su Ming, the smile on his face was even more sincere than last time.

"Master Su, you've come. The Master is waiting for you in the study."

Su Ming passed through the courtyard, heading straight for the study.

He reached the doorway, his hand about to touch the door knocker.

"Come in."

Zhou Wenhai's voice came from inside, steady and powerful.

Su Ming pushed the door open and entered.

The last rays of the setting sun slanted in through the window lattice, dyeing the study a layer of warm gold.

Zhou Wenhai wasn't sitting behind the desk. He stood by the window, hands clasped behind his back, gazing out at the parasol tree whose leaves had already begun to wither.

Hearing the footsteps, he slowly turned around.

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

Chapter 98: The winds of the capital can kill.

[2,262 words]

Zhou Wenhai turned around.

A faint aroma of tea permeated the study. Zhou Wenhai did not sit behind the desk that symbolized a teacher's authority.

He pointed to a small tea table by the window, where two white porcelain teacups had already been set out.

"Sit."

Su Ming took his seat as instructed.

This gesture instantly shortened the distance between the two, transforming them from strict teacher and student to something more like close friends of different generations who could sit and converse frankly.

Zhou Wenhai picked up the small red clay stove on the table. The fire was strong, making a pot of mountain spring water bubble and gurgle.

He personally warmed the cups, rinsed the tea leaves, and brewed the tea.

The entire process flowed smoothly, carrying a pleasing rhythm.

Soon, a cup of clear, bright golden tea soup was pushed before Su Ming, steam curling up, the tea fragrance pure and refreshing.

"Try it. Longjing tea picked before the Qingming Festival." Zhou Wenhai picked up his own cup, his gaze falling on the tender green tea leaves floating and sinking within. His voice held a trace of barely perceptible melancholy. "A gift from an old friend."

Su Ming lifted the teacup but did not drink immediately.

"It is good that you will be traveling with Xu Qing this time." Zhou Wenhai began slowly. "He is quick-witted and decisive, you are steady and reserved. You complement each other. As your teacher, I feel much more at ease."

He changed the subject abruptly, his gaze shifting from the teacup to Su Ming, sharp and piercing.

"But do you know why I, your teacher, left the capital back then?"

Su Ming's heart gave a violent jolt.

He knew this was the true final lesson his teacher intended to impart tonight.

"This student does not know."

Zhou Wenhai let out a low, almost self-mocking chuckle.

"It was not due to failure in political struggles, nor was it due to incompetence." His tone grew heavy, as if peeling open a wound that had never healed. "It was because of a single 'Memorial on Rectifying Canal Transport Malpractices'."

He looked at Su Ming, speaking each word clearly and deliberately.

"At that time, I was young and impulsive. After enduring a few years in the Hanlin Academy, I thought I had understood the court's ills and found a brilliant strategy for the country and the people, one that could save the national treasury millions of taels of silver annually."

"Little did I know, that memorial touched the lifeblood of the entire system—from the Director-General of the Grand Canal to the granary superintendents along the route, and behind them... the Yongchang Marquis Manor, which had stood unshaken in the capital for centuries!"

Yongchang Marquis Manor!

Su Ming's breath hitched for a moment.

"They did not care about right or wrong, about the empty national treasury, about people starving in the streets." A flash of bone-chilling coldness passed through Zhou Wenhai's eyes. "They only cared about their own interests. Impeachments, false accusations, slander... flew before the Emperor overnight like a blizzard of snowflakes."

"First, they slandered me, saying I 'associated with palace eunuchs and spied on the inner court'—a major taboo for any official. Then, they instigated censors to impeach my mentor—the then Vice Minister of the Ministry of Rites, Senior Official Li—accusing him of forming cliques for personal gain and controlling the censorial system. And I, they claimed, was the vanguard Senior Official Li had planted in the Hanlin Academy to disrupt court governance!"

A cold sweat instantly broke out on Su Ming's back. This move was utterly vicious! It attacked not personal conduct but framed it within the category of "factionalism," the Emperor's greatest taboo. It directly implicated his mentor, instantly expanding the scope of the attack and making rescue impossible.

"To protect himself, Senior Official Li could only close his doors to guests and sever contact with all his disciples." Zhou Wenhai's voice carried a trace of sorrow. "In the court, I instantly became a rootless duckweed. But that wasn't enough..."

He looked at Su Ming, his eyes sharp as knives.

"Their most fatal blow was to bribe a minor canal transport official who had been exiled for a crime. Before that man 'died suddenly' on his way to exile, he left behind a 'blood-written letter,' accusing me of having 'demanded a huge bribe from him while drafting the canal transport memorial and promising to recommend him for a three-rank promotion if the matter succeeded'."

"The 'witness' was 'already dead,' the 'evidence' was 'conclusive'." Zhou Wenhai's voice held a weariness born of seeing through worldly affairs. "Consorting with eunuchs was a suspicious case. Forming cliques was insinuation. But this charge of 'soliciting bribes' was ironclad, solid proof enough to ruin the reputation of any upright official!"

"If not for Brother Liu Wenyuan risking his life to defend me, staking his entire family's lives before the Emperor to vouch for my character, and uniting with a few censors who still had integrity to tenaciously argue the evidence in this case was questionable and demand a joint trial by the Three Judicial Offices... I'm afraid I would not have 'retired honorably,' but would have been stripped of my home, convicted, and exiled three thousand li!"

Zhou Wenhai picked up his teacup and drank the now cold tea in one gulp, as if swallowing the humiliation and indignation of those years.

"Even so, I was forced to leave the Hanlin Academy, to leave the capital. Because of this matter, Brother Liu also completely offended his superiors. He remained stuck in the position of Vice Director of the Imperial College for over a decade."

He set down the teacup, looking at Su Ming with an immensely complex gaze.

"This, is the capital."

"There, you find the most splendid writings, the highest authority, the most dazzling prosperity. But the wind there is also the coldest."

"Cold enough to kill."

A deathly silence filled the study.

Su Ming felt a chill rise from the soles of his feet, instantly spreading through his entire body.

This was more direct, more brutally bloody, than any teaching on political strategy.

Inside the ring, Lin Yu, for once, did not make any sarcastic remarks.

He just let out a faint, deep sigh.

This old man truly regarded this disciple as his own son. He was using his own flesh and blood experience to pave a road to the capital for Su Ming, a road lined with warning signs.

After a long while, Zhou Wenhai pulled himself out of that painful memory.

From his bosom, he retrieved a deep purple brocade pouch with extreme solemnity.

The pouch was embroidered with intricate cloud patterns in gold thread. Just touching it, one knew it was no ordinary item.

He did not hand it directly to Su Ming. Instead, he drew a letter from the pouch.

The letter paper was slightly yellowed, bearing the marks of time. The seal was an ancient, complex dark red wax imprint, definitely not something used by ordinary families.

"Keep this letter safe."

Zhou Wenhai handed over the letter with both hands.

This gesture represented not a bestowal from a teacher, but an equal entrustment.

"Vice Director Liu Wenyuan is the only elder in the capital you can trust completely. He is upright and principled by nature, never forming cliques. Precisely because of this, his words carry a weight few others can match."

"Take my letter and go to him. There is no need to deliberately ask him to scheme for you. Just perform the rites of a disciple, visit occasionally, and seek his guidance on studies."

"With this connection established, many of the open and hidden arrows from the shadows in the capital will not dare to easily target you."

Su Ming received the letter with both hands.

It felt light to the touch, yet seemed to weigh a thousand jun.

He could feel the thickness of the paper and the lingering, resolute aura of another person on that wax seal.

Zhou Wenhai looked at Su Ming, his voice dropping even lower, carrying the gravity of entrusting a matter of life and death.

"Su Ming, you must remember, this is not an ordinary letter of recommendation."

"This is... the token of a pledge I made back then with Brother Liu and several like-minded individuals. We vowed that no matter where we were in the future, alive or dead, seeing this letter would be like seeing the old friend in person!"

Upon hearing this, Su Ming's heart contracted violently.

He instantly understood that behind this letter was a group of old comrades who had long since scattered like stars, yet still shared a bond of fellowship.

This letter was his teacher's last trump card in the capital, a protective talisman his teacher had obtained for him using his most precious personal connection!

Su Ming did not say another word.

He slowly rose from his seat, stepped back, and performed a deep, ninety-degree bow to Zhou Wenhai.

The long bow reached the ground, and he remained there for a long time.

"This student... will never forget Teacher's grace in preserving my life and protecting my path."

Zhou Wenhai stepped forward, helped him up, and pressed him back into the seat.

He looked at Su Ming, his gaze penetrating the young man's exterior, as if seeing something deeper within.

"Su Ming, you are different from me, your teacher, and from Xu Qing."

"There is something hidden in your eyes. It is not a passion for power, nor a thirst for scholarly honor, but rather a kind of... more transcendent quest."

Su Ming's heart shook violently.

"I do not know exactly what you are seeking, nor do I need to know." Zhou Wenhai's gaze grew profound, as if capable of piercing through past and present. "But I, your teacher, give you eight words."

He took up brush and ink and wrote eight characters on a plain white paperweight.

Harmonize with the light, blend with the dust. Unfurl and furl with the times.

"Before you find what you seek, do not let anyone discern your true purpose. Conceal cleverness within clumsiness, use obscurity to achieve clarity."

Inside the ring, Lin Yu almost couldn't help but clap and cheer.

Listen, just listen! Harmonize with the light, blend with the dust. Unfurl and furl with the times! Putting it so elegantly— isn't it just "if you can't beat them, join them, and seize the right moment to reap benefits"? Cultured people sure talk in a roundabout way. But this old man really gets it! These eight words are practically the official credo of our "Way of Survival"!

Zhou Wenhai put down the brush and then retrieved an inconspicuous old bronze plaque from the bottom drawer of his desk.

The plaque was only half the size of a palm. The cloud patterns on it were already worn and blurred, making its exact origin unclear.

"I obtained this by chance during my travels in my youth, at a dilapidated ancient temple. It is not a valuable item." He handed the plaque to Su Ming. "But I have carried it with me for many years, and it has a rather calming effect. Take it with you. The capital is noisy, people's hearts are restless. Perhaps it can help you find a moment of calm when you feel troubled."

Su Ming took the bronze plaque. It felt cool to the touch, and a strange sense of tranquility transmitted from his palm, clearing his agitated thoughts.

Lin Yu's Soul Body swept over the plaque and let out a soft sound of surprise.

Hmm? Let this teacher take a look... This thing... is a bit interesting. A faint trace of spiritual energy is tightly locked inside, as if asleep. Not an ordinary item, but not some earth-shattering treasure either. Perfect—carrying it won't attract attention. Accept it, must accept it!

Everything that needed to be said had been said.

Zhou Wenhai stood up, walked to Su Ming, and extended the hands that had written characters all his life, giving Su Ming's shoulder a firm pat.

The pat was heavy, carrying a final exhortation.

"Go."

His tone was unprecedentedly gentle.

"Whatever it is you seek, I hope you attain your wish."

"Take care... on the road ahead."

Su Ming bowed deeply once more.

Then, he turned, pushed open the study's heavy wooden door, and did not look back.

He knew his teacher was surely watching his back until his figure completely disappeared into the courtyard.

Walking through the bluestone-paved courtyard of the Zhou Residence, Su Ming felt the traveling bag on his shoulder seemed much heavier.

Inside were not just a few changes of clothes and his parents' concerns.

Now, it also carried his teacher's lifelong regret, his final exhortation, and that ideal that had not yet been extinguished.

He carefully placed the weighty letter and the cool bronze plaque close to his chest inside his clothing.

"This Old Zhou has practically handed over his most treasured possessions and connections to you." Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind, tinged with emotion. "We must acknowledge this karmic debt. He is betting on your future, and the stake is his all. This deal is worthwhile, but also heavy."

"But disciple, those eight words he said are indeed golden advice. Our journey to the capital is precisely about 'harmonizing with the light, blending with the dust,' quietly reaping enough benefits and sinking our roots deep!"

Su Ming tightened his grip on the tokens close to his chest and walked out through the black lacquered main gate of the Zhou Residence.

Outside the East Gate of the town.

A somewhat old carriage stood quietly by the roadside.

Xu Qing, carrying his neat and tidy blue homespun cloth bundle, was standing beside the carriage, waiting quietly.

Seeing Su Ming's figure, he asked no questions, merely pointed at the carriage.

"Everything is ready."

Su Ming nodded.

Neither spoke further. They just exchanged a glance and then boarded the carriage one after the other.

The coachman raised his whip, flicking it in the air with a crisp crack.

"Giddy up!"

The wheels began to turn slowly, making a rumbling sound, moving forward resolutely into the silent night.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 99: This official road is truly difficult to traverse.

[3,021 words]

The carriage wheels rolled over the official road, producing a monotonous "rumbling" sound.

This sound became the fading background noise of Qingshi Town.

The carriage did not travel at breakneck speed through the night.

As soon as dusk began to settle, the cart driver, Old Chen, pulled on the reins, steering the carriage to the leeward side of a gentle slope.

Not far away, a small stream gurgled, its sound exceptionally clear in the night.

"Gentlemen, we'll rest here tonight," Old Chen said, jumping down from the driver's seat and deftly unhitching the horses. "Traveling at night wears out the horses and makes people anxious. This area is open, close to water, safe."

Xu Qing emerged from the carriage, surveying the surroundings.

The wilderness was silent, only the rustling of wind through grass.

He nodded. "Uncle Chen is experienced. We'll follow your lead."

Su Ming got down afterwards. He walked to the stream, scooped up a handful of water to wash his face. The icy stream water refreshed him.

Soon, a campfire was lit.

Orange-red flames danced, dispelling the chill of the autumn night, casting three swaying shadows on the ground.

Old Chen fished a hard, flatbread from his pocket and took big bites, washing it down with water from his waterskin.

Xu Qing, meanwhile, took out the notebook he never parted with from his blue homespun cloth bundle, along with a piece of charcoal pencil.

By the firelight, he meticulously recorded in his notebook.

"Twenty-third year of the Qiyuan era of Daxing, autumn, the third day of the ninth month. Departed Qingshi Town, traveled approximately forty li, camped below Apricot Blossom Ridge. Cart fare prepaid two hundred wen, provisions..."

His handwriting was neat, meticulous, as if he were transcribing a classical text.

Su Ming watched him, not disturbing.

Lin Yu's lazy voice sounded in Su Ming's mind. "We handle the fighting, he handles the money and accounts. Perfect match!"

Su Ming replied mentally, "Brother Xu is a gentleman, not comparable to a mere accountant."

"Hey, that's what makes it good. A gentleman loves wealth, but acquires it through proper means. Trustworthy."

Old Chen finished half his flatbread, drank some water, and sighed.

"Gentlemen, is this your first time heading to the capital?"

Xu Qing stopped writing and looked up. "Yes, Uncle Chen. You seem very familiar with this route."

"Familiar, too familiar." Old Chen tapped the mud off his shoe sole with his pipe. "Make this trip at least seven or eight times a year. But this year's situation is different from previous years."

He lowered his voice, gesturing southward with his chin.

"Unsettled."

"A few days ago, on my way back from a delivery, just outside Luocheng, I ran into a group fleeing from Yingzhou in the south. Whole families, a miserable sight. Said there's a severe drought there, crops failed completely, the government's relief grain is delayed, so they had to come out seeking a way to survive."

Old Chen's face was full of wrinkles left by wind and hardship, looking even deeper under the firelight.

"When people are hungry, they'll do anything. I've heard that on several southern roads, some have already turned to banditry. We're on the official road, fine during the day, but at night we must keep our eyes sharp."

Xu Qing's expression turned serious. He noted Old Chen's words in his notebook too, drawing a circle at the end as a key mark.

"Thank you for the warning, Uncle Chen. Tonight, we'll take turns keeping watch."

Su Ming spoke up.

Xu Qing took out two pieces of dried meat wrapped in oil paper from his bag, handing one to Old Chen and the other to Su Ming.

"Uncle Chen, you've worked hard. Have something to fill your stomach."

Old Chen looked at the glossy dried meat, chuckled, didn't stand on ceremony, and accepted it.

Su Ming took the dried meat, held it near the fire to warm it. The fat sizzled, aroma wafting.

He noticed Xu Qing himself was still eating the most ordinary flatbread.

He broke off half of his warmed dried meat and offered it to Xu Qing.

"Let's eat together."

Xu Qing was taken aback, about to decline, but met Su Ming's calm gaze.

He said no more, accepted it, and ate it silently in small bites.

The night deepened.

Xu Qing and Old Chen had already wrapped themselves in blankets and fallen asleep by the carriage, emitting soft snores.

Su Ming sat cross-legged by the campfire, adding a dry branch.

He closed his eyes and extended his spiritual sense.

The surrounding world instantly became different.

The sound of wind, insect chirps, the crackling of burning flames all became crystal clear, as if right by his ear.

His perception spread out silently in all directions like water.

He "heard" a night owl landing on a dead branch a li away, preening its feathers.

He "heard" several small fish chasing and playing among rocks downstream.

He could even vaguely "sense" that about two li southeast, there was another campfire, along with over a dozen chaotic, noisy auras. Those auras carried hunger, exhaustion, and a trace of barely noticeable restlessness.

Refugees.

Old Chen was telling the truth.

"Not bad, improvement." Lin Yu's voice held a note of satisfaction. "The scanning radius of this human radar can already cover a small village."

"Master, I sensed them."

"Mhm, just a bunch of pitiful, hungry people. Far from us. As long as they're not stupid, they won't provoke a carriage with official travel passes."

Su Ming opened his eyes, looking up at the low-hanging starry sky.

The Milky Way was brilliant, eternal and unchanging.

Under this sky, some studied hard in their studies, some toiled for their livelihood, some slept peacefully in warm beds, and others endured hunger in the cold wilderness.

Teacher Zhou said the capital's wind could kill.

But in this world, it wasn't just the capital's wind that could kill.

On the third day of travel, the outline of a majestic city appeared on the distant horizon.

Luocheng had arrived.

Compared to Yunshuo Prefecture, Luocheng's city walls were slightly lower, but still solid and thick, covered with marks of wind and rain erosion.

The moat was wide, the drawbridge long since lowered.

The city gate was a bustling throng of people. Those pushing carts, carrying loads on shoulder poles, driving donkeys, all mixed together, forming a long queue waiting for the soldiers' inspection.

When it was their carriage's turn, a soldier who looked like a squad leader walked over, an impatient expression on his face.

"Where from? Where to? Travel passes!"

The cart driver, Old Chen, offered a smile and handed over the passes.

The squad leader took them, gave a cursory glance, was about to wave them through when his gaze halted.

He saw on the pass, besides Old Chen's information, two lines clearly written: "Daxing Bingchen Examination Cycle New Provincial Graduates Su Ming, Xu Qing."

The squad leader's expression changed instantly.

The impatience on his face vanished without a trace, replaced by an almost fawning respect.

He bent at the waist, respectfully returning the passes to Old Chen with both hands, his tone turning three times more polite.

"So it's two Provincial Graduate gentlemen! This lowly one failed to recognize your eminence, my offense! I beg your forgiveness, gentlemen!"

He turned and shouted at several soldiers still slowly inspecting pedestrians nearby.

"All of you, get out of the way! Blind fools! If you delay the gentlemen entering the city, I'll skin you!"

The previously congested gate passage was instantly cleared.

The squad leader personally ran to the carriage side, bowing again toward the carriage curtain.

"Gentlemen, please!"

Xu Qing, inside the carriage, saw all this clearly. His face showed no expression, but his eyes were somewhat complex.

Su Ming remained calm as usual.

The carriage smoothly entered the city.

The scene inside the city was at least ten times more prosperous than Qingshi Town.

The main street paved with bluestone slabs was broad and tidy. Shops lined both sides in rows: wine houses, tea houses, silk shops, money shops... signboards and banners fluttered in the wind, shop assistants' cries rose and fell.

"Brother Su, let's find an inn first, then go check the market," Xu Qing suggested.

"Good, as you arrange."

Old Chen took them to an inn.

The inn wasn't large, but clean and tidy. The innkeeper, seeing their status as Provincial Graduates, was even more attentive, immediately arranging the two best rooms.

After settling their luggage, Xu Qing pulled Su Ming out.

He didn't go to the seemingly lively wine houses, but headed straight into several bustling, noisy alleys.

This was Luocheng's rice and cloth market.

Xu Qing seemed to have a natural nose for these places.

He entered a grain shop, grabbed a handful of rice, weighed it in his hand, sniffed it.

"Shopkeeper, how much for this coarse rice?"

"You have a good eye, sir! Top-quality official field rice, thirty-five wen per dou!" the potbellied shopkeeper said.

"Qingshi Town, twenty-eight wen per dou," Xu Qing put down the rice and said flatly.

The shopkeeper's expression changed slightly, re-examining this plainly dressed young man.

"You're an expert too, sir. Fine, seeing you're a scholar, I'll give it to you for thirty-two wen. Can't go lower."

Xu Qing shook his head, said nothing more, and pulled Su Ming out of the grain shop.

"Rice prices nearly twenty percent higher than Qingshi Town, salt prices up fifteen percent," he walked, rapidly recording in his small notebook. "Luocheng is a transportation hub, prices should be more stable. It seems the southern drought's effects are starting to show."

Su Ming, watching his focused demeanor, felt admiration.

Xu Qing's keenness didn't come from dead book learning, but was honed bit by bit in the markets, among the daily necessities of life.

Next, Xu Qing took Su Ming into a bookshop.

This bookshop was several times larger than Xu Qing's bookstall in Qingshi Town. Rows of bookshelves were filled with various books.

Xu Qing was like a fish in water.

He didn't look at the classics or histories, but headed straight to a corner where stacks of newly printed contemporary essay collections were placed.

He picked one up, flipping through it rapidly.

"Capital Literary Essence,' collects new works by several famous masters in the capital this year," the shopkeeper, a thin middle-aged man, walked over. "You have a good eye, young master."

"Shopkeeper, do you know who the chief examiners for this year's Metropolitan Examination might be?" Xu Qing asked.

"That's hard to say," the shopkeeper shook his head. "But currently, the most esteemed in the capital are still the Grand Secretary Zhang, and the Hanlin Academy Chancellor, Lord Wang. Their literary styles, one majestic and vigorous, the other steep and sharp, both masterful hands."

Xu Qing asked a few more questions about the capital's major scholarly schools and literati gatherings. The shopkeeper answered fluently.

Finally, Xu Qing picked two of the latest contemporary essay compilations and paid.

"Brother Xu, you are..." Su Ming was curious.

"Know yourself, know your enemy," Xu Qing put the books into his travel pack. "The examination hall is like a battlefield. While the essay's quality is paramount, if one can somewhat gauge the chief examiners' preferences, it adds a bit more chance of success."

Su Ming nodded.

Xu Qing's pragmatism made him feel inadequate.

As the two prepared to leave, Su Ming's steps suddenly paused.

"Huh?" Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind, carrying a trace of surprise.

Following Lin Yu's guidance, Su Ming's gaze landed on the entrance of a pharmacy across the street.

The pharmacy was named "Hundred Herbs Hall," its facade simple and classic.

On the most prominent counter, laid with red cloth, sat an old mountain ginseng under a glass cover.

The ginseng was plump in form, with numerous fibrous roots. A wooden sign stood beside it, reading "Shop's Treasure, Fifty-Year-Old Mountain Ginseng."

In Su Ming's perception, this ginseng actually faintly emitted a weak vitality, completely different from the surrounding plants.

That vitality, though not even one ten-thousandth of his own backyard ancient well's, truly existed.

"Master, this ginseng..."

"Mhm, somewhat interesting," Lin Yu commented. "Its spiritual energy is pitifully thin, at most thirty years of age, yet dares claim fifty. But for mortals, this thing truly is a good life-saving treasure."

"It seems good things exist in the mortal world, just hidden in obscure corners, or treated as mortal treasures," Lin Yu's voice held a playful note.

After resting a day in Luocheng, the two set off again.

The further north they went, the heavier the atmosphere on the official road became.

Refugees began appearing by the roadside in twos and threes.

They were sallow and thin, eyes dull and numb, sitting by the road in tattered clothes, staring blankly at passing carriages and horses.

Some children, unable to bear the hunger, would follow behind carriages, extending grimy little hands, silently begging.

Xu Qing took some provisions from his bundle and distributed them to those children.

But there were too many refugees. The provisions he carried were soon depleted.

He silently returned to the carriage, saying nothing, only the frequency of his notebook entries increased.

They reached the important town of Xiangfan five days later.

Xiangfan had high walls and deep moats, a military stronghold for north-south traffic.

The inspection at the city gate was several times stricter than Luocheng's.

A long queue stretched for several li.

As they queued waiting to enter the city, several idlers in worn short jackets, looking shiftless, sauntered over.

Their gazes, with ill intent, swept over the several bulging pieces of luggage on the carriage.

The leader was a one-eyed man with a fierce, menacing scar on his face.

He walked to the carriage side, lightly tapping the carriage with a short stick in his hand.

"Two bosses, looks like you're heading to the capital for the exams?" The one-eyed man grinned, revealing yellow teeth. "This road isn't easy. My brothers and I happen to be free. How about we escort you for a stretch, ensure your safety?"

The cart driver Old Chen's face changed. He tightened his grip on the horsewhip.

Inside the carriage, Xu Qing also tensely gripped the self-defense short cudgel he carried, his palms sweaty.

Su Ming lifted the carriage curtain and stepped out.

He didn't look at the ruffians first, but gave Old Chen and Xu Qing a reassuring glance.

Then, he turned his gaze to the one-eyed man.

He said nothing. The moment his gaze settled, the strand of gentle spiritual energy from the "Greenwood Longevity Art - Lin Yu Modified Version - Foundation Chapter" within him was subtly activated in an unprecedented way.

To the one-eyed man, this seemingly frail young man before him seemed to transform instantly.

A primal, instinctual fear seized him, as if he had become a noisy insect posturing before a slumbering giant tree, about to be silently crushed in the next moment.

Years of drifting through the Jianghu, surviving by the blade, honed intuition screamed alarms in his mind—Danger! Run!

The one-eyed man's smile froze.

His throat went dry. He instinctively took a step back.

"Damn it, bad luck!"

He spat on the ground, as if to cover up his own guilty conscience, glaring fiercely at his underlings.

"What are you looking at! Let's go!"

With that, he led a group of equally confused lackeys, slinking away into the crowd.

A conflict that seemed about to erupt dissipated into nothingness.

Old Chen and Xu Qing were both dumbfounded.

"Su... Brother Su, you..." Xu Qing opened his mouth, unsure what to say.

"Not bad, not bad, teachable indeed," Lin Yu in Su Ming's mind offered sincere praise. "Killing intent, that's low-level skill. Using 'presence' to pressure others, that's master-level style. Your move 'What are you looking at? Looking at you, what of it? Stare at who, who gets pregnant'... no, 'Death Stare,' already has about thirty percent of your master's skill from back in the day."

Su Ming ignored his master's nonsense.

He just smiled at Xu Qing.

"Just some bluffing little trick, not worth mentioning. Let's go in."

Past Xiangfan, they officially entered the capital region.

The official road became even broader and smoother, wide enough for four carriages abreast.

More carriages and horses appeared on the road.

Ornately decorated carriages were everywhere, family crests painted on their sides. Beside them were brightly dressed, fierce-looking guards on horseback, clearly private soldiers of powerful aristocratic families.

The air itself seemed permeated with an intangible sense of order and majesty.

Xu Qing closed his notebook, now more than half full, his expression grave as he spoke to Su Ming.

"Brother Su, observing the people's livelihood along this journey, I see much hardship and suffering. The decay of official governance likely far exceeds that in Qingshi Town. Teacher Zhou's words, living in the capital is not easy. These words truly do not deceive. From now on, we must be extremely cautious in speech and action."

Su Ming nodded.

"I understand."

Before nightfall, they stopped at the last relay station outside the capital.

This was the final night of their journey.

Su Ming did not rest immediately.

He sat cross-legged in his room, entering meditation again.

He felt that the closer they got to the capital, the thinner and harder to grasp the ambient spiritual energy in the world became.

It seemed to be forcibly drawn, converging toward one direction by an invisible giant hand.

That direction was the heart of the capital.

"Master, this capital's spiritual energy..."

"Feel it?" Lin Yu's voice also turned serious. "This force is vast, overbearing, brooking no resistance. It's extracting, suppressing all spiritual opportunities within hundreds of li. This should be the legendary 'Dragon Qi.'"

"Dragon Qi?"

"Mhm, formed from a dynasty's fortune and destiny. It's both the guardian of imperial authority and the shackles of cultivators." Lin Yu mused. "In such a place, ordinary breathing techniques' effectiveness will be greatly reduced. Cultivation becomes doubly difficult. However..."

He chuckled.

"There are exceptions to everything. This Dragon Qi, poison to others, might not be entirely bad for our 'Greenwood Longevity Art.'"

The next morning.

The carriage traveled along a gentle ridge.

When the first rays of dawn pierced the clouds, spilling onto the earth, the cart driver Old Chen's voice held a trace of excitement.

"Gentlemen, look!"

Su Ming and Xu Qing simultaneously lifted the carriage curtain.

At the horizon's edge, an immensely vast complex of buildings lay like a giant beast crouching on the earth.

Grey city walls stretched continuously, seeming endless.

Countless pavilions, towers, palaces, and pagodas stood in orderly, layered rows within the walls.

Under the morning sun, those towering glazed tile roofs reflected a grand and dazzling golden light, brilliant to the eyes.

That was the heart of the Daxing Dynasty.

The center of power under heaven.

The capital.

Xu Qing took a deep breath, instinctively straightening his clothes and hat, his eyes filled with longing and nervousness.

Su Ming's gaze, however, pierced through that golden splendor, looking toward a deeper, farther place.

There lay Teacher Zhou's lifelong regret, Professor Liu's unfinished ideal.

Perhaps, it also hid a slim thread of hope for his pursuit of that world.

"Master, we've arrived."

"Mhm, arrived." Lin Yu's voice, for once, held no teasing, only an inexplicable, profound emotion.

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Chapter 100: Prisoner in the Pool

[2,295 words]

The carriage left the ridge from which the capital's outline could be seen, followed the official road, and merged into the stream of horses, carts, and people headed for the city gate.

The closer they drew, the more the gray-black colossal thing that squatted on the land looked fierce. The towering city walls cast shadows like tangible weight, pressing down on everyone's hearts in advance.

The moment the carriage entered the city gate tunnel, the light abruptly dimmed.

Noise and sunlight were both cut off by the heavy walls. The sound of wheels rolling over the smooth stone road mixed with the crackle of torches on the wall, echoing back and forth through the deep passage.

Xu Qing instinctively sat up straight, breathing the capital's air through the gap in the carriage window. That air carried a complex mix of dust, livestock, and food, but it also possessed an indescribable, substantial sense of prosperity.

Su Ming sat quietly. He could feel that vast, omnipresent pressure called Dragon Qi becoming denser here, like mercury, wrapping in from all directions and weighing heavily on his soul.

"Disciple, restrain your spirit." Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind, unusually grave. "Don't let your senses flail about. Here your meager cultivation is like a firefly in the night, far too conspicuous."

Su Ming followed the advice, withdrawing his outward senses into his body, relying only on his eyes and ears to observe.

The carriage slowly emerged from the gate tunnel, and the view opened wide.

The capital's prosperity unfolded like a painting suddenly spread out, striking with tremendous force.

A broad street that could accommodate eight carriages abreast was paved with huge bluestone slabs, smooth as a mirror. Lining the avenue were three- to four-story wooden pavilions with upturned eaves and carved beams. Golden signboards glittered in the sunlight...

The street teemed with people and constant traffic.

There were young masters riding tall steeds and dressed in brocade, noble ladies in green-linen sedan chairs with heavy curtains, and more—hurrying merchants, shop assistants, and provincial newcomers like them, whose faces showed a mix of confusion and awe at their first arrival.

Gulp.

Xu Qing swallowed and clenched his blue cloth bundle tightly, as if that was the only way to anchor himself amid the flood of splendor.

Their carriage was forced to stop a few hundred steps from the inner city gate.

Ahead, the line of people waiting to enter stretched like a long dragon.

Several soldiers wearing uniform coats and swords at their waists were impatiently checking passersby.

They barely glanced at carriages with lavish escorts and waved them through; but ordinary folk with handcarts or shoulder poles were barked at and shoved roughly.

The light in Xu Qing's eyes dimmed. He watched silently, lips pressed tighter.

Su Ming said nothing, only watched calmly.

At that moment, the rapid thud of hooves sounded from behind.

A wildly ornate carriage, drawn by two magnificent northern horses, rudely squeezed through the line, ignoring the startled shouts and dodging pedestrians.

The driver wore a haughty face and snapped his whip, which cracked loudly in the air.

“Get out of the way! All of you, move! Don't you see this is the carriage of the Wei Duke's house? If you delay the young master, can you answer for it?”

The crowd parted like butter cut by a hot knife, making a path.

When the soldiers saw the Wei family crest on the carriage, their faces immediately changed to servile smiles as they ran over.

“Your young master! I salute you!”

The luxurious carriage showed no sign of stopping; a knuckle-boned hand lifted the curtain a little, revealing a pale, almost sickly handsome young face.

The youth, around seventeen or eighteen, wore a moon-white brocade robe embroidered with intricate cloud patterns in gold thread at the collar and cuffs. He lazily glanced out, his gaze full of innate arrogance and indifference.

“Trash.”

He parted thin lips, spat out two words, then let the curtain fall.

The soldiers bowed, watched the carriage disappear in a cloud of dust, and didn't even check the travel pass.

“Tsk, tsk, big official airs.” Lin Yu commented in Su Ming's mind.

As their carriage inched forward, another carriage tried to imitate that young master and force its way in.

This carriage was finely made but looked petty beside the Wei Duke's.

A squad leader-looking soldier frowned, stepped forward, and knocked impatiently on the carriage shaft with a scabbard.

“Stop! Whose carriage is this? Know the rules? Get to the back of the line!”

A house steward-like middle-aged man pushed back the curtain, smiling with practiced politeness.

“Officer, please be accommodating. My young master is from Minister Wang's household in the Ministry of Personnel. He has urgent business entering the city.”

Hearing “Minister Wang,” the squad leader's expression softened a bit, but he still refused to let them cut in.

“Even Minister households must follow rules. Back to the end of the line.”

The steward's face soured but he dared not cause a scene. He had the driver take their place at the back.

“See, disciple.” Lin Yu laughed. “The capital's circles are divided clearly. A duke's house is top VIP; a minister's household is a high-level member, treated much lower. People like us with no name or status are queueing for handouts.”

Finally it was their turn.

A soldier sauntered over and held out his hand for the travel pass.

Old Chen, the driver, had it ready and handed it over with a smile.

The soldier opened it and scanned the contents carelessly.

When he saw the three characters Qingshi County, a slight sneer flashed in his eyes.

But when his gaze moved down and landed on the five characters Disciple of Zhou Wenhai, his hand froze.

He looked up and gave the carriage a longer look, his expression growing odd—an uneasy mix of scrutiny, curiosity, and an indefinable hint.

He didn't immediately wave them through. Instead he took the pass over to the squad leader who was drinking water nearby and whispered a few words.

The squad leader looked up, his sharp gaze like a hawk's, fixed straight on Su Ming's carriage.

His stare lingered on the carriage for three full breaths.

Then, with no particular warmth, he waved the soldier over.

The soldier returned the pass to Old Chen, voice flat.

"Go on."

The carriage slowly started.

As it passed the squad leader, Su Ming felt that man's gaze sweep his body once more.

It was not friendly scrutiny, nor routine inspection.

It was a mark.

Like an experienced hunter discovering an unfamiliar prey in the woods, perhaps linked to an old enemy, and leaving a sign only he could understand.

"Master, he—"

"He recognized Zhou Wenhai's name." Lin Yu's voice was very calm. "Your teacher made a big stir in the capital back in the day. Though it's been over ten years, some still remember. The city's low-ranking clerks have the keenest ears. We've been tagged."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Hard to say. But remember, disciple, from now on our every move might be watched from the shadows."

After passing through the inner gate, the atmosphere on the street changed.

If the outer city had been boisterous and common, the inner city carried a colder order. People there were dressed more neatly, walked with more composure. Patrol soldiers in armor passed in orderly rows, eyes straight ahead.

The air pulsed with the pressure of power as if it had substance.

“Brother Su, let’s go to the south of the city first. There are many inns there, places where examinees from all over usually stay.” Xu Qing had obviously done his homework. He put aside his earlier awe and switched to a practical tone.

Old Chen steered the carriage deftly through several wide streets and turned into a quieter neighborhood.

Indeed, inns crowded the lanes, their signs hung densely along both sides.

“Top Scholar Tower!”

“Promotion Inn!”

“Wenchang Guesthouse!”

The names were auspicious.

Xu Qing jumped down and asked at three places. Each gave the same answer.

“Full, guest.”

And the prices made him wince. The cheapest lower room for a night cost as much as three days in Qingshi Town.

“Looks like with the Metropolitan Examination coming, rooms are tight.” Xu Qing frowned.

At the end of an alley they finally found an inn called Penglai.

The inn looked aged: two-story wooden building, small frontage, paint on the sign peeling—an air of old times.

“Shopkeeper, any rooms?” Xu Qing went inside.

Behind the counter, a gaunt old man flicking an abacus lifted his eyelids and glanced at them.

“Yes. No heavenly-grade rooms left, only two human-grade rooms.” His voice was dry and flat.

“What’s the price?”

“One room, three hundred copper coins a night, no haggling.”

That price was still over three times that of comparable rooms in Qingshi Town.

Xu Qing looked back at Su Ming, who nodded.

“Two rooms, then.” Xu Qing counted copper coins from his pouch.

The shopkeeper took the money and tossed a rusty key at them.

“Second floor, the two at the end. A fair warning: the shop runs on thin profits, hot water is supplied one bucket a day, so fetch water early.”

Xu Qing accepted the key and thanked him.

The shopkeeper hummed, then bent over his abacus and muttered.

“Rice is dear in the capital; living here is not easy.”

The room was tiny—barely space for a bed, a table, and a chair. The window looked out on the back wall of the inn opposite, covered in moss.

A faint musty smell hung in the air.

Xu Qing seemed satisfied. He put down his luggage, took out a small notebook, and began recording the day’s expenses and planning future costs.

Su Ming tidied the room briefly and closed the windows and door.

Night deepened.

Daytime clamor faded, and the capital fell into another kind of quiet. Only the faint sound of the night watch’s wooden clappers and an occasional dog bark marked time.

Su Ming sat cross-legged on the bed and tried to enter a meditative state.

But the moment he concentrated he felt a huge resistance.

The ambient spiritual energy here was no longer lively and intimate as in the wilds; it was dead, heavy, and hostile—full of rejection. The omnipresent Dragon Qi formed an

airtight iron net that bound everything. His consciousness felt like a bird trapped in a cage; no matter how it beat its wings, it could not leave its body.

“Don’t force it.” Lin Yu’s voice came. “You’re struggling against the capital’s entire fate. A mantis trying to stop a chariot.”

“What should I do?”

“Run the Aura Concealment Art.” Lin Yu said. “Remember, our cultivation method centers on one principle: merge and follow. Don’t resist; adapt. Become part of it, like a drop of water merging into the sea.”

Su Ming obeyed. With a thought his spiritual energy followed the unique canalization of the Aura Concealment Art.

His breath quickly sank and withdrew until it was almost imperceptible. He became like a roadside stone, a withered blade of grass at a courtyard corner, utterly devoid of presence.

In this near-turtle-breath state, the heavy mountain-like pressure of Dragon Qi eased a little.

Within his closed perception the world took on another texture.

The entire capital was like an iron plate compacted by enormous pressure.

Yet when Su Ming pushed the Aura Concealment Art to its limit, his highly compressed consciousness detected several extremely faint “anomalies” on that iron plate.

The sensation was like touching with a fingertip a few invisible nails driven into a smooth table.

One “nail” came from the southeast.

It felt sharp, arrogant, and aggressive, like a spear planted in the ground—its tip of cold steel still showing despite being buried in earth.

Another “nail” came from due west.

It was gentle yet tenacious, like a piece of jade that had been coiled for a thousand years, emitting its own faint, undying glow under weight.

But the most alarming was one at the southeastern corner of the Imperial City.

It was neither sharp nor gentle. It was vast, solemn, and filled with an order-bound lawfulness. It wasn't an outsider's intrusion but a node forged and refined as part of the iron plate itself.

"Do you sense them?" Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of approval.

"Mm." Su Ming answered mentally. "Those are..."

"Dragon Qi doesn't eliminate spiritual energy; it suppresses and disciplines it." Lin Yu explained. "It forces all wild, disorderly spiritual energy into the imperial system. Under this system, any cultivation without authorization gets repressed."

"The 'nails' you sensed are exceptions. They can maintain their own spiritual sources under the Dragon Qi iron curtain for two reasons."

"Either they're authorized by imperial power—institutions like the Astronomical Bureau or the Imperial Sacrificial Court. They are part of the Dragon Qi system itself, tools the emperor uses to control supernatural forces. The southeastern corner one in the Imperial City is probably that."

"Or they possess a powerful formation or concealment treasure that blocks Dragon Qi detection, carving out a small space on the iron plate. The western one is likely the latter."

Lin Yu's tone turned playful.

"To dare privately set formations in the capital to resist Dragon Qi... If there isn't shady business behind it, I'll write my name the other way around."

Su Ming slowly ceased the exercise and opened his eyes. The darkness outside was ink-deep.

All his initial excitement at arriving in the capital had vanished, replaced by alertness.

Early the next morning Su Ming and Xu Qing went downstairs for breakfast.

The inn's main hall had seven or eight tables occupied, mostly by provincial examinees like them, hunched over tasteless porridge and pickles in a muted atmosphere.

Only a table by the window held two middle-aged men who looked like merchants, leaning in low and whispering.

Su Ming chose a seat at their neighboring table.

With his sharpened hearing, even their hushed speech came through in fragments.

“Not only that! My distant nephew working in the Ministry of War says the northern military reports are unstable. The court is in turmoil. Marquis Yongchang is the fiercest advocate of war, slamming the table daily against the dovish civil officials.”

“War? That’s trouble...” the thin merchant’s face showed worry. “If war breaks out, taxes rise and business will suffer.”

“Who could disagree...”

Su Ming ate silently and stored these fragments of information mentally.

Yongchang Marquis.

Again Yongchang Marquis.

That name, like an invisible thread, linked Teacher Zhou’s past, last night’s spiritual probe, and the current street gossip.

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