

LONGEVITY CHRONICLES

Chapter 3 3 Immortal Dutch Water

In the early morning, a thin mist mixed with the smoke of daily life drifted about in Seeking Immortal County.

The breakfast stalls were the first wave of activity, followed by the market-goers, and one by one, the shops opened their doors, bringing the entire town suddenly to life.

At Vegetable Market Street, the most unremarkable of places, was a shop named Chengyou Bookstore.

Tao Qian slowly closed the account book, exhaling a breath of stale air accumulated over the night.

He had stayed up all night to finish reading this diary-like ledger.

Tao Qian had now come to understand the prices of this world and many other details, seamlessly integrating into his new identity.

He stood up straight away and took a trip to the sleeping area at the back.

When he returned, he carried an extra blue cloth bag, the sound of clinking coins spilling from it as he opened the bag.

Once the noise stopped, several silver coins, a few silver dimes, and dozens of copper coins lay scattered across the counter.

Tao Qian counted them once, frowning.

Then, he counted a second time, frowning even more deeply.

He didn't bother with a third count, but instead carefully put the silver back into the bag, muttering helplessly,

"A family's savings, nearly gone in half a month, leaving only eight yuan seven jiao, plus fifty-three copper coins. What a prodigal."

"One copper coin can buy eight to ten pieces of candy, or a big pancake plus a fried dough stick. Add another coin, and you can get a bowl of peppery soup. Purchasing power seems okay, but this is all the assets I have."

"Setting aside regular expenses for food, clothing, and entertainment, just the monthly rent for the shop is twenty yuan, not to mention the biggest expense of buying books..."

"That is to say, I am very poor now."

Tao Qian, holding the bag of money, criticized his predecessor.

According to the current prices, it would be difficult for him to keep Chengyou Bookstore from closing within a month.

The only consolation for Tao Qian was that hidden within that ledger was a way to make money.

It was only that the original owner thought it beneath his dignity, so he did not continue.

"Satisfying one's hunger comes first, followed by fulfilling one's cultural needs. What's so undignified about that?"

"If there's no business later, I'll go to the book market to find 'Night Talk,' 'Kongkong Illusion,' 'Lianxiangban,' 'Zen Truth History'—the entire set. Promote them discreetly, and I will be the brightest star on Vegetable Market Street."

"Scholars are indeed pretentiously bashful, deeming these books too vulgar, repelling customers who come for them, yet secretly listing their titles in the diary."

"Indeed, can anyone who writes a diary be a serious person?"

Tao Qian tucked the money bag into his chest, using his ridicule to dilute the bewilderment of his transmigration and rebirth.

Perhaps because he had become an "Undead Abnormality" or due to emotional upheaval, Tao Qian felt no tiredness despite staying up all night.

Listening to the various hawkers outside, Tao Qian decided to get up and freshen up.

A few minutes later, he solemnly opened the door.

Bright daylight and a bustling scene hit him with the force of reality.

Even though it was only around eight or nine in the morning, the county was already bustling with people.

Tao Qian paused for a few seconds, and then slowly and carefully took in the various scenes before him:

The steamy dumpling stall with numerous customers.

The old beggar crouching at the alleyway, struggling to pick up a broken piece of cornbread.

A dozen refugees who had fled from elsewhere, haggard and destitute, pouring into the city at dawn.

The barber tapping his shave hook at the street corner, the vendors selling all kinds of items.

Well-off youngsters recklessly riding a Western gadget known as a "bicycle" in the middle of the city.

Two lithe ladies sitting by the window of a newly built restaurant, holding coffee cups, chatting comfortably and enjoying life.

New-style soldiers coming from beyond the city, in military attire and carrying rifles, riding tall horses and cutting across the main street.

Sturdy-bodied martial artists in short clothes, carrying all sorts of peculiar weapons...

"Things seem the same but aren't," Tao Qian exclaimed with a sense of futility and complexity.

Just as he contemplated his next move, his stomach rumbled.

This reminder made Tao Qian recall that he was now human again.

Without resistance, he deliberately walked a bit further and ended up on the other side of the street, buying a large bag of steamed buns.

He took his time, following the slow, pedantic walking style of the scholarly old self.

When he returned to the bookstore, he had just the right amount left—an individual bun, which he ate in a few bites, still warm.

As it was still early, naturally, there wouldn't be customers coming to buy books, but Tao Qian did not intend to idle away his time.

He rolled up his sleeves and started organizing the messy bookstore.

Poor as he was, he still owned property.

While tidying up, Tao Qian occasionally picked up a book that piqued his interest, skimmed through it hastily, the contents mostly being "God Demon Tales," "Transcendent Novels," "Abnormal Chronicles."

His idea was to see if it was possible to glimpse a fraction of this world, or rather the world of Extraordinary Cultivation, through them.

Having gone through beheading, undying, and rebirth, with the memories of two local lives added to his own, Tao Qian surmised that there were probably Demons, Ghosts, Devils, and Immortals in this world, and most likely human Cultivators as well.

His current goal was to establish himself and survive well.

If there was a chance to understand the truth, to touch the Transcendent, he would not let it go.

Unfortunately, after half an hour of busyness, he found nothing.

It was quite normal; in reality, whether Cultivators or Demons, some might coexist with humans, but there would always be a barrier in between.

Even if ordinary people had the intent to search, they might not necessarily get their wish.

In this aspect, it's all about so-called fate.

Of course, half an hour's hard work did yield some rewards, at least Tao Qian now had a complete understanding of his own bookstore.

This tiny shop mainly dealt in beginner's reading books and calligraphy copybooks, and most of the profits came from these.

Other books, such as travel notes, miscellaneous talk, novels, storybooks, maps, almanacs, etc., were all categorized by the original owner as "miscellaneous books."

Praiseworthy was that everything the original owner had stocked was the genuine article.

Of course, this was probably one of the reasons he had gone through his entire family fortune.

After tidying up, Tao Qian began the day's business.

I don't know if it was because there was a different soul, and with it, a change of luck.

Throughout the morning, although Chengyou Bookstore's business wasn't as good as the stores at the crossroads, Tao Qian still attended to quite a few customers.

When noon arrived, Tao Qian finally had a break, and with an abacus in hand, he began clicking away.

"Altogether, ten books sold: six copies of 'Four Words of Opposite,' two calligraphy copybooks, one almanac, and a copy of 'Zhu Gong's Travels,' amounting to a total of one yuan and two jiao."

"It seems that 'Four Words of Opposite' is some private school teacher's requested teaching material. No matter what era, it's indeed more profitable to sell teaching materials. It's just a pity that I didn't bring the 'Huanggang Secret Book' with me when I transversed."

Tao Qian murmured to himself.

Suddenly, there came a familiar "pop fizz" sound at the doorway.

Looking up, Tao Qian saw two figures, each carrying something, standing at the entrance with a grin.

Both of them looked to be around thirty years old, respectable middle-aged men.

One was dressed in a round-neck robe and wore a green velvet warm hat, with regular features but small eyes, radiating shrewdness, quite resembling Lin Yongjian.

The other was in a long robe with a riding jacket, sporting a goatee, appearing somewhat crafty.

In Tao Qian's mind, the corresponding memories floated up.

Coincidentally, both were his neighbors, and Tao Qian had just read about these two men in the records the night before.

There was Li Sanyu, the strange stone shop owner who bought 'Night Talk.'

And Jia Qiang, the pharmacy owner who sought to purchase 'Yulou Spring' and other books.

"Tao Scholar, business has been good this morning, hasn't it?"

"I saw you've done a good trade ten or so times back and forth, definitely something to celebrate."

"Isn't that why we're here? Tao Scholar, you haven't had your lunch yet, have you? We brothers will treat you this time; you'll have to make it up to us next time."

"But taking someone's hospitality can soften them up, so when you're free, you still need to help us out. My brother and I haven't completed our collection of the ten great banned books yet."

"Hehe, that's right, that's right."

The two of them talked back and forth as if performing a comic dialogue, and unceremoniously made their way inside.

Each carried a small stool, cleared a spot on the low wooden platform.

They set out the food they'd brought: braised beef, fried peanuts, and the like.

At that moment, Tao Qian's attention was fully caught by the three round glass bottles they had with them.

One of the bottles was already open, holding a pale green transparent liquid, with subtle bubbles popping to the surface.

An oddly familiar feeling surged within him, and he almost blurted out the words "fat geek's delight."

Seeing Tao Qian's "curious" look, Li Sanyu and Jia Qiang exchanged a glance, raised their eyebrows slightly, and a look of pride appeared on their faces.

The man resembling Lin Yongjian, Li Sanyu, pointed to the glass bottle and said with pride:

"You must be dumbfounded, Tao Scholar, such a well-informed man, but this is indeed a foreign novelty item."

"It's called some 'Dutch Water;' supposedly it came from the Western barbarians. Last year a great merchant in the provincial capital opened a factory to produce this, and in a few months, it became all the rage across the entire city, from nobility and officials to commoners and street vendors, no one could resist trying it."

"The subsidiary factory in Seeking Immortal County opened up just the other day, and today was its grand opening, but for the time being, it only supplies high-end hotels and nobles."

"We, two brothers, saw you weren't in the best of moods these past few days and went out of our way to ask the owner of De Shun Residence for a favor and got three bottles for you."

"Come on over and give it a try, everyone who drinks it says that it goes directly to the head and makes you as happy as an immortal, really exhilarating."

...

Tao Qian was initially somewhat uncomfortable with the two men's overly familiar behavior, but as the conversation went on, he quickly grew accustomed to it.

His predecessor's memories were taking effect.

Tao Scholar was stubborn and inflexible, lacking adaptability. The bookstore had hardly opened when he was swindled, which showed that he didn't really have any true friends. It wasn't that they were fair-weather friends, but certainly, there was a lack of heartfelt connection.

It just so happened that he became somewhat acquainted with the two neighboring shop owners over the exchange of some vulgar banned books.

Both were a bit older than his predecessor, both sharp small businessmen who could see that Tao Scholar was a kind and valuable person, and often looked after him a bit.

Of course, no matter what, they were not family, unable to stop his predecessor's self-destruction at the right time.

Listening to Li Sanyu's words, Tao Qian, following his predecessor's memories, naturally showed his confusion.

Even more naturally, curiosity and disbelief shone in his eyes.

He tossed the abacus aside, walked over directly, picked up the glass bottle and said:

"As happy as an immortal? I don't believe it."

"Isn't it just a bottle of water?"

After saying this, Tao Qian skillfully tipped the bottle's mouth to his lips and took a swig.

Glug glug glug!

Burp!

He downed the entire bottle in one go.

The previously somewhat anxious expression on his face lifted off in an instant.

The corners of Tao Qian's mouth turned up into a smile, he gave the genuinely dumbfounded pair a thumbs up, and then said contentedly, "I don't know about being like an immortal, but indeed, it's quite enlivening."