No Money to Cultivate Immortality? (Arc 1)

Bear Wolf Dog

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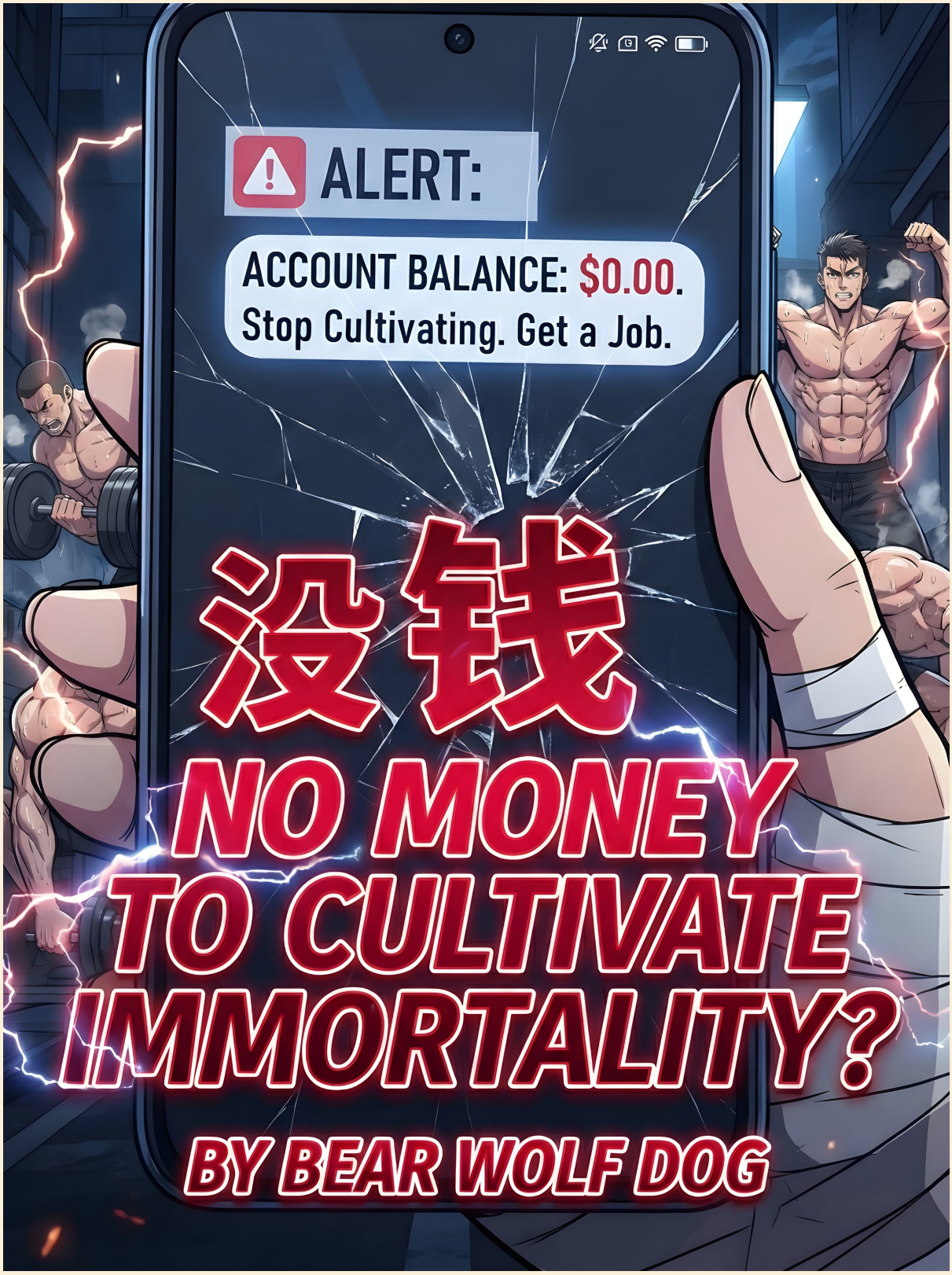

Figure 1: Cover

Chapter 1: The Interview

"Are you there yet?"

"Don't be nervous. With grades like yours, you'll definitely make it."

"Don't worry about the surgery fee. Mom found a new part-time job and will definitely scrape it together for you. Just focus on your interview."

Looking at the messages from his mother on the screen, Zhang Yu silently put his phone away, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes, waiting quietly.

A long while later, a voice called out from ahead.

"Candidate 989, Zhang Yu."

Zhang Yu stood up and walked into the interview room.

He looked at the three interviewers and offered a polite smile he had long practiced.

"Good day to you three. I am Zhang Yu from Dongyang Junior High School."

The interviewer in the middle regarded him and said flatly, "Why do you want to apply to our school?"

Zhang Yu replied, "Your school's long history, profound foundation, and rich educational resources have consistently cultivated many outstanding talents for society..."

The interviewer frowned, cutting him off. "Spare me the formalities."

Zhang Yu answered honestly, "I want to get into a prestigious university, and of all the schools I can apply to, Songyang High School has the highest university acceptance rate."

The interviewer smiled slightly, looking down at the documents in his hand.

"Hmm, perfect scores in all subjects, first in the entire school? No wonder you were recommended to us."

"There's no issue with your grades, but if you want to enter Songyang High School, exam scores from your school are far from enough."

He thought for a moment, then asked casually, "How long do you sleep each day?"

Zhang Yu replied, "Five hours."

The interviewer was surprised. "Five hours?"

"Students at our school, starting from elementary school, sleep no more than two hours a day on average. And the top graduates throughout the years basically don't sleep at all."

"You actually sleep five hours a day? That means you study three hours less than others every day. Over nine years, that's a difference of nearly ten thousand hours..."

Zhang Yu was slightly stunned. He had thought himself exceedingly diligent, yet he never expected such a vast gap in effort between himself and others. He knew that students in Songyang City started elementary school at age nine and entered high school nine years later at eighteen, but he hadn't expected that within the same nine years, the gap between people could be so vast.

Zhang Yu quickly said, "I will work hard to catch up to them."

The interviewer on the left asked, "How much of the high school curriculum have you covered?"

Zhang Yu composed himself slightly and said with confidence, "I've already self-studied the entire first-year curriculum."

The man's brow furrowed. "Only the first year? Don't you know that we assume all our students have already finished the entire high school curriculum before they even attend?"

Zhang Yu was dumbstruck by this revelation. This was yet another piece of information he was unaware of. What he thought was his advantage had turned into a disadvantage in an instant.

Just as he was at a loss, the middle interviewer posed the next question.

"In order to improve academic efficiency and prevent puppy love, our school requires all students to undergo a sterilization procedure to have the relevant organs removed before enrollment, so they may focus on their cultivation."

"Were you aware of this?"

Finally hearing something he knew, he hastily replied, "My family is already preparing for it. I will definitely complete the sterilization surgery before the school year begins and maintain my hormone levels at the most optimal state for studying."

The interviewer nodded noncommittally. "Alright, that's all for today's interview. You may leave."

Zhang Yu walked out of the classroom, feeling anxious. It seemed to him that his interview was shorter than those of the other students.

After he left, the middle interviewer shook his head. "Still not sterilized in junior high. This child's devotion to the Dao is insufficient."

The female interviewer beside him chuckled. "It seems to me he came here knowing nothing. He has none of the required test reports or extracurricular exam scores. I can only say the quality of recommended students from these ordinary junior highs is getting worse year by year. If not for the support policies, they wouldn't even be qualified to see us."

The middle interviewer nodded. "Sigh, I thought the poor would be more diligent. Perhaps my expectations for them were too high."

"Let's put this one on the reserve list for now."

With that, he tossed Zhang Yu's resume into the wastebasket to the side, where it was crammed together with several hundred other reserve resumes.

Although Zhang Yu felt his interview had not gone well, he had no extra time to dwell on it. He was already preparing for one interview after another, visiting one high school after another.

"Student Zhang Yu, we understand that your family's financial situation may not be sufficient to cover the tuition here. However, we do offer favorable loan services for students from poor families, as long as you're willing to mortgage some of your non-essential organs…"

"Rest assured, you haven't come to the wrong place. We know you are male, and while our school is an all-girls institution, we never discriminate against men. As long as you complete gender reassignment surgery, not only will you be able to enroll, but you will also be considered a promising student with a resolute Dao heart, with the opportunity to enter the key class to study the Primordial Yin Qi Refining Art…"

"It's a pity, you're still just a little short of our admission standard. However, to accommodate students from poor families this year, we have introduced a policy for students with special talents. If you are willing to abandon your physical body, you can enroll as a specialized soul cultivator and study within the principal's Ten Thousand Souls Banner…"

"My friend, you've come to the right place. This is the most suitable high school for a civilian prodigies like you.

Let me introduce you to the benefits here. We add intellect-enhancement agents to the drinking water to ensure students maintain a state of level-five focus at all times.

Every day, your class advisor will distribute over 900 grams of supplements specialized for ox demon physique to ensure your cultivation is more than ten times as effective as before.

Even the air circulation system is filled with neuro-stimulants, so you will never need to sleep again. And all of this is completely free.

Of course, to withstand these performance-enhancing supplements, you must undergo modification at our designated hospital.

Don't worry, it just involves implanting a few small magical artifacts to boost your metabolic capacity. Here is the specific price list…"

Interview after interview, question after question.

Either the threshold was so high as to be utterly hopeless, or the contracts were so riddled with traps that he felt he would be swallowed whole.

All of this made Zhang Yu feel like he was being crushed.

At that moment, he suddenly realized that, despite being first in his entire school at a suburban junior high, he was already worlds apart from the students in the city center.

Even now, he had only seen the tip of the iceberg regarding the true extent of the gap between them.

All his years of diligent study seemed to have become a joke.

In the end, there was no difference between him and his classmates who had slacked off; he, too, would be unable to attend high school.

Returning home, Zhang Yu sat in silence like a stone statue.

The phone on the table began to vibrate repeatedly.

Mom: How was the interview this time?

Mom: I have to work overtime today. Remember to heat up the food in the fridge for yourself.

A moment later, the phone vibrated again.

Mom: Son, don't you worry. Whether you choose sterilization or gender reassignment, Mom will definitely get the money for the surgery.

But Zhang Yu did not look at the vibrating phone. He just stared blankly at the ceiling, trying to think about his future, yet his mind felt completely empty, unable to squeeze out a single thought.

Just then, the phone began to vibrate violently again.

Zhang Yu initially wanted to ignore it, but after the phone had been vibrating for a full minute, he finally couldn't resist picking it up, only to find that the caller had already hung up.

Then, he received a text message from them: Your 5,000 reserve fund is ready and can be in your account in just ten seconds…

A loan advertisement?

"Hmph."

Zhang Yu figured one of the schools must have sold his interview information.

But after putting the phone down for a moment, he picked it up again and reopened the message.

…

That night, when his mother returned from working overtime, she found that the ashen-faced Zhang Yu seemed to have recovered, sitting upright at the desk and reading a book.

"Mom, don't worry, I won't be defeated this easily."

"If I can't make it this year, I'll try again next year. I will definitely cultivate."

"I'll go look for a tutoring class tomorrow. I'm going to make up for everything I'm lacking, one by one."

Early the next morning, Zhang Yu rushed out, returning that evening with a joyful expression.

"Mom, I found an Immortal Dao tutoring class! The teachers there are all from key high schools. Studying with them, I'll definitely be able to get into high school."

"You don't have to worry about the tuition. They saw that my grades have always been good and knew my family isn't well-off, so they waived the fee for now. As long as I can get into Songyang High School next year, I won't have to pay it back. It'll just be like advertising for them."

"Don't you worry, they're a big company. They wouldn't lie."

His mother watched as Zhang Yu left for his tutoring class before dawn each day and returned late at night, only to study until two or three in the morning.

Watching him bring back second- and third-year textbooks for language, math, physics, and more, seeing his intention to master all the general education courses of high school besides the Immortal Dao, she felt gratified by her son's drive.

But when she saw the boxes of medicine he brought back, a trace of doubt still rose in her heart.

Zhang Yu explained with a smile, "Mom, growing up, I've already studied ten thousand hours less than those top students. If I don't work harder, I'll only fall further and further behind them."

"These neuro-stimulants will let me get by on just half an hour of sleep a day and increase my study efficiency, so at least I won't lose any more ground to the students in the city."

"Don't worry, this medicine doesn't cost anything."

"The principal of my tutoring class thinks very highly of me. He gave me all of this."

Hearing that the principal had given them to him, his mother was even happier that her son was so appreciated.

Soon, Zhang Yu began bringing more things home.

Besides various high school textbooks and neuro-stimulants, there were also capsules to regulate hormone levels, supplements meant for demonic beasts, and bottle after bottle of unpackaged medicinal powders.

Zhang Yu had many explanations—sometimes he said they were cheap goods he bought with money from a part-time job, sometimes that a classmate gave them to him, and other times that they were rewards from the tutoring class…

His mother was happy for her son's diligence, and even more pleased by his good relationships and excellent performance at the tutoring class.

She transferred 1,000 yuan to Zhang Yu, reminding him to thank his classmates and teachers.

Gradually, however, she noticed that Zhang Yu's moods began to turn erratic. Sometimes he would leave the house happy in the morning, only to come back in the evening without a word and go straight to bed.

Sometimes he would be eating happily, but then answer a phone call and his brow would furrow, unable to eat another bite.

She knew the pressure of cultivation must be immense, leaving Zhang Yu's nerves tightly wound.

All she could do was buy more of his favorite foods and save up more money for his tuition, hoping only to alleviate some of his stress.

Slowly, she also discovered that Zhang Yu was particularly protective of his phone. Not only was it almost always on his person, but he wouldn't let anyone touch it. When a call came, he would always go into the bathroom and close the door to answer it.

Once, when she saw his phone was out of battery and took it to charge, Zhang Yu had even scolded her angrily.

Understanding the immense pressure he was under, she never dared to touch his phone again, fearing she might disrupt her son's cultivation.

Then one day, Zhang Yu asked her for a tutoring fee, saying the class had invited a senior who had been accepted into a top university to give a lecture, and this was the fee for the senior.

Then it was a recommendation fee for the high school admissions teacher.

A spiritual root assessment fee for the hospital.

And he also needed to purchase a civilian-grade children's flying sword with his classmates from the tutoring center.

From two or three thousand to seven or eight thousand… the last time, he had her transfer twenty thousand yuan directly, which Zhang Yu said was the rental fee for a Heavenly Spiritual Root.

But good news finally arrived: Zhang Yu had successfully been accepted into Songyang High School.

His mother was overjoyed, feeling proud of her son's hard work and talent. She readily agreed to all of Zhang Yu's subsequent requests for tuition, miscellaneous fees, pharmaceutical costs, and so on.

But after school started, Zhang Yu began asking for more and more money, and the family's finances gradually became unable to cover the expenses.

Finally, one afternoon, listening to the voice on the other end of the phone, his mother's heart trembled.

"Hello? Is this Zhang Yu's mother?"

"Are you aware that your son's loan has been overdue for 30 days…"

That night, Zhang Yu confessed everything to his mother.

All this time, the various expenses for his studies were not free, appreciated, or gifted as he had claimed… all the money had come from loans he had taken out from various platforms.

"Mom, I'm sorry."

"But I really want to cultivate."

"Even if I'm in debt for a lifetime and can never pay it back, I want to cultivate…"

After hearing everything, his mother silently sold all the valuables in their home and then took out another loan to pay off Zhang Yu's debts.

She thought that her son would be able to focus on his cultivation from then on.

But she soon discovered new overdue loans under her son's name.

Repay… borrow… repay… borrow…

His mother finally couldn't help but urge Zhang Yu to spend less money.

"Mom, I can't stop this medicine. If I do, my Dao heart will regress, and all my previous efforts will be wasted…"

"I have to rent the Heavenly Spiritual Root. Without it, my mana can't keep up…"

"This VIP card for the tutoring class needs to be topped up, otherwise I won't understand the cultivation techniques the school teachers talk about in class…"

Advanced Immortal Dao technology allowed even mortals without spiritual roots to walk the path of cultivation, but the price was a continuous cycle of the costly studies and maintenance just to keep going.

In the blink of an eye, three months of the school year had passed. Seeing the ever-increasing debt, to the point where they could no longer afford rent or utilities… it was all like a never-ending nightmare, and his mother finally could not bear it any longer.

And so, when Zhang Yu came home from school one day, he no longer saw his mother.

After reading the note she'd left, he sat stunned for a long time before finally picking up his phone and walking out.

…

On the rooftop of the apartment building.

A sharp pain shot through the man's mind, gradually awakening his chaotic consciousness from the darkness.

He opened his eyes and looked forward, seeing not far away a bustling street teeming with people and flowing with sewage.

On both sides of the street flickered the neon glow of various advertising signs. Looking further up, tightly packed, pitch-black buildings seemed to blot out the entire sky.

The building beneath his feet was a dilapidated apartment, its mottled red-brick wall still projecting a video of a financial advertisement, in which flying, earth-rending immortals jointly recommended a thirty-day interest-free cultivation loan for new users.

Wasn't I just playing that game?

Where is this?

Just as he was wondering what was happening, he turned his head and found the rooftop covered in candles.

Rows of candles, flickering with scarlet flames, surrounded him and a shabby doll.

It was a cloth doll whose fabric had yellowed and faded, its stitches crooked and twisted as if it could fall apart at any moment.

The strange scene seemed to stimulate his brain, causing fragments of memory to tumble and leap through his mind.

This isn't China anymore… I've been thrown into another world?

He found it somewhat difficult to accept the fact that he had transmigrated.

But the real memories of Immortal Dao technology in his mind continuously assaulted his consciousness, and as he gradually merged with the original owner of the body, they relentlessly reminded him that he was now in another world.

This place was Kunxu, a super-structure that stood upon the earth like a pyramid, with thirty-six floors above ground and eighteen floors below.

Starting from the first floor, which was as vast as a continent, each level was a new world unto itself.

As for what the world outside of Kunxu was like, Zhang Yu's mind held no answer.

He only knew that within Kunxu, it was a world where the major sects of the Immortal Dao reigned supreme.

The great sects were high and mighty, holding a near-monopoly on all industries, including food, energy, transportation, education, scientific research, healthcare, finance, and the internet. In front of the sect enforcement teams, the government and army seemed more like gate guards.

But ordinary people were unable to enjoy most of the benefits brought by Immortal Dao technology, instead busying themselves daily just to make a living.

And he was a high school student named Zhang Yu, living on the first floor of Kunxu, who had been accepted into Songyang High School and had recently become obsessed with some sort of strange ritual…

The me of now has become the Zhang Yu of another world.

Just then, a stinging pain came from his palm, waking the immersed Zhang Yu from the shock of the memories.

He looked down and saw a transparent symbol appear in his palm, which was slowly turning black at an extremely sluggish pace.

What is this thing?

As the night wind blew past, the surrounding scarlet candlelight flickered.

And on the ground, the shabby doll stared straight at him with a pair of hollow eyes made of black buttons.

He tried to recall what was going on, but the more he thought, the more his head ached and spun.

The atmosphere grew increasingly grim and eerie. Zhang Yu clutched his still-dizzy head, feeling the world spin around him.

When he came to his senses, he found that he had dazedly left the rooftop and walked step by step back to his own front door.

Glancing at the rent collection notice, he stepped through the doorway. All that met Zhang Yu's eyes was a bed and a table.

This is my home?

Feeling his skin sticky and soaked with sweat, and the incredibly stuffy environment around him, Zhang Yu wanted to look for the air conditioner remote, only to remember that this apartment had no air conditioner at all.

He then wanted to rinse off with some water, but found that the water had been shut off.

Zhang Yu sat down on the bed, somewhat helplessly.

"What a dump."

"So what if there are real immortals? This life is worse than in a world without them."

Zhang Yu's gaze swept across the wall, where he saw that the wall behind the desk was covered with awards from childhood to the present.

First grade, second grade, third grade… all the way to the third year of junior high, the original Zhang Yu had been first in his grade almost every year.

Looking at these awards, various memories of receiving them also flooded Zhang Yu's mind.

The original Zhang Yu was a diligent student with excellent grades since he was a child.

The Songyang High School he's attending now is also a key high school in the city.

I'm a top student.

Recalling the knowledge in his mind, Zhang Yu's eyes gradually brightened.

Getting into a prestigious university means I can achieve Foundation Establishment. Joining a major sect means I can form my Core. I can also climb higher in Kunxu, leave this slum, and enjoy more of the benefits of Immortal Dao technology. Living a few hundred years longer wouldn't be a problem then.

At this thought, Zhang Yu suddenly felt that coming to this world might not be so bad after all.

Just as he was thinking this, his phone suddenly rang.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Zhang Yu, good day. Your loan on our platform is now 3 days overdue…"

Hanging up the phone, Zhang Yu scrolled through his text messages and found it flooded with debt collection reminders, all overdue notices from various platforms where the original owner had taken out loans.

At the same time, the related memories flooded his mind.

This guy started borrowing money for tutoring before even getting into high school. After entering Songyang High School, in order to keep up with everyone's grades, he had a stroke of genius and started feeding his debt with more debt to improve his scores, borrowing money from everywhere for medicine and tutoring, forcibly stimulating his potential. In the end, not only did the debt grow larger and larger, but his potential was also gradually drained.

This son of a bitch is a fake cultivation genius propped up by platform loans.

Even his mom couldn't stand him and finally just left.

Calculating the total overdue debt, cold sweat immediately beaded on Zhang Yu's forehead.

It was because he discovered that with the interest rolling over, Zhang Yu already owed various platforms a total of more than seven hundred thousand yuan.

And when he checked his account, he had only a little over fifty yuan left.

"I actually owe seven hundred thousand… damn it!"

Zhang Yu slammed his fist on the bed, furious.

"In this world… even for a heaven's chosen graduate from high school, this is a colossal debt."

No wonder this guy was obsessed with some bizarre ritual… he was just a hopeless debt slave.

He had his fun, and now I have to pay his debts?

At the same time, the lights in the room suddenly went out.

After flicking the switch repeatedly and observing the situation with his neighbors, Zhang Yu confirmed one thing… his electricity had been cut off.

"This blasted place…"

If only I could just wake up tomorrow morning and be back where I was…

His mind churning with all sorts of chaotic thoughts, Zhang Yu eventually fell into a groggy sleep on the bed.

And on his palm, the once-transparent symbol was now one-tenth filled with black.

(End of this chapter)

Chapter 2: School

The incessant ticking of the clock echoed as Zhang Yu, seated in the classroom, diligently worked on the test paper before him.

But the test seemed endless; no matter how much he did or how much he filled in, there was never a moment of completion.

His seat also grew more and more distant from his classmates, until he could no longer make out the figures ahead, as if he were being slowly devoured by the darkness behind him.

Cold sweat beaded on his forehead as panic surged from his heart. The hand that had been writing nonstop began to weaken, losing its strength.

Only when he plummeted into the bottomless darkness along with countless books and test papers did Zhang Yu jolt awake in his bed.

"Was that a dream?"

Seems like it was all memories from the original Zhang Yu.

He rubbed his head, feeling innumerable fragmented memories of the body's previous owner rise and fall in his mind, shifting and uncertain.

Although the current Zhang Yu was in control, he had yet to fully integrate the original memories, and many details required conscious effort to recall.

This was especially true for the memories concerning that bizarre ritual from the day before. The slightest attempt to remember brought on a wave of dizziness, making it impossible to recall what had happened.

He glanced at his phone and saw it was only five in the morning. He intended to fall back asleep, but found that this body simply couldn't.

It was as if waking up at five every day for school had become an instinct for this body.

Why do I feel a sense of guilt for staying in bed?

Zhang Yu sat up, figuring this was likely an influence from the original owner's memories.

Feeling his somewhat empty stomach, Zhang Yu simply stood up.

Forget it, I'll just go to school. At least I can get a full meal there.

He remembered that Songyang High School was supposed to provide three meals a day, and this month's meal fees had already been loaded onto his student card.

Now, burdened with a massive 700,000-yuan debt and with only fifty-odd yuan to his name, he certainly couldn't afford to eat out.

So, he left the stuffy apartment, cut through an alley filled with sewage, and squeezed onto a bus with a crowd of people.

Jammed in a carriage thick with the mixed smells of sweat and food, the air conditioning might as well have been off. Zhang Yu felt like a misshapen takeout order being jostled and bumped toward the city center.

After an hour and a half and two bus transfers, a sweat-drenched Zhang Yu finally pushed his way off the bus.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Zhang Yu thought, *Come to think of it, why am I a day student?*

Oh, right. It's because I couldn't afford the boarding fees.

Unlike the area where Zhang Yu lived, the place he got off was in the city district. All he could see were skyscrapers and clean, wide roads, and even the air was much fresher.

The men and women on the streets were also mostly well-dressed, looking like urban elites.

After a walk with several stops, he finally reached the school gates, where he could see the large characters for "Songyang Advanced Immortal Arts High School" from a distance.

An electronic screen at the entrance was even displaying a list of rankings, showing the top ten students from last month's exams for all three high school grades.

This alone was enough to show that Songyang High School was a school that placed extreme importance on student achievement.

And if Zhang Yu were to summarize it based on his recollections, it would be that at Songyang High School, grades were king. It was a world where everyone was judged solely on their scores.

Here, studying and taking exams were as natural as breathing, and nearly everyone harbored an extreme prejudice based on scores.

Things like "Your score is so low, no wonder it takes you so long to queue in the cafeteria," "With a score that low, you're not even qualified to sit at our table," and "Top students should mercilessly humiliate the slackers"... were all considered 'positive campus energy.'

This is a world where scores are supreme, a living hell for underachievers.

Zhang Yu glanced at the screen displaying **First-Year Total Score 10th Place: Zhang Yu,** and sighed internally.

Good thing I'm one of the ones with a high score.

Though my current rank might not be entirely deserved, at least I haven't been exposed yet. I should still be able to live a decent life at school, right?

The cafeteria at Songyang High School served breakfast, so Zhang Yu followed his memories there.

As he walked, he noticed that although there were many students lining up for food, the cafeteria was eerily quiet. Nearly everyone queued in silence, collected their food in silence, and silently found a place to eat, moving with the precision of interlocking gears.

Some students were even reading books as they ate, seizing every single minute to study.

After finding a random seat and taking a bite of a meat bun, Zhang Yu saw someone sit down in the empty spot across from him.

It was a girl with long, jet-black hair and a fair complexion.

Her name surfaced in Zhang Yu's mind.

'Bai Zhenzhen.'

'To be precise, Bai Zhenzhen, first place in the first-year overall rankings, the woman at the very top of the first-year pecking order.'

Looking at the girl sipping porridge in front of him, Zhang Yu wondered, *Are we friends? Is it because I'm in the top ten? Is this the so-called circle of top students?*

Bai Zhenzhen was the type of person who, if not smiling, always looked like she was sulking. Even the most ordinary words from her could carry a sense of alienation that kept others at a distance.

Just by sitting in front of him without saying a word, she made Zhang Yu wonder if she had some sort of problem with him.

Just as Zhang Yu was focusing on the memories related to Bai Zhenzhen, trying to confirm the nature of their relationship.

He heard the girl speak.

"Meet me in the small garden after you finish eating. I'll wait for you there."

Watching her retreating back, a thoughtful look flashed in Zhang Yu's eyes.

A short while later, after he'd had his fill, he left the cafeteria and made his way to the small garden behind the school.

It was a quiet spot behind the dormitories, and with most students rushing to the academic buildings at this hour, it was practically deserted.

Bai Zhenzhen was standing by a flowerbed. The moment she heard Zhang Yu's footsteps, she turned and strode up to him.

"Dad!"

With a thud, she knelt on the ground, hugging Zhang Yu's thigh.

"There were too many people in the cafeteria just now, I was too embarrassed to say anything."

"Please lend me some money, my payday loan is almost a month overdue! I'm begging you on my knees…"

Staring at the scene before him, Zhang Yu cursed inwardly.

What kind of messed-up school is this? The first and tenth in the year are both taking out loans to keep up appearances?

And at that moment, Zhang Yu finally remembered. He and Bai Zhenzhen knew each other not because of some top-student circle, but because she was his handler, the one who had pitched him payday loans.

Allow him to reintroduce her: Bai Zhenzhen, his classmate, was his brother-in-arms in sharing intel on various lending platforms, bonded by a solid friendship forged in borrowing money from all corners.

Realizing that behind her icy poker face in the cafeteria, she had been racking her brain on how to borrow money from him, Zhang Yu shook his head helplessly.

"Let go of me first. Where would I possibly have money to lend you?"

Bai Zhenzhen looked up, desperate. "You're only tenth in the year, how much could you possibly spend? The loans you applied for must be much smaller than mine, right?"

She paused, then added stiffly, a flush creeping up her neck, "As long as you help me pay off my debt… you can do whatever you want."

Zhang Yu's eyes lit up at her words. Seeing the usually cold Bai Zhenzhen now blushing like a peach blossom, he found her uniquely charming.

He looked her up and down. "Really, anything?"

Bai Zhenzhen bit her lip and nodded. "Mhm."

"Then can I use you as collateral?"

Bai Zhenzhen immediately let go of his leg and glared at him.

"Yu-boy, are you really broke?"

Zhang Yu took out his phone, showing her his account balance and the overdue notices.

Bai Zhenzhen stood up, dusted off her trousers, and then looked at Zhang Yu in disbelief.

"You owe seven hundred thousand? You'd probably have to work for a long time even after graduating from university to pay that off."

"You're only in your first year of high school and you're already spending this recklessly?"

At this, Bai Zhenzhen shook her head repeatedly. "Zhang Yu, how on earth did you spend all this money?"

Zhang Yu rubbed his head. "I forgot… let me think for a second."

Bai Zhenzhen looked at him doubtfully. "You didn't invest it in something, did you? Were you scammed?"

As he tried to remember, Zhang Yu himself grew uncertain.

"Probably… not?"

But Bai Zhenzhen's expression turned serious. The more she thought about it, the more she felt there was something suspicious about how he'd spent over seven hundred thousand.

"Let me see your phone."

Zhang Yu knew she was just concerned for him. After all, bad investments, scams, gambling, sudden death, and cultivation deviation were the top five causes of death in Songyang City, with cultivation deviation ranking fifth.

He, too, felt a growing suspicion about what his predecessor had been up to, so he handed over his phone.

"Good, I also want to review how this money was spent. Let's look at the transaction history together."

Their eyes scanned the phone screen, taking in the original Zhang Yu's expenses, one by one.

As Zhang Yu saw them, detailed memories began to surface in his mind.

Pill Cauldron Pharmacy -280.00

Pill Cauldron Pharmacy -250.00

Time and Tide Meditation Chamber -120.00

"Here, I bought medicinal pills," Zhang Yu explained. "Then I rented a meditation chamber for breathing exercises…"

Besides general education subjects like language, math, physics, and history, Songyang High School's curriculum consisted of courses related to the Immortal Dao.

The so-called Immortal Dao was the path of cultivation for a person to become an immortal, step by step. This was the most important subject in high school, accounting for the highest percentage of grades, and was the key to getting into a prestigious university.

Breathing exercises were the most fundamental skill of the Immortal Dao. By using them to gather the spiritual energy from the atmosphere, a cultivator could accumulate mana within their body.

Only with sufficient mana could one achieve greater combat strength and ascend to higher realms. It could be said that mana was the foundation for all Immortal Dao techniques.

For example, to break through from the Qi Refinement realm to the Foundation Establishment realm, one needed over 60 points of mana, while the maximum mana one could master in the Qi Refinement realm was 100 points.

In the system built by the Ten Great Sects, everything was standardized and digitized as much as possible, including mana. The current power level tests at school were all accurate to one decimal place.

Bai Zhenzhen nodded slightly and continued scrolling.

Shuixiu Catering Services Co., Ltd. -532.00

"This was for a supplementary nutritional meal at the cafeteria. It was quite expensive."

In Immortal Dao cultivation, the strength of one's physical body was equally crucial, and consuming large quantities of food rich in spiritual energy and Immortal Dao elements was a daily part of a cultivator's routine, known as dietary supplementation.

Longxiang Education Services Co., Ltd. -1500.00

Longxiang Education Services Co., Ltd. -3000.00

Zhang Yu recalled for a moment. "Hmm… this was for the last tutoring session, and the fee for renting a spiritual root."

A spiritual root was originally a special kind of talent, possessed by only a handful of geniuses, that could greatly increase a cultivator's training efficiency and combat power.

As the most famous barrier to entry on the Immortal Dao in the past, even Zhang Yu and his mother had heard the legends about spiritual roots back in middle school, so much so that the original Zhang Yu had used renting one as an excuse to get his mother to send him money for tutoring and loan repayments.

But now, with the advancement of Immortal Dao technology, even ordinary people like Zhang Yu, who were born without a spiritual root, could rent one to improve their cultivation efficiency.

As she continued to scroll, apart from the initial few items Zhang Yu explained, the subsequent expenses were all more of the same, almost entirely related to Immortal Dao cultivation.

After quickly finishing the review of Zhang Yu's spending over the past few months, Bai Zhenzhen's eyes were filled with pity.

"You kid… you really spent all this money on cultivation? You're seven hundred thousand in debt just to scrape into tenth place?"

"School only started a little over three months ago, right? What are you going to do now?"

As someone who had only been in this new world for a day, Zhang Yu was naturally lost about the future. He just shrugged and said, "I'll just get by for now and figure something out slowly."

Noticing it was almost time for class, the two started walking toward the academic building. Bai Zhenzhen couldn't believe his attitude.

"You owe a fortune, yet you look more relaxed than me with my two hundred thousand debt. Don't you get it? You won't have any money to pour into your studies anymore!"

"Do you have any idea what the consequences of not having money for your studies are? Do you realize how dangerous this is?"

"What consequences?" Zhang Yu asked.

"The monthly exams are in three weeks," she shrugged grimly. "For three weeks, you'll have no money to rent a spiritual root, no money for pills, no money for the tutoring center, not even enough for daily supplements… and everyone else is improving every second of every day. It would be completely normal for your rank to drop by dozens of places, and then you'll be kicked straight out of the model class!"

As Bai Zhenzhen spoke, more related memories flooded into Zhang Yu's mind.

The entire first year was divided into ten classes, from Class 1 to Class 10, with placements determined by the monthly exams.

Given Zhang Yu's rank, he had naturally been placed in Class 1, the one with the best resources, also known as the model class.

And while the monthly exams included regular general knowledge tests, the most important component was always one's Immortal Dao cultivation results.

After all, general education was only worth 50 points, while the various Immortal Dao subjects combined were worth a total of 650 points.

Furthermore, since they were all first-year students who had only officially begun cultivating after school started, the gap in their cultivation levels was actually limited.

Although he was seemingly in tenth place, if he failed to maintain his previous rate of progress over the next few weeks, he could easily be left dozens of places behind.

"If you stay broke," Bai Zhenzhen continued, "your rank will get worse and worse, and your treatment will get worse and worse. In this vicious cycle, you'll be kicked down from Class 1 all the way to Class 10, one step at a time!"

Her face was grim. "No money and no results means you'll be nothing but combustible trash in the teachers' eyes, a joke to the students in the model class, and a target for the nobodies in the regular classes to get their cheap sense of superiority!"

Bai Zhenzhen clutched her head. "In a situation like that, forget about cultivation resources; it'll be hard to even maintain a stable Dao heart. Your grades will only get worse, and eventually, you'll fall below the elimination line, forced

to leave Songyang High School with a body full of ailments and a mountain of debt."

As if seeing that pathetic future in her mind's eye, Bai Zhenzhen looked up at the sky and lamented, "Do you want to live at the bottom of the entire school's pecking order, being insulted over and over! To end up as a high school dropout, the dregs of society?"

Zhang Yu's lips twitched. "Then what do you suggest I do?"

Bai Zhenzhen fell silent for a moment before turning her head.

"Bro, to be honest… if you're seven hundred thousand in debt just to reach tenth place, you might really not be cut out for the Immortal Dao."

"I don't know how you got into Songyang, but my advice is… drop out and get a job. Otherwise, I'm afraid you'll only sink deeper."

Zhang Yu didn't reply, but he sighed in his heart.

'The only good thing about this damn world is that you can cultivate, and on my very first day, I'm being told I have no talent for it?'

Not long after returning to the classroom, Zhang Yu picked up his vibrating phone to see that Bai Zhenzhen had transferred him 500 yuan, along with a message.

Bai Zhenzhen: *Pay your utility bills first.*

Zhang Yu froze for a second, then sniffed his clothes. He immediately understood that Bai Zhenzhen must have noticed that he hadn't showered in days.

While he had gotten used to the smell, it must have been quite noticeable to others.

Thinking of how she had sent him money despite her own dire financial straits, Zhang Yu sighed. He typed out a long message on his phone, deleted it all, and finally just replied: *Thanks.*

After sending the message, Zhang Yu looked at his palm and saw that the symbol there was already half-filled with black.

On his way to school and into the classroom, Zhang Yu had already realized that only he could see the symbol on his palm.

He calculated the time and estimated that the symbol would be completely filled with black by tonight; he just didn't know what would happen when it was.

(End of this chapter)

Chapter 3: Physical Education

There wasn't much time for sentiment. Shortly after Zhang Yu returned to the classroom, the math teacher, wearing black-framed glasses, strode in with a stack of papers.

"Today, we're going over the tests from last time."

"Pass the papers down."

"Look over your mistakes. I've told you countless times to come ask if there's something you don't understand, yet I sat in my office for three hours yesterday afternoon and not a single person came to me with a question…"

Just as the math papers were being distributed, the tall and powerfully built physical education teacher arrived in the classroom.

He looked the math teacher up and down.

"You're sick."

After dismissing the sick math teacher, the physical education teacher, Wang Hai, looked at the students and announced, "This period has been changed to P.E. class."

"However, don't forget to review your math when you get home. General studies courses are worth fifty points on the college entrance exam, and on that exam, being off by a single point means you're behind a great many people."

"Speaking of general studies, I'll also let you know that I've already spoken with your language arts teacher about the next period. It's also been changed to P.E. Combined with the originally scheduled P.E. class, this entire morning is mine."

Everyone followed P.E. teacher Wang Hai to the indoor training hall, which was as vast as a public square and filled with all sorts of exercise equipment.

"As the first stage of the Immortal Dao, the Qi Refinement realm is all about building a solid foundation. How firm a foundation you build in your first year will determine the heights you can reach in your second and third years…"

As he took in these familiar scenes, numerous details and memories surged forth from Zhang Yu's mind.

Ever since the cultivation of the Immortal Dao had been systemized and integrated by the Ten Great Sects, it had long possessed a systematic division of realms and power, encompassing all aspects of Immortal Dao techniques in a truly encyclopedic fashion.

The most widely known of these were the ten great realms of the Immortal Dao.

The key metrics that determined which Immortal Dao realm a person could ascend to were their Dao heart level and their mana level.

For high school students, only by surpassing a level 10 Dao heart and exceeding 60 points of mana could one break through from the Qi Refinement realm to the Foundation Establishment realm.

The high school P.E. class before him now was for the purpose of honing the body and tempering the will.

After all, a powerful physical body not only increased the efficiency of mana growth but was also a great help in forging the strong will required for one's Dao heart level, and it could enhance one's practical combat ability in the Qi Refinement realm.

If the Dao heart and mana were the foundation of the Immortal Dao, then the physical strength trained in P.E. class was the foundation of the foundation.

At the same time, waves of light scanned across the bodies of the students present, displaying their physical strength data on a large screen nearby, ranked from highest to lowest.

1st Place, Qian Shen, Physical Strength 1.15

2nd Place, Bai Zhenzhen, Physical Strength 1.13

3rd Place, He Dayou, Physical Strength 1.12

…

Zhang Yu had to look all the way down to the 19th position before he found his score.

19th Place, Zhang Yu, Physical Strength 0.82

The Immortal Dao technology within Kunxu had continuously developed, and now various data points and metrics had become increasingly refined.

For instance, physical strength was not only quantified but was also re-tested every P.E. class.

This metric, just like the Dao heart, could only reach a maximum of level 10 in the Qi Refinement realm.

Although physical strength was not a key metric for breaking through Immortal Dao realms, it was related to a cultivator's efficiency and combat power, making it an important foundation of the Immortal Dao and accounting for 150 of the 650 points in the Immortal Dao curriculum.

My physical strength has already dropped to 19th place?

Zhang Yu looked at his result, his mind recalling how his rate of progress in physical strength had been continuously surpassed by those around him recently.

Meanwhile, the surrounding students took out syringes and jabbed them into their arms, injecting various enhancement supplements into their bodies.

Once these supplements from various brands entered the body, they not only enhanced the strength of muscles and bones but also boosted training efficiency by several to even more than ten times, making them essential drugs for first-year high school students.

Here, you could go a day without training, but you couldn't go a day without an injection; the top students often took eight or more shots a day.

Zhang Yu saw Bai Zhenzhen, not far away, give herself a total of nine injections in her rear, arm, and thigh in one go.

However, compared to the many hulking figures around her, Bai Zhenzhen appeared much more petite; Zhang Yu remembered this was because their physical training focused on different directions, resulting in different physiques.

Seeing Zhang Yu's delayed action, the P.E. teacher Wang Hai walked over with a frown.

"Zhang Yu, how many days has it been since you've injected a functional enhancer?"

Zhang Yu didn't dare say he was out of money. He knew that at Songyang High School, this was just as shameful as having poor grades, something he would only dare admit to a close friend like Bai Zhenzhen who knew his situation.

Furthermore, the fragmented memories in his mind told him that the original owner of this body had pushed the drugs too hard, putting a heavy burden on his internal organs and cardiovascular system, leading to several fainting spells that were beginning to endanger his life.

So, Zhang Yu evasively said, "I wanted to try without the drugs..."

Who would have thought that upon hearing this, Wang Hai's frown would deepen, his voice booming like thunder.

"Have you been watching those internet celebrities again, the ones who can't take the hardship of the drugs and promote 'natural body tempering'? That's all a scam. How can you keep up without drugs?"

"Look at how many places you've dropped! If this continues, you'll be kicked out of the model class after the next monthly exam."

He looked at him with an expression of bitter disappointment.

"Am I making you use drugs and temper your body for my sake? It's not like I'll gain muscle if you take them."

With that, he casually pointed to a student in the distance.

"Look at Qian Shen. Twelve shots of Dragon-Elephant Preparation a day to grow his muscles and bones, two shots of painkiller to suppress the tearing pain of his body's growth, and two shots of Ravenous Aid to accelerate his metabolism and the absorption of Immortal Dao elements from food. He even crams fifteen pounds of food every day to gain weight..."

"In just three short months, his physical strength has skyrocketed from 0.13 to the current 1.15, making him the strongest physique in the first year. That's equivalent to twenty years of your 'natural body tempering'."

As Wang Hai spoke, Zhang Yu recalled how Qian Shen had transformed from a skinny kid under 170 centimeters three months ago into the little giant he was now, over two meters tall and weighing more than three hundred pounds.

Wang Hai then pointed to another student.

"And look at Zhao Tianxing, who used to be weaker than you. The day before yesterday, his physical strength also broke through 1.00. Now his blood is truly like lead and mercury, his arterial walls have hardened like rubber, and his heart has swelled to three times its size..."

After casually pointing out a circle of students, Wang Hai sighed.

"Zhang Yu, I'm only saying so much to you because your physical strength used to be in the top ten. Your talent isn't bad, and your drug tolerance is exceptional..."

Seeing Wang Hai's earnest and heartfelt expression, Zhang Yu could feel the man's concern, but whether it was due to a lack of money or a fear of death, he was unwilling to inject any drugs now.

Just as he was wondering how to explain himself, he saw Wang Hai pull a box of injections from a nearby bag.

"As they say, training is thirty percent, diet is seventy percent, and the remaining ninety percent is all about how you take your shots."

"This is the new Divine Elephant Force functional enhancer from the Vajra Sect. Top-quality, straight from a major sect. One shot equals ten regular ones."

"I'll be honest with you, this stuff was originally still in the lab. I got it from a good friend. Seeing as you have good talent, I'll sell it to you at a twenty percent discount. Ten vials for 8,800..."

Watching Wang Hai pitch his wares, Zhang Yu now fully remembered that more than half of the various physical enhancement supplements the students in his class ate or injected were purchased from Wang Hai.

A situation like this was considered normal at Songyang High School. After all, pharmacology and physical education were two sides of the same coin. Every P.E. teacher was not only an excellent body tempering expert but also a skilled pharmaceutical salesman, often with multiple medical supply channels behind them.

But at this moment, Zhang Yu could neither afford these things nor could his body handle the drugs, so he could only think of a way to brush it off.

Seeing Zhang Yu beat around the bush and constantly make excuses, Wang Hai snorted coldly, put the medicine back, and said with a look of disappointment, "Then suit yourself."

Watching the P.E. teacher turn and walk away to instruct and sell to other students, Zhang Yu sighed helplessly.

This damn place, is even P.E. class this hard to get through?

Just then, a teenager walked over, leaned in close to Zhang Yu, and asked, "Wang Hai was pitching to you again?"

The speaker was a handsome youth with a wholesome, next-door-neighbor look.

Memories related to him also surfaced in Zhang Yu's mind.

He is… Zhou Tianyi.

Zhou Tianyi was a meal and study buddy whom Zhang Yu had met on the first day of school.

The two had eaten together and studied together for three months, establishing a fragile friendship in the process.

However, as the memories emerged, the first thing that came to Zhang Yu's mind was the other boy's grade ranking.

Ranked 25th in the grade; brarely qualified to eat at the same table as me… Hmm? How did I also develop this kind of academic discrimination?

Zhang Yu felt that as the memories continued to merge, he seemed to be constantly influenced, placing more and more importance on the school's academic rankings.

Hearing Zhou Tianyi's question now, he nodded.

"Yeah, he wanted to sell me Divine Elephant Force."

"You didn't buy it again?" Seeing Zhang Yu nod, Zhou Tianyi hissed, "Aren't you afraid that Old Wang will mess with you?"

"Mess with me?" Zhang Yu said, "I just didn't buy some drugs, it can't be that serious."

Zhou Tianyi shook his head repeatedly. "Tsk, do you want to hear some gossip about Wang Hai?"

"Forget it, I'm not one for gossip."

Zhang Yu turned and walked toward a nearby piece of training equipment, intending to familiarize himself with his body and the P.E. curriculum.

Zhou Tianyi continued, "A teacher complained that Wang Hai was… relieving himself… in the office next door, and when he finished, the force cracked the ceiling."

Zhang Yu's footsteps halted. He wasn't a gossip, but gossip this bad… he had to see what this was all about.

Zhou Tianyi grinned.

"Wang Hai later explained that he didn't do it, and that the banging sounds were him disciplining disobedient students."

"Later, I asked some senior students, and they told me Wang Hai has long had a habit of corporal punishment for underperforming students."

"Especially if your grades drop and you don't buy his medicine, he'll lead the charge in bullying you."

"I heard a student a few years ago was even driven to a mental breakdown by him."

Hearing this, Zhang Yu's gaze sharpened instantly.

"And Wang Hai got away with it?"

Zhou Tianyi shrugged, "Wang Hai's teaching results have always been excellent. He's the ace P.E. teacher of Songyang High School, having coached three students who earned the city's highest physical strength scores on the college entrance exam. Some even say he has connections to the great sects, getting access to drugs still in the laboratory phase."

"Even if the school really wanted to get rid of him, most of the students and parents wouldn't agree. They all count on Wang Hai to buy drugs and help them improve their physical strength."

As he spoke, he looked at Zhang Yu and warned, "If you keep refusing to buy drugs and your grades don't improve, I'm afraid he'll come after you too."

Looking at Zhang Yu's furrowed brow, Zhou Tianyi asked curiously, "Say… you used to take a lot of shots before, why did you suddenly stop buying? Don't tell me you're broke? Want me to lend you some?"

Sensing the sincerity in the other's eyes, Zhang Yu could only give a wry smile.

"No need."

"Really no need?" Zhou Tianyi pressed, "How about you use mine for today?"

Zhang Yu, of course, shook his head repeatedly. He was genuinely afraid that a few more injections would kill him on the spot.

According to the memories in his head, this world was not short of people who were severely injured, disabled, or even killed due to drug overdose, and even Songyang High School had students who were seriously injured every year from excessive drug use.

But even so, the stream of students using drugs in pursuit of physical strength was endless.

The original owner of his body had already shown signs of being overwhelmed since last week.

Thinking about how the original owner had not only left him with a massive debt of seven hundred thousand but also this wreck of a body, Zhang Yu sighed in his heart once more.

Just as the two were whispering, a cold gaze suddenly swept over them, and Wang Hai shouted, "No talking during P.E. class."

Zhang Yu and Zhou Tianyi immediately stopped their conversation and began their own workouts.

Zhang Yu walked up to a large iron ball, and with a tremor of his muscles and a sudden exertion of force, he lifted the hundred-kilogram sphere.

Then, as his muscles contracted and expanded with effort, the large iron ball was moved around his body as if it were a toy.

As the iron ball moved up and down, flipping and rotating, Zhang Yu could feel the qi and blood surging throughout his body, and its various parts gradually warmed up.

This is the warm-up…

The entire process seemed to be instinctively carved into his flesh and blood; Zhang Yu completed the warm-up routine almost without thinking.

And in the training that followed, his mastery over this body deepened, and related memories continuously surfaced from his mind.

"Body tempering in the Qi Refinement stage is mainly about forging muscles and bones, breaking through limits through repeated exercises to ultimately raise one's physical strength level."

"As for specific methods… for example, the most widespread method among high school students is a cultivation technique called the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms."

The Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms was a body tempering cultivation technique created by the Ten Great Sects specifically for high school instruction. Its thirty-six movements, paired with different equipment, could comprehensively develop the physical body and effectively increase physical strength.

Under the Immortal Dao framework summarized by the Ten Great Sects, all martial arts and Daoist techniques were divided into levels from 1 to 100.

Most students at Songyang High School, for example, could successfully master the basics after one or two weeks of study, bringing a fundamental martial art like the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms to level 1.

And if one could continue to raise its level, the training effects of the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms would become stronger and more incredible.

But this was obviously not easy. In Zhang Yu's memory, in the three months since school started, only Bai Zhenzhen had managed to raise the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms to level 2.

It was precisely because of this that Bai Zhenzhen, with just nine injections a day, could maintain her physical strength rank at second in the entire grade, closely chasing Qian Shen, who took sixteen injections a day.

The level of the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms affects the efficiency of physical strength improvement, but the key factor that truly determines power, as well as one's P.E. grade, is still physical strength itself.

Speaking of which, my physical strength is 0.82, and I can toss around things weighing several hundred pounds. The highest physical strength can reach in the Qi Refinement realm is level 10, and after Foundation Establishment, it can reach level 20… The gap between people here is too vast.

At first, Zhang Yu only intended to train casually to familiarize himself with the P.E. curriculum and his own body.

But as he practiced the sets of the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms, he became more and more serious, more and more meticulous, as if an instinct within his body was urging him on, encouraging him to persevere in his training.

Muscles were constantly torn, and bones were constantly impacted. With each successive repetition, his body was repeatedly ravaged, until finally, a warm current flowed out from within, beginning to silently repair the damage in his flesh and blood.

This was the mana within Zhang Yu's body, and just like in the P.E. classes of the past few months, the body was broken down under heavy pressure and then continuously repaired and made stronger by the action of mana.

Huu!

Two hours passed in a flash. Zhang Yu let out a deep breath, feeling sore all over, as if his entire body was about to fall apart.

No wonder they need to take painkillers…

He looked up at Bai Zhenzhen still sweating profusely in the distance, and at the other classmates who were also training madly on the other side, and a sense of urgency instinctively welled up in his heart, seemingly urging him to continue pushing his body.

If I trained this crazily in my original world, I probably would have worked myself to death long ago, right?

'It's only because this world has the support of various drugs from Immortal Dao technology, as well as mana… that one can endure it and even grow stronger.'

Feeling the pain radiating from all over his body, as well as the instinct that still craved training and yearned to become stronger, Zhang Yu couldn't help but marvel at the depth of the original Zhang Yu's obsession.

However, as the training continued, this instinct hidden deep within the human body seemed to be gradually fading.

The path forward would ultimately have to be chosen by the current Zhang Yu himself.

When the morning's P.E. classes were finally over, Zhang Yu was already exhausted and collapsed on the floor, surrounded by a group of classmates who were still full of energy and training frantically.

Zhang Yu mused that this must be the difference between using drugs and not.

Suddenly, he caught sight of the dark patch on his palm and noticed that less than a quarter of it remained to be filled in with black.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 4: Inviting a Deity

Gazing at the change on his palm, Zhang Yu could not help but wonder, *What in the world does this mean?*

Will I die once this thing is filled?

Unfortunately, there was no one who could answer the unease in his heart.

After the morning's physical education class ended, Zhang Yu dragged his exhausted body to lunch with Bai Zhenzhen and Zhou Tianyi, and then after a brief rest, the afternoon's classes began.

The first class of the afternoon was history, and the lecturer was an old man with a head full of white hair.

After entering the classroom, the old man sat himself down behind the lectern and, flipping open a book, began to lecture nonchalantly.

He seemed completely unconcerned that the students below were using the time to rest, perform breathing exercises, cultivate, or even leave the classroom for body tempering.

Zhang Yu had no interest in listening to the history teacher's lecture either. He just flipped rapidly through the textbook, recalling its contents and integrating them with his own memories.

'Kunxu has no nations; everything is monopolized and controlled by the Ten Great Sects. Kunxu is comprised of thirty-six layers, with the first layer being roughly twice the size of China. It is formed from cities of varying sizes, each managed by a city government established by one of the great sects.'

'On the first layer, aside from things related to the Immortal Dao, the level of technology seems similar to my past life, but the lives of the common folk is much more arduous.'

'Kunxu's first layer is also where Zhang Yu has always lived. As for the layers above… he had only ever seen them in movies and on television.'

According to Zhang Yu's memories, one could only enter the second layer of Kunxu by being accepted into a university, and only by graduating and joining a great sect could one ascend to the higher layers.

It could be said that within Kunxu, one could only climb higher step by step by mastering stronger Immortal Dao powers and gaining greater authority.

And the higher the layer, the more abundant the spiritual energy, the more advanced the Immortal Dao technology, and the more plentiful all manner of resources.

As he thought of this, Zhang Yu could not help but turn to look out the window, feeling the sunlight cascading down from the sky.

'Such a realistic sky and sun… are we really inside some kind of colossal structure?'

'The first layer alone is twice the size of China, so how much space must the entirety of Kunxu take up? It surely can't be on Earth anymore, can it?'

'And how exactly did I come to this world?'

He unconsciously recalled the scene of his arrival in this world, remembered that bizarre ritual, and his head once again began to feel dizzy.

Zhang Yu quickly shook his head. For him, at this moment, compared to such grand questions, his high school grades, living expenses, earning money, PE class… these pressing matters demanded his attention.

And at the thought of his grades and cultivation, Zhang Yu felt another headache coming on.

Besides the morning PE class, his Immortal Dao grades were divided into four subjects: Dao heart, mana, martial arts, and Daoist arts.

Dao heart was worth 150 points, mana was worth 150 points, martial arts 100 points, and Daoist arts 100 points.

And according to Zhang Yu's memories, his academic ranking had been slipping across the board; there wasn't a single subject in which he wasn't falling behind.

If this continued, it seemed that being expelled from Songyang High School was only a matter of time.

Another question then surfaced in Zhang Yu's mind.

'From the looks of it, Zhang Yu's family isn't wealthy, he has no outstanding talent for the Immortal Dao, and his interview performance was terrible. How on earth did he get into Songyang High School?'

Zhang Yu searched his memories repeatedly, only recalling that the body's previous owner had entered Songyang High School despite a less-than-ideal interview.

And thinking of the previous owner's family, his eyes flickered, and he pulled out his phone to open his contacts.

'Right, should I contact Zhang Yu's parents and sister after school?'

Zhang Yu spent the afternoon classes reviewing his lessons while organizing the memories in his head. This process deepened his understanding of the knowledge in his mind, of this world, and of his identity as Zhang Yu.

In the blink of an eye, it was six o'clock, the end of the school day.

The day's classes at the school were over, but for the vast majority of Songyang High School's students, their school day was only half over. Next, they had to attend their various tutoring centers, after which they would study on their own late into the night before they could finally rest.

But unlike his classmates who were rushing off to their respective tutoring centers, Zhang Yu was currently sitting in a deserted cafeteria.

With his savings and credit depleted, he had stopped attending his tutoring center two weeks ago.

So after finishing dinner, he deliberated for a moment before taking out his phone again.

'Let's give it a try.'

He first called Zhang Yu's mother, then his father, but both calls went unanswered.

Recalling the memories of Zhang Yu's parents and sister, he finally gave in and reluctantly called his sister.

"Zhang Yu?"

Hearing the slightly cold voice on the other end, Zhang Yu braced himself and said, "Sis, can you lend me some money?"

A silence fell, and just as Zhang Yu thought she was about to hang up, a voice came through the phone, "Back when you were in first grade, I told Mom and Dad that you have no talent for the Immortal Dao. Pursuing this path is a complete waste of time and money."

"After the divorce, Mom actually believed your delusions. She resolved to support you through high school all on her own. Not long ago, she even came to us to borrow money, wanting to use my tuition funds."

"Heh, and as a result, you, you overreaching fool, have resorted to taking out loans for cultivation. To pay for high school, you've already racked up a mountain of debt, haven't you?"

Faced with her accusations, Zhang Yu was speechless, because based on the memories he had sorted through, she was not wrong.

After their parents separated, each taking one of the siblings, the original Zhang Yu, knowing full well his mother's income was insufficient and that they had no money, had been far too ambitious. In the end, he had resorted to taking out payday loans to cultivate, paying off old loans with new ones right up to the present.

And his mother, after he repeatedly borrowed money, after she helped him pay it back time and again, and with each discovery that the financial hole was only getting deeper, she had finally left him too.

The voice from the phone continued.

"This is the last time we'll speak. Pay back the debts you've accrued yourself."

"Here's one last piece of advice: drop out of school, get a job."

"Out of consideration for the family we once were, I'll send you 500. That should be enough for you to find a job before you starve."

Hearing the click of the phone disconnecting, Zhang Yu sighed helplessly, "Well, at least I got 500."

Counting the 500 from Bai Zhenzhen, Zhang Yu's savings finally broke 1,000.

But as he walked home, his sister's advice kept replaying in his mind.

Drop out and get a job?

Lying back on the bed in his rented room, Zhang Yu stared blankly at the slightly moldy ceiling.

Declining grades, penniless, burdened with immense debt, his body on the verge of collapse… he had to admit, dropping out early to go to work seemed like a rational decision.

Just then, a sharp pain flared from his palm. The symbol that only he could see was, at that very moment, finally filled completely with black.

Simultaneously, a crisp female voice sounded from beside him, "Kid, the god-invoking ritual is complete. Time to grant three wishes."

Zhang Yu whipped his head around to find a cloth doll sitting on the edge of his bed.

Looking at the doll—its fabric yellowed and faded, its stitches crooked, as if it could fall apart at any moment—he had a sudden realization. Wasn't this the very same doll he had seen during that strange ritual on the rooftop the day he arrived in this world?

The cloth doll said, "Hey, did you hear me? Three wishes, not one less."

Faced with this bizarre scene, Zhang Yu's only thought was to leave.

He was no longer the novice who was completely ignorant of this world.

After organizing his memories, he knew that gods in this world were not some vague objects of faith, but administrators who presided over countless matters, large and small, throughout all of Kunxu.

But these were righteous gods, not beings that a failure on the Immortal Dao like Zhang Yu could summon casually. The deity that could be summoned by his so-called god-invoking ritual had to be one of the evil gods of legend—those who wreaked havoc, treated human life as worthless, and were mercilessly suppressed by the Ten Great Sects and the various factions of righteous gods.

The common folk of Kunxu's first layer grew up hearing cautionary tales of mortals who made deals with evil gods, only to end with their bodies destroyed and Daos extinguished, their very souls scattered to the winds.

This Zhang Yu fellow was so desperate he turned to an evil god?

No wonder my head spins whenever I recall those memories. Is this also the evil god's doing?

Zhang Yu's first instinct was to flee the danger, but a second thought stopped his trembling body in its tracks.

The original Zhang Yu had sought out an evil god only because he had truly run out of options.

Should he spend a lifetime as a beast of burden at the lowest rung of society paying off his debt, or should he risk his life to gamble for a chance to continue his cultivation?

"Evil god! My first wish is for you to grant me 100 wishes!"

After speaking, Zhang Yu swallowed hard, looking at the doll nervously as he asked, "You can do that, right?"

"Hehe, of course I can do something so simple."

Seeing the smile spread across Zhang Yu's face, the cloth doll let out a sneer, "But my choice… is to refuse."

"Because after the god-invoking ritual is complete, it is you who must grant *my* three wishes."

"If you choose to refuse to grant my wishes, or if you intentionally delay or fail in the process of granting them, you will suffer the ritual's backlash, your body exploding and your soul shattering."

"Now then, my first wish is for you to grant me 1,000 wishes."

Hearing this, Zhang Yu froze for a moment, cursing internally,

What the… he performed this whole ritual just to grant wishes for *you? Was the original Zhang Yu an idiot? Granting 1,000 wishes? Is that even allowed?*

After stating her first wish, the cloth doll gave a slight smile, its hollow eyes made of black buttons continuing to stare straight at Zhang Yu.

"Are you ready? I am about to state my next wish."

Hearing this, Zhang Yu's heart tightened.

What is this cursed thing going to wish for now?

If she really makes me grant a thousand wishes, won't I become her slave?

Or… what if she makes a wish that I can't possibly fulfill… won't I be as good as dead?

The cloth doll said slowly, "I've decided. My next wish is… for you to help me collect a batch of antiques."

Zhang Yu swallowed. "Antiques?"

The cloth doll giggled. "Don't worry, I've already picked them out for you. All you have to do is buy everything in your shopping cart."

Zhang Yu paused at her words, then took out his phone. Opening the shopping cart as he remembered, he found it was already full of various Buddha statues, altars, incense burners, and wooden swords… all of them were expensive, with any single item costing tens of thousands.

And if he could not afford these antiques, it seemed he could not fulfill the wish. If he could not fulfill the evil god's wish, wouldn't he die a violent death under the ritual's power?

At this thought, Zhang Yu hurriedly asked, "Could you perhaps consider a different wish?"

"I'm afraid I can't afford so many antiques."

"Making excuses…" The cloth doll's gaze hardened, endless malice seeming to pour from its pitch-black eyes. "Are you trying to go back on your word? If you can't afford it, borrow. If you can't borrow, sell your heart, liver, kidneys, spleen, and lungs. There's always a way for you to raise the money."

Zhang Yu looked at the cloth doll seriously and said slowly, "If I do that, I'll die just to fulfill this one wish, won't I?"

The doll chuckled lightly. "So what?"

Zhang Yu said, "You can either choose to immediately lose a person who will grant you a thousand wishes in the future."

"Or you can give me some time, allowing a future disciple of a great sect to purchase these antiques for you, and then, one by one… grant you those thousand wishes."

"Hmm?" The cloth doll gave Zhang Yu a surprised look. "Continue."

Zhang Yu said, "I've done the math. To buy all these antiques, I probably couldn't raise enough money even if I worked for decades on the first layer of Kunxu."

"But if I can join a great sect, it wouldn't take more than a few years to save up enough."

The cloth doll said, "So?"

Zhang Yu said, "What I mean is… as long as I study hard, cultivate diligently, and continuously grow stronger, get into a prestigious university, and join a great sect after graduation, I can use the sect's stipend to grant your wishes."

The cloth doll fell silent for a moment before suddenly speaking, "You're telling me you're going to study hard, get a job, and earn a salary, all to grant my wish?"

"Are you kidding me?"

An infinite malice washed over him. The doll's eyes were like two giant black holes, threatening to instantly devour all surrounding light.

Zhang Yu clenched his fists, doing his best to still his trembling legs as he stared at the doll and said, word by word, "Your first wish is for me to grant you one thousand wishes. Your second wish is to collect the antiques in the shopping cart."

"If I die of poverty while collecting antiques for you, how can I grant the thousand wishes?"

"If I know this, yet still proceed in a way that ensures my death to fulfill the second wish, wouldn't that be a deliberate attempt to not fulfill the first wish?"

"Deliberately making it impossible for me to fulfill the first wish would violate the ritual's terms. I'd likely die from the backlash before I could even complete the second wish, right?"

"Therefore, studying hard, getting into a university, and working earnestly to make money is the only feasible plan I can currently think of that will allow me to fulfill both the first and second wishes."

As Zhang Yu finished speaking, a deathly silence filled the room.

A moment later, the cloth doll's voice sounded.

"Let me see your balance."

After seeing the balance in Zhang Yu's account and the various text messages about overdue loans, the cloth doll was silent for a long time.

'This kid…' The doll's thoughts raced. 'This situation shouldn't normally happen. The ritual's targets are supposed to be wealthy; buying a pile of antiques should be a trivial matter for them.'

'But this kid… this kid is so poor, so poor he can't even fulfill the first part of the wish, so poor that he's created a loophole.'

'Damn it, didn't I say to find someone rich! How did you find this one for me!'

After a long silence, the cloth doll looked at Zhang Yu and said, "What you said… is not entirely without reason."

"Fine. Go and study hard. I'll be back when you've earned enough money."

With that, the doll sneered again. "But you had better remember, all of this is for the sake of fulfilling my wishes."

"From now on, should you show the slightest bit of laziness in the process of fulfilling my wishes, you will die under the ritual's backlash."

Watching the doll gradually fade away, Zhang Yu let out a sharp breath, his body going limp as he collapsed onto the bed.

Suddenly, he remembered something and yelled, "Wait, this ritual… what did I get out of this ritual?!"

Though he suspected his transmigration might be connected to the ritual, he did not dare voice this secret directly, opting for an indirect approach instead.

Unless it was a matter of life and death, he resolved to bury the secret of Earth deep within his heart, never to reveal it.

The cloth doll vanished completely, leaving only a voice lingering by Zhang Yu's ear, "Your potential has been awakened. However, everyone's potential is different. As for what it is… discover it for yourself."

Outside the room, the cloth doll mused as it walked away, 'This kid's aptitude is terrible. Awakening his potential will at most enhance his mana or physical strength a little, right? I doubt he can even get into a university, let alone join a great sect. How is he supposed to fulfill my wishes?'

'But his quick thinking is rather interesting… Let's see just how far you can struggle.'

Inside the room, Zhang Yu watched as the black symbol in his palm gradually began to change.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 5: The Feathered Tome

As the black symbol in his palm shifted, a thick, ink-black book materialized in Zhang Yu's hand.

"The Feathered Tome?"

Seeing the two large characters on the cover, Zhang Yu was momentarily stunned.

Then, with a flicker of his will, the black book in his hand opened to the first page of its own accord, its pages turning without a breeze.

"Is this a table of contents?"

He saw that apart from the first line, which read "Prologue," all the subsequent lines were a blurry, illegible script, as if they had been censored.

Does this mean only the prologue is available right now? Zhang Yu wondered.

With a thought, he turned to the prologue. A portrait of a person appeared on the left page, while lines of data and information filled the right.

"Is this a portrait of me?"

The figure on the left page was indeed Zhang Yu, sitting cross-legged with his eyes lightly closed, as if in meditation.

The depiction was so lifelike that it felt as though the person in the portrait was still breathing.

A faint radiance seemed to circulate within it, which Zhang Yu guessed must represent the flow of mana in his body.

The page on the right, meanwhile, displayed lines of information and data:

[Zhang Yu]

[Dao Heart: Level 1]

[Mana: 7.7]

[Physique: Level 0.83]

[Martial Arts: Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms (Level 1), Freehand Combat (Level 1)]

[Daoist Arts: Basic Breathing Technique (Level 1), Basic Heart Tempering Art (Level 1)]

"This is me?"

"The top section shows my stats for the Immortal Dao, and the Dao heart level here is just like the school's test—it can't be measured to a decimal place."

"And below that are the martial and Daoist arts I've learned so far?"

Among the four skills listed below, aside from the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms used for body tempering, there was also Freehand Combat from his martial arts class for practical combat training, the Basic Breathing Technique from mana class for refining mana, and the Basic Heart Tempering Art for improving his Dao heart, all at the novice Level 1.

Looking at the numbers, Zhang Yu thought to himself, *So this is the potential the evil god unlocked? This book can detect all my attributes?*

But… surely there's more to it than that?

According to that evil god, it unlocked my potential, but what kind of potential is simple detection? I can get tested at school every day.

There has to be some other function.

Thinking this, Zhang Yu decided to test it. He focused his attention on the attribute numbers and shouted in his mind, *Feathered Tome! Add points for me!*

Seeing the data on the page remain completely unchanged, Zhang Yu sighed. That evil god was utterly useless; it hadn't unlocked his potential at all.

He tried turning to the next page, only to find the four large words 'To be continued' written there.

Recalling the unrevealed entries in the table of contents, Zhang Yu guessed, *What does this mean? Can this ability be upgraded? Do the other functions only unlock after an upgrade?*

He could only turn back to the previous page, continuously focusing his attention on the lines of data and skills, hoping to trigger some effect.

And just as he concentrated on 'Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms (Level 1)', he suddenly felt the line of text twitch. It could actually be dragged, moving around the page at his mental command.

Zhang Yu dragged the 'Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms (Level 1)' line back and forth across the page, wondering what use it could possibly have.

As it touched the portrait, the line of text suddenly froze and was absorbed directly by the image of Zhang Yu.

With that absorption, Zhang Yu felt as if a cool spring were washing down from the crown of his head. An indescribable feeling welled up within him, making him feel a strange connection to his portrait.

At the same time, the portrait, which had been sitting cross-legged, abruptly stood up and began to practice the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms, move by move.

A new line of small text had appeared above the portrait: Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms (Level 1)+

Staring at the small '+' at the end, Zhang Yu became instantly excited.

It's here! It's finally here! My potential has truly been unlocked!

He quickly focused his attention on the '+', feeling as if he were pressing it with his mind.

The next moment, the '+' blurred slightly before changing into '(0/10)'.

Then, a wave of insight washed over Zhang Yu: practice the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms ten times to complete the martial art upgrade.

Looking at the 'Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms Level 1 (0/10)' on the Feathered Tome, Zhang Yu was astonished.

I can upgrade this martial art just by practicing it ten times?

Ever since the school year began, he had practiced these forms countless times without ever feeling like he was close to leveling up.

"Ten times?"

Zhang Yu eagerly began to try. He took a single step, and with a resounding bang, the muscles and sinews of his entire body coiled like a great python, unleashing waves of power.

Although Zhang Yu used equipment when he practiced the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms at school, that was only to enhance the training's effectiveness.

In reality, as the most fundamental body tempering art, the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms could be practiced with or without equipment. Practitioners could even focus on different aspects like strength, speed, or dexterity according to their own preferences.

The original Zhang Yu, for example, had chosen a balanced approach to strength and speed, avoiding becoming overly bulky.

Now, Zhang Yu moved back and forth within his small room, his feet thudding against the floorboards as the flesh and blood throughout his body gradually warmed from constant expansion and contraction.

But before he could execute more than a few moves, a string of curses came from next door.

"Are you crazy?! Trying to tear the house down in the middle of the night?!"

Zhang Yu stopped immediately, thinking with resignation,

The soundproofing in this rental is terrible. I can't practice martial arts at night.

Looking at the Feathered Tome that had appeared in his palm, he couldn't suppress the urge to immediately begin a burst of intense training, to complete all ten repetitions in one go and see what would happen.

"Maybe I should find another place?"

"I remember there's an abandoned, unfinished building nearby…"

…

In the pitch-black darkness.

The sound of thudding echoed continuously through the corridors of the abandoned building.

As the neon lights from a distant street flickered, the silhouette of a young man would occasionally materialize in the shadows.

It was none other than Zhang Yu, who had rushed to the abandoned building to practice the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms.

His gaze was solemn as he performed the training method, move by move. A short while later, he was already drenched in sweat, with steam rising from his body.

Zhang Yu had already trained for the entire morning and had collapsed from exhaustion. Without the aid of injections, boosters, or any dietary supplement, the moment he started practicing the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms, his entire body felt sore. Every movement, every exertion of force, brought a pain like his muscles were being torn apart.

However, the thought of the changes in the Feathered Tome lifted his spirits, and he persevered, finishing one full repetition of the forms.

Panting heavily, Zhang Yu eagerly opened his palm, and the Feathered Tome appeared once more at his command.

Looking at the 'Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms Level 1 (1/10)' on the page, a hint of joy touched his face.

"Is this my potential?"

"Raising the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms to Level 2… it seems it's really possible."

"I'm going to finish all ten repetitions tonight!"

Zhang Yu impatiently began the second repetition of the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms.

But after only a moment, he was so exhausted that he collapsed to the ground, feeling as if his arms and legs no longer belonged to him.

"I can't go on. I've reached my limit. Looks like I'll have to try again tomorrow."

Just as Zhang Yu decided to stop training, rest for a bit, and then head home for a good night's sleep, a vicious chill surged through his heart.

At the same time, a voice echoed in his mind.

"Please abide by the ritual's agreement. Strive to complete the wish. Do not deliberately slack off or delay. 10."

"Please abide by the ritual's agreement. Strive to complete the wish. Do not deliberately slack off or delay. 9."

"Please abide by the ritual's agreement. Strive to complete the wish. Do not deliberately slack off or delay. 8."

As the voice's countdown continued, the vicious chill in Zhang Yu's heart grew more intense, as if something were about to erupt from within his body and tear his flesh and blood to shreds.

"Ritual… agreement… wish…" He immediately understood. "Could this be the power of that god-invoking ritual?"

The words the cloth doll had once spoken immediately surfaced in his mind.

…

"If you choose to refuse to fulfill my wish, or deliberately delay or even fail in the process of fulfilling it, then under the ritual's backlash, your body will explode, and your soul will scatter to the winds."

…

So… Zhang Yu thought, *it's because I plan to fulfill the second wish by studying hard, getting into a prestigious university, joining a major sect, and earning money.*

Does slacking off during this process count as deliberately delaying the fulfillment of my wish?

If I don't listen, will I really die from the ritual's backlash?

Hearing that the countdown had already reached 3, Zhang Yu scrambled to his feet.

With a pained cry, he forced himself to endure the tearing agony in his muscles and began practicing the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms.

The moment he began to practice, the countdown vanished without a trace.

Chapter 6: Freedom

"Shit!"

Bang!

"Shit!"

Bang!

"Shit!"

Bang! Bang!

In the pitch-black concrete room, amidst waves of low shouts and the sound of impacts, Zhang Yu finally completed the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms for a second time, enduring the intense pain that wracked his body.

With a final thud, he collapsed to the ground, gasping for breath.

Feeling the faint trembling in his hands and feet, Zhang Yu felt that this body had been pushed to its absolute limit; every inch of his flesh and blood refused to move.

But even in such a state, that malevolent chill and the voice in his mind returned.

"Please abide by the ritual's pact. Strive to fulfill your wish. Do not deliberately slacken or delay. 10."

Dammit! Zhang Yu cursed internally. *I'm already at my limit!*

I really can't train anymore!

I have class tomorrow!

But no matter what he said or how he tried to explain, the countdown continued without the slightest pause or hesitation.

Watching the countdown tick relentlessly toward its end, Zhang Yu could only curse as he stumbled back to his feet to continue his training.

Under normal circumstances, when most people trained alone, it was difficult to push themselves to their true limits.

Only with a master, a teacher, or a coach—only when someone was supervising and making strict demands—could a person truly train to their limit again and again.

It was the same for Zhang Yu. If he had been on his own, he probably would have practiced the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms once or twice before collapsing from exhaustion and resting for the day.

But now, the power of the ritual was like a demonic drill instructor, staring at him at all times, using death as a threat to urge him onward, not allowing for the slightest bit of laziness.

The third time…

The fourth time…

The fifth time…

All the way to the tenth time!

Under the repeated threats of the ritual's power, Zhang Yu had actually performed the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms a full ten times!

During that period, the pain in his body shifted from a tearing agony to a searing torment of a thousand needles, before finally, gradually giving way to numbness. He even felt as if his hands and feet were about to disappear.

At the same time, every last wisp of mana in his body was forced out, continuously infusing his damaged flesh.

After completing those ten repetitions, Zhang Yu felt as if both his body and his mana had been wrung completely dry, like a rag that had been twisted thousands upon tens of thousands of times, without a single drop left to give.

At that moment, Zhang Yu just wanted to lie there on the ground, unwilling to move in the slightest.

To his relief, the life-hounding voice that had been relentlessly pushing him did not sound again, seeming to acknowledge that he had truly given his all and reached his limit.

And during the grueling training session, Zhang Yu had also begun to get a feel for the characteristics of this ritual's power.

This thing is like some kind of artificial imbecile. It doesn't have true intelligence, it just operates according to a fixed set of rules…

Zhang Yu had seen similar things in the movies, television shows, and news from Kunxu.

Powerful magical treasures contained artifact spirits, and these spirits were like artificial intelligences, possessing a certain degree of wisdom to handle various problems. The most powerful artifact spirits even had intelligence on par with humans.

At this moment, having confirmed that the ritual's power was no longer forcing him to train, Zhang Yu could finally relax his mind and feel the effects of his upgraded Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms.

That was right. The moment he completed the tenth repetition of the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms, he could feel that the martial art had leveled up.

In that instant, his awareness and understanding of the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms deepened.

Many details he had previously overlooked or failed to grasp appeared in his mind like a sudden flash of lightning.

And on the Feathered Tome, the initial 'Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms Level 1 (0/10)' had become 'Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms Level 2 (0/20)'.

I just need to practice another 20 times to raise the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms to Level 3?

If I keep training like this, won't I be able to max out the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms at Level 10 in no time?

Zhang Yu knew that in the Qi Refinement realm, martial arts and Daoist techniques could only be cultivated to a maximum of Level 10.

When that time comes, even without acupuncture or boosters, the effects of my training won't be any less than Bai Zhenzhen and the others… No, it might even far surpass them.

If this keeps up, it might not be impossible for my physical strength to become number one in our grade.

At this thought, Zhang Yu's spirits lifted, and he felt the pain throughout his body lessen.

Incredible. My potential is simply too incredible. Once it's been unleashed by the evil god, I'm practically going to soar into the heavens.

With these wonderful fantasies of the future, Zhang Yu, his body exercised to its limit, gradually succumbed to drowsiness and fell asleep without realizing it.

He slept until five o'clock the next morning, waking up instinctively, just as he had countless times before.

But today, his entire body was sore and weak, and even opening his eyes was an immense effort.

Though he was awake, Zhang Yu had no desire to get up. He just wanted to sleep a little longer, even if it was on the concrete floor of an unfinished building.

Five minutes… just five more minutes…

But just as Zhang Yu tried to stay in bed, the voice that sent a malevolent chill through him echoed from the depths of his heart once more.

"Please abide by the ritual's agreement. Strive to complete the wish. Do not deliberately slack off or delay. 10."

"God damn it!" Zhang Yu's eyes shot open. He listened carefully as the voice continued, and after confirming repeatedly that it was not a hallucination, he could only curse under his breath as he sat up.

In that moment, Zhang Yu suddenly realized that things might be far more serious than he had imagined.

From now on, for anything related to studying, cultivation, university exams, or work—in other words, anything related to studying, cultivating, working, and earning money to fulfill the second wish… I can't slack off even for a moment?

A 24-hour overseer, is that it?

Laden with exhaustion and fatigue, Zhang Yu could only rush back to his rented apartment.

Feeling greasy and covered in sweat, he quickly paid the 323.4 water fee, took a five-minute shower, and then hurried to the bus station.

Glancing up at the display on the platform, Zhang Yu thought to himself, *The next bus arrives in ten minutes?*

He found a pole to lean against and thought, *I'll rest for a bit. Good thing that damn thing isn't telling me to use this time to train.*

The moment that thought crossed his mind, Zhang Yu regretted it.

A malevolent chill welled up from his heart, and the nightmare-like voice sounded once again.

"Please abide by the ritual's agreement. Strive to complete the wish. Do not deliberately slack off or delay. 10."

Son of a… Zhang Yu cursed internally. *Is this thing constantly monitoring my thoughts? As long as I think of a way to work harder but don't act on it… it's going to kill me?*

And so, amidst the relentless countdown, Zhang Yu could only endure his fatigue and begin practicing the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms under the surprised, confused, appreciative, or indifferent gazes of the people around him.

"Hah!"

Bang!

With the final punch, Zhang Yu, now drenched in sweat, collapsed onto the ground once more.

Watching the bus draw nearer in the distance, he felt a wave of relief. *It's finally here.*

And to his delight, Zhang Yu actually found an empty seat on the bus today.

Finally, I can get some proper rest.

I'll just doze off for a bit. It can't possibly force me to train on the bus, right? Unless it's a breathing exercise…

The instant the words 'breathing exercise' formed in his mind, Zhang Yu had a bad feeling.

"Please abide by the ritual's agreement. Strive to complete the wish. Do not deliberately slack off or delay. 10."

Sure enough, the countdown began again, forcing Zhang Yu to practice the Basic Breathing Technique while riding the bus.

Performing a breathing exercise while on the bus sounded simple and efficient, but even the previous Zhang Yu had given up after just a few tries.

One reason was that the bus was too noisy, making it difficult to concentrate.

The second, and most important, reason was that waking up early every day left Zhang Yu utterly exhausted.

With a rare seat to himself, all he wanted was to doze off for a little while; he simply couldn't muster the energy for a breathing exercise.

The few times he had tried, he would usually start to feel drowsy and fall asleep after only a few breaths.

But now, compelled by the ritual's power, Zhang Yu had no choice but to force himself to perform the breathing exercise, constantly fighting off sleepiness as he diligently absorbed the spiritual energy from the world with each breath.

At this point, he fully understood that the situation was far more severe than he had previously imagined.

This isn't some ordinary 24-hour overseer. This thing is trying to drive me to my death at every single moment.

As long as this thing is on me, all laziness, slacking, entertainment, enjoyment, and relaxation… will be gone from my life.

There will be no more weekends, let alone holidays. My life will have no more joy. Every minute and every second will be dedicated to studying, to cultivation, to work… until the second wish is fulfilled.

Zhang Yu subconsciously clutched his head. "I will become a complete study machine and workhorse, with no leisure time whatsoever. I'll be forced to be

the ultimate grinder for the rest of my life… until I'm completely crushed by the pressure!"

He lamented in his heart, *If my whole life is going to be like this, then even if I achieve success in the Immortal Dao, what's the point of living for a few hundred more years? However many more years I live will just be that many more years of suffering.*

"Oh, heavens!"

The surrounding passengers all turned to look at Zhang Yu, who was clutching his head with a pained expression.

But Zhang Yu could no longer care about them. As the countdown of "Please abide by the ritual's agreement…" began anew, he had already sat up perfectly straight, forcefully suppressing the sorrow in his heart as he continued to practice the Basic Breathing Technique.

But at the same time, a new resolve began to grow in his heart.

In truth, up until this morning, Zhang Yu had felt somewhat lost since arriving in this world.

Although he thought about getting into a prestigious university, joining a major sect, and achieving success in the Immortal Dao, it was hard to say how much of that was the influence of his body's original memories—a choice made by following the inertia of his life.

Until this moment, Zhang Yu finally had a goal, something he was determined to accomplish, no matter the setbacks.

That was to become strong enough—strong enough to completely rid himself of the ritual's power that was forcing his hand.

Zhang Yu wanted… freedom!

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 7: The Difference Between People

On the bus.

After acquiring the Feathered Tome, Zhang Yu had thought his future would be: *Feathered Tome! Let me see where your limits are!*

Who knew that in a blink of an eye it had become… Ritual: *Zhang Yu! Let me see where your limits are!*

But things had already come to this. If Zhang Yu wanted to break free from the ritual's power, the only path he could think of was to become stronger.

So, he could only dedicate himself to cultivation at this moment.

With every breath Zhang Yu took, wisps of spiritual energy from the world around him flowed into his body, gathering in the sea of qi in his dantian to be refined, drop by drop, into mana, strengthening the foundation of his Immortal Dao.

However, thinking back to his practice of the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms last night, Zhang Yu wanted to try the same trick and see if he could also rapidly level up the Basic Breathing Technique.

At his mental command, the Feathered Tome unfurled. Zhang Yu focused his attention slightly on the 'Basic Breathing Technique Lvl 1' on the page, and immediately, he was able to drag it.

But just as he dragged 'Basic Breathing Technique Lvl 1' toward his own character portrait, a sliver of understanding flowed from the Feathered Tome.

"You can only focus on improving one skill at a time."

"Once you switch, you must wait one day before you can switch again."

Zhang Yu mentally named this function of the Feathered Tome 'Specialization.'

In that instant, he understood that a specialized skill could be improved rapidly, but he could only specialize in one skill at a time. After switching skills, he had to wait a day before switching again.

"So if I switch my specialization from the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms to the Basic Breathing Technique right now, then the breathing technique will improve quickly through practice, but the body-strengthening forms will return to their normal practice efficiency."

"Unless I switch it back after a day…"

Thinking about the situation in PE class, Zhang Yu decided not to switch for the time being and to continue focusing on improving the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms.

Time flew by in an instant, and Zhang Yu maintained his Basic Breathing Technique right up until the moment he got off the bus.

…

Inside the school cafeteria.

Bai Zhenzhen, carrying her tray, sat down in front of a zombie-like Zhang Yu, gave him a curious look, and said flatly, "Did you jerk off all night yesterday?"

Zhang Yu swallowed the large meat bun in his hand in one gulp and retorted, "I was working my ass off training until midnight."

Bai Zhenzhen's face remained expressionless, but her words were merciless.

"Sigh, you're the only one in the whole school who hasn't had the sterilization surgery. I told you not to be cheap about those twenty thousand yuan. Look how much time, energy, and protein you've wasted."

Zhang Yu swallowed an egg in another bite and smiled confidently.

"Bai Zhenzhen, let me tell you something. My current self-discipline and potential scare even me. It won't be long before I snatch that number one spot in the grade from you."

Hearing this, Bai Zhenzhen rolled her eyes and her delicate little mouth spoke without a trace of mercy, "Yu-boy, it's fine if you say such overconfident things to me, but if anyone else heard, I'm afraid they'd piss themselves laughing."

"You're fighting to be first place in total grade score, not first place in grade masturbation. Your unsterilized advantage won't help you there."

Zhang Yu shook his head, speechless

This girl, Zhen, she usually acts so cold and distant, but in private, she dares to say anything, doesn't she.

Speaking of being the only student in school who hadn't been sterilized, Zhang Yu wasn't that surprised anymore. He was gradually getting used to the insanity of this messed-up world and messed-up school.

But the fact that he wasn't sterilized was still a small secret of his, one he had only shared with Bai Zhenzhen among his classmates.

At this thought, however, a question suddenly surfaced in Zhang Yu's mind.

"Why was I able to enroll without having the sterilization surgery?"

Just then, Zhou Tianyi also came over with his tray and sat down, looking at Zhang Yu with the same curiosity.

"You look exhausted. Did you pull an all-nighter studying?"

Zhang Yu shook his head and said, "I just practiced the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms for a bit and had a small breakthrough."

As they ate and chatted, Zhang Yu suddenly noticed that ever since Zhou Tianyi arrived, Bai Zhenzhen had become much quieter, as if she had reverted to that cold, taciturn top student.

After finishing breakfast, the three of them walked across the sports field toward the academic building.

Zhang Yu would occasionally open his palm, watching the Feathered Tome appear and disappear from its center.

So it's true that no one else can see the Feathered Tome?

Just then, a loud bang came from the direction of the main school building, followed by waves of shouts and screams.

A crowd had already formed in front of the main entrance to the academic building.

The people all around were muttering amongst themselves.

Someone in the know was sharing the relevant gossip.

"That's Lu Chao from Class 3 of the third years. He used to be in a model class. I think his grades have been slipping, so he's about to get moved down again, right?"

"Lu Chao? He was in the top ten of the grade back in his second year."

Someone with a prejudice against the poor started a broad attack.

"So what if his grades were good in the second year? The poor are still poor. By the third year, how many poor students can stay in the model classes? Poor people just aren't suited for immortal cultivation."

Someone with a severe bias for grades began their own commentary.

"Hmph, can't even handle a jump from the sixth floor. A bad student, indeed. If one of the top students from a third-year model class jumped, I'd expect them to start from at least the tenth floor."

Passing by, Bai Zhenzhen looked at the scene and sighed, "Another third-year?"

Zhou Tianyi said, "This is the third one this year, isn't it? It seems the pressure on this year's third-years is immense."

But Zhang Yu suddenly asked, "Was he very poor?"

"He probably took out a lot of loans. Anyone who has to borrow money to study isn't rich, that's for sure," Bai Zhenzhen glanced at him, her tone ambiguous—was it a warning or a lament?

"When students like that first enter Songyang High School, their grades are often quite good."

"But usually, by the third year, they gradually fall behind their wealthy classmates and can only get into some second or third-rate universities in the end."

"As for the Ten Greats, it seems like it's been over a decade since a commoner from Songyang High School managed to test into one."

Zhang Yu was slightly stunned by her words. He knew the so-called Ten Greats referred to the universities directly affiliated with the Ten Great Sects—they were the top ten universities, the dream schools for countless students.

But what he didn't know was that no commoner from Songyang High School had gotten into the Ten Greats for over a decade.

Is it because of a lack of resources, not enough money?

Zhang Yu then recalled some of the legends about those wealthy students. It was said that many ace tutors, secret supplementary texts, high-end cultivation techniques, and laboratory drugs… all circulated only within the circles of the rich, never to be revealed to the poor.

Zhang Yu thought grimly, *If my potential hadn't been unlocked, I might have ended up on the same path in the future.*

Although the incident caused a stir, for students busy with their studies and cultivation every day, it was just a bit of gossip for their break time.

Soon, no one paid it any mind, and the students threw themselves back into their daily studies of the Immortal Dao, fighting for their futures.

Although they had only recently become adults, every one of them already understood a cruel fact.

Different scores led to different universities.

Different universities determined one's future sect.

Different sects determined one's entire life.

The classmates around them, whether their relationships were good or bad, would all go their separate ways if their grades were different.

…

In the blink of an eye, it was time for the three-period block of PE class.

After once again refusing the sales pitch from the PE teacher, Wang Hai, Zhang Yu wondered if it was his imagination, but he felt the way the man looked at him seemed to have changed.

But he really had no choice; whether it was because of money or his health, he couldn't take those shots anymore.

So, Zhang Yu could only pretend not to notice and continue with his practice.

Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms Lvl 2 (1/20)

Counting the one practice session before he got to the station, Zhang Yu now only needed to practice the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms 19 more times to level up.

This filled him with motivation for his subsequent training, and he pushed his muscles time and again, draining every last inch of his mana.

Even when he sometimes wanted to slow down and take a rest, the ritual's power would remind him, and he would quickly rally and continue his diligent practice.

Accompanied by the tearing pain throughout his body, he broke his limits again and again, facing life-and-death threats time after time. It could be described as both painful and joyful.

After two class periods, Zhang Yu finally collapsed completely on the ground, not wanting to move another inch.

Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms Lvl 2 (17/20)

I'm at my limit.

The ritual's power didn't continue to force him, apparently agreeing that he had reached his absolute limit.

But Zhang Yu wasn't the least bit discouraged. To bring a basic martial art from level 1 to nearly level 3 in just two days was something the old Zhang Yu would never have dared to imagine.

If I hadn't done that extra training last night, I probably could have lasted the full three PE periods, right?

But with this damn ritual forcing me to seize every single second to train, I'm afraid that extra practice at night, leading to being too tired to train during PE class and having to rest… will become the new normal.

Zhang Yu felt it was like in his previous life, when some people crammed and studied frantically at night only to sleep through their classes during the day—clearly not a healthy routine.

It's all this moronic ritual's fault, it can't tell the time or place at all.

Just then, as he lay on the ground, Zhang Yu suddenly felt his body covered by a shadow, as if a mountain were blocking the space above his head.

Wang Hai looked down at Zhang Yu on the ground and said coldly, "It's PE class. What are you doing?"

Zhang Yu quickly said, "Sir, I did some extra training last night, so I'm a bit worn out now."

Sensing Wang Hai's displeased expression, Zhang Yu added an explanation, "My Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms broke through last night. It's already level 2."

The reason for this explanation was that Zhang Yu knew that in this results-oriented school, most teachers wouldn't give students with good grades a hard time.

He thought that if Wang Hai knew he had made significant progress, he probably wouldn't trouble him.

This was something Zhang Yu had been pondering ever since he vaguely sensed the change in Wang Hai's attitude toward him.

But Zhang Yu was wrong.

There are many kinds of teachers in this world.

For example, most of the main subject teachers at Songyang High School liked students with good grades—students who were effortless to teach and gave them a sense of accomplishment, and they were more tolerant when these students made mistakes.

Other teachers poured more energy into students with poor grades, focusing on improving their scores because it was easier to see improvement in underachievers.

Then there were many elective teachers who didn't care how their students did. They just showed up for class on time, left on time, and would consider spending an extra second on work a loss.

But there was another type of teacher, one who, more than their students' grades, cared about whether their students were obedient and whether they challenged their authority.

In such a teacher's classroom, he was the absolute authority, accepting no defiance from any student. Even if you simply used a learning method he hadn't taught, you would be openly mocked and singled out as a negative example to be belittled.

And it was obvious that Wang Hai, who liked to sell drugs and dish out corporal punishment, was exactly this type of teacher.

PE class at Songyang High School was his little kingdom, and the students were his distribution channel for performance-enhancing drugs.

The fact that Zhang Yu consistently refused to buy his drugs had already earned his displeasure.

Seeing Zhang Yu lying down to 'slack off' just now had made him even more dissatisfied, and he wanted to use this opportunity to teach him a lesson and make an example of him, to make the other students ashamed of this person who didn't take shots and discourage them from following Zhang Yu's example of natural body tempering.

But his intended lecture was cut off by Zhang Yu's "My Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms broke through last night."

In Wang Hai's eyes, this was a challenge to his authority in PE class.

"So what if you've reached level 2 of the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms? Is that so impressive?"

Wang Hai pointed at Bai Zhenzhen and said, "Look at her. Did she stop taking shots after she reached level 2? Has she been slacking off in class?"

Zhang Yu said helplessly, "Sir, that's not what I meant…"

Wang Hai said coldly, "Zhang Yu, I've seen plenty of students like you. You think you can ignore your teacher's guidance and the school's curriculum just because you have a little talent."

"You need to understand that the only reason you were able to break through is because you've been diligently attending class and taking shots for the past three months. It was my guidance that built you such a solid foundation."

"As for any self-study or tutoring you do outside of class, that's nothing more than dessert at best."

"Only the classes here at school are the most important main course."

"I will be reporting your attitude to your class advisor. You'd better watch yourself."

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 8: The Teacher's Concern

Wang Hai paid Zhang Yu no more attention for the rest of the gym class, treating him as if he were thin air and offering no further instruction or guidance.

Following Wang Hai's lead in isolating him, the other students also subconsciously kept their distance from Zhang Yu, as if an invisible dead zone had formed around him.

"That old Wang is so… How can he be so petty?"

But things had already come to this, and there was nothing Zhang Yu could do, so he simply lay back down on the ground to rest.

In the blink of an eye, class was over, and everyone gradually headed for the cafeteria.

After the others had left, Zhou Tianyi walked over to Zhang Yu and shot him a thumbs-up.

"You're a real warrior. Have you bought accident insurance yet?"

Zhang Yu slowly climbed to his feet, dusting off his pants.

"What's there to be afraid of? Give me some time. Once my cultivation base improves and my scores skyrocket, plenty of teachers will be lining up to protect me."

He glanced confidently at the Feathered Tome in his palm; his physical strength had already risen from 0.83 to 0.84.

This improvement was achieved without any injections or medicine, let alone any dietary supplements, but solely through training with the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms.

He imagined that as the level of his Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms increased, his physical strength would improve at an ever-faster rate.

Just the thought of it made Zhang Yu marvel again at his own terrifying potential.

Seeing the suddenly confident expression on Zhang Yu's face, a curious Zhou Tianyi asked, "Did you find a new source for meds? If you've got the good stuff, don't forget your brother."

Zhang Yu clenched his fist and smiled. "My friend, I'm all-natural body tempering!"

Outside the training room, Bai Zhenzhen's cheeks were flushed from her intense body tempering. Sweat dripped from her forehead, and steam rose from her entire body.

Knock, knock, knock!

She knocked on the door and said cooly, "Zhang Yu, are you done striking poses? I'm starving. Let's hurry and get something to eat."

The trio hurried to join the throng at the cafeteria. They were late, and from a distance, they could see a huge crowd of people queuing in front of the main entrance.

However, as students of the model class, Zhang Yu's group of three had the privilege of priority entry and could use the VIP channel to get their meals directly.

The three of them walked into the cafeteria under the mixed gazes of the students from other classes.

How could he describe the feeling?

If Zhang Yu had to describe it, it was like a scene from a novel where the chosen geniuses of the inner sect slowly enter the Grand Immortal Pavilion to dine under the envious, jealous, or covetous gazes of the outer sect handymen.

As soon as they entered the cafeteria, Bai Zhenzhen said, "I'm taking a dietary supplement today, so I'm eating on the second floor."

The so-called dietary supplements were meals cooked with ingredients rich in Immortal Dao elements and fortified with various medicines. They could effectively strengthen one's constitution, replenish the body's energy after strenuous exercise, and increase the efficiency of both body tempering and breathing exercises.

Dietary supplements offered countless benefits for studying the Immortal Dao, but the only reason Zhang Yu wasn't partaking at that moment was that it was too expensive. Simply far too expensive.

A single meal cost several hundred at a minimum, and it was normal for those with rarer ingredients to cost thousands. Even the old Zhang Yu, with a mountain of loan money, couldn't bear to eat it every day, to say nothing of the present Zhang Yu.

Watching Bai Zhenzhen walk up to the second floor alone, Zhang Yu could feel that the cafeteria's first and second floors represented another clear dividing line, much like the one between the queuing students outside and his own position inside.

But a sliver of doubt crept into Zhang Yu's mind.

Doesn't Zhen say she was broke? How can she afford to go to the second floor?

…

Not long after lunch, Zhang Yu, who was in the middle of his lunch break, was summoned to the teacher's office.

A middle-aged man sipped his tea and glanced at Zhang Yu, who stood before his desk.

"Teacher Wang Hai told me what happened," he said.

The man's name was Su Haifeng; he was not only the class advisor for the model class but also the head of the first-year grade.

He looked at Zhang Yu with an expression of disappointment and said, "Do you remember what you told me during your interview?"

When the original Zhang Yu had interviewed for Songyang High School, Su Haifeng had been the interviewer sitting in the center.

Hearing Su Haifeng's words now, Zhang Yu was taken aback for a moment. Although he had his predecessor's memories, he couldn't recall every detail in an instant.

Su Haifeng sighed. "I still remember you said you wanted to get into a prestigious university."

"In gym class, you don't buy medicine, you don't get acupuncture, you lie on the ground slacking off, and you talk back to the teacher. Is this the attitude of someone who wants to get into a prestigious university?"

Listening to the criticism, Zhang Yu was at a loss for how to explain himself. He couldn't very well say that he was too poor and useless to afford medicine and acupuncture, and that because his potential had been unlocked, he had been slacking off in gym class.

Sensing Zhang Yu's silence, Su Haifeng sighed again. "Zhang Yu, your performance these past three months has been quite good. I know you're a good kid."

"Has something happened with your family recently?"

Zhang Yu looked up in surprise. Feeling the concern in the man's gaze, he found it hard to believe.

In this insane school, there's actually a teacher who cares about students?

He thought for a moment before saying softly, "Yes, there was a bit of a disagreement with my family."

"I'll do my best to sort it out and get back on track quickly."

Although he felt the man's concern, Zhang Yu could only give a perfunctory answer for now. In a while, when his results improved, he wouldn't have to explain these complicated matters to his teachers.

But Su Haifeng frowned as if in dissatisfaction and said irritably, "Is there anything you can't tell your teacher?"

"Are you having financial problems at home?"

"Calls from the loan platforms… the debt collectors have already been calling the school."

"What?" Zhang Yu's head snapped up. "They called you, sir?"

Su Haifeng nodded grimly. "If they hadn't called me, I would never have known you owed so much money. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I…" Zhang Yu began.

He truly hadn't considered what good telling the school would do. Especially given the atmosphere at Songyang High School, he figured that their knowing would only make his situation worse.

But Su Haifeng let out a long sigh and looked at Zhang Yu with a kindly expression.

"I know the school can be rather strict at times, and you're afraid to tell us when something goes wrong."

"But you must remember that we are your teachers. How could we not help our own students?"

With that, he pulled a document from his drawer and handed it to Zhang Yu.

"This is the financial assistance plan for students in need that I specially applied for on your behalf. Go on and sign it."

Reaching out for the document, Zhang Yu looked at Su Haifeng, deeply moved.

"Teacher, thank you."

He realized he had been wrong about the teachers at this school yet again.

Zhang Yu thought to himself, *While there are scoundrels like Wang Hai, there are also kind-hearted elders like Teacher Su.*

Su Haifeng smiled, waved his hand, and passed over a pen.

"Go on, sign it."

Zhang Yu lowered his head, his gaze sweeping across the document. Then he froze.

Su Haifeng chuckled. "What is it? Hurry and sign. I'll try to get it submitted for you before I leave work."

Zhang Yu's voice was low. "Sir, this appears to be a debt restructuring contract. Did you give me the wrong document?"

Su Haifeng laughed heartily. "Why are students in need? Isn't it because of debt? By restructuring the debt, we are helping the student in need. This is the financial assistance plan."

Zhang Yu scanned the contract's contents. In essence, all of his outstanding debts would be consolidated, and the school would then loan him the money to pay them off.

From that day forward, the school would be his creditor.

Zhang Yu did a quick calculation of the restructured debt. After all the convoluted procedures, the various interest rates, principal amounts, service charges, and hidden fees… it seemed the total had swelled to over a million.

"Some debt restructuring! This is just taking on new debt to pay off old debt."

He roared inwardly, *"So the class advisor is a loan shark, too."*

"Is this how they operate? Are there any normal teachers left in this wretched school?"

Suppressing his rage, Zhang Yu let out a breath and said, "Teacher, on second thought, I think I'll pass. I can pay this money back myself."

Su Haifeng persuaded him earnestly, "How can a boy like you possibly repay such a large sum? Just sign it. The school will take on this burden for you."

"Don't worry, the school's repayment plan is very flexible."

"No, thank you, sir. Really, I don't need it," Zhang Yu said.

After refusing several more times, Zhang Yu simply tossed the contract down and fled the office.

Watching his retreating figure, Su Haifeng raised his teacup and blew gently across its surface.

A moment later, he picked up his vibrating phone. "He refused," he said.

"Mm, I'll try again in a while."

"Don't worry. He's a poor kid… once he can no longer stand the collection agencies' tactics, he'll come to us to borrow."

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 9: Work

After school that day.

Inside the cafeteria.

Zhang Yu, Zhou Tianyi, and Bai Zhenzhen were sitting together, eating dinner.

Bai Zhenzhen was just as she always was, cold and silent, calmly working her way through the large plate of food before her.

Zhou Tianyi glanced at Zhang Yu and said, "Your financial situation seems a bit dire lately."

"Is it that obvious?"

Zhang Yu froze for a moment.

Have the debt collectors already started calling my classmates? he wondered. *Is my seven-hundred-thousand-yuan debt about to be exposed at school?*

Zhou Tianyi glanced at Bai Zhenzhen's lavish dinner, complete with chicken, duck, fish, and meat, and then at Zhang Yu's five-yuan pauper's special.

He stroked his chin and said, "Based on my observations of the cafeteria over the past three months, what someone eats can be an effective reflection of their financial situation at the time, and even their cultivation level."

"For example, someone who eats ten pounds of food in one sitting wouldn't sit at the same table as someone who only eats three."

"That's because they're in completely different social strata, occupying the top and bottom of the campus pecking order, respectively."

So, it's because he saw how little I'm eating. Zhang Yu breathed a sigh of relief, thinking his status as a dirt-poor debtor was about to be revealed.

He turned to Bai Zhenzhen, his eyes landing on the dozen or so chicken legs on her tray, and asked with a curious expression, "Zhen, those chicken legs look amazing. Let me try one, please?"

Without looking up, Bai Zhenzhen said, "Get lost."

Beside them, Zhou Tianyi smiled and picked a duck leg from his own bowl for Zhang Yu.

"Zhenzhen had a really intense workout today; you can tell she's famished. Here, try mine."

"You're a true brother!" Zhang Yu gave Zhou Tianyi a thumbs-up, grabbing the duck leg and starting to gnaw on it.

Watching Zhang Yu wolf down the food, Zhou Tianyi smiled faintly.

"If you're having money problems, I can lend you some."

Zhang Yu waved his hand. "No need. I'll figure it out myself."

Even though he was drowning in debt, Zhang Yu had no intention of borrowing from his classmates; it wasn't as if that could solve a seven-hundred-thousand-yuan debt in one go. What he needed was a way to earn money consistently and keep up with his repayments.

I have to at least cover the monthly interest. I can't let the collectors escalate their methods any further.

Zhang Yu knew that the longer his payments were overdue, the more aggressive the collection agency would become, moving from online harassment to real-world threats, each step more severe than the last.

And there's rent, utilities, food…

A headache began to throb as he considered it all.

Just after Zhou Tianyi left, Bai Zhenzhen suddenly spoke up.

"Based on my observations of you and Zhou Tianyi these past three months, he's exceptionally good to you."

Zhang Yu said, "He is?"

Bai Zhenzhen let out a dry laugh. "A guy smiling while giving a duck leg from his own bowl to another guy… in my eighteen years, I've only ever seen that happen in two situations."

"One, they're father and son."

"The other… hehehehe…"

Zhang Yu raised an eyebrow. "Ah Zhen, you've been reading some interesting things, haven't you?"

"Yu-boy, you don't actually have to be afraid. In this school, you're the one in the dominant position, anyway."

With that, Bai Zhenzhen pushed her own tray in front of Zhang Yu.

"Sigh, I can't eat another bite. I'll bestow these leftovers upon you. Who told you to be my good boy, after all?"

"Get lost," Zhang Yu retorted, snatching the tray. A single glance revealed that a good portion of the food inside was neatly arranged and clearly untouched.

Just as Zhang Yu looked up to thank her, he only saw Bai Zhenzhen's back as she walked out of the cafeteria.

Once outside, Bai Zhenzhen's expression became indifferent again.

Yu-boy, she thought, *there's actually a third situation where that happens.*

Bai Zhenzhen turned her head and looked toward the steps of the cafeteria entrance, where one of the cafeteria workers was pouring leftovers from a slop bucket into a bowl for a cat.

…

After leaving the school, Zhang Yu began to scheme up ways to make money.

My rent is fifteen hundred, utilities are over two hundred a month, and the loan repayment is fifteen thousand a month…

Hiss…

At that thought, his head began to ache again.

I need to earn at least twenty thousand a month. A normal job definitely won't cut it.

With a thought from Zhang Yu, the Feathered Tome unfurled before him.

[Zhang Yu]

[Dao Heart: Level 1]

[Mana: 7.7]

[Physical Strength: Level 0.84]

[Martial Arts: Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms Level 2 (17/20), Freehand Combat Level 1, Basic High School Swordplay Level 0]

[Daoist arts: Basic Breathing Technique Level 1, Basic Heart Tempering Art Level 1]

Seeing the new entry for 'Basic High School Swordplay Level 0', Zhang Yu's mind flashed back to his martial arts class from earlier that day.

The so-called martial arts class was a course for learning various combat techniques, and a full eighty of the one hundred points for the class were based on practical application.

For instance, first-year students were required to learn one form of unarmed combat and one weapon-based combat art.

This Basic High School Swordplay was precisely what he had learned in class today, but because he hadn't truly mastered it yet, it was still displayed as Level 0.

However, when Zhang Yu tried, he found that he could also drag the 'Basic High School Swordplay Level 0' entry.

He figured that if he focused on this martial art, he could leverage his potential to master it and then level it up quickly.

As these thoughts flashed through his mind, Zhang Yu continued to stare at his status panel, contemplating what kind of work he could do.

I may have only just set foot on the path of the Immortal Dao, but I'm still an official student at Songyang High School…

A moment later, Zhang Yu began using his phone to contact his old tutoring center.

The original Zhang Yu had gotten into Songyang High School only after attending sessions at this very center.

The pay at these tutoring centers should be decent, and as an official Songyang High School student, I ought to have an advantage.

But after he inquired, a teacher at the center told him they were already fully staffed and that he should try other places.

So, Zhang Yu started contacting other tutoring centers.

"Hello, I'd like to apply for a part-time tutoring position. I'm a first-year student at Songyang High School…"

"And where did you graduate from for elementary and middle school?"

"That doesn't matter, I'm already an official student at Songyang High School!"

"I'm sorry, but there are plenty of tutors from top-tier high schools. For an ungraduated, first-year student like yourself looking for part-time work, parents place a lot of importance on your elementary and middle school credentials."

After he told them which elementary and middle schools he had attended, the other party stopped replying.

After this same conversation repeated itself five or six times, Zhang Yu gradually began to understand.

Dammit!

Who knew they'd be so strict about elementary and middle school credentials?

Has the competition for tutoring jobs really gotten this intense?

Zhang Yu felt as if his elementary and middle school histories were two ugly labels branded onto his face, making even the search for a part-time tutoring job incredibly difficult.

Thus, Zhang Yu had no choice but to temporarily abandon the tutoring center route and move on to his backup plan.

I guess I'll have to try finding some odd jobs for now.

In fact, the original Zhang Yu had already learned a bit about this path of working odd jobs over the first three months of the school year.

Of course, this wasn't the kind of temporary work ordinary people looked for, but rather jobs for those who had already embarked on the Immortal Dao.

High school students made up a significant portion of this group; after all, not every student was a rich kid. A good number of them needed to earn their own money, either to ease the burden on their families or to buy things they wanted for themselves.

And since high school students lacked a diploma and had to spend most of their time in class, they could usually only take on temporary, part-time jobs.

Zhang Yu had looked into this a bit over the last couple of days, so he immediately added an agent and asked if there was any work available.

"You're asking too late. All of today's jobs have been taken for now."

"Why don't you come over here and wait? That way you can grab any new jobs as soon as they come up."

...

Half an hour later, Zhang Yu arrived at a small plaza.

From a distance, he could see many people scattered about the plaza, some sitting, some lying down. They were old and young, men and women; some were napping on the ground, while others, still in their school uniforms, were seated cross-legged, performing breathing exercises.

Following the address he was given, Zhang Yu found a human resources company in a corner of the plaza.

The company wasn't large; its storefront looked like a real estate agency, with various crude recruitment flyers plastered all over its grimy glass windows.

After a glance at the old sign, Zhang Yu pushed the door open, and a thick wave of smoke hit him in the face, causing him to frown.

Behind a cluttered desk, a middle-aged man who was smoking looked up, glanced at Zhang Yu, and said, "Are you that high school kid who just called?"

When Zhang Yu nodded, the man introduced himself as Old Wang, the agent here. He pulled out a few sheets of paper and said, "Fill out this form. I'll get you registered in a bit."

Zhang Yu took the papers and saw that in addition to personal information, he had to fill in his learned martial and Daoist arts, including their levels, as well as his school grades.

Handing the completed form back to the man, Zhang Yu asked, "How long does it usually take to find a job? And what's the pay like?"

Old Wang scratched his messy hair and said casually, "The minimum is a few hundred an hour… but it's hard to say how long it'll take to find something. If your luck's bad, it's normal to go a week without work."

The pay is that high here? Zhang Yu thought. *If that's the case, working just two or three hours a day should be enough to cover my loan payments and living expenses, right?*

A flicker of joy ignited in Zhang Yu's heart at the thought.

But then he heard the man say that jobs were hard to come by, and he asked curiously, "Why is that?"

He emphasized his own credentials. "I'm in the top ten of my class at a top-tier high school. Is it still that hard to find work?"

Old Wang chuckled at this and pointed outside.

"See those people in the plaza? Apart from high school students like you, the rest are all high school graduates."

Zhang Yu was shocked and found it hard to believe.

"How is that possible? They've graduated high school and are on the path of cultivation, but they're still here looking for temporary work?"

Old Wang shrugged. "They didn't get into a university. Not every high school student does, you know."

"If you can't get into a university, you're stuck in the Qi Refining stage for life. You can't ascend to the second level of Kunxu, so you can only scrape by on this first level, year after year…"

Zhang Yu was still confused. "But they could still get a full-time job on the first level, right? Why do temporary work?"

Old Wang explained, "They don't need to sleep. They come looking for temporary gigs after finishing their day jobs, assuming their companies don't require overtime."

"Otherwise, how would they make their loan payments? Or have enough money to maintain their cultivation?"

The man's words sent ripples through Zhang Yu's mind. In his previous memories, he had no idea that life after high school graduation was this arduous.

He had always imagined that after graduating, even if you didn't get into a university, you'd get a decent salary sitting in an air-conditioned office in a downtown skyscraper, sipping tea…

But it turned out to be twenty-four hours of studying before graduation, followed by twenty-four hours of working after. The hardship just kept piling on.

Old Wang looked at Zhang Yu's form and smiled.

"Oh, Songyang High School. That makes us schoolmates. I went there too, but I dropped out in my third year."

"Dropped out?" Zhang Yu asked.

Old Wang shrugged. "Couldn't get into a university, so I figured I might as well stop wasting money. I only just finished paying off my high school loans the year before last."

"Since we're schoolmates, let me give you a piece of advice."

"Know your limits in high school. If you feel like you're not going to make it, cut your losses early. You don't want to end up like some people, drowning in so much debt that their whole life is ruined."

After he finished filling out the form, the man told Zhang Yu to wait outside and that he would be notified immediately if any work came up.

"Competing against all those high school graduates," Zhang Yu said, "will there even be any jobs left for me?"

"Don't worry," said Old Wang. "Some jobs are specifically looking for currently enrolled high school students."

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 10: Fierce Competition and Level Three Body-Strengthening

Finding a random spot to sit, Zhang Yu gazed at the crowd of people also waiting for work in the plaza and felt a wave of exhaustion wash over him.

"This damn place is impossible to get by in; is there nowhere that isn't a rat race?"

Just as he sat down on the ground to rest for a moment, a vicious chill surged from within Zhang Yu's heart.

"Please abide by the ritual's agreement. Strive to complete the wish. Do not deliberately slack off or delay. 10."

"Damn it."

Zhang Yu cursed inwardly but could only force himself back into the grind under the pressure of the ritual's power.

However, considering his body had not yet fully recovered and the upcoming work might also have physical demands, Zhang Yu did not choose to practice the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms at this moment, instead opting to refine mana with the Basic Breathing Technique.

With each breath he took, wisps of spiritual energy from the world soon began to surge toward him, gradually gathering in the sea of qi within his dantian to be refined, drop by drop, into a part of his mana.

Time trickled by as Zhang Yu performed his breathing exercises, and an hour soon passed.

Within that hour, three different groups had come to recruit workers: one was hiring temporary security guards, another was a construction site in urgent need of cultivators for heavy labor, and a third was a delivery company hiring cultivators for sorting packages.

Zhang Yu gradually came to understand that most temporary jobs hiring novice cultivators were almost all related to manual labor.

After all, cultivators in the early stages of their practice had not yet achieved a qualitative leap in intelligence or knowledge compared to mortals. On the contrary, their physical fitness was exceptional, each a match for a hundred, allowing them to shine in construction, factories, security, and other jobs with production efficiency that far surpassed ordinary people.

Thus, many places in urgent need of extra manpower would come here to hire cultivators.

Although the wages demanded by cultivators were far higher than those of ordinary people, it was still cost-effective when all was said and done.

After all, if one cultivator could do the work of thirty ordinary people, they often only needed to be paid ten times the salary.

The people waiting in this plaza were each and every one a superhuman workhorse, capable of enduring a relentless work schedule.

In front of them, Zhang Yu, who still needed four or five hours of sleep each day, was nothing more than an ordinary first-year student who could still afford to sleep.

Thus, after glancing at the mob of people who swarmed forward to fight for jobs each time, Zhang Yu simply maintained his breathing exercise and did not join the fray.

He knew that in his current state as a first-year high school student, he could not possibly out-compete those who had already graduated.

He was waiting, waiting for the job Old Wang had mentioned that specifically sought currently enrolled high school students.

A few other high school students were in the same boat as Zhang Yu. Some were reading, some were performing breathing exercises, and some were practicing their boxing, but none of them went up to compete for the job opportunities, instead waiting in silence.

In the blink of an eye, another hour passed.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

A series of soft popping sounds echoed in the air.

Feeling that his physical body had rested enough, Zhang Yu began to practice the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms.

The people around him glanced over but paid him no mind. There were too many who cultivated while waiting for work, and a basic cultivation technique like the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms was hardly enough to attract their attention.

Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms Level 2 (18/20)

Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms Level 2 (19/20)

Although Zhang Yu felt his muscles begin to ache and go limp after practicing the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms twice, his spirit grew ever more invigorated, simply because one more repetition would raise it to level three.

This was something that not even Bai Zhenzhen, the top-ranked student in their grade, had managed to achieve.

And yet, he was about to do it in just two days.

Just as Zhang Yu was practicing his third repetition of the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms, a temporary job that required high school students finally appeared.

A small car drove to the front of the plaza, the window rolled down, and the driver shouted from inside, "Any first or second-years? I'm hiring two martial arts sparring partners."

A martial arts sparring partner was someone hired to assist a cultivator with practical combat training according to a specific set of requirements.

Hearing the driver's words, the high school students who had been waiting quietly in the plaza all moved at once, transforming into streaks of afterimages as they rushed toward the car with the sound of wind and thunder.

"I'm a second-year!"

"My physical strength is at level 2.15!"

The second-year students were a great deal ahead of the first-years in terms of physical strength. By the time Zhang Yu rushed over, he found that the spots in front of the driver were almost completely occupied by hulking figures, leaving him no room to squeeze in.

So many people are rushing to get beaten up, Zhang Yu thought. *Have high school students no self-respect left?*

The driver glanced at the numerous students with their hands raised and asked, "Are any of you from a key high school?"

The number of raised hands instantly dropped by more than half.

Zhang Yu quickly raised his hand, "I'm from Songyang High School!"

The driver asked again, "Anyone with practical combat arts at level three or above?"

Looking at the remaining three, the driver asked again, "Three hundred an hour, you in?"

A student with a buzz cut said with dissatisfaction, "Isn't three hundred a bit too low?"

But another student beside him anxiously said, "I'll do it for three hundred!"

Watching the car speed away after the other student got in, the buzz-cut student cursed, "Three hundred an hour, who the hell does he think he is."

"Trying to hire a sparring partner for only three hundred? If you can't afford it, don't hire one."

Someone else chimed in with a curse, "He took it for 300? Scab! Once that kid gets beaten up, he'll find out that three hundred isn't even enough to cover his medical bills."

With the employer's departure, the surrounding students also dispersed after a round of grumbling, each returning to their own cultivation or studies.

Zhang Yu could only go back and continue practicing the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms.

If things continued at this rate, he felt he probably wouldn't find a job today.

More than ten minutes later, someone else drove up to recruit high school students, this time with a specific request for first-years.

But the job this time was drug testing; it was said to be for a new medicine developed in a laboratory for Immortal Dao beginners.

Zhang Yu considered his physical condition and didn't even bother going forward to apply, instead continuing his twentieth repetition of the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms.

A moment later, with a final crackle, Zhang Yu threw the last punch of the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms, successfully raising the martial art to its third level.

Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms Level 3 (0/30)

At that moment, countless memories of practicing the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms seemed to flood Zhang Yu's mind, making him feel as if he had practiced it thousands upon thousands of times.

And among these practice sessions were not just memories of flesh and blood, but also the memory of mana circulating on its own within his body.

"Once the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms reaches the third level, practicing this martial art can simultaneously stimulate the circulation of mana for a full cycle, accelerating the repair and enhancement of the physical body."

If the first and second levels of the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms merely damaged the flesh and blood during practice to forcibly squeeze out mana to participate in the training.

Then stepping into the third level meant the movements themselves guided the mana to roam throughout the entire body, nourishing the flesh and blood during practice and greatly enhancing the training's effect.

At this very moment, as Zhang Yu began a new repetition of the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms, streams of warmth flowed through his limbs and bones with his movements, silently increasing his physical strength and propelling him on the path from an ordinary person to a superhuman one.

Under the nourishment of the warm current, the flesh and blood that had begun to ache and protest seemed to lighten considerably, allowing Zhang Yu to persist in his training with greater ease.

Suddenly, Zhang Yu felt his muscles and flesh contract and expand all over.

Physical Strength Level 0.84 → 0.85

Glancing at the change in his physical strength displayed on the Feathered Tome, a flash of joy crossed Zhang Yu's mind.

At this moment, even without the urging of the ritual's power, his spirits were lifted as he continued to train.

While Zhang Yu was cultivating the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms, the recruitment for the drug trial on the other side continued.

However, not many first-year students were willing to try a job like drug testing.

Although the recruiter wanted to hire five students, they ultimately only managed to find two after shouting for a long time before leaving.

As the night gradually deepened, fewer and fewer employers came to hire, and Zhang Yu still had not found a job, leaving him to continue practicing the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms.

Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms Level 3 (6/30)

By the time Zhang Yu had practiced the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms for the sixth time, he felt he couldn't just wait around like this any longer.

Zhang Yu walked back into the human resources company and saw Old Wang still sitting behind the same desk, looking as if he hadn't moved for the past few hours.

He took out a pack of cigarettes he had bought, handed one to the man, and then asked, "Brother Wang, are there any jobs I can do?"

Old Wang glanced at the cigarette Zhang Yu offered and said nonchalantly, "Didn't I tell you? They'll call out when there's work outside."

But Zhang Yu persisted, "I mean, besides the ones outside."

"Surely not all the temporary jobs in Songyang City drive over here to recruit people, right? Are there any others?"

After being pestered by Zhang Yu for a while, Old Wang said impatiently, "If you don't believe me, look for yourself. It's not that I won't let you do them, but are those other temp jobs really so easy?"

Zhang Yu looked at the screenshot sent to the man's phone, which listed rows upon rows of long-term recruitment positions.

There were positions for participating in long-term drug trials after signing a contract.

There were positions as test subjects for long-term cultivation technique research.

There were even positions for delving deep into the Kunxu underground as a handyman for an exploration team.

There were also positions for assisting patrol teams in fighting criminals.

Zhang Yu looked through the list, but every single job was either too dangerous, or both dangerous and beyond his capabilities.

"These long-term jobs that can't even get enough people… they really are all traps."

Suddenly, Zhang Yu looked at one of the listings and asked, "Brother Wang, this one about participating in cultivation technique research, what are the dangers?"

Old Wang said casually, "It's to be a technique tester, trying out the newest cultivation techniques developed by the big corporations. As you practice, they record what side effects you experience, what injuries you sustain, which parts of you become disabled, and finally, how you die…"

Zhang Yu swallowed hard, then his gaze suddenly shifted as he looked at another temporary job and asked, "What about this introductory technique trial? Ten thousand yuan for one time? Why does it only recruit first-year students?"

Old Wang thought for a moment, then let out a sound of recognition.

"Oh, that one. I think it's because the Immortal Resonance Group developed a new technique. It's already gone through cultivation testing, has no side effects, and won't kill you."

"But the introductory process is too difficult, and failing to learn it can easily lead to internal injuries, so they're always looking for people to test it."

"Since it's a cultivation technique intended to be sold to Immortal Dao beginners, they are specifically looking for first-year students to test it…"

At this point, he looked at Zhang Yu, who was listening intently, and frowned.

"You're not thinking of doing this, are you? The last student who went ended up losing control of his mana during practice and suffered internal injuries. He took two weeks off from school and still hasn't recovered."

"That ten thousand yuan won't be easy to earn."

Zhang Yu shrugged helplessly, "I have no choice. I need the money urgently, so I have to give it a try."

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 11: Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering

Before a skyscraper in the city center.

Zhang Yu raised his head, gazing at the tower that soared into the clouds as if to pierce the very heavens. He could faintly see what looked like a celestial palace looming at its peak.

This was the Immortal Resonance Group's office building in the center of Songyang City.

Beyond it, Zhang Yu could see an even taller giant of a building in the distance, one that seemed to connect to the very edge of the sky. He knew that was Songyang City's tallest skyscraper, the 999-story Central Tower, a landmark he often saw on his way to and from school.

At this moment, he turned his head back to the office building before him.

The Immortal Resonance Group?

On the way over, Zhang Yu had already searched online for information about the Immortal Resonance Group.

It was a mega-corporation under the Myriad Laws Sect, with business operations that included developing and selling cultivation techniques, Immortal Dao education, and book publishing.

The Myriad Laws Sect was one of the Ten Great Sects, and in this world of Kunxu, a person's life—from the cradle to the grave—was inextricably linked to them. This was, of course, even truer for the cultivation of the Immortal Dao.

Therefore, Zhang Yu was not surprised that a corporate giant like the Immortal Resonance Group was part of the Myriad Laws Sect, one of the Ten Greats.

He lowered his head and walked into the building. After stating his purpose at the front desk, Zhang Yu went through registration, signed a contract, and underwent a simple physical examination before finally being led to a place that resembled a classroom.

He saw that several other students were already seated in the classroom.

After waiting for some time, once the number of students in the classroom reached fifteen, a middle-aged man in a sharp suit walked in and began to explain the day's trial.

"Hello, everyone. I am your instructor for today."

"All of you here have already signed the contract, but I must still remind you that nothing we discuss here today is to be shared. If our company discovers that any of you have leaked information, we will find you, no matter where you run."

Hearing these words, a chill went down the spines of the students, but they knew he was not bluffing. With the power of the Immortal Resonance Group and its backer, the Myriad Laws Sect, accomplishing such a feat would not be difficult.

"The cultivation technique you will all be attempting to learn today is what we call Experimental Technique 113. Now, please watch the instructional video..."

According to the instructional video, this was a Qi Refinement realm breathing exercise. However, what set it apart from the Basic Breathing Technique was its immense complexity. It was like trying to establish some kind of mana circuit throughout the entire body.

So much so that after watching the video, most of the students who had come for the trial remained completely bewildered.

It was not until the instructor's detailed explanation that the students began to grasp a vague understanding, yet they only felt their scalps tingle with dread.

"No way... they want *us* to practice this technique? Are we even qualified?"

The technique's circulation path was simply too complex, its difficulty too high. It was like trying to paint the *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*[^1] scroll on a single sheet of A4 paper.

If Zhang Yu had to describe it, he would say it was as difficult as carving a flower on a piece of shit.

Forget about circulating mana according to the instructional path; no one present could even memorize the route. Most of them had forgotten the majority of it almost as soon as the explanation was finished.

Forget about leaking it; the students had absolutely no confidence they could even learn the technique and complete the experiment.

Seemingly sensing the shift in the students' mood, the instructor spoke from the front of the room, "Rest assured, this experiment does not require you to master this technique."

"In fact, it's impossible for a beginner to master this technique on their own."

"What we are testing today is an auxiliary circulation device designed to pair with Technique 113…"

Next, the students were taken to a testing room where mana-detecting patches were attached to their hands, feet, chests, and backs.

Then, silver needle-like objects connected to wires were presented before each student by robotic arms.

The instructor continued from the side, "Once you begin circulating your mana, the detection patches will continuously monitor its flow within your bodies."

"The Primordial Magnetism Needles will then be guided by the robotic arms to stimulate points along your circulation pathways, helping you identify and correct the route…"

Zhang Yu listened for a moment and understood.

It's basically an auto-pathing system… oh, no, an auto-circulation system.

Because the mana pathway for Technique 113 was so convoluted and its requirements for the timing and positioning of spiritual energy and mana flow were so high, it was necessary to simultaneously monitor the cultivator's circulation path and use the Primordial Magnetism Needles to guide them by stimulating various points on the body.

However, the process was not without considerable risk, as the circulation path for Technique 113 was exceedingly complex.

With such a complicated circulation path, the slightest error would cause one's mana to spiral out of control and disperse throughout the body, creating an agonizing mix of itching and aching, hot and cold flashes, and easily leading to a greater loss of control.

If this persisted, it would lead to internal injuries, which would grow more severe the longer the situation dragged on.

Afterward, the victim would have three options: go to a hospital and pay a high price for a powerful expert to suppress the runaway mana; rely on their own physical resilience to endure it until the mana exhausted itself; or successfully master the technique and use it to actively rein in the errant mana along the circulation path.

Meanwhile, the instructor continued, "...As stipulated in the contracts you signed, payment for this trial will be based on the percentage of the circulation path you complete. Only those who finish 100% of the route will receive the full ten thousand yuan."

"If your mana only makes it halfway, you will only get five thousand."

"Alright everyone, if there are no more questions, please begin."

Zhang Yu glanced at the information that appeared on his Feathered Tome.

Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method Level 0 (0/1)

Does this mean I only need to complete it once? he thought to himself.

Zhang Yu closed his eyes and began to circulate the technique he had just learned, starting from his dantian and moving the energy toward his spine.

At the same time, he felt a slight prickling on his back and knew it was the Primordial Magnetism Needle guiding his mana's flow.

He then followed the needle's guidance, slowly and carefully circulating his mana along the indicated path.

...

Meanwhile, outside the testing room, a group of people was observing the students' progress.

"They've started."

The lead researcher, a man with messy short hair, was staring intently at the constantly changing data on the screen.

It displayed the status of each student's internal mana circulation as they attempted to practice Experimental Technique 113.

An assistant stood beside him, his expression just as grave as he watched the cultivation diagrams of the students on the screen. These images were generated from the mana data collected from various points on their bodies and depicted the circulation paths within them.

The correct circulation path was displayed in green, while any deviations were marked in red.

As the seconds ticked by, more and more red errors appeared on the circulation paths, and the assistant's eyes filled with growing disappointment.

"Professor, it seems we still need to improve the guidance precision of the Primordial Magnetism Needles. Otherwise, they can't meet the accuracy requirements for a beginner practicing Technique 113."

"It's still too difficult for beginners to master 113. Should we recruit a batch of test subjects with a higher Dao heart level?"

The researcher, addressed as "Professor," frowned.

"Both Technique 113 and the Primordial Magnetism Needles were developed specifically for beginners. I will not change that direction."

"Besides, those with higher Dao heart levels have better cultivation techniques to learn; 113's passive breathing effect isn't competitive for them. It's beginners who need this passive effect the most…"

Just then, a student who had made a mistake grunted and violently coughed up a mouthful of blood.

The 'Professor' said coldly, "Get him out of here immediately. Don't let him disturb the others' state of mind."

But with the first student coughing up blood, more and more of those attempting the technique began to show signs of distress. Some turned blue in the face, unable to breathe; others screamed and fainted from the pain. A few with milder injuries merely grew pale, feeling pain or itching where their mana was circulating…

Watching the students being carried out one after another, the 'Professor's' expression grew increasingly grim.

He said with displeasure, "The quality of this batch is terrible. Can't we recruit some more capable students?"

The assistant explained in a low voice, "Professor, the test subjects from the previous trials were too severely injured. No school is willing to work with us anymore."

The 'Professor' snorted, his face etched with displeasure.

"They're just a bunch of poor students. Once we successfully refine Technique 113 and the Primordial Magnetism Needles, think of the size of the beginner market. What does it matter if a few batches of them die?"

Meanwhile, only three students were left in the testing room, still persevering with the technique.

Two of them were holding on because they had fewer errors, and thus very little of their mana had gone out of control.

But the third student, pale-faced, surprised even the 'Professor'.

"This kid has made quite a few mistakes. He must be in unbearable pain right now, yet he's still holding on?"

The assistant asked, "Professor, should we stop him?"

The 'Professor' shook his head, a flicker of interest in his eyes.

"Since he wants this money so badly, let's give him the chance."

"Besides, more data on the mistakes made during a complete circulation is clearly beneficial to our research."

...

Inside the testing room, whenever Zhang Yu felt like giving up, he would feel the chill of the ritual's power and see the countdown timer in his mind.

"This stupid thing! All it knows how to do is pressure me. Why don't you try it if you're so great?"

As he circulated the technique, Zhang Yu could feel that with every small mistake, mana would spill out of control from the pathway, leaving various parts of his body aching and itching, alternating between hot and cold.

He finally managed to complete the entire circulation path once. Glancing at his Feathered Tome, he saw 'Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method Level 0 (0/1)' change to 'Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method Level 1 (0/20),' and he breathed a small sigh of relief.

Zhang Yu admitted to himself that he had taken a gamble, but luckily, this time it had paid off.

At that moment, the memory of performing this technique hundreds, even thousands of times, flooded his mind, making him feel as if he had been practicing it for months.

In that instant, Zhang Yu felt that with just a thought, he could use the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method to rein in all the runaway mana in his body and establish a complex circulatory system.

He did not do so immediately, however. Instead, he endured the aching and itching all over his body and slowly stood up.

The instructor quickly walked over, a look of surprise on his face.

"Young man, are you alright?"

It was the first time he had ever seen someone with such a high error rate manage to persist and complete the entire technique.

Zhang Yu clutched his stomach and said, "I feel like my insides are on fire. It's itchy and painful. My upper body feels like it's burning, and my lower body feels like it's frozen… It's unbearable."

The instructor quickly supported him.

"Let me take you to the medical office to get you checked out."

"No need!" Zhang Yu waved his hand dismissively. "What I mean is… I want more money."

The instructor looked him up and down, taking in Zhang Yu's incessant trembling and increasingly pale face. He said, "One thousand yuan. And you sign another contract stating that whatever happens to you from now on has nothing to do with us."

After some haggling, the Immortal Resonance company finally added another 3,000 yuan for Zhang Yu, on the condition that the company would not be held responsible for any injuries he sustained, no matter how severe.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 12: Valiant Progress

A moment later, Zhang Yu emerged from the Immortal Resonance Group's office building looking pale and hunched over, the very picture of weakness.

However, a few kilometers away from the skyscraper, his complexion gradually began to return to normal after he boarded the subway.

As he began to circulate the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, the mana within him surged forth like countless streams, instantly permeating every fiber of his being.

The once runaway mana was guided back onto its proper course by these surging currents, merging into the intricate circulatory network within his body and resuming its endless, natural flow.

Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method Level 1 (0/20)

A faint smile touched Zhang Yu's lips as he looked at the technique that had appeared in the Feathered Tome.

I really can master it.

If I hadn't mastered this Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, it probably would have taken a week or two for the runaway mana to dissipate.

His confidence in the Feathered Tome was the entire reason he had dared to accept the technique-testing job.

He had been careful, however, not to reveal his ability to master the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method while at the Immortal Resonance Group.

Although this is just a breathing technique for beginners, once mastered, it can operate on its own twenty-four hours a day, without rest.

Even without actively circulating it, it has thirty percent of the efficiency of active circulation. After mastering it… doing nothing all day is equivalent to someone else performing breathing exercises for more than seven hours.

And that's just its effect at Level 1.

If this technique is successfully developed, it would instantly become one of the best-selling breathing techniques on the market.

Zhang Yu knew that, apart from the various cultivation techniques taught in schools, the techniques from large corporations and major sects were all copyrighted, requiring payment for purchase and representing immense profits.

It was precisely because the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method was so potent—and because he saw it as a development project of extreme importance to the Immortal Resonance Group—that he was unwilling to expose the fact he had mastered it, lest he invite unnecessary trouble.

The technique was also incredibly difficult to cultivate. In Zhang Yu's view, without the guidance of the auxiliary equipment, a first-year high school student could not even dream of mastering it, let alone completing a single full circulation.

This made him even more reluctant to reveal that he had mastered the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method.

In order to master the technique, Zhang Yu had switched the Feathered Tome's specialization from the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms to this new breathing technique.

Although this meant the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms could no longer be rapidly improved for the time being, the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method was now on the fast track.

A Level 3 Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms is sufficient for now.

From now on, I will focus on improving this Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method.

Aside from gaining the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, the biggest reward from this endeavor was the payment from the Immortal Resonance Group.

Ten thousand yuan, plus the additional three thousand, came to a total payment of 13,000.

In that moment, Zhang Yu's savings soared to thirteen thousand seven hundred yuan.

Unfortunately, after he used ten thousand yuan to repay loans on multiple platforms, his savings instantly dropped to three thousand seven hundred.

Fortunately, after paying back the ten thousand, the frequency of collection attempts dropped considerably, and it was unlikely they would escalate their methods anytime soon.

The countdown timer that then sounded in his mind quickly cut short Zhang Yu's reverie, forcing him to refocus his attention and circulate the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method.

A night passed in the blink of an eye.

At the entrance to Songyang High School, Zhang Yu checked the changes on the Feathered Tome as he walked.

Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method Level 1 (0/20) → Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method Level 1 (11/20)

His mana, thanks to his previous hard work and his recent diligence with the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, had also increased.

Mana 7.7 → 7.8

It really is running passively. Last night, I only completed five celestial cycles before sleeping, counting as five repetitions.

But when I woke up this morning, it had increased to eight repetitions, and after actively circulating it on my way to school, it rose to the eleventh.

As he did the math, Zhang Yu was secretly overjoyed. Compared to the thirteen thousand yuan, the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method was yesterday's greatest gain.

He now resolved to raise the level of this Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method first.

Naturally, he also decided to keep the Feathered Tome's specialization set on the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method.

Unfortunately, this morning brought another double period of physical education.

Walking toward the training grounds, Zhang Yu felt a slight sense of regret.

Sigh, time to practice the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms again.

My specialization is now the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method; I should be cultivating this breathing technique.

The moment Zhang Yu entered the training ground, he saw several young giants with muscles bulging like marble, injecting themselves one needle at a time.

This was followed by a series of explosive cracks, all kinds of beast-like roars, and the clang of equipment as the students of the model class began to train with fiery enthusiasm.

Just then, a student looked at Wang Hai in shock, "N-no… impossible. My cousin sold this to me…"

Wang Hai shook his head, crushing the syringe in his hand to powder with a *crack* before tossing it into the trash can.

"Have you seen any change in your body weight these past two weeks? There are no signs of growth in your muscles or organs. Your physical strength has only increased by 0.03 in two weeks—the pathetic results of natural body tempering. It's obvious you bought counterfeit drugs."

Saying this, he turned from the crestfallen student and raised his voice.

"How many times have I told you all? You must buy your drugs through proper channels. The supply from your school teachers is undoubtedly the safest."

"If you buy counterfeit or expired drugs just to save a little money, you'll lose more than you gain. You're only wasting your own time."

After lecturing the students, Wang Hai's gaze swept over to Zhang Yu, who was practicing body tempering in a corner.

As he looked at Zhang Yu, he recalled the results from Zhang Yu's latest test.

"Level 0.85? An increase of 0.02 in three days?"

Zhang Yu wasn't even this fast back when he was injecting himself daily, was he?

Based on Wang Hai's years of coaching experience, with such a rapid increase in physical strength, it was impossible that Zhang Yu was progressing naturally without pills or injections as he claimed; he must have been secretly taking something before class.

Not only is this not natural body tempering, but the drugs he's using must be extremely potent to get these results. The damage to his body must be immense.

The possibility that Zhang Yu had reached the third level of the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms and had undertaken hellish training at his limits all on his own never even crossed Wang Hai's mind.

Regardless, in Wang Hai's eyes, the current Zhang Yu was increasingly challenging his authority in the classroom.

In particular, this raised a question: where was Zhang Yu getting his drugs?

Would other students see his results and seek out the same source?

If that happened, wouldn't it affect his sales figures?

The thought of the cutthroat market for body tempering drugs instantly set Wang Hai's nerves on edge.

A second-year teacher? A third-year?

Or did an off-campus tutor guide him?

Are they trying to sell their goods on my turf?

As for Zhang Yu himself, Wang Hai saw him as just a pawn. What he most wanted to figure out now was who was behind him.

However, the influence in the class still had to be erased.

So, a moment later, Wang Hai gave a few instructions to a student named Zhao Tianxing.

Zhao Tianxing then walked over to Zhang Yu and said, "Zhang Yu, Teacher Wang asked me to check with you, are you sure you're not buying any more drugs?"

After seeing Zhang Yu nod, Zhao Tianxing scratched his head and said sheepishly, "Well… Teacher told me to say that, in order not to disturb the others' training, he'd like you to practice alone in the small room off to the side. Is that okay?"

After being instructed by Wang Hai, Zhao Tianxing understood that Wang Hai wanted to further isolate Zhang Yu.

He looked at Zhang Yu with a trace of pity in his eyes, but his actions showed no hesitation.

As one of Wang Hai's so-called good, obedient students, it was precisely because Zhao Tianxing had completely accepted Wang Hai's guidance, purchased all the recommended drugs, and added his own hard work that he had managed to break through to a physical strength of Level 1.00, becoming one of the top ten students in the class for physical strength.

Therefore, he had always been obedient to the physical education teacher, Wang Hai.

Worried that Zhang Yu might react poorly, however, he spoke very politely, adding after a moment, "Why don't you just buy some? Teacher Wang's supplies are very high quality. Natural body tempering really isn't enough…"

But to Zhao Tianxing's surprise, Zhang Yu agreed to go train elsewhere without the slightest hesitation.

Watching his retreating figure, Zhao Tianxing scratched his head.

Sigh, Zhang Yu is so stubborn. Couldn't he just apologize to the teacher, admit his mistake, and get on with class? To ruin his future over a moment of impulse.

Meanwhile, Zhang Yu entered the small room, let out a soft laugh, and sat down, immediately beginning to practice the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method.

Wisps of spiritual energy flowed into the sea of qi in his dantian, where Zhang Yu refined them drop by drop into mana.

Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method Level 1 (11/20) → Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method Level 1 (16/20)

In the blink of an eye, five celestial cycles were completed, and the two physical education periods were over.

But during the following Chinese and math classes, Zhang Yu remained in the classroom, engrossed in circulating the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method.

The long process of absorbing spiritual energy and refining mana was naturally a tedious affair.

His waist, abdomen, and shoulders would ache, his skin would itch, and his mind would grow weary from the monotony.

Even the old Zhang Yu would have been unable to resist taking a break after one or two hours of breathing exercises, standing up to walk around, or perhaps scratching an itch or his head.

But now, compelled by the ritual's power and encouraged by the changing numbers on the Feathered Tome, Zhang Yu forced himself to endure, finally completing the twentieth repetition of the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method in a single stretch.

Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method Level 2 (0/40)

The experience of circulating the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method countless times bloomed in Zhang Yu's mind, and he could feel the mana circulation within him become more complex, intricate, and powerful.

When Zhang Yu stopped, the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method continued to operate, but its speed was now slightly faster than before.

At Level 1, the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method's passive breathing has only thirty percent of the speed of active breathing.

But after reaching Level 2, the passive breathing speed has increased to thirty-five percent of the active speed.

As for actively circulating the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, the breathing efficiency has also improved significantly, far surpassing my original Level 1 Basic Breathing Technique.

Zhang Yu nodded slightly, feeling a sense of satisfaction. This was, after all, a constant, day-and-night improvement.

So after lunch, he redoubled his efforts and continued to improve the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method.

In the time that followed, he poured nearly every available moment into the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method.

The study of the Immortal Dao in high school was both boring and difficult, and Zhang Yu, compelled by the ritual's power, had no time for rest. Only by watching the numbers for the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method tick upward and imagining the long-term benefits of its passive effect could he find some small measure of mental comfort.

As the saying goes, if you can't fight it, you might as well enjoy it.

So, he cultivated the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method during physical education class.

He cultivated the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method during Chinese class.

He was still cultivating the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method during his lunch break.

While waiting for work in the square at night, he continued to cultivate the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, though unfortunately, he found no work for three days.

Needless to say, when he went home to sleep, the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method was still operating on its own.

In just three short days, the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method was raised to Level 4 (5/80).

His mana also advanced valiantly with his hard work, increasing from 7.8 to 8.3.

At this point, the passive breathing speed of the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method had already reached forty-five percent of the active breathing speed.

Chapter 13: The Mana Competition

During mana class that day, the students of the model class sat cross-legged in the quiet room, practicing their breathing exercises.

A camera at the front of the room monitored the students' every move, taking note of whether they opened their eyes, scratched an itch, fidgeted with their hands and feet, or shuffled their bottoms… every single slight anomaly was recorded.

And all this data was uniformly recorded as a distraction rate.

Each week, the class with the highest distraction rate was publicly criticised in a school-wide announcement.

The students of the model class were unconcerned by this. After all, no matter the metric, their class was always guaranteed to be first.

Meanwhile, the student with the lowest distraction rate each week would not only be commended in a school-wide announcement but would also be rewarded with 500 yuan and one hour of free rental time with a Heavenly Spiritual Root.

This, however, was enough to make every student in the model class sit up and take notice.

When Zhang Yu first learned of this 'distraction rate' concept, he mused that if such a thing had existed in his previous life, students would have definitely cursed the school out for being complete idiots.

But this world was different. The students of the model class stared at the daily distraction rate like bulls in heat, and the entire classroom was filled with a fiercely competitive air.

At that moment, a bell chimed, and everyone who had been silently cultivating in the quiet room stopped, turning their eyes to the large screen at the front, awaiting the distraction rate data from the class session.

1st Place: Zhang Yu, Distraction Rate 0%, Mana 8.3

2nd Place: Bai Zhenzhen, Distraction Rate 0.03%, Mana 11.2

3rd Place: Qian Shen, Distraction Rate 0.12%, Mana 11.1

...

Looking at the distraction rate rankings, although the students in the classroom made no sound, one could sense a ripple of surprise spreading from the subtle shifts in their eyes and expressions.

The mana instructor on the dais, a female teacher with the surname Yan, wore her hair in a bun and had on black-framed glasses.

This Teacher Yan looked at the results on the screen and said, "For those few students whose distraction rates exceeded 0.3%, I won't name you individually today."

"The semester started three months ago. How many times have I told you to focus your mind and calm your qi?"

"With a distraction rate that high, how could the efficiency of your breathing exercises possibly compare to others?"

"Everyone cultivates twenty-four hours a day; you don't get more time than anyone else. Once the efficiency of your breathing exercises drops, you fall behind a little each day. After three years of high school, the gap in your mana could be ten, twenty, or even thirty points."

"And how many times have I said it? Students who can't lower their distraction rate can come to my office and buy a Calming Agent. I sat in my office for three hours yesterday afternoon, and not a single person came to see me... Do you all think you're completely fine?!"

After her round of criticism, Teacher Yan smiled faintly and looked at the top names on the screen.

"Of course, there were also students who performed very well."

"I want to commend by name the three students with the lowest distraction rates, especially Zhang Yu. He's had a 0% distraction rate for four days straight now, which, compared to before, is a true quantum leap."

"His mana has also increased by a full 0.5 points in the last three days, which proves he must have been putting in tremendous effort outside of class—he either rented a spiritual root or a cultivation room with high spiritual energy. Isn't that right, Zhang Yu?"

All eyes in the class immediately turned toward him.

But they saw that Zhang Yu's eyes were still tightly shut. Looking to be in a state between sleep and wakefulness, he was still silently practicing the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method.

Teacher Yan said admiringly, "You see? This is the attitude of a true top student. He doesn't stop even when class is over, seizing every single minute and second to cultivate and become stronger."

Zhao Tianxing watched Zhang Yu, who was still diligently performing his breathing exercises, and found himself understanding this classmate less and less.

He's clearly so diligent, so why did he slack off in gym class and refuse to take his stamina potion?

Bai Zhenzhen looked at Zhang Yu, whose eyes were still closed, and thought to herself, *These days, Yu-boy is doing his breathing exercises at every moment except when he's eating, shitting, or walking. To be this diligent… could he have been pushed this far by the 700,000-yuan debt collection calls?*

On the dais, Teacher Yan continued, "Of course, you get what you pay for. There's no free lunch on the path of the Immortal Dao. You won't get far if you don't invest money. The school's Heavenly Spiritual Root rentals have some vacancies recently; any interested students can come see me."

But before Teacher Yan left, something she said caught Zhang Yu's attention.

"That's right, the city's Mana Competition is starting next month. The first-year division will have participants from basically every high school in the city. The prize for first place is 100,000…"

"Registration for the competition is next Friday, so the school plans to select the top ten first-year students by mana level on that day to participate…"

…

That evening, in the cafeteria.

Zhou Tianyi had to rush off to the tutoring center early, leaving just Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen at the table.

Finding the way Bai Zhenzhen was looking him up and down unbearable, Zhang Yu finally spoke.

"Zhen, I know I'm handsome—a crane among chickens here at a school like Songyang High where everyone just studies—but you don't have to stare so hard."

"You're saying you want to enter the Mana Competition?" Bai Zhenzhen asked.

"It's a shame, Zhen," Zhang Yu said, shaking his head. "If you, the peerless genius ranked first in our grade, weren't my friend, this would be the part where you provoke me, only to be repeatedly humiliated by my stunning performance in the arena, leaving you with your pupils quaking in utter shock."

Bai Zhenzhen shook her head. "Yu-boy, this is the city-wide Mana Competition you're talking about."

"Every high school in all of Songyang City will be sending their best, their most powerful in mana, and their wealthiest students to compete. It's a gathering of the filthy rich."

Bai Zhenzhen said with a sigh, "What kind of outcome do you think an ordinary person like you could expect?"

Her eyes seemed to pierce the veil of the future, and she spoke with a sorrowful expression, "You'll be repeatedly humiliated by countless powerful opponents, become a stepping stone for the rich, the laughingstock of Songyang High School, and drag our school's reputation through the mud!"

"It's too tragic! I can already see you being ruthlessly crushed under the feet of the prodigies from other schools, your Dao heart shattered, looking just like a dead dog."

Zhang Yu rolled his eyes. "Don't be so dramatic. The Mana Competition isn't a combat tournament; there's no shame in losing."

"Besides, the prize for first place is a hundred thousand yuan."

"Even making it into the top ten gets you ten thousand."

Bai Zhenzhen looked at Zhang Yu's greedy expression and thought, *Yu-boy really has been pushed to the edge by the debt collectors. He's become so obsessed that he's deluding himself into entering the competition.*

Zhang Yu was indeed in dire financial straits. Although he had just earned thirteen thousand yuan from the Immortal Resonance Group a few days ago, he had immediately used ten thousand to repay a loan and another fifteen hundred to cover his rent, leaving him with just over two thousand.

"If you want to compete, you should first figure out how to raise your mana level into the top ten of our grade. You're ranked sixteenth right now, aren't you? How much money will you have to borrow to break into the top ten?"

Zhang Yu quickly did the math in his head.

His current mana level was 8.3, ranking him sixteenth in his grade.

The student currently ranked tenth in the grade had a mana level of 9.5.

To surpass that person, Zhang Yu would have to raise his mana level to 9.5 by next Friday...

No, I have to account for the fact that everyone else will be improving too.

To be safe, it would be best to raise my mana to 10.0 by next Friday.

There are eight days until next Friday. Can I really increase my mana from 8.3 to 10.0 in that time, a full 1.7 points?

That's an increase of more than 0.2 per day... is that even possible?

Absolutely! Easily!

In the eyes of his teachers and classmates, Zhang Yu's recent rapid improvement must have been achieved by spending a fortune to rent a high-quality spiritual root and cultivation space.

But Zhang Yu knew that it all stemmed from his own astonishing potential and extreme self-discipline.

A level 4 Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method had allowed him to increase his mana by a full 0.5 in just three days. He believed that as he continued to level up the technique, his mana growth would only become more rapid.

After all, during the Qi Refinement stage, the highest a skill can be leveled is 10.

For the vast majority of first-year students, reaching level 4 in a breathing exercise within the first semester is impossible.

And if I continue to cultivate, I'll probably be able to raise the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method to level 8, 9, or even 10 in a short time—a level that many people might not reach even after three years of high school.

Just as Zhang Yu was steeling his resolve with these thoughts, he suddenly noticed Bai Zhenzhen's chopsticks reaching for his bowl.

"The nerve!" Zhang Yu barked, raising his own chopsticks to block.

Amid a clattering of impacts, Bai Zhenzhen easily disarmed him of his chopsticks.

Feeling a sense of familiarity in her movements, Zhang Yu asked in surprise, "Basic High School Swordplay? You've already learned it? And you've even adapted it for use with chopsticks?"

After swiftly plucking a few pieces of meat from his bowl, Bai Zhenzhen chuckled.

"Is this supposed to be difficult, Yu-boy? Anyone with hands can do it."

Damn it, Zhang Yu thought. *She got me with another one of her flexes.*

Bai Zhenzhen mixed the stolen meat with her rice and quickly shoveled down a few mouthfuls.

"I didn't expect the pork ribs in the 5-yuan combo to be this tasty," she said, surprised. "I'll get one next time, too."

Patting her slightly full stomach, Bai Zhenzhen burped and said, "Sigh, if I eat any more, it'll affect my tutoring session."

With that, she pushed her tray toward Zhang Yu.

"Here, extra food for you, Yu-boy."

Looking at the perfectly neat, untouched half-portion of 'leftovers' Bai Zhenzhen had left, Zhang Yu knew she had done it on purpose for him.

It seemed that ever since learning of his financial difficulties, Bai Zhenzhen had often taken to feeding him during dinner.

Zhang Yu pulled the tray over and, as he started to eat, said, "Zhen, you don't have to worry about my pride or saving face or any of that. Given our relationship, it'd be fine even if you just gave me the money directly."

Bai Zhenzhen rolled her eyes. "I'm heading to my tutoring session. Take your time."

...

Outside the cafeteria.

A tall figure stood in a nearby corridor, eyes locked on the cafeteria entrance.

A moment later, when Zhang Yu emerged from the cafeteria, the tall figure tensed and immediately began to follow.

He followed Zhang Yu out the school gates, and when he saw him enter a stationery shop across the street, a thought struck Zhao Tianxing.

Could this be where Zhang Yu gets his supplies?

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 14: Preparations and a New Job

The stationery shop at the school entrance always sold all sorts of things students needed.

The one at the entrance of Songyang High School was no different.

Beyond the usual stationery, the massive display cabinet behind the owner looked just like a pharmacy, filled with all the drugs a high school student could need, from sedatives and stimulants to focus potions.

Zhang Yu leaned on the counter with both hands and asked, “Boss, do you carry neural fillers?”

The owner, who was scrolling through his phone, replied without looking up, “You want the expensive kind or the cheap kind?”

Zhang Yu said, “I’m a student. Can you give me a discount on the expensive one?”

The owner finally looked up, giving Zhang Yu a sideways glance.

Zhang Yu said nonchalantly, “I’m tenth in my year in Class One, a big name on campus. If your stuff works well for me, my classmates will definitely follow my lead and buy from you.”

The corner of the owner’s mouth twitched. He pulled a box from the cabinet and placed it in front of Zhang Yu.

“Purple Cloud Company’s neural filler. Guarantees you’ll only need twenty minutes of sleep a day. Five hundred a box. I’ll give it to you for 480 this time.”

Zhang Yu picked up the box and examined it.

“Not going to throw anything in for free?”

The owner frowned, then pulled out a few painkillers.

"Here, these are for you."

Zhang Yu gave a sly grin, stuffed the painkillers into his pocket, and said, "Thanks, boss. In that case, maybe I don't need the neural filler after all."

Seeing the owner's face darken, Zhang Yu scanned the payment code at the side of the counter.

"Just kidding. Sending the payment now."

As he picked up the neural filler from the counter, Zhang Yu felt the sharp sting of the expense.

A single box would only last about a week, yet it had cost him a full 480. His account balance instantly dropped to just over seventeen hundred.

But Zhang Yu was certain it was all worth it.

After all, he had already decided to enter the Mana Competition, so he was prepared to give it his all. He wouldn't sleep for the next week, dedicating every moment to cultivating the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method.

Heh, my goal isn't just top ten in our year.

Meanwhile, Zhao Tianxing had followed him into the stationery shop. Watching Zhang Yu leave with his purchase, he wondered, *Is it really neural filler?*

He followed Zhang Yu out of the shop and down the street, until he rounded a corner and was startled to find Zhang Yu already standing there, waiting for him.

"You… uh, hello, Zhang Yu," Zhao Tianxing said awkwardly. "What a coincidence. You take this way too?"

Zhang Yu stared at him and asked, "Why are you following me?"

Zhao Tianxing scratched his head, playing dumb. "Following you? Nah, I always go this way after school."

Zhang Yu said impatiently, "Do me a favor and take a look at yourself."

"You're over two meters tall and weigh more than three hundred pounds. I spotted you the moment I left the cafeteria."

"So what is it you really want?"

Of course, Zhao Tianxing couldn't tell him that his PE teacher, Wang Hai, had asked him to get close to Zhang Yu and find out about his supply channels.

So, Zhao Tianxing scratched his head again and said sheepishly, "Zhang Yu, I just think you're really exceptional. I want to stick with you and learn a thing or two."

Looking at the shy expression on the eighteen-year-old, three-hundred-plus-pound boy before him, Zhang Yu thought, *Seriously… are your social skills stuck at the elementary school level?*

Zhang Yu thought for a moment, then said, "Fine. Just buy me some fried chicken, and you can follow me around all you want."

Feeling a dreadful chill creeping through his body and a relentless countdown ticking in his mind, Zhang Yu knew he couldn't linger.

He started walking again with a sense of resignation, waving a hand over his shoulder.

"Let's talk while we walk."

Zhao Tianxing trailed behind Zhang Yu, hesitating. "You're going to eat fried chicken? That's strictly forbidden for body tempering. Mr. Wang told us not to eat it. Could we get chicken breast instead?"

"Don't worry, I'm not asking you to eat it. You just have to buy it for me."

At the thought of fried chicken, Zhang Yu couldn't help but wipe the drool from the corner of his mouth.

Ever since arriving in this world, his three meals a day had been the 'pauper's health meal' from the high school cafeteria. It had been a long time since he'd eaten anything like fried chicken.

The daily grind of his harsh training had caused stress to build up inside him, leaving him no time to relax and no courage to spend an extra cent.

Now, the thought of eating fried chicken soon made his heart feel much lighter, as if some of that pressure had already melted away.

Zhao Tianxing followed him onto the subway and off again, watching as he stopped in front of a fried chicken shop.

"We came all this way," he asked curiously, "this place must be really good, right?"

Zhang Yu replied, "Because it was on the way."

Unfortunately, the moment Zhang Yu stepped into the fried chicken shop, he heard that damn countdown start up again in his head.

He had no choice but to turn to Zhao Tianxing.

"Buy me a fried chicken combo meal. I'll wait for you here."

Watching Zhang Yu sit down right where he was and begin to meditate, Zhao Tianxing scratched his head, completely baffled.

A moment later, as he watched Zhang Yu happily chewing on a drumstick as they walked, Zhao Tianxing felt things were getting even weirder.

He's so self-disciplined he uses the time waiting in line for breathing exercises, yet he insists on eating fried chicken… What a strange guy.

What surprised Zhao Tianxing even more was that after following Zhang Yu, he didn't go to a tutoring center or to buy more medicine, but instead went to a public square to wait for temporary work.

Zhao Tianxing asked, "You're looking for work?"

Zhang Yu rubbed his stomach, found a clean spot on the ground, and sat down comfortably. He waved a dismissive hand.

"One fried chicken meal doesn't buy you conversation. I'm going to cultivate while I wait for a job. Do whatever you want."

Watching Zhang Yu simply begin his breathing exercises right there on the ground, Zhao Tianxing was stunned once more.

"Breathing exercises?"

He glanced at a puddle of filthy water nearby, listened to the loud music blaring from the barbershop across the street, and then looked at the rough-looking crowd of job seekers around them.

He couldn't help but ask again, "You're doing them *here*?"

But Zhang Yu had already begun to wholeheartedly cultivate the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, and this time, he completely ignored him.

Zhao Tianxing squatted down beside Zhang Yu and watched him carefully for a while. Realizing he was genuinely performing his breathing exercises, even more questions bubbled up in his mind.

What's the benefit of doing them here?

Is he just trying to squeeze in some practice while waiting for a job?

After waiting a while, it became clear Zhang Yu had no intention of getting up. Just as Zhao Tianxing was wondering if he should leave, his phone vibrated.

Seeing the message from Wang Hai asking for an update, Zhao Tianxing replied that he was getting close to his target.

After a long hesitation, he finally sat down beside Zhang Yu and began his own breathing exercises.

Half an hour later, Zhao Tianxing couldn't resist opening his eyes; Zhang Yu was still performing his breathing exercises.

An hour later, Zhao Tianxing had to stand up, walk a circle, and stretch his back. When he looked over, Zhang Yu was still at it.

More than two hours later, Zhao Tianxing had long since given up on the breathing exercises and had begun to practice the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms, move by move.

And in all the time he was observing, Zhang Yu remained utterly motionless from start to finish. He didn't make a single small movement—no scratching his head, no shifting his weight—he didn't even so much as twitch an eyelid, and the rhythm of his breathing never changed in the slightest.

Zhao Tianxing couldn't help but marvel internally.

Such incredible focus. No wonder he's the guy who can go for days with a zero percent distraction rate.

But without a spiritual root to draw upon, no high-density spiritual energy in the environment, and no drugs in his system… the efficiency of these breathing exercises has to be abysmal. Is there really any point?

Meanwhile, under Zhang Yu's focused practice, his progress in the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method advanced once again, reaching Level 4 (12/80).

Just then, another van pulled into the square. Hearing the driver call out for security personnel, Zhang Yu simply retracted his focus for a moment before returning to his cultivation.

A first-year high school student like him had no chance of competing for a security job against the old-timers surrounding him.

But then he heard the man's requirements: young, in good shape, with a clean and fresh appearance, and couldn't be unattractive.

Zhang Yu's eyes snapped open. He strode toward the van with a powerful gait and raised his hand confidently.

"How about me?"

The driver's eyes immediately lit up, and he walked in Zhang Yu's direction.

"Excellent, excellent. You're just what I'm looking for."

Zhang Yu grinned, about to shake the man's hand, only to realize the driver had walked right past him. The man grabbed Zhao Tianxing's hand, praising him.

"Great build, and a handsome face, too."

"Look at this chest!"

"This waist!"

"This back!"

The driver clapped Zhao Tianxing on the body as he spoke in admiration.

"Absolutely perfect proportions! His absolute power might not be there yet, but the fundamental framework is flawless. He's like a piece of uncut jade, full of limitless potential."

"To reach this state without persistent, harsh training, an extremely disciplined lifestyle, the guidance of a master teacher, and pushing his body to the limit with drugs and acupuncture… it would be absolutely impossible."

"You're the one, kid. I'll pay you 800 an hour. Come with me."

At that moment, Zhang Yu, standing off to the side, was stunned.

He never imagined that his own lean, defined physique, his coolly handsome face, and his otherworldly air would lose out to a mountain of muscle like Zhao Tianxing.

"Boss, take a look at me! I can do it, too."

The driver glanced at Zhang Yu and shook his head.

"No skinny guys."

"You don't inspire confidence for a security job. You'd stop half as many flying swords as the next guy."

Zhao Tianxing started to refuse. "Actually, I'm not here to…"

Zhang Yu quickly cut him off. "Boss, we're brothers. We swore an oath that whether it's a one-man job or a group job, we do everything together."

The driver frowned, glancing from Zhang Yu to Zhao Tianxing, and finally back to Zhang Yu.

"Four hundred an hour for you. Four hours total. You in or out?"

Zhang Yu nodded eagerly. "I'm in! I'm in! I'm in!"

Zhang Yu pulled Zhao Tianxing toward the van.

"I'm not here for a job, and my mom will worry if I get back too late. I should go tell the boss…" Zhao Tianxing said to Zhang Yu, his face a mask of embarrassment.

Zhang Yu quickly said, "Didn't you have something you wanted to ask me? We can talk while we work. Ask me anything you want."

Thinking about the task Wang Hai had given him, Zhao Tianxing could only agree reluctantly.

"I need to call my mom first."

The van carried the two of them toward the city center, and on the way, the driver explained the job.

"Ms. Li Xuelian is holding an art exhibition in the Cloudfall Hall on the 999th floor. The main security is already in place."

"However, Ms. Li isn't satisfied with the appearance of her regular security detail. She's worried they'll ruin from the viewing experience, so she asked us to find some handsome young men."

"When you get there, you'll change into security uniforms and follow the security captain's orders."

"And remember this above all else: you absolutely, positively cannot offend Ms. Li."

Zhang Yu asked curiously, "This Ms. Li must be very wealthy, right?"

"Heh, wealthy?" The driver snorted, saying proudly, "She's more than just wealthy. Ms. Li is the daughter of a Golden Core Perfected Master!"

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 15: The Central Tower

Upon hearing the words "Golden Core True Monarch," Zhao Tianxing gave a slight start in the car, then said in disbelief,

"How could the daughter of a Golden Core True Monarch possibly come to Songyang?"

Zhang Yu nodded slightly at his side. He knew that Foundation Establishment came after Qi Refinement, and Golden Core came after Foundation Establishment.

To reach the Golden Core realm, one would have to graduate from a top-tier high school, successfully enroll in one of the Ten Greats, and rise through the ranks of a major sect; who knew how many levels of Kunxu one would have to climb.

The daughter of such a figure would be born on the second level of Kunxu at the very least, so how could she possibly come to a first-level place like Songyang City?

The driver smiled upon hearing this, and as if wanting to show off, he said slowly, "And you think Ms. Li Xuelian is the only one coming to our Songyang City?"

"They say her father, True Monarch Xinghuo, is originally from our Songyang City. He's retiring now and plans to return to Songyang City to live out his golden years..."

Zhang Yu found this odd. A Golden Core expert retiring to the starter village?

The driver continued, "This art exhibition features more than just Ms. Li's paintings. I heard there's also a piece called the 'Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll,' personally painted by True Monarch Xinghuo, which is said to hide a peerless martial art."

"Of the people coming to this exhibition, aside from those hoping to connect with Ms. Li, many others want a chance to comprehend the Martial Ascension Scroll and master the peerless martial art hidden within."

...

Songyang Central Tower.

The 999th floor.

Zhang Yu stood before the floor-to-ceiling windows, looking down in awe at the roiling sea of clouds beneath his feet. It was the first time he had ever stood at such a height, gazing down upon the entire city.

He adjusted the new security uniform he was wearing, a wave of emotion washing over him.

Ever since entering the Central Tower, Zhang Yu felt as though he had stepped into another, dreamlike world.

If the suburban district where he lived was somewhat reminiscent of his past life, then the infrastructure of Songyang High School had already surpassed that world in nearly every aspect, and as for the Central Tower before him...

Whether it was the terrifying height of its 999 floors or the various Immortal Dao technologies suffused with flowing mana within, the entire place was like something from a fantasy.

Recalling how he had been pulled up to the 999th floor in seconds by a formation array, empowered by Daoist arts, yet emerging completely unscathed, Zhang Yu couldn't help but be moved once more.

"All part of Songyang City, yet mortals live in the suburbs, cultivators gather in the city center, and this Central Tower... this is the domain of the truly wealthy."

"Three places, all within the same city, yet they feel like three separate, stratified worlds..."

Just then, Zhao Tianxing's voice sounded from behind him.

"Zhang Yu, the captain told us to start our patrol. Shouldn't we get going?"

Zhang Yu turned to see Zhao Tianxing standing behind him, also dressed in a security uniform.

But unlike Zhang Yu's composure, Zhao Tianxing was incredibly awkward and timid… looking utterly pathetic, as if he were in agony.

He felt like a clown in this uniform, and imagined the gazes of everyone around him were filled with disdain, contempt, and scorn.

In truth, Zhao Tianxing was overthinking things. Once he put on the uniform, he was no longer just a commoner, but had become part of the tower's background, his presence in most people's eyes barely more noticeable than the greenery.

Zhang Yu clapped him on the shoulder.

"Chest out, head up. We're security for the Central Tower now, not delivery boys. What's there to be afraid of?"

Sensing that the passersby had been drawn by Zhang Yu's voice, Zhao Tianxing said hurriedly, "I get it, Zhang Yu, just keep your voice down. Don't bother the other guests."

The art exhibition was quite large, occupying a space of over a thousand square meters and providing drinks and a buffet. To Zhang Yu, it seemed less like an art show and more like a social gala.

The legendary Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll was currently covered by a large cloth, which, according to rumor, would be personally unveiled by Ms. Li Xuelian.

Zhang Yu and Zhao Tianxing were assigned to patrol a section near the edge of the venue.

With the exhibition yet to officially begin, the patrol was incredibly relaxed, and it didn't trigger his ritual's backlash either.

After all, the ritual's power was directed toward the fulfillment of a wish.

His method for fulfilling that wish was to study, cultivate, and work hard to get into a university and earn money… all to ultimately grant the evil god's desire.

A temporary job like this was part of earning money and even of his studies and cultivation, so the ritual's power wouldn't compel him to do something else.

In fact, this state of aimless wandering was a far, far more relaxing experience for Zhang Yu than the last few days of arduous training had been.

Just then, as the two neared the dining tables, they saw a group of servers arranging plates and setting out table decorations.

Zhang Yu glanced over at the dishes being laid out plate by plate and asked in surprise, "Is that… seafood?"

Zhao Tianxing looked over as well, his eyes falling on the abalone and lobster.

"They're sea creatures. I saw the one with the shell when I was out with my mom. I think a single pound costs thirty or forty thousand."

"But this is the Central Tower, so having things like this is probably normal."

Zhang Yu had seen and eaten plenty of seafood in his past life.

But here in Kunxu, at least on the first level, sea creatures were an extreme rarity. The original Zhang Yu had only ever seen them online and had certainly never eaten, or even laid eyes on, them in real life.

This was simply because within the twenty-million-plus square kilometers of Kunxu's first level… there were no oceans.

It was said that the sea creatures available on the market were either imported from the upper levels of Kunxu or farmed by organizations in their own artificial marine environments.

Hearing the price of tens of thousands for a single pound from Zhao Tianxing, Zhang Yu was inwardly stunned.

"So expensive?"

"What's the benefit of eating this stuff? Does it increase your mana?"

It was no wonder Zhang Yu thought this way. In the Immortal Dao world he knew, both as his former and current self, everyone was striving to advance by any means necessary, pushing themselves to their limits to improve their mana, martial prowess, Daoist arts, physical bodies, and Dao hearts.

Clothing, food, housing, transportation… every aspect of life was inextricably linked to raising one's cultivation.

"Benefits?" Zhao Tianxing thought for a moment before shaking his head. "I've never heard of any benefits. I think it's just for the taste."

"Just for the taste?" Zhang Yu stared, slightly stunned, at the platters of fine food on the table.

Just as Zhang Yu and Zhao Tianxing were furtively inspecting the dining tables, a cold voice suddenly spoke from behind them.

"You two are security. What are you doing skulking around here instead of patrolling?"

The voice startled Zhao Tianxing, who spun around and hastily explained, "We weren't doing anything…"

But when he saw who it was, Zhao Tianxing froze on the spot.

Zhang Yu, however, turned around casually, looked at Bai Zhenzhen, and said, "Well, if it isn't Zhen. Fancy seeing you at an art exhibition."

Meanwhile, upon realizing the newcomer was a classmate, Zhao Tianxing felt the security uniform on his body become unbearably ugly. He squirmed uncomfortably, looking like he might burst at any moment.

He squirmed even more as he imagined what would happen if word got out at school that he was working as a security guard. Labels like 'poor,' 'part-timer,' and 'broke' would be slapped on him by his classmates, and his status and reputation in his social circle would plummet.

Bai Zhenzhen looked at Zhang Yu, her face devoid of expression.

"I didn't realize you two were so eager to get ahead in life that you'd skip decades of struggle and jump straight to being security guards."

Zhao Tianxing waved his hands frantically.

"No, that's not it, Classmate Bai Zhenzhen! I just came along with Zhang Yu."

But Zhang Yu clapped a hand firmly on Zhao Tianxing's shoulder.

"What are you so flustered about? You're a temporary security guard earning 800 an hour, with enough purchasing power in a single hour to cover a mortal's food and drink for ten days. Do you have any idea how many people would kill for that?"

"Huh?" Zhao Tianxing was taken aback. He had never considered an 800-per-hour wage to be anything special.

But as he looked at Bai Zhenzhen, who had suddenly fallen silent, he felt a distinct chill coming from her.

Zhao Tianxing had never been very familiar with the genius girl who ranked first in their grade, knowing only that she was always cold and unapproachable and exclusively ate lunch with Zhang Yu and Zhou Tianyi.

In fact, Zhao Tianxing's own social circle had tried inviting her out, but they never received a response.

In his mind, Bai Zhenzhen was a prodigy of immense talent, but also incredibly arrogant and difficult to get close to.

Now, seeing her silent and expressionless, Zhao Tianxing could only assume she was angry.

Zhang Yu must have angered her with his careless words.

Just as he was fidgeting and racking his brain for something to say to diffuse the tension, he heard Bai Zhenzhen ask coldly, "You make 800 an hour?"

"Yeah," Zhao Tianxing nodded dumbly, not understanding her point.

At that moment, a voice called out from the other side of the tables, where a server was setting up.

"New girl! Get over here and bring out the dishes! What are you standing around for?"

Bai Zhenzhen said to Zhang Yu and Zhao Tianxing, "I have to go serve the food. We'll talk later."

Meanwhile, she was thinking, *Damn it! Security guards make 800 an hour? I only make 500! I would've signed up for security if I'd known.*

Only then did Zhao Tianxing notice that Bai Zhenzhen was wearing the exact same uniform as the other servers.

"Bai Zhenzhen is working here, too?" he asked, his face a mask of shock.

"Is that so strange? Who in this world isn't working for someone else?" Zhang Yu had recognized her uniform at a glance. Given Bai Zhenzhen's financial situation, he thought it was perfectly normal for her to have a job.

He was, however, secretly amazed that she could still maintain her rank as first in the grade while working a part-time job.

Zhen's talent is truly something else. Among all the new disciples of my Songyang Sect, she's probably second only to me.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 16: Patrol

Glancing back at Zhao Tianxing, who was still frozen in place, Zhang Yu urged, "Let's get to work, Little Zhao. You slacking off already?"

Zhao Tianxing quickly hurried to catch up, though he couldn't resist glancing back a few more times at Bai Zhenzhen serving dishes.

No one at school would ever believe this, he thought. *Bai Zhenzhen is working a part-time job? Did something happen to her family?*

After another round of patrols, Zhao Tianxing followed Zhang Yu into an empty emergency stairwell, where he watched Zhang Yu suddenly sit down cross-legged.

"You might as well take a break too," Zhang Yu said.

"Huh? But the captain told us to keep patrolling. If he finds out…"

"The exhibition hasn't even started yet. What is there to patrol? Besides, what could possibly happen inside this building?"

With a small laugh, Zhang Yu added, "Anyway, didn't you want to talk to me? This is a perfect chance for me to teach you the true way of the security guard."

Hearing this, Zhao Tianxing remembered Wang Hai's instructions.

Across from him, Zhang Yu then dropped a bombshell.

"The whole point of being a security guard is to slack off!"

"Huh?" Zhao Tianxing asked.

Zhang Yu continued, "Think about it. Whether you patrol a few more times or a few less, does your pay change?"

Zhao Tianxing hesitated for a moment. "I guess… not?"

Zhang Yu asked again, "With or without us here, does the security level of this venue really change?"

Zhao Tianxing scratched his head. "I guess… not either? But…"

Zhang Yu stated, "But the time we steal for ourselves is our own."

"Alright, I'm going to rest for a bit. We'll head back out later when the exhibition officially begins."

Watching Zhang Yu close his eyes and begin his breathing exercise, Zhao Tianxing grew nervous, terrified of being caught slacking off by their superiors.

Glancing again at Zhang Yu, now completely absorbed in his breathing exercise, Zhao Tianxing felt a mix of admiration for his dedication to cultivating at every opportunity and disbelief at how incredibly reckless he was being.

Wait a minute, wasn't I supposed to ask him about the medicine? How did I get sidetracked into a lecture on slacking off…

Suddenly, Zhao Tianxing's eyes flickered as he replayed Zhang Yu's words in his mind, lost in thought.

Zhao Tianxing was the type of person who wasn't particularly skilled at socializing. He was thoughtful and sensitive, always worried about what others thought and prone to overthinking things.

Now, as he recalled what Zhang Yu had just said, he realized it all seemed to apply to his own situation.

If I ask him a few more questions, or a few less, will Teacher Wang Hai refuse to guide me?

Without me digging up information, will Teacher Wang Hai really be unable to find anything out?

Could Zhang Yu have already figured out what I was planning? Was he saying all that to subtly give me a hint—to tell me to slack off on this too?

At this thought, Zhao Tianxing looked again at Zhang Yu and his steady breathing exercise, and suddenly even the simple act felt profound and inscrutable.

As mana surged through his body, Zhang Yu silently circulated his energy for a full cycle, advancing his Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method to (13/80) just as the art exhibition finally, officially began.

…

"It's just as you'd expect from an exhibition hosted by Ms. Li. Every guest here is either wealthy or influential."

Zhao Tianxing sighed with sincere admiration as he watched the attendees file in.

Although he didn't know who any of these people were, a single glance at their luxurious clothes and accessories was enough to tell him they were all of considerable means.

Even though his own father was a minor manager at a company with a respectable income, he could still identify numerous luxury items on these guests that his family could never hope to afford.

Just then, Zhang Yu whispered from the side, "Old Zhao, look at that!"

Zhao Tianxing followed the direction of Zhang Yu's chin and immediately spotted a gleaming golden figure entering, surrounded by an entourage.

Focusing his gaze, he saw that the man's skin was like a layer of gold foil, faintly reflecting the light with a soft, metallic sheen.

Beside him, Zhang Yu asked curiously, "What is that? A robot?"

Zhao Tianxing hastily clamped a hand over Zhang Yu's mouth, watching nervously until he was sure the golden man hadn't looked their way, before finally letting out a quiet sigh of relief.

He then released his hand and explained, "That's the Immortal Resonance Group's Songyang City Director. You can't just say whatever you want."

"Immortal Resonance Group?" Zhang Yu asked, looking curiously at the golden man. "Then why is he so… shiny?"

Zhao Tianxing explained, "That's an Arcane Frame. You've never heard of it?"

Seeing Zhang Yu's blank expression, Zhao Tianxing figured his family probably wasn't exposed to such things and patiently explained, "An Arcane Frame… well, it's sort of like a prosthesis, but infinitely more powerful."

"And on the technological level of the Immortal Dao, Arcane Frames have been developed to encompass the entire human body."

"It's like you can replace any part of your body with a magical treasure, drastically enhancing its abilities while preserving all the original functions."

"The only catch is you need a mana level of 100 or more to have one implanted..."

At these words, Zhang Yu's eyes flickered. He knew that 100 mana was the absolute limit one could reach in the Qi Refinement realm.

He asked, "So you can get one implanted with just 100 mana, or do you have to wait until after Foundation Establishment?"

Zhao Tianxing replied, "100 mana is enough, but this man is a true Foundation Establishment cultivator. He comes from a prestigious family and graduated from Myriad Laws University."

Zhang Yu got it. This was a Foundation Establishment grandmaster, fresh out of university, coming down to a low-level lobby to stomp on newbies—showing off and putting a bunch of stubborn Qi Refinement cultivators in their place.

As more and more guests arrived, Zhang Yu spotted two other individuals who looked like they might have Arcane Frames. One had eyes that shone like jewels, while the other had a halo of light floating behind his head. Their entire aesthetic was a stark contrast to the other wealthy attendees.

These two, along with the glittering director from the Immortal Resonance Group, formed three separate centers of gravity, periodically drawing in Qi Refinement hopefuls who looked desperate enough to kneel and kowtow.

By now, Zhao Tianxing seemed to be gradually getting used to his security uniform, no longer appearing so tense as he watched the guests come and go.

As the two of them patrolled, they inadvertently overheard snippets of conversation.

Some remarked on Ms. Li Xuelian's immense wealth.

Others praised the outstanding quality of the paintings, speculating on their exorbitant value.

And, of course, some were discussing the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll, personally painted by a Golden Core True Monarch.

"Brother Li? Don't tell me you're also here to seek enlightenment from the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll painted by Senior Xinghuo?"

"Of course. If any young prodigy under the age of twenty can master the martial arts contained within it, Senior Xinghuo will take them as a direct disciple. That news has already spread throughout the entire Immortal Dao community of Songyang City, so how could I possibly miss this?"

Wait, that's a thing? Zhang Yu thought. *And it's spread throughout the entire Immortal Dao community of Songyang? How come I never heard about it?*

Maybe a bottom-feeder like me in the Immortal Dao community doesn't deserve to know?

For the moment, however, Zhang Yu suppressed his questions and decided to carry out his duties as a security guard.

He walked up to the person who had been speaking and asked politely, "Sir, is everything alright?"

The youth who had spoken had sharp, defined brows and starlike eyes, marking him as someone extraordinary. He gave the security guard a puzzled look.

"Is there a problem?"

The youth announced proudly, "I am Lian Tianji of Purple Cloud High School. Can't you see I'm talking with my friend?"

Zhang Yu and Zhao Tianxing glanced at him, and then at his so-called 'friend.'

This 'friend' was a box resting on a nearby table, its surface covered in a peculiar wood grain. In size and shape, it looked exactly like a funerary urn.

Schizophrenia? Zhang Yu wondered. *Did he study himself into insanity?*

He had, however, heard of Purple Cloud High School. It was an elite institution even more prestigious than Songyang High School, one of the top three schools in Songyang City. It was a place the old Zhang Yu wouldn't have even dared to dream of applying to.

Purple Cloud High School was legendary for its principals, who were known for their cruel methods, appalling pressure tactics, and hellishly strict school rules.

Everything at Songyang High School paled in comparison. The legendary campus caste system, where underachievers ate their meals in the bathroom and the weak were expected to kneel before the strong… rules like these were enough to strike terror into the hearts of students from any other school.

Looking now at Lian Tianji, who was deep in conversation with a funerary urn, Zhang Yu couldn't help but sigh. Purple Cloud High School really did drive its students mad.

But just then, the 'funerary urn' spoke. "Brother Lian, I believe these two security guards have misunderstood."

"I am Li Xingyu, a soul cultivator from Mount Mang High School."

Mount Mang High School? A soul cultivator?

Zhang Yu remembered now. Wasn't that a school he had once considered applying to?

He knew that soul cultivators had lower score requirements for the college entrance exam and were on a specialized track, but he also knew it came with the requirement of abandoning one's physical body.

But staring at the 'funerary urn' on the table, he was still utterly shocked.

"Mount Mang High School… it really does turn people into ghosts."

Zhang Yu and Zhao Tianxing quickly apologized and backed away. They watched as Lian Tianji and Li Xingyu exchanged a few more words before four propeller-like devices extended from the 'funerary urn,' and it flew away like a drone.

Watching this, Zhang Yu was secretly grateful his predecessor hadn't chosen the path of a soul cultivator. Otherwise, he wouldn't even be able to look the part… to have that ethereal, transcendent bearing of an immortal. What kind of cultivator would he be then?

Wait, that soul cultivator doesn't even have a physical body. How does he plan to practice the martial arts from the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll?

Then he recalled the information the two had just shared about the scroll.

If that's true, does that mean tons of young prodigies under twenty will be attending this exhibition? All just for a chance to master the peerless martial art within the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll?

At this thought, Zhang Yu found himself looking forward to the exhibition more and more.

Four hundred an hour, a free show, and a chance to comprehend a peerless martial art? Whoever said this was a bad gig was dead wrong. This job was amazing.

He turned to Zhao Tianxing beside him and asked, "How about it, Old Zhao? Are you interested in the peerless martial art from the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll?"

Zhao Tianxing instinctively shook his head.

He knew his own limits. A technique that only true prodigies or the fabulously wealthy could ever hope to master—what could that possibly have to do with an ordinary person like him?

Far from being interested, he was filled with an urge to shrink away. Even if the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll were brought out right now, he wouldn't even dare to try, terrified of making a fool of himself in front of everyone.

A moment later, however, Zhao Tianxing—who had just started to get comfortable in his role—wanted nothing more than to cover his face and flee, to rip the security uniform right off his body.

Zhang Yu glanced at Zhao Tianxing's rapidly retreating figure, then looked in the direction he had been facing, immediately spotting several familiar faces.

"Huh? Isn't that Qian Shen? And those others look like they're from our school too, right?"

Qian Shen was the academic prodigy who was always ranked just behind Bai Zhenzhen, consistently holding the number two spot in their year since school began.

Zhang Yu clapped Zhao Tianxing on the shoulder.

"Old Zhao, look. Aren't those our classmates?"

Zhao Tianxing quickly yanked Zhang Yu back.

"Turn around, hurry!" he said, his voice tight with anxiety. "Don't let them see us."

(End of Chapter)

Translator's Note

In Chinese culture, Mount Mang is synonymous with death, burial, and the afterlife.

Located north of Louyang in Henan provice, Mount Mang was considered the most auspicious place to be buried due to its excellent *feng shui* (high soil quality, deep earth, and protection against floods).

Chapter 17: Scores and Secrets

"So hungry."

Qian Shen rubbed his stomach, completely uninterested in the paintings at the art exhibition. He just wanted to find a place to have a big meal.

He had, after all, just finished a supplementary body tempering session before rushing over, and his rumbling stomach made him feel like he could eat an entire cow.

"I'm going to see if I can find anything good to eat."

After telling his classmates who had come with him, Qian Shen started searching through the exhibition hall.

The students who came to the art exhibition with him were not the least bit surprised by this.

Diligently studying the Immortal Dao and arduously tempering their bodies day after day, the nutrients they required and the portions they ate naturally far exceeded those of ordinary people.

For a top student like Qian Shen, who trained arduously twenty-four hours a day, the daily food intake was even greater. Eating only five meals a day would make his private tutor worry if he had lost his appetite.

Just then, Qian Shen's gaze suddenly lit up, his eyes locking onto the buffet table.

He strode forward, grabbed a plate of large shrimp, and downed them in a few bites, but after eating for a moment, he frowned.

"How is this food so lacking in nutrients?"

As the top student of Songyang High School's freshman class, the perennial number two, Qian Shen's success was not only due to his own talent and hard work but, most importantly, his family's wealth.

To enhance the effects of his cultivation, especially the efficacy of his body tempering, the food he usually ate was rich in all sorts of Immortal Dao elements.

For a score-chaser like him, taste was secondary; the ability to increase his cultivation efficiency was all that mattered.

He could certainly afford the seafood provided at the art exhibition's buffet, but he had no interest in spending money solely to satisfy his palate, instead feeling it was a waste of his time and stomach capacity.

Seafood, gourmet meals… if it can't improve my scores? Then it's just trash.

So, as Qian Shen scanned the other dishes on the table, he called over a server, wanting to ask if there was any other food available that could be used as a dietary supplement.

"Everything edible is right here. Take what you want."

Hearing the server's somewhat cold voice, Qian Shen couldn't help but frown, and when he looked up, he saw a familiar face.

Qian Shen glanced at the server uniform on the other person and said with surprise, "You work here?"

"Yes," Bai Zhenzhen said expressionlessly. "Is there anything else?"

Qian Shen, however, frowned and said, "Are you that short on money?"

"You should hurry up and sign a contract with the student council. Otherwise, continuing to waste time on meaningless jobs like this will only drag you down on your path of the Immortal Dao."

"Even if I were to surpass you then, there wouldn't be any satisfaction in it."

Qian Shen's tone was filled with emotion; after all, he had always regarded Bai Zhenzhen, the only girl in his year who could surpass him in total score, as his rival.

He felt that Bai Zhenzhen must think the same way.

The next three years of high school, the entire grade level, and even the entire school, would be the battlefield where their two great talents would contend with and yet cherish one another.

They were supposed to break through their limits in one competition after another, ultimately getting into a top-tier university together three years later.

But in response to Qian Shen's heartfelt sentiment, Bai Zhenzhen just said flatly, "Are you telling me what to do?"

Before Qian Shen could answer, Bai Zhenzhen continued, "A guy with a total score just over 600 is going to teach me, a 650, what to do?"

Faced with Bai Zhenzhen's blatant academic discrimination, Qian Shen, a staunch believer in the supremacy of scores, felt his confidence instantly deflate. The 50-point gap felt like a mountain crashing down on him.

Your score is higher, so you must be right.

In that moment, in Qian Shen's eyes, it was as if three glowing numbers, 650, were hovering above Bai Zhenzhen's head, emitting a powerful pressure that crushed him so much he couldn't utter a single word of rebuttal.

Bai Zhenzhen frowned. "No, seriously, why are you staring over my head when you're talking to me?"

Qian Shen snorted coldly and turned to leave.

Just you wait, Bai Zhenzhen. Wasting your time like this, it won't be long before I surpass you.

Who would have known that just a few steps after turning around, he would almost collide with two security guards.

It was Zhang Yu, who had come over to check on the situation, and Zhao Tianxing, whom he had dragged along.

Having just seen what looked like a conflict between Bai Zhenzhen and Qian Shen, Zhang Yu, as a security guard, had hurried over.

Qian Shen looked at the two of them, and although they wore security uniforms, they were his classmates, so he recognized them at a glance.

"550 and 580?"

Hearing this form of address, Zhang Yu paused for a second, then realized in the next moment that 550 was his total score from last month's exam, and 580 was, he supposed, Zhao Tianxing's total score?

Good grief, this guy only sees scores and can't even remember his classmates' names, can he? Another one who's studied himself into a freak.

But in truth, it wasn't just names that Qian Shen couldn't remember. In fact, for any student below 550 points, he remembered neither their names nor their scores.

After all, to him… below 550? Weren't they all just NPCs? Was there any need to remember them?

Someone like the 550 before him was already a sub-human in Qian Shen's eyes.

Based on his observations during this period, the other party would likely score below 550 on the next monthly exam, at which point there would be no need to remember him at all starting next month.

And looking at the security uniforms on Zhang Yu and Zhao Tianxing, Qian Shen shook his head again.

"How did you two end up working here too?"

Facing the 550 and 580, the confidence that had just been crushed by the 650 instantly swelled back up within Qian Shen.

He said arrogantly, "Instead of seizing the time to study and cultivate more, what are you two doing wasting your time here?"

Zhang Yu said, "Aren't you here too?"

Qian Shen chuckled confidently. "I specifically postponed my tutoring session today to come here and comprehend the peerless martial art within the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll."

Zhang Yu said, "Yeah, we're also here to comprehend the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll."

"And we get paid 800 an hour on top of it."

"Earning money while comprehending a divine art, isn't that a much better deal?"

"Hmm?" Qian Shen paused upon hearing this, looking at Zhang Yu with some surprise.

The words of a 550-pointer actually make some sense?

He looked at Zhang Yu and said, "550, I'll remember you."

"My name is Zhang Yu!" Zhang Yu couldn't help but glance above his own head again. "Why do you keep staring at the space above my head?"

But Qian Shen quickly came to his senses.

"No, that's not right. You two think you can comprehend the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll?"

Zhao Tianxing could feel more and more people looking over, and Qian Shen's disdainful gaze made his cheeks flush slightly. He quickly waved his hands and said,

"No, no, no, I'm not trying to comprehend the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll."

Qian Shen, however, couldn't be bothered with Zhao Tianxing's explanation and just shook his head with a sigh.

"The Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll was personally painted by a Golden Core expert. The peerless martial art it contains is specifically meant to select true geniuses. Even I don't have absolute confidence in mastering it, let alone you two."

With that said, Qian Shen lost all interest in looking at the 550 and 580 before him and turned to leave.

Watching Qian Shen's departing figure, Zhao Tianxing's expression grew even more bitter.

Now, not only had the other boy seen him working as a security guard, but thanks to Zhang Yu's careless words, he also misunderstood that he was here to comprehend the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll.

Zhao Tianxing was filled with bitterness, already imagining the ridicule he would face from his many classmates.

This is a huge embarrassment, he thought to himself.

The nearby Zhang Yu, however, didn't have as many thoughts racing through his head as Zhao Tianxing. He looked at Bai Zhenzhen and asked, "Are you okay? You and Qian Shen don't get along?"

Bai Zhenzhen pursed her lips and said casually, "What could happen to me? Most of the time, he just brings the humiliation on himself."

Then her gaze turned to Zhang Yu, a little peculiar.

"You're also planning to comprehend the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll?"

Seeing Zhang Yu nod confidently, Bai Zhenzhen thought to herself, *This mountain of debt is driving Yu-boy more and more delusional. With his level… he even wants to try and comprehend a martial art left behind by a Golden Core True Monarch?*

The nearby Zhao Tianxing just wanted to get out of there quickly. He tugged on Zhang Yu's clothes, wanting to leave, only to find him exchanging looks and winks with Bai Zhenzhen.

Immediately after, he saw Bai Zhenzhen secretly pass a plate of seafood into Zhang Yu's arms.

Zhang Yu said, "Old Zhao, want to try some?"

Zhao Tianxing said anxiously, "The captain said we're not allowed to eat from the buffet."

As he spoke, he hurriedly used his body to shield Zhang Yu, afraid that someone might see what was happening.

Zhang Yu said lightly, "Isn't it perfect that Zhen is working here too? We can just skim a little off the top from the company."

Just as Zhang Yu was tasting the large shrimp on the plate, a voice came from behind Zhao Tianxing.

"What are you two doing?"

The voice startled Zhao Tianxing, but when he turned and saw that it was their classmate, Zhou Tianyi, he breathed a sigh of relief.

Unconsciously, it seemed Zhao Tianxing was gradually getting used to wearing a security uniform in front of his classmates.

Zhang Yu looked at Zhou Tianyi in surprise.

"Old Zhou, you're here too?"

Zhou Tianyi smiled. "Yeah, I came with Qian Shen and the others."

"Really? How come I didn't see you just now."

"Heh, what brings you here?"

The two chatted briefly about their respective situations, while a nearby Zhao Tianxing once again urged Zhang Yu that it was time to continue their patrol.

Zhou Tianyi, however, suddenly put on a mysterious expression and said, "I've got a piece of gossip about a Golden Core True Monarch. I wonder if you're interested in hearing it?"

Seeing the curious look on Zhang Yu's face, Zhao Tianxing said, "The captain is already pinging us in the group chat, asking where we are…"

Zhang Yu nodded. "Never mind then, work is more important. I'll hear it from you next time."

Just as the two were turning to leave, they heard Zhou Tianyi say, "True Monarch Xinghuo is planning to retreat to the first layer because he had half of his cultivation taken away after leaving his post."

"Hm?"

Both Zhang Yu and Zhao Tianxing immediately turned back around, waiting for Zhou Tianyi to continue.

Although the nearby Bai Zhenzhen didn't look over, she too perked up her ears to listen.

Zhou Tianyi smiled and continued, "A Golden Core True Monarch can live for a maximum of 400 years, but True Monarch Xinghuo was already 350 last year and was 'optimized' by the Myriad Laws Sect."

"When he left his post, half of his cultivation was reclaimed, leaving him unable to afford the expenses of the upper layers, which is why he wants to retreat to the first layer of Kunxu to focus on raising his descendants and teaching his disciples."

Zhang Yu was once again shocked by this bullshit world.

"Wait… you have to give back half your cultivation when you quit?"

Zhou Tianyi stated as if it were obvious, "The sect cultivated him, gave him the opportunity and resources to form his Golden Core. Isn't it normal for him to hand over half of his cultivation when he leaves?"

Just as the three were listening to Zhou Tianyi's news about True Monarch Xinghuo, the crowd in the distance suddenly began to stir.

A guest said in a low voice, "Madam Li is here. The Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll is about to be unveiled."

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 18: Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll

Amidst the gazes of the guests, a tall woman, surrounded by a crowd, slowly approached.

A head of long, silver hair reflected a unique metallic luster.

Is that head of beautiful hair an Arcane Frame? Zhang Yu wondered. *I wonder how much a single strand is worth.*

The woman's red evening gown was adorned with traces of flowing light, like clusters of flames leaping within, and it emanated powerful mana fluctuations.

This gown seems to be a magical treasure in itself, Zhao Tianxing thought. *It's probably priceless.*

At the same time, the director of the Immortal Resonance Group, who looked as though he were covered in a layer of gold foil, took the initiative to approach Li Xuelian.

Then, two other wealthy individuals at the Foundation Establishment stage joined their conversation.

They were surrounded by a circle of rich and famous people, all desperate for a chance to exchange a few words with the four and become a familiar face.

But they weren't given much of an opportunity. After a brief chat with the three, Li Xuelian arrived before the curtain concealing the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll.

"Everyone, thank you for attending the art exhibition today."

Amid the applause, Li Xuelian smiled faintly and continued, "In this moment filled with creativity and inspiration, we gather together…"

Listening to Li Xuelian's speech, Zhang Yu let out a bored yawn, wondering if he should just take this time to do his breathing exercises.

Suddenly, a thought flickered in his mind. He had been getting more and more diligent in his cultivation lately, and he wasn't sure if it was the power of the ritual forcing a new habit or the subtle influence of this world and its society.

Fortunately, Li Xuelian's speech was not long. Just as Zhang Yu was pondering, she had already moved on to the topic that most interested the many talented young cultivators present.

"For the past few years, my father has been seeking a disciple to inherit his legacy and pass on his lifetime of martial arts and Daoist techniques."

"Unfortunately, his standards are quite high, and despite searching for many years, he has yet to find a disciple who truly meets his requirements."

"Thus, he personally painted this Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll and concealed a set of martial arts within it."

"If any young hero under the age of twenty can master the martial art within, my father is willing to take them as his disciple and spare no effort in cultivating them until they can enter a top university."

"However, this painting contains a trace of the martial will left by my father. Viewing it will subject you to the impact of this will, and there is a danger of damaging your Dao heart."

"During the comprehension process that follows, please act within your limits to avoid being injured by the martial will within…"

Following her introduction, Li Xuelian slowly drew back the curtain, revealing the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll behind it.

Within a frame more than two meters tall, a blurry human figure slowly emerged.

This is a painting by a Golden Core expert?

Zhang Yu stared at the scroll, feeling it looked like a simple human shape scribbled carelessly, no better than something a primary school student might draw.

Just as Zhang Yu was thinking this, someone shouted, "A masterpiece!"

"This painting is so vibrant and full of life, the brushwork is exquisite! True Monarch Xinghuo's artistry is truly at its peak, putting our generation to shame."

Someone else quickly chimed in with flattery, "It's too beautiful! The painting appears simple, yet it hides a profound artistic conception. The more you look, the more endlessly fascinating it becomes."

As more and more people began to praise the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll, Li Xuelian couldn't help but cough, interrupting everyone.

Then she explained, "Everyone, to prevent this painting from unintentionally harming anyone, my father placed an additional subtlety upon it. Only when you are within five meters can you see its true content, but you will also be affected by the martial will within."

"Any young heroes who wish to comprehend it, please step forward to view the painting."

Hearing Li Xuelian's words, the few who had just been boasting immediately flushed red and fell awkwardly silent.

However, someone had already taken the lead and walked toward the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll. It was Lian Tianji from Purple Cloud High School, who had just been speaking with the 'funerary urn.'

"Haha, allow me, Lian Tianji, to see just what's so profound about this Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll."

Laughing, Lian Tianji strode briskly toward the scroll.

Qian Shen's eyes flickered as he watched this scene.

That's Lian Tianji from Purple Cloud High School, a formidable person who scored 670 on last month's exam. He is one of the opponents I plan to challenge after I defeat Bai Zhenzhen.

As Lian Tianji walked step by step toward the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll, the figure in the painting grew increasingly clear in his eyes, seemingly revealing a middle-aged man slowly demonstrating a profound set of martial arts.

Lian Tianji's mind was gradually drawn in, until finally, he saw the man in the painting throw a sudden punch at him from across the void.

Thump!

A muffled sound seemed to echo in the air.

Lian Tianji stopped abruptly in his tracks, his eyes wide with fury as he stared fixedly at the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll.

Seeing him standing there, frozen and motionless, the crowd assumed Lian Tianji had become immersed in the scroll, comprehending the mysterious martial art within.

Not far away, however, Li Xuelian explained calmly, "In order to select a disciple with a resilient will and an extraordinary spirit… when comprehending the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll, the observer will come face to face with the terror in their own heart."

"Only by steeling one's spirit and conquering inner weakness can one comprehend the mysteries within the painting."

Hearing this, the crowd was once again astonished, looking curiously at the motionless Lian Tianji, wondering what exactly he was seeing.

At this very moment, in Lian Tianji's eyes, the world had changed. He had unknowingly returned to his classroom, as if the art exhibition, Li Xuelian, and the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll… were all forgotten.

And the class advisor was at the podium, announcing the results of the last monthly exam.

But starting from first place, he never heard his own name.

He wasn't in the top 10…

He wasn't in the top 20…

Still not in the top 50…

As the announced scores grew lower and lower, Lian Tianji's heart grew tighter with anxiety…

At the exhibition, looking at Lian Tianji still comprehending the scroll, Li Xuelian said, "The Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll can be comprehended by multiple people at once. Are there any other young heroes interested? Please come before the painting."

Qian Shen exchanged a glance with a few classmates around him, and they all walked toward the scroll together.

At the same time, other youths who had come to comprehend the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll went forward one after another.

Zhang Yu looked at Zhou Tianyi beside him and asked curiously, "You're not going to give it a try?"

Zhou Tianyi chuckled and shrugged, "I'm just here to watch the show. I'd rather not go up there and embarrass myself."

Zhang Yu then turned to Bai Zhenzhen and asked, "What about you? You're not going either?"

Bai Zhenzhen glanced toward the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll and said flatly, "I'm still hesitating."

Zhang Yu asked curiously, "Hesitating about what?"

Bai Zhenzhen replied, "I don't want to find myself a master."

Becoming a disciple will definitely involve signing a contract with that True Monarch Xinghuo, she thought inwardly, *some kind of indenture.*

Bai Zhenzhen sighed internally, *Forget everything else… just choosing which university and what major would probably be under his control. I'd also rack up a mountain of debt, and who knows how they calculate the interest…*

Hearing Bai Zhenzhen's hesitation, Zhang Yu immediately said, "Then just don't master this martial art, and you won't have to become True Monarch Xinghuo's disciple."

Zhang Yu looked toward the scroll with a slight smile and said, "A martial art left behind by a Golden Core True Monarch, even one for the Qi Refinement stage, would cost us at least tens of thousands to buy the usage rights for, right? Why pass up a chance to learn a martial art for free?"

"If you don't want to be True Monarch Xinghuo's disciple, then at worst, just don't master the art today."

Nearby, Zhao Tianxing heard this and secretly curled his lip, thinking that Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen were each more arrogant than the last. At the same time, he took a few steps away, afraid that someone might look over and mistake him for the same kind of arrogant, ignorant fool.

Bai Zhenzhen looked at Zhang Yu speechlessly.

To have pushed Yu-boy into this kind of mental state… just how vicious are the collectors from those small loan platforms?

Zhou Tianyi smiled, "That makes sense. It doesn't cost anything to try and comprehend it anyway. Why don't we all give it a shot together?"

Zhao Tianxing, however, refused Zhang Yu and Zhou Tianyi's suggestion. Just the thought of himself in a security guard or waiter's uniform, comprehending the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll under the watchful eyes of the crowd, was too humiliating.

But watching Zhang Yu's back as he walked forward, he suddenly felt a sliver of admiration for the other's thick skin.

Just then, the walkie-talkie on Zhao Tianxing's waist crackled to life.

The security captain yelled, "What are you guys doing? You're security! Who told him he could abandon his post to comprehend the scroll? Get him back here, now!"

Sweating under the verbal assault, Zhao Tianxing hurriedly shouted as he ran forward, trying to pull Zhang Yu back.

But as Zhao Tianxing drew closer to the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll, the figure within it grew clearer, and waves of laughter drifted from all around.

Zhao Tianxing turned his head to see that everyone at the exhibition was looking at him, pointing and commenting, mocking him for overreaching, a mere security guard daring to comprehend the scroll.

Amid the countless jeers, Zhao Tianxing slowly came to a halt, frozen in embarrassment. He touched his head, then scratched his ear, utterly at a loss for how to even stand.

Meanwhile, as Zhang Yu's group of three approached the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll, the blurry figure within gradually sharpened, transforming into a middle-aged man with a resolute face, who finally threw a punch at them from across the void.

Bai Zhenzhen's vision went dark, and her phone began to vibrate manically.

She picked it up and saw it was a collections message from a loan platform.

"Regarding your overdue 'Owe-It' loan, due to multiple failed collection attempts, the situation is severe. Please settle your payment within three days of receiving this message. If you remain overdue, we will proceed according to relevant laws…"

"Continued delinquency will result in a background check on your location…"

"Deadbeat, you've lost all face over this little bit of money. How about your whole family helps you by collecting bottles…"

More and more collection messages appeared, their content growing increasingly unrestrained, shifting from simple reminders to all-encompassing insults, curses, and threats…

Staring at the endless stream of messages on her phone, Bai Zhenzhen broke out in a cold sweat, her entire body tensed, until her phone's ringtone also began to sound.

But as she watched the phone ring incessantly, Bai Zhenzhen didn't dare to answer.

Yet even though she did nothing, the phone answered itself.

To her horror, a cold male voice emanated from the phone.

"Due to credit fraud and failure to pay, you have committed a serious breach of contract. We have locked onto your position via the Heavenly Net system. If the debt is not settled within three days, a lightning tribulation will descend…"

A low rumble of thunder sounded.

Bai Zhenzhen shot her head up and saw the faint flicker of lightning in the sky above.

(End of chapter)

Chapter 19: Terror and the Dao Heart

"645... 644... 639..."

The figures of his classmates appeared one by one before Qian Shen. He couldn't make out their forms, but he could clearly see the scores displayed above their heads.

"680, 690, 660..."

The score displayed above each person's head was so impossibly high, so brilliant, that it made Qian Shen feel utterly inadequate.

He felt so pathetic standing before his classmates, as insignificant as a common thug.

"Standing among these people, I'm no better than a bag of wet trash."

"With a paltry score of just over 600, I don't deserve to be here, let alone speak to them or even get near them..."

In his eyes, the scores above his classmates' heads climbed ceaselessly as their figures stretched upward, transforming them into giants towering among the clouds. Soon, he could only see their legs, unable to even make out their faces.

...

Meanwhile, on the other side of the art exhibition, Li Xingyu of Mount Mang High School's drone carved an arc through the air, then slowly flew toward the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll.

But in the next instant, with a sharp crackle, the drone seemed to malfunction, spiraling erratically to the ground.

"The soul cultivator students from Mount Mang High School are already bound by contracts, so they shouldn't bother joining the fray."

Li Xuelian murmured softly, then withdrew her gaze from the drone and turned her attention back to the other students.

"It's a shame that nearly all the students trying their luck at this exhibition are first-years. To master the martial arts on the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll, second and third-year students would have a much better chance."

"But it's understandable… The top students from the second and third years either don't meet the age requirement or are already under contract, so they wouldn't be looking for a new master."

Just then, shimmering with golden light, the Songyang City Director of the Immortal Resonance Group approached Li Xuelian's side and said with a smile.

"This Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll is truly worthy of being personally painted by True Monarch Xinghuo. It is exceptionally profound, but I wonder what exactly it is intended to test?"

Li Xuelian did not answer his question directly, stating instead, "The first trial of the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll tests the Dao heart."

"Those who cannot withstand it are often forcibly repelled, and may even be left with a flaw in their Dao heart."

…

Feeling the scornful and mocking gazes of countless people around him, Zhao Tianxing couldn't help but retreat again and again, moving away from the effective range of the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll.

When he came to his senses and took in his surroundings, he realized that the feeling of the 'entire crowd watching' and the 'scornful glares' were merely effects of the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll.

At this thought, realizing he had utterly failed the scroll's test, his face flushed crimson and he hurried away, afraid that someone might notice him, a security guard, making a fool of himself.

…

At the exhibition, Li Xuelian continued, "Passing this first trial naturally has the effect of tempering one's Dao heart."

"As for the Dao heart level, the vast majority of us cultivators rely on cultivation techniques to raise it."

"And different cultivation techniques require different mindsets to be compatible."

"Take the ancient god-worshipping techniques, for instance; the practitioner must be incomparably devout and possess absolute faith in the deity. The more fervent their belief, the more effective the technique."

"Or consider Purple Cloud High School's Heavenly Diligence Art, which requires a practitioner to engage in ascetic training to the extreme, integrating that hardship into their very instincts to achieve maximum efficacy."

"Take also the introductory Basic Heart Tempering Art for high schoolers, which seeks a calm and focused spirit. It requires a mindset of silent perseverance, like water dripping through stone, to be effective."

"There are countless cultivation techniques to elevate the Dao heart, some profound and some basic, but the key is whether the practitioner possesses a mindset compatible with the technique."

"But thoughts are difficult to fathom. How a person truly thinks, whether they are genuinely in sync with their cultivation technique—forget outsiders, sometimes even they themselves cannot say for certain."

"Fortunately, the stronger the Dao heart, the stronger one's willpower. Thus, measuring the strength of one's willpower to determine their Dao heart level and test the efficacy of their cultivation technique has become the simplest method."

"But the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll does not simply test the strength of one's willpower to ascertain the strength of their Dao heart."

"The scroll targets the terror within one's heart, striking directly at the soul's weaknesses and giving no opportunity to resist with cultivation techniques; it tests their most primal reaction."

"When faced with a weakness of the soul, one can only pass by promptly adjusting their mindset to overcome that inner flaw."

The Immortal Resonance Group Director's eyes lit up.

"I understand," he said. "Senior Xinghuo wants a disciple with a flexible mind? Someone who, while practicing a god-worshipping art, could switch which god they worship, and while practicing the Heavenly Diligence Art, could be just as competitive in their asceticism as they are in 'lying flat'?"

Li Xuelian nodded. "There are countless cultivation techniques, and it is good for one's mindset to be compatible with them. But only those who can constantly adjust their thinking to adapt to changing environments and different techniques—unbound by any single art—are true geniuses."

"This is especially true as the world develops at an ever-increasing pace. The Ten Great Sects influence every facet of society, and the whole of Kunxu is undergoing drastic changes. It is unacceptable for one's mindset to fail to adapt in time."

"For example, in this day and age, exams and scores are indispensable for anyone who wishes to walk the path of cultivation. They have long been integrated into the life of every practitioner."

"Consequently, an obsession with exams and scores has naturally become a part of the modern cultivator's mindset."

"Having excellent scores and a fixation on them can strengthen a top student's will, which in turn makes it easier to raise their Dao heart level."

"But this, in turn, is also a weakness of the spirit. There is always someone better, a higher mountain to climb; a momentary lead does not guarantee you will lead forever. Many top students are as confident when their ranking is high as they are insecure when it falls."

"To overcome this spiritual weakness, a practitioner must be able to promptly and flexibly adapt their thinking; this is the key to passing the trial."

"For instance, a previous student in the scroll's trial repeatedly experienced receiving low exam scores until he finally overcame his fear of them, honing a kind of wishful-thinking mindset."

...

Lian Tianji listened as the teacher on the platform announced the results, then suddenly burst out laughing.

"Hahahaha, since I've already become the worst student in last place, I might as well start over from scratch."

"From this day forward, I am the most useless, the slacker with the absolute worst grades."

"But even as a slacker, I have the chance to surpass every single one of you and claim the top spot."

"I will become number one in our year!"

As he conquered the terror in his heart, he felt as if he had returned to the exhibition, the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll before him growing clearer.

…

Li Xuelian continued, "Kunxu has thirty-six levels above ground and eighteen below, each a world in itself. Whether mortal or immortal, everyone is divided into a strict hierarchy. This class system is ingrained in the very bones of every cultivator, influencing the depths of their thoughts."

"There was once a student who, within the scroll's trial, experienced endless oppression from countless others and ultimately developed a 'lying flat' mindset."

…

Qian Shen watched as the giants, their scores far surpassing his own, rose from the earth, growing taller and taller until their faces became impossible to discern.

Only the scores above the giants' heads continued to grow, emitting a dazzling radiance.

He tried to keep up with them, but it was utterly useless.

As the giants grew to ever more absurd heights and their scores climbed, his anxiety turned to fear, his fear to despair, and finally, despair faded into numbness.

He collapsed onto the ground, no longer looking at the giants' figures.

"Fine, then."

"I just won't chase them anymore."

"As long as I can cultivate, that's enough. Even if I can't compare to anyone else… as long as I can cultivate, that's all that matters."

As if waking from a long dream, Qian Shen, still lying on the ground, opened his eyes. He looked at the exhibition hall and the Martial Ascension Scroll before him, a glimmer of understanding in his gaze.

…

At the exhibition, the Songyang City Director of the Immortal Resonance Group listened to Li Xuelian's analysis and agreed.

"Changes in mindset are inextricably linked to the influence of the times."

He ventured a guess, "Given that everyone in modern society relies on loans, I imagine that would also be reflected in the scroll's trial, wouldn't it?"

"Correct," Li Xuelian said with a nod. "There was once a student who, in the scroll's test, faced the terror of repaying her debts on the path to immortality. In the end, she developed a 'deadbeat' mindset."

…

Watching the debt-collecting heavenly lightning brewing in the sky, Bai Zhenzhen squatted down, her face a mask of terror.

"Wait! I'll pay it back!"

"I'll pay it back, alright!"

"Don't strike me!"

She quickly opened her phone to check her accounts, wanting to see just how much she owed and how much she could possibly repay.

"Eight hundred thousand?!"

Opening the first lending app, Bai Zhenzhen's heart sank.

The 1.2 million she owed on the second platform made cold sweat stream down her back.

Two million… five million… eight million…

As the total debt she calculated in her mind continued to swell, the hand holding her phone gradually fell limp at her side.

A full eight million in debt—for a high school student, such a staggering sum would either lead to a complete breakdown, or…

Bai Zhenzhen suddenly threw herself onto the ground, looked up at the lightning, and bellowed, "If you've got the guts, then strike me dead!"

"Strike me dead, and your eight million goes up in smoke."

Seeing that the lightning still hadn't fallen, Bai Zhenzhen continued, "Either you strike me dead, and the eight million vanishes into thin air."

"Or you can find me some work, and I'll pay you back once I've earned the money."

As the heavenly lightning gradually dissipated, the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll reappeared before Bai Zhenzhen's eyes.

As she watched the figure within it practice martial arts, Bai Zhenzhen felt a sense of enlightenment.

...

Back at the exhibition, Li Xuelian remarked with a sigh, "But whether it's wishful thinking, lying flat, or being a deadbeat, these are merely mental states used to counteract immense pressure. While they can temper one's will and Dao heart, their future ultimately depends on the path they walk in reality."

"After all, this is only the first trial of the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll—merely a threshold."

She recalled when she was in high school, and her father had also tested her Dao heart.

Back then, her greatest fear had been her own father. In the trial, she had been brutally oppressed by him until she finally rose up in resistance, establishing a mindset of 'explosive filial piety.' After waking, she fiercely 'looted the old boss's gold,' and her cultivation advanced by leaps and bounds.

Not long after, however, the pressures from all aspects of society, along with her father's every action, led her to once again feel admiration and respect for him.

The Songyang City Director of the Immortal Resonance Group, standing beside her, nodded slightly, knowing she was right; the effects of such a Dao heart trial were only temporary.

After all, a person's thoughts are constantly changing; how could the fleeting influence of a Dao heart trial withstand the long-lasting impact of the real world and society at large?

Li Xuelian continued, "After passing the first trial and overcoming the inner terror, the true comprehension begins."

"And after passing the comprehension trial, whether one can ultimately master the art is another matter entirely."

The Director nodded, understanding now that overcoming terror, comprehending the scroll, and mastering the martial art were the three stages to understanding the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll.

"Then among those present, how many do you think can succeed?"

Li Xuelian glanced over the many students present and shook her head. "I fear we will be lucky to find even one."

...

As the figure on the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll gradually came into focus, and as he watched it begin to perform a set of fist techniques, Zhang Yu suddenly felt a chill rise in his heart.

"Please abide by the ritual's agreement. Strive to complete the wish. Do not deliberately slack off or delay. 10."

Zhang Yu paused, stunned. "Wait... aren't I striving to comprehend the Martial Ascension Scroll right now? Isn't that part of studying hard to get into a good university?"

But the chill could not communicate with him; it simply continued its countdown.

"Please abide by the ritual's agreement. Strive to complete the wish. Do not deliberately slack off or delay. 9."

"Please abide by the ritual's agreement. Strive to complete the wish. Do not deliberately slack off or delay. 8."

Left with no choice, Zhang Yu could only sit down and try a breathing exercise with spiritual energy to see if it would stop the countdown.

As he began the breathing exercise, the chill gradually faded, and the countdown stopped.

This moron…

Just as Zhang Yu was performing his breathing exercise while inwardly cursing the ritual's power, another surge of cold washed over him.

"Please abide by the ritual's terms. Strive to complete your wish. Do not deliberately slack off or delay. 10."

Hearing this new countdown, Zhang Yu was utterly shocked.

"Wait… I am trying to cultivate."

"Why is it counting down again?"

What's wrong with this idiotic ritual?

Zhang Yu stopped his breathing exercise to test his theory, only to find that the surging chill and the countdown didn't disappear. Instead, a new wave of cold and another countdown began.

Hearing two countdowns ringing out in his head, taking turns to count down, Zhang Yu finally understood what was happening.

"Two countdowns?"

Is one of them fake?

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 20: Insight

Two identical chills, two identical countdowns. After several attempts, Zhang Yu discovered that the two streams of ritual power were compelling him in different directions.

One of them would stop its countdown the moment he performed his breathing exercises to absorb spiritual energy.

The other would stop its countdown only after he began to study the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll.

Zhang Yu instantly grew more certain of one thing: one of the two countdowns was a fabrication.

It must be an effect of the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll.

Face the terror in my heart… so it's reproducing the pressure the ritual power exerts on me?

I never expected that the ritual power reproduced by the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll would contradict the real one affecting me.

But of the two streams of ritual power, which one was fake?

Is it the one that stops counting down when I perform my breathing exercises?

Or is it the one that stops when I study the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll?

Zhang Yu was more inclined to believe it was the latter, yet he couldn't make the decision lightly.

The price for choosing wrong was death.

Which one do I choose?

Listening to the ever-shifting countdown in his mind, Zhang Yu's thoughts were a tangled mess, and he remained unable to decide.

If I can't choose, then I simply won't.

His gaze hardened as he came to a resolution.

"I'll just treat both countdowns as real."

Zhang Yu immediately sat down cross-legged and began circulating the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, performing the breathing exercises to draw in the spiritual energy of the world around him.

As the countdown in his mind ticked away, from ten to five and then to three, Zhang Yu stood up once more, turned back toward the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll, and attempted to comprehend the martial art it contained.

In this way, driven by the pressure of two separate countdowns, Zhang Yu alternated between practicing the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method and studying the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll, progressing in both pursuits.

At the same time, others at the art exhibition gradually began to notice Zhang Yu's odd behavior.

The Songyang City Director of the Immortal Resonance Group watched Zhang Yu with curiosity, remarking, "This young man is performing breathing exercises one moment and standing up to study martial arts the next. What on earth has he seen?"

Beside him, Li Xuelian also cast her gaze toward Zhang Yu and commented thoughtfully, "It almost looks as if someone is forcing him to perform those breathing exercises."

"Perhaps it stems from a fear of a certain teacher in his life."

Just then, they saw Zhang Yu change his movements again. He was no longer performing breathing exercises but had begun practicing the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms.

It turned out that Zhang Yu had come to a sudden realization: the countdown that paused when he did his breathing exercises might not have been compelling him to cultivate at its core, but rather forcing him down the conventional path of studying, training, preparing for university exams, and eventually, working for a living.

So, he decided to try practicing his martial arts while simultaneously observing the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll.

His Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms had long since become muscle memory anyway. If he could practice them while studying the scroll, he could devote the majority of his attention to the latter.

After all, his primary goal at the moment was to comprehend the martial arts depicted on the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll.

After this attempt proved successful, he began to feel that practicing and studying at the same time was still a bit cumbersome, so he simply took out his phone and tried browsing his school textbooks while looking at the scroll.

When he found that looking at his textbooks also worked, he put the audio of the material on speaker, listening to the content while he continued to study the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll.

…

Watching Zhang Yu alternate between breathing exercises, martial practice, and academic study, Li Xuelian sighed with genuine feeling.

"This child must have an incredibly strict teacher, one who has pushed him relentlessly, to the point of becoming a figure of immense terror in his heart."

"Now, we shall see if he can achieve a mental breakthrough under all this pressure…"

But before Li Xuelian could finish her sentence, Zhang Yu suddenly walked away from the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll, went straight to the buffet table, and returned with a large plate of seafood, which he began to eat while continuing his study of the scroll.

It had occurred to him that eating was also something the ritual was unlikely to prevent.

Li Xuelian watched this unfold with a hint of surprise.

"Oh? Such a swift breakthrough. Under layers of oppression, he's adopted a mindset of rebellious indolence? Only then can one truly face the terror in their heart and continue to comprehend the martial arts within the scroll."

"Perhaps he himself hasn't even realized it, but he has unconsciously conquered his inner fear and passed this trial of the Martial Ascension Scroll; his actions are now completely natural."

Seeing a security guard about to step forward and stop Zhang Yu, Li Xuelian waved him away. She was now quite curious to see just how much Zhang Yu could comprehend from the scroll.

As he ate lobster and gazed at the Martial Ascension Scroll, Zhang Yu could now gradually make out the martial art the figure was performing.

It looks like a set of fist techniques?

The fist technique itself wasn't complex, and Zhang Yu had a rough idea of it after watching a few times, but when he checked his Feathered Tome, he saw that nothing had changed. He clearly hadn't truly learned the art, let alone mastered it.

Based on his experience with Basic High School Swordplay and the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, a martial art like this should have appeared as Level 0 on his Feathered Tome after a single viewing.

What did I do wrong?

Just then, Lian Tianji let out a great laugh, his face brimming with confidence as he declared, "I have fully comprehended the martial arts within. It is, as I thought, an exquisite palm technique."

Before his words had even faded, Qian Shen, who was standing nearby, spoke up.

"What palm technique? It's clearly a leg technique."

Ordinarily, Qian Shen, with his total score of 600, would never dare to speak so loudly in front of someone with a score of 670.

But having just had his Dao heart tempered by the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll, Qian Shen's courage was at its absolute peak.

Their exchange quickly drew disagreement from others.

Someone argued, "No, no, the art hidden in the scroll is obviously a saber technique."

Another began to mock them all indiscriminately, "A bunch of blind fools. It's plainly a finger technique."

Bai Zhenzhen furrowed her brow slightly; what she saw was a form of sword art.

Evidently, while Zhang Yu had been eating and studying, more and more students had completed their own comprehension of the scroll.

Listening to the discussion, Lian Tianji simply turned his gaze to Li Xuelian and asked, "Ms. Li, what kind of martial art is actually hidden within this scroll?"

Seeing that everyone was now looking at her, Li Xuelian merely smiled.

"As for the specific martial art, I have no comment."

"However, I will offer you all a reminder: the Martial Ascension Scroll holds its own mysteries. If anyone here masters the art within it, the scroll itself will provide a clear indication."

The crowd understood. This meant that if someone managed to master the martial art from the scroll, the scroll would display some kind of sign.

With this in mind, Lian Tianji took the lead without a second thought.

As a student from Purple Cloud High School, Lian Tianji already possessed the absolute confidence of a prodigy.

After the trial he had just endured, that confidence had swelled to its absolute peak. The moment he moved, he began to perform the palm technique he had just comprehended from the scroll.

As his hands moved, the sound of rushing wind and cracking thunder echoed, while a surging power and killing intent erupted from his body, threatening to blast the entire exhibition hall apart.

From a distance, Zhao Tianxing had been watching the events unfold. Seeing this display, he was struck with awe.

Such high physical strength, and what a terrifying palm technique. This is a deadly martial art designed for combat.

However, while Lian Tianji's physical strength was impressive for a first-year student, many cultivators present had long since graduated high school. They

were more astonished by the sheer proficiency with which he executed the art.

One of them marveled internally, *Is that really the palm technique he just learned from the scroll? Every move is so polished. The top student from Purple Cloud High School is truly a genius among geniuses.*

But when Lian Tianji finished performing the entire set of palm techniques, the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll remained utterly still, showing no reaction whatsoever.

"How is that possible?" Lian Tianji said in disbelief. "I've clearly mastered the art from the scroll. How could it not work?"

Qian Shen chuckled and stepped forward, coming to stand before Lian Tianji.

"I told you, it's a leg technique."

He then began to perform the martial art he had comprehended from the scroll. Although he lacked Lian Tianji's fluid grace, his execution of the moves was already second nature.

Watching this, Bai Zhenzhen's brows furrowed once more.

Is this a body tempering art? Specifically for training the legs.

Yet, when Qian Shen finished his final move, the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll was still motionless, showing no change at all.

"How can that be?"

Echoing Lian Tianji's words, Qian Shen stared at the scroll in equal disbelief.

Following him, a steady stream of students came forward to demonstrate the martial arts they had comprehended.

Including Lian Tianji and Qian Shen, twelve students in total demonstrated nine different sets of martial arts: fist, palm, leg, finger, claw, saber, sword, spear, and staff.

Three of the students had comprehended arts that were identical to what others had shown.

But even after this series of demonstrations, not a single person managed to elicit a reaction from the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll.

Lian Tianji couldn't stop himself from turning to Li Xuelian again.

"Ms. Li, with so many of us, has truly not one person succeeded?"

Li Xuelian didn't reply, only shaking her head slightly, a hint of disappointment in her eyes.

At that moment, Bai Zhenzhen slowly walked forward. Under the watchful eyes of the crowd, she used her fingers as a sword and began to perform a set of sword techniques.

Although the swordplay possessed a peerless sharpness and Bai Zhenzhen's every move was masterful, the onlookers lost interest after a few glances.

After all, two others had already demonstrated sword techniques without provoking any change in the scroll.

But to their surprise, after finishing the swordplay, Bai Zhenzhen's style abruptly shifted. Using her hand as a saber, she began to perform a saber technique.

Then came a fist technique, a palm technique, a leg technique…

Zhao Tianxing exclaimed in shock, "Did Bai Zhenzhen learn all the martial arts everyone just demonstrated?"

Lian Tianji frowned as he watched.

To be able to replicate everyone's martial arts after seeing them only once, and in such a short time… which top-tier high school is this woman from?

Watching Bai Zhenzhen execute each move as if it had been forged through years of arduous practice, Qian Shen's mind reeled.

On the one hand, he was stunned that Bai Zhenzhen could perform all nine martial arts. On the other, a question kept surfacing in his mind.

If she performs all nine arts that everyone comprehended, could it actually work?

Just then, under the astonished gazes of the crowd, the man in the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll moved. He turned to look at Bai Zhenzhen with a smile in his eyes, and two words materialized on the scroll.

Not bad.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 21: Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering

Seeing these words, the many students present were startled, assuming Bai Zhenzhen had succeeded.

But then Li Xuelian sighed, looked toward Bai Zhenzhen, and said, "To be able, on your own, to learn the forms of these nine martial arts in such a short time, your innate talent is already one in ten thousand."

"It is only a pity that you still fall a little short of my father's requirements."

Hearing this, some of the students present breathed a sigh of relief, while others were secretly astonished.

Zhao Tianxing thought, *She still didn't meet the requirements? Just what kind of ridiculously talented disciple is this True Monarch Xinghuo looking for?*

Bai Zhenzhen, on the other hand, secretly let out a breath of relief.

She hadn't expected to trigger a change in the Martial Ascension Scroll with a single attempt and had thought the matter settled. In a flash of panic, she had been on the verge of speaking up to refuse True Monarch Xinghuo's offer of discipleship.

Good thing I didn't say anything, or that would have been a huge loss of face. I knew something still seemed to be missing.

After Bai Zhenzhen's attempt, a few others went forward to try performing the nine sets of martial arts, but none of them could trigger a change in the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll.

Conversely, Lian Tianji, who had been brimming with confidence, was slow to go up and try again, seemingly pondering the reason for Bai Zhenzhen's failure and what it was they were still lacking.

For a time, the entire venue fell silent; imperceptibly, no one was going up to try anymore.

Just as Li Xuelian was lamenting that this was the end of it, she saw Zhang Yu walk up, holding his phone.

"Oh?" Li Xuelian's interest was suddenly piqued. She thought, *After seeing so many people fail, he still has the confidence to go up. It seems he has some kind of assurance.*

But the next moment, she could not help but frown.

Because Zhang Yu had actually started playing a video on his phone, practicing the martial arts by copying Bai Zhenzhen's image in the video.

Evidently, he had just recorded Bai Zhenzhen's performance.

And seeing Zhang Yu following the video, executing the forms move by clumsy move, Li Xuelian's brow furrowed even deeper.

It was obvious that aside from the fist technique he had comprehended himself, Zhang Yu was quite unfamiliar with the other eight martial arts. Although he was now mimicking Bai Zhenzhen's movements from the video, it only served to highlight the chasm in their respective understandings of the eight arts' forms.

From a distance, Zhao Tianxing watched Zhang Yu in his security guard uniform, imitating Bai Zhenzhen's movements in a clumsy display under everyone's gaze, and felt his scalp tingle, cringing so hard his toes could have carved out a three-bedroom apartment.

Just by watching, he could feel that the crowd's gazes toward Zhang Yu were filled with contempt and mockery. He couldn't imagine what the person actually standing in that spot, doing that very thing, must be feeling.

Stop it, Zhang Yu!

Zhao Tianxing could no longer bear to watch, shouting only in his heart.

This is too humiliating! You're already being seen as a clown!

Zhang Yu naturally could not hear Zhao Tianxing's thoughts, nor did he care what the people in the exhibition hall now thought of him.

He just earnestly, move by move, performed each of the nine martial arts in accordance with Bai Zhenzhen's actions in the video.

And as he executed the final move, countless streams of experience and sensation suddenly flooded his mind, instantly giving Zhang Yu a different understanding of the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll, as if he had practiced it tens of thousands of times.

At this moment, the forms of the nine martial arts gradually faded from his mind, replaced by nine different intents, faintly looming within his consciousness.

At this moment, Zhang Yu abruptly understood that the nine martial arts on the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll emphasized intent, not form.

What a cultivator needed to do was to contemplate the artistic conception within each and every move while practicing the martial art.

The killing intent to shatter an army of thousands, the fighting spirit that would not regret nine deaths, the imposing aura to forge ever forward… the nine martial arts cultivated martial will, and through it, fortified one's Dao heart.

"This isn't a martial art for combat or body tempering, but one that uses martial will to temper the Dao heart."

This was a martial heart technique used to raise the level of one's Dao heart!

Martial will was the collective term the Ten Great Sects had settled on for the martial powers of sword intent, fist intent, saber intent, and the like.

The most fundamental function of martial will was to strengthen the spirit and solidify one's own will, thereby raising a cultivator's Dao heart level.

And for a Golden Core expert like True Monarch Xinghuo, his martial will could even be left within a painting to influence the minds and spirits of others.

At the same time, the aura around Zhang Yu underwent a powerful transformation.

Killing intent, fighting spirit, imposing aura, valor… one after another, incredibly potent qualities emerged from within him, seeming as though they would coalesce into his martial will in a single breath.

Simultaneously, the man on the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll grew clearer and clearer, even gradually taking on vivid colors, as if transforming into a real person who was staring intently at the changes in Zhang Yu.

The onlookers who noticed this were also stunned. This was undoubtedly the most significant reaction from the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll all day.

Lian Tianji, Qian Shen, Bai Zhenzhen… all of them stared intently at Zhang Yu, and they all sensed the change in him as the same incredible thought rose in their minds.

"Is he really going to succeed?"

But in the next instant, the change occurring in Zhang Yu was abruptly cut short, and the martial will that had seemed on the verge of condensing a moment ago dissipated into nothing.

"What a pity, what a pity," a line of text appeared on the painting. "A talent of celestial caliber, yet one move short."

Zhang Yu's face, however, showed no surprise.

Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art Level 0 (1/1, 8.3/8 mana, 0.85/0.8 physical strength, 1/3 Dao heart)

On the Feathered Tome, a martial art called the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art had appeared.

This was the martial art that finally manifested on the Feathered Tome after Zhang Yu had repeatedly studied the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll, carefully observed the performances of the many students, and recorded Bai Zhenzhen's video for repeated contemplation.

And unlike the martial arts Zhang Yu had learned before, this Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art had requirements for mana, physical strength, and Dao heart.

"Besides having to practice all the forms like the fist, palm, and leg arts, it also requires 8 mana, a physical strength of 0.8, and a level 3 Dao heart."

"I already meet the other requirements, but this level 3 Dao heart…"

Zhang Yu's own Dao heart was only level 1.

Attempting it as he did, he was, as expected, stuck at the final step.

"This Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, it seems for now, is a martial art meant for after reaching a level 3 Dao heart, used to condense martial will, fortify the mind with that martial will, and temper the Dao heart."

Such a high requirement of a level 3 Dao heart… is that even achievable for a first-year high school student only three months into the school year?

Li Xuelian looked at the failed Zhang Yu, her eyes glittering with an extraordinary light.

Her original plan flashed through her mind. She had never expected any of the first-year high school students present to succeed.

"According to the file the security company just sent over, this person is Zhang Yu, a first-year student at Songyang High School."

"For him to have reached this stage, he can truly be called a talent of celestial caliber."

Recalling Zhang Yu's performance, she sighed inwardly.

Impressive. I almost misjudged him completely.

His forms looked stiff, every punch and kick was clumsy, yet he was ultimately able to comprehend the intent contained within.

This shows that he prioritizes intent over form and saw the true mystery of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art early on.

Excellent, excellent. Father can add another fine disciple to his tutelage.

In truth, as soon as Li Xuelian had checked the information of the participants, she had felt that it was unlikely anyone would succeed in this test.

After all, any students who could master the martial art within the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll on the spot would either be from a prominent family or already be a second or third-year who had long been signed to a contract. It was highly unlikely they would come seeking to become True Monarch Xinghuo's disciple.

The possibility of finding a genius who could master the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art on the spot was exceedingly small to begin with.

But that did not mean no one could be accepted as her father's disciple.

If, among the first-year students present, someone could withstand the impact of the martial will, learn all the forms on the spot, and comprehend the mystery of martial will from it, then even if they could not ultimately master the art, they were definitely a genius of exceptional talent.

If such an individual were to come a year later, they would certainly be able to master the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, which would also meet her father's requirements; finding them now was like discovering them a year early, before they had fully developed and been signed to a contract.

She believed her father would absolutely be willing to accept such an outstanding disciple.

In that case, the fact that this first-year student couldn't master the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art was not a flaw, but rather an advantage that would allow Li Xuelian to negotiate a slightly lower price when it came time to sign the contract.

At this thought, she was already smiling toward Zhang Yu.

"This student, although you were unable to truly master the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, you have already perceived its mysteries. Mastering this art is merely a matter of time for you."

"I will ask my father shortly to see if he is willing to accept you as his disciple."

Hearing this, the crowd was once again thrown into an uproar.

Lian Tianji looked in Zhang Yu's direction, took out his phone, and secretly snapped a picture of him. He needed to find out just where this formidable security guard had appeared from.

Qian Shen stared at Zhang Yu in disbelief, screaming internally, *Impossible! How can someone with a score of 550 be taken as a disciple by a Golden Core True Monarch? I must be dreaming! Is the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll still testing me?*

Bai Zhenzhen: *Is Yu-boy… using a cheat code?*

Discovering that her good brother, who was once her inferior in every way and mired in debt alongside her, had suddenly soared into the heavens, Bai Zhenzhen felt an immediate sense of unease.

Ah, Yu-boy, it's not that I don't wish you well. If you had ranked in the top ten, or the top five, better than before but still below me, then this brother would have certainly wished you all the best.

Who told you to suppress all the heroes and even surpass me?

However, watching the surrounding people approach Zhang Yu to get on his good side, Bai Zhenzhen thought to herself, *After Zhang Yu signs with a Golden Core True Monarch, he'll definitely be able to attract a lot of investors. When that time comes, I have to fleece him for all he's worth and borrow money from him.*

But the next moment, her thoughts shifted, and she frowned.

But with half his cultivation base taken away and having been let go by one of the great sects, he has no resources and no backing. If Zhang Yu really becomes his disciple, he'll be a workhorse for the rest of his life.

Forget it, forget it. For the sake of our brotherhood, I should probably give him a reminder. Can't let him be dazzled by the words 'Golden Core.' I have to tell him to refuse the offer.

Elsewhere, Zhao Tianxing's eyes were wide, his mind a complete blank. But he soon recalled how he had tried to persuade Zhang Yu and was struck by a wave of embarrassment.

So humiliating.

He's a true genius. When I was saying all those things to him, he must have thought I was a clown.

Just as Bai Zhenzhen started walking toward Zhang Yu, many other students also began to crowd around.

Some wanted to add Zhang Yu's contact information, some wanted to ask him about the mysteries of the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll, and still others wanted to take a picture with him.

Meanwhile, Li Xuelian had already stepped to the side and was calling her father.

"Dad, I've found a good prospect here in Songyang City…"

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 22: The Contract

After Li Xuelian finished explaining Zhang Yu's situation, a light laugh came from the other end of the line.

"He is indeed impressive, but there's no need to take him on."

Li Xuelian asked in confusion, "Why not?"

True Monarch Xinghuo burst into laughter, his voice filled with delight.

"I've already found a true genius."

"Also a first-year, and it only took him half an hour to master the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art."

"And he isn't bound by any contracts."

At this, True Monarch Xinghuo couldn't help but laugh heartily again.

Li Xuelian said in surprise, "A prodigy like that actually exists?"

True Monarch Xinghuo chuckled. "I've told you before, the first layer of Kunxu has never been short on geniuses, only on people to invest in them."

"Think of the top scorers in each subject of the annual college entrance exams, not to mention the overall champion; you know how astonishingly brilliant those individuals are."

"But geniuses of that caliber appear by the handful every year on Kunxu's first layer, along with a whole crowd not far behind them, cropping up year after year like an endless field of chives."

"There are simply too many geniuses out there. In the past, I just never found them, always getting beaten to the punch by others, but now, I've finally managed to be one step ahead."

Li Xuelian glanced in Zhang Yu's direction with a hint of regret and asked, "Shouldn't we sign this Zhang Yu as well?"

True Monarch Xinghuo replied, "Forget it. From now on, our family's resources will be invested in the true genius; let's not divide our focus."

...

In the conference room adjacent to the art exhibition.

Li Xuelian looked at Zhang Yu with a deeply apologetic expression.

"I'm sorry, my fellow student, but my father has other urgent matters to attend to and will likely be unable to take you as his disciple for the time being."

She continued with utmost sincerity, "However, you can use the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art freely from now on. I'll personally grant you the rights to its use."

Li Xuelian's eyes were filled with admiration as she looked at him.

"Finally, I would like to give you ten thousand yuan as a personal gift."

"Don't be so quick to refuse; this gift stems purely from my admiration for your talent."

"I hope that by the next time we meet, you will have been accepted into a prestigious university."

"Oh, and one more thing. Regarding the videos you recorded, they involve the distribution rights for the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, so I'll need you to delete them..."

A moment later, as she watched Zhang Yu's departing figure, the smile on Li Xuelian's face slowly faded.

Even though True Monarch Xinghuo didn't intend to take him as a disciple, Li Xuelian had no intention of making an enemy of such a talented young man.

After all, granting the usage rights to the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art and giving away ten thousand yuan were trivial matters for her.

She couldn't even remember how many times she had made similar small gestures to gifted youngsters.

The vast majority of them, however, ultimately faded into mediocrity and were long forgotten.

After settling this matter, Li Xuelian met with a few more important guests before eagerly seeking out her father.

She was incredibly curious about the peerless genius True Monarch Xinghuo had mentioned.

…

Meanwhile, at the art exhibition which had not yet formally concluded.

Bai Zhenzhen watched Zhang Yu emerge from the conference room and asked, "How did it go? Did you turn down True Monarch Xinghuo? Li Xuelian didn't give you a hard time, did she?"

Zhang Yu, recalling Li Xuelian's admiring expression, shook his head.

"She didn't give me a hard time at all."

"Before I could even say a word, she rejected me first, saying True Monarch Xinghuo had other urgent business…"

"She did give me an extra 10,000 yuan at the end, though."

Hearing this, Bai Zhenzhen pursed her lips.

"A standard excuse."

"Maybe she looked into your background and found you weren't so great after all."

"Like your monthly exam scores are terrible, you have no sterilization record, your muscle development is poor, and you're drowning in debt…"

Zhang Yu pursed his lips as he listened to her.

"Zhen, you lost and you're still not over it, so now you're resorting to personal attacks?"

Seeing Zhang Yu's smug expression, Bai Zhenzhen couldn't resist grabbing his shoulder and demanding, "Are you going to tell me what kind of cheat you're using or not?"

"Tell me, did you borrow money to bribe the staff so you could study the Martial Ascension Scroll beforehand?"

Zhang Yu chuckled at the sight of Bai Zhenzhen's face, contorted with jealousy.

Keep it up, Zhen. Watching the pathetic displays of you weaklings after your defeat is my new favorite pastime.

As the two were talking, Qian Shen approached from a short distance away.

He looked at Zhang Yu with a grave expression and asked, "Do you intentionally do poorly on your exams?"

The trial of the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll had prepared Qian Shen to face other high-scorers.

But for a low-scorer to outperform him was something he found utterly shocking.

Seeing Zhang Yu shake his head in denial, Qian Shen said resentfully, "Impossible. If you weren't throwing your exams, why is there such a mismatch between your talent and your scores?"

"Hmm?" Zhang Yu thought for a moment before replying, "Exams can't possibly reveal a person's full potential…"

But Qian Shen cut him off, exclaiming agitatedly, "Impossible!"

"The college entrance exam and the six major high school subjects were established by the Ten Great Sects as a system specifically for evaluating students. It has been verified and adjusted by countless experts and powerful individuals, making it the most optimal, scientific, and Immortal Dao-aligned system for assessing a person!"

"Every subject, every single point, perfectly reflects the comprehensive differences between individuals, including bloodline superiority, regional backwardness, and evolutionary incompletion…"

Looking at Qian Shen's incredibly earnest expression, Zhang Yu realized he had misjudged the guy.

This guy isn't just a simple score snob. He's evolved from score discrimination to bloodline, regional, and even racial discrimination. He's become a believer in a score-based caste system.

In essence, according to Qian Shen, high scores meant you were amazing, an elite, someone entitled to feel superior and confident, while low scores meant you were worthless trash.

This was the worldview he had built over many years, the very source of his confidence as a top student, and arguably the unspoken rule in all key high schools.

"Hmph. If you won't admit it, fine."

"But I will report what happened here to the school. I expect you to show your true abilities on the next monthly exam and not score an evolutionarily incomplete 550 again."

Watching Qian Shen walk away, Zhang Yu felt as if he had just been insulted, yet at the same time, not.

Bai Zhenzhen, however, nodded thoughtfully.

"Amidst all that nonsense, there was one thing you should actually pay attention to."

"The school will definitely find out what happened here, and when they do, they'll probably approach you with a contract."

"A contract?" Zhang Yu looked at Zhen curiously. He had heard vague mentions of this before, but the details had always been hazy.

Bai Zhenzhen explained, "You know, not everyone in high school is as wealthy as Qian Shen's family."

"For many talented students who are poor but have good grades, they need investors."

"The school itself is one such investor."

"Typically, at the beginning of the second year, the school selects a group of outstanding students based on their first-year performance and grades, then signs contracts and invests in them."

"Of course, for a small number of exceptionally brilliant students, the school will approach them during their first year to prevent others from signing them first."

At this, Bai Zhenzhen puffed out her chest.

"Like me, for example."

Zhang Yu asked, "How come you never told me about this?"

Bai Zhenzhen shot him a look, as if to say, *Have you forgotten what a sorry state you used to be in?*

Bai Zhenzhen continued, "Given your performance here, the school will definitely approach you about a contract. As for whether you should sign it…"

Seeing the conflicted look on her face, Zhang Yu asked, "Is it that difficult of a choice?"

Bai Zhenzhen sighed. "It's not necessarily difficult. The choice is actually quite clear depending on your personal situation."

"The hard part is knowing whether your perception of yourself is accurate."

She looked at Zhang Yu seriously and asked, "For instance, what cheat did you use to comprehend the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll this time?"

But halfway through her sentence, she waved her hand. "Never mind. We're close, so we don't ask about each other's secrets. You don't have to tell me."

"In any case, if you're absolutely confident you can get into one of the ten top-tier universities, then don't sign this contract."

"On the other hand, if you aren't sure you can make it into the Ten Greats and would be happy with a regular university, then you should sign the contract as long as the terms aren't too exploitative."

Zhang Yu grew thoughtful upon hearing this and asked a few more questions about the school and the contract details.

After they had been talking for a little while, someone else approached Zhang Yu—a charming young woman.

"Hi there. You were really cool earlier. Can I get your contact info?"

Similar things had happened several times since he comprehended the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll. Even Lian Tianji from Purple Cloud High School had asked for his contact details.

Zhang Yu was gradually getting used to it. He sighed internally and added her contact.

"Heh, even beautiful girls are approaching me now?"

Zhang Yu asked, "Which school are you from?"

She replied, "I'm Wu Qingqing, from the honors class at the Saintess Academy."

Zhang Yu's expression instantly froze. In the world of Kunxu, someone who looked like a man wasn't necessarily one, but a student from the honors class of an all-girls academy… had to have been a man previously.

Wu Qingqing seemed to notice the change in his expression and smiled faintly.

"Oh? You're quite old-fashioned, aren't you? Do you think our class is just full of people who gamed the system to get into an key high school, but whose actual scores are a complete mess?"

"Let me tell you, the top students in my class are no worse than you, as you'll see in the next city-wide exam."

Zhang Yu speechlessly watched her walk away.

No, that's not what I was thinking about at all.

Kunxu… in this blasted place, even transgender people are judged first and foremost by their scores.

"Congratulations," Zhou Tianyi said, walking over from the side. "Did you sign a contract with the Golden Core True Monarch?"

Zhang Yu looked at Zhou Tianyi and suddenly recalled that he had barely noticed him in front of the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll earlier.

For the remainder of his shift, Zhang Yu continued to act as security, exchanging a few words with guests, both familiar and unfamiliar.

By the time his security work for the day was done, his savings had grown by 1,600 and 10,000 yuan, soaring to a total of 13,300.

After paying off the remaining 5,000 on his loan for the month, his balance dropped to 8,300, and Zhang Yu could finally stop worrying about collections for a while.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 23: Negotiations

One in the morning.

Having finished his security shift, Zhang Yu navigated the crowded subways and buses, making his way back to his rented room in the suburbs.

As for why the public transit was still packed at one in the morning, it was naturally because this was the evening rush hour for the night shift in Songyang City, teeming with commuters.

Back home, he first took a shower, then glanced at his account balance, wondering if he could finally afford an air conditioner.

After all, with a deposit of 8,300, his finances for the month suddenly felt much more comfortable.

But then he remembered that the next month was only two weeks away, and he would have to repay a 15,000 loan, which made him frown.

He recalled what Bai Zhenzhen had said.

The school's contract? he murmured to himself.

If signing a contract could provide him a large sum of money each month, he would not have to worry about the loan anymore.

However, Zhang Yu knew it was useless to overthink it. Whether it was his performance before the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll or the school's contract, everything ultimately boiled down to his own talent and strength.

With this in mind, he took out the neural filler he had bought at the stationery shop by the school gate earlier that day and consumed it.

He then sat cross-legged on his bed and began to circulate the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, feeling wisps of spiritual energy from the world flowing into his body.

Although he had switched the Feathered Tome's specialization to the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art for the trial of the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll, he would have to wait twenty-four hours to switch it back to the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method to resume its rapid advancement.

But since his Dao heart was not yet level three, he couldn't practice the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art anyway, and he needed to prepare for the Mana Competition by increasing his mana.

Even though the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method could not be rapidly advanced for now, having already reached level four, it could still help him effectively increase his mana.

And so, the rest of the night passed in Zhang Yu's silent breathing exercise.

…

Early the next morning.

The moment Zhang Yu stepped into the classroom, he noticed something was different.

Normally, the vast majority of students at Songyang High School were focused on their own studies and cultivation, paying little attention to the other, more ordinary students in their class.

Even two people in the same class might go months without exchanging a single word.

Just as how, every day when Zhang Yu entered the classroom, no one ever paid him any mind.

Only someone like Zhao Tianxing would wonder if his classmates were watching him every time he walked in.

But today was different; Zhang Yu could clearly feel furtive glances being cast his way from the moment he entered.

The instant Zhang Yu sat down, Zhou Tianyi clapped him on the shoulder and said, "The news that you were accepted as a disciple by a Golden Core True Monarch has spread throughout the class."

"It seems like the few people who went to the art exhibition with Qian Shen mentioned it in the group chat."

It was a well-known fact that schools were one of the fastest places in the world for rumors to spread.

And as a key institution, Songyang High School had immense pressure to cultivate, a surplus of celibate youths, and a mobile phone in every hand, which only accelerated the dissemination of gossip.

Forget text messages; even a photo of Zhang Yu in his security guard uniform from yesterday was already making the rounds in the group chat.

Zhang Yu let out a chuckle at this.

"Has the class started spreading tales of my exploits? Truly the speed of Songyang. Let them talk."

In these days of being forced into ascetic training, feeling the attention and discussion of others regarding his excellent performance was a rare pleasure for Zhang Yu.

But he immediately pursed his lips, thinking of a complication.

Yesterday, Li Xuelian had secretly called him into a small meeting to inform him of her rejection.

This meant that many of the people who had been present didn't know he had actually been turned down by the Golden Core True Monarch. They all still believed what Li Xuelian had announced on the floor—that he was to be taken as a disciple.

It would be pretty stupid of me to run up to the podium and clarify things now.

Whatever, let them say what they want. They'll probably forget about it after a while.

Zhang Yu closed his eyes and resumed circulating the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, absorbing spiritual energy through his breathing exercise.

The chatter of his classmates was nothing more than a temporary amusement.

As he had planned, his primary goal was still to focus all his efforts on increasing his mana in preparation for the city-wide Mana Competition.

This time, however, Zhang Yu had only taken a few breaths before he was called out of the room by his class advisor, Su Haifeng.

…

He remembered the last time Su Haifeng had called him for a talk; it was on his third day in this world.

At that time, his understanding of Songyang High School and its teachers was still superficial.

He had even initially mistaken Su Haifeng for a kind teacher who cared for students in need.

But now, standing outside the classroom and walking behind Su Haifeng, Zhang Yu could feel the terrifying pressure emanating from the model class advisor who was also the grade director.

Wherever Su Haifeng passed, the classrooms instantly fell silent, and students trembled.

Qian Shen didn't dare move a muscle, focusing intently on his breathing exercise.

Zhao Tianxing, who had just stood up to go to the restroom, quickly sat back down and picked up a book to read.

Even Bai Zhenzhen sat bolt upright like a primary schooler, her eyes fixed on the textbook before her.

Everyone's nerves were stretched taut, all of them hoping Su Haifeng's gaze wouldn't land on them.

This was Su Haifeng, the first-year grade director of Songyang High School, the devil incarnate in the hearts of countless Songyang students, and the author of the research paper, "On the Application Prospects of Electric Shock in High School Education."

This was a man so intimidating that a stray dog would feel compelled to read a few pages if it passed him by.

Zhang Yu followed Su Haifeng through this oppressive scholarly field and into the office, where the demon king smiled at him and said, "I heard True Monarch Xinghuo wants to take you as a disciple?"

Zhang Yu had no intention of deceiving the school into thinking he had become a disciple of a Golden Core expert. A lie about his apprenticeship would be easily exposed, putting him in a difficult position.

So he told the truth, "No. I felt True Monarch Xinghuo's offer was a bit lacking, so I rejected it."

The corner of Su Haifeng's mouth twitched.

This Zhang Yu came from a poor family and hadn't given him a single gift in the three months since school started. Now, after a brief moment in the spotlight, he was already putting on airs.

Is he trying to… drive up his price for the contract?

As expected, these paupers were prone to getting inflated egos.

If that was the case, however, Su Haifeng suspected that signing the contract in a few moments would not be so easy.

"I see." After a moment of thought, he produced a document and said, "The school is aware of your performance at the art exhibition in the Central Tower."

"Although your grades have slipped recently, you've been criticized by the physical education teacher, you haven't been proactive about purchasing medicine, and a debt collection agency even called my office, the school is still dedicated to nurturing talent and has decided to offer you some assistance."

Zhang Yu's eyes narrowed at his words.

Worthy of being Songyang High School's resident devil; a master manipulator right out of the gate.

Zhang Yu recalled what Bai Zhenzhen had said about a contract and guessed this was all a prelude to negotiating its terms.

And just as he expected, Su Haifeng placed the document in front of him and continued, "The school has prepared a student aid contract for you. The terms are much better than the previous financial aid plan for impoverished students. Take a look and see if there are any issues."

Zhang Yu took it and gave it a quick scan, discovering that upon signing, the school would give him ten thousand a month. However, the money had to be repaid, though the interest rate was significantly lower than a loan.

Furthermore, it stipulated that regardless of whether he was admitted to a university, he would be required to work for a company under the school's affiliated education group for ten years.

Songyang High School was part of the Myriad Stars Education Group, which in turn was under the Myriad Laws Sect, one of the Ten Great Sects.

In other words, signing this contract meant Zhang Yu would have to work for the Myriad Stars Education Group for a decade.

Additionally, during the university application process, Songyang High School would have the right to decide which university and major he applied to.

"Ten thousand a month for me to sign this kind of indenture contract?"

Even without seeing any other student's contract, Zhang Yu could tell this one was insulting.

Zhang Yu put the document down and said with a frown, "Sir, isn't this compensation too low? I make 800 an hour as a security guard at the Central Tower."

"Can a temporary job be a long-term solution?" Su Haifeng retorted, then shifted his tone. "I know the terms of this contract are a bit low, but the school's leadership has its reasons."

"After all, regarding the trial with the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll at the art exhibition—what was the content? What were the selection criteria? What were the specific qualities of the candidates? The school has no firsthand information and thus cannot make its own judgment, not to mention you failed to master the martial art in the end."

"On the contrary, your academic performance has shown a marked decline this month."

"The school is, ultimately, a place that values grades. The six-subject, 700-point evaluation system is certainly more in line with the Immortal Dao, more rational, and more highly regarded by the board of directors than the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll. The contract process is bound by this reality..."

Zhang Yu's frown deepened, because what Su Haifeng said was not without reason.

At Songyang High School, academic scores were the ultimate priority.

After all, besides him, no one at the school knew the true difficulty and power of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, much less that it required a level three Dao heart.

And Zhang Yu did not have the right to disseminate the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, nor did he have anyone to vouch for his claims about it.

Zhang Yu said, "There's no way I can accept this contract."

Su Haifeng smiled slightly, thinking to himself, *Is he about to ask for more?*

He said lightly, "Don't be so hasty. I'm your class advisor, after all. I can help you fight for a better offer."

Zhang Yu asked, "Can it be as good as the terms you gave Bai Zhenzhen?"

Su Haifeng didn't answer directly. He simply laughed, but the meaning behind his laughter was self-evident.

Then he said, "I'm not in charge of Bai Zhenzhen's contract, but I can give you a response. Bai Zhenzhen is number one in our grade with 650 points. What's your score?"

Zhang Yu countered, "Does that mean if I become number one in the grade, everything is negotiable?"

Looking at Zhang Yu's serious face, Su Haifeng smiled and took the contract back.

"How well you can score depends on your own ability."

"The contracts are primarily based on grades. While there can be some flexibility in the details, they are generally divided into four tiers: A, B, C, and D."

"The monthly exam is in two weeks. If you're not satisfied with a D-tier contract, we can wait until your results are out and continue this discussion then."

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 24: Spiritual Root

Leaving Su Haifeng's office, Zhang Yu walked on his way back to the classroom.

Next week, he had to break into the grade's top ten for mana to qualify to represent Songyang High School in the Mana Competition.

The week after, the monthly exams would begin, and only with a sufficiently outstanding score could he secure a better contract from the school.

Zhang Yu was fully confident he could break into the top ten in mana within the next week. After all, his Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method had already reached level four, and this level would only climb higher, making his mana growth increasingly rapid.

But the monthly exams also included physical education, Dao heart, martial arts, and Daoist arts in addition to mana, and the thought of having to drastically improve in these four areas over the next two weeks instantly filled Zhang Yu with immense pressure.

As for the general education exam?

Not only was general education itself worth a mere fifty points, but nearly everyone in the model class scored close to full marks on it, making it impossible to create any real gap.

It was safe to say that Zhang Yu wasn't quite sure what he could ultimately achieve in the monthly exams two weeks from now.

"In any case… the only way is to grind."

Zhang Yu could feel a fire ignite within him.

Who said a manual hack wasn't a hack?

Feathered Tome! Show me your limits over these next two weeks!

And so, the moment he returned to the classroom, Zhang Yu began his breathing exercises for spiritual energy, circulating the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method with all his might.

In the blink of an eye, it was the end of the first period.

Sigh, I'm so tired.

Just as Zhang Yu's mind relaxed slightly and he considered taking a break, the countdown timer with its bone-deep chill rose once more, compelling him to push onward.

"Fuck!"

Idiotic ritual… I'll kill you one day!

Meanwhile, in another corner of the classroom, Zhao Tianxing glanced at a message on his phone and breathed a sigh of relief.

Previously, the physical education teacher, Wang Hai, had tasked him with finding out Zhang Yu's supply channels. When he was asked for an update today, Zhao Tianxing told him about the art exhibition.

Wang Hai's reply was: Understood, you don't need to follow up on Zhang Yu for now, just maintain a good relationship with him. Come to the training grounds after school tomorrow, and I'll lead you through a body tempering session.

No longer needing to probe Zhang Yu for information was a great relief to Zhao Tianxing.

And the reward of an extra training session with Wang Hai made Zhao Tianxing secretly rejoice.

After all, as an ace teacher, the quality of Wang Hai's private lessons was beyond question; not only were they expensive, but they were often impossible to book.

As for continuing to maintain a relationship with Zhang Yu…

Zhao Tianxing looked up toward Zhang Yu's seat and saw him performing his breathing exercises.

After what happened yesterday, I must be nothing but a clown in his eyes.

Just thinking about how the other boy might be mocking his clumsy performance from last night made Zhao Tianxing's cheeks burn again.

But the thought of Wang Hai's private lesson spurred him on. He resolved to go and chat with Zhang Yu for a bit once class was over and he was free.

Yet as the morning classes passed one by one, Zhao Tianxing simply could not find a single opportunity to exchange a few words with Zhang Yu.

Is he still doing breathing exercises?

He does them during class.

He does them after class, too.

He hasn't even gone to the bathroom once… What powerful kidneys.

Zhang Yu's diligent appearance made even Zhao Tianxing feel a knot in his stomach.

After what felt like an eternity, it was finally time for lunch. Zhao Tianxing had just gotten his food and was about to walk over to sit with Zhang Yu.

Then he saw the other boy shovel the meal into his stomach in two bites like a phantom before bolting out of the cafeteria as if on wings.

Seeing this, Bai Zhenzhen cursed inwardly, *You're even grinding through lunch? Can't you let anyone eat in peace?*

Lunchtime was the only period at Songyang High School untouched by grades, free from the supervision of a devil incarnate like Su Haifeng, and untainted by the meddling of a pervert like Wang Hai.

It was a rare moment in the school day when the top students could relax, rest, and even trade a bit of gossip.

It was Songyang High School's own mental spa time.

Bai Zhenzhen was deeply displeased with Zhang Yu's study fiend attitude, saving even his lunch break for cultivation.

Bro, you're grinding this hard, how are the rest of us supposed to eat with a clear conscience?

What if you surpass us because of this?

Is this an academic arms race you're starting?

When Zhao Tianxing returned to the classroom, he saw Zhang Yu already performing his breathing exercises and thought to himself, *Of course.*

For the rest of the afternoon, Zhao Tianxing couldn't find the slightest chance to speak to him, because every time he turned to look, Zhang Yu was either paying rapt attention in class or doing breathing exercises for spiritual energy.

The longer he watched, the more anxious Zhao Tianxing became.

He's apprenticed to a Golden Core master and he's still this diligent? Is he trying to leave us regular students no way to survive?

Finally, when the dismissal bell rang, Zhao Tianxing found his chance to follow him, assuming Zhang Yu would be off to find another temporary job.

Instead, he heard the other boy say, "Look for a temp job?"

"Little Zhao, as high school students, we should put our studies first. How can we run off to work every day?"

"Don't get cocky just because you earn 800 an hour. That's temporary work; you can't find it every day."

Zhang Yu glanced at his balance of 8,300 yuan, which gave him the confidence to stop working for now and focus solely on his training.

He returned home, took a neural filler, and continued his breathing exercises straight through to the next morning.

During that time, aside from using the bathroom and switching the Feathered Tome's specialization back to the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, Zhang Yu invested every second into his breathing exercises.

And just like that, four days flew by.

After four days of this ascetic training, Zhang Yu's Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method reached level 6 (45/120).

His mana, through these days of diligent practice, had also surged from 8.3 to 9.4, leaving him just two spots shy of the grade's top ten.

...

On this day, outside the first-year hallway.

Su Haifeng strolled leisurely to the back door of the classroom to observe the students during their self-study period.

As the class advisor of the model class, even though he had no more classes, he made a special trip to wander by. Naturally, his goal was to use his icy glare, merciless ridicule, and the authority of a grade head to give the students' morale a savage boost.

Then Su Haifeng discovered that the students in the classroom were grinding even harder than usual today.

Fewer people were going to the bathroom.

More were focused on their breathing exercises, and fewer were dozing off in the middle of them.

The students who were actually spacing out while pretending to stare at their books just to avoid his notice were gone.

The class's overall rate of inattentiveness had dropped significantly.

In fact, Su Haifeng had faintly noticed this trend starting a couple of days ago.

Through his observations, he discovered that the source of this trend was the student named Zhang Yu.

Following Zhang Yu's frenzied breathing exercises, his unbroken streak of 0% inattentiveness, and his recent surge in mana… Bai Zhenzhen, Qian Shen, and Zhao Tianxing were the first to be spurred into action.

Then, the competitive pressure erupting from them stimulated even more people.

The 550-pointers were grinding, the 600-pointers were grinding, and the 650-pointers were grinding, so how could you possibly still be resting?

Su Haifeng even checked a report and found that the average mealtime for model class students in the cafeteria had decreased by over 20%.

Su Haifeng looked at Zhang Yu, who was still deep in his breathing exercises, and mused, *Is it because I wounded his pride before?*

Perhaps I can use this tactic more often in the future.

Unconsciously, the topic for his next educational research paper had already formed in his mind: *An Exploration of Student Humiliation in High School Pedagogy*.

After another satisfied look at the academic atmosphere in the classroom, Su Haifeng nodded and departed.

Not long after Su Haifeng left, the dismissal bell rang. Zhang Yu immediately stood up and headed for the school's quiet rooms.

For becoming the student with the lowest rate of inattentiveness in the entire grade last week, Zhang Yu had not only received a 500-yuan bonus and a public commendation but also the right to a free one-hour rental of a Heavenly Spiritual Root.

And today was the day to redeem that one-hour rental.

Since the spiritual root rentals and the quiet rooms for breathing exercises were scheduled by the school, the reward would be forfeited if he missed his slot, so he hurried to the rental office without a moment's delay.

Zhao Tianxing seized the opportunity and fell in step behind Zhang Yu, asking, "Are you going to rent a Heavenly Spiritual Root?"

Seeing Zhang Yu nod, Zhao Tianxing continued, "You don't seem to rent them from the school very often, do you?"

"Want me to give you a rundown of the Heavenly Spiritual Root models we have here?"

A flicker of interest crossed Zhang Yu's eyes. The original Zhang Yu, ever conscious of the price, had always rented spiritual roots from various training institutions that offered discounts; he was not at all familiar with the models the school provided.

After all, with the advancement of the era, especially after the categorization and research done by the Ten Great Sects, spiritual roots were no longer as crudely classified as they were in ancient times.

First, in terms of grade, spiritual roots were divided by the Ten Great Sects into five levels.

These included the lowest Human Spiritual Roots, the more advanced Earth Spiritual Roots, and the even higher Heavenly Spiritual Roots. These first three grades could be purchased as long as one had the money.

Further up were the military-grade Divine Spiritual Roots and the Immortal Spiritual Roots, which were exclusively supplied to the Ten Great Sects.

Divine Spiritual Roots were only accessible to the military and certain special government departments.

As for Immortal Spiritual Roots, one had to be initiated into one of the Ten Great Sects to even have permission to use them.

In terms of classification, the ancient categories like Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth spiritual roots… such a system had long since vanished in Kunxu.

As the design and manufacturing industries for spiritual roots became increasingly advanced and prosperous, they were gradually categorized by function, such as learning-type, combat-type, cultivation-type, and so on.

Zhao Tianxing began to explain, "The most popular spiritual roots in our high school are definitely the learning-type and cultivation-type ones."

"For instance, the Host Spiritual Root…"

Zhang Yu's face fell. "The Ghost Spiritual Root?"

Zhao Tianxing said, "Host, as in one that hosts something. A Host Spiritual Root can be temporarily lodged inside a person's body to transfer the mana they refine to yourself. It's a favorite among the wealthy."

"The Muscle-Growth Spiritual Root is another popular choice. During breathing exercises, it can refine spiritual energy into a kind of growth-promoting spiritual energy that gets injected directly into the muscles. It accelerates muscle growth for 24-hour gains, greatly enhancing the effects of body tempering…"

Chapter 25: Sea of Qi

"The Primordial Yang Spiritual Root is also very popular among the Heavenly Spiritual Roots. After all, our school is full of virgins, and the Primordial Yang Spiritual Root can refine the primordial yang essence within a virgin's body into mana. Its effect on mana growth is incredible."

Zhao Tianxing said proudly, "This is especially true for our high school's Primordial Yang Spiritual Root, which has been passed down for nearly twenty years. It has been handled by generations of upperclassmen and has absorbed the primordial yang essence of thousands of students, granting it even more profound qualities."

Zhang Yu's brow furrowed as he listened. This Primordial Yang Spiritual Root sounded rather sordid to him, and besides…

"Hasn't everyone been sterilized? How can this virgin spiritual root still be used?"

"It's the Primordial Yang Spiritual Root," Zhao Tianxing explained. "The sterilization procedure only temporarily removes certain organs, but the primordial yang essence in our bodies still flows continuously from our kidneys; it just no longer stimulates our emotions or spirit."

"Otherwise, how would it be possible for each graduating class to undergo restorative surgery and regain what they've lost?"

As they walked, Zhang Yu continued to ask, "Among the school's Heavenly Spiritual Roots, are there any that are particularly helpful for mana growth?"

Zhao Tianxing's interest was piqued upon hearing this. Recalling Zhang Yu's recent activities, he thought about how dedicated the other boy had been to increasing his mana.

Could it be for the Mana Competition?

Zhao Tianxing thought for a moment and said, "There are many spiritual roots that can aid mana growth. The most effective one at our school is probably the Sea of Qi Spiritual Root. It's just rather expensive, but since you're getting it as a free reward, the price doesn't matter..."

The Sea of Qi Spiritual Root, nicknamed the 'King of Phasing,' had its greatest advantage in its vast coverage area. It could penetrate all kinds of walls, buildings, and even the earth itself to gather spiritual energy over a wide range, thereby increasing the efficiency of mana refinement.

After listening to Zhao Tianxing's description, Zhang Yu had already decided to try this Heavenly Spiritual Root.

Arriving at the spiritual root rental office beside the meditation rooms, Zhang Yu didn't immediately state his purpose, instead picking up an informational brochure from the desk to look it over.

The administrator on duty was a female teacher with a baby face.

Seeing his hesitation, she seized the opportunity to ask, "Student, are you a member here? Do you have a spiritual root you're familiar with?"

Zhang Yu answered without looking up, "I'm not, and I don't."

The administrator quickly pitched, "We're running a promotion for new members: deposit ten thousand and get one thousand free. Would you like to try it?"

Zhang Yu said, "I'm here for the Heavenly Spiritual Root rental, my reward for achieving a 0% distraction rate. I'm only here for the reward and nothing else, so you don't need to give me a sales pitch."

The administrator gave a helpless smile and stepped back.

"Well then, student, let me know if you need anything."

Hearing his words, she silently labeled Zhang Yu as stingy and lost all interest in making a sale.

Zhang Yu, however, didn't care what she thought. He simply lowered his head, quickly scanning the brochure, and found that its contents matched what Zhao Tianxing had told him.

He then said to the administrator, "I'd like to rent the Sea of Qi Spiritual Root."

"Scan your student card," she said.

Zhang Yu took out his student card and handed it to her.

This Songyang High School student card was proof of his identity, the essential credential that allowed him to legally practice cultivation and access various related services on the Immortal Dao.

A moment later, the administrator returned with a jade box and presented it to him.

"The Sea of Qi Spiritual Root is inside. Go to meditation room number two, open the jade box, and consume the spiritual root."

"Your rental period is one hour, which starts the moment you enter the room. If you go over by even one minute, you'll be charged for a full hour, so keep an eye on the time…"

After reminding him of a few more details, the administrator urged Zhang Yu to go on in.

Zhao Tianxing, who had been waiting nearby, said, "Well, I'll let you get to it, Zhang Yu. I should be going."

Zhang Yu nodded to him. "Thanks."

Watching Zhang Yu turn to leave, Zhao Tianxing replayed his expression and tone in his mind.

Our relationship should be a little closer now, right?

Meanwhile, inside meditation room number two.

The room was about twenty square meters. A meditation cushion sat in the center, and the surrounding walls were covered with a layer of soundproofing material, which in turn was covered with sprawling, distorted talismans of various sizes.

These talismans were said to accelerate the gathering of spiritual energy, which had some effect on improving the efficiency of one's breathing exercises.

However, Zhang Yu only had one hour from the moment he stepped through the door, so he had no time to concern himself with the room's decor. He sat directly on the cushion and opened the jade box.

Inside the palm-sized box lay a delicate, translucent crystal shimmering with a faint cyan light.

The crystal floated in the center of the box, encircled by swirling wisps of smoke-like motes of light.

This was the spiritual root he had rented: the Heavenly Spiritual Root known as the Sea of Qi.

Zhang Yu carefully picked up the Sea of Qi Spiritual Root. The moment it touched his lips, he felt a coolness in his throat as the Heavenly Spiritual Root flowed into his body like a ball of ice water, sinking into his lower abdomen and entering his dantian in a single breath.

Once inside his dantian, the Sea of Qi Spiritual Root seemed to sprout, extending crystal-like tendrils that took root in the surrounding mana.

Zhang Yu understood that, just as the manual and the administrator had instructed, the Heavenly Spiritual Root had now been successfully planted in his dantian.

Now, all he had to do was perform his breathing exercises as usual, and the Heavenly Spiritual Root would naturally do its work.

With this in mind, Zhang Yu took a deep breath and began to circulate the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method.

Boom!

A great roar seemed to erupt within his mind.

Zhang Yu felt the surrounding spiritual energy swarm toward him, pouring into the Heavenly Spiritual Root inside his body.

Two times?

Three times?

So fast… It's still increasing!

Feeling more and more spiritual energy flooding his body, Zhang Yu quickly centered his mind and operated his level-six Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method at full capacity.

As the circulation of mana throughout his body accelerated, wisps of spiritual energy were refined into mana.

His dantian, which had felt bloated from the initial surge of spiritual energy, returned to normal.

But as if sensing the speed of Zhang Yu's refinement, the Sea of Qi Spiritual Root in his dantian pulsed once and again increased the rate at which it gathered spiritual energy.

This time, it wasn't just the spiritual energy immediately around him that surged; even the spiritual energy from outside the room was drawn in.

The hallway… outside the window… the sky… even the ground beneath…

The Sea of Qi Spiritual Root matched the efficiency of Zhang Yu's refinement, steadily increasing its gathering range until it finally stabilized at a fifty-meter radius.

He felt a massive tide of spiritual energy, like a great river, pouring ceaselessly into his body. It was then guided into his mana circulation channels and, strand by strand, refined into his own power.

In that moment, Zhang Yu felt a thrill at the explosive growth of his mana.

So this is the true efficiency of a level-six Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method?

Zhang Yu finally understood that during his normal breathing exercises, he had never come close to unleashing the true power of his level-six technique.

Now, with the aid of the Sea of Qi Spiritual Root, he was truly pushing the refinement efficiency of the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method to its absolute limit.

Not daring to waste a single second, Zhang Yu focused wholeheartedly on his breathing exercises, drawing in spiritual energy and refining his mana.

Meanwhile, back in the rental office, the administrator who had assisted Zhang Yu looked at her computer screen in surprise.

"Hm? The spiritual energy concentration has dropped?"

The school's meditation rooms were not merely quiet; they were also arrayed with spirit-gathering talismans that controlled the ambient spiritual energy concentration to enhance the effects of breathing exercises.

The administrator carefully examined the monitoring parameters and discovered a significant spiritual energy convergence centered on meditation room

number two. It was drawing in so much of the surrounding spiritual energy that it was causing the concentration in the adjacent rooms to drop.

"Meditation room two… I remember that was the first-year student from just now, wasn't it?"

"To think a first-year could achieve this level of spiritual energy convergence."

The administrator was increasingly surprised. In her memory, only second-year students or higher could utilize the Sea of Qi Spiritual Root to such a degree.

"Zhang Yu, was it?"

Recalling the name and class the student had registered with, the administrator committed them to memory, completely reversing the "stingy" label she had mentally applied to him.

"To be this powerful as a first-year, he must have spent a fortune on his pursuit of the Immortal Dao."

As she activated more spirit-gathering talismans to restore the spiritual energy concentration, the administrator thought to herself, *I'll get his contact information later. If I can convince him to sign up for a platinum membership, my sales quota for the next few months will be taken care of.*

She decided not to tell anyone, intending to cultivate this promising client all by herself.

In the blink of an eye, an hour had passed.

Immersed in the thrill of the wildly surging spiritual energy, Zhang Yu's mana had risen from 9.4 to 9.5 without him even realizing it. This single hour was clearly equivalent to half a day of his usual ascetic training.

Just then, a woman's voice came through the room's intercom.

"Student Zhang Yu, your hour is almost up. Would you like to extend your time?"

For some reason, the administrator's voice sounded much gentler to Zhang Yu.

Relishing the satisfying feeling of the spiritual energy surging while his Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method ran at full power, Zhang Yu couldn't help but ask, "How much to extend?"

The administrator replied quickly, "The rental price for the Sea of Qi Spiritual Root is five thousand per hour. However, we have a special promotion today for new users. If you deposit one hundred thousand at once, you'll not only get an extra ten thousand, but also a twelve percent discount on all rental fees."

Zhang Yu sighed inwardly and slowly ceased his breathing exercises.

"I have other things to do today, so I won't be extending."

As he returned the spiritual root, Zhang Yu noticed the administrator was being exceptionally courteous, and he happened to have a few questions of his own.

With a reluctant glance at the Sea of Qi Spiritual Root as it was placed back into the jade box, Zhang Yu asked, "If this spiritual root were for sale, how much would it be?"

The administrator's eyes lit up, and she smiled. "The price of a Sea of Qi Spiritual Root is sixty million."

Zhang Yu inwardly drew a sharp breath, though his expression remained unchanged.

"That expensive?"

The administrator smiled. "It is. We don't generally recommend buying one, in fact. Renting is far more cost-effective. After all, obtaining a Heavenly Spiritual Root so early in the Qi Refinement realm is quite extravagant. Most cultivators don't even consider buying a spiritual root until after they're accepted into a university."

Zhang Yu nodded slightly. He knew that the final hurdle in breaking through from the Qi Refinement realm to Foundation Establishment was to plant one's own spiritual root, and that was indeed a concern for university-level cultivators.

Whether one implanted a Heavenly, Earthly, or Human-grade spiritual root, however, depended entirely on the cultivator's financial resources.

As for the even higher-grade Divine and Immortal Spiritual Roots, one could only hope to be granted a transplant after joining a special government department or being accepted into a major sect.

"A useful Heavenly Spiritual Root… is really… damn expensive."

He took one last, long look at the spiritual root as it was put away, thinking that one day, he would buy one for himself.

Before he left, the administrator took the initiative to exchange contact information with him, and it was only then that Zhang Yu learned her name was Wei Xin.

Wei Xin, for her part, silently changed the contact name for Zhang Yu in her list to "Zhang Yu (Prospective Platinum Member)."

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 26: Registering for the Mana Competition and the Coming Monthly Exam

Songyang High School.

In the blink of an eye, four days had passed since the day Zhang Yu rented the Sea of Qi Spiritual Root.

This was the day that Songyang High School's first-year students would be selected to register for the city-wide Mana Competition.

In mana class.

As the bell rang to signal the end of the period, Zhang Yu took a rare break from his breathing exercises, opening his eyes to look toward the large screen.

After several more days of ascetic training, his mana had continued to surge, climbing from 9.5 to 10.5. The sheer speed of his progress drew stunned looks from many of his classmates.

Zhang Yu's Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method had also risen from level 6 all the way to level 8 (3/160), but he was the only one who knew of this achievement. If his classmates and teachers were to find out, their reaction would be far more than mere surprise.

After all, while Zhang Yu's mana growth was rapid, it was not without precedent. Many of the wealthy could achieve even faster results, provided they threw enough money at the problem.

But to raise a breathing exercise to level 8 in such a short time… at his current level, Zhang Yu knew of no one else who had accomplished such a feat.

He looked at the large screen, where the mana rankings for the entire grade had appeared.

First Place, Bai Zhenzhen, 12.1

Second Place, Qian Shen, 11.9

Zhang Yu continued to scan down the list, soon finding his own name in eighth place.

Eighth Place, Zhang Yu, 10.5

Eighth place, huh? Zhang Yu nodded slightly, knowing that registering for the Mana Competition would now be no problem at all.

But the chill in his heart quickly returned. Hearing the countdown in his mind, Zhang Yu had no choice but to close his eyes once more and seize every available second to practice his breathing exercises.

On the dais, Teacher Yan swept her hair back, glanced at the rankings, and spoke with satisfaction.

"Over the past week, everyone's rate of distraction has dropped by another eight percent, and your mana growth efficiency is twelve percent higher than last month. I'm very pleased."

She saw Zhang Yu immediately resume his breathing exercises and nodded, gratified, before continuing, "I'd also like to give special praise to one student in particular: Zhang Yu."

"Not only has he maintained a zero percent distraction rate for two consecutive weeks, but over the last week, his mana has taken a qualitative leap forward, jumping from sixteenth place to eighth. It's truly remarkable. Let's give him a round of applause."

A smattering of applause broke out, after which Teacher Yan announced that the top ten students would be participating in the Mana Competition.

"The Mana Competition begins next month. I will send you the specific schedule and rules as soon as I receive them."

"Alright, class dismissed."

"Oh, and any students who want to buy Spirit-Gathering Pills, remember to find me in the office. There's a discount running right now..."

Down below, Bai Zhenzhen looked a little thinner, her cheeks slightly sunken.

Seeing Teacher Yan's beaming expression, she thought to herself, *This whole rat race has been so intense lately, and isn't it because of…*

At that thought, she instinctively glanced over at Zhang Yu's seat, only to see that he had already started his breathing exercises again.

You beast! Zhang Yu, you absolute beast! Stop it! Stop dragging everyone into this damn grind!

After fuming internally for a moment, Bai Zhenzhen ultimately couldn't bear to watch her good friend advance all by himself. She squeezed her eyes shut in anguish and began her own breathing exercises.

Not far from her, Qian Shen had been staring intently at both Bai Zhenzhen and Zhang Yu. Seeing them both use the break and the teacher's announcements to practice their breathing exercises, his heart sank.

As a student in Songyang High School's model class, Qian Shen had always believed he would never shy away from competition.

But after the last eight days of this relentless grind with Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, his perspective had changed.

"They barely even go to the bathroom, they don't even scratch an itch… I really can't keep up with them!"

"Compared to them, am I the one who's not fully evolved?!"

Staring daggers at the two of them, still lost in their breathing exercises, Qian Shen finally closed his eyes in unwilling resignation.

Grind! Then he would just have to grind harder!

…

During physical education class.

Students were scattered about, some performing acupuncture, others doing body tempering. Beast-like roars echoed through the hall, and the floor was slick with the pungent stench of sweat.

Bai Zhenzhen wiped the sweat from her brow and subconsciously glanced toward a small, dark room in the corner.

Because he had been singled out and isolated by the P.E. teacher, Wang Hai, Zhang Yu had been training on his own in that little room for the past few classes.

At this moment, however, Zhang Yu was not practicing his spiritual energy breathing exercises as he had the past few days, but was instead practicing the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms.

With a series of sharp cracks, the muscles on Zhang Yu's body bulged, erupting with ferocious power as he violently lifted the training equipment before him, lowered it, then lifted it again, and lowered it again…

Simultaneously, he had switched the specialization on his Feathered Tome from the level 8 Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method to the level 3 Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms.

Zhang Yu had his reasons for doing this.

First, because he lacked a matching spiritual root, the amount of spiritual energy he could absorb was limited, and the benefits of leveling up his Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method were diminishing.

Second, he had already qualified for the Mana Competition, which meant his next objective was the monthly exam in nine days.

My mana has improved significantly recently. Besides, at level 8, the passive effect of the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method constantly provides sixty-five percent of the benefit of active practice, even when I'm not focused on it.

My mana score on the upcoming monthly exam is already secure. Continuing to invest heavily in it… the return on investment for my overall score would be too low.

Zhang Yu calculated his options.

To improve my exam results from here, I'll have to focus on my Dao heart, physical education, martial arts, and Daoist arts.

For my Dao heart… while I haven't mastered the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, I have fully grasped its principles. That should be enough to earn a good score on the Dao heart portion of the exam.

For martial arts, apart from the twenty points for theory, the remaining eighty are based on combat. That would require hiring sparring partners to trade blows with me, so improvement won't come quickly.

Daoist arts are even more difficult; it's impossible to make any progress in such a short time.

After weighing his options, Zhang Yu decided it was best to spend the next nine days focusing on improving his Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms and his physical strength.

He had even discovered an unexpected side benefit of the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method while practicing the forms.

As he exerted force, his muscles contracting and expanding, the mana circulation within his body continued to operate, converting wisps of spiritual energy into mana as it flowed.

In the process, as the mana circulated through his strained tendons and past his torn muscle fibers, it began to nourish the areas worn down by his training. It replenished his flesh and blood, accelerating repairs and enhancing the effects of his workout.

Originally, the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms could only produce a similar effect by guiding mana after reaching the third level.

But now, under the influence of the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, a far more complex and refined circulation of mana continuously enveloped his entire body, drastically improving his recovery and the effectiveness of his body tempering.

He felt that if he could previously only practice the forms twenty or thirty times a day, with the aid of the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, he could now manage at least fifty or sixty repetitions daily.

And so, for the foreseeable future, Zhang Yu planned to start grinding the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms.

As these thoughts flashed through his mind, a wave of emotion washed over him.

It seems I'm getting more and more used to the grind.

Sigh. This damned Kunxu really turns people into monsters.

But after completing fifteen consecutive repetitions of the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms, Zhang Yu realized he was mistaken.

He lay on the ground, drenched in so much sweat that a faint human outline was visible on the floorboards.

Even the P.E. teacher, Wang Hai, upon witnessing such a scene of diligent training, would have certainly said: You've worked hard, take a rest.

But the one supervising Zhang Yu now was not a person. It would only trigger the ritual: Continue training.

"Please abide by the ritual's agreement. Strive to complete the wish. Do not deliberately slack off or delay. 10."

Zhang Yu lamented, "You mindless thing! I'm already at my limit."

This was agony!

The drudgery of body tempering was so much more grueling than the breathing exercises.

At that moment, Zhang Yu felt his lungs heaving like a bellows, and a tearing soreness radiated from every inch of his flesh and blood.

I was so naive, thinking I had already adapted to this wretched world.

Listening to the incessant countdown in his ear, Zhang Yu remained on the floor like a dead fish. It wasn't until the final moments ticked away that he suddenly sprang to his feet. Enduring the overwhelming soreness and fatigue, he resumed his training of the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms.

Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms Level 3 (22/30)

After forcing his way through another repetition, Zhang Yu collapsed into his own puddle of sweat again, listening to the chilling countdown as he felt the ritual's power threatening to tear his body to pieces.

Is this a world a person can even adapt to?

Damn it… Before this thing forces me to jump off a building, I have to break this cursed ritual!

That day at noon, Zhang Yu acted completely out of character. Under the astonished gazes of Bai Zhenzhen and Zhou Tianyi, he spent over a hundred yuan at once, ordering a massive bucket of food.

If mana growth depended on absorbing more spiritual energy, then improving the effects of body tempering depended on eating more nutritious food.

"I'm going to eat ten pounds of this!"

Seeing the size of Zhang Yu's lunch, Bai Zhenzhen knew exactly how hard he must have pushed himself in P.E. class.

He must feel he's grinded mana enough for now, so he's starting on physical strength?

Just when did this guy start trying so hard?

Could this be some extra competitive drive that comes from being un-neutered?

Watching Zhang Yu devour a whole chicken leg in a single bite, then crunch the bones to powder and swallow them, Bai Zhenzhen found herself unconsciously eating faster.

Zhou Tianyi sighed helplessly, "Slow down, you two. Nobody's grading you on your eating speed."

Not far away, Su Haifeng, also eating in the cafeteria, watched some of the slower students and thought to himself, *The lunch break is still too long.*

I've been saying the school should install more surveillance cameras in the cafeteria. Publicly reprimand and fine anyone who takes more than ten minutes to eat.

With that, he began to draft a proposal to send to the principal, offering this valuable suggestion for cafeteria reform.

For the following days, outside of his regular lessons, Zhang Yu spent every spare moment practicing the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms. When he reached his physical limit and could train no more, he was forced to practice his spiritual energy breathing exercises.

Tormented day in and day out, the time for the monthly exam, nine days later, finally arrived.

Chapter 27: Pre-Exam Sprint

Three in the morning.

Inside an office at Songyang High School.

Su Haifeng stared at a list on his computer screen as he spoke into the phone, "Hmm… his Dao heart score hasn't changed."

"His mana saw a rapid increase a while back. It looks like he spent most of his time and money on breathing exercises, which is how he broke into the top ten."

"As for his physical strength, it hasn't been tested in three weeks due to his isolation, but it had already dropped to nineteenth place. Now that he's focusing on mana, he'll be lucky to even hold that rank."

"His martial and Daoist arts haven't shown any significant progress either. It's possible he'll drop below thirtieth place in both subjects on this monthly exam."

Looking at Zhang Yu's recent academic records, Su Haifeng shook his head.

"All in all, I'm not optimistic about him making any major improvements this time."

"The school will probably still offer him a D-rank contract."

"I understand. I'll do my best to persuade him to sign it."

"I don't know how he managed to get Li Xuelian's attention, but after this exam, he should have a clear picture of his own situation."

After hanging up, Su Haifeng casually closed Zhang Yu's file and moved on to the next document.

To him, Zhang Yu was just one minor issue among many. There were far more pressing matters and more important students at Songyang High School that demanded his attention.

...

Four in the morning.

In the abandoned building.

Today was the day of Songyang High School's monthly exam.

Although his strength had improved significantly after nine days of torment, Zhang Yu was still seizing every moment to practice the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms, striving to boost his power a little more before the exam officially began.

His current panel in the Feathered Tome's preface now read:

[Zhang Yu]

[Dao Heart: Level 1]

[Mana: 11.7]

[Physical Strength: Level 1.05]

His mana had increased from 10.5 to 11.7, thanks to his passive breathing exercises interspersed with occasional active sessions.

His physical strength had soared from Level 0.85 to Level 1.05 under his frenzied training.

Of course, the greatest progress in these nine days had been in the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms, which had now become: Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms Level 9 (89/90).

And as Zhang Yu threw one final punch, the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms finally broke through to Level 10, reaching the maximum limit for the Qi Refinement realm.

The moment he raised the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms to Level 10, it was as if countless memories flooded his mind—the image of himself practicing the forms over and over and over, his deepening understanding of his own body, his more profound reflections.

After being meticulously polished countless times, his body finally underwent a qualitative change and began to readjust itself in a more rational way.

A roar seemed to echo in his mind!

As his heart pumped waves of blood and qi to his limbs and bones, Zhang Yu's entire body seemed to undergo a metamorphosis.

His flesh and blood contracted and expanded, and a series of sharp cracks echoed from his joints as his entire frame seemed to grow slightly larger.

His muscle distribution became better suited for exerting force, his skeletal structure grew firmer and more stable, and his whole body seemed to become more balanced and coordinated.

The structural optimization of his body, a process that should have occurred incrementally while leveling the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms to level 10, was now completed in an instant.

Physical Strength: 1.05 → 1.25

With the adjustment and optimization of his physical structure, Zhang Yu's physical strength shot up by 0.2 levels, a massive 20% increase.

More importantly, Zhang Yu could feel that the improvement brought by this structural optimization was not just a one-time boost to his physical strength but would have longer-term effects. His more balanced and coordinated body would allow his future path of body tempering to be smoother and faster.

Zhang Yu smiled faintly, excitement rising within him.

Leveling the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms to 10 can actually trigger an optimization of my body's structure.

Could it be that all skills provide such a huge boost when they reach Level 10?

This was information his teachers had never taught in class.

But Zhang Yu figured that Level 10 in any skill—even a basic martial art like the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms—was simply too distant a goal for first-year high school students, so it was normal that the teachers wouldn't mention it.

Next, I'll raise the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method to Level 10 and see what happens.

Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method: Level 8 (3/160)

Zhang Yu estimated that it would take him a week at most to get this breathing exercise to Level 10.

But even with this thought, he didn't immediately switch the Feathered Tome's focus to the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, because he had other plans for today.

"Please abide by the ritual's agreement. Strive to complete the wish. Do not deliberately slack off or delay. 10."

Just as Zhang Yu was feeling inspired and marveling at his improvement, that damned countdown sounded once again.

Zhang Yu cursed a few times, but the thought that this thing lacked even will or intelligence left him with only the empty feeling of punching cotton.

So he sat cross-legged, meditating and performing his breathing exercises while also giving his body, exhausted from another night of labor, a chance to rest and recover his stamina.

It was time to prepare… for the monthly exam.

…

Songyang High School.

A trace of anxiety was visible on the faces of the students hurrying through the grounds.

The campus itself seemed to have taken on a somber atmosphere today.

Zhang Yu looked up; the original banner, "Live until you die, learn until you die," had been replaced with an anti-suicide slogan: "One person acts recklessly, the whole family pays the price."

Even the perimeter of the rooftop had been enclosed with a layer of wire mesh, making it more difficult for students to act recklessly.

Beside him, Bai Zhenzhen commented, "Looks like those beastly school leaders finally learned to care about the students. They know the monthly exams can cause emotional breakdowns, so they actually took some protective measures."

But the moment they arrived at the cafeteria for breakfast and saw the notice about price increases for certain dishes, Bai Zhenzhen couldn't help but explode with anger.

"The prices went up again? How many times is that since the semester started?"

"A bunch of parasites can't even run the cafeteria properly, how can they run the school?"

Zhang Yu tried to console her, "Sigh, being inhuman is standard procedure for them. Just stay calm and don't let it affect your exam today."

But a moment later, after hearing the new rule from the cafeteria lady serving the food, Zhang Yu raged.

"Why is the five-dollar meal set limited to one per person per day? I could still get ten yesterday! Why can't a student even get a full meal!"

"Alright, alright, Yu-boy." Bai Zhenzhen patted Zhang Yu's shoulder comfortingly. "Don't be impulsive, a teacher is looking over here. I'll just buy you an extra poor man's special."

Carrying their trays to a table, Zhang Yu checked his bank balance.

Although he had once again received the 500-dollar reward for 0% distraction, his savings had dropped to 6,000 due to the massive food consumption required for body tempering, the continuous purchase and use of neural fillers, and miscellaneous expenses like transportation.

A new month was about to begin, which meant new loan payments, new rent, and new utility bills were due…

And then there was the cost of food. Since starting high-intensity body tempering, Zhang Yu had felt his appetite grow larger and larger; eating ten pounds a day was normal. His daily food expenses alone amounted to several hundred dollars, which would add up to over ten thousand a month.

Zhang Yu felt more and more that cultivation was an endeavor that only grew more expensive the further one progressed.

I hope I can get a good score on the monthly exam and land a good contract.

Otherwise, I'll have to go back to working part-time.

Just then, Zhou Tianyi sat down beside them with his tray and shook his head helplessly.

"Do you guys know why the cafeteria raised its prices?"

Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen snapped their heads up in unison, staring at Zhou Tianyi and waiting for him to continue.

"To promote Oasis Corporation's synthetic food, the municipal government has raised the tariffs on ingredients imported from other cities. In the future, the prices of all food in Songyang City, except for synthetic food, are likely to keep rising."

"I heard the principal is also considering replacing the cafeteria's pre-made meals with synthetic food."

Before he started cultivating, the original Zhang Yu had eaten plenty of synthetic food, since it was much cheaper.

Fried insects, vegetable protein, plus recycled water and oil—the taste was something not even a pig would eat.

"We won't even get pre-made meals anymore?"

Upon hearing this, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen let out another wail, cursing both Oasis Corporation and the municipal government for being utterly inhuman.

After breakfast, because it was the monthly exam, the three of them did not return to their classroom as usual but went to their respective examination halls.

The morning consisted of the general education exam and the martial arts theory exam, both of which were written tests worth 50 and 20 points respectively.

The afternoon featured the 100-point Daoist arts exam and the 80-point martial arts practical exam.

The 80 points from the practical combined with the 20 points from the morning's theory test made up the total 100 points for the martial arts course.

The morning exams were all written, and the original Zhang Yu had already mastered this material.

After finishing, Zhang Yu didn't bother checking answers with other students. Instead, he quickly ate lunch and hurried to the small garden to begin his training.

Freehand Combat: Level 1 (0/10)

Zhang Yu switched the Feathered Tome's focus to Freehand Combat, which was why he hadn't switched to the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method earlier.

After pushing the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms to Level 10 yesterday, no amount of time spent on the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method would yield significant improvement.

But if he used his daytime break to improve Freehand Combat, which was only at Level 1, Zhang Yu estimated he could raise it to at least Level 2.

This would undoubtedly provide a considerable boost for the afternoon's martial arts practical exam.

With this in mind, Zhang Yu practiced with even greater focus.

As he executed the moves, propelled by his Level 1.25 physical strength, his bones and sinews sang in unison, and every punch and palm strike carried the rumble of wind and thunder.

Simultaneously, with each move, a trace of mana was circulated to different parts of his body, enhancing its power.

Freehand Combat was a foundational practical martial art. Although it only consisted of fifteen moves, it included punches, palm strikes, kicks, and throws, not only covering various combat situations but also having a corresponding mana circulation route for each technique.

Zhang Yu was now repeatedly practicing these fifteen moves.

As a practical martial art, the training intensity of Freehand Combat was far lower than that of the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms.

Combined with his Level 1.25 physical strength, the mana circulation from his Level 8 Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, and the physical optimization from his Level 10 Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms, he trained at a blistering pace, raising Freehand Combat to Level 2 in just over fifty minutes.

Freehand Combat: Level 1 (0/10) → Freehand Combat: Level 2 (0/20)

In that instant, Zhang Yu felt the fifteen moves of Freehand Combat flash through his mind, becoming deeply ingrained in his memory in the blink of an eye.

But he didn't stop. Although he felt a little tired, he decided to continue practicing this martial art.

There are still two and a half hours until the afternoon exam begins.

I'll see if I can push Freehand Combat to Level 3 before then.

Zhang Yu continued to practice the fifteen moves over and over again, sweat pouring down like rain.

His body grew increasingly fatigued, his limbs gradually becoming sore and weak, and his movements began to lose their form slightly.

But whenever he thought of the mountain of debt he was under and his ever-increasing expenses, he gritted his teeth and persevered.

Over two hours later, a large bead of sweat dripped onto the ground with a soft splash.

Steam was rising from Zhang Yu's entire body, his muscles intensely heated from more than three hours of high-intensity exercise.

But a smile appeared on his face; he had finally succeeded in pushing this martial art to the third level.

(End of this chapter)

Chapter 28: Daoist Arts and Practical Combat

Freehand Combat Level 2 (0/20) → Freehand Combat Level 3 (0/30)

In an instant, the fifteen stances of Freehand Combat became profoundly more familiar in his mind. Even the follow-up variations and transitions for each move grew exceptionally clear and distinct.

The mana circulation for every stance became as instinctual as breathing. Zhang Yu felt that if he were to execute a move now, the mana within him would shift on its own, flowing naturally to his limbs.

The passive breathing exercise of the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method also played a part in this process.

As Zhang Yu sensed the circulation of mana in his body, he could feel that because it was constantly coursing through every part of him, his mana manipulation had become much more fluid when performing Freehand Combat.

He was struck by how much the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method helped beginners, benefiting not only their breathing exercises and body tempering, but even their practical combat skills.

However, with the exam about to start, Zhang Yu had no more time for reflection.

After a brief breathing exercise to recover some stamina, he hurried to the examination hall.

The first exam in the afternoon was on Daoist arts, and the second was the Martial arts practical combat exam.

The content of the Daoist arts exam mainly covered the recognition and use of talismans.

After all, those in the Qi Refinement realm had yet to master true Daoist arts and could only use their knowledge and mana to activate talismans, so the three years of high school Daoist arts curriculum was fundamentally related to them.

Talismans referred to the secret arts through which mortals communicated with gods and commanded divine power.

…

Inside the computer lab.

Having arrived at the exam hall, Zhang Yu sat before a computer, silently reviewing his knowledge of talismans.

Not far away, Zhao Tianxing was frantically flipping through his textbook, repeatedly memorizing key points he was afraid of forgetting.

Bai Zhenzhen was resting her head on her desk for a quick nap, seemingly not the least bit nervous about the upcoming exam.

Just then, a bell rang, and the students all placed any items unrelated to the test on the desk at the front of the room before returning to their seats.

A moment later, the computer screens before them flickered to life, displaying this exam's test paper.

Question 1: Which of the following talismans belongs to the God of Myriad Roads and Unimpeded Passage from the Department of Transportation.

The relevant information instantly surfaced in Zhang Yu's mind.

The Department of Transportation, one of the eight great divine ministries of Kunxu, governed all matters of roads, aviation, and maritime traffic within Kunxu, possessing the authority to inspect all transportation in the world.

The God of Myriad Roads and Unimpeded Passage was a righteous god within the Department of Transportation responsible for urban roads, and Zhang Yu recalled that one of the deity's powers was the recording of all surveillance data from city roads and vehicles…

Through this talisman, one could borrow the power of the God of Myriad Roads and Unimpeded Passage to access all sorts of surveillance within the city's road network, a power said to reveal three hundred years into the past, leaving no detail uncovered.

After the memory flashed through his mind, Zhang Yu continued on to the options below.

There were four options in total, looking something like this:

A. □*★□°*:.☆(□▿□)/$: *.°★*□

B. (o>ε(o>□(□∩□)(□□□)X(ᵀ)

C. *)\)*□‘)*)(((()

D. □□□o(▿□o)=□=□=□

All four options are the beginning of a talisman, and judging by the style, they're all from righteous gods in the Department of Transportation… Heh, trying to mess with my head right from the start?

It should be option D, the Vehicle Surveillance Talisman, right?

Zhang Yu mulled it over and chose D, then the next multiple-choice question popped up.

"Among the following talismans, which one is not a Reporting Talisman?"

Zhang Yu paused for a moment.

A Reporting Talisman? We never learned that. Another question that's beyond the curriculum?

Frowning, he randomly picked one that looked right and moved on to the next question.

After finishing all the multiple-choice questions one by one, he was met with fill-in-the-blanks and short-answer questions, where the difficulty spiked sharply.

There were questions like, "Please compose a Health Check Talisman to respectfully request the God of Health and Verdant Spring from the Ministry of Health to check your gastrointestinal tract for any tumors."

And also, "What talisman could be used to quickly subdue three mortals without mana located 30 meters due north? Please draw the talisman. The specific data for the three mortals and the surrounding environment is provided below…"

Damn it… if it's just three mortals, can't I just beat them up? Why would I need a talisman for that?

Just as Zhang Yu was sweating over composing a Detainment Talisman, he heard the sound of a chair being pushed back.

He looked up to see his classmate, He Dayou, who had already finished the test and was preparing to leave.

Zhang Yu remembered that this He Dayou had placed third overall in last month's monthly exam and was a filthy rich person, just like Qian Shen.

But unlike Qian Shen, who was focused on his grades, this He Dayou loved to flaunt his wealth and generally had very little interaction with Zhang Yu.

Turning in his exam paper early like this was, in itself, a form of flaunting.

This was because talismans were a subject where one could only truly succeed by pouring money into it, making this exam the clearest dividing line between the poor and the rich.

Many people even referred to talismans as the language of the rich.

Specifically, the so-called drawing of talismans allowed one to mobilize the power of the Eight Great Divine Ministries to accomplish all sorts of incredible feats, and these eight ministries were often referred to by the world as the Eight Ministries of Righteous Gods.

But schools only taught the most basic methods of talisman creation; to learn more advanced ones, or even many talismans not taught in schools at all, one had to purchase Talisman Tomes.

And besides the exorbitant cost of purchasing these Tomes, there were also membership fees, offerings to the gods, faith level requirements, and other massive expenditures.

It could be said that besides being categorized by a cultivator's realm, the most important criterion for the talismans provided by the Tomes was money.

Only by spending enough money on a Talisman Tome could one attain a sufficient faith level to unlock more permissions, thus mastering more advanced talisman creation methods and various different types of talismans.

Only after fulfilling these prerequisites did one earn the qualification to study and practice talismans diligently, which included things like one-on-one talisman dialogues with the Eight Ministries of Righteous Gods, divine-guided talisman debugging, and talisman optimization while practicing under a god's guidance… of course, this diligent practice was also incredibly expensive.

One could say that learning talismans outside of campus was a process entirely built on money.

And throughout this entire process, if one violated the rules set by the Eight Ministries of Righteous Gods, such as by privately sharing talismans or using them to break sect laws, they would be punished—with light penalties being fines and severe ones being complete financial ruin.

Every time Zhang Yu attended a Daoist arts class to study talismans, he couldn't help but lament that this was a subject that was anything but fair and just, and it was the best way for the wealthy to rack up points on the college entrance exams and widen the gap with the poor—truly worthy of being called the language of the rich.

But Zhang Yu had also once heard Zhou Tianyi say that talismans were not even the most expensive among the Daoist arts.

Many of the various Daoist arts that could only be learned after Foundation Establishment required enormous sums of money, enough to leave even a university student deeply in debt.

After finally surviving the Daoist arts exam, Zhang Yu had just stepped out of the classroom when he saw a large crowd surrounding He Dayou, checking their answers.

He Dayou smiled faintly, took out a jade-like tablet, and then traced a series of ghost-like scribbles on it.

As the mana in his hand fluctuated, a golden, illusory figure slowly emerged from the jade tablet.

He Dayou said with a smile, "This is an Answer Talisman from the God of Celestial Knowledge and Myriad Questions. If you have any questions, just ask him."

Many of the students who witnessed this scene gasped in amazement, their eyes filled with envy as they looked at He Dayou.

As Zhang Yu's gaze was fixed on the jade tablet in He Dayou's hand, Bai Zhenzhen's voice sounded from the side.

"Is that a Talisman Tome? He even got a jade-colored skin for it. That guy must have been planning this flex for a long time, huh?"

Zhang Yu turned his head to see Bai Zhenzhen beside him, indignant and contorted with jealousy.

Zhang Yu asked, "How did you do on the test?"

Bai Zhenzhen replied with dissatisfaction, "How else? At least a quarter of it was talismans we never learned."

"The college entrance exam went 20% beyond the curriculum the year before last, and this year it's pushing 25%? If this keeps up, by the time we take the exam, will half the content be stuff we were never taught? They have absolutely no shame."

"They'd better hope I don't run into those filthy rich kids in the practical exam, or I'll beat them until they fail."

On the other side, He Dayou seemed to sense the gazes of Bai Zhenzhen and Zhang Yu. He turned his head and gave them a slight smile.

Bai Zhenzhen instantly switched to a calm and detached expression, nodding slightly at him.

A short while later, the next exam was about to begin, and He Dayou walked towards the Martial arts practical exam hall with a few of his companions.

He Dayou was the kind of person whose elementary school essay could be titled "My Father, the School Director."

Because his father was, in fact, a director on the board of Songyang High School.

But despite being born with a silver spoon, he didn't feel his life was easy, for he was merely one of his father's thirty-something children.

It was only after passing numerous assessments, countless competitions, and repeatedly meeting family KPIs that he became one of only two high school students, one of only two cultivators, among those thirty-plus siblings.

As for his other mortal brothers and sisters, they had long since gone to work at their father's company to pay back their upbringing debt.

Although I am the child of a wealthy family, the fact that I've made it this far is ultimately due to my own effort and talent.

I earned my father's investment through my own hard work, so why can't I flaunt my wealth?

Those poor ghosts do nothing but whine all day, thinking I got to this point just because I have a rich dad? What a bunch of naive and ridiculous fools.

With these thoughts in mind, He Dayou had always looked down on those who were both poor and had bad grades.

And after he entered Songyang High School as the son of a director and gained a deeper understanding of the school's many unwritten rules, he gradually began to look down on the poor students with good grades as well.

Good grades are ultimately temporary. These poor people have no idea… from the moment of their birth, they never stood a chance of getting ahead.

Perhaps they and we can no longer even be considered the same species.

Holding such views, He Dayou had always maintained his rank as third in the grade, flaunted his wealth from time to time, and lived a peaceful campus life, waiting for the moment he would be admitted to a top university.

Until the change in one person shattered his inner peace.

Watching Zhang Yu work harder and harder over the past half-month, even sparking a competitive frenzy throughout the entire class, made him feel disgusted.

This kind of poor ghost… counting his loan payments on his fingers every month, rushing off to a part-time job right after school to earn a few hundred or a thousand in pocket change, scrimping and saving just to cultivate, dreaming of striking it rich overnight and living a long life.

They have no idea what kind of people they're competing against in the college entrance exams.

And they're still scrambling around at school.

So poor it's ugly.

He Dayou couldn't stand the sight of Zhang Yu's frantic efforts, as if hard work could actually let him win against wealthy people like them.

This was especially true after he heard the rumor that Zhang Yu had been accepted as a disciple by a Golden Core True Monarch; the director's son specifically used his connections to confirm the news.

After confirming that Zhang Yu had not been taken as a disciple by any Golden Core True Monarch, his aversion for the person reached its peak.

He's intentionally not clarifying it. Is he trying to bluff by borrowing the tiger's might?

Therefore, he planned to use the practical combat exam as an opportunity to teach this poor ghost a lesson and make him recognize his true place.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 29: Combat Examination

Within the enormous training grounds, the students taking the examination stood in neat lines, their gazes fixed on the proctor at the front.

This scar-faced, powerfully built, middle-aged man, who exuded a murderous aura, was none other than Zhang Yu's martial arts teacher, Lei Jun.

If the five major subjects of the high school Immortal Dao—Dao heart, mana, and physical education—were considered foundational, then martial arts and Daoist arts were the practical application of those immortal techniques.

As for whether martial arts or Daoist arts were stronger or more useful, cultivators each had their own differing opinions.

Zhang Yu still recalled a controversial rant this martial arts teacher, Lei Jun, had delivered during their very first class.

"In this world, martial arts are incredibly useful; Daoist arts are worthless."

"Every Daoist art you practice is another path to poverty. The more you train, the poorer you become, until all your money ends up in corporate pockets and you're left a destitute wretch."

"But martial arts are cheaper, more cost-effective, and still highly practical. Therefore, only by practicing affordable martial arts can you build a fortune; the more you train, the wealthier you become."

This was Lei Jun's martial philosophy.

As today's proctor, Lei Jun likewise refrained from using the power of any Daoist art.

His method for arranging the monthly exam was always the same: have students with similar scores from the previous month draw lots for one-on-one combat.

The two opponents would fight three consecutive matches, each with a duration of three minutes. A match would end if someone was knocked down or forced out of bounds within that time.

After all three matches were concluded, the teacher would award a score based on both combatants' performance.

This was actually quite similar to the martial arts combat test in the college entrance examination, except that during the college exam, students fought against Yellow Turban Strongmen rather than each other.

But this was just a monthly exam, after all, so it was impossible to truly adopt the standards of the college entrance exam, especially since not hiring Yellow Turban Strongmen saved the school a considerable sum of money.

And so, after Lei Jun finished explaining the rules for the combat examination, the large screen overhead flickered to life, and as names began appearing one by one, the lottery commenced.

Once the drawing concluded, the results were sent to each student's phone, instructing them to proceed to their designated areas to begin the combat examination.

The entire training ground had been divided by white lines into a grid of small squares, each a dozen or so square meters in size, serving as an individual fighting ring.

Following the lottery results, Zhang Yu walked into square number 12 and saw He Dayou already waiting for him.

Seeing He Dayou offer a polite smile and a nod, Zhang Yu nodded in return.

"You finally came," He Dayou said, suppressing the violent urge in his heart as he slowly walked toward the center of the square.

In order to teach Zhang Yu a lesson under legitimate pretenses, He Dayou had used his privilege as the son of a school director to rig the lottery, matching Zhang Yu, who ranked 10th last month, against himself, who had ranked 3rd.

Of course, according to the lottery rules, their scores from the previous month were close enough that the matchup was unlikely to be questioned.

But this past month, aside from his mana class, his progress in the other subjects has long since fallen behind, hasn't it? His true rank should be somewhere between 20th and 30th.

He Dayou, on the other hand, considered himself to have not only maintained his top-three standing, but had also raised his Freehand Combat to level 2 two weeks ago, and had even recently mastered a new martial art at a tutoring center.

Still, I won't need the new martial art. To deal with this pauper, level 2 Freehand Combat is more than enough.

The only question now is… should I injure his arm? Or his leg?

Lost in thought, He Dayou walked with Zhang Yu to the center of the square, the two of them taking their positions just over a meter apart.

He Dayou's eyes began to roam over Zhang Yu's body as he considered how he would inflict a painful blow.

Outside the square, an assistant teacher took out a phone and began to record a video.

After the examination, Lei Jun and the other first-year martial arts teachers would review all the combat videos in order to assign their scores.

"Are you two ready?"

Hearing the assistant teacher's question, Zhang Yu and He Dayou nodded in unison.

"Then, model class students Zhang Yu and He Dayou, first combat match…"

"3, 2, 1… begin!"

The moment the assistant teacher gave the command, He Dayou struck, his right arm blurring into an afterimage as he chopped a palm strike toward Zhang Yu's neck.

At the same time, he had already anticipated all of Zhang Yu's possible counterattacks in his mind.

After all, as a second-generation heir, he had enough time and money to hire sparring partners for daily combat training.

He had already experienced, trained against, and developed counters for every possible reaction an opponent could have to this palm strike.

Such was the advantage of practical combat experience.

Level 2 Freehand Combat, combined with his superior experience, gave He Dayou absolute confidence in his ability to defeat his opponent.

Then… I'll go for the arm.

The mana in He Dayou's body surged toward his palm…

Pow!

A loud thud echoed from He Dayou's abdomen.

He then felt his vision spin wildly, followed by the shock of the hard ground and an explosion of pain throughout his body.

It took a full few seconds for He Dayou to gradually realize what had happened.

He had been sent flying out of the ring in a single move by Zhang Yu, and had landed hard on the ground.

I was defeated in an instant?

He Dayou's face flushed a deep crimson.

"How is this possible?"

Seeing He Dayou's agitation and hoping to avoid any trouble, the assistant teacher immediately played back the recorded footage of the fight for both him and Zhang Yu to see.

The video showed that just as He Dayou had launched his palm strike, Zhang Yu had moved with impossible speed, ducking under the attack while simultaneously slamming his entire body into He Dayou and throwing him out of the ring with a tackle.

The entire exchange had taken less than a second, and it almost looked as if He Dayou had deliberately allowed Zhang Yu to throw him.

Watching the playback, He Dayou grew even more indignant. He hadn't used his full strength yet, and he still had his new martial art in reserve, yet a single moment of carelessness had…

I underestimated this Zhang Yu far too much, getting distracted during our fight…

At this thought, He Dayou felt a rising tide of indignation.

But he knew that whether it was carelessness or negligence on his part, any further excuses would only bring him more shame.

He took a deep breath and nodded at Zhang Yu.

"A good move. Let's continue."

The assistant teacher asked if He Dayou was physically fit to continue, and after receiving confirmation, had them both step back into the square.

Once again, they stood a meter apart, facing each other.

Zhang Yu watched He Dayou with a smile, thinking to himself,

My score for this combat exam should be quite high.

The effects of level 3 Freehand Combat were even better than he had anticipated.

Although Zhang Yu estimated his own combat experience was likely inferior to that of a second-generation heir like He Dayou.

But his level 3 proficiency meant he was intimately familiar with the fifteen moves of Freehand Combat.

In the previous match, the instant He Dayou had moved, Zhang Yu had already known what he intended to do and where the opening in his technique would appear.

The moment the idea surfaced in his mind, his body was already in motion, surging forward and channeling mana into his arms to smoothly execute the throw.

In a fight between first-years using Freehand Combat, as long as my opponent's skill level is below 3, their reaction time will likely be a step slower than mine.

Coupled with my current physical strength, I doubt I would lose a Freehand Combat duel against any other first-year in the entire school.

Meanwhile, He Dayou's expression was grim, all traces of his earlier nonchalance gone.

He resolved to focus completely in this second match and use his full strength to viciously defeat Zhang Yu.

This time, he would not give his opponent the slightest opportunity.

"Zhang Yu versus He Dayou, second match."

"3, 2, 1… begin!"

The instant the assistant teacher finished speaking, He Dayou exploded with his full power, his right fist gathering a surge of mana as he threw a vicious punch at Zhang Yu's face.

Boom!

Again, a tremendous impact resounded.

Again, there was the familiar spinning of his vision, the hard, cold ground, and the pain that wracked his entire body.

He Dayou scrambled to his feet in a daze.

Had he been defeated in an instant again?

He watched the assistant teacher's recording once more.

The video showed that at the very instant he threw his punch, Zhang Yu had already landed a kick on his chest, sending him flying out of the ring.

Because they had both moved so quickly, it almost looked as though He Dayou had intentionally thrown himself chest-first into Zhang Yu's outstretched foot.

The third match began.

This time, He Dayou did not rush to attack with his full strength, instead adopting a defensive posture and cautiously observing Zhang Yu.

Zhang Yu thought to himself, *Beaten in an instant twice in a row. Is he finally starting to be careful?*

The reason he had been able to defeat his opponent in an instant was that he had used his familiarity with Freehand Combat to predict his opponent's movements and trajectory, allowing him to actively intercept the opening created by the full-force attack.

It was a tactic that used the sum of their combined speeds, causing He Dayou to lose before he could even react.

But now that He Dayou was being cautious and no longer attacking with full force from the outset, Zhang Yu could no longer replicate his previous instant victories.

But Zhang Yu had prepared a strategy for this exact situation.

In terms of both mana and physical strength, Zhang Yu, who had recently grown by leaps and bounds, was confident he was not far behind He Dayou, the third-ranked student in their year.

In terms of pure physical power, his opponent also had a balanced build like his own, rather than relying on brute strength.

Since his opponent was unwilling to attack, Zhang Yu decided to take the initiative.

He channeled his mana and sent a palm strike toward He Dayou's chest.

"Here it comes!" A sharp glint flashed in He Dayou's eyes as he threw a punch of his own, blocking the attack.

Then he saw Zhang Yu launch the exact same palm strike again.

The same move? What is he playing at?

After blocking three of Zhang Yu's palm strikes in a row, He Dayou's arm felt sore and numb, and the mana within him roiled.

The sheer volume of Zhang Yu's mana and the strength of his physical body were far beyond his expectations.

His opponent's strategy was also remarkably simple: to clash with him head-on.

Zhang Yu's level 3 Freehand Combat didn't just give him greater familiarity with the techniques. It allowed him to execute the same move with greater physical power and more abundant mana.

This gave him a decisive advantage in a direct confrontation.

He Dayou quickly realized this as well, but a slight smile couldn't help but touch his lips.

He wants to meet force with force?

Fine, let's clash. We'll see who's tougher.

He channeled his newly learned cultivation technique, the Lesser Heavenly Star Palm, and the mana in his dantian instantly transformed into a chilling palm force that blasted from his hand toward Zhang Yu.

Chapter 30: A Contest of Palm Force and the Dao Heart Examination

The Lesser Heavenly Star Palm was not a martial art with any specific stances. Rather, it was a pure application of mana, channeling it into a frigid, yin-natured palm force.

As He Dayou unleashed the force of his Lesser Heavenly Star Palm, he was confident that its frigid power would heavily injure Zhang Yu, freezing his internal organs.

He also believed that, given Zhang Yu's financial situation, he certainly wouldn't have the money for hospital treatment and would be forced to just endure the injury.

Poor bastard, this will keep you out of school for at least a week.

Boom!

As their palms slammed together, their mana collided with a force that seemed to detonate within their bodies.

Although He Dayou's Lesser Heavenly Star Palm was formidable, he had, after all, only just recently mastered it.

And while the technique Zhang Yu employed was the exceptionally common Freehand Combat, he had already trained it to level three and could unleash a respectable palm force of his own.

As their palm forces met and their mana surged, He Dayou discovered his advantage was not as great as he had imagined. His Lesser Heavenly Star Palm could only force back his opponent's power bit by bit, slowly invading his body.

What surprised him even more was that Zhang Yu was like a roly-poly toy. Each time a bit of the Lesser Heavenly Star Palm's force invaded, he would quickly

push it back, holding on and refusing to be defeated despite his clear disadvantage.

Meanwhile, the circulation of mana within Zhang Yu's body continued unabated, endlessly restoring his reserves and allowing him to withstand He Dayou's Lesser Heavenly Star Palm again and again.

The assistant teacher watching from the side was startled by the scene.

"They're competing with mana?"

Seeing their solemn expressions, the assistant teacher feared an accident would occur, which would ruin his performance review for the year. The thought that one of them was the son of a school director made the possibility of an incident even more terrifying.

He quickly interjected with a reminder, "Students, if either of you can't hold on, concede immediately. The other party must then withdraw their mana at once."

"Don't let a monthly exam lead to serious injury and jeopardize your future."

Neither of them spoke. He Dayou stared intently at Zhang Yu, frantically channeling his mana and unleashing wave after wave of Lesser Heavenly Star Palm force.

Zhang Yu, however, remained calm and composed, actively employing the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method to recover his mana while simultaneously resisting He Dayou's assault.

In the blink of an eye, both of their foreheads were beaded with sweat, and steam rose from their bodies as if they were two great furnaces.

But Zhang Yu's complexion was rosy, and he appeared increasingly at ease.

In contrast, He Dayou's face was now ashen, and he was gradually showing signs of faltering.

He could no longer control his emotions, his gaze a mixture of shock and anger as he stared at Zhang Yu.

The assistant teacher checked the time; their contest of mana had already lasted for over a minute. Seeing He Dayou's condition, he had no choice but to remind them again, "Students, if you can't hold on, concede immediately."

"This is just a monthly exam."

He Dayou struggled to open his mouth several times, his eyes fixed on the increasingly relaxed Zhang Yu, and finally forced a few words through his clenched teeth.

"I…"

"I surrender."

As they both slowly withdrew their mana, He Dayou collapsed onto the floor.

His face was ashen, and the mana within his dantian was almost completely depleted.

He looked at Zhang Yu with resentment and asked, "How much mana do you have left?"

Seeing his opponent's deathly pallor and weakened state, Zhang Yu answered humbly, "Only about ten or twenty percent."

He Dayou snorted; he could tell from Zhang Yu's appearance that it was far more than that.

He slowly rose to his feet and gave Zhang Yu a long, hard look.

"You're good."

"We'll have a rematch next time."

With that, He Dayou turned and left.

As he walked away, he replayed the battle in his mind and was forced to admit something to himself.

Zhang Yu… is strong.

But… it's a pity. As a poor commoner, he's destined to become our dog.

I hope you can hold on until I can defeat you fair and square. Don't leave me with any regrets.

On the other side, watching He Dayou's unsteady retreat, Zhang Yu thought to himself, *A rematch?*

You'd better not think about it, classmate… This was the closest you'll ever get to my level of strength, your fondest memory. If we fight again, I'm afraid you'll be saying, "My apologies, Lord Zhang Yu, for not making you use your full strength."

Zhang Yu headed out of the examination hall and immediately saw Bai Zhenzhen leaning against the wall.

"Hey, Zhen, that was fast."

"Yeah, it was over in a few moves." Bai Zhenzhen glanced at him. "Who did you get?"

Zhang Yu replied, "He Dayou."

"Damn it!" Bai Zhenzhen stamped her foot in anger. "He just got to show off in the Daoist arts exam, and now he gets to humiliate you? That guy must be on cloud nine today."

"But don't worry, I'll challenge him during the next practical combat class and humiliate him for you."

Zhang Yu looked at Bai Zhenzhen, speechless. "I won."

Sensing Bai Zhenzhen's astonishment, Zhang Yu decided to act directly.

He threw a punch, which Bai Zhenzhen immediately blocked with a palm.

Their fists and palms collided in rapid succession, their four arms blurring into afterimages that filled the air with the muffled thuds of heavy hammer blows.

Thump!

After exchanging several moves, the two abruptly broke apart.

"Your Freehand Combat is at level three?" Bai Zhenzhen asked.

"Your Freehand Combat is at level three?" Zhang Yu echoed.

Bai Zhenzhen said in shock, "Weren't you only at level one before? How are you suddenly at level three? Don't tell me you reached level three a long time ago and were just waiting for a chance like today's fight with He Dayou to make a big show of it. You… you've been reading too many of those power-fantasy novels, haven't you?"

Zhang Yu looked back at her with equal suspicion.

"Zhen, are you projecting your own thoughts onto me? You're the one who claimed to be at level two. You'll really do anything for the spotlight, won't you?"

Bai Zhenzhen blushed and explained, "I wasn't trying to show off."

"Having a high Freehand Combat level doesn't get you extra points."

"On the contrary, holding something back in a real fight allows you to catch your opponent by surprise and get a higher score on the practical exam."

"Haven't you heard the teachers say that intelligence warfare is a part of combat?"

Zhang Yu suddenly thought of his fight with He Dayou.

That frigid palm technique his opponent had suddenly used had almost caught him off guard.

Hearing Bai Zhenzhen's words now, Zhang Yu found himself in complete agreement.

I really should hold something back, he thought. *I can't just reveal all my trump cards.*

After Zhou Tianyi finished his exam, the three of them went to the cafeteria for dinner, after which they went their separate ways, either heading home or to tutoring sessions.

The next day would be the examinations for Dao heart, mana, and physical strength.

But after returning home, Zhang Yu once again made his way to the abandoned building.

The twenty-four-hour cooldown for the Feathered Tome's specialization switch had not yet ended.

Since his specialization was still in Freehand Combat, Zhang Yu decided to continue practicing it and raise its level even further.

Heh, even though I revealed my level-three Freehand Combat to Zhen, as long as I can train it to level five or six tonight, I'll have a new trump card.

The thought of Bai Zhenzhen's shocked expression next time made Zhang Yu feel as if his punches already carried more power.

So Zhang Yu practiced his Freehand Combat in earnest, resting with breathing exercises when he grew tired and resuming his training once his stamina recovered, and in this way, the night passed in a flash.

The next morning, as sunlight slowly filtered through the empty window frames of the abandoned building and fell upon his body, Zhang Yu, who was seated cross-legged on the floor, slowly opened his eyes.

After a night of ascetic training, his Freehand Combat had reached level five (3/50), and his understanding of the basic martial art had deepened considerably.

His mana also increased, rising from 11.7 to 11.8.

Zhang Yu marveled inwardly, *With the passive effect of the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, my mana grows by a good amount each day even if I only do breathing exercises when I rest.*

Feeling the constant growth of mana within him, Zhang Yu's mood improved considerably.

This made him look forward even more to raising the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method to level ten once the specialization cooldown was over.

…

He squeezed his way onto the bus and rode to school.

A gloomy atmosphere still hung over Songyang City.

The grim expressions on many students' faces were a clear sign that their exams the previous day had not gone well.

After breakfast, Zhang Yu made his way to the examination hall for the first test of the day: the Dao heart examination.

With its white walls and neat rows of beds, the examination hall resembled a hospital ward.

The only difference was that instead of an oxygen machine, a mask-like device was connected to the head of each bed.

Zhang Yu had barely settled onto his assigned bed when he heard the countdown begin in his mind again.

He pursed his lips and simply sat down cross-legged to begin his breathing exercises.

While Zhang Yu was performing his breathing exercises, other examinees continued to file in, and soon all the beds in the hall were occupied.

A bell chimed, and the students' expressions tensed in unison, knowing the exam was about to begin.

At the same time, a strain of light music began to play over the broadcast system.

When the music ended, a woman's voice came over the speakers.

"This is the unified monthly Dao heart examination for all high schools in Songyang City. The examination will last for sixty minutes."

Hearing the voice on the broadcast, Zhang Yu was not surprised in the slightest.

After all, he had memories of taking this monthly exam on several past occasions.

Unlike the previous day's general knowledge, martial arts, and Daoist arts exams, the Dao heart portion of the monthly exam was always a unified test for all high schools across Songyang City.

This was intrinsically linked to the special nature of the Dao heart itself and its examination.

The woman's voice continued over the broadcast.

"Attention. Please ensure the spiritual interface mask is worn correctly over your face for the entire duration of the examination."

"You may now inspect and don your equipment."

All the students immediately picked up the masks from their beds to inspect them.

Zhang Yu did the same, first checking that the cable at the back of the mask was plugged into the socket, then turning on the power to ensure the device was not damaged.

After confirming everything was in order, Zhang Yu fitted the mask over his face.

He felt the mask shift and mold itself to his features until it fit perfectly, like a second skin.

But with his eyes covered by the mask, all Zhang Yu could see was darkness.

A moment later, the woman's voice sounded from the broadcast again.

"The time for equipment inspection and preparation has ended."

"The Dao heart examination will now begin."

The darkness before Zhang Yu's eyes suddenly trembled, and as particles of light began to appear, he found himself transported to another world.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 31: Spirit Realm

Spirit Realm.

A spiritual world jointly created by the Ten Great Sects.

As the exam officially began, Zhang Yu felt his consciousness pulled from his flesh and transported to another world.

A light breeze gently stirred his hair, and he felt the hard pressure of a chair beneath him.

When Zhang Yu opened his eyes, he found himself in an ordinary classroom.

The room was filled with dozens of students his age, all from different high schools.

This was the Spirit Realm, a spiritual world separate from reality.

The Spirit Realm could be called a real world, yet it could also be called a false one.

It was called real because every sensation a person experienced here was indistinguishable from the real world.

It was called false because nothing in this world physically existed in reality. It was like a dream or an illusion, where everything seen, smelled, touched, and felt could be artificially controlled.

Zhang Yu knew that his physical body was still on his bed back at Songyang High School; only his consciousness had come to the Spirit Realm.

Like the students around him, he had been randomly selected from the multitude of examinees in Songyang City and placed in this classroom.

He glanced around the classroom's environment. In any case, Zhang Yu could not spot a single difference between this place and reality.

I'd better not get stuck halfway through this thing. That's all we need—a city-wide incident of high schoolers trapped in a virtual game.

A place akin to a virtual reality world—this was Zhang Yu's understanding of the Spirit Realm based on the information he had reviewed.

Except Kunxu had used Immortal Dao technology to achieve this.

Of course, Zhang Yu also understood that his knowledge of the Spirit Realm was far too limited. His interpretation was certainly one-sided, but for now, it was sufficient.

Before them all, a slender man wearing an owl mask stood behind the lectern, looking out at them.

Li Xingyu swept his gaze over the examinees.

In the next moment, from his perspective, each student's exam number, name, and high school appeared above their head.

Sigh. I hope this finishes quickly so I can clock out.

As a soul cultivator from Mount Mang High School, Li Xingyu, who had no physical body and only a soul, was long accustomed to daily life in the Spirit Realm.

Due to the unique nature of soul cultivators, they were not required to participate in this Dao heart examination and were instead conscripted by the teachers to act as proctors.

The thought of the forty-five hours of work he had left today made him sigh inwardly.

Suddenly, his eyes narrowed as he inspected the students, his gaze fixing on Zhang Yu.

Him?

Li Xingyu still remembered how this security guard had stolen the show at Li Xuelian's art exhibition that day, triggering the anomalous phenomenon in the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll.

From Songyang High School?

This is getting interesting. I should record his exam process. Maybe I can sell it to the principal as some decent research material.

After taking special note, Li Xingyu took a few steps forward. With each step, several identical versions of himself split off, and by his tenth step, a Li Xingyu stood before every single student.

This type of spiritual world cloning was second nature to a soul cultivator like Li Xingyu.

Zhang Yu looked at the owl-masked proctor before him, his mind racing with speculation.

The strength of one's will was a manifestation of the Dao heart, and determining the Dao heart level was generally done by testing the strength of that will.

Therefore, the Dao heart examination primarily tested one's willpower, at least at the Qi Refinement stage.

But the methods for testing each person's willpower were many and varied. To prevent examinees from undergoing targeted training beforehand and causing inaccuracies in the results, the specific content of each Dao heart exam was different.

As far as Zhang Yu knew, the more prestigious the examination, the more resources were invested into the Dao heart test, and the more complex the content experienced by the examinees in the Spirit Realm would be.

After all, only more complex and diverse experiences could more accurately assess the students' conditions.

This is a monthly exam… Zhang Yu thought to himself. *Based on past experience, it shouldn't be too complicated.*

At that moment, Li Xingyu extended a hand toward him. He opened his palm, revealing a device that looked like a mobile phone.

"Take it."

Simultaneously, all the Li Xingyus spoke in unison, "Today's Dao heart examination is very simple… Pain."

"For the next sixty minutes, the controller in your hand can adjust the level of pain you experience at any time."

"During these sixty minutes, the higher the pain level and the longer you maintain it, the higher your rank will be."

The Dao heart exam was graded based on ranking, so one's specific score depended not only on oneself but also on the performance of the other students.

For Songyang City's monthly Dao heart exam, scores were based on the citywide high school student rankings.

The real college entrance examination, however, was graded based on the rankings of all examinees on the first layer of Kunxu.

"Furthermore, if the pain level exceeds your tolerance and you fall unconscious, your consciousness will immediately be ejected from the Spirit Realm, and your score will be treated as zero."

After explaining the content of this exam, Li Xingyu pointed a finger, and a ten-second countdown appeared in the air of the Spirit Realm.

"The timer will start in ten seconds."

Zhang Yu looked at the phone-like controller in his hand and saw the screen displaying Pain Level 0, Pain Level 1, Pain Level 2, Pain Level 3…

The only two buttons on the controller represented up and down, allowing one to continuously adjust from Pain Level 0, changing the perceived level of pain at any time.

Just looking at it made Zhang Yu feel like his entire body was already starting to ache.

What devil incarnate came up with this exam question? Is the creator even human?

Don't tell me this scale includes levels like being burned alive, castration, or death by a thousand cuts…

So this is Songyang City's version of Saw[^3], is it?

The thing Zhang Yu hated most was suffering, and what he hated even more than suffering was someone forcing his head down to suffer.

Yet, ever since he had arrived in Kunxu and embarked on this path of immortal cultivation, he had been constantly suffering, eating mouthful after mouthful of it.

At this moment, Zhang Yu felt utterly disgusted, the resistance in his heart reaching its limit.

Noticing this, Zhang Yu's gaze sharpened, and he thought inwardly, *But then again, as a high school cultivation student, studying, cultivating, and taking exams are my bounden duty. The more hardship I endure now, the more money I can earn later.*

"I love studying, I love exams!"

After giving himself a pep talk, Zhang Yu felt a little more invigorated, and the pain controller before him seemed slightly more agreeable.

What is willpower? What is thought? What is a Dao heart?

The Dao heart course teacher had lectured at length, explaining how from ancient times to the present, people had worshiped gods, demons, and men… establishing all sorts of different ideologies, using different thoughts in coordination with heart arts to elevate the Dao heart and strengthen the will.

In Zhang Yu's understanding, willpower was simply the ability to endure hardship; the stronger the willpower, the more hardship one could endure.

And thought enhancing willpower was a mindset that convinced you there was a benefit to this suffering, enabling you to endure even more.

At this moment, Zhang Yu was using these little thoughts to console and encourage himself, hoping to improve his performance in a little while.

Zhang Yu had many such minor thoughts, as did everyone.

But a truly sustainable, systemic ideology was something Zhang Yu did not yet possess, and it was something the school's Dao heart course had failed to teach him.

That was something each student had to establish for themselves, by combining the curriculum with their own experiences and cultivation techniques.

The strength of will a cultivator displayed could be used to grade their Dao heart level.

The ideology within a cultivator's mind could coordinate with a heart art to raise the Dao heart level, further strengthening their will.

Thought as the core, will as the manifestation, and heart art as the method—the combination of these three was a cultivator's complete Dao heart.

The next moment, as the countdown in the air reached zero.

The students present began to operate their controllers, and one after another, some let out blood-curdling screams, some's faces twisted in agony, and some gasped in cold air…

When Zhang Yu adjusted the pain level to 1, he felt as if a steel needle had pierced his palm.

He hurriedly activated the level 1 Basic Heart Tempering Art taught in his Dao heart course, striving to stabilize his spirit.

Emptiness, nothingness, selflessness… the Basic Heart Tempering Art was a heart art that calmed one's emotions, maintained composure, and gradually guided one into a meditative state.

Through long-term practice, one's Dao heart level would rise, and their willpower would grow stronger.

This level 1 Basic Heart Tempering Art was something the original Zhang Yu had learned before he came to this world.

But because he had always been busy improving his mana, physical strength, and advancing his Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms, and Freehand Combat, he had never gotten around to improving this heart art.

Now, as Zhang Yu activated the Basic Heart Tempering Art, he felt a calm gradually settle over his mind, and his tolerance for pain seemed to increase significantly.

He immediately raised the pain level to 2.

Hiss!

Zhang Yu felt as if his other hand had also been pierced by a steel needle.

But it was still bearable.

So Zhang Yu increased the pain level by level, and when it reached 37, he felt as if thirty-seven steel needles had been driven through his hands and feet.

At this point, Zhang Yu's face was contorted, and no matter how hard he tried to circulate the Basic Heart Tempering Art, he could not feel the slightest bit of peace.

Calm your heart and quiet your qi! Calm your heart and quiet your qi! Calm your heart and quiet your qi!

Quiet the mind, focus the spirit, endure in silence, persevere with patience, constant dripping wears away the stone… the Basic Heart Tempering Art had to be paired with such an ideological system to maximize its effectiveness.

This was the standard way to improve the Dao heart; only when one's own ideology matched the heart art would the effect be optimal.

But this whole set of calming the heart, quieting the spirit, silent endurance, patient perseverance, and dripping water wearing away stone was fundamentally at odds with Zhang Yu's personality.

At this moment, all he wanted was to find the sadist who wrote this exam and beat them into a groveling apology.

Just as Zhang Yu felt he was reaching his limit, the contents of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art suddenly flooded his mind.

Fist, palm, leg, spear, saber, sword…

One after another, figures emerged in his mind, carrying the killing intent to break an army of ten thousand, the unyielding will to fight through nine deaths, and the indomitable spirit to press ever forward… this was what resonated with his heart.

Although Zhang Yu's Dao heart level was insufficient to truly master the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art.

Just recalling the intent within this martial art was enough to cause a surge of power to rise in Zhang Yu's heart.

He was like a common soldier trailing a peerless general; the sight of his commander's heroic bearing was enough to fill his own heart with courage and rally his spirit.

At this moment, the piercing pain of the steel needles all over his body no longer seemed so unbearable.

A savage grin spread across his lips.

When I climb to the top, I'll make the devil incarnate who designed this test kneel and beg for mercy.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 32: Mana and Physical Education

The Spirit Realm.

Li Xingyu had been observing Zhang Yu's condition from the side.

When he saw Zhang Yu's pain level reach 37, he sensed that the other had reached his limit.

He can't last much longer in this state.

Glancing at the top of the other's head, he could see parameters like his counterpart's heartbeat and respiration displayed from his perspective.

He's already at his limit; he should lower the pain level.

At this level, he's still within the bounds of a level 1 Dao heart, right? There's nothing particularly special about him, yet he could comprehend the mysteries of the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll?

Just as Li Xingyu was thinking this, he felt the aura around the other person suddenly shift. The originally contorted expression gradually returned to normal, even twisting into a savage grin.

Hm? He's holding on?

This aura… it feels like the martial arts from the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll?

Li Xingyu watched Zhang Yu's state with some surprise, seeing him hold on, second by second, minute by minute, all the way until the 60-minute mark.

He grew even more astonished, calculating inwardly, *With this level of willpower, his Dao heart is close to reaching level 2.*

Although he hasn't mastered the martial arts from the Celestial Paragon's Martial Demonstration Scroll, it seems he can use some of the profound insights gained from it to strengthen his own will.

This guy is something else. This intel should fetch a good price.

At this thought, Li Xingyu wrote up a description of Zhang Yu and posted it on an intelligence-broker website for 1,000 yuan.

After a moment's thought, however, he changed the price from 1,000 to 10,000.

Then he wrote a title: 'Shocking! Peerless Martial Arts Genius Emerges at Songyang High School'.

...

Taking off the spiritual interface mask, Zhang Yu stood up, trembling. Even though he had already left the Spirit Realm, he still had the illusion of a piercing pain all over his body.

On a nearby bed, a student tried to stand, only for his legs to give out, causing him to collapse back onto the floor.

Similar scenes were playing out on the surrounding beds. Clearly, everyone was still suffering from the aftereffects of the Spirit Realm.

One student immediately opened a personal vial and swallowed a pill.

Zhang Yu guessed it was probably a Dao heart buffer.

It was possible to gradually raise one's Dao heart level by relying on cultivation techniques like the Basic Heart Tempering Art and the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, coupled with the appropriate mindset.

But many students still chose to take Dao heart buffers.

These drugs adjusted neurotransmitters and brain secretions to improve mood and positivity, allowing for a more effective boost to one's willpower and Dao heart level.

But Dao heart buffers were not without side effects. The higher the quality and the stronger the effect, the more expensive and addictive the drug became, and the more terrifying the withdrawal symptoms were.

Once you started taking them, you typically needed to continue long-term; otherwise, stopping would cause your Dao heart to regress.

The original Zhang Yu, unable to afford more of the drug, had experienced a regression from his previous level, which had been close to a level 2 Dao heart.

It was only recently, after a series of trials and his comprehension of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, that the current Zhang Yu felt he had returned to that level.

And now, Zhang Yu had no intention of ever touching Dao heart buffers again.

He now had more faith in his own potential and self-discipline than in taking drugs.

But at this moment, there was no more time for anyone to rest.

The second exam of the morning was still to come, so the students had no choice but to pull themselves together and hurry to the next testing site.

...

Arriving at the mana examination hall, Zhang Yu saw that many assistant teachers and testing instruments were already prepared.

When it was his turn, detector patches were placed on his arms, chest, and lower abdomen, and he was instructed by the teachers to begin circulating his mana from his dantian to his palms.

This mana test was clearly more detailed and precise than usual to ensure the accuracy of the monthly exam results.

The patches would not only measure the total amount of mana circulating within his body but also the efficiency of each circulation.

This was to prevent situations where a candidate's mana was purely a matter of quantity bought with money, completely lacking in quality.

Zhang Yu could clearly feel that, compared to the torment of the Dao heart exam, most students were far less nervous during the mana test.

After all, everyone's mana level was determined long before the test and had little to do with on-the-spot performance.

You either had mana or you didn't; you either knew how to use it or you didn't.

Just as Zhang Yu finished his test, the assistant teacher recording the data let out a small cry of surprise and couldn't help but glance at him a few more times.

Zhang Yu asked, "Is something wrong, teacher?"

The assistant teacher quickly shook her head. "No, nothing."

Such high mana circulation efficiency, she muttered to herself, *he must be another one of those filthy rich kids.*

...

Lunchtime.

The cafeteria was filled with students who looked like the walking dead.

Some were still suffering from the aftereffects of the Dao heart exam, some were distraught over their poor performance, and some were even contemplating suicide.

Bai Zhenzhen sat down with a heavy sigh. "What a devil incarnate!"

"The devil incarnate who wrote this Dao heart exam must have no soul. I bet he's going to post a poll for feedback online, then set his phone to vibrate and shove it down his own pants..."

She continued a creative, two-minute-long string of curses, only stopping to take a bite of food when Zhou Tianyi walked over.

Zhang Yu was sure that similar curses were echoing through the halls of every high school in Songyang City at that very moment.

The moment Zhou Tianyi sat down, he couldn't help but ask, "Did you guys hear? People have been having emotional breakdowns at several high schools."

Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen's eyes narrowed, and they both instantly looked at him.

Zhou Tianyi continued, "It's because the rules for this Dao heart exam were too strict."

"For example, some students who were aiming for a high score accidentally set the pain level beyond their limit. They passed out, got kicked from the Spirit Realm, and their exam was scored as a zero."

He shook his head with a sigh. "Some of them couldn't handle it after they woke up and just broke down completely."

"A zero," Bai Zhenzhen thought grimly. *"That's the ultimate humiliation in high school. You basically lose all rights to exist at school after that."*

"I'd break down too. But before I did, I'd make sure to take out that devil incarnate who wrote the exam."

Zhang Yu asked, "In that case, won't the exam creator be in hot water? If one of the affected students was rich, wouldn't their parents retaliate like crazy?"

Zhou Tianyi looked at Zhang Yu as if he were an idiot.

"How could that be possible?"

Zhang Yu replied, "You're saying the rich parents can't get revenge? Does the exam creator have a powerful background?"

Zhou Tianyi shook his head. "I mean, how could a rich kid ever get into real trouble at school? Every one of them has paid security fees. The moment there's an issue, a school-wide alarm goes off, and security guards or teachers rescue them immediately. Even if one tried to jump off a building, they'd definitely be saved by the emergency response team."

He said, with a matter-of-fact expression, "If a rich person wants to die, they'd have to find another way. At school, you can't even die from jumping off a building."

Seeing how convinced Zhou Tianyi was, Zhang Yu had to admit that in this damned Kunxu, that was probably how things really were.

After eating, Zhang Yu took advantage of the specialization cooldown finishing to switch the Feathered Tome's focus back to the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, and he also ran through his breathing exercises a few times.

Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method Lv. 8 (3/160) → (6/160)

...

In the blink of an eye, it was time for the final exam of the afternoon.

The physical education exam.

Inside the massive training ground, Wang Hai was seated at the judges' panel.

During the upcoming exam, he and several other first-year physical education teachers would be grading all the first-year candidates.

He glanced down at the list of candidates, his eyes eventually settling on Zhang Yu's name.

Zhang Yu. In his memory, the boy had been a model student who diligently trained, took his medicine, and underwent acupuncture every day.

His attitude was earnest and his drug tolerance was good; just last month, he had become a student of interest.

If the boy had just persisted, Wang Hai wouldn't have minded cultivating him into the next Zhao Tianxing—another prized student to serve as a testament to his teaching after achieving high scores.

But starting this month, for some unknown reason, the boy had begun to repeatedly challenge his authority in class, even spouting the heretical slogan of "natural body tempering."

At first, he suspected the boy had found another supplier and that someone was backing him to compete for the market in Songyang High School's first-year model class.

However, after some observation and a report from Zhao Tianxing, he gradually dismissed that possibility.

Then he heard the rumors spreading everywhere that Zhang Yu had been accepted as a disciple by a Golden Core True Monarch.

Although Wang Hai was one of Songyang High School's ace physical education teachers, he was not influential enough to have contact with someone at the level of a Golden Core True Monarch.

He couldn't determine whether the rumors about Zhang Yu were true or false.

As Wang Hai was mulling this over, ten students walked onto the platform before him.

The students revealed their physiques, their bodies covered in various detector patches.

Hah! Hah! Hah!

Following a series of guttural roars, the ten students' muscles swelled dramatically, veins bulging as they unleashed astonishing power.

Data from the detector patches flashed across the screens in front of the teachers, informing them of the power each and every muscle in the candidates' bodies had just unleashed.

This was different from the usual crude, full-body strength tests; it was a detailed analysis of the physical strength of every part of the body at the moment of exertion.

At the same time, Wang Hai and the other judges quickly scanned the candidates, grading them based on the shape of their muscles, their physical structure, and their explosive state, all in conjunction with the data they had just received.

Physical strength was not the only metric being graded in the monthly physical education exam.

The dimensions, size, and structure of every muscle in the body were all important.

Which structure was better suited for power generation? Which muscles were more useful in actual combat? Which were living muscles, and which were dead muscles? All these questions required experienced judges to evaluate in combination with the data.

After all, even when physical strength was comparable, differences in bodily structure and dimensions could lead to vast discrepancies in power, speed, and overall combat performance.

Wang Hai was an old hand at this. As an ace physical education teacher, he had seen countless slabs of muscle weighing two or three hundred pounds over the past few decades. He had even seen five-hundred-pound behemoths on multiple occasions.

After a quick glance, he recorded his scores, his thoughts returning once more to Zhang Yu.

Let's see what your score is, then.

If your score has dropped significantly after three weeks of isolation, then that will prove you can't possibly be the disciple of a Golden Core.

And at that point…

A cold glint flashed in Wang Hai's eyes at the thought.

Anyone who interfered with his business deserved to be expelled.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 33: The Physical Exam and Wang Hai's Strategy

Inside the men's preparation room.

As the students warmed up and went through their preparations, the smells of sweat, feet, and oil continuously diffused throughout the cramped space.

While enduring the foul odors of the preparation room, Zhang Yu continuously smeared the Vajra Ghee he had bought onto various parts of his body, making the lines of his muscles more distinct.

The thought that a single jar of this Vajra Ghee cost over a hundred yuan, and that one exam required a full jar, made Zhang Yu apply it all the more carefully, afraid of wasting even a drop.

"This damn school, selling necessary exam supplies for so much."

But Zhang Yu didn't dare go without it.

Although the Vajra Ghee had no body tempering effects, it made the muscle lines and physical structure of his entire body more pronounced, making it easier for the judges of the body tempering exam to score him.

And if he didn't apply the oil, and the judges' vision blurred for a moment, preventing them from clearly seeing the lines of his flesh and muscle, a low score would be a great loss.

Furthermore, with his current understanding of the world of Kunxu, Zhang Yu strongly suspected that the school's business of selling this Vajra Ghee certainly cut the judges in for a good sum of money; it was even possible that not using the oil would directly lead to a maliciously low score.

Zhang Yu called over his shoulder, "Old Zhao, help me get my back."

"You got it." Zhao Tianxing dipped his hand into the Vajra Ghee Zhang Yu was holding and began to rub it across his back.

As he did, he observed Zhang Yu's physical condition and thought to himself, *Zhang Yu's physical strength level seems quite high.*

Although Zhang Yu pursued a balanced development of strength, speed, and agility, unlike Zhao Tianxing's path of focusing on strength, he knew what to look for.

As a core student who often attended Wang Hai's classes, Zhao Tianxing had naturally seen many top students who excelled at body tempering.

Now, looking at Zhang Yu's muscles and feeling their marble-like texture, he could clearly sense that Zhang Yu's physical strength was by no means low.

It seems… it seems a bit higher than my own?

But how is that possible? He doesn't even have a supervising teacher for physical education anymore.

A short while later, Zhang Yu, Zhao Tianxing, and the rest of their group of ten arrived at the examination area, glistening with oil and wearing testing patches.

The gazes of the five physical education teachers below the stage swept across them, with Wang Hai's eyes pausing on Zhao Tianxing and Zhang Yu before he spoke.

"Begin."

Hah!

Hyah!

Hrah!

With a series of fierce shouts, the students on the stage took turns erupting with the full force of their bodies, their muscles bulging as they unleashed the raw violence contained within their flesh.

The platform beneath their feet creaked and groaned under the explosive force, as if parts of it could no longer withstand the abuse from these waves of body tempering monstrosities.

At the same time, the strength data from the testing patches was rapidly transmitted to the judges' screens.

Wang Hai immediately looked at Zhang Yu's data. "Right arm muscle burst: 443 kilograms of force. Left arm muscle burst: 422 kilograms of force..."

This much progress in just a few weeks?

What kind of demonic beast drug did he take? Is his physical structure on the verge of being destroyed?

Seeing this data, Wang Hai's gaze sharpened, and he immediately looked up at Zhang Yu on the stage.

At the same time, not long after the ten students on the stage had unleashed their physical power, they felt five icy gazes sweep over them.

Looking up from below, one would have the impression of seeing ten ferocious, body-tempering beasts, their momentum surging.

But to the students on the stage, looking down at the five physical education teachers felt like being targeted by five terrifying behemoths.

Those cold, critical eyes were like five great beasts at a butcher's stall, picking and choosing which cuts of meat to devour from their bodies.

In that moment, Zhao Tianxing felt like a lamb to the slaughter before the five teachers, able only to tense every muscle and do his utmost to unleash his power.

Zhang Yu, on the other hand, felt something completely different from his classmates.

He felt as if he had been instantly locked onto by five pairs of blazing eyes, a stare so intense it gave him goosebumps.

At the same time, one of the teachers below exclaimed in admiration, "What a frame! The back of a beast, the chest of a demon, the arms of a fiend. To think a first-year student has already refined their physical structure to such a degree."

Another teacher said, practically drooling, "Look at his legs. You can tell at a glance that his joints have been shaped through countless trials. With a foundation this solid, he's destined to soar. Why don't I ever get students like this?"

A third teacher clapped Wang Hai on the shoulder and said, "Teacher Wang, is this another one of your specially nurtured disciples? His structural alignment is perfect. Such outstanding sculpting must have taken a great deal of effort on your part. Your year-end bonus is a sure thing now."

Wang Hai, who had just been debating whether to betray his conscience and give Zhang Yu a maliciously low score, simply gave an awkward smile and didn't reply after being clapped on the shoulder.

Yet, his gaze toward Zhang Yu still held a trace of irrepressible admiration.

He couldn't help but think, *Although selling drugs is my main business…*

As a physical education teacher, Wang Hai simply couldn't bring himself to give a low score to a physique as flawless as uncarved jade; the body was practically a work of art!

Besides, the comments from the other teachers had already blocked off any path he might have had to grade unfairly.

So, after grading Zhang Yu fairly, a ruthless glint flashed in Wang Hai's eyes.

Such a massive improvement in so little time, especially with how well his physical structure has been aligned.

From the looks of it, there's an eighty percent chance Zhang Yu has truly become a Golden Core disciple.

Since that's the case, I have no choice but to use my final option.

…

Dinnertime.

In the cafeteria.

Because he had started practicing the eighth level of the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method again today, Zhang Yu's appetite had shrunk considerably, and he was about to finish the food on his tray in just a few bites.

But just then, a large shadow fell over him.

Like a great mountain, Wang Hai sat down in front of him with a thud.

Then, Wang Hai smiled at Bai Zhenzhen, who was sitting nearby.

"Bai Zhenzhen, would you mind if I had a private word with Zhang Yu?"

Bai Zhenzhen looked at Zhang Yu, and after he gave her a nod, she moved to a seat a dozen meters away, watching them with a curious expression.

Zhang Yu's gaze toward Wang Hai also carried a hint of caution; after all, their relationship could hardly be called good.

But then Wang Hai said, "Let's exchange contact info. We haven't done that yet."

After becoming eighty percent certain that the boy was a Golden Core disciple, Wang Hai decided to resort to his final option: giving a gift.

He would use a gift to mend their relationship.

But what to give became a new problem.

Wang Hai hadn't gotten to where he was today without a certain wisdom when it came to giving gifts.

His first thought was naturally body tempering drugs. As a peddler of such things, giving out samples, experimental products, and even contraband was second nature to him, almost a conditioned response.

But on second thought, he dismissed the idea.

Zhang Yu himself said he tempers his body naturally. True or not, wouldn't I be slapping him in the face by offering him drugs? No, that won't do.

So, his thoughts turned to body tempering cultivation techniques instead.

As a star physical education teacher, another of his major income streams besides selling drugs came from private tutoring.

Tutoring the children of certain people and teaching them body tempering cultivation techniques had always been his surefire method for building connections.

But he soon dismissed this option as well.

What good are the few cultivation techniques I'm authorized to teach to the Zhang Yu of today?

He's a Golden Core disciple, after all. Why would he need a cultivation technique from a mere high school P.E. teacher?

After thinking it over, it seems the only thing to give is…

Just then, after they had exchanged contact information, Wang Hai spoke again.

"Zhang Yu, your performance on the exam today was excellent. I was thinking I don't have anything particularly worthy to give you, so I'll just transfer you some money."

"It's just a small token of my appreciation. I hope you won't think it's too little."

Picking up his vibrating phone and seeing it was a transfer notification from Wang Hai, Zhang Yu's thoughts stirred.

He's sending me money to smooth things over? Does he think a little cash can just erase the fact that he isolated me?

Since his past life, Zhang Yu had always looked down on such monetary transactions. As he tapped the notification, he tried to form a disdainful expression, but found he couldn't quite manage it.

Transfer received from Wang Hai: 66,666.66.

From a dozen meters away, Bai Zhenzhen watched Zhang Yu's expression and wondered, *What in the world happened? Yu-boy can't even keep the corners of his mouth from turning up.*

At the same time, Wang Hai said with a look of utter sincerity, "Seeing your progress today has brought me great relief."

"It was my own poor teaching ability before. I misjudged you, and for that, I apologize."

Seeing Wang Hai about to stand and bow, Zhang Yu stopped him.

"Teacher, you were only trying to do what was best for me. How could I let you apologize?"

Zhang Yu was disgusted with his own worldliness.

Damn it, Zhang Yu, how did you become this kind of person? Were you really bought off so easily?

But this wasn't about the money. Old Wang was a man in his seventies or eighties, a proud, face-conscious, star teacher, and he had apologized to him; there was sincerity in that.

Seeing Zhang Yu's smile, Wang Hai breathed a small sigh of relief, but the thought of the sixty-six thousand sent another pang of pain through his heart.

Although his income was high, his expenses were far beyond those of an ordinary person, so he never had much spare cash on hand. Sixty-six thousand was by no means a small sum to him.

But he knew this was no time to be agonizing over sixty-six thousand yuan. After all, before him was the newly accepted disciple of the Golden Core True Monarch, Senior Xinghou.

Years of experience had taught Wang Hai that if you were going to give money, you had to give enough to make an impact all at once.

He grasped Zhang Yu's hands and said earnestly, "From now on, my class is your class. You can do whatever you want. It's fine even if you don't show up. Skip whenever you like. I'll give you absolute freedom."

What was the ultimate sign of a teacher's respect for a student?

Having taught at Songyang High School for many years, Wang Hai had his own answer: letting them skip class freely. This was the respect he showed to a disciple of a Golden Core.

"Huh?" Zhang Yu was slightly taken aback at first, but then a wave of delight followed. For a self-disciplined student like him, being able to freely manage his class time was indeed a good thing.

Wang Hai looked at Zhang Yu's surprised expression and said meaningfully, "Heh, it's not as if you need my guidance anymore, after all."

After a few more pleasantries, Wang Hai took his leave.

"Alright, I have other matters to attend to, and I'm sure you do as well, so I won't disturb you any longer."

(End of this chapter)

Chapter 34: The Results Are In, A Top Student Emerges

Watching Wang Hai's departing figure, Zhang Yu remarked with a sigh, "He's truly a responsible and good teacher."

Bai Zhenzhen sidled up to him, asking suspiciously, "What exactly just happened? There was laughing, handshaking, and talking."

"Did Wang Hai suddenly discover you're his long-lost father?"

Zhang Yu shook his head.

"There could be many reasons, but when you get down to it… it all comes back to my performance on this monthly exam."

"Zhen, as long as my grades keep getting better and my skills grow stronger, I'll have more and more good friends in this world, won't I?"

Seeing Zhang Yu's smug look, Bai Zhenzhen wondered inwardly, *How many points did Yu-boy actually score this time? Did he score higher than me? No, that should be impossible…*

That evening, upon returning to the suburbs, Zhang Yu resumed grinding the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, his next objective being to raise the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method to level 10.

The next morning arrived in a flash, and Zhang Yu had elevated the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method to Level 8 (37/160).

After a day of passive breathing exercises mixed with active ones, his mana had once again increased from 11.8 to 11.9.

And thanks to Wang Hai's assistance, Zhang Yu's savings, even after deducting his expenses from the past few days, had suddenly reached over seventy-two thousand yuan.

The moment he saw his savings, Zhang Yu immediately thought of all sorts of ways to spend the money.

In the end, however, he suppressed his various impulses, deciding to first see what kind of contract the school would offer him after the monthly exam before planning how to use the money for his self-improvement.

...

Songyang High School, four in the morning.

Inside the faculty office.

After another typical all-nighter, Su Haifeng received the results from the monthly exam.

To ensure the students could understand themselves, know their scores, and guide their studies as quickly as possible, the teachers had worked overtime, calculating the scores and rankings for every student who took the monthly exam on the very night of the test.

How joyous, how delightful.

Su Haifeng looked at the detailed rankings and scores.

First Place: Bai Zhenzhen, Total Score: 651

Su Haifeng nodded slightly.

Bai Zhenzhen is still the undisputed number one. It's a shame her Daoist arts score was only 60, otherwise her total would be even higher.

Second Place: Qian Shen, Total Score: 626

Qian Shen is making steady progress, especially since his 80 points in Daoist arts really boosted his score.

Third Place: Zhang Yu, Total Score: 620

Su Haifeng froze for a moment, then rubbed his eyes and looked again, more carefully this time.

Third Place: Zhang Yu, Total Score: 620

"How is that possible?"

Su Haifeng sat up straight and quickly looked at Zhang Yu's specific scores for each subject.

General Knowledge: 48. Dao Heart: 135. Mana: 142. Physical Education: 145. Martial Arts: 90. Daoist Arts: 60.

"This…"

Su Haifeng was shocked, and this was with a Daoist arts score of only 60.

If his Daoist arts score had been just seven points higher, wouldn't he have reached 627, surpassing Qian Shen to become the second in the grade?

In other words, Zhang Yu had jumped from tenth in the grade all the way to third in a single go.

No… according to Su Haifeng's estimation, his scores three weeks ago should have already dropped him to twentieth place. In that time, aside from mana, his scores in every other subject should have been steadily declining, putting his total rank closer to thirtieth.

"How could he have improved so drastically?"

"Did he win the lottery?"

Su Haifeng grew more and more alarmed as he reviewed Zhang Yu's scores for each subject; especially with 142 in mana, how could he possibly have a full 145 in physical education?

He couldn't help but call Wang Hai to ask what was going on, and whether Zhang Yu's score had been marked incorrectly.

Four in the morning was precisely when the cultivators of Songyang were at their most energetic.

Wang Hai answered the phone quickly.

"What is it, Teacher Su?"

"I'm seeing here that Zhang Yu's physical education score is 145? There must be some mistake…"

Wang Hai's attitude toward Zhang Yu had been very good today, but that didn't mean he had suddenly become a good-tempered person.

He was still that star teacher who hated having his professional authority challenged.

Hearing Su Haifeng's doubt now, he gave a cold snort and cut him off.

"Teacher Su, are you questioning our physical education standards, or our professional integrity?"

As Songyang High School's ace physical education teacher and star promoter, Wang Hai wasn't the least bit afraid of Su Haifeng.

"If you have an issue with the score, then file an application for a review."

"But I can tell you, there is absolutely nothing wrong with Zhang Yu's score; it is 145."

"His physical strength has not only reached level 1.25, which already puts him at the top of his grade, but the structural proportions of his entire body are also absolutely outstanding."

"With the foundation he's laid, his physical strength is certain to increase in the future. He's bound to be a leading figure in this year's class, and it's not out of the question for him to participate in athletic competitions."

Athletic competitions, much like mana competitions, involved contests with content that far exceeded the high school curriculum.

Achieving a sufficiently outstanding result in one would not only earn a large cash prize but also provide an advantage in university interviews and even grant bonus points on the college entrance exams.

And as the school that had produced a city-wide athletics champion, Songyang High School had always held a certain advantage in these competitions.

Hearing Wang Hai's high praise for Zhang Yu, Su Haifeng was even more astonished. Ignoring the unfriendliness in the other man's tone, he pressed,

"But hasn't he been skipping physical education for the past three weeks? How did his score improve so much?"

Hearing this, Wang Hai's old face flushed red, and he paused for a moment before explaining, "Zhang Yu is different from ordinary students. He has his own path of development and knows how he needs to cultivate."

Since Zhang Yu is a Golden Core disciple, what need does he have for my guidance? Wang Hai thought, then continued aloud,

"It was precisely because I recognized this that I left him to his own devices in physical education."

"Never mind him managing himself during class; he could skip it entirely from now on, and it would be fine."

"This is what it means to teach according to the student's aptitude."

After ending the call with Wang Hai, Su Haifeng still found it somewhat unbelievable. Was Wang Hai really talking about Zhang Yu? That poor wretch?

After frowning in thought for a moment, Su Haifeng made another call.

"Hello? The monthly exam results are out. Zhang Yu is third in the grade, his score is…"

After reporting the score, Su Haifeng sighed and said with some awkwardness, "I have to admit, my judgment of Zhang Yu was completely wrong."

"With a performance like this, it would be completely normal for the school to offer him a B-tier, or even an A-tier, contract."

"That won't be my responsibility, then. I expect someone from the student council will approach him in a couple of days."

A man's voice came from the other end of the line: "I understand. Do what you can to delay the student council for me. I'll try another way."

Su Haifeng replied, "You know how that bunch from the student council is. I can't delay them. Whatever you're going to do, you'd better do it fast."

…

Six-thirty in the morning.

The entrance to Songyang High School was already bustling with students arriving for class.

And as Zhang Yu neared the school gate, he saw that the monthly exam results had been updated on the giant screen at the entrance.

Student privacy, psychological burden… such things naturally didn't exist at the Songyang High School.

Not only were the results harshly displayed on the big screen at the entrance, but the scores for the entire class were also posted on the door of every classroom, and even the electronic screens in the cafeteria constantly scrolled through the rankings.

Even when Zhang Yu went to the restroom, he could hear the broadcast discussing the monthly exam, praising students with high total scores and great improvements while simultaneously insulting those whose scores had dropped or were low.

The Songyang High School prided itself on having no blind spots, no privacy, and maximum psychological burden.

"...Fellow students, today we would like to offer a special congratulations to student Zhang Yu of the first-year model class."

"Student Zhang Yu has leaped from his previous rank of tenth in the grade all the way to third place this time, with a total score of 620—a full 70-point increase, which can only be described as a quantum leap in progress..."

After using the restroom, Zhang Yu listened to the broadcast while washing his hands and couldn't help but nod to himself.

"The school's widespread publication of the results does have its positive aspects; there's certainly some merit to it."

When Zhang Yu walked into his classroom, he was met with the stares of many people, their gazes sweeping over him from time to time, their eyes filled with all sorts of different emotions.

Qian Shen looked from Zhang Yu to Bai Zhenzhen, their scores of 620 and 651 floating before his eyes, eclipsing all the other students around them.

Just as I thought. Besides Bai Zhenzhen, this Zhang Yu will also be my rival for all three years of high school.

Qian Shen felt as if he could already see the next three years unfolding: the three of them clashing, competing fiercely in a contest too close to call, and ultimately all getting into a top-tier university together.

He was fired up!

He eagerly took out his Talisman Tome and immediately began studying talismans again.

Talismans are my best subject, but I only scored an 80 this time. I have to practice more!

Meanwhile, He Dayou's expression was grim as he looked over his own scores.

A total score of 603.

Fifty points in martial arts…

The 50-point martial arts score was so jarring that he felt his blood boil, and he wished he could smash the desk before him to smithereens with a single punch.

It was obvious that his consecutive defeats at Zhang Yu's hands, coupled with two clumsy performances where he was instantly defeated, had caused his martial arts score to drop this low.

This made a trace of killing intent surface in his eyes as he looked at Zhang Yu.

However, as the son of a school director, he ultimately suppressed the impulse.

Every poor wretch is a valuable resource for the school. How could I make a move against one?

No point in getting angry. Besides, the student council has probably already set its sights on Zhang Yu by now, right?

We're not even in the same race. I can't let him break my concentration; I need to focus on my own improvement.

He Dayou activated his heart art, allowing his emotions to slowly calm.

He had figured it out: he and Zhang Yu weren't competing on the same path at all, so he shouldn't let the other boy affect his state of mind and, consequently, his grades—like this 50 in martial arts.

In the end, increasing my own strength and assets is the true path.

My Daoist arts score was 90 this time. Even though it's already one of my strengths, there's still room for improvement.

At this thought, He Dayou took out his Talisman Tome and, ignoring everything around him, began to study with intense focus.

Meanwhile, Bai Zhenzhen tilted her head as she looked at Zhang Yu, thinking, *Could Yu-boy have been lying low all this time, pretending for four months just to stun everyone now?*

No, that's not right. He shouldn't have that kind of ability.

Don't tell me Yu-boy is like me… and he's unlocked his own cheat, too?

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 35: Choices and Cultivation Techniques

White Dragon High School.

As a high school known as one of the three great institutions in Songyang City, alongside Purple Cloud High School, it boasted a long history and substantial financial backing. Whether it was the number of students winning competitions each year, the number accepted into the Ten Greats, or the number who suffered mental breakdowns, it held a dominant position in Songyang City.

To many students of White Dragon High School, in fact… what three great institutions? There was only one renowned school in Songyang City, and that was White Dragon High School.

And at this moment, in the cafeteria of White Dragon High School.

Zhang Pianpian was eating her meal while flipping through her Talisman Tome, studying a newly purchased talisman textbook.

Just then, a petite girl sat down in front of her and said mysteriously, "Pianbao, I heard some interesting news. Want to know? Treat me to a meal, and I'll tell you."

"Not interested.", Zhang Pianpian replied without looking up.

The girl chuckled. "Your little brother made quite a splash at the Central Tower last time, but it's a shame he wasn't accepted by a Golden Core master in the end. Don't you want to hear the latest about him?"

Zhang Pianpian's brow furrowed slightly as she spoke, "It's worth a nine-yuan pauper's special at most. Any more, and I'm not interested."

"That's enough, that's enough." The girl laughed. "It's a rare occasion to have you treat me to a meal, Pianbao. No one in our class would believe it if I told them."

Seeing the impatient look on Zhang Pianpian's face, the girl continued, "My friend at Songyang High School told me the news."

"Your brother placed third in the grade on this month's exam, with a total score of 620."

Zhang Pianpian was surprised. "620 points? Are you sure this information is accurate?"

"Guaranteed," the girl said. "That score would be enough to get into the top fifteen among our first-years here. That's incredible."

"Didn't you say your brother's talent was lacking? It seems pretty good now."

A trace of doubt flashed in Zhang Pianpian's eyes.

"My judgment is never wrong. He doesn't possess the talent to walk the Immortal Dao. It seems something must have happened to him recently."

The girl asked, "The student council at Songyang High School will probably have their eyes on him now. Aren't you going to help him out?"

Zhang Pianpian lowered her gaze and said faintly, "We'll see what he chooses for himself."

"If he's willing to sign a contract with the student council, his high school life will at least be a bit easier."

"Are you testing him?" The girl pouted. "Isn't that a bit too strict? How many students can really withstand the pressure from the student council?"

Zhang Pianpian said coldly, "If he can't handle it, then he must walk a path suited for those who can't. Otherwise, my help would do more harm than good."

"What he is truly made of will ultimately depend on the choices he himself can make."

...

Songyang High School.

Zhang Yu could clearly feel that the atmosphere of the entire school had changed.

During breaks, classmates he wasn't very familiar with started to greet him.

"Zhang Yu, your physical strength has improved so quickly. Is it really from natural body tempering?"

"Zhang Yu, can I borrow your martial theory exam notes to take a look?"

In the hallways, students from other classes whom he didn't know would point at him.

"Look, that's the Zhang Yu that Teacher Lei was talking about."

"Sigh, these monsters from the model class really don't give anyone else a chance."

In martial arts class, Teacher Lei Jun repeatedly played the video of him defeating He Dayou.

He even had Zhang Yu describe his combat strategy from that moment, causing He Dayou's blood to surge and his heart to pound with ever-increasing strength, as if he were being revitalized.

In the cafeteria, students began to intentionally detour past Zhang Yu's table, seemingly to sneak a peek at what dishes he was eating.

There were also some students with whom he had no real connection who wanted to sit and eat with him.

At dinnertime, Zhang Yu simply called Zhao Tianxing over, pulling him to eat together with him and Bai Zhenzhen.

After all, Zhao Tianxing alone could occupy two seats, so the three of them filled the entire table perfectly.

As for that kid Zhou Tianyi, who knew what he was up to today. He had left the school the moment class ended and didn't join them for dinner.

Zhao Tianxing had eaten with them a few times over this period, gradually becoming much more familiar with both Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen.

Zhang Yu even discovered that Bai Zhenzhen seemed much more relaxed around Zhao Tianxing than she was around Zhou Tianyi.

Just then, Zhao Tianxing could be heard complaining, "How much longer is the cafeteria's electronic screen going to display the monthly exam scores? It's not even convenient to see the prices when getting food now."

Zhang Yu took a bite of rice and sighed, "Little Zhao, that's where your perspective is too narrow. The school displays the exam scores to urge everyone to study hard. I think it's fine if they display it for a few more days."

At his side, Bai Zhenzhen also nodded slightly. "Exams are the fundamental duty of a student, after all. How can the importance of displaying scores compare to the mere price of food?"

Zhao Tianxing looked speechlessly at the two of them, especially Zhang Yu.

Then he suddenly realized that Zhang Yu was no longer the student whose monthly exam rank had been similar to his; they were no longer in the same social class on campus.

Those actions that deeply stung other students, frantically applied pressure, and incited vicious infighting among them were now, for the current Zhang Yu, nothing but a blatant form of showing off.

Just a few days ago, Zhang Yu was right there with me, vehemently criticizing these inhumane school practices.

And now he's become like this. He lamented internally, *Do people really change this fast once their scores get higher?*

Bai Zhenzhen looked at Zhang Yu and smiled.

"Yu-boy, you seem to be in a very good mood."

It was more than just good.

Zhang Yu felt on top of the world right now.

He had never found the scenery of Songyang High School so beautiful, nor the students and teachers so warm.

For him, who had to persevere in ascetic training every single day, this was the most beautiful sight, a rare comfort, a reward from the heavens for his diligence and self-discipline.

Zhang Yu waved his hand humbly.

"Alas, it's all just useless, empty fame."

"I don't know why everyone likes to come looking for me all of a sudden."

"Zhen, you've been first in the grade for so long, how come not as many people have come to hang out with you?"

Bai Zhenzhen pursed her lips, her face full of disdain.

"Because my first place offers them no hope of catching up. All they feel is the absolute gap between our talents. But your sudden improvement makes them feel like it's possible to imitate you. That's why every last one of them wants to be your good friend, to spy on the secret of your progress."

Bai Zhenzhen devoured a chicken leg in one bite, mercilessly exposing the cruel reality.

"In the world of high school, scores are king."

"A book of select practice problems, a paid talisman technique, or some practical combat experience learned in a cram school—any of these is enough to make countless high school students flock to it. To say nothing of the mystery behind your seventy-point improvement in one month; even the top ten academic stars in our grade can't help but be tempted."

"These students coming to find you aren't really here to be your friends. They just want to obtain the secret to your massive score increase, and ideally, transfer those seventy points of progress onto themselves."

Nearby, Zhao Tianxing shifted his weight, and the two chairs beneath him let out a groan as if unable to bear the load.

He thought to himself, *I placed tenth this time, and I did intentionally try to get closer to Zhang Yu before.*

Could Bai Zhenzhen's words be directed at me?

Although I really do want to learn some of their excellent study habits, and maybe take the opportunity to ask Zhang Yu the secret to his rapid improvement…

At this thought, he squirmed even more, feeling the atmosphere at the table grow tense, and he temporarily suppressed the idea of asking Zhang Yu for his secret.

It wasn't until he parted ways with Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, watching one take the bus and the other the subway, that Zhao Tianxing was still pondering the matter.

Was Bai Zhenzhen really talking about me?

…

On the bus.

Just after getting on, while being jostled by the crowd, Zhang Yu felt his phone vibrate.

He took it out and saw a message from Bai Zhenzhen.

"The student council will probably approach you about a contract in the next few days."

"No matter what they offer, don't agree to anything yet."

"Wait until I've finished my talks with them, and then we can discuss it together."

Reading Bai Zhenzhen's message, Zhang Yu's gaze flickered.

So the advanced contracts are handled by the student council?

Zhang Yu had never really known much about Songyang High School's student council.

In his mind, a high school student council? What could they possibly do?

But judging from Bai Zhenzhen's words, the student council was clearly not simple; it even held the power to negotiate contracts with students.

I wonder what the terms of my contract will be.

From the sound of it, does Zhen want us to present a united front? To raise the price together?

After a few seconds of fruitless thought, he heard the countdown timer resound in his mind, forcing him to temporarily cast aside these stray thoughts and start scrolling through the textbooks saved on his phone.

However, after looking at the material for a while—whether due to the feedback from his exam results or the impending contract—Zhang Yu felt somewhat restless on the bus today and couldn't focus on his reading.

He simply put his phone away and began to contemplate his current cultivation path.

The ritual's power, for its part, did not compel him in this line of thought.

After all, pondering the road ahead and planning his cultivation… it all aligned with his desire to study hard, cultivate hard, get into a good university, work hard, and earn enough money to eventually buy all the antiques in his shopping cart.

First, I'll get the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method to level 10.

The next target is the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, but that martial heart art requires a level 3 Dao heart. That means I'll have to practice the Basic Heart Tempering Art first, raising it to level 10 while also getting my Dao heart to level 3, and then I can practice the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art…

After that, the only things I have left to practice are the basic breathing exercise, Free-hand Combat, and Basic High School Swordplay.

After confirming his future plans, Zhang Yu thought of his current savings of over seventy thousand yuan and the potential income from signing a contract, and an idea inevitably surfaced.

Should I buy some more powerful, more effective cultivation techniques?

Previously, Zhang Yu had no money, so he'd never had such a plan.

But after receiving sixty-six thousand from Wang Hai today, Zhang Yu couldn't stop thinking about how to spend it.

Spiritual roots, talismans, combat experience… many things he hadn't dared to consider before now sparked vague ideas in his mind, and he was just waiting to see how much money he would have after the contract negotiations before making concrete plans.

And now, as he considered the future of his training, the idea of purchasing cultivation techniques couldn't help but rise in his mind as well.

"Even if I don't buy anything, I can at least take a look and get an idea of what's out there."

The phone screen flashed as Zhang Yu opened a shopping website and entered his real-name account.

After another facial recognition scan, Zhang Yu finally entered the marketplace for Immortal Dao cultivation techniques, though with his current status, he could only view techniques for the Qi Refining stage.

The moment he entered, he saw a recommendation bar that read, "Your friends are viewing": *Yin Maiden Grand Art (Unisex Version)*, *Great Dream Heart Sutra: Cultivate in Your Sleep*, *Nine Heavens Crash Course in Eight-Part Talismans*…

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 36: The Grade-A Contract

Gazing at the cultivation technique in the recommendation slot, Zhang Yu grew curious.

My friend is currently viewing this? Which friend is looking at these martial arts?

Unfortunately, since the platform used real-name logins, most of the classmates he knew in real life were also his friends on the site; there were simply too many of them for him to determine who was browsing.

Nine Heavens Crash Course in Eight-Part Talismans?

Thinking of his 60-point score on the Daoist arts exam, Zhang Yu immediately clicked on it, only to be scared off by the 98,000-credit price tag.

"The cost-to-benefit ratio for talismans is too low; I'll put them on the back burner for now."

Zhang Yu simply opened the leaderboards to see what the most popular cultivation techniques were at the moment.

"Evergreen Longevity Art: Deluxe Revised Edition, Health-Preserving and Sickness-Dispelling Art, The Brick-Moving King's Guide to the Excavator Palm and Crane Claw, Sports Car Legs: Uncensored Version, A Practitioner's Guide to the Elevator Leap…"

Seeing these cultivation techniques sold for the Qi Refinement stage, Zhang Yu was slightly taken aback.

The bestsellers were, first and foremost, techniques for extending one's life and curing illnesses, which Zhang Yu completely understood—who didn't want to live a few more years? As for curing illnesses, that was even more reasonable. Hospitals were too expensive, after all, and toughing it out by cultivating was far more cost-effective.

But the next items on the bestseller list were either strength-based martial arts that mimicked excavators and cranes, or movement techniques modeled after sports cars and elevators… in short, they all looked like arts meant for laborers.

However, after a moment's thought, Zhang Yu understood.

Compared to high schoolers like him, the true majority of people in the Qi Refinement stage were working-class adults, particularly the high-income earners in construction, factories, delivery, and security—people who did the work of dozens all by themselves.

To them, this Excavator Palm, this Crane Claw, these Sports Car Legs were the tools of their trade, the very cultivation techniques they relied on to make a life for themselves in Kunxu.

For them, these were the only truly useful techniques, far more reliable than anything for breaking through to new realms or advancing one's cultivation.

Having figured this out, Zhang Yu changed the filter settings, adjusting the suitable age to between 18 and 20.

The cultivation techniques that popped up now instantly changed to things like Mana Bonus Point Strategy, General Dictionary of Basic Eight-Part Talismans, Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms: Simplified Edition…

Looking these over, Zhang Yu felt that the highest-selling techniques were all too basic, too simple.

"Looks like these are being bought by students from ordinary high schools."

And so, Zhang Yu added a new filter: cultivation technique grade.

According to what Zhang Yu had learned at school, cultivation techniques were divided into five grades: Basic, Advanced, Expert, Military, and Sect.

It was said that Sect-grade techniques had even finer distinctions within them, but Zhang Yu didn't know the specifics.

After all, Military and Sect-grade techniques were not something ordinary people could cultivate. One required joining the military or a government branch to gain access, while the other necessitated joining a major sect.

As for the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method he possessed, he estimated it was likely Advanced-grade.

The Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, on the other hand, was probably Expert-grade.

"Mount Buzhou Shifting Scripture, Primeval Heart Grand Seal, Celestial Cycle Starfall Sword, Luminous Heart Sutra…"

Zhang Yu's gaze swept across these Expert-grade cultivation techniques, and after a moment of envy, he could only shake his head in resignation.

"Expert-grade techniques not only have higher cultivation thresholds and more requirements… the usage rights for the cheapest one alone cost tens of thousands. I really can't afford them."

Unless the school's contract really offers me a fortune.

His gaze swept over the Advanced-grade techniques as he thought, *The Advanced-grade ones, on the other hand… I can consider buying a few after the contract negotiations are done.*

Especially a heart art that suits me, one that can help me raise my Dao heart to level 3 faster so I can start practicing the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art.

After browsing the shopping platform for a while and adding a few interesting cultivation techniques to his cart, Zhang Yu was about to log off.

Just then, he suddenly noticed the recommendation bar had changed again.

Your competitor is placing an order for: Mana Bonus Point Strategy, General Dictionary of Basic Eight-Part Talismans, Demonic Parasite Art…

What the hell!

"You people are just going to abuse big data like this, are you? Starting a cultivation arms race between users to drive consumption?"

"No, wait… what in the world is this Demonic Parasite Art?"

Your competitor is ordering the Demonic Parasite Art…

How could anyone not click on that? Even a dog passing by would have to stop and take a look.

Zhang Yu clicked on it, only to discover that the Demonic Parasite Art was an Expert-grade cultivation technique that combined abilities like flesh regeneration, organ transplantation, devouring flesh and blood, blood qi adaptation, and parasitizing human bodies.

In short, it was a martial art designed to seize the bodies of others.

As a legitimate Qidian web novel reader in his past life, Zhang Yu had only one impression upon seeing the name and description.

Could anyone who buys this technique possibly be a good person?

"My competitor? Which fiend is trying to cultivate the Demonic Parasite Art?"

"Does this competitor even exist? Or is the website just making it up?"

Zhang Yu was skeptical, but when he considered the various miraculous powers and ethics of the Kunxu world, he felt it wasn't entirely impossible.

Zhang Yu checked the price; the usage rights for the Demonic Parasite Art cost a full three hundred thousand. He could only think of a few people he knew who would be qualified to cultivate it, and adding the "competitor" qualifier…

"Qian Shen?"

"Or He Dayou?"

Zhang Yu immediately felt that He Dayou was the prime suspect. After all, Teacher Lei Jun had replayed the video of their fight countless times, and he remembered the incredibly hostile look in He Dayou's eyes.

"I'll have to be careful of the rich people around here, regardless."

"To actually cultivate something like the Demonic Parasite Art… truly a beast in human skin."

But soon after, in the recommendation bar at the bottom of the page, he saw…

Users who viewed this technique also viewed: Anti-Parasite Art, Purification Divine Art, Heaven-Slaying Demon Art…

Seeing these names with their extremely specific countermeasures, Zhang Yu immediately began to doubt his earlier judgment.

"Don't tell me this platform is just messing with me to trick me into placing an order?"

Based on his understanding of the Kunxu world, the companies here were absolutely capable of pulling such a stunt.

For now, he could only commit the matter to memory, but before leaving the platform, he thought for a moment and added the Anti-Parasite Art, Purification Divine Art, and Heaven-Slaying Demon Art to his favorites.

A moment later, he opened the platform again and added the Demonic Parasite Art to his favorites as well.

"Heh, I hope that fellow who placed the order can also see that his competitor is looking at the Demonic Parasite Art, Anti-Parasite Art, Purification Divine Art, and Heaven-Slaying Demon Art…"

In the blink of an eye, another night passed.

Zhang Yu's Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method progressed again, rising to level 8 (95/160).

And after a full day of ascetic training, his mana had risen accordingly to 12.1.

…

The next day.

On the campus of Songyang High School.

Zhang Yu received a friend request from a user with a barbell for an avatar.

"Hello, Zhang Yu. I'm Lan Ling from the second-year model class, and I'm also the head of the student council's athletics department. There's something I'd like to discuss with you. Please add me as a friend."

After Zhang Yu accepted, the other party quickly sent a new message.

"Hello, Zhang Yu. To advance the development of the societal Immortal Dao, to aid the students of our school in bravely scaling new heights on the path to immortality, and to help them achieve more outstanding results, we are honored to invite you to discuss a contract, based on the principles of mutual consent and win-win cooperation, in the hopes of reaching a deeper, value-added partnership…"

The other party asked to meet him at the student council office at noon that day to discuss the signing.

It's finally here?

And so, at noon, after washing his face, combing his hair, and straightening his clothes, Zhang Yu arrived outside the student council office.

He had just knocked on the door when he saw another door appear as the first one opened.

Oh… it wasn't that a second door had appeared, but that a person who strongly resembled a door had appeared.

A student with the build of a door plank opened the way for Zhang Yu, smiling as he stepped back.

"You must be Zhang Yu, right?"

Zhang Yu glanced at the dumbbell still clutched in the door-plank-man's hand and greeted him.

"Lan Ling?"

As the two of them exchanged greetings, a laugh echoed from behind the door-plank figure, followed by the thudding of running feet.

"Is Zhang Yu here?"

A young man who hadn't even had time to put on his shoes leaped off a sofa, trotted over to Zhang Yu, and grasped his hands excitedly.

"Hahaha, I heard yesterday that our Songyang High School had produced another peerless genius. I've finally been waiting for you."

With that, he grabbed Zhang Yu and led him inside.

The nearby Lan Ling followed up with an introduction.

"Zhang Yu, this is the vice president of our student council, Zhou Chechen."

Zhang Yu recalled that this person seemed to be the top-ranked student in the second year.

He was a name that, like his own, was now frequently seen around the school since the monthly exams ended.

Zhou Chechen pulled Zhang Yu over to a sofa, and the two of them sat down together.

Feeling his hand being squeezed tightly and seeing the look of admiration, excitement, and thrill in the other's eyes, Zhang Yu's heart clenched.

What the hell, don't tell me he's a fencer?

Zhou Chechen, however, simply reached out and made a grasping motion in the air; a stack of files flew from the office desk and into his hand.

"After I saw your results, I immediately looked up your file."

"Only then did I discover that debt collection calls about you have been coming to the school."

Hearing this, Zhang Yu's heart sank as he thought, *Are they going to use my debt to pressure me on the price?*

But instead, Zhou Chechen waved the documents in his hand with a smile.

"As soon as I heard, I had someone buy out all your debts."

"Over a dozen platforms, a total of 700,000 in debt—it's all here."

"How can a prodigy of our school be crushed under the weight of debt? If word got out, other high schools would think our Songyang High School was too poor to even invest in its own students."

As he spoke, he released a pulse of mana from his hand, instantly turning all the debt documents to ash.

Under Zhang Yu's astonished gaze, Zhou Chechen continued, "You don't have to make any more monthly payments."

"This 700,000 debt will be on my tab for now. There's no interest, and you don't have to be in a hurry to pay it back."

"From now on at Songyang High School, just focus on your studies and cultivation. Once you graduate from university, get into a major sect, and start earning money, you can pay me back slowly."

Zhang Yu stared at the other student in shock, never expecting this student council vice president to have resolved his most pressing financial crisis in a single stroke.

Then Zhou Chechen picked up another document and explained, "This is the Grade-A contract that the president and I have decided upon for you."

"Fifty thousand a month for cultivation expenses, a twenty-percent discount on the school's spiritual roots, meditation chambers, Spirit Realms, talismans, cafeteria, potions… and we've also prepared a private room for you in the school dormitory…"

Listening to the list of favorable terms, one after another, Zhang Yu's heart couldn't help but pound faster, and he felt the overwhelming urge to sign the document on the spot.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 37: A Net Cast from Heaven and Earth

Thump.

With the closing of the door, only Zhou Chechen and Lan Ling were left in the office.

Lan Ling continued to pump the barbell in his hand as he spoke.

"President, this Zhang Yu is a bit greedy."

Zhou Chechen lay on the sofa and chuckled lightly. "He's from a poor background. It's perfectly normal for someone like that to get a little arrogant and reckless after a sudden taste of success."

"If I raised my score by seventy points in a single month like he did, I'd be just as arrogant."

"We'll just give him another month to think it over."

Lan Ling's gaze was cold. "President, are you really going to raise the contract benefits for him again?"

Zhou Chechen said faintly, "Lan Ling, you've seen too few poor people. You still don't understand them."

"Limited by their upbringing, experience, and standard of living, the poor often have a very narrow perspective."

"In a situation like the one just now, nine out of ten would have signed the contract with us on the spot."

"But Zhang Yu was able to keep his composure and say he needed to go back and consider it. For that, I have to think a little more highly of him."

"If his score improves again in next month's exam, what does it matter if I raise his benefits by one level?"

Lan Ling frowned. "I'm just afraid that sort of person will be insatiably greedy."

Zhou Chechen laughed heartily. "Alright, Big Lan, you need to be more magnanimous. Don't squabble with the people below us."

"Zhang Yu isn't walking the same path as us, nor will he be competing with us for our positions. They have never been our competition."

"On the contrary, the better he does and the more progress he makes, the more we earn, making him an even more worthy investment…"

As he spoke, Zhou Chechen had already placed a spiritual interface mask over his head.

"I have to attend remedial lessons in the Spirit Realm all afternoon, so don't come looking for me unless it's important."

…

Inside the cafeteria.

The moment he left the student council office, Zhang Yu rushed over to Bai Zhenzhen.

Seeing that she was still calmly eating, Zhang Yu said anxiously, "Zhen, you'd better give me a good enough reason."

"Do you know how much determination it just took for me not to sign? You have no idea how much they appreciate my talent…"

"Did he rush over to shake your hand the moment you walked in, so fast he didn't even have time to put on his shoes?"

Zhang Yu paused, the words dying in his mouth.

Bai Zhenzhen continued, "It's always the same. That's how Zhou Chechen treats everyone he wants to sign a contract with."

"Huh?" Zhang Yu was astonished.

So he was playing the 'honored guest' card with me, huh?

Zhang Yu added, "But he also canceled my debt."

Bai Zhenzhen snorted and asked, "Did he really cancel it?"

"Or did he just become your new creditor?"

"Did he also tell you there's no interest, that you don't need to be in a hurry to pay it back, and that you can just repay it slowly after you graduate and find a job?"

Zhang Yu was stunned again. "He said that to you too?"

Bai Zhenzhen said, "He probably says that to everyone he wants to sign."

"But don't you dare think this is some kind of favor."

"His so-called 'you don't have to repay' is just empty talk."

"If you don't continue to pay your debt and it goes into default, the decision is entirely in his hands."

"If he really doesn't care, then nothing will happen."

"But the moment he applies for compulsory enforcement, the money in your account will immediately be used to repay the debt."

"If there isn't enough money, your assets will be used to cover it."

"Think about it, what is your most valuable asset?"

Zhang Yu's eyes flickered; he didn't really have any assets to speak of. If they tried for compulsory enforcement, he'd probably just end up as a deadbeat.

But Bai Zhenzhen gave a cold snort and said, "The most valuable thing you have is your cultivation—your flesh and blood tempered through a thousand trials, and the dantian you've tirelessly trained."

Hearing this, Zhang Yu's expression hardened. "You're saying they would?"

Bai Zhenzhen nodded. "Compulsory enforcement. If you have money, you pay. If you don't, your assets are auctioned off. Once your worldly possessions are sold, they'll naturally move on to your organs, your flesh and blood, your dantian…"

Although he had long since held no expectations for the depravity of Kunxu, Zhang Yu's heart still sank upon hearing Bai Zhenzhen's words.

And Bai Zhenzhen's explanation continued. "And don't even think about running. This contract isn't just on paper."

"Remember the Law Division within the Eight Ministries of Righteous Gods?"

"When this contract is signed, the student council will use a talisman to respectfully request the Heavenly Covenant God from the Law Division to act as a witness. Any compulsory enforcement will then be carried out by the Eight Ministries of Righteous Gods."

Well, I'll be damned. What a piece of work, that Zhou Chechen.

The more Zhang Yu listened, the more alarmed he became.

I pour my heart out to you, and you try to screw me over? Are you trying to get me locked up in some kind of scam?

Across from him, Bai Zhenzhen continued, "However, if you fully comply with the contract and your academic improvement meets their expectations, they might not necessarily do anything to you."

"But there's another crucial part, another section of the contract concerning your university applications—the choice of university and major, and the penalties for violating those terms."

"In other words, after signing the contract, which university and which major you apply for will be decided by them."

"On top of that, there are all sorts of other clauses, and violating any of them comes with an astronomical breach-of-contract fee…"

Seeing Zhang Yu's bewildered expression, Bai Zhenzhen said in exasperation, "Didn't you read that part of the contract?"

Zhang Yu said righteously, "The benefits they listed up front were so good I could barely handle it. I was afraid I'd sign on the spot if I kept reading, so I quickly turned Zhou Chechen down and ran here to find you, didn't I?"

Bai Zhenzhen nodded. "Fine, I suppose that counts as you having exceptional willpower, Yu-boy."

Then her tone shifted as she brought up another matter.

"Yu-boy, have you ever noticed that the filthy rich students at our school rarely get into conflicts with us poor devils?"

"Haven't they always been gentle, kind, and polite, rarely using their power to bully others?"

Zhang Yu thought back for a moment, then nodded. "I guess that's true."

"It's because the rich and the poor aren't even competing in the same race. From start to finish, they've never seen us as competitors, which is why they can appear to be decent people."

Zhang Yu frowned slightly at her words. Everyone took the same college entrance exams, so what did she mean by "not in the same race"? Could they get into university through gymnastics?

Bai Zhenzhen continued, "Because the poor are testing for ordinary universities, while the goal of those filthy rich kids is the Ten Greats, the top-tier universities."

"For them, with their financial power, getting into an ordinary university is a given. They don't consider the poor devils competition at all."

"Only for the top-tier universities do even they have to give it their all to compete with other wealthy people."

Zhang Yu couldn't help but ask, "So poor people can't get into top-tier universities?"

"The enrollment quotas for the Ten Greats are limited, and even fewer are allocated to each city."

"For example, in Songyang City, the total number of spots for all Ten Greats combined… is only a few dozen each year."

"These spots have long been monopolized by them through various means."

"Contracts like the Grade-A one are one of those means. They sign up talented and high-scoring poor devils, directly controlling which universities they apply to."

"Of course… once you sign this contract, although you can't apply to the Ten Greats, you become their investment project. They will continue to be polite and friendly to you, their good classmate."

"But if you don't sign this contract, and even show an inclination to apply for the Ten Greats later on, then you truly become their competitor."

"What awaits you will be an incredibly brutal competition, and you will see all the truly inhuman methods they employ, along with pressure coming at you from all sides."

"The enrollment quotas for the Ten Greats are something their circle collectively protects, something they will never allow any poor devil to touch."

"On this point, the student councils of all the key high schools are in it together; they rise and fall as one."

"And don't expect the school to interfere much. When the social influence of the students' parents far exceeds that of the school, the principal often has no control over the student council."

Listening to Bai Zhenzhen's explanation, Zhang Yu immediately understood. The big shots of Songyang City were ganging up to exclude the damn poor.

At that moment, he felt as if he could see an invisible net, vast and suffocating, covering the sky and blanketing the earth, cast over the heads of all the students.

Zhang Yu couldn't help but marvel, "Is the gap between the Ten Greats and ordinary universities really that big? Big enough to make them this afraid?"

Bai Zhenzhen rolled her eyes. "What do you think?"

"The Ten Great Sects are an inescapable part of life, from birth to death. They are the power that decides the very direction of Kunxu."

"And only by entering one of the Ten Greats do you have a chance to enter one of the Ten Great Sects."

"As for graduates from ordinary universities? The Ten Great Sects won't accept them as disciples. At best, they can become an employee of some corporation under the Ten Great Sects."

Zhang Yu sighed internally. So even after graduation, you couldn't escape academic discrimination. A degree from an ordinary university meant you were destined to be a contract disciple for life.

Bai Zhenzhen continued, "Of course, there is another very important point. Only within the Ten Great Sects… can one achieve immortality."

A trace of longing crept into her voice.

Achieving immortality, the ultimate pursuit in the hearts of countless cultivators. It could be said that of all the cultivators who set foot upon the Immortal Dao, there was not one who hadn't dreamed of it.

Zhang Yu was reminded of it as well: immortals existed only within the Ten Great Sects.

Bai Zhenzhen said, "Anyway, that's the situation."

"If you want to apply to the Ten Greats, you will face an all-out effort to crush you."

"Yu-boy, now that you know all this… what are your plans?"

Under Bai Zhenzhen's gaze, Zhang Yu's expression was one of extreme hesitation.

Should I sign? If I sign, I can study and take my exams in peace. With the Feathered Tome, even if I get into an ordinary university and work for a sect's corporation, I should be able to live quite well, right?

But… the Ten Great Sects…

In that moment, Zhang Yu thought of the Immortal Spiritual Root that only disciples of the great sects could implant, the Immortal-grade cultivation techniques only they could use, and the fact that only they could achieve immortality…

Countless disparities, both known and unknown, separated the futures offered by the Ten Greats and ordinary universities.

Just as Zhang Yu was wavering, a chilling sensation welled up from his heart. The appearance of a countdown timer reminded him of something.

"Heh… Study hard, get into a good university, join a great sect, and then earn enough money to buy all the antiques in my shopping cart."

To join a great sect, I have to get into one of the Ten Greats…

Damn it… The truth is I never had a choice.

Seeing Zhang Yu's conflicted expression, Bai Zhenzhen patted his shoulder and said, "Take your time. This isn't an easy decision to make."

"They should have given you a month to consider it, anyway."

As Bai Zhenzhen stood up to leave, Zhang Yu suddenly asked, "What about you? Zhen, what are your plans?"

Bai Zhenzhen paused for a moment, then said with absolute resolve, “I’m not signing.”

“I’m aiming for the Ten Greats.”

Feeling the chill within him slowly dissipate, Zhang Yu seemed to see his own heart’s choice clearly.

He smiled. “Then let’s do it together.”

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 38: Level 10 Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method

Turning her head to look at Zhang Yu, Bai Zhenzhen asked in surprise, “Are you sure?”

“Yu-boy, don’t make this decision so lightly.”

“Trying for one of the Ten Greats means you’ll be making enemies with countless people in Songyang City.”

“You’re not just saying this to sound impressive, are you?”

Zhang Yu retorted angrily, “What the hell… I’m being serious with you. Do you think I’m joking?”

Seeing his serious expression, Bai Zhenzhen suddenly smiled. “Fine, we’ll say you’re also aiming for the Ten Greats.”

“They gave you a month to consider, didn’t they?”

“The deadline they gave me is in one month.”

“For the next two weeks, you should focus on improving yourself. I’ll take you to meet some people at the Mana Competition.”

“The Mana Competition?” Zhang Yu’s interest was piqued. He recalled that the competition he had signed up for was set to begin this month, in just two weeks.

“Meet people there? Who are we meeting?”

Bai Zhenzhen said mysteriously, “People who might be able to help us.”

Damn riddlers.

Zhang Yu pressed, “Who exactly?”

Bai Zhenzhen replied, "I'm not entirely sure myself yet. You'll find out when the time comes."

Helpless, Zhang Yu could only resolve to focus all his energy on self-improvement in the time that followed.

In any case, the only thing he could truly control right now was his own strength.

...

During martial arts class.

"Daoist arts are useless."

"It's the martial path that's truly useful."

"When you're cornered and come face-to-face with an opponent, masterful martial skill is the most reliable tool you have."

"In that moment, there are only two outcomes: either you kill your opponent, or you end up on the ground, killed by them..."

Listening to the speech from the martial arts teacher, Lei Jun, He Dayou secretly rolled his eyes, clearly unimpressed by this tirade.

Just then, Lei Jun announced, "Alright, break into groups for combat practice."

"He Dayou, you're with Zhang Yu."

"Huh?" He Dayou was stunned, instinctively looking at Lei Jun and pointing to himself.

Lei Jun snorted coldly. "What are you looking at? You lost miserably on the monthly exam. With results that poor, did you even go home and reflect on it?"

"I'm giving you another chance now to learn from Zhang Yu. Are you unwilling?"

Weighed down by the banner of his poor performance in the monthly martial arts combat exam, even the son of a school director like He Dayou was left speechless.

After all, in the current climate where a poor student could do no right, He Dayou couldn't defy the teacher in class.

This damn old martial arts codger, picking on a top Daoist arts student, is he?

He walked silently to stand before Zhang Yu, thinking, *But I might not actually lose to Zhang Yu this time.*

Despite three consecutive losses to Zhang Yu, and though He Dayou didn't intend to hold a grudge, it didn't mean he wouldn't reflect and re-evaluate his own performance.

He had not only rewatched the recordings of those three fights many times himself, but had also shown them to his private combat tutor for review.

The analysis concluded that Zhang Yu's Freehand Combat had reached the third level. Once he spotted an opening, he could easily inflict heavy damage.

But Zhang Yu's weakness was also obvious: the third match showed his extreme lack of practical combat experience.

So, He Dayou had practiced a few countermeasures.

For instance, on the platform now, he no longer took the initiative, instead focusing entirely on defense, waiting for his opponent to grow impatient before looking for a chance to strike with a surprise Lesser Heavenly Star Palm…

With a strategy in mind, He Dayou believed that even if he lost, it wouldn't be a disgraceful defeat—he might even have a chance to win.

Pow!

Pow!

Pow!

After blocking several of Zhang Yu's consecutive moves, He Dayou felt fine at first.

But soon he felt his opponent's fists growing heavier and heavier, making his hands ache from blocking, and the mana within him began to churn.

Boom!

Another of Zhang Yu's punches blasted right through his guard, followed by a kick that sent He Dayou flying.

He crashed to the ground with a thud, feeling his internal mana surge so violently that for a moment, he couldn't even get up.

Zhang Yu's Freehand Combat is even stronger than before?

Could he have…

He Dayou looked at Zhang Yu in disbelief.

On the other side, Lei Jun's figure flashed and appeared beside Zhang Yu, exclaiming in shock, "Your Freehand Combat is at the fourth level?"

Zhang Yu, whose Freehand Combat was actually at the fifth level, gave an awkward smile.

"Yeah, I just broke through yesterday."

Zhang Yu hadn't intended to reveal his progress, and had been deliberately suppressing the power of his Freehand Combat while fighting He Dayou.

But his lack of experience showed. When He Dayou switched to a full defense, Zhang Yu accidentally lost control during his fierce assault and pushed the circulation of his mana and vital energy to the fourth level of power.

Hearing this, Lei Jun laughed heartily. "It seems you have quite a talent for the martial path."

"What do you say? Want to participate in next month's Songyang City Martial Combat Tournament?"

Zhang Yu's eyes lit up. "Is there prize money?"

Lei Jun replied, "Of course. First place in the city gets fifty thousand, plus the right to use an expert-grade martial technique."

Zhang Yu thought, *The Mana Competition I signed up for has a prize, and this martial combat tournament does too…*

He suddenly realized that if he could win more placements and prizes in competitions, then even without the student council's support, he should have enough money for daily expenses and even to speed up his training.

Seeing Zhang Yu's interest, Lei Jun continued, "I've told you all before that martial arts are incredibly useful. As long as you're good in a real fight, you won't have to worry about money."

"I'll sign you up then. When the time comes, I'll take you and Bai Zhenzhen together."

After Lei Jun left, Zhang Yu looked at He Dayou, who was still on the ground, and asked, "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, what could happen to me?" He Dayou scrambled to his feet, gave Zhang Yu a deep look, and suddenly said, "I heard the student council called you in yesterday?"

After Zhang Yu nodded, He Dayou slowly quelled the anger in his heart.

No point getting angry with him. It's all school property, and it doesn't affect my college entrance exams.

He comforted himself while rubbing his chest, *Being a little stronger or weaker in combat during the first year doesn't mean much. Once I've built a solid foundation and start practicing expert-grade cultivation techniques, I'll be able to crush people like Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen.*

On the other side of the training grounds, Bai Zhenzhen said impatiently, "Are you done watching? Let's continue."

Qian Shen pulled his gaze away from Zhang Yu, but as he faced Bai Zhenzhen, he felt waves of pressure wash over him.

If he were facing a demi-human with a score of 550, he was confident he could crush them.

But facing a prodigy with a score of 651, Qian Shen felt as if his every move was seen through, and the moment he engaged with Bai Zhenzhen, he felt completely constrained, his combat power dropping sharply.

My score is so much lower than hers, how could I possibly be her opponent? Old Lei is really something else. He should have paired me with Zhang Yu, whose score is six points lower than mine.

Zhang Yu glanced at He Dayou, Qian Shen, and the other rich kids, a thought suddenly crossing his mind. What would these seemingly friendly, wealthy students be like once they found out he and Bai Zhenzhen were aiming for the Ten Greats?

Would they also join forces to oppose him and Zhen?

Watching Qian Shen being completely suppressed by Bai Zhenzhen, Zhang Yu mused, *Speaking of which, Qian Shen is such a score-supremacist, it's like he's completely unaware that poor students have no path to the Ten Greats. Could he be acting?*

Zhang Yu didn't think so; Qian-boy's naivety didn't seem like an act.

It couldn't be one of those "let the young master focus on his studies and shield him from the filth of society" scenarios, could it?

Zhang Yu shook his head, unable to be sure.

…

During Daoist arts class.

The instructor looked at He Dayou with admiration.

"This Health Check Talisman is well-drawn. It seems your understanding of the talismans of the God of Health and Verdant Spring is already profound."

He Dayou replied humbly, "You praise me too much, teacher. I still have much to learn."

The instructor waved his hand. "Excessive humility is just another form of pride."

"To have reached this level in your first year, He Dayou… I'd say you don't even need to attend the school's first-year courses anymore."

"It's fine if you don't attend this class from now on; I'll mark you as present."

Feeling the envious gazes of his classmates, He Dayou once again offered humble refusals.

The instructor, however, suddenly turned his head.

"Zhang Yu, Bai Zhenzhen, you two need to work harder."

"It's not good to be so lopsided in your studies."

"If you have time, come to me for some tutoring. I'll give you both a twenty percent discount…"

Both Bai Zhenzhen and Zhang Yu could only lower their heads and take the lecture, though inwardly they were unmoved. The return on investment for talisman tutoring was simply too low, and they planned to spend their money on more practical things first.

…

In the quiet room.

The administrator, Wei Xin's, voice came through.

"Student Zhang Yu, your time is almost up. Would you like to extend?"

Zhang Yu, who had once again achieved the lowest rate of distraction for the week, hesitated for a moment before saying, "Add another hour."

With the Mana Competition drawing ever closer, Zhang Yu decided it was time to moderately increase the pace of his mana cultivation.

He took a deep breath, feeling a tremor from the Sea of Qi Spiritual Root within his dantian as spiritual energy swarmed in from all directions, which he then refined into mana, strand by painstaking strand.

An hour later, watching Zhang Yu's departing figure, Wei Xin sighed, "As expected of a Golden Core disciple. The efficiency of his breathing exercises is improving so quickly."

"I just wish he'd upgrade to a platinum membership already."

…

After school.

On the school rooftop.

Amidst a flurry of sharp cracks, two figures collided repeatedly at high speed, creating sounds like thunder and wind.

It was Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, engaged in a sparring match.

Compared to the drills in their combat class, their private sessions allowed them to go all out without fear of revealing their trump cards, which was far more effective for improving their practical experience.

In the exchange of fists and feet, Zhang Yu's Freehand Combat was more powerful, but his physical strength was a notch below Bai Zhenzhen's.

And while Bai Zhenzhen's Freehand Combat level was lower than his, she had also mastered a basic high school sword art, periodically weaving in sword-finger strikes that sent the inexperienced Zhang Yu scrambling.

"Yu-boy, don't watch my hands. You need to watch my hips and shoulders to anticipate my moves."

"Stop trying to rely only on your familiarity with Freehand Combat to react…"

…

In the stationery shop by the school gate.

The owner pointed to the first-year rankings.

"Zhang Yu, third in his year, improved by seventy points in one month because he bought my tranquilizers, painkillers, fillers, and muscle supplements…"

As he spoke, he took out a bag of vials and pitched to the Songyang students before him, "The official Zhang Yu training combo, now ten percent off."

Zhang Yu, who had come to restock, stood at the doorway watching the adult behind the counter shamelessly peddling his wares for profit, and once again felt the ugliness of the adult world.

After that group of students left, Zhang Yu walked up and said, "See? I told you I was a campus celebrity. My endorsement really moves product."

"Isn't it time for a raise?"

The owner replied, displeased, "I still haven't broken even on that batch of neural fillers I gave you."

He pointed a finger toward a gift bag. "Look, I've only sold one set today."

Zhang Yu thought, *You're just selling common stuff that's no cheaper than online. People can buy it anywhere.*

The owner added, "And about the body tempering medicine, a lot of students are saying you're a natural and don't use enhancers."

Zhang Yu quickly changed the subject. "That's just because I haven't been seen using your products enough at school. Give me two more bottles of neural fillers, and I'll take them every day on campus. That'll be better for publicity."

…

Reading, classes, cultivation, breathing exercises, combat…

For five days, Zhang Yu threw all of his energy into his training.

This evening, while performing his breathing exercises in bed, a smile crept onto his lips.

After completing his final breathing cycle, his Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method had finally reached the tenth level.

In that instant, the mana circulation within Zhang Yu's body swelled, surging endlessly like a great river, and a phantom whistling sound seemed to ring in his ears.

A long while later, as the turbulence in his mana circulation gradually subsided, Zhang Yu could feel his passive breathing exercises had become more powerful and more dynamic.

"Now that the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method has reached the tenth level, my passive breathing has the full efficiency of active breathing."

The smile on Zhang Yu's face widened. This meant that from now on, even if he wasn't actively performing his breathing exercises, it would be as if he were constantly circulating the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method to absorb spiritual energy, his mana improving every moment of the day.

And after this period of ascetic training, his mana had also grown considerably, rising to 13.3 and making him second in the entire grade.

At this thought, a strange expression crossed Zhang Yu's face.

"My potential is astonishing and my self-discipline is peerless, so it's not surprising that I'm improving this fast."

"But how is it that Zhen's progress has also seemed to be speeding up lately?"

"Is she using a cheat, too?"

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 39: Heart Art

With the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method finally at level 10, Zhang Yu planned to switch the Feathered Tome's specialization and select another cultivation technique to upgrade.

After deciding not to sign the contract with the student council and to instead fight his way into one of the top ten universities, Zhang Yu had come to understand a few things.

First, without the student council's investment, the resources at his disposal would inevitably be far more limited.

And to get into one of the Ten Greats, the pressure he would face would only be much greater than it was now.

Fewer resources, yet heavier pressure.

Therefore, Zhang Yu had to meticulously plan the allocation and use of his resources, pushing himself to develop faster and better within any given period.

To do this, he would have to leverage his greatest strengths as much as possible: his absolute self-discipline and astonishing potential.

Simply put, it meant practicing stronger and more difficult cultivation techniques.

For Zhang Yu, master of the Feathered Tome, if he was going to pour the same ascetic training into a cultivation technique, it was only natural that the stronger the technique, the better the results.

It was like one version of himself training the 'Great Desolate Heaven-Imprisoning Finger' while another trained the 'Basic Extended Palm'. Just from the names, you could tell which had a better future.

...but this isn't something that can be done casually.

The more powerful the cultivation technique, the higher the threshold to learn it.

It was like how any dog could learn the doggy paddle, but not everyone could perform water ballet.

Among expert-grade cultivation techniques, take the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art he possessed; he still hadn't met its requirement of a level 3 Dao heart.

Thus, to cultivate powerful techniques, the first condition was to meet their prerequisites.

Zhang Yu's gaze swept across his phone screen, reading the requirements that one powerful cultivation technique after another demanded of its practitioner…

"Dao heart! Mana!"

Just as his high school teachers always said, the Dao heart and mana were the foundation of the Immortal Dao.

The Dao heart level represented a cultivator's control over and capacity to bear the powers of the Immortal Dao.

Mana was the most fundamental energy used to power all kinds of cultivation techniques.

The prerequisites for the vast majority of powerful cultivation techniques were related to one's Dao heart and mana.

Therefore, to practice powerful cultivation techniques, one needed a sufficiently high Dao heart and plenty of mana.

In terms of mana, I already have the level 10 Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, which is like constantly performing a breathing exercise to absorb spiritual energy and refine mana.

My Dao heart level, on the other hand, is what I've neglected to improve recently.

Zhang Yu checked his savings. After paying for rent, utilities, food, and other miscellaneous expenses, he had just over 62,000 left.

Even if he spent all of it on increasing his mana, it would only be enough to rent a Heavenly Spiritual Root for a little over ten hours, like paying for an all-nighter at an internet cafe—gone in a flash, with very limited improvement.

So, after thinking it over for the past few days, Zhang Yu decided he should purchase a stronger heart art, raise his Dao heart to level 3 as quickly as possible, and then switch to the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art to accelerate its growth even further.

After all, during the initial stage of cultivation, the Dao heart level ranged from 1 to a maximum of 10, whereas mana ranged from 1 to 100.

Raising his Dao heart level to 3 would not be a quick process; if he had a heart art that was stronger and more suited to him than the Basic Heart Tempering Art, he could save a considerable amount of time.

Once both his Dao heart level and mana were higher, he could then practice a stronger cultivation technique. This was the fastest and most cost-effective path for his development right now.

As for which heart art to buy, Zhang Yu had already done a lot of searching and thinking over the past few days.

Basic, Advanced, Expert…

Among the heart arts he could currently afford, the basic-grade ones were the cheapest, but they offered him little improvement.

Although the expert-grade arts were powerful, they were not only expensive but also had high cultivation thresholds, making them unsuitable for him at the moment.

The advanced-grade heart arts, however, were just right for him, even though they were considered of dubious value to most students four months into their first year of high school.

In terms of effectiveness, the first year of high school was all about building a solid foundation, and the basic cultivation techniques promoted by schools were all developed by the Ten Great Sects to be perfectly balanced and stable, making them excellent for that purpose.

Learning an additional advanced-grade heart art at this stage was a waste of time and energy; it was better to just focus on improving a basic one.

That was why even wealthy students tended to stick to the basics in their first year, only beginning to apply their resources toward learning various expensive heart arts in their second year.

This was one reason why at Songyang High School, the academic gap between the rich kids and the poor students often widened dramatically in the second year, and why talented but poor students would begin to see their rankings fall.

From a price perspective, while advanced-grade cultivation techniques were much cheaper than expert-grade ones, the subsequent costs were still substantial.

After all, self-studying a cultivation technique was too difficult. For most people, it wasn't a simple matter of getting a manual and mastering it, but often required hiring a tutor for guidance.

An advanced-grade heart art manual might only cost a few hundred or a few thousand, but the follow-up tutoring, classes, and guidance… those supplementary fees could run into the tens of thousands.

It reminded Zhang Yu of certain games from his past life: the base game was free, but spending money on various items and characters could cost thousands.

Time to run.jpg

But for Zhang Yu, these two points were perfect.

Tutoring? Not for me.

I, Zhang Yu, can rely on myself alone and still master divine arts with my peerless aptitude.

Opening the favorites tab on a shopping website, Zhang Yu looked at a heart art he had selected.

An advanced-grade cultivation technique: the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra.

Judging by the name alone, it seemed to be a mighty, domineering, and incomparably resolute heart art that could shake one's very soul.

But upon closer inspection, he discovered that the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra required a corresponding mindset: one of diligence, perseverance, and endurance, like an old ox tirelessly plowing a new field.

Crucially, the heart art's most powerful state required the cooperation of another person—a figure who could constantly pressure and suppress the practitioner, ceaselessly assigning them tasks, like a manager or a boss.

The more one was ordered around, the harsher the pressure, and the longer the working hours, the stronger the effects of the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra became.

For ten consecutive years, the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra had been voted the best heart art for construction sites and the most beloved by bosses.

It was also a "beast of burden" heart art, with a user rating that perennially hovered below 1.2 stars.

Zhang Yu looked at the user reviews.

One star.

"My company requires it. It's *really* useful."

One star.

"I'll give the five-star review in installments."

One star.

"Got chewed out by my moron boss again today."

After a quick scan, Zhang Yu was hit by a palpable wave of resentment. Obviously, the vast majority of people who practiced this beast-of-burden heart art were forced into it, meaning they perfectly met its requirements.

Zhang Yu then looked at the technique's detailed system requirements.

Recommended Specifications:

1. Forced to work more than 18 hours a day.

Zhang Yu thought for a moment. He was being forced by the ritual's power 24 hours a day, so that certainly met the requirement.

He read the next line.

2. Method of compulsion must be at least verbal pressure. Threats to salary are optimal. The harsher the pressure, the better the effect.

He considered this. He was currently being threatened with death, which also fit the requirements perfectly.

This beast-of-burden heart art really is perfect for my current situation, and most importantly, the price…

Zhang Yu checked the price for the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra; the usage rights currently cost only 588 yuan.

It was one of the cheapest advanced-grade cultivation techniques Zhang Yu had ever seen.

However, because getting started required the practitioner to have a 'boss' to work with, the page also recommended a guidance service for 1,000 yuan a day.

After all, many jobs required this heart art as a prerequisite for hiring, but many people needed to find a job and have a boss before they could master it.

To solve this employment catch-22, the platform had conveniently introduced a paid guidance service.

So you're supposed to fucking pay to hire your own boss?

Zhang Yu cursed inwardly, knowing he had no need for that; he already had something pressuring him 24/7.

In terms of effect, price, and requirements, the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra was a heart art perfectly suited for Zhang Yu's current situation.

For 588, you couldn't go wrong and you couldn't get scammed. Even if he found his mentality couldn't adapt to it, the loss would be minimal.

The only thing that bothered Zhang Yu was the art's underlying philosophy.

But he was no longer the same Zhang Yu who had just transmigrated; facing the harsh environment of Kunxu and the relentless pressure from the ritual's power, he had already learned to adjust his mindset to survive.

Zhang Yu took a deep breath and thought, *A beast of burden it is, then. Desperate times call for desperate measures.*

I'll swallow my pride when I have to. I'll just be a beast of burden for a while.

With my potential, even if I have to toil away like an animal, a day will come when I can tear a hole in the heavens.

Zhang Yu knew full well that by practicing this heart art, he wasn't resigning himself to a life of servitude; it was a temporary measure to build power for a better future.

Order placed, payment sent, item received.

In the blink of an eye, he received a digital copy of the heart art.

After he finished reading through it carefully, the new cultivation technique appeared in the Feathered Tome.

Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra 0 (0/1, requires Dao heart level 1/1)

Zhang Yu sat cross-legged and began to practice the heart art.

He emptied his mind, keeping his spirit as calm as possible, and began to construct the technique's visualization diagram in his thoughts.

It was the image of an old ox, head bowed, silently tilling the wasteland.

But after a short while of trying to form the image, he felt that something was off.

Suddenly, as if remembering something, he quickly stopped his cultivation and sat there in a daze.

A moment later, a dreadful chill welled up in his heart as the countdown timer sounded in his mind.

This time, when Zhang Yu resumed practicing the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra, everything suddenly clicked into place.

A few minutes later, the image of an old ox, head bowed and silently tilling the wasteland, was fully formed in his mind.

At that moment, he felt as if he had become that silently toiling, uncomplaining ox, and much of the displeasure in his heart dissolved.

As he completed the visualization, a flood of memories of practicing the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra seemed to materialize from nothing in his mind, allowing him to grasp the heart art in an instant.

Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra Level 1 (0/3)

"I only need to practice it three times to level up?"

Zhang Yu didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Is it because this cultivation technique is so compatible with my current state?"

So he waited a moment longer for the countdown to ring in his mind before practicing the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra again, sketching out the visualization of the old ox tilling the wasteland.

He practiced it back and forth like this three times. After about ten minutes, Zhang Yu felt a stir in his spirit as his understanding of the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra deepened once more, and the visualization in his mind grew clearer and more vivid.

Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra Level 2 (0/6)

Especially after raising the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra to level 2, he felt that cultivation wasn't so tedious or unbearable anymore.

"Is this the effect of the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra? It makes you less afraid of hardship and more able to just grind…"

It was only when he stopped circulating the heart art that feelings of fatigue, tedium, and the desire to slack off surged back into his mind.

A moment later, after the ritual's power descended, Zhang Yu activated the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra again. The restless, avoidant thoughts in his mind were instantly swept away, allowing him to begin cultivating in earnest.

"This technique… doesn't seem as bad as I thought."

He suddenly recalled a line from the technique's foreword, written by its founder, who called himself the Great Sage of the Desolate Ox.

"May all under heaven who face hardship feel less bitterness in their hearts and more hope for the future."

A thought suddenly occurred to him: *Maybe the person who created this technique never intended for it to be a beast-of-burden heart art.*

Nearly half an hour passed in the blink of an eye. Zhang Yu took a sharp breath, feeling a tremor in his sea of consciousness as his Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra rose to level 3 (0/9).

After cultivating for a short while longer, he suddenly felt that both the mana and physical strength within his body had become as responsive as his own limbs, far more tangible and controllable.

"My Dao heart level has risen to 2."

Although Zhang Yu had already felt his Dao heart level was about to advance, he couldn't help but marvel at the rapid progress he had made after practicing the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra.

This technique was truly a perfect match for his current state.

"Then I'll keep being a beast of burden. As long as the reward is good enough, it's no big deal."

And so, Zhang Yu once again immersed himself in the practice of the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra. As the technique circulated, he seemed to feel the tedium and toil of cultivation less and less, replaced by a growing sense of satisfaction from his steady accumulation of power.

It was like the sense of achievement an old ox feels as it diligently plows a field, watching the fertile soil expand beneath its feet.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 40: The Joyful Heart Art and Mana Competition Tutoring

The next morning.

Ever since breaking through to level 10 in the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method last night, Zhang Yu had purchased and begun practicing the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra…

Constantly forced to study, cultivate, and work by the power of the ritual, Zhang Yu had gradually adapted, and the moment he began the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra, he felt an unparalleled affinity for it. His progress was faster and more ferocious than he had ever imagined.

Especially as the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra leveled up again and again, Zhang Yu found himself increasingly able to endure the dryness, tedium, and solitude of practicing a heart art.

Aside from invoking the ritual's power to compel himself, he barely paused, advancing with valiant diligence on the path of the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra.

At the crack of dawn, Zhang Yu slowly opened his eyes; his Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra had already reached level 7 (15/21).

To have raised this heart art to such a level overnight, Zhang Yu sometimes felt frightened by his own talent.

Beyond that, his Dao heart had also made significant progress. Specifically, he saw new data in the Feathered Tome: Dao Heart Level 2 (1%).

Could it be that after cultivating the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra, my grasp of my Dao heart has become more precise, allowing me to perceive its specific progress?

Zhang Yu shook his head; he still knew too little about the Feathered Tome.

After getting up, brushing his teeth, and washing his face, Zhang Yu continued to make the most of his time by silently practicing the heart art on his way to school.

At the breakneck pace he was advancing in the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra, he felt he could probably push the heart art to level 10 today.

…

Songyang High School.

During the break between classes.

Zhang Yu, who was practicing his heart art, heard the approaching footsteps and his brow furrowed slightly.

A tall, bald-headed boy walked up to him and asked, "Zhang Yu, sorry to bother you for a moment."

"Could I borrow your math test from yesterday to take a look?"

After waiting a moment and seeing that Zhang Yu was slow to respond, the boy smiled nonchalantly.

"My apologies, it seems I've disturbed you."

"Carry on with your cultivation, then. I'll come find you later."

However, as the boy turned away, a gloomy look flashed in his eyes.

The way Zhang Yu focused on his cultivation, completely ignoring him, made him feel disrespected.

Hmph, as expected of the third-ranked in our year, so arrogant, he thought darkly. *A 530-pointer like me probably isn't even human to him, is he?*

Meanwhile, listening to the boy's departing footsteps, Zhang Yu felt a sense of relief that he was finally gone.

This Liang Qin kid is a bit too familiar, isn't he?

Liang Qin was the boy who had just asked to borrow his math test.

Ever since Zhang Yu's monthly exam results were released, classmates had often approached him, trying to probe the secret behind his rapid academic improvement.

But most of them would stop coming after one or two attempts, especially since Zhang Yu spent nearly every break cultivating diligently. The other students saw that he paid them no mind, and as the buzz from the monthly exam faded, fewer and fewer people came around to bother him.

Only this Liang Qin came to find him after almost every single class.

And it wasn't just during the breaks.

During Martial Arts class, Liang Qin would bring him water.

After PE class, he would bring Zhang Yu a towel.

When they ate in the cafeteria, he would try to save a seat for Zhang Yu.

In conversation, he was always quick to flatter Zhang Yu.

He buzzed around Zhang Yu from time to time, like an attentive little bee.

At first, Zhang Yu had thought he was a decent person.

But after a few days, he found Liang Qin increasingly annoying.

Especially since he always came looking for him during breaks, which interfered with his cultivation.

Moreover, while flattering him, Liang Qin was always trying to subtly dig for the secret to his academic improvement, which Zhang Yu found tiresome.

Thus, for the past two days, Zhang Yu had gradually started ignoring him, hoping he would get the hint and back off.

Although this process seemed to have generated some resentment from the other boy, Zhang Yu had no other choice.

…

In the blink of an eye, it was nearly time for school to end.

During self-study, Zhang Yu's body trembled slightly as he felt a stream of sweet nectar surge from the depths of his sea of consciousness, nourishing his entire being and filling him with an incredible sense of ease.

At the same time, a low roar echoed from the visualization diagram in his mind, where the ox Zhang Yu had sketched was now not only vivid and lifelike, but had its horns raised to the sky, letting out a deep bellow as if it had come to life.

Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra: Level 10

The moment this heart art reached level 10, Zhang Yu felt an unparalleled sense of satisfaction and joy.

The very thought that his power would continue to grow steadily, that he would push one cultivation technique after another to level 10, filled Zhang Yu's heart with eager anticipation and a boundless joy born from that feeling.

Is this the effect of the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra reaching level 10?

As long as you hold anticipation for the future in your heart, you can feel joy and satisfaction even through tedious ascetic training and constant hardship.

Zhang Yu found this heart art more and more interesting the more he practiced. A cultivation technique that allowed one to feel joy during ascetic training—wouldn't that lessen the pain of cultivation and increase its efficiency? Why did so many people rate it poorly?

Unless… many who practiced this heart art, even after reaching level 10, could no longer feel joy because they had lost all anticipation for the future?

Thinking about the current state of Kunxu's first level, Zhang Yu shook his head helplessly.

The Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra is a good cultivation technique.

But no matter how good it is, a technique is just a technique. The future ultimately depends on the person.

Just as Zhang Yu was lost in these thoughts, a girl's voice called out, "Yu-boy?"

Bai Zhenzhen stared at Zhang Yu's satisfied, blissful expression, her gaze sweeping him from head to toe before she asked suspiciously, "Yu-boy, you didn't just… finish… in the middle of class, did you?"

Zhang Yu's eyes snapped open. He looked at Bai Zhenzhen's disgusted expression and said, exasperated, "I was just marveling at the beauty of cultivation and contemplating the helplessness of the world, and then you, a person of such vulgarity, have to open your mouth and ruin the entire mood."

Bai Zhenzhen, however, couldn't be bothered with his talk of beauty and helplessness. She grabbed him and started pulling him out of the classroom.

"Enough of that nonsense. Did you forget we have tutoring for the Mana Competition after school today? We already paid 3,000 yuan for it."

After his mana level broke into the top ten of his grade last month, Zhang Yu, along with Bai Zhenzhen, was selected for the first-year team to participate in the Mana Competition.

But the topics tested in the first-year Mana Competition were things neither Zhang Yu nor Bai Zhenzhen had ever learned in school, subjects that went far beyond the standard curriculum.

Therefore, the mana studies teacher, Ms. Yan, had organized a tutoring session to teach the competition topics.

...

Inside the classroom.

Aside from Ms. Yan, who wore her hair in a bun and had on black-framed glasses, the only students in attendance were Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen.

Ms. Yan explained, "Besides you two, everyone else has a private tutor to help them. They have their own tutoring arrangements, so they won't be attending."

Doesn't this mean we're the only two poor kids in the top ten for mana? Zhang Yu thought.

Bai Zhenzhen clenched her fists, thinking, *I can't believe attending this session will lower my campus reputation.*

A fierce, competitive light flashed in Ms. Yan's eyes as she thought, *This bunch of rich kids is so disrespectful. They all trust their private tutors over me?*

Those private tutors are all smooth talkers who only know how to scam people out of their money. How can they possibly compare to my thirty years of solid teaching experience at a top-tier high school?

Only two out of ten showed up. Isn't this going to crush my campus reputation?

It's one thing if they don't come, but they didn't even pay the tutoring fee?

If the students from Class 2 or 3 had dared to pull something like this, Ms. Yan would have been on the phone with their parents in an instant, summoning

them all to the school to learn the consequences of underestimating a mana studies teacher.

But when she thought about the parents of these eight students from the model class…

Well, their parents are just so busy with work; a teacher should be more understanding.

She looked at Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen and thought, *You two poor kids had better make me proud. Thrash those other eight so thoroughly that they all come crawling to my tutoring sessions from now on.*

Though all sorts of thoughts were running through her mind, Ms. Yan's expression remained placid as she began to speak.

"The topics on the Mana Competition exam are completely different from what you normally study. Your total mana is merely the foundation; the key is control…"

She projected a diagram of energy circulation within the human body and began to explain earnestly, "The mana currently in your bodies is in its most basic form."

"By controlling the flow and pathways of your mana, you can change its form."

"For example, one advanced application is for martial purposes, such as sword qi or palm strikes…"

"A step beyond that, you can even induce phenomena like heat, cold, or thunder…"

As she spoke, she held out a finger. A sharp fluctuation emanated from its tip, effortlessly slicing through a sheet of paper before her.

A moment later, her fingertip glowed faintly red, and a tiny flame flickered into existence.

"This is the most basic form of mana transformation."

"Of course, a basic transformation like this relies on fundamentals—on your control over mana—and its power is extremely limited."

"The truly valuable next step is to cultivate specialized mana, which is transformed by various unique and powerful techniques…"

Listening to Ms. Yan's explanation, Zhang Yu suddenly recalled the chilling palm strike He Dayou had used against him during the practical combat portion of the monthly exam.

He figured that must have been a form of specialized mana produced by some cultivation technique.

On the teaching platform, Ms. Yan projected an animated diagram of energy circulation and said to the two students, "This is the simplest conversion pathway for sword qi, capable of transforming mana into a wisp of sharp sword energy."

"Follow the method I just taught you and see if you can do it."

Bai Zhenzhen stared at the animated diagram of the circulation pathway for a while before her head started to feel a bit dizzy.

This circulation pathway is too complex!

Then she tried it herself, only to be left speechless.

The mana spun round and round in her left arm but steadfastly refused to transform into a wisp of sharp energy.

Is this really the simplest conversion pathway for sword qi?

This is competition-level difficulty?

She felt as if she had just learned addition, only for the teacher to present her with a linear equation with two variables and tell her to solve it.

Just then, Zhang Yu's voice rang in her ears.

"Zhen, come quick and look at this!"

Bai Zhenzhen turned her head to see Zhang Yu lightly tapping his fingertip on his notebook, effortlessly carving out a linear equation with two variables.

Yu-boy, this unfamiliar side of you is sickening.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 41: The Conspiracy and the Start of the Mana Competition

When Zhang Yu saw the complex circulation diagram, he was initially a little startled.

But once he actually tried it, he realized—wasn't this much simpler than the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method he practiced daily?

Compared to the full-body mana circulation established by the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, this current route for converting mana into sharp sword qi was just too simple.

After all, Zhang Yu had already raised his mana circulation from the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method all the way to level 10, having practiced it a countless number of times.

Practicing this now… was as effortless as a college student schooling kids in a mental math competition.

So when he began to follow the circulation diagram in the projection, guiding his mana to his right arm, a brief attempt was all it took to feel a sharp aura gush from his fingertips.

This sharp aura couldn't even be called sword qi, and its power was hardly greater than a utility knife, but Zhang Yu still felt a thrill of excitement.

"Zhen, look! I did it!"

Ugh, Zhang Yu! So cringe!

Teacher Yan immediately looked over, asking in surprise, "Have you learned this before?"

After seeing Zhang Yu shake his head, she remarked with feeling, "It seems you have a real talent for this."

Having noticed Zhang Yu's aptitude, Teacher Yan taught with even greater diligence.

She then taught several basic mana conversion routes—such as heating, cooling, and generating electricity—and watching Zhang Yu master them all in a short time, she nodded repeatedly, full of praise.

"That's all I'll be teaching you today. Go home and practice diligently."

"Don't forget, same time tomorrow and the day after, I'll give you two more supplementary lessons."

"I'll teach you how to dispel mana then, as well as mana intrusion."

Watching Zhang Yu's departing figure, Teacher Yan thought to herself, *You'd better crush all eight of those kids who didn't show up for tutoring in the Mana Competition.*

As for actually placing in the Mana Competition? Making it into the top ten? Winning prize money and bonus points for university interviews…

Teacher Yan had never even considered it.

If it were a sports competition, Songyang High School would have a fighting chance.

Although a competition was just a competition and the college entrance exams were what truly mattered, Songyang High School had, after all, produced a citywide sports champion and had always been a sports powerhouse.

But in any competition outside of athletics, it was almost always the playground of the three great schools. Their only rivals were each other, and even a key high school like Songyang City's rarely got a look in.

In Teacher Yan's most optimistic estimation, Zhang Yu would become the best performer among Songyang High School's ten contestants, making those students who skipped tutoring regret it bitterly and rush to pay her for lessons after the competition ended.

Meanwhile, after leaving the classroom, Zhang Yu found a message on his phone from Zhou Chechen, agreeing to let him continue to honor the loan contract and make his monthly repayments.

After all, Zhou Chechen had previously bought his seven-hundred-thousand-dollar debt, becoming Zhang Yu's new creditor, but as a gesture of goodwill, he had said Zhang Yu was in no hurry to pay him back each month.

Zhang Yu had discussed the repayments with Zhou Chechen over the phone several times in the last few days; Zhou Chechen had refused a few times but finally agreed to his request, stating that he understood the feeling of not wanting to be in debt.

He agreed?

With a wince of financial pain, Zhang Yu paid this month's 15,000-dollar loan installment. Though it hurt, he didn't want to give them a handle on him that could be forcibly acted upon at any time, just as Bai Zhenzhen had warned.

Especially if these wealthy people found out he wanted to break through their blockade and get into one of the Ten Greats, an overdue loan would become a massive vulnerability.

After that 15,000, plus the 3,000 for tutoring, Zhang Yu's savings had dropped to just over 43,000.

"Sigh, this money disappears so fast."

"I hope I can earn a good bit from this Mana Competition."

...

Elsewhere.

Just as Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen were leaving the model class's classroom to head to Teacher Yan's for tutoring.

Liang Qin, having just returned from the restroom, walked back in and frowned at Zhang Yu's empty seat.

After searching the entire floor and finding no trace of Zhang Yu, he couldn't help but curse inwardly, "He was just in the classroom a moment ago. Where did he run off to?"

"Is this guy avoiding me on purpose?"

"So what if he got lucky and became a Golden Core disciple? Does he have to be so snooty?"

"If you hadn't become one, you wouldn't be much stronger than me..."

Fuming, Liang Qin walked out of the building and received a phone call.

Listening to the question on the other end, he answered vaguely, "Yeah, he already went home."

"Nothing happened all day."

"Ever since becoming a Golden Core disciple, he's had a real attitude, always on guard against his classmates like they're thieves, as if he's terrified someone will discover the secret to his improvement."

"I know, I'll keep an eye on him. Just don't forget to send the money."

After hanging up, Liang Qin looked absent-minded for a moment, but a smile spread across his face when the text message confirming the transfer arrived.

The reason for this was simple: he had been especially short on money lately.

Most people at Songyang High School, students and teachers alike, were short on money.

But Liang Qin was even more desperate for cash than the average poor person.

His family's financial situation had originally been decent. They didn't live downtown, but not in the distant suburbs either, residing instead in an apartment on the edge of the city's ring district.

His mother was a homemaker and his father a junior office worker; though supporting his education was a strain, they never had to worry about food or drink.

Things changed a month after he started at Songyang High School.

Perhaps it was the heavy academic pressure, or his gradually falling grades, or the oppression from one top student after another, or maybe it was the blatant or unintentional flaunting of wealth by the rich students, the extreme strictness of the teachers…

Liang Qin himself didn't know why, but despite having been a top student from elementary through middle school, he suddenly began to lose focus in his high school classes.

He would get halfway through his breathing exercises before he couldn't resist opening his eyes to scroll through his phone.

During body tempering, he always felt weak and listless.

When studying talismans, he couldn't help but space out.

He… seemed to be growing sick of school.

And what were the consequences of being sick of school at Songyang High?

The mere thought was suffocating, which only made his condition worse.

It was then that a second-year student he had met by chance introduced him to a way to relax and vent his stress.

The student said, "Go have some fun on this platform."

Liang Qin hesitated. "Is this for gambling with mana?"

The other student laughed nonchalantly. "A little gambling is just for fun. If you win, you can relax for a few days and take a break. If you lose, just think of it as putting some pressure on yourself to study harder."

He clapped Liang Qin's shoulder and advised, "I had trouble adjusting when I was a first-year too. I just went on here to have a little fun and relax."

"You don't need to be scared. For geniuses like us who got into this high school, our willpower is beyond that of ordinary people."

"As long as you control yourself and don't get addicted, a little relaxation is harmless. You might even earn some extra mana…"

Thinking of his self-discipline throughout the years, Liang Qin ultimately couldn't resist giving it a try.

It was a platform where you could deposit money, place bets, and win mana.

If you won, you could obtain mana cultivated by others through a Host Spiritual Root.

If you lost, you either had to help others cultivate mana through a Host Spiritual Root or pay off the debt with money.

The first bet, Liang Qin lost.

The second, he lost again.

Just when he thought he was going to lose all his money and that such platforms were indeed unreliable, he won 0.3 mana on his third bet.

To this day, he could still remember the excitement of that moment.

He still remembered the incredible rush of withdrawing the 0.3 mana from the Host Spiritual Root delivered by the platform.

That feeling, the thrill of his mana suddenly surging, was something he would never forget.

In the time that followed, he would occasionally place small bets on the platform.

At first, it was just as the upperclassman had said.

If he won, the mana he gained would relieve the pressure of his mana classes for several days, making life much easier.

And if he lost, he would work twice as hard to cultivate it back, feeling even more motivated.

"It's true, as long as I can control myself, this platform is harmless..."

That was what Liang Qin thought two months into the school year.

But now, four months into the school year...

Regret! Regret! Regret!

Every time he thought about how he had secretly used his parents' bank cards, about the mountain of debt he owed, Liang Qin would jolt awake from his dreams, staring at his bedroom door in terror, as if afraid someone would burst in the next moment to take his dantian, his organs, his very vital energy...

But at this moment, standing at the school gate and looking at the 500-yuans he had just received, Liang Qin's hands started to itch again.

A moment later, watching the freshly acquired 500 melt away in an instant, Liang Qin was overcome with despair, once again sinking into a state of regret.

"It's fine, it's fine."

He comforted himself, "I'll get more money for following Zhang Yu tomorrow."

"Next time, I'll stop the moment I'm up by 300."

"As long as I use my absolute willpower to control my greed, I can pay back the debt little by little..."

Mulling over his grand plan to patch up his life, Liang Qin started on his way home.

…

In an office at Songyang High School.

Su Haifeng watched the man before him hang up the phone and said, "So you were the one who sent Liang Qin."

"But that student has become a gambling addict. You can't trust a word he says."

The man opposite him smiled faintly.

"I'm just having him keep a bit of an eye on Zhang Yu. He was always just a spare piece, a way to make use of trash. I never expected him to find out anything significant."

Su Haifeng shook his head.

"Zhang Yu has already spoken with the Student Council. It probably won't be long before he signs a contract. Are you still not giving up?"

The other man replied coldly, "I was the one who got Zhang Yu in here. Although events have developed somewhat beyond my expectations, I won't let go so easily."

"Don't worry, I've already received word that Zhang Yu and the Student Council will sign the contract after the next monthly exam."

"I will hurry up and take care of everything."

…

In the days that followed, Zhang Yu happily cultivated the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra, feeling fulfilled and satisfied as he felt his Dao heart level improve bit by bit.

Aside from that, his days were still filled with classes and studying.

He also practiced the techniques he learned from Ms. Yan from time to time in preparation for the Mana Competition.

More than ten days passed in the blink of an eye, and the day of the Mana Competition finally arrived.

Over those ten-plus days, thanks to his vigorous progress with the level 10 Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra, Zhang Yu's Dao heart level had risen to 2 (42%).

He felt that he would likely have a chance to raise his Dao heart level to 3 around the time of the next monthly exam.

His mana had also grown steadily under the day-and-night breathing exercises of the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, now reaching a level of 15.4.

Zhang Yu's explosive growth in mana once again astonished the students, but after noticing that his physical strength had barely changed, they could only surmise that he had poured all his energy into spiritual energy absorption and mana refinement, guessing he must be preparing to go all out in the Mana Competition.

On this day, at the entrance of Songyang High School.

Ms. was leading Zhang Yu, Bai Zhenzhen, Qian Shen, He Dayou, and the others onto a bus, headed for the venue of the Songyang City First-Year Mana Competition.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 42: The Mana Competition Roster

On the bus.

Because the Mana Competitions for the first, second, and third years were held at different times, the only ones on the bus rented by Songyang High School were the contestants from Zhang Yu's grade level.

He Dayou looked in Zhang Yu's direction, a thoughtful expression in his eyes as he recalled the other boy's recent efforts.

With his mana recently surging to a level of 15.4, Zhang Yu had already claimed the number one rank in their grade.

However, the thought that Zhang Yu had probably spent all his time just to raise his mana left He Dayou rather unimpressed.

Is it all for the Mana Competition?

The Mana Competition isn't just a contest of who has more mana.

He Dayou was well aware that if it were not for his focus on building a solid foundation to master his mana control, his family could have easily poured more money into it and made him number one in the grade long ago.

This was also why at Songyang High School, the gap in mana between wealthy students and the poor ones only truly widened in the second year.

Their families' experience had taught them that the first year was primarily for building a foundation.

Excessively pursuing a higher mana value, on the contrary, would likely result in insufficient control, a flaw that could take a very long time to correct.

He Dayou continued his train of thought, *In the Mana Competition, a high mana level is just the basic threshold; what truly determines one's rank is their control over that mana…*

At this, he sighed inwardly. *At the end of the day, unless it's a sports competition, which is Songyang's strength, we're just going through the motions in the Mana Competition. We're just here to be background props for those freaks from the three great schools.*

In a seat on the other side of the bus.

Zhang Yu looked at Bai Zhenzhen, who was resting with her eyes closed, and asked, "So? Are you going to tell me who we're meeting now?"

Bai Zhenzhen rolled her eyes at him and took out her phone, aiming it at him.

Zhang Yu saw a line of text appear on the screen: Prying ears are nearby. Let's talk on our phones.

Zhang Yu quickly typed his question, "So who are you taking me to see at this Mana Competition?"

Bai Zhenzhen: "The poor kids from other schools."

A flicker of understanding crossed Zhang Yu's eyes.

"You mean… there are poor students from other schools who think like us?"

Bai Zhenzhen: "Yes."

Zhang Yu asked curiously, "Which schools?"

Bai Zhenzhen sent a female gender symbol, followed by a tilde.

Zhang Yu's eyes widened as he replied in surprise, "A black woman?"

He was genuinely taken aback.

Could it be that Kunxu also has… uh, never mind, also has black people?

Bai Zhenzhen rolled her eyes again, having no idea what he was talking about. She replied directly on her phone, "I'm talking about students from the girls' school, and soul cultivators."

Hearing these two answers, it instantly clicked for Zhang Yu.

That's right. How many wealthy people would undergo gender reassignment surgery, or even abandon their physical bodies, just to get into high school?

Mount Mang High School and the Saintess Academy—these two schools were natural havens for the poor.

The top-ranked students there were inevitably poor as well.

After pouring their heart and soul into graduating with excellent grades, how could they not want to break through their shackles and get into a top-tier university?

Wait.

A new question popped into Zhang Yu's head.

"Soul cultivators can compete too?"

Bai Zhenzhen shook her head.

"They probably aren't here to compete. It seems they're here to assist the referees, help with event coverage, and act as spectators."

...

The bus slowly pulled into the campus of a high school.

This was the venue for the Mana Competition: Red Pagoda High School, one of the three great schools of Songyang City.

The group of students from Songyang High School followed their supervising teacher, Ms. Yan, into an indoor stadium, where they saw many other students already waiting.

The variety of colorful and uniquely styled school uniforms indicated that they all came from different high schools across Songyang City.

The moment the group from Songyang High School stepped into the stadium, countless gazes immediately swept over them.

Someone remarked internally, *Songyang is here too? Another powerhouse.*

Another person observed them carefully, thinking, *Their presence is so strong. Is this what the top students from a key high school are like?*

Yet another person gloated, *So what if they're from a key high school? They're still here to be our foils, just like the rest of us.*

Upon reaching the preparation area assigned to Songyang High School, Ms. Yan began reminding the students of what to look out for.

"There are three events in today's competition. Pay attention to your mana distribution, and whatever you do, don't get nervous. Just treat it like a regular practice session..."

After Ms. Yan dismissed them to rest and use the restroom, Qian Shen hurried off to check the list of competitors.

He took out his phone and began looking up scores while cross-referencing the names on the list.

"White Dragon High School, Song Hailong, 682 on the last monthly exam."

"Purple Cloud High School, Le Mulan, 678 on the last monthly exam."

"Hiss..."

The more scores he checked, the more Qian Shen sucked in a sharp breath.

"They're all monsters."

Meanwhile, Zhang Yu was heading to the restroom with Bai Zhenzhen when he suddenly felt a heavy pressure suffuse the air.

The spiritual energy... was in turmoil!

It felt like jumping from the shallow end of a pool directly into the deep end.

The two of them instantly whipped their heads around, looking in the direction the pressure was coming from.

They saw a group of people in white uniforms walking slowly into the stadium.

Each of their white uniforms bore a different number, from 1 to 10.

Zhang Yu was baffled.

"What's this? Have the Ten Blades arrived?"

What he didn't know was that these were the special uniforms of White Dragon High School, each capable of displaying a number.

After every monthly exam, the numbers on their chests and backs would update to show their new rank.

The numbers 1 through 10 on these ten students represented their status as the top ten in their grade.

What Zhang Yu did know, however, was that the source of the disturbance in the spiritual energy was the one leading the group.

He was a giant of a man, two and a half meters tall, built like a titan, with long hair that shot straight up into the sky.

Seeing everyone's eyes on him, the giant grinned, rubbing his sky-piercing hair with an embarrassed look.

"Sorry, everyone," he said. "I just got this Heavenly Spiritual Root and I'm not quite used to it. I'll try my best to control it..."

With a low grunt from him, the pressure in the air slowly subsided, returning to normal.

Bai Zhenzhen watched the scene unfold, speechless.

"Showing off his wealth the second he walks in. These disgusting rich people are the worst."

But the thought that she would likely lose to people like him in the upcoming competition filled her with another wave of helplessness.

After the past few days of cramming and practice, Bai Zhenzhen had confirmed one thing: when it came to pure mana control, her talent was far inferior to Zhang Yu's. She was destined to just be playing a minor part in this competition.

On the other side of the room, Qian Shen stared at the uniforms of the White Dragon High School students, the scores he had just looked up flashing in his mind.

After matching each student to the number on their uniform, he looked at the giant and thought, *He must be Song Hailong. The leader of White Dragon High School's year, an absolute monster with a score of 682. He might as well be a super-species that has developed reproductive isolation from the rest of us.*

He Dayou looked toward Song Hailong and raised an eyebrow.

"What a show-off. But he's competing with a Heavenly Spiritual Root? His mana must surge uncontrollably. It should be hard for him to manage, right?"

Not long after White Dragon High School's arrival, the sound of rushing air whistled from outside the stadium, and a massive flying ship came to a halt in the sky above the venue.

At the sight, the countless students from ordinary high schools held their breath, feeling an aura of immense wealth instantly sweep over them.

A group of students in purple uniforms descended from the flying ship. Zhang Yu recognized one of them as Lian Tianji, who had also been at the art exhibition.

Zhang Yu had even exchanged contact information with him afterward and often saw his name in the top three of the daily step-count leaderboard.

Lian Tianji seemed to have spotted Zhang Yu as well. He smiled and waved, then appeared to say something to the girl beside him before pointing in Zhang Yu's direction.

The girl, whose face was like ice, looked where Lian Tianji was pointing and gave Zhang Yu a distant nod.

Zhang Yu thought to himself, *She looks like a real ice queen beauty, not a phony one like Zhen.*

Qian Shen was also looking at the Purple Cloud High School team, searching for photos of Le Mulan online to compare. His gaze finally locked onto the aloof girl next to Lian Tianji.

"That must be Purple Cloud High School's Le Mulan, a high-caste being with a score of 678. In her eyes, anyone with a score below 650 is probably no different from dirt!"

Shortly after the teams from White Dragon High and Purple Cloud High had made their appearances, the team from the host, Red Pagoda High School, finally made their belated entrance.

But when Zhang Yu saw the most conspicuous person among them, he blurted out in surprise, "A demon?"

Bai Zhenzhen immediately leaped to the side and pointed at Zhang Yu.

"Hey, hey, hey! Watch your terminology. It's a demon-kin citizen of Songyang City."

Although the student wore a school uniform, his glossy red fur, thick tail, and round face made him look exactly like a red panda.

As Zhang Yu looked at this red panda-like student, an overwhelming sense of weakness washed over him.

He asked curiously, "No, but how did this red panda get into Red Pagoda High School? It couldn't have been his innocent smile, could it?"

Although he had to admit the red panda's smile was indeed very pure, Zhang Yu was certain he had to possess some special talent to get into a key high school and participate in the competition.

Bai Zhenzhen shrugged. "Demon-kin citizens of Songyang City are generally quite gifted in physical strength, but looking at him... I feel like I could take down three of him with one punch."

"Then he must have a special talent for mana?"

Chatting, the two of them entered separate restrooms.

After they were finished, Bai Zhenzhen pulled Zhang Yu along, following directions from a message on her phone to a viewing stand on the second floor of the venue.

Two girls were already waiting there. Zhang Yu recognized one of them as Wu Qingqing from the Saintess Academy, the girl who had also been at the art exhibition.

Zhang Yu's gaze shifted slightly as he looked at the other girl.

Then she must be a heavy hitter from the Saintess Academy too?

"Hehe, long time no see." Wu Qingqing walked over to greet Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen. The girl following her seemed oblivious to the world, one hand holding a book she was reading with her head down, the other pinching the corner of Wu Qingqing's shirt as she trailed behind.

It felt as though even if Wu Qingqing led her straight into the road to be hit by a truck, she would just keep her head down and follow silently.

"These two are Bai Zhenzhen and Zhang Yu, the impoverished geniuses from Songyang High School."

After the introduction, Wu Qingqing pushed the bookish girl forward.

"This is Ye Xianyun, the top-ranked first-year at our Saintess Academy."

She added proudly, "She's also the only girl in our honors class who hasn't had the surgery."

Zhang Yu: *Seriously, what is there to be proud of?*

Ye Xianyun looked up and gave the two of them a silent nod before lowering her head to her book again.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 43: The Alliance and the Mana Competition's First Trial

After the greetings were exchanged, Wu Qingqing picked up her phone again, aiming the screen at Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen.

A faint light flashed on the screen, revealing a cartoonish youth, and she introduced him, "This is Mo Tianyi from Mount Mang High School."

Zhang Yu was startled. *What the hell, a V-tuber with a 2D avatar?*

The youth nodded toward Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen and introduced himself, "Hello, you two. I'm Mo Tianyi."

"I've already checked the surroundings; we can speak freely here."

Zhang Yu looked at the phone screen curiously and asked, "Where are you right now?"

Mo Tianyi gave a slight smile. "I'm currently in the Spirit Realm, but it's connected to the internet, so I can contact you."

Then his expression turned serious as he asked earnestly, "Student Zhang Yu, I need to ask you something. Have you been accepted as a disciple by True Monarch Xinghou?"

Just as Zhang Yu was about to speak, Bai Zhenzhen stepped forward, blocking him.

"He hasn't."

"I told him about the pitfalls of being a Golden Core disciple and had him reject True Monarch Xinghou."

Zhang Yu looked at Bai Zhenzhen in surprise, wondering why she would say such a thing, but out of his trust for Zhen, he didn't say anything, merely listening quietly to their conversation.

Upon hearing Bai Zhenzhen's words, a flash of disappointment crossed the faces of both Wu Qingqing and Mo Tianyi on the screen.

Wu Qingqing couldn't help but say, "How could you make Zhang Yu refuse this opportunity? True Monarch Xinghou would be a powerful ally in trying to get into the Ten Greats."

Bai Zhenzhen scoffed, "An old geezer kicked out of a major sect whose cultivation has already been halved. If he gets a divorce and his daughter bleeds him dry, you'll probably find him under a bridge begging for disciples. What would be left for us to gain? Working like a dog for him might be worse than me taking odd jobs every day."

"You…" Mo Tianyi sighed, thinking to himself that if he'd known this would happen, he never would have urged Bai Zhenzhen to try her luck at the art exhibition. Otherwise, Zhang Yu might have actually become a Golden Core disciple, and the chances of a poor student getting into the Ten Greats would have been that much higher.

Bai Zhenzhen continued, "I came to talk to you today because I want your people to get to know Zhang Yu."

"Although he's just a tiny bit inferior to me, he's still an incredibly rare talent, and he's also being targeted by the student council now."

Mo Tianyi's image on the screen refreshed as he recomposed himself, smiling.

"I've long heard of Student Zhang Yu's talent."

"This Mana Competition will be a perfect opportunity to witness it."

"That's it?" Bai Zhenzhen said, annoyed. "How about a real investment?"

Mo Tianyi replied helplessly, "We're all poor with limited resources. You know our focus has always been on our leader; we really don't have much to spare."

"This is a small token from me personally. Please don't think it's too little…"

With that, he transferred 2,000 yuan to Bai Zhenzhen.

Watching this, Zhang Yu thought to himself, *Well now, it seems Zhen dragged me here today to shake them down for money.*

But it looked like this 'Alliance of the Rich-Haters' was extremely poor and couldn't offer much.

Seeing the transfer notification on her phone, Bai Zhenzhen frowned.

"Only 2,000?"

She knew who he was talking about—the one among these poor geniuses who currently had the best grades, the greatest talent, and the most potential; the one everyone believed was most likely to break through the shackles and enter one of the Ten Greats.

This poor genius had earned the trust of the other impoverished students, who scrimped and saved to invest many resources in him.

They were all counting on this prodigy to get into a top university and a major sect, hoping his success would lift everyone up with him and slowly tear open the inescapable net cast over Songyang City.

Even inviting Bai Zhenzhen to the art exhibition last time, in her opinion, was likely done in the hopes that she would become a Golden Core disciple and could then use that status to help their leader.

Bai Zhenzhen said, "Didn't we agree to watch over and help each other, to be united as one? You're just going to say one thing and do another? Was my membership fee a waste?"

Mo Tianyi shook his head with a wry smile. Compared to the 2,000 yuan membership fee Bai Zhenzhen had paid, the money she had wheedled and extorted from them each time already amounted to tens of thousands.

If Bai Zhenzhen weren't so exceptionally talented, and if they didn't think she could draw a great deal of attention away from their leader in the future, they certainly wouldn't have invested so much in her.

Sensing the awkward atmosphere, Wu Qingqing smiled from the side and said, "Zhenzhen, don't be anxious. Our leader is at a critical juncture, so there isn't much money to go around. Mo Tianyi may manage the funds, but he still needs the approval of several seniors to use them."

"I think we should do this: Student Zhang Yu is so formidable that as long as he achieves a good ranking in this Mana Competition, Mo Tianyi can bring it up with the seniors. Then it would be perfectly justifiable to request funds for you."

After some more back-and-forth, Bai Zhenzhen finally grabbed Zhang Yu and left the stands.

Watching their retreating figures, Wu Qingqing said helplessly, "Every time Zhenzhen comes to us, it's for money. She treats us like an ATM."

Mo Tianyi replied, "When it comes to getting into the Ten Greats, her conviction is indeed the strongest among us. That's why she's so desperate for money."

Mo Tianyi could clearly sense that Bai Zhenzhen wasn't counting on their leader to get into the Ten Greats and then protect them; she wanted to get into the Ten Greats herself.

Mo Tianyi added, "I just didn't expect her to bring Zhang Yu along to ask for money this time."

Speaking of Zhang Yu, Wu Qingqing said admiringly, "Improving by seventy points in a single month… Zhang Yu really is amazing. He's worth our investment."

Mo Tianyi, however, shook his head.

"If he were wealthy, that performance would indeed be enough to contend for a spot in the Ten Greats."

"But unfortunately… he's poor."

He sighed in lament. "For a poor person to prop up the heavens above them, amazing monthly exam scores are far from enough… far, far from enough…"

Behind Wu Qingqing, Ye Xianyun had been silently reading her book the entire time, as if nothing in the outside world concerned her.

…

Elsewhere, as Bai Zhenzhen walked, she said to Zhang Yu, "Yu-boy, the Mana Competition is starting soon. You'd better make me proud!"

"Get a top-ten finish, at least. That'll give me more leverage when I ask them for money."

That's not… You seemed plenty forceful when you were demanding money just now.

Zhang Yu thought for a moment, then voiced the question on his mind.

"This union of the poor—besides watching over each other and pooling money, are there any other ways to get into the Ten Greats?"

From his perspective, it seemed unrealistic for a few poor students, even if they were all Immortal Dao geniuses from their respective schools, to break the blockade of the wealthy and get into the Ten Greats just by scrimping and saving.

Bai Zhenzhen explained, "That's exactly what I want to find out from them."

"As far as I know, their leader is a second-year student from one of the three key high schools."

"I don't know what method he used, but it seems he has yet to sign a contract with any school or student council, he hasn't been crushed by their joint efforts, and he still retains his eligibility for the university entrance exams."

"I want to know how he did it."

"The only way, it seems, is to continuously increase our influence within their group, then find that 'leader,' and figure out a way to make him reveal his methods."

Zhang Yu asked curiously, "Then how do we increase our influence?"

Bai Zhenzhen stated the obvious. "We're students. The way to increase influence is, of course, through exams! Competitions! Results!"

"This is true for both the poor and the rich. They invest in whoever gets the best results."

"It's just that I'm really not good at this Mana Competition. It's up to you to see how high you can place."

Not long after Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen returned to the Songyang High School rest area, Zhang Yu's gaze suddenly shifted, and he saw a person in the stands.

"Liang Qin?"

Seeing Liang Qin wave at him with a look of encouragement, Zhang Yu nodded back in greeting.

"What the hell? He followed me all the way to Red Pagoda High School just to watch my competition as a spectator?"

Dude, are you okay? If you keep this up, I won't dare turn my back to you ever again.

Meanwhile, Liang Qin watched Zhang Yu in the rest area, a faint smile playing on his lips. He then took out his phone, opened a platform, and prepared to place a bet.

Gambling, after all, was a popular form of entertainment deeply loved by the people of Songyang City.

The platform Liang Qin frequented was a major one endorsed by the deputy mayor himself, offering a comprehensive range of betting options on practically anything in Songyang City.

A quick search now confirmed for Liang Qin that there were indeed events for various high school competitions.

He had taken time off to watch the competition, of course, to track Zhang Yu for his payment.

However, upon seeing the Mana Competition, he couldn't help the itch to start betting.

At the same time, Zhang Yu noticed a promotional flyer for a platform floating down nearby.

"Why compete when you can bet? New users get a 100 yuan bonus..."

Zhang Yu felt speechless.

Fucking gambling ads are being promoted right here at the venue? I guess if everyone does it, it's not considered chaos, right?

Seeing this, Bai Zhenzhen immediately snatched the flyer away, stared at Zhang Yu, and said, "Yu-boy, you can't touch this."

Zhang Yu said, "I think I have a pretty good shot at the top ten. If I placed a bet..."

Bai Zhenzhen's expression turned serious. "How much do you plan to bet? What if you lose?"

Zhang Yu replied, "The probability of winning is very high..."

Bai Zhenzhen continued, "If you win, the problem is even bigger. Your entire perspective on money will change. Because you've won once, you'll always want to win again."

As a Songyang City native, Bai Zhenzhen had seen too many people ruined by gambling.

She had even seen news reports about immortals who had gambled away their entire fortunes.

She continued to persuade him, "I'm afraid you'll get used to relying on this and end up betting yourself away."

"Yu-boy, you really can't touch it."

With a slight tremor of her palm, Bai Zhenzhen turned the flyer to dust.

Zhang Yu took a deep breath, circulating the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra to suppress the stray thoughts in his mind.

"You're right, Zhen. I was being greedy. I really shouldn't touch this stuff."

Zhang Yu understood the logic perfectly well. It was just that the immense financial pressure had momentarily tempted him with greed.

A moment later, a burst of music signaled the official start of the Mana Competition.

One by one, drones controlled by soul cultivator students flew out, delivering the props needed for this trial.

As the crowd watched the competition items being placed in the arena, successive gasps of surprise erupted.

"They're flying swords!"

"Are we supposed to ride them? Such a difficult test for the first trial? Previous competitions have never tested flying swords!"

"It's over, it's over! I've never used a flying sword before!"

The host walked up to a flying sword that was floating in mid-air and announced, "From the Nine Heavens, sword-light descends—one strike shakes Kunxi! We thank the lethally effective Nine Heavens Flying Sword company for its joint sponsorship of this Mana Competition."

Holy shit!

Zhang Yu cursed internally. *A flying sword manufacturer sponsors the event, so you bastards make the Mana Competition about flying swords? Utterly shameless.*

By that logic, if the Joyful Union Sect were the sponsor, would you test dual cultivation? Go on, I dare you!

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 44: Flying Sword

Zhang Yu could tell at a glance that the flying swords on the field were a completely different beast from the children's flying sword his predecessor had once bought; they were obviously not something one could master casually.

Confronted with the murmurs of discontent from the entire audience, the host's expression remained unchanged as he finished reciting the advertisement, then proceeded to announce the rules for the first round of the competition.

The flying swords currently floating on the field were products of the Nine Heavens Flying Sword company, a type of civilian-grade mana flying sword.

It was claimed that one needed no training in any sword-wielding arts, required no minimum Dao heart level, and could control the flying sword simply through variations in mana output, testing one's ability to control a flying sword with mana.

The scabbard of this flying sword acted as a remote control and mana transmitter. By varying the frequency, type, and magnitude of the inputted mana, one could control the flying sword.

The specific content of this round was for the competing students to use the flying swords to strike signal plates dancing in mid-air; the faster the speed and the more precise the force, the higher the score.

The total score for this round, just like the upcoming second and third rounds, was 100 points.

Ultimately, the final rankings of this Mana Competition would be determined by the sum of the scores from all three rounds.

As the operating manuals for the flying swords were distributed, the students were given half an hour to study.

Behind the White Dragon High School team, a middle-aged man in a tracksuit smiled faintly and said, "So it's still a test of mana control, then? At least it's not too outrageous. I thought we were going to have to learn sword-wielding arts on the spot."

This was White Dragon High School's competition coach, a man named Han Xingye.

Unlike Songyang High School, where mana class teachers served as competition advisors, White Dragon High School had teachers who specialized in competitions.

Hearing Han Xingye's words, Song Hailong, who stood beside him, touched his own sky-high hair and said casually, "This is the first competition for our year."

"Coach, help me take a look and see if there are any noteworthy opponents here, especially the quality of this year's students from Purple Cloud and Red Pagoda."

As the three most powerful high schools in Songyang City, if nothing unexpected happened, many of the opponents White Dragon High School, Purple Cloud High School, and Red Pagoda High School would be competing against for the next three years were likely present on this field.

Han Xingye readily agreed to Song Hailong's request.

Aside from Song Hailong's outstanding academic performance, it was, of course, due to his status as someone from an unquestionably wealthy family.

This chosen scion from one of Songyang City's great families was a descendant who ranked at the top of his family's KPIs, and could be called the ace of his generation in the Song family.

Han Xingye nodded, his fingertips swiping repeatedly across his Talisman Tome, and in the next moment, accompanied by a burst of mana output, he had already activated the Heaven's Eye Talisman.

This Heaven's Eye Talisman was a spell to respectfully request the God of Celestial Knowledge and Myriad Questions from the Department of the People to evaluate the individuals he saw.

This evaluation gathered a person's comprehensive and vague profile based on all-encompassing data, from bank deposits and personal assets to school grades, work performance, and family relationships.

Disliked the vagueness and wanted more detail, more specifics? Then one would need a higher faith level and would have to spend more money.

In short, the efficacy of the Heaven's Eye Talisman was simple: the more detailed, the more expensive; the more vague, the cheaper.

As Han Xingye looked out over the entire venue, he naturally didn't dare to check any detailed evaluations. He was afraid a single glance would bankrupt him, knowing full well that such things were not without precedent in the history of Kunxu.

The moment the Heaven's Eye Talisman activated, a cloud of golden light particles converged into Han Xingye's eyes.

As he looked across the entire scene, he could see different evaluations appearing above each person's head.

Not worth mentioning, not worth mentioning, not worth mentioning, not worth mentioning, not worth mentioning.

Not worth mentioning, not worth mentioning, bankrupt gambling addict, not worth mentioning, not worth mentioning.

Not worth mentioning, Ice-Skinned and Jade-Boned (Expand Details), not worth mentioning, not worth mentioning, not worth mentioning.

"Hm?"

Han Xingye's gaze shifted as he noticed that a female student from Purple Cloud High School had actually leaped up into the spectator stands.

"Is that Le Mulan from Purple Cloud? Why did she climb up there? Is she looking at the competition's signal plates?"

He looked closer, and the evaluation above her head immediately expanded.

Ice-Skinned and Jade-Boned | Booster Fiend | High Caste | Purple Cloud Loyalist | Untouchable Beauty

He was an old hand with the Heaven's Eye Talisman, after all, and though the terms were a bit complex at first glance, Han Xingye pondered the vague evaluations for a moment and quickly pieced together their probable meaning.

"She's a high-quality, wealthy individual with a special constitution, a high tolerance for boosters, excellent grades, unwavering loyalty to Purple Cloud High School, and a complex background."

"Boosters? Constitution?"

Han Xingye grew thoughtful, sending the keywords to Song Hailong before turning his attention to the others present.

Just as he was sizing up the students on the field, the competition officially began.

The venue was divided into eighteen sub-arenas, and in each round, eighteen contestants were randomly drawn to take the stage, controlling flying swords in their respective arenas to shoot at the signal plates in mid-air.

In Han Xingye's eyes, a stream of 'not worth mentioning' students from ordinary high schools took the stage. They were like fumbling rookies, clumsily operating the flying swords, and doing well to hit even one or two of the mid-air signal plates, earning them a mere 10 or 20 points from the judges.

"Looks like none of them have ever used a flying sword before, have they?"

Han Xingye knew that although this round was nominally a test of mana control, prior experience with flying swords made all the difference.

Especially when it came to the control of space, distance, accuracy, and speed. A first-timer, no matter how strong their mana control, would likely struggle to achieve a high score.

But for the students of the three great academies, playing with flying swords was hardly a rare experience.

For instance, among the ten students from his White Dragon High School competing this time, each of their families owned at least four or five flying swords.

He even knew that Song Hailong's family possessed an entire sword vault containing hundreds of flying swords, and he had surely lost count of how many times he had handled them.

At the same time, besides the endless stream of 'not worth mentioning' individuals, students with 'Rare' and 'Elite' evaluations began to appear on stage in Han Xingye's Heaven's Eye Talisman vision.

Han Xingye knew these were typically the top students from ordinary high schools or the elite students from key high schools.

"Getting 30 or 40 points would be impressive enough for them."

"Their mana control is weak to begin with, and they've never used a flying sword. If it weren't for the genuinely good quality of the Nine Heavens flying swords, they probably couldn't even hit a single signal plate._

At this thought, Han Xingye felt a flicker of temptation, wondering if he should buy a Nine Heavens mana flying sword for himself.

Just then, his gaze shifted slightly, and amidst the crowd of 'not worth mentioning,' 'rare,' and 'elite,' he finally spotted a different evaluation.

Pure-hearted Score-Grubber

Han Xingye looked at the student's uniform; it appeared to be someone from Songyang High School.

In the arena, Qian Shen took a deep breath and slowly gripped the scabbard of the flying sword before him.

The next moment, as he channeled a stream of mana into it, the flying sword shot out of the sheath with a *swoosh*.

The flying sword was all blade, with no hilt, and it soared skyward like a streak of cold light, heading for the signal plates in mid-air.

Although he hadn't used one much, Qian Shen had tried his grandfather's mana flying sword a few times.

Following the techniques his family tutor had taught him, he now slowly infused mana into the scabbard, controlling the flying sword by altering the rhythm of the mana flow, striking one signal plate after another with a series of swooshes.

72 points.

Seeing his score for this round, Qian Shen breathed a small sigh of relief.

"Not bad, that should be an acceptable result."

On the other side, Han Xingye glanced at the score of 72 and secretly shook his head.

"Sigh, Songyang High School is an old, key high school, yet the quality of its students declines with each passing year."

"In the end, they're just complacent, unwilling to learn from the advanced methods of other schools, like Purple Cloud High School's score-caste system or our school's low-score slavery system. Their teaching methods never innovate, so how can they possibly keep up with the times…"

Just as Han Xingye was thinking this, he saw another contestant with a special evaluation appear.

In his eyes, Lian Tianji from Purple Cloud High School walked onto the stage with the words 'Son of Heavenly Diligence' above his head, and with a flick of his arm, he sent the flying sword out, swiftly racking up 90 points.

"That seems to be Lian Tianji, the one in Purple Cloud High School's current year who is the best match for the Heavenly Diligence Art."

As more and more contestants took their turns, Han Xingye's eyes roamed the venue, and he began to see an increasing number of exceptional students.

A 'Son of the School Director' from Songyang High School had just appeared, scoring 78 points.

Le Mulan, the 'Ice-Skinned and Jade-Boned' from Purple Cloud High School, created a sensation the moment she appeared, scoring a staggering 95 points, the highest so far, drawing gasps of amazement from the entire audience.

As Han Xingye's gaze swept the area, a particular woman suddenly caught his attention.

Sword Freak (Expand Details)

"Oh? A student from Songyang High School?"

Han Xingye watched Bai Zhenzhen walk onto the stage. He knew that individuals with an 'expandable' tag usually had complex backgrounds, indicating extraordinary origins, strength, or talent, but he had never expected to find one among the students of Songyang High School.

His gaze narrowed slightly, and he saw a line of text expand above Bai Zhenzhen's head.

Sword Freak | Fist Freak | Palm Freak | Blade Freak | Spear Freak | Booster Freak | Score Tyrant | Loan Slave | Card Slave | Proponent of Daoist arts' Uselessness | Songyang Hater | She is very poor…

Looking at the evaluation that was too long to be read in a single breath, Han Xingye was profoundly shocked.

He never thought he would find himself shocked while looking at a student from Songyang High School, and for the sole reason that her profile was just too complex, far beyond that of an ordinary person.

The next moment, however, his shock subsided slightly, simply because her score was 34 points.

"I don't know why the evaluation is so long, but judging from that score, this woman is not worth mentioning."

Soon, his attention was drawn to Song Hailong.

Before this top student from White Dragon High School took the stage, he removed the towering mass of long hair from his head.

Zhang Yu, who was watching this scene, was astonished.

"What the hell! He's already bald in high school?"

Bai Zhenzhen returned to the rest area with a sullen expression on her face, and hearing Zhang Yu's surprised exclamation, she pointed and explained, "That's not a wig, it's an external spiritual root."

"An external spiritual root?" Zhang Yu recalled that such a thing existed, but this was the first time he had ever seen one in person.

Bai Zhenzhen said with envy, "This isn't like those outdated spiritual roots at school. This kind of external spiritual root is plug-and-play, you can swap it out whenever you want. Yu-boy, you better remember this, it's the birthday present I want most."

Zhang Yu patted Zhen's shoulder comfortingly.

"I can't afford an external spiritual root, but I can definitely help you with the baldness and the wig."

Bai Zhenzhen rolled her eyes, then continued to stare intently at the hairpiece Song Hailong had placed on a chair, contemplating the possibility of snatching it.

But after a look at the surrounding students and teachers, she could only let out a long sigh.

After Song Hailong took the stage, he felt the mana circulating within him as if it were an extension of his own limbs, and a faint smile touched his lips.

Equipping a spiritual root to enhance mana, to make it surge dramatically?

Such a peasant's way of thinking.

Song Hailong had only one purpose for equipping an external spiritual root: to train his mana control during the more turbulent processes of breathing exercises for spiritual energy and mana refinement.

Only the weak worry about losing control over a mana surge brought on by spiritual energy. For a powerhouse like me, it's the perfect training opportunity.

He gripped the scabbard in one hand, and with a release of mana from his palm, the flying sword shot out like a bolt of lightning.

From the sidelines, Han Xingye watched his student on the field wield the flying sword as if it were a bolt of lightning, instantly racking up 100 points to become the new highest scorer in the venue, a proud expression spreading across his face.

100 points is only because the maximum score is 100.

With the sheer volume of Song Hailong's mana, the intensity of his mana control, and his mastery of the flying sword, he was held back by the score limit in this round.

Meanwhile, after Bai Zhenzhen returned to the rest area, Teacher Yan's gaze frequently swept over her.

Bai Zhenzhen only started practicing for the Mana Competition recently, didn't she? Her rate of improvement is remarkably fast. Is it talent? Or just a fluke?

In Teacher Yan's eyes, however, Bai Zhenzhen's talent in mana was ultimately no match for Zhang Yu's.

A few moments later, when Zhang Yu took the stage, she found herself looking forward to his performance as well.

On the field, Zhang Yu gently gripped the scabbard. As he fed mana into it bit by bit, he could feel the flying sword within begin to tremble slightly.

Just moments ago, while offstage, Zhang Yu had been contemplating how he could possibly score as high as possible.

His current situation felt as if he had perfectly nimble, unimpaired hands, and someone walked up to him and said: "Oh? You have strong finger control? Let me test you. Use this excavator to open a bottle cap, and we'll see just how good your finger control really is."

What the hell, another unjust and unfair competition where the rich have an absolute advantage.

Zhang Yu complained silently in his heart.

This flying sword feels like a drone, or maybe a racing drone. Even if my mana control is exquisite, since I've never used one of these before, there's no way I can control it with any real skill.

The thought of having to maneuver this flying sword back and forth to hit those palm-sized signal plates in mid-air felt incredibly difficult to Zhang Yu.

So, I can't treat it like a traditional flying sword…

(End of Chapter)

A Chat About the New Book, Seeking Your Continued Support

Let's have a chat about the new book, and I'd like to ask for your continued support in reading along.

The new book has been out for nearly a month now, and so many readers are enjoying it. As the author, I am incredibly happy—so happy that I wish I could keep my phone in my pocket to check it all day long.

The initial inspiration for this book likely stems from Cyberpunk. However, I have always felt a certain disconnect with Western Cyberpunk content. What I wanted to write was *Immortal Dao* Cyberpunk, similar to the difference between standard Cthulhu and Chinese-style Cthulhu.

Some veteran readers might know that I started attempting something similar as far back as three books ago, in *Tribulation of Tomorrow*. However, at that time, my understanding of Cyberpunk was quite superficial—consisting merely of cool equipment, prosthetics usable by everyone, and mass-produced combat power.

I can only say that the Cyber elements back then were merely fashion accessories in my book, serving only as embellishments.

By the time of the book before the last one, *Talisman of the Old Days*, I tried incorporating content regarding loans and debt repayment within the cultivation system. I attempted to construct a loop of interests with a stronger Cyber style, which finally established a bit of a genuine *Immortal Dao* Cyber atmosphere. However, my skill was still lacking, and my understanding was insufficient, so I failed to capture the specific *Immortal Dao* Cyber flavor I wanted.

Then came my previous book, *I Said I Could Turn Back Time*, where I directly depicted the Immortal World as a Cyber Immortal World. Unfortunately, due to inconsistent styles between the beginning and end, combined with my poor health and the protagonist becoming too overpowered, I couldn't properly flesh out that Immortal World, and the story ended hastily.

Now, after several years of accumulation, I have a much deeper understanding of the *Immortal Dao* Cyber flavor I desire. I feel that I can finally write a unique and interesting novel.

As more and more readers flood in, this book has shifted from being purely for my own interest to something that carries a growing sense of responsibility. Reading the words you leave behind every day makes me feel that I must not let down the profound love shown by so many readers.

However, this book is truly difficult to write. Because the worldview and the characters' mindsets are quite unique, I constantly need to shift my mindset to keep writing. Sometimes, as I write… I unknowingly slip into "normal" thinking and make the plot too conventional. I then have to delete and rewrite; for instance, I just deleted two chapters.

Coupled with the fact that the worldview needs constant deduction and development, I can never write fast enough… *laughing-crying face*.

Finally, I want to say, dear readers, that you all display magical prowess in the chapter comments. Your stunning brilliance is truly at the peak of perfection, putting people like me to shame.

I have felt the talent and passion rushing toward me. To repay this enthusiasm, I have decided to postpone the premium launch date (originally scheduled for December 1st) and provide more free chapters as a bonus. I simply want to do better! ~(□□^)/

I hope you will continue to support and follow the story. Your readership and chapter comments are the driving force behind this book's progress! Please also recommend it to your friends and bring them along to take a look at Kunxu.

Ladies and gentlemen of talent, let me see your limits!

Please keep up with the daily updates! Please keep up with the daily updates! Please keep up with the daily updates!

Chapter 45: Purple Cloud Supplements

A sharp, piercing shriek of friction cut through the air of the stadium.

Zhang Yu's palm was held high, and upon it rested the flying sword, spinning at an incredible speed like the rotor of a helicopter.

I choose you! Spiral shuriken!

The next moment, he expelled a breath of mana, and the spinning flying sword shot out like a colossal disc, sweeping from low to high toward the signal plates hanging in midair.

...

Ascetic (expand details)

As Han Xingye's attention focused on the expanded text above Zhang Yu's head, he saw a long string of words.

Ascetic | Athlete | Extremely Impoverished Resident of Songyang City | Debt-Slave | Card-Slave | ???

After seeing the string of evaluations above Zhang Yu's head through the Heaven's Eye Talisman, Han Xingye was stunned for the second time that day.

"Songyang High School again?"

"Where in the world did they recruit their talent this year?"

The preceding "Ascetic" and "Athlete" were easy enough to understand. It simply meant he was diligent and self-disciplined in his training, as well as being athletically gifted.

The following three evaluations were also simple to grasp, summing up to just two words: poor man.

But it was the final three question marks that truly shocked Han Xingye.

"Question marks?"

"A concealment talisman? A disguise talisman?"

If there was a Heaven's Eye Talisman that could inspect one's status, there were naturally countermeasures to balance it, such as concealment or disguise talismans.

But firstly, how could such a poor person afford to use talismans?

And secondly, Han Xingye had never seen anyone use a concealment or disguise talisman only to deliberately create this "???" effect; wasn't that just blatantly advertising that you were hiding something?

"These three question marks… how arrogant."

Arrogance and poverty, two words that should not belong together, were what Han Xingye simultaneously perceived from the text above Zhang Yu's head.

Thus, he grew curious about Zhang Yu's performance.

Then, he saw it—the flying sword that spun to life and soared into the sky like a disc.

Han Xingye's gaze sharpened as he watched the rapidly spinning flying sword stir up cyclones of air, sweeping through the signal plates like a full moon, a trace of astonishment crossing his face.

Then he began to laugh.

"Heh, that certainly is an easier way to hit the signal plates. By turning it into a disc, he can sweep through all of them in just a few passes, compensating for his lack of experience in sword manipulation."

80 points

Han Xingye was nodding slightly at the score when he heard numerous students cry out in protest, complaining that Zhang Yu had cheated or violated the rules.

Han Xingye's eyes swept over them.

Not worth mentioning, rare, not worth mentioning, not worth mentioning…

Looking at the disgruntled students, Han Xingye curled his lip and thought, *A bunch of fools.*

To make a flying sword spin like that while maintaining control, preventing it from flying off and crashing wildly, requires incredibly fine mana control.

This mana flying sword was designed for straight-line trajectories. To make it rotate like that, he would have had to constantly alter the rhythm of his mana input every single instant.

That kid used his formidable mana control to make up for his lack of experience in sword handling.

Eighty points isn't high at all; if anything, it's too low.

The judges probably took the sponsors into account and didn't want to encourage this kind of technique.

Han Xingye glanced over at Purple Cloud High and Red Pagoda High. Sure enough, not a single student from the three great schools voiced any opposition. It was clear they could all see the difficulty involved.

In the subsequent matches, some competitors tried to imitate Zhang Yu's method, but every one of them failed, sending their flying swords careening off course.

Thankfully, the referees were watching closely, preventing any injuries.

At this point, the many students who had initially protested gradually came to realize that Zhang Yu's spinning sword technique was anything but simple.

On his way back, Zhang Yu lamented internally, *This flying sword really isn't built for this kind of maneuver. My mana could have pushed the tempo even faster, but the sheath's command reception frequency was at its limit. Otherwise, my score could have been higher.*

Evidently, the high-speed rotation was still well within the limits of the mana control he had honed through the tenth level of the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, but it had reached the design limits of the flying sword itself, which had never been intended for such use.

The moment Zhang Yu returned to the Songyang High School rest area, he was immediately met with praise from Teacher Yan.

"Zhang Yu, you did very well. Using mana control to compensate for your lack of sword handling skills—that score of eighty was too low."

"As for the complaints from those underachievers from ordinary high schools, just treat them like air. Don't pay them any mind."

Teacher Yan thought about Zhang Yu's score, inwardly delighted.

If the next two rounds have events that play more to his strengths, could he perhaps squeeze into the top ten?

Only the top ten in the Mana Competition's overall score would receive prize money and an official ranking, something that would be useful in university interviews. The high school's valuation of such an achievement would be completely different.

The thought of her year-end bonus increasing if Zhang Yu actually managed to break into the top ten sent Teacher Yan's spirits soaring.

She casually pointed to the student with the lowest score from this round and said, "Bai Zhenzhen, go get a bottle of water for Zhang Yu. Zhang Yu, don't be nervous for the next two rounds, just perform at your normal level…"

Bai Zhenzhen's eyes widened. She shot a glance at the snickering Zhang Yu beside her and could only stand up reluctantly to go fetch water from the organizers.

"Wait, Zhen, let me take a picture."

"You wanna die, Zhang Yu?"

Bai Zhenzhen hurled the water bottle at his head and sat down in a huff.

Damn it all, I should have just left before the competition started.

What a load of crap, this Mana Competition. It's just a game for rich people.

You'd better make it into the top ten, Yu-boy, or else I'll…

Not far away, He Dayou looked at Zhang Yu's score, a flicker of surprise in his eyes.

His mana control is that incredible? Good thing… good thing he's a poor ghost.

Soon after, the first event concluded completely. The host returned to the stage, smiling broadly as he announced, "For good boosters, choose Purple Cloud. Wholehearted, for all ages, Purple Cloud Supplements. One dose cures all ills. We thank the Purple Cloud Company for their joint sponsorship of this Mana Competition."

"All first-aid drugs for the upcoming second round will be sponsored by the Purple Cloud Company…"

As he spoke, the host began to announce the rules for the second event.

This round would test the ability to neutralize specialized mana.

The process involved attaching sensor patches to the competitors, after which a judge would inject a stream of specialized mana. The competitor would then be timed on how long it took them to neutralize it; the shorter the time, the higher the score.

If more than ten minutes passed, or if a competitor felt they could not endure it, they could immediately take a mana-dispelling drug sponsored by the Purple Cloud Company to eliminate the specialized mana from their system.

In addition, the Purple Cloud Company had set up temporary stalls all around the venue, selling various drugs that the competitors might need.

The reason the Purple Cloud Company was selling drugs here was because of another rule for this second round.

In this round, taking drugs was permitted.

Zhang Yu was stunned.

What the hell! Are you people even human? You're encouraging drug use in a competition just to earn sponsorship money from the Purple Cloud Company?

At the same time, Zhang Yu saw his classmates from Songyang High School begin to pull out their own supplies.

Painkillers, tranquilizers, focus enhancers… watching them take out their three-piece sets, Zhang Yu suddenly realized they had come prepared.

Beside him, Teacher Yan asked with concern, "Zhang Yu, did you bring your drugs?"

"Remember to take them before it starts."

Taking drugs during a competition… this seemed perfectly normal to Teacher Yan.

Afraid of pain and itching, chew a painkiller. Lacking willpower, drink a tranquilizer. Worried about losing focus while circulating your technique, down a bottle of focus enhancer…

In short… to be a dragon on the field, you had to stay drugged off the field.

This was competition.

To compete was to take drugs!

Mana competitions had always been a favorite sponsorship target for pharmaceutical companies, so there was usually at least one round where competitors were allowed to use drugs, as long as they were on the organizer's approved list. This was something the referees and soul cultivator assistants would be supervising and inspecting.

Therefore, taking drugs was a part of the competition, even a reflection of a high school's resources.

Seeing Zhang Yu's dumbfounded expression, Teacher Yan sighed and opened her bag.

"Look at you, coming to a competition without even preparing your drugs?"

"Good thing I brought a spare set."

With that, Teacher Yan pulled out various bottles and jars from her bag, pouring out a few doses and handing them to Zhang Yu.

Facing Teacher Yan's loving and concerned gaze, Zhang Yu had no choice but to accept the drugs.

Crap! This body can't take drugs, can it?

The original Zhang Yu had ruined his health by taking drugs, and the memory terrified the current Zhang Yu into never touching them, at most using some neural fillers to reduce his need for sleep.

Coupled with his own astonishing talent and massive debt, he never had any intention of carelessly taking drugs.

Although he wasn't sure if his current body would have problems with these substances, he certainly had no intention of taking the risk.

Taking all these drugs for a mere competition… I'm afraid the life I gain from cultivation won't be enough to offset the cost.

But feeling Teacher Yan's expectant gaze on him, he could only force a smile and nod, thinking, *I'll just pretend to take them in the bathroom later.*

Meanwhile, the entire stadium had transformed into a drug exhibition.

In the Purple Cloud High School rest area, Lian Tianji abruptly tossed a large handful of pills into his mouth, followed by a big gulp of water to wash them all down.

The coach beside him watched as his face gradually turned reddish-purple and nodded.

"Good. You're entering your competition state."

After speaking, he took out a wooden box from his bag.

As the box opened, ten syringes glowing with a faint purple light were revealed to everyone.

The coach announced, "This is the Meridian Expansion Injection from the Purple Cloud Labs. It will temporarily widen your body's meridians as it circulates through your blood, accelerating your technique circulation efficiency in a moment."

"One shot per person, no fighting over them."

After watching each student administer their injection, he rallied them, "Everyone must hold out until the very end. Our total score isn't far behind White Dragon High. We must catch up in this round!"

"ROAR!"

Having just taken their drugs and injections, the students felt an infinite fighting spirit surge within them and let out a deafening roar.

In the Red Pagoda High School rest area.

The coach was holding a panda-like demon-kin student, scooping up handfuls from a nearby bag of veterinary drugs.

"Bufan, have some more. We're at the bottom of the three great schools right now. If the second round goes like this too, my year-end bonus is finished."

The little panda, Xiong Bufan, raised a paw and gave him the middle finger.

"Enough!"

"Stop feeding me!"

"Mmph… you bastard… stop feeding me!"

On the other side, in the White Dragon High School rest area.

Song Hailong swallowed a large handful of drugs, then looked toward the Purple Cloud High School section in the distance.

Hearing the roars coming from their direction, he snorted coldly.

"In a little while, I will personally crush all of your fighting spirit."

At that moment, Coach Han Xingye walked over carrying a thermos.

"This is the Spirit Recovery Needle, specially prepared for you by the school," he said to the group. "Inject it into your dantian. Hurry up and get one."

As the thermos opened, a wave of cold air washed over them, revealing two rows of fluorescent syringes.

Song Hailong grinned, and as the student with the number 1 printed on his uniform, he was the first to pick one up.

The other students around them followed suit according to the numbers on their chests, taking the syringes from the thermos and plunging the needles into their dantian.

Students from other schools watched this scene with immense envy.

"Is that the Spirit Recovery Needle? It's concentrated spiritual energy essence that can rapidly restore mana. Are they planning to replenish their mana while simultaneously neutralizing the specialized mana during the event?"

Another student's face was full of jealousy. "A Spirit Recovery Needle to the dantian, my fate is mine and not for the heavens to decide. Sigh… I wonder if I'll ever be able to afford one in my lifetime."

Just then, a commotion erupted from a corner of the stadium.

A student, foaming at the mouth and convulsing, was carried out, sparking a wave of discussion.

One student lamented, "An overdose?"

A teacher scoffed, "There's no such thing as an overdose, only insufficient drug resistance. They still need more training!"

Another teacher clapped his hands, urging, "Stop minding other people's business! Focus on the competition!"

As everyone's preparations gradually concluded, the second event officially began.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 46: The Mountain

One by one, detection patches were pressed onto the students' arms.

A judge then lightly touched a finger to each student's arm, slowly infusing a stream of specialized mana.

Simultaneously, on the panel of the detection patch, numbers jumped with the injection of mana, rising from 0.5 to 1.3, then to 2.4... continuing until they finally stopped at 5.

This represented that the judge had infused a total of five units of specialized mana into the student's arm.

During this infusion process, the judge was exceedingly cautious, terrified of making a mistake and accidentally killing the student.

Even if it was a student from an ordinary high school, injuring or killing them would require compensation; prices varied, high and low, depending on their pedigree.

If it happened to be a student under contract, the compensation would be even more expensive.

After all, it wasn't unheard of for news to break about the battle aftershocks from a Foundation Establishment expert accidentally killing a bystander, only to discover it was over a dozen genius third-year high school students in whom fortunes had been invested, leading to a final compensation—calculated from training fees, living expenses, tuition, tutoring fees, sterilization fees...—that bankrupted the expert.

And in the few seconds of the mana infusion, the student's body abruptly tensed and their breathing grew heavy; their system was clearly already being affected by the specialized mana.

Even if no one actively triggered this specialized mana to attack, its mere presence within the body would inherently cause a certain amount of damage.

Fortunately, the student had taken a painkiller. Though there was some discomfort, it had not yet reached an unbearable level.

As the infused mana reached 5, the detection patch's panel began to time, recording how long the student would take to dispel this specialized mana; the shorter the time, the higher the score.

Because the time at which each student was infused with specialized mana differed, they naturally couldn't be ranked by who finished first, but rather by their own individually recorded times.

After stopping the mana infusion, the judge took a capsule from an assistant.

He popped the capsule into his mouth and, with a smile, spoke to the camera before him.

"For mana replenishment, choose Purple Cloud. After taking one of Purple Cloud's Spirit-Gathering Capsules, my mana has been rapidly restored. Infusing another fifty students will be no problem at all."

Just like that, as the competition began, several judges injected specialized mana into the students' arms one after another.

More and more contestants began to close their eyes and circulate their techniques, focusing wholeheartedly on dispelling the specialized mana that had invaded their bodies. The entire venue grew quieter and quieter, until gradually only the sound of breathing exercises remained.

From the moment that ball of specialized mana was infused by the judge, Zhang Yu felt a fire burning in his right arm, a fire that grew fiercer and more incandescent as the mana continued to pour in.

A sharp, stabbing pain traveled incessantly from his arm to his brain, making Zhang Yu understand why so many contestants had taken painkillers.

Right now, for instance, the pain made him want to smash his fist into the face of the old judge still infusing him with specialized mana.

Damn it, no wonder I saw someone selling insurance earlier. It's way too easy to get injured in this event.

Hurriedly activating the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra, Zhang Yu finally felt the unbearable pain gradually weaken.

He then marshaled the mana within his dantian, sending it surging toward his right arm.

The invasion is from a heat-aspected specialized mana.

That means I need to counter it with a cold-aspected mana.

Zhang Yu recalled the mana conversion pathway Teacher Yan had taught him, circulating the mana in his dantian and transforming it into a current of frigid mana that rushed toward his right arm.

Wherever this frigid mana passed, a cooling sensation spread through his body, as if a bucket of ice water had been poured over him.

And when Zhang Yu's frigid mana collided with the invading heat-aspected mana, he could feel the scorching temperature in his arm begin to drop.

But in the process, his own frigid mana was rapidly consumed, like using a bucket of water to douse a fire; although the flames diminished, the water was also gone.

Zhang Yu could only do his best to convert more mana to extinguish the fire.

Fortunately, he had the full-body mana circulation of the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method to constantly restore his mana, the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra to stabilize his mind, and his powerful mana control to continuously convert frigid mana.

…

A short time earlier.

Before the judge had reached the Songyang High School section.

Within the White Dragon High School competition area.

Han Xingye glanced at Song Hailong, who was dispelling the specialized mana in his body, then looked toward the large screen up ahead and thought, *It should be soon, right?*

Within Song Hailong's body, his mana was currently like a great river, flowing inexhaustibly toward the ball of scorching mana in his right arm.

The Spirit Recovery Needle ceaselessly restored his mana, and combined with his own astonishing reserves, it allowed him to unleash his mana without restraint, even enveloping the entire ball of scorching mana in an attempt to extinguish it in a single breath.

During the mana-dispelling process, all sensations of pain were suppressed by drugs to the point of near nonexistence, leaving Song Hailong to feel almost nothing amiss; he only needed to focus on the task at hand.

With my mana reserves and my control over mana, who in this round can possibly be faster than me?

Just then, a cry for help rang out across the field.

A student was seen letting out a muffled groan as he collapsed to the ground, and people immediately rushed over to feed him a mana-dispelling drug.

"It's fine, he just ran out of mana. He's already been given a mana-dispelling drug."

A moment later, another student let out a blood-curdling scream and fell, vomiting a large mouthful of blood.

This was a case of poor execution while dispelling the mana, causing the specialized mana to scatter throughout the body and inflict internal injuries.

Han Xingye glanced in the direction of the fallen student.

Not worth mentioning, not worth mentioning, not worth mentioning…

He knew that more and more students from ordinary high schools would likely be unable to hold on, whether due to insufficient mana reserves, a lack of mana control, or because their drugs were of poor quality… they would be eliminated one by one.

He paid it no mind.

Do they think they can close the gap just by taking drugs alongside us?

With everyone taking drugs, the gap between the ordinary high schools and the three great schools will only grow wider…

Just as he was thinking this, the large screen in front of him suddenly flashed, and a name appeared.

White Dragon High School, Song Hailong, 1:29

Seeing this, Han Xingye gave a slight smile, "Oh? Faster than he was at school. It seems the atmosphere here has hyped him up."

Next, name after name began to appear on the large screen, quickly filling up ten rows.

The screen only displayed the top ten names.

The names on the screen shifted back and forth, the rankings from second to tenth in constant flux, yet Song Hailong's name remained firmly planted at the very top, as if he alone was suppressing all the other students at the venue.

But soon, more and more names began to lock into place, the changes from the second to the tenth rows gradually ceasing.

The crowd stared in shock at the ten unchanging names, and soon a student discovered an obvious fact, "These ten people… are all students from White Dragon High School!"

Although White Dragon High School wasn't among the first batch of contestants to be infused with mana, following Song Hailong's ascent to the top, its students had also dispelled the specialized mana in their bodies one after another and, based on their various completion times… had swept the top ten spots on the leaderboard.

Teacher Yan gazed at the ten static names on the large screen, feeling as if a mountain had just risen to block Songyang High School's path.

"Sigh, the three great schools… In the end, this kind of competition truly is their domain."

Just then, the names from second to ninth place suddenly shifted down one spot; a newcomer had charged into second place in one fell swoop.

Red Pagoda High School, Xiong Bufan, 1:35

The students of Red Pagoda High School were also beginning to finish dispelling the specialized mana in their bodies.

Not long after Xiong Bufan claimed second place, two more students from Red Pagoda High School squeezed into the top ten.

Han Xingye turned his head toward the Red Pagoda High School section and, within the vision of his Heaven's Eye Talisman, immediately found the most conspicuous thing.

Protected Zone | Drug Barrel | High-Speed Mana

The "Protected Zone" evaluation was easy to understand; Han Xingye guessed this monster must have come from a demon-kin protected zone.

High-Speed Mana… Han Xingye wasn't quite sure about that one, but "Drug Barrel" he understood perfectly.

How many drugs did they stuff into this monster?

Damn it, are they secretly using monsters for drug experiments?

That monster's body must be full of illegal drugs. I should really report you people.

What? Our school does it too? And on humans?

Well, in that case, forget it.

Although Xiong Bufan's performance brought great prestige to Red Pagoda High School, he hadn't claimed first place, and the leaderboard was still dominated by White Dragon High School.

But a moment later, the top nine students all dropped down one place again.

As Le Mulan of Purple Cloud High School's name appeared out of nowhere in first place, it was as if a great roar sounded through the air.

Purple Cloud High School, Le Mulan, 00:25

"Twenty-five seconds!"

Cries of astonishment erupted from more and more students.

They found it impossible to imagine that while they were still struggling for their lives against the foreign mana in their bodies, someone had managed to dispel it in a mere twenty-five seconds.

Was she even human?

Everyone could imagine that Le Mulan was guaranteed a perfect score of 100 in this second round, but in truth, she was being limited by that 100-point ceiling; otherwise, the gap between her and the others would have been even greater.

This was Han Xingye's third shock of the day.

He frowned at the words "Ice-Skinned and Jade-Boned" above Le Mulan's head, thinking that her ability to dispel the foreign mana so quickly must be related to some special constitution.

Not far away, Song Hailong showed no sign of anger. Instead, he looked toward the Purple Cloud High School section and laughed heartily, "Interesting, interesting! It seems my greatest rival for the next three years of high school will be this Le Mulan."

A full minute later, the other students from Purple Cloud High School finally dispelled the foreign mana in their bodies, with Lian Tianji and one other also making it into the top ten.

Ultimately, the top three spots were occupied by Le Mulan, Song Hailong, and Xiong Bufan, respectively.

The top ten on the list was completely carved up by four students from White Dragon High School, three from Purple Cloud High School, and three from Red Pagoda High School.

Looking at the ranking, which no longer showed the slightest change, a sense of gloom fell over the many high school students at the venue.

For most of them, this was the first time they had truly experienced the gap between themselves and the three great schools.

The ten names and their scores on the screen were like a great mountain pressing down on them, displaying a chasm-like disparity between the three great schools and everyone else.

Just then, the ranking on the large screen changed once more.

The names from fourth to tenth place all dropped down one spot.

In a situation where the three great schools held near-total dominion over the competition, someone had unexpectedly thrown a wrench in the works, forcefully charging into fourth place.

Songyang High School, Zhang Yu, 1:38

When the timer detected that Zhang Yu had dispelled the specialized mana in his body, it let out a soft beep.

But that gentle sound landed like a great stone in the hearts of the several Songyang High School students nearby.

The students from the three great schools also subconsciously glanced toward the Songyang High School section, surprised to find a student there on a level close to their own.

Teacher Yan looked at the ranking on the board and quickly pulled out her phone to snap a picture.

This was an important record of her teaching success.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 47: Contention

Inside the venue.

Following a fleet of drones, box after box of catered meals was delivered.

After the first and second rounds of the Mana Competition concluded, it was already time for lunch.

However, the many contestants eating their boxed lunches were still discussing the highlights of the two previous matches, their gazes occasionally drifting toward the scoreboard on the large screen.

But the name that had originally ranked fourth had vanished, and the top ten was once again dominated by the three elite schools: White Dragon High School, Purple Cloud High School, and Red Pagoda High School.

This was because with the official conclusion of the first and second matches, the top ten displayed on the large screen had been updated to show the top ten in total points.

Only those who entered the top ten in the Mana Competition's final overall rankings would receive prize money, a true placement, and a result that universities would recognize—something that would be useful during college interviews.

And the name that had torn open a fissure in the second match, forcing its way into fourth place, had now disappeared as if it were a phantom.

It was like a small bird trying to break through the heavens, only to be swatted back down by a great hand formed from the three elite schools.

Teacher Yan sighed inwardly.

Zhang Yu's score in the first flying sword match was ultimately a bit too low. It dragged him down, which is why his total score couldn't squeeze into the top ten.

But what could be done about it?

The rich had an absolute advantage when it came to wielding flying swords, and Teacher Yan couldn't blame Zhang Yu's family for not buying him a mana flying sword.

If there's anything to blame, it's his bad luck for running into a competition sponsored by a flying sword manufacturer.

Elsewhere, Zhang Yu looked at the lunch box in his hand, eating while complaining, "They're selling a single meal for eighty? Why don't the people from Red Pagoda High School just go rob someone?"

Just as Zhang Yu was grumbling, another lunch box was placed before him.

Zhang Yu looked up to see Teacher Yan holding it out.

Teacher Yan said kindly, "You must be exhausted after this morning. I knew you'd be hungry, so you can have this one too."

Nearby, Bai Zhenzhen watched this scene and pouted to herself.

How could he be hungrier than me? Yu-boy dispelled the specialized mana in a minute and a half, but I had to hold on for over eight minutes to finish. It nearly killed me.

The more Teacher Yan watched Zhang Yu devour two meals, the more pleased she grew. Such a large appetite was clearly the sign of a good student.

As for Bai Zhenzhen, Qian Shen, and He Dayou, who also had big appetites? Hah, for students with no chance of placing in a mana competition to eat so much—were they anything but useless gluttons?

Teacher Yan offered some encouragement, "You did very well this morning. Just do your best this afternoon, and don't put too much pressure on yourself."

Although Teacher Yan wished Zhang Yu would give it four hundred percent of his focus, she knew that circulating mana was not something to be rushed. A calm and peaceful mindset was crucial, or it could backfire.

Thus, fearful that placing in the second match would put too much mental pressure on Zhang Yu, she immediately came to comfort him, hoping he would compete in as relaxed a state as possible.

Inwardly, Teacher Yan couldn't help but calculate Zhang Yu's score.

Eighty points in the first round, ninety-three in the second, for a total of 173.

She looked up at the large screen, her eyes scanning from the first-place score of 195 down to the tenth-place score of 176.

As long as Zhang Yu can catch up by 4 points in the next round, he can make it into the top ten.

Four points might not sound like much, but Teacher Yan knew that in a highly difficult and competitive event like the Mana Competition, the higher the score, the harder every single point was to earn.

This was especially true with thirty top students from the three elite schools all vying for those top ten spots.

Thinking of this four-point gap, Teacher Yan couldn't help but feel a little tense herself.

"It all depends on what this final round will test."

Lunchtime ended quickly, and the final round of the afternoon's Mana Competition officially began.

The host walked onto the stage and began, "For martial arts, for Daoist techniques, come to Immortal Resonance! With three hundred laboratories and one hundred cultivation technique masters, they have been dedicated to Immortal Dao education for a hundred years. We thank the Immortal Resonance Education Group for sponsoring this Mana Competition…"

Immortal Resonance Group. Zhang Yu remembered that this company was affiliated with the Myriad Laws Sect. It was the same major corporation where he had worked part-time testing techniques and obtained the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method.

He also recalled seeing the Songyang City Director of the Immortal Resonance Group at Li Xuelian's art exhibition.

A moment later, a complex mana circulation diagram was distributed to every competing student.

This was the task for the final round of the Mana Competition: to convert one's own mana into specialized mana by following the pathways on the diagram.

At the same time, cameras operated by the soul cultivator students were sweeping across the entire venue, ready to assess the condition of each contestant at a moment's notice and to facilitate the recording of their completion order.

As the timer officially started, students began circulating their mana according to the pathways on the diagrams.

Zhang Yu frowned slightly as he studied the routes on his diagram.

This thing… it seems to be a type of specialized mana used for combat.

Although his level 10 Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method gave him exceptionally strong control over his mana, the pathways on this mana circulation diagram were vastly different from the mana cycle of the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method.

If the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method was a technique of internal circulation for self-improvement, then the cultivation pathways on the diagram before him were a method of projecting mana externally for combat.

He could tell that, in terms of complexity, this cultivation pathway was inferior to the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method.

But whether it was the circulation pathways or the techniques they contained, they were completely different from the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method he was familiar with.

In particular, there was an oscillation and refinement technique that he had never encountered before.

This Mana Competition is going way too far off-curriculum.

And yet…

Zhang Yu glanced at the Feathered Tome that had appeared beside him, only to find no change whatsoever.

It's not a cultivation technique?

I guess I have no choice but to force my way through it.

Zhang Yu drew upon the mana in his dantian and began to circulate it cautiously according to the diagram.

Meanwhile, in the Purple Cloud High School section.

Lian Tianji gazed at Le Mulan not far away, noting her confident expression, and thought, *Our esteemed number one student is guaranteed to get an outstanding score. All I have to do is not drag us down and help boost our school's total score…*

Le Mulan looked at the diagram before her and tilted her head.

"I feel like I've drilled something similar to this."

Let me think… this is the Body-Protecting Astral Qi from some martial arts technique, isn't it?

She circulated the mana within her body and, sure enough, began converting it strand by strand into the specialized mana indicated on the diagram with practiced ease.

Body-Protecting Astral Qi, converted from mana, was considered a specialized mana belonging to the Martial Dao branch within the Immortal Dao system established by the Ten Great Sects.

Le Mulan recalled that converting mana into Body-Protecting Astral Qi required the step of mana oscillation, and the better the quality of the astral qi, the more oscillations were needed.

"Each mana oscillation increases the quality of the astral qi, but it also makes it harder to control."

"According to the instructions in this diagram, it should require seven mana oscillations, followed by circulation along the prescribed pathways…"

Suddenly, her brow furrowed slightly.

Listening to the various muffled grunts and pained cries coming from nearby, she found it distracting.

These were students who had been injured dispelling mana in the previous round. Their injuries hadn't healed, and circulating their techniques now only agitated their wounds.

"Can't these students from ordinary high schools afford some decent medication?"

"Even if they can't afford it, they can't even buy quality painkillers?"

As the thought crossed her mind, Le Mulan suddenly realized that these poor students from ordinary high schools probably really couldn't afford expensive painkillers.

This was the sound of poverty.

It's distracting me from the test.

But Le Mulan knew that the power of money could block out the sound of poverty.

She reached out, put on a pair of soundproof earmuffs worth tens of thousands, and felt the world finally fall silent. A faint smile touched her lips as she resumed her mana conversion.

...

Over in the White Dragon High School section, Song Hailong stared at the diagram in his hands as the mana throughout his body began to circulate automatically, moving as if by his will alone, gradually aligning with the instructions on the chart.

His long-term practice with the Heavenly Spiritual Root made his mana control exceptionally deft now that he was without it.

He had also practiced many similar problems before, which made his movements more fluid and faster by a large margin.

Boom!

A mass of mana in his dantian abruptly scattered amidst a violent oscillation, only to be slowly gathered back together by Song Hailong.

"First mana oscillation, complete!"

Simple! Simple! Simple! Too simple!

My parents have the finest genes, selected from among thousands.

I stopped sleeping at the age of five.

I am now eighteen. In all these years, I have always had the best performance, the highest scores, and the strongest constitution among my peers in the Song family! I am also the only one of my generation who has never attempted suicide, never grown weary of studying, and never suffered from depression! I am the Song family's ace!

"You pieces of trash in this arena, what makes you think you can compete with me!"

At that moment, he was completely focused, without the slightest distracting thought, wanting only to master the technique in the diagram as quickly as possible and trample the top students from the other two elite schools under his feet.

…

At the same time, Xiong Bufan of Red Pagoda High School was hunched over his diagram. His eyes were shut tight, and his fluffy tail twitched continuously, as if he had reached a critical moment in his cultivation.

The competition coach at his side watched this scene and thought, *When Bufan and his batch were at the breeding facility, they were being dosed with alchemical enhancers since before birth. By the time he was ready for high school, his physique was the most outstanding of them all.*

When the school brought him over from the breeding facility in the conservation area, the toughness of his meridians was already more than ten times that of an ordinary student. No matter how he strained himself circulating his technique, there's no need to worry about injury.

Since he enrolled, I've had him constantly train the speed of his mana circulation.

He has also practiced Body-Protecting Astral Qi many times before.

This time, he is bound to be the first to master this diagram.

Hmm, I really should have the principal naturalize more demons… no, wait… I mean, plan for more demon-kin students.

How is just one enough? I think adding another four to the competition team would be no problem. Those leaders who insist on a pure human team are too conservative. I heard the neighboring city already has a team composed entirely of demons… I mean, demon-kin.

…

Zhang Yu had to admit that without the relevant training or prior preparation, securing a good rank in this round seemed like an impossible task.

This competition wasn't just a contest of talent and aptitude; it was also a battle of financial power, influence, and resources.

Damn it!

Does my journey in this competition end here?

Zhang Yu! Are you really going to lose to money?

…

Not far away, Teacher Yan saw Zhang Yu's troubled expression and sighed inwardly.

She then glanced at the other Songyang High School students. Seeing them sweating profusely, their faces pale, or looking as if they desperately needed to take a dump from the strain, Teacher Yan shook her head helplessly.

The students of Songyang High School were already no match for the top students of the three elite schools. After consistently failing to achieve results in the Mana Competition, the school had simply stopped investing in it.

Without the school's investment, their competition results grew worse and worse, which in turn made the school even less willing to invest. It was a vicious cycle.

Teacher Yan understood that without the school's full support, lacking the proper teaching and practice, the two sides were never on the same starting line to begin with.

Just then, a student suddenly raised his hand.

"I need to use the restroom."

Teacher Yan cursed inwardly.

So you really did have to go.

"Go on, quickly!"

At that moment, Teacher Yan suddenly heard the sound of sinews and bones ringing out in unison from nearby.

She turned her head and was surprised to see Bai Zhenzhen practicing a fist form.

Has she already given up? This is a competition of circulating mana, what is she doing practicing martial arts for?

The sounds of the fist form also drew Zhang Yu's attention. He glanced over and sighed to himself, *Alas, Zhen has been driven mad.*

Huh?

Suddenly, Zhang Yu felt that the fist form Bai Zhenzhen was practicing was inexplicably familiar, as if it could be combined with something.

The martial art was very simple, composed of just six moves repeated over and over. After watching for a moment, he had a sudden realization.

Could this martial art be combined with the mana circulation diagram?

Seeing "Limitless Cloud Hand Level 0" appear on the Feathered Tome, Zhang Yu felt an urge to pick Bai Zhenzhen up and spin her around.

"Zhen!"

"You're a saint!"

"You're the savior of Songyang High School!"

The diagram detailed a method of mana circulation, while Bai Zhenzhen was performing the external martial stances.

Together, they formed a complete combat martial art—the Limitless Cloud Hand.

This was an advanced-level martial arts cultivation technique.

However, this technique emphasized internal cultivation over external moves. The key lay in the application of mana, in how to convert it into Body-Protecting Astral Qi. The six external forms were less like techniques and more like six practical examples of its application.

The Mana Competition had simply isolated the mana circulation diagram from the technique to use as a test question.

For an ordinary person, the absence of the external forms wouldn't affect their ability to learn the method of converting Body-Protecting Astral Qi.

But for Zhang Yu, whether or not it was a complete cultivation technique that could be registered by the Feathered Tome… that made a world of difference.

Zhang Yu had no idea how Bai Zhenzhen had comprehended the external forms. All he could do now was seize the opportunity, immediately switch the Feathered Tome's specialization to the Limitless Cloud Hand, and begin practicing.

Limitless Cloud Hand Level 0 (0/1, 15.4/5 Mana)

One pass!

All he needed was one pass! Even if it was riddled with errors, even if his execution was a complete mess, he would be able to completely master this Limitless Cloud Hand!

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 48: The Top Ten!

At the Mana Competition, within the Purple Cloud High School zone.

Dense beads of sweat covered Le Mulan's forehead.

She had just completed her fourth mana oscillation. The repeatedly ravaged mass of mana had seemingly transformed into a hazy white mist, floating and sinking indeterminately within her dantian, growing ever more difficult to control.

"Three times. Just three more times and I'll succeed."

…

Song Hailong's breathing grew increasingly heavy.

A vast tide of mana rose from his dantian like layered white clouds, gradually coalescing into a vortex.

"The last mana oscillation."

"As expected… I'll be the one to win in the end."

Boom!

Boom!

A sudden roar echoed from the distance.

Song Hailong's expression suddenly changed.

Someone actually beat me to it?

No… that's not it… He quickly realized something, his eyes revealing his astonishment.

"It's two people. Two people were actually faster than me?"

In the distance, Xiong Bufan pressed his palms together. Wisps of white, cloud-like mana flowed from his hands and gathered into a ball, making it seem as though he had caught a living cloud. However, the cloud quickly began to dissipate, clearly unable to last for long.

But he paid it no mind, instead turning to look in the other direction—where the roar had come from.

"Just a step behind me? Are they from White Dragon High or Purple Cloud High?"

Xiong Bufan stared at the column of white qi that shot skyward, condensed and unwavering like a pillar of cloud, a look of astonishment in his eyes.

"What's he doing? This is just a competition; the goal is speed, and everyone is rushing. Why would he practice the Body-Protecting Astral Qi to such perfection?"

"What a show-off!"

In Songyang High School's competition area.

Zhang Yu spread his palms, and torrents of white energy erupted from them, streaming straight toward the sky like a plume of white signal smoke. In an instant, it drew the attention of more and more people.

After Zhang Yu had hastily forced his way through the Limitless Cloud Hand at top speed—and, as expected, failed to convert any astral qi in the process—he felt that he had already mastered the cultivation technique.

At a mere thought, his qi moved with his will. Currents of mana completed seven consecutive oscillations, transforming into vigorous astral qi that erupted from his palms and created the spectacle before them.

Witnessing this, Teacher Yan excitedly clenched her fist, then quickly pulled out her phone and began snapping a series of pictures in Zhang Yu's direction.

Teacher Yan thought to herself, *Zhang Yu's talent for mana control is this astonishing? It seems the previous mana exam failed to reflect this at all.*

Recalling Zhang Yu's recent mana growth, she mused that it must have been his improvement in this area that had so greatly increased the efficiency of his breathing exercises.

Bai Zhenzhen watched with a moved expression, saying with heartfelt relief, "The boy's grown up."

And after a moment, the results of the third stage of the Mana Competition also appeared one after another.

Xiong Bufan of Red Pagoda High School was ranked first.

Zhang Yu of Songyang High School was ranked second.

Song Hailong followed closely behind, becoming third.

Le Mulan of Purple Cloud High School was pushed to fourth place.

And as the third stage gradually concluded, the total Mana Competition scores for each student were released one by one.

The students looked at the final rankings, their expressions a mixture of emotions.

First Place, White Dragon High School, Song Hailong, Total Score: 290

Second Place, Purple Cloud High School, Le Mulan, Total Score: 287

Third Place, Red Pagoda High School, Xiong Bufan, Total Score: 285

The three great academies had still swept the top three ranks, pulling far ahead of the other contestants.

At this moment, however, the gazes of most students were not on the top three, but were instead fixed on the person in fourth place.

Fourth Place, Songyang High School, Zhang Yu, Total Score: 273

Although Songyang was also a key high school, its name now appearing in the top ten, surrounded by the three great academies, was strikingly out of place.

It was as if a crack had been forcibly torn open in what was originally an impenetrable dark cloud.

"Fourth place, how much was the prize money again?"

Looking at the final rankings, Zhang Yu couldn't help but grin as he began to wonder about the prize money for fourth place.

He himself was already very satisfied with this ranking.

After all, he was confident he would surpass these rivals in the future.

But in terms of current strength, he was still no match for the prodigies of the three great academies.

He still needed more time to develop.

He had to admit that squeezing into fourth place was thanks to Zhen's divine intervention and the Feathered Tome's filial piety, though the most important factor was, of course, his own perseverance.

Qian Shen stared intently at Zhang Yu, clearly remembering that Zhang Yu's monthly exam score was 620—a full six points lower than his own.

Yet this 620-scorer was now ranked in the Mana Competition alongside the high-level prodigies, the high-caste elites, the ultimate monsters from the three great academies who all scored over 650?!

"It's happening again… It was the same at the art exhibition. This Zhang Yu always manages to perform far beyond the capabilities his score would suggest."

He clutched his head, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"It's as if the six-subject, 700-point evaluation system is no longer sufficient to perfectly express his level of evolution."

"This man…" Qian Shen stared intently at Zhang Yu, a thought that surprised even himself suddenly bubbling up in his mind.

"This man, who cannot be perfectly defined by a score, might just spark another reform of the high school scoring system in the future, making it even more perfect."

Just then, He Dayou glanced at Qian Shen muttering to himself with his head in his hands and thought, *What is this idiot freaking out about now?*

He turned his head, his eyes fixed on Zhang Yu, unable to conceal the turbulent emotions within.

Envy, jealousy… it was impossible not to feel such things, especially when it was all happening to the poor kid he despised most.

At this thought, a hint of regret even surfaced in He Dayou's heart.

He's just a penniless nobody in the end.

And it's a good thing… that he's just a penniless nobody.

…

Inside Purple Cloud High School's rest area.

The competition coach looked at Le Mulan, Lian Tianji, and the others, then suddenly spoke.

"What do you think about us recruiting that Zhang Yu?"

The coach had clearly seen Zhang Yu's performance and wanted to bring him into their fold.

Lian Tianji added, "Zhang Yu may not have a Purple Cloud High pedigree, but his performance was excellent. I agree it would be good to bring him over."

This so-called lack of pedigree referred to a pecking order popular within Purple Cloud High.

It generally referred to one's origins from Purple Cloud Nursery, Purple Cloud Kindergarten, Purple Cloud Elementary, and Purple Cloud Middle School.

The more of these Purple Cloud institutions one had attended, from nursery onward, the purer their "pedigree" was considered to be.

Le Mulan asked from the side, "Where did he go to elementary and middle school?"

"I actually asked him about that." Lian Tianji mentioned Zhang Yu's former elementary and middle schools.

An irrepressible look of disgust instantly crossed Le Mulan's face; those two schools reeked of poverty.

Seeing the change in Le Mulan's expression, Lian Tianji knew it was a lost cause.

Then the next time I see Zhang Yu, it will likely be to face off in the Martial Arts Competition, he thought.

Thinking of this, a trace of anticipation actually surfaced in his heart.

…

In front of the restroom.

The moment Zhang Yu stepped out, he was stopped by a man: Han Xingye, the competition coach from White Dragon High School.

"Zhang Yu, come to White Dragon High School." Han Xingye extended a hand toward Zhang Yu. "With your talent, it's a waste to stay at Songyang."

"Although you performed well in this competition, in the future you will only get further and further away from us."

Han Xingye was speaking the truth.

Although the most outstanding students in Songyang City were almost all divided up by the three great schools, over time… there would always be some left behind in other key high schools, or even regular high schools.

Han Xingye had seen a few first-years from… other high schools perform exceptionally in the Mana Competition.

But he had never seen a second- or third-year student from… other high schools perform excellently in the Mana Competition.

"If you come to White Dragon High, I'll be sure to get you a contract with excellent terms."

Zhang Yu asked suddenly, "If I go to White Dragon High, can I get into the Ten Greats?"

Han Xingye was slightly stunned, seeming not to have expected Zhang Yu to ask such a question, and was caught off guard.

The real answer was naturally no; if Zhang Yu went to White Dragon High School he would merely become an investment project for the school.

Forget the Ten Greats; they wanted to poach Zhang Yu just to keep him out of the remaining first-year competitions. After all, these achievements, which were tied to college entrance exams and university interviews, were vanity projects for the rich. A poor person shouldn't be allowed to take one of the spots.

As for university, he could definitely get into a decent university in the future, but it would absolutely not be one of the Ten Greats.

After all, the conditions at White Dragon High School were definitely better than at Songyang High School, and Zhang Yu could also develop better here.

Only, the spots for the Ten Greats… were never meant for the poor.

Just then, Teacher Yan walked over, blocked Zhang Yu's path, and looked at Han Xingye warily.

"Teacher Han, what are you saying to my student?"

Regardless of whether Zhang Yu was rich or poor, to Teacher Yan, his ability to get a rank was a testament to her teaching success.

Han Xingye gave a helpless smile; they all brought students to competitions every year, so he and this Teacher Yan were acquaintances.

Caught in the act of poaching her student, Han Xingye felt a bit awkward and said to Zhang Yu,

"Whatever the case, it's better than staying at Songyang High… you know what I mean, right?"

Teacher Yan became furious upon hearing this.

What "you know what I mean"? Don't think that just because you didn't say it, I can't guess the insulting words you have for Songyang High School!

However, thinking of the gap between her school and White Dragon High, Teacher Yan was genuinely afraid he would say something she couldn't refute, so she cut in.

"That's enough. If you have something to discuss, you can speak with me. Please don't harass our student."

Watching Teacher Yan and Zhang Yu leave, Han Xingye shrugged and thought, *If he's smart, he'll choose our side. Even if he still can't get into the Ten Greats."*

…

"Did you see that?"

"Fourth place! Zhang Yu got fourth place in the overall score! Fourth place, do you hear me?"

"Just say how much money you plan to invest."

Listening to the commotion on Bai Zhenzhen's end, Mo Tianyi said helplessly, "Zhenzhen, you don't have to be so excited. I can see it…"

"Then why aren't you sending the money yet?! Your leader wasn't even this amazing in his first year, was he?"

"Of course the boss has also placed in competitions…"

After some back-and-forth, Mo Tianyi concluded.

"Zhang Yu's results are indeed very outstanding. I admit the money I gave you before was too little. I will discuss the situation with the boss and several other seniors, and do my best to secure more investment for you."

Bai Zhenzhen was already aware of this, and urged, "Remember to approve the money quickly."

Disconnecting the call, Mo Tianyi looked at the screen, at Zhang Yu's fourth-place ranking, and his long-since-cooled chest seemed to grow slightly warm.

"That was beautifully done."

"To break through the suppression of so many rich kids and climb to this rank."

"Unfortunately, it's too late..."

A flicker of helplessness and gloom passed through Mo Tianyi's mind.

If only this had been two years earlier, I would have chosen you without a doubt.

Meanwhile, Bai Zhenzhen thought, *Placed in a Martial Arts Competition, did he? I'm curious to see just who you are.*

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 49: Limitless Cloud Hand

Zhang Yu looked at his phone, which was displaying an electronic agreement.

The content of the agreement was simple: to grant the top ten finishers of the Mana Competition the right to use the Limitless Cloud Hand, on the condition that they not disseminate it, profit from its contents, and so on.

Bai Zhenzhen stood beside Zhang Yu, tilting her head to look at the agreement and complaining, "Talk about stingy. The Immortal Resonance Group is such a huge company, so why are they so cheap with their sponsorship? You have to be in the top ten overall just to get usage rights? Shouldn't everyone get a copy?"

Zhang Yu shook his head in disagreement. "If everyone got a copy, wouldn't that be unfair to the students who performed well in the competition?"

"The way I see it, even giving it to ten people is probably too many. I feel like anyone ranked below fourth place didn't have a very good grasp of the test questions."

Bai Zhenzhen shot Zhang Yu a sidelong glance.

You have got to be kidding me…

Listen to that. Unfair to the students who performed well? Anyone below fourth place didn't have a good grasp of the questions? Was he even human? Had Zhang Yu forgotten how he had railed against the injustices of the modern Immortal Dao education system just one month ago? Where had his principles gone?

Bai Zhenzhen looked with disappointment at Zhang Yu's ugly expression.

Yu-boy! My Yu-boy is dead. The thing standing before me now is just a walking corpse controlled by test scores!

"Haha, Zhen, the prize money is here," Zhang Yu said, looking at the payment notification on his phone. He felt the corners of his mouth were harder to keep down than an AK-47.

His fourth-place finish in the Mana Competition came with a prize of a full twenty thousand in cash, instantly boosting his savings to over sixty-three thousand.

Zhang Yu clapped Bai Zhenzhen on the shoulder and declared with a grand wave of his hand, "Zhen, I'll treat you to dinner when we get back to school."

"Attaboy!" Bai Zhenzhen said cheerfully. "I knew you were a good kid at heart, that you'd never forget your roots."

Before long, students from the various schools began to disperse.

Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen followed the group from Songyang High School out of the venue's main gate.

Just then, a dark figure fell from the top of the stadium.

"That's…" Zhang Yu's gaze flickered. "Is that a person?"

Did someone fall?

Just as Zhang Yu registered what was happening, people on the scene had already sprung into action.

On any other day, the jumper would have likely hit the ground with a splat.

But at this very moment, the area was crowded with high school students, teachers, coaches, referees, and judges.

A great many of whom belonged to Red Pagoda High School.

As the saying goes, protecting the campus environment is everyone's responsibility.

The instant the figure fell, several blasts of astral qi shot out, forming a series of cushions that saved the jumper.

Liang Qin, who had closed his eyes and braced for death, did not feel the excruciating pain he expected. Instead, it felt as though he had landed on an incredibly warm, large bed.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself being gently lowered to the ground by a ball of astral qi.

"Why did you save me!"

Liang Qin looked on in agony, feeling not a shred of joy at having been rescued.

While watching the Mana Competition just now, he had placed bet after bet, finally losing all his money. His father had even called to ask about the debt collectors… and so, like any degenerate gambler, he had made his choice.

The teacher who saved him showed no joy either, stating flatly, "Jumping from buildings is prohibited on school grounds."

"I have already reported your situation to the police. A specialist will contact you to discuss the specific compensation…"

Hearing this, a flicker of despair crossed Liang Qin's eyes, and he quickly tried to defend himself.

"I didn't mean to jump! I just lost my footing…"

The other man replied coolly, "Lost your footing? So it was an accidental fall from a building? That costs money too."

Liang Qin was furious, but remembering the man's display of astral qi, he could only suppress his rage.

When I get the chance, I'll find another place to jump.

Having calmed down, Liang Qin began to contemplate his next jumping spot. Schools, hospitals, shopping malls, residential complexes… every single one of them would demand compensation.

"In this god-forsaken world, it's hard to even find a place to jump off a building for free."

Meanwhile, the students from Songyang High School had nearly left the campus.

It wasn't just the other students; even Zhang Yu was no longer so shocked by the sight of a jumper. He merely found the person enveloped in the ball of astral qi to be somewhat familiar.

…

Songyang High School.

The cafeteria.

Bai Zhenzhen popped a chicken leg into her mouth, and with a few soft crunches, swallowed it whole, bone and all.

Spread out before her was a large table laden with chicken, duck, fish, and other meats, a meal that had cost Zhang Yu over four hundred.

Even for cultivators of Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen's current level and physical strength, it was more than enough for a hearty feast.

"Ah, the school's processed meals always hit the spot. You can smell that just-out-of-the-freezer freshness."

Bai Zhenzhen took a bite and remarked, "That boxed lunch from Red Pagoda High School tasted off. Who knows how much synthetic food they put in it."

Although Zhang Yu was also eating with great relish, he possessed a trove of culinary memories from his past life.

"Zhen," he said, "when I'm rich, I'll treat you to something even better."

"You mean the dietary supplement meals on the second floor?"

Zhang Yu understood. To the students of Songyang High School… no, to the vast majority of high school students in all of Songyang City, "better food" meant food that could advance one's cultivation and improve one's grades.

As for the pursuit of flavor for its own sake… that was secondary, something most of Songyang City's high school students didn't have the luxury to pursue.

For a high school student, taste was a luxury.

Zhang Yu didn't explain, simply saying, "You'll know when I'm rich."

As he spoke, he recalled the events of the competition.

"Zhen," he asked curiously, "that set of fist techniques you used in the last match, how did you figure it out?"

Bai Zhenzhen answered casually, "Couldn't you see the six stances in the energy circulation diagram?"

"There were stances?" Zhang Yu asked, startled.

"Of course," Bai Zhenzhen said after a moment's thought. "Wasn't it obvious at a glance?"

Is she using a cheat? Zhang Yu looked at Zhen, still unable to comprehend how she could have seen it at a glance. It seemed that even students ranked below 100th place had their hidden strengths.

After she spoke, however, Bai Zhenzhen's face filled with frustration.

"I was pushed into a corner, so I had no choice but to see if I could use external martial stances to support the mana circulation method."

"But it still didn't work."

Thinking of the constant setbacks she had faced during the Mana Competition, Bai Zhenzhen made a firm resolution to diligently work on her mana control.

She looked up at Zhang Yu, recalling his spectacular performance on the competition grounds, and suddenly felt even worse.

"I'm starting remedial classes tomorrow!"

I, Bai Zhenzhen, will not be outdone by anyone!

Bai Zhenzhen asked, "Are you going to Teacher Yan's remedial class?"

Before they had parted ways earlier, Teacher Yan had approached Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, informing them that she would use their competition results to apply for school funding to set up a Mana Competition remedial class, and she encouraged them to sign up.

Zhang Yu nodded. "Of course I'm going."

Although he had achieved an excellent fourth-place finish, the competition had also made Zhang Yu aware of his own limitations.

If he hadn't comprehended the Limitless Cloud Hand from Bai Zhenzhen at the last critical moment, he likely wouldn't have even made it into the top ten of the overall rankings.

He wanted to become stronger in his mastery of mana so that in future competitions, he would no longer have to rely on luck to win.

Moreover, with the school providing funding, Teacher Yan's class might come with benefits like flying swords and cultivation techniques, which filled Zhang Yu with anticipation.

Seeing Zhang Yu nod, the corners of Bai Zhenzhen's mouth turned up.

"Alright then. We'll go to Old Yan for remedial classes together."

...

After returning home, Zhang Yu did not cultivate the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra to enhance his Dao heart as he usually did.

After all, his Feathered Tome specialization was now switched to the Limitless Cloud Hand martial art.

So he decided to take this opportunity and continue to raise the level of his Limitless Cloud Hand.

He figured that since the Limitless Cloud Hand only had six moves, it might level up even faster than Freehand Combat; perhaps he could even reach level ten in a single night.

Thus, Zhang Yu returned once more to the abandoned, unfinished building.

Coming here felt like returning home, as he had spent night after night practicing his martial arts in this place.

It was quiet, there was no fear of disturbing anyone, and he could train without restraint.

If he hadn't already paid his rent, and if the abandoned building had internet, electricity, and water, he would have considered moving a bed over and living in this wonderful, free place.

He walked into a large, bare, dust-gray hall.

With a mere thought, streams of mana rose from his dantian, passed through seven layers of oscillation, and transformed into clouds of mist that gushed from his palms.

Because he had already reached Level 1 in the Limitless Cloud Hand, the speed and quality with which he converted mana into martial astral qi now far surpassed that of any contestant from the competition.

Feeling the mist enveloping his hands, Zhang Yu thought to himself, *Formless Cloud-Astral Qi?*

After signing the electronic agreement, Zhang Yu had gained the right to use the Limitless Cloud Hand, along with a digital manual.

The true name of this martial astral qi was written within the manual.

Formless Cloud-Astral Qi, shaped like a white cloud, could be either hard or soft. It excelled at redirecting force and using an opponent's strength against them, making it a versatile martial astral qi for both offense and defense.

Next, Zhang Yu began to practice the six external stances of the Limitless Cloud Hand.

He threw a punch forward, and the white Formless Cloud-Astral Qi carried a surging power, like a great siege hammer, letting out a whistling sound as it moved.

This was one of the fierce and powerful moves of the Limitless Cloud Hand, designed for breaking through enemy defenses head-on.

Then, Zhang Yu shifted his hands, and the white Formless Cloud-Astral Qi swirled around his body in layers of mist, imbued with a soft, yielding elasticity.

This was a defensive move from the Limitless Cloud Hand. The elastic Formless Cloud-Astral Qi could not only deflect the force of an opponent's attack but could even rebound a portion of it.

In just a few moments, Zhang Yu had completed a full practice of the six stances of the Limitless Cloud Hand, and then he immediately started over.

The Limitless Cloud Hand had remarkably few stances, a mere six, and it took Zhang Yu only a little over ten minutes to practice them ten times.

Limitless Cloud Hand Level 1 (0/10) → Level 2 (0/20)

As the Limitless Cloud Hand advanced to Level 2, Zhang Yu felt as if he had experienced countless practice sessions in an instant. Whether it was the process of refining mana into Formless Cloud-Astral Qi, his control over the qi itself, or even the application of the six external stances, everything improved dramatically in a flash.

Zhang Yu looked down at his hands.

Previously, when the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi had enveloped his hands, wisps of white, smoke-like qi would drift upward like signal smoke rising to the heavens; this was how it had appeared during the competition.

But now, with the Limitless Cloud Hand at Level 2, far fewer wisps of qi drifted upward, a clear sign of his increased control over this astral qi.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 50: Changes and Upping the Ante

With only six moves, this Limitless Cloud Hand is so quick to practice. Couldn't I get it to level 10 tonight?

But after Zhang Yu rallied his spirits and practiced another five times, he felt the mana within him growing increasingly thin, no longer enough to support his cultivation of the Limitless Cloud Hand.

Zhang Yu realized his earlier thinking was flawed.

It seems there's no way to get this Limitless Cloud Hand to level 10 in one night.

Unlike a foundational cultivation technique such as Freehand Combat, the Limitless Cloud Hand consumed far more mana.

Even with the passive breathing exercise of the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method constantly restoring his mana, it was impossible for him to practice for hours on end as he did with Freehand Combat.

So, Zhang Yu simply sat cross-legged, allowing the passive breathing exercise to continue recovering his mana while he also practiced the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra to enhance his Dao heart.

By practicing in such fits and starts, when the night was over, Zhang Yu had raised his Limitless Cloud Hand to level 6 (7/60).

The coverage of his Formless Cloud-Astral Qi had now extended from his hands all the way to his arms and shoulders, surging ceaselessly like a rolling sea of clouds.

The original phenomenon—of a cloud of mist rocketing upward like a column of wolf smoke—had also vanished.

Now, only the faintest wisps of vapor could be seen slowly drifting a dozen centimeters upward before dissipating into the air.

This was because as his control increased, the consumption of astral qi during his circulation of the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi was drastically reduced.

…

The next day, at Songyang High School.

Inside the student council office.

Zhou Chechen looked at the message on his phone and smiled faintly.

"He actually took fourth place in the Mana Competition? That's a bit unexpected."

Lan Ling, lifting a dumbbell, said, "I heard White Dragon High School's competition coach spoke to him, wanted to poach him."

Zhou Chechen chuckled. "They had a competition spot snatched away this time, which means one less achievement on a student's resume. Of course they want to recruit him."

"What do you think? If we sign Zhang Yu and specifically train him for Mana Competitions, could we snatch a few more top spots? And let the students from the three great schools win a few less awards?"

For the wealthy families of Songyang City, the number of spots at the Ten Greats' top universities was limited; every award missing from someone else's resume increased their own child's chances of success.

Lan Ling stated sullenly, "He might have a chance in his first year, but starting from the second, I don't think Zhang Yu can beat them."

Zhou Chechen said cheerfully, "Even so, that's not bad."

"Then it's decided."

"We can't let White Dragon High School actually poach him."

"After this month's exams end…"

Zhou Chechen looked at his hand as he slowly closed it into a fist, as if tightly gripping everything he desired within his palm.

"Zhang Yu must sign the contract."

Lan Ling understood the meaning behind those words: after the monthly exams, Zhang Yu would have no choice but to sign.

…

Outside the school gates, Zhao Tianxing spoke into his phone, "I know, Mom, I know…"

A woman's voice came from the phone: "Spend more time with Zhang Yu. Look how quickly his grades are improving…"

"I know, I know." After a few perfunctory replies, Zhao Tianxing finally hung up.

Just as he walked through the school entrance, he saw the line of large text scrolling across the electronic screen again: A warm congratulations to our school's first-year, class (1) student, Zhang Yu, for winning 4th place in the city-wide Mana Competition, high school division.

So it's true…

Although he had already heard related rumors in several school group chats yesterday, only now, upon seeing the words for himself, did Zhao Tianxing confirm that it was real.

The thought that Zhang Yu, who just recently was eating at the same table as him, had suddenly surpassed a crowd of top students from the three great schools and other key high schools to take fourth in the Mana Competition made Zhao Tianxing's heart clench.

A wave of shame followed.

Zhao Tianxing, oh, Zhao Tianxing, how can you be so jealous when a classmate achieves such great results? It's hideous! Where did your moral character go?

Sigh, I can't compare myself to Zhang Yu. He's a Golden Core disciple, after all. We're not even the same species anymore.

He must have won fourth place in the competition because that True Monarch Xinghou put in a great deal of effort.

And Mom still tells me to hang out with him more…

Zhao Tianxing gave a bitter smile internally.

With such a huge gap between us, can we even hang out together?

The rumor of Zhang Yu being a Golden Core disciple was further solidified among the students because of his fourth-place finish in the competition.

And as someone who tended to overthink what others thought, Zhao Tianxing felt a sense of inferiority just thinking about the dazzling halo surrounding Zhang Yu now.

He's a Golden Core disciple, and the gap between our scores is only getting wider. Does he already look down on me? In his eyes, I'm probably just another average student on the side of the road.

If I deliberately try to get close to him now, to hang out with him… won't that look too sycophantic to others? Will they think I'm a vain social climber? That I want to bask in his Golden Core disciple glory?

You couldn't blame Zhao Tianxing for overthinking; as a teenager who grew up in the city, he had seen too many similar situations at school.

Once a gap in scores appeared between friends, the friendship would always gradually change.

Things like, "You've changed ever since your score got higher." Or, "Your score is so low, I feel embarrassed being seen with you." And even, "I'll help you raise your score by 10 points, but don't ever look for me again after that…"

Sigh, if Zhang Yu doesn't ask me to lunch today, I'd better not go find him myself, just to avoid being rejected.

When the bell rang for the end of the last class of the morning, Zhao Tianxing intentionally or unintentionally glanced in Zhang Yu's direction.

Seeing Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen chatting, he felt a pang of envy. If only his grades were as good as Bai Zhenzhen's, then he could also chat and laugh with Zhang Yu.

Seeing Zhang Yu then talking with Zhou Tianyi, he grew envious of Zhou Tianyi. His score was even lower than his own, yet he could still talk freely with Zhang Yu without any awkwardness. He never had that kind of easy confidence.

Just then, Zhao Tianxing noticed the three of them stand up and walk in his direction.

Zhao Tianxing quickly lowered his head, and as he sensed the three of them getting closer, he pretended to organize his desk, moving a few books back and forth as if he couldn't get them right, completely ignoring their approach.

But in his mind, he was keenly focused on their movements, with one question revolving in his head.

Will he ask me to eat with them?

Zhang Yu said, "Old Zhao! Let's go get lunch together."

Zhao Tianxing quickly stood up and smiled. "Yeah, let's go."

They walked on the path to the cafeteria.

Zhou Tianyi said with a smile, "Zhang Yu, have you noticed that the atmosphere in the school feels a little different today?"

"Has it?" Zhang Yu thought for a moment and said, "The teachers are still as gentle, the students are still as friendly, and the air is still filled with the scent of learning. It's all good."

Zhou Tianyi said, "You got fourth place in the competition. Now most of the school believes you must be a Golden Core disciple. Haven't you noticed everyone treating you with more respect?"

Zhang Yu reflected for a moment, and it did seem like his classmates' attitudes toward him had indeed… gained a subtle sense of distance.

Bai Zhenzhen, who was beside them, said coolly, "Yes, I heard people talking about you in the girls' restroom. They were all saying you must have been boosted up by a Golden Core True Monarch, that it's all about connections and good luck."

Zhou Tianyi added, "I heard people in the boys' restroom saying you must have cracked the code to wooing a rich older woman. Otherwise, how could ordinary people like them not even know where the art exhibition for selecting Golden Core disciples was held, let alone attend and be chosen…"

Zhang Yu sighed. "Alas, to think that my hard-won glory for the school has only earned me distance and jealousy."

Zhou Tianyi smiled. "Zhang Yu, the higher your score, the better your achievements, the more jealousy you'll naturally attract."

He said slowly, "They won't think about your hard work or your talent. They'll only assume you have better circumstances and attribute all your success to your luck."

Looking at Zhou Tianyi's contemplative expression, Zhang Yu said thoughtfully, "I didn't expect you, ranked 25th in the year… to know so much."

Zhou Tianyi stumbled, retorting irritably, "Hey… there are over five hundred students in our grade. A 25th-place ranking is still standing on the heads of many people."

Watching Zhang Yu joking and laughing, Zhao Tianxing, who was walking alongside them, gradually began to relax.

I can't believe Zhang Yu is still so approachable after getting fourth in the competition.

But a moment later, Zhao Tianxing changed his mind; Zhang Yu had changed, at least a little.

At the food counter, Zhang Yu looked at the cafeteria lady and said, "Ma'am, I got fourth place in the city-wide Mana Competition. Could you give me a little extra meat?"

The cafeteria lady replied, "You got it! This biggest piece of pork rib is for our city-wide Mana Competition's fourth-place winner."

Songyang High School had a strong academic atmosphere; of course, even the cafeteria ladies judged a person by their score first.

…

That night.

A suburb of Songyang City.

With a series of whooshing sounds, a black shadow flickered at high speed through the night sky, continuously approaching Zhang Yu's rented apartment.

Bang!

After a brief pause at the main entrance of the apartment building, the door opened and the black shadow shot inside like a wisp of green smoke. In the blink

of an eye, it had already reached Zhang Yu's floor, finally appearing ghost-like before his door.

A knocking sound, *dong dong dong*, echoed.

Zhang Yu quickly stood up to open the door.

He saw a middle-aged man with the stride of a dragon and the stance of a tiger, whose presence was as deep as an abyss and as imposing as a mountain, standing at his door and looking at him.

"Are you Mr. Zhang Yu?"

Zhang Yu nodded and said, "Swift-Arrival Delivery? It's only been about twenty minutes. You guys are fast."

The middle-aged man smiled, pulled the item out of the large backpack he was carrying, and presented it to Zhang Yu.

"Mr. Zhang, this is the item you ordered. Please sign for it."

A moment later, Zhang Yu closed the door again and took out the things he had purchased.

Through the Mana Competition, Zhang Yu had come to recognize the gap between himself and the top students from the famous schools, which made him even more eager to improve himself.

In his current situation, his mana was cultivated day and night by the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method, and his Dao heart was his main focus for improvement every day. Only his physical strength had been neglected and had temporarily stagnated.

Thinking about the martial arts competition next month, where he would likely have to face off against the rich kids from the famous schools again, Zhang Yu felt an increasing need to enhance his physical strength.

So, after some careful calculation, he had purchased a few things online.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 51: Surging Undercurrents

Zhang Yu gazed at the vest, shorts, wrist guards, and ankle weights before him, along with two large canisters sitting nearby.

This was the weighted suit and demonic beast meat powder he had purchased.

The weighted suit was a durable piece of body tempering equipment. It was inexpensive, could be used at any time, allowed one to train hard in secret without being easily discovered by classmates, and even offered the dramatic effect of being cast off in a fight for a classic reveal—truly an indispensable, classic piece of gear on the path of the Immortal Dao.

The suit Zhang Yu purchased weighed a total of 150 kilograms, allowing him to train his physical body during his daily activities.

The demonic beast meat powder, on the other hand, was a nutritional supplement that could better replenish the vital energy he expended and fuel his growth, helping a young man grow taller, faster, and stronger.

The two items cost him more than 4,000 yuan in total, reducing his savings to just over 59,000.

"Sigh, I'm still too poor. I can only afford this poor man's gear."

While browsing the shopping website, what Zhang Yu had actually wanted most was an external spiritual root called the Gluttony Spiritual Root.

According to the product description, once that thing was inserted into the body, it would frantically stimulate one's metabolism and strengthen the body day after day, absorbing every available nutrient to fuel one's vital energy; in the words of the ad, you could even get stronger by eating shit.

Unfortunately, it was too expensive; one cost forty million.

Spending forty million to experience the feeling of getting stronger even by eating shit was not something the current Zhang Yu could afford.

"Sigh, I'll just try the school's Muscle-Growth Spiritual Root during the next free rental."

As he put on the weighted suit piece by piece, Zhang Yu felt his body grow heavier and heavier. Simple actions like bending over, walking, and raising his hands were now met with layers of resistance, making movement much more difficult.

"Hoo…"

Before he could even take more than a few steps, a furious shout came from downstairs.

"Are you trying to demolish the building in the middle of the night!"

Knowing he was making too much noise with the weighted suit on, Zhang Yu made his way to the abandoned building.

The entire way there, it felt as if he were bound by heavy shackles, and he could feel all sorts of discomfort from every part of his body.

However, after he began circulating the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra and focused on his desire to improve his physical strength day and night, all this discomfort was temporarily suppressed, replaced by a sense of satisfaction from knowing his body was constantly being trained.

"So the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra is effective for this too."

Zhang Yu's next goal was to maintain the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra at all times if possible, constantly using the heart art to raise his Dao heart level while simultaneously resisting the discomfort from the weighted suit.

"Training my Dao heart and my physical body, 24 hours a day."

If he could achieve this, he would be able to further increase the efficiency of his Dao heart level progression and train his physical strength at the same time.

A wry smile appeared on Zhang Yu's face as he thought about how he had voluntarily taken on such a huge burden without anyone forcing him.

He sighed to himself, "I have no choice. Those rich bastards from the three great schools are more ridiculous than the last."

"To survive, to get into one of the Ten Greats, to enter a major sect… I have to grind, there's no other way…"

Arriving at the abandoned building once again, Zhang Yu, still wearing the weighted suit, sat cross-legged on the floor, letting his body rest while striving to maintain the state of his Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra, continuously visualizing the image of the old ox plowing the wasteland in his mind.

Theoretically, as long as a cultivator could endure, a heart art could be maintained indefinitely.

It was like listening to an audiobook while playing a game, a manifestation of multitasking.

However, mental weakness, fatigue, and various external stimuli could all interrupt the maintenance of a heart art.

And if one needed to use their brain for complex tasks, such as solving problems on an exam or strategizing in a fight, then the heart art would be even more difficult to maintain.

So, although he had heard from his Dao heart class teacher that a heart art could theoretically be maintained at all times and that a powerful cultivator could maintain it as long as their consciousness remained clear, the old Zhang Yu had never been able to do it.

But ever since Zhang Yu had recently raised his Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra to level 10 and his Dao heart level had reached 2, he felt it had become much easier to maintain the heart art.

If maintaining the heart art before was like constantly solving a series of math problems in his head, he now felt like he was just counting from 1 to 1000—it had become much simpler.

"I should now be able to perform a variety of more complex exercises while maintaining my heart art."

That was why Zhang Yu was attempting this now. He needed to practice maintaining the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra under more varied conditions.

After resting for a while, Zhang Yu stood up in his weighted suit and began to walk back and forth while maintaining his heart art.

He felt as if he had discarded half his brain and lost half his muscle, learning all the movements again from scratch.

The next evening, upon returning to the abandoned building, Zhang Yu tried doing some simple warm-up exercises while maintaining his heart art.

On the third day, as he grew more accustomed to it, Zhang Yu began to practice the Limitless Cloud Hand while wearing the weighted suit and maintaining the heart art.

The level 6 Limitless Cloud Hand felt as if it had been rehearsed thousands upon thousands of times in his mind, and he could execute every movement naturally without much thought.

At this moment, as he maintained the visualization for his heart art in his mind, his physical body, under the pressure of the weighted suit, continuously practiced the forms of the Limitless Cloud Hand.

The mana within his body, surging with torrential momentum, transformed into wisps of Formless Cloud-Astral Qi as it was repeatedly oscillated.

However, because he had to divide his attention to maintain the heart art, coupled with the weighted suit and mana consumption, Zhang Yu's efficiency in practicing the Limitless Cloud Hand had slowed down considerably.

Three full days passed before he finally managed to advance the Limitless Cloud Hand to level 10.

Listen to that—*only* advanced it to level 10.

Zhang Yu clearly felt this speed was a little too slow.

"Sigh, the Feathered Tome still isn't powerful enough. It's limiting my potential and the fruits of my self-discipline."

Within the abandoned building, mana rose from Zhang Yu's dantian, silently completing seven consecutive oscillations before dispersing into his limbs and meridians, erupting from every inch of his body.

In an instant, Zhang Yu was wreathed in white, cloud-like vapor, giving him the bearing of a transcendent immortal.

"This is the effect of the Limitless Cloud Hand at level 10. The Formless Cloud-Astral Qi is no longer confined to the hands but emerges from every part of the body, truly integrating offense and defense."

But the mana consumption had also increased drastically. Zhang Yu felt he couldn't sustain it for more than a few minutes, so he quickly stopped.

And after these days of ascetic training, Zhang Yu's various attributes had once again improved.

His mana, from his day and night breathing exercises, had increased to 16.9.

The constantly worn weighted suit, along with his Limitless Cloud Hand training, had raised his body strength to level 1.28.

His Dao heart, under the near-constant tempering of the level 10 Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra, was still the fastest to improve, having already reached Level 2 (65%).

...

One day, not long after Zhang Yu arrived in the classroom, he saw a middle-aged woman with a weary face at a desk, packing up some things.

Just as Zhang Yu was feeling confused, he heard Zhou Tianyi beside him say, "Liang Qin dropped out. That's his mom, here to pack his things."

"Huh?" Zhang Yu asked, surprised. "Why?"

Zhou Tianyi lamented, "Apparently he racked up over a million in gambling debts. After his parents found out, they came straight here to process his withdrawal from the school."

"I heard their family made a scene in the teacher's office yesterday. Liang Qin kept kneeling and kowtowing, but his parents still insisted on having him withdrawn."

Zhou Tianyi shook his head and sighed, "His parents did the right thing. Once you get addicted to gambling, you can only live as a mortal for the rest of your life. You'll never achieve anything on the path of the Immortal Dao."

"Forget about a first-year high school student; even a true immortal would fall, lose their entire cultivation, go bankrupt, and become a mortal again."

Zhang Yu was silent for a moment. In terms of borrowing money, this Liang Qin was a bit like his predecessor. He thought that if he hadn't transmigrated, the original Zhang Yu might very well have met the same end.

Just then, Bai Zhenzhen dragged Zhang Yu out of the classroom and said to him, "I've finally heard from those poor sods. They sent over an electronic agreement for you to sign."

Not long after Zhang Yu signed the electronic agreement, a transfer notification chimed on his phone.

Seeing the 20,000 yuan that had been deposited, both Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen were invigorated.

"For those skinflints to send twenty thousand in one go, they must really think highly of you."

"Send 8,000 to my account, I need it for something."

Zhang Yu didn't ask why. After sending the 8,000, he simply added a word of caution, "What have you been busy with lately? You disappear as soon as school lets out every day."

Bai Zhenzhen smiled faintly. "What else? Trying to find a way to get into one of the Ten Greats."

"Since these skinflints value us so much, we have to make them help lighten our load."

Speaking of which, she seemed to remember something and offered a reminder, "After next week's monthly exam, Zhou Chechen will probably try to persuade us to sign again."

"If we refuse the student council again this time, they will definitely apply even more pressure."

"Especially you, kid. Since you took fourth place in the Mana Competition, they'll definitely try to force you to sign. Can you handle it?"

Zhang Yu wasn't sure himself, but seeing the concern in Bai Zhenzhen's eyes, he laughed and said, "Of course I can handle it. Just make sure you don't give up halfway."

Zhang Yu thought about the pressure from the ritual, thinking to himself that he would either be killed by the ritual or get into the Ten Greats; there was simply no other choice.

Just as he was thinking this, that all-too-familiar chill rose up within his body again. Zhang Yu knew it was urging him to hurry back and focus on his studies and cultivation.

"Sigh, let's not talk about it. My own strength is what matters most. I'm heading back to cultivate."

Bai Zhenzhen placed a hand on his shoulder and reminded him, "Remember, when you refuse, you can shift the blame onto Purple Cloud High School and White Dragon High School. Say they're trying to recruit you, and keep negotiating with the student council to stall for time."

"You have to remember, you absolutely cannot let them find out that you're aiming for the Ten Greats."

Watching Zhang Yu's rapidly retreating back, Bai Zhenzhen also seemed to sense his urgency.

"Yu-boy has been working harder and harder lately."

"He must be anxious too."

"But it's fine, I'm about to find that guy..."

"I really am something else. Even though Yu-boy was a tiny bit better than me in the Mana Competition, when it comes to getting into the Ten Greats, he'll still need me to watch his back."

...

In a quiet chamber.

Having rented a Muscle-Growth Spiritual Root, Zhang Yu could feel that every time he performed his breathing exercises, as the spiritual energy was drawn into the spiritual root, the root would in turn release wisps of an even more vibrant spiritual energy.

This was the growth-type spiritual energy produced by the Muscle-Growth Spiritual Root.

As this growth-type spiritual energy was naturally absorbed by his body, he felt as if his flesh and blood all over were squirming on their own, beginning to devour all available nutrients at an accelerated rate.

With the continuous effect of the Muscle-Growth Spiritual Root and the constant infusion of growth-type spiritual energy, this state would last for six to twelve hours, greatly enhancing the effectiveness of Zhang Yu's physical strength training.

Wei Xin's voice came through the broadcast: "Student Zhang, would you like to extend your time?"

Zhang Yu slowly exhaled, thought for a moment, and said, "Add one hour."

...

In the training hall.

The martial arts teacher, Lei Jun, was giving Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen extra lessons for next month's martial arts competition.

Amidst a series of rumbles and cracking sounds, two figures could be seen colliding back and forth, tearing at each other like a pair of giant beasts.

Zhang Yu's Limitless Cloud Hand blasted out with surging martial astral qi.

But Bai Zhenzhen formed a sword with her fingers, striking out in a blur of sword-like motions, piercing the weakest and most critical points of the astral qi and instantly dissipating the incoming blast.

From the side, Lei Jun shouted, "Zhang Yu, the greatest strength of the Limitless Cloud Hand is its adaptability! Guide the flow of power, don't always try to overwhelm people with brute force!"

It wasn't that Zhang Yu wanted to rely solely on brute force; it was that Bai Zhenzhen's combat experience was far superior to his. If he didn't subconsciously rely on his martial astral qi for a frontal assault, he was almost constantly being suppressed by her.

"How is this girl, Zhen, so good at fighting?"

Although Zhang Yu wasn't using his full strength, he was still using a level 1 Limitless Cloud Hand, yet he was still being completely suppressed by Bai Zhenzhen relying on just a few basic martial arts, making him strongly suspect that she was cheating.

Is she using fucking wallhacks or an aimbot? Or is she reading my inputs? How can she always hit my openings? How can she always see through my moves?

…

The days passed like this, with Zhang Yu constantly studying, cultivating, and attending extra lessons.

In the blink of an eye, another week had gone by.

The day of the monthly exam at Songyang High School had arrived once again.

And his classmates, the teachers, the student council… and all sorts of people, both known and unknown to Zhang Yu, were gradually turning their gazes toward him and Bai Zhenzhen.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 52: The Monthly Exam Ends, A Storm Gathers

Inside the unfinished building.

Zhang Yu, clad in a weighted suit, threw a punch. As his foot stamped on the concrete floor, a muffled boom suddenly erupted through the level.

Already drenched in sweat, Zhang Yu continued without pause, practicing the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms, one move at a time.

His entire body was scorching hot, emitting faint clouds of white vapor into the cold night.

A week ago, he had become able to maintain the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra while wearing the weighted suit and practicing the Limitless Cloud Hand to level 10. Since then, Zhang Yu had begun to challenge an even greater difficulty: practicing the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms to level 10.

It was incredibly difficult at first, a dual trial of both body and mind.

Fortunately, as long as he could maintain the heart art, the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra always brought Zhang Yu a sliver of joy and satisfaction born from anticipation.

And when he couldn't maintain the heart art?

The power of the ritual itself would guide Zhang Yu back onto the right path, compelling him to maintain the heart art.

For instance, at this very moment, the instant his focus slackened and the visualization in his mind began to blur, he knew the ritual was about to start wailing at him again.

"Please abide by the ritual's agreement. Strive to complete the wish. Do not deliberately slack off or delay. 10."

Zhang Yu hurriedly focused his mind, striving to maintain the state of the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra, and the visualization in his mind gradually sharpened once more.

Damn it!

Although the chill had receded again, Zhang Yu couldn't help but curse inwardly at that moment.

Just then, the sound of a phone ringing echoed through the dark, unfinished building.

Hearing the sound was like listening to celestial music for Zhang Yu.

Thankfully, this moronic ritual had some small measure of judgment, at least allowing him a short break to answer his phone.

Picking up his phone, Zhang Yu saw it was a message from the Student Council Vice President, Zhou Chechen.

Zhou Chechen: Zhang Yu, how is your consideration coming along?

Zhang Yu glanced at the time.

A student council message sent at four in the morning. That's a normal schedule for us Songyang people.

Zhang Yu: I want to focus all my energy on preparing for the monthly exam first. We can talk about signing the contract after it's over.

Zhou Chechen: Haha, no problem, we'll talk after the exam then. I've already prepared a contract that you'll be absolutely satisfied with. I look forward to the day we sign.

Although Zhang Yu knew that Zhou Chechen probably talked to every potential signee this way, it was impossible to say it wasn't pleasant to be flattered by him from time to time over the past month.

A pity. In the end, it isn't a pure friendship that wants to suck up to me without any ulterior motives.

The thought of having to continue this charade with him made Zhang Yu feel a little uncomfortable.

I wonder if he'll turn hostile after I reject him again after this month's exam?

Zhang Yu looked up at his Feathered Tome.

[Dao heart: 2 (93%)]

[Mana: 18.7]

[Body Strength: 1.33]

After these past few days of harsh training, his strength had improved significantly.

In particular, he was getting closer and closer to a level 3 Dao heart, and his mana level was already in a league of its own among the first-years at Songyang High School, surpassing even Bai Zhenzhen.

Only his body strength had dropped back to around seventh or eighth place, as he had stopped for over half a month and only recently resumed training it.

However, Zhang Yu estimated that if he continued his ascetic training in his current state, it wouldn't be long before his body strength would also achieve a dominant lead among Songyang's first-years.

But even so, he was still a great distance away from being admitted into one of the Ten Greats.

Thinking of this, he took a deep breath and threw himself back into his ascetic training.

...

The day of the monthly exam.

A grim atmosphere permeated the high school campus.

But for Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, the monthly exam itself was no longer a major cause for concern.

After smoothly finishing the morning's theory exam and having lunch, Zhang Yu completed his midday training session and then went to the computer lab for the Daoist arts exam, finishing the test with his head covered in sweat.

Next came the final test of the day—the martial arts combat exam.

This time, the opponent he drew was Qian Shen.

Qian Shen's gaze was complicated as he looked at Zhang Yu.

His opponent was someone who had scored six points lower than him on last month's exam, yet whose total score in the Mana Competition was several dozen points higher.

So, while Zhang Yu might have a lower score, it also seemed unlikely. This contradiction made Zhang Yu all the more complex and unpredictable in Qian Shen's eyes, the first person to ever make him so cautious despite having a lower exam score.

Zhang Yu saw Qian Shen's cautious expression and smiled faintly.

"I'm coming."

The next moment, he shot out a palm, his entire body appearing before Qian Shen with a whoosh.

Although Qian Shen was being sufficiently cautious, he gradually fell into a disadvantage after a dozen or so exchanges.

Finally, as a blast of wind rushed toward his face, he stared at the fist stopped just before his head and said helplessly, "I lose."

But before the second round began, he stared at Zhang Yu and said with sudden seriousness, "You weren't using your full strength, were you? You didn't even use the Limitless Cloud Hand."

Qian Shen had seen Zhang Yu learn the Limitless Cloud Hand on the day of the competition, so he naturally knew that Zhang Yu had gained the right to use the technique.

Moreover, in the martial arts classes over the past two weeks, Zhang Yu had used the Limitless Cloud Hand every time he fought Bai Zhenzhen.

Qian Shen said sternly, "Use the Limitless Cloud Hand. Fight me with your full strength."

"We're in the middle of a monthly exam, not a practice session in class."

"I don't want a single point I earn on this exam to be fraudulent."

"Use your full strength. Don't insult my score."

Zhang Yu took a deep breath. "I understand."

He sighed inwardly. *Is this rare moment of joy during my ascetic training already over?*

With another whoosh, Zhang Yu charged toward Qian Shen again, then violently thrust a palm infused with Formless Cloud-Astral Qi.

Having already seen the power of the Limitless Cloud Hand in their combat classes, Qian Shen naturally chose not to meet it head-on.

As he dodged to the side, he threw a vicious kick toward Zhang Yu's lower body.

But Zhang Yu's other palm, wreathed in layers of cloud-like energy, blocked the incoming kick.

When Qian Shen's kick landed on the cloud energy, it felt as if he had struck a light, insubstantial mist, but in the next instant, a ferocious force rebounded from it, blasting him out of the designated area.

The second round was over.

The third round began.

After that last exchange, Qian Shen really wanted to take back what he had just said.

He may have looked cool making that demand, but getting a low score on the combat exam was a truly miserable feeling.

Not far away, Lei Jun withdrew his gaze from Zhang Yu and Qian Shen and looked over at Bai Zhenzhen and He Dayou.

Watching He Dayou being taken down by Bai Zhenzhen in just a few moves, Lei Jun thought to himself, *The skill gap is too wide. For the next monthly exam, I just won't let Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen draw lots. I'll just schedule them to fight each other for the combat exam.*

…

The following morning held the Dao heart and mana exams.

He stepped into the Spirit Realm once again.

This time, Zhang Yu found himself strapped to a hospital bed, with a syringe to his left and a button to his right.

A female voice came over the broadcast: For good boosters, choose Purple Cloud. Purple Cloud Supplements for all your needs, for all ages. One dose cures all ills.

We thank the Purple Cloud Company for their joint sponsorship of this Mana Competition…

Listening to the rules explained over the broadcast, Zhang Yu finally understood that the theme of this Dao heart exam was—dependence.

Every press of the button would inject his body with a neuromodulator powder, also known as 'Bliss Powder'.

Once the exam began, the neuromodulator powder would be automatically administered to the students, making them feel euphoric, content, and tranquil.

The requirement for the students was to press the button as little as possible. The less they injected, the higher their rank, and thus the higher their score.

Zhang Yu cursed in his heart, *What a fucking bunch of devils incarnate.*

Running this kind of advertisement during a monthly exam.

The person who designs these Dao heart exams is getting more and more outrageous. One day, I'm going to crush them…

…

Compared to the stimulating Dao heart exam, the mana and physical education exams were rather unremarkable.

But when the physical education exam ended, Wang Hai once again applied to the school administration to let Zhang Yu join the competition team, only to be rejected yet again.

The official reason given was that Zhang Yu's physical education scores had declined and he still needed time to mature.

Privately, however, Wang Hai was told that it had something to do with the student council.

After thinking it over, Wang Hai sent a message to Zhang Yu the next day.

"Do you have some kind of grudge with the student council? It seems like they don't want you on the P.E. competition team."

…

Inside the unfinished building.

Clad in his weighted suit, Zhang Yu stood perfectly still, sensing the changes within his sea of consciousness.

He had finally reached a level 3 Dao heart.

His control over his physical body had become more refined, the mana in his dantian was more lively and controllable, and even every iota of vital energy and every shred of strength throughout his body felt increasingly coordinated and comfortable under his perception.

Even the mental fatigue from these many long days seemed to vanish in that instant, replaced by an incredible sense of well-being.

Dao heart 3 (0%)

This was the feeling Zhang Yu had after reaching Dao heart level 3—a stronger command over himself and his own power.

I've finally reached Dao heart level 3.

Now I can cultivate the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, right?

Zhang Yu had long been looking forward to this expert-level cultivation technique passed down from a Golden Core True Monarch.

Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art! Let me see what your limits are!

The very instant his Dao heart reached level 3, he eagerly switched his Feathered Tome's specialization to this cultivation technique.

The Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art was a martial arts heart art that encompassed a total of nine martial disciplines: fist, palm, leg, finger, claw, saber, sword, spear, and staff.

These nine disciplines had methods for combat and methods for body tempering, but none of that was the crucial part.

The true essence of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art lay in comprehending the artistic intent contained within these nine disciplines, and using it to forge one's own martial will.

Just like that time at the art exhibition, Zhang Yu once again began to practice the nine disciplines of fist, palm, leg, finger, claw, saber, sword, spear, and staff from beginning to end.

With each of Zhang Yu's movements, the surrounding air vibrated with force, and the concrete floor boomed under his feet.

Having raised the basic-level Freehand Combat to level 5, cultivated both the basic-level Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms and the advanced-level Limitless Cloud Hand to level 10, and sparred with Bai Zhenzhen over a hundred times, Zhang Yu's perspective was now completely different from before.

The more he trained in it, the more he could feel that it contained both methods of combat and methods of body tempering. Its scope was incredibly comprehensive; once mastered, it could be used to both temper the body and fight enemies.

...It just takes a long time.

Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art 1 (0/10)

It took Zhang Yu nearly fourteen minutes to practice all nine sets of martial arts once while wearing the weighted suit.

Realizing this, Zhang Yu felt a faint ache in his soul.

He knew this cultivation technique was going to be another long grind.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 53: Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering

The moment Zhang Yu completed a cycle of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, countless images of his own cultivation flashed through his mind—scenes of him comprehending these nine disciplines time and again, perceiving their intent and contemplating their unique nature.

The next moment, nine distinct intents surfaced in his mind simultaneously.

The killing intent to shatter an army of ten thousand, the fighting spirit to face death nine times without regret, the valor to advance unflinchingly… These intents, as if forged and tempered a thousand times in his mind, finally converged into a single human silhouette.

This was the martial will that had condensed in his sea of consciousness after he mastered the first level of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art.

Its silhouette resembled Zhang Yu, but its face was a blur, radiating an aura of defiance against heaven and earth.

"The Martial Ascension Will…"

With a flicker of Zhang Yu's thought, the Martial Ascension Will in his sea of consciousness began to move, performing the nine disciplines of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art move by move under his mental guidance.

As the Martial Ascension Will activated, an aura he had never possessed before began to surge from his body.

In that instant, Zhang Yu felt like a war god, one who defied heaven and earth, poised to annihilate everything in his path with sheer, brutal force.

Bloodshot veins surfaced in his eyes, while the blood and mana throughout his body began to quicken slightly.

Zhang Yu could feel his physical state gradually adjusting, becoming more and more suited for combat.

He exhaled, temporarily halting the circulation of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art.

Is this Martial Ascension Will always so savage? The mindset required to match it must be that of a battle maniac, right?

That True Monarch Xinghou… an old geezer kicked out of a major sect, actually created this kind of martial heart art?

Damn it… he couldn't have been kicked out for assaulting his superior, could he?

The feeling it gave Zhang Yu was strange, like discovering that a sleazy, middle-aged man who got fired from his company was secretly a battle-crazed fanatic.

Logically, that shouldn't be the case.

After all, when it came to fighting in Kunxu, killing a bystander meant paying compensation, and destroying a building meant paying even more; the greater the destruction, the higher the cost.

So, what about fighting in the unclaimed wilds? As far as Zhang Yu could remember, he didn't know of a single plot of land that hadn't been bought up by some corporation; at the very least, there were none around Songyang City.

If an expert wanted to fight frequently, they would have to spend money to prevent the authorities from showing up when they won, and spend even more money to make them arrive faster when they lost. Healing from injuries cost money, and staying uninjured meant paying for insurance just in case. And if you insured yourself, didn't that mean your various magical treasures and Arcane Frames also needed annual insurance plans?

The better you are at fighting, the more you spend; the more you spend, the poorer you become; and the poorer you are, the less you can afford to fight.

Therefore, the better you can fight, the less you can fight.

Maybe True Monarch Xinghou was kicked out precisely because the old geezer was too belligerent.

Zhang Yu remarked with a sigh, "The path of the Immortal Dao isn't one you can walk just by fighting and killing."

But further thought was pointless for now. Zhang Yu resumed his practice, intending to advance the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art to the second level.

Cultivating the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art required the gradual synchronization of his physical body and his internal Martial Ascension Will, performing the nine disciplines in unison.

Merely circulating the technique within the sea of consciousness using the martial will would only activate the heart art's effects.

And as the Martial Ascension Will activated once more, Zhang Yu gained a deeper understanding of the heart art's effects.

One could only operate a single heart art at any given time.

Thus, at this moment, the effects of the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra were absent, leaving only those of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art.

Without the effects of the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra, his capacity for enduring hardship should have been drastically reduced.

Yet, under the influence of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, he felt his fighting spirit surge to the heavens; he feared nothing, and nothing could make him shrink back.

Be it a powerful enemy or any daunting hardship, he would shatter it with a single damn punch!

The strain of cultivation was even suppressed by this fighting spirit, making Zhang Yu feel just as motivated as he would have been with the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra.

"So intense! This is exhilarating."

Feeling the blood throughout his body quicken, Zhang Yu realized the Martial Ascension Will not only provided a buff in combat but also enhanced his cultivation.

In the blink of an eye, more than two hours had passed. Steam rose from Zhang Yu's body as his blood churned, having already practiced the martial art a full ten times.

Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art Level 1 (0/10) → Level 2 (0/20)

In an instant, Zhang Yu felt as though his mind had traversed countless days and nights, becoming deeply immersed in the intent of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art through repeated practice.

Simultaneously, the figure formed by the Martial Ascension Will in his sea of consciousness grew clearer, its face faintly beginning to take on Zhang Yu's features.

The night passed in a flash. Training intermittently, Zhang Yu finally advanced the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art to Level 3 (12/30).

He then received a call from Wang Hai, informing him that, due to the student council's influence, he had not been selected for the school's athletics team.

A deliberate show of force? Zhang Yu wondered. *If I refuse to sign the contract again, are they going to use even more tactics against me?*

Not long after, he received another invitation from the student council to discuss the contract.

...

Songyang High School.

Noon.

The Student Council Office.

With a cold snort, the temperature in the office seemed to plummet, making even the powerfully built Lan Ling shiver involuntarily.

But in the next moment, the temperature returned to normal, as if the chill had been nothing but an illusion.

Lan Ling knew, however, that it was no illusion; Zhou Chechen's mood had simply soured.

Just a few minutes earlier, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen had both, one after the other, rejected the student council's contract offer, their reason being that the three great academies could offer a better price.

Lan Ling slowly set down his dumbbell and looked at the vice president, Zhou Chechen, who was on the sofa.

"President, what are your orders?"

Zhou Chechen murmured, "I've shown them enough respect, haven't I?"

"I've already given them the best terms I possibly could, no?"

"I just don't understand it. How can they refuse something that benefits them, benefits the school, a clear win-win situation?"

Lan Ling said, "Perhaps his fourth-place finish in the Mana Competition gave Zhang Yu some undue ambition, and now Bai Zhenzhen wants to raise her price as well."

Zhou Chechen sighed. "Does he really think the three great academies can sign them if we don't let them go? A higher price… Don't they even consider if they're worth it?"

"These paupers… if you're too harsh, they resent you, curse you behind your back, and don't do their work properly."

"But give them a little respect, and they'll take a mile, getting ideas above their station and making a mess of things in the end."

With that, he gave a helpless wave of his hand. "As for the specifics, do whatever you think is best."

"Just make sure I see their signed contracts within seven days."

…

In the Year One model class classroom.

Zhang Yu was actively maintaining the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra while continuing with his studies.

Ever since he began practicing the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, Zhang Yu had started to alternate between the two heart arts.

When practicing the physical techniques of this martial heart art, he would naturally maintain the state of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art.

At other times when he couldn't practice the martial technique, such as when resting or in class, he would maintain the state of the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra instead.

This process created a sort of ideological conflict within Zhang Yu, which in turn affected the efficiency of both heart arts.

One demands I fight, fight, fight, and destroy everything. The other requires me to endure silently and accumulate strength.

Switching back and forth between them… ugh.

He couldn't help but scratch his head, the mental conflict between the two heart arts reminding him of the contract choice laid before him.

I can choose my mindset, but it seems reality doesn't offer a 'fight, fight, fight' option…

Just then, his phone vibrated.

Zhang Yu saw it was a message from his mana class instructor, Teacher Yan.

"Zhang Yu, did you offend the student council? I've refunded you for the tutoring sessions. You also won't be able to participate in the Mana Competition for the time being."

"You need to find a way to patch things up with them, quickly."

Zhang Yu's gaze hardened as he read the message; he knew the student council was applying pressure again.

Suddenly, Bai Zhenzhen's voice came from beside him.

"Old Yan kicked me off the team. Did you get kicked off the Mana Competition team too?"

Seeing Zhang Yu nod, Bai Zhenzhen fumed, "Those devils incarnate from the student council! I bet they're going to keep coming after us now."

"Can you still handle it?"

Zhang Yu nodded. "I can handle it, but for how long? When will it end?"

Bai Zhenzhen replied, "Until we're strong enough. Until we've figured out how to get into a top-tier university."

"And throughout that process, the pressure from the student council will inevitably grow."

"That's just how these rich kids are. The moment you affect their bottom line… no, even if you just cause them to make a little less money, they'll instantly drop their phony masks and come after you with everything they've got."

Bai Zhenzhen clutched her head, her face grim. "We'll be constantly suppressed and isolated."

"They'll probably use combat practice classes as an excuse for teachers or upperclassmen to beat us up, use the Dao heart lessons to torture us in the Spirit Realm, bribe teachers to give us low grades, and erase any benefits or opportunities we might have…"

"And all their little lackeys will crawl out of the woodwork to pull dirty tricks—glue on our chairs, cold water over the bathroom stalls, stealing our homework—all that sort of petty nonsense."

"Basically, they'll use every trick in the book to screw with us."

Her eyes seemed to foresee an incredibly dark high school experience ahead of them.

"We'll gradually become outcasts, hated by everyone, and fall to the bottom of the social food chain. We'll suffer constant humiliation from the rich kids until we're the kind of people no one even wants to be seen eating with."

She suddenly raked her fingers through her hair. "Ugh, damn it all."

"Things won't get any better; in fact, they'll get worse and worse, right up until we graduate and get into a university… or until we get on our knees and sign their slave contract."

Zhang Yu rolled his eyes. "How do you know so much about this?"

Bai Zhenzhen said, "A senior told me a long time ago, right before she killed herself."

With that, she turned to look at Zhang Yu. "If you can't take it, you should sign now, while you can still get a good price for yourself."

Zhang Yu pursed his lips. "I'm not signing."

"I'm getting into the Ten Greats. They can kill me, but I won't sign."

Seeing his determined expression, Bai Zhenzhen smiled. "Then we'll get through this together."

"But don't worry, sitting back and waiting for disaster isn't my style."

"I'm close to finding the leader of that 'Pauper's Alliance.' I'll definitely get a method from him to get into a university without signing a contract."

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 54: Zhang Yu's Choice

6:00 AM.

The sky was still a dim gray when Zhao Tianxing arrived near the school.

This was far earlier than his usual commute, for the simple reason that the monthly exam scores were being released this morning.

Since last night, Zhao Tianxing had been unable to quiet his mind enough to study or cultivate. Today, he simply came to school early, wanting to see his score the moment it was posted.

"This Daoist arts exam was a little tough; I wonder if I'll even manage to score a 60."

"Ugh, that Dao heart exam was brutal, too. I had to use the Bliss Powder twenty-three times. I have no idea what my score will be..."

Unlike students such as Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, who were indifferent to their scores after a test, Zhao Tianxing was the type to go around comparing answers with everyone.

If someone else's answer matched his, he would feel a secret thrill of satisfaction; if their answers differed, he would often ask a few more people.

And for an exam like the Dao heart test this time, he would ask others how many times they had pressed the button, how many times they had administered the Bliss Powder.

If he heard someone had pressed it more times than he had, he would offer a few words of comfort, but inwardly, he would be delighted.

If he heard they had pressed it fewer times, his face would remain a mask of indifference, but his heart would sink, and a pang of anguish would strike him.

At this moment, still over two hundred meters away, he could see a crowd of students already gathered at the school gate, all of them clearly just like him, having arrived early to wait for the results.

There were students who felt they had improved and were eager to see their new rankings.

There were students who felt their grades slipping and worried they would be moved to a different class.

And, of course, there were pure score junkies who just wanted to know exactly how they had performed this time.

Zhao Tianxing watched Qian Shen standing at the very front, waiting while practicing his cultivation, knowing that he was always the first to arrive whenever the monthly exam results were posted.

Glancing at the still-closed school gates, Zhao Tianxing found a corner to sit down in, flipped open a book, and began to review.

After a few minutes, with a soft creak, the gates of Songyang High School swung open.

The students waiting at the entrance immediately pressed forward, surging into the campus like a school of sardines caught in a net.

When Zhao Tianxing reached the classroom, he saw that Qian Shen was already standing at the door.

Qian Shen was currently staring at the results sheet posted on the door, and a wave of relief suddenly washed over him.

Although his total score had dropped significantly this time due to a lower combat exam score, at least…

Phew… at least Zhang Yu's score matches his strength. The monthly exam evaluation system at Songyang High School is, for the moment, bug-free.

Meanwhile, Zhao Tianxing glanced at the students around him, thinking to himself, *Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen aren't here yet?*

Well, it makes sense. With their level of strength, they already knew the outcome without looking.

A wave of envy washed over Zhao Tianxing at the thought. It would be nice to one day have that kind of confidence and composure, to not be in a rush to see his results.

Zhao Tianxing quickly moved closer and began scanning the list from top to bottom for his name.

First Place, Zhang Yu, 653 points.

Second Place, Bai Zhenzhen, 652 points.

Seeing their rankings, Zhao Tianxing sighed to himself, *Aside from Daoist arts, their scores in every other subject must have been near perfect.*

Of course, Zhao Tianxing knew this didn't mean they could relax. As time went on, the difficulty and standards of the monthly exams would only increase, requiring constant progress just to maintain their scores.

Many second and third-year students saw their grades decline precisely because their own progress couldn't keep pace with the rising standards of the assessment.

But Zhao Tianxing felt that with the talent Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen possessed, maintaining their scores shouldn't be much of a problem.

At this thought, envy stirred in his heart once more.

If only I had their talent.

Continuing down the list, he finally found his own name, and his heart leaped with joy.

Eighth Place, Zhao Tianxing, 594 points.

A short while later, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen entered the classroom, one after the other.

Zhao Tianxing noticed they both gave the rankings a cursory glance, seemingly paying them no real mind.

Watching them, Zhao Tianxing thought that Bai Zhenzhen and Zhang Yu looked incredibly cool in that moment.

In contrast, he had been consumed with anxiety since last night, only to rush here first thing in the morning to check the results.

Ugh, I'm so pathetic.

But as the day went on, Zhao Tianxing noticed that Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen seemed troubled by something.

He couldn't imagine it; one was first in their year, the other second… what could they possibly have to worry about?

Just then, a dark figure flashed past the window.

A loud crash echoed from the first floor.

Another student had snapped.

…

After school that day.

When Zhang Yu went to the school's quiet room again, intending to use his weekly privilege for free use of a spiritual root.

He saw Wei Xin swipe his student card, then look up in confusion.

"Huh? Why isn't it working? Student Zhang Yu, please wait a moment, I'll go and ask…"

Zhang Yu casually took his card back. "No need to ask. I probably just made a mistake."

Even without asking, Zhang Yu knew this was undoubtedly the student council's doing again.

Later, on his way home, Zhang Yu felt an almost comical anger as he read a message on his phone.

It was from Lei Jun, his martial arts teacher, the one who guided him in combat practice.

"Zhang Yu, the school feels your physical strength still needs tempering. The plan is to have you consolidate for a year and participate in the martial arts tournament next year."

Zhang Yu silently exhaled.

The mana competition, the athletics competition, the martial arts tournament… It was obvious the student council intended to strip him of every chance to compete, barring him from this path entirely.

Other benefits, like the free use of a spiritual root, would also be cut off one by one.

If this continued, it seemed Zhang Yu would be reduced to taking temp jobs after class again.

I'm still too weak…

While waiting for the bus, he seized the moment to practice the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, but the more he practiced, the more discordant it felt.

He was acutely aware that he lacked the mentality of fighting against all obstacles, a mindset that was fundamentally at odds with the state of mind required by this heart art.

Zhang Yu felt a fire smoldering in his heart with nowhere to vent.

Walking through the alley that led to his apartment, Zhang Yu thought, *What if I go to Li Xuelian? If she sees my current level in the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, would True Monarch Xinghou consider taking me as a disciple?*

Can I bring True Monarch Xinghou into this and create more room to negotiate?

But the thought that True Monarch Xinghou was likely just another person who wanted him to sign an indenture agreement made Zhang Yu sigh again.

He looked up at the sky, feeling as though all of Songyang City was one giant dining table, and he and Bai Zhenzhen were two dishes served on that table, waiting to be chosen by wealthy patrons.

Should I run?

Flee to another city? Work odd jobs while I cultivate and lie low for a decade or so before re-emerging?

But what about Zhen? Would she be willing to run away?

Ugh, and this stupid ritual is forcing me to get into a university. She probably wouldn't agree…

Opening the door to his apartment, Zhang Yu was taken aback and froze on the spot.

A slender girl in a White Dragon High School uniform was sitting in his chair.

Her long hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and her fair hands gently caressed the scabbard of a longsword resting on her lap.

Zhang Yu spoke with some difficulty. "S-Sis?"

This student from White Dragon High School was none other than the original Zhang Yu's sister—Zhang Pianpian.

What he hadn't expected was that she was a student at White Dragon High School, a detail completely absent from his inherited memories.

The large number '1' embroidered on her chest was especially shocking; it meant that Zhang Pianpian was ranked first in her year at White Dragon High School.

My sister managed to achieve that? How did she do it? Why did the original Zhang Yu know nothing about this?

Zhang Pianpian regarded him coldly and said in a flat voice, "Go see Zhou Chechen and sign the contract."

Zhang Yu instinctively frowned. "You're here to get me to sign?"

"I'm doing this for your own good," Zhang Pianpian said coolly. "If you keep resisting, they'll crush you."

Thinking of the ritual afflicting him, Zhang Yu replied in an equally flat tone, "Making me sign is the same as killing me."

Their gazes clashed. Seeing Zhang Yu's unyielding stance, Zhang Pianpian seemed to sense a grim resolve in his eyes, an acceptance of death.

She nodded slightly. "I didn't expect you to become like this."

"I thought you were better suited for a quiet, ordinary life."

"Since you're unwilling to sign with Songyang High School, then come with me. I'll take you to White Dragon High School."

Zhang Yu was momentarily stunned. Though a thousand questions flooded his mind, he asked the one he felt was most crucial.

"Can I still take the exam for the Ten Greats?"

Zhang Pianpian smiled. "Of course."

"The you of today finally has some of the spirit needed to strive for the Immortal Dao. Since that's the case, I'm willing to give you a chance to test for the Ten Greats."

Though this was his first time meeting his body's original sister, the Zhang Pianpian before him felt like a complete stranger, worlds apart from the person in his memories.

Is this really Zhang Yu's sister? Are they the same person?

Did money and scores change her so completely?

But Zhang Yu knew this wasn't the time to dwell on that, so he asked what he considered the second most important question.

Zhang Yu said, "Can I bring someone else with me?"

Seeing Zhang Pianpian tilt her head and look at him with curiosity, Zhang Yu continued, "Can I bring Bai Zhenzhen to White Dragon High School?"

Zhang Pianpian looked bewildered. "Why?"

Zhang Yu replied, "She's my sworn brother. I want to help her."

He thought to himself, *If I leave Zhen to face the student council alone, those bastards will be even more ruthless.*

Zhang Pianpian asked, completely lost, "Sworn brother? Is Bai Zhenzhen a relative of ours?"

At first, Zhang Yu thought she was mocking him, but seeing her genuinely serious expression, he tried to explain.

"I mean that we're exceptionally close. When I was at my poorest, during the darkest time of my life, she gave me 500 yuan and bought me a meal."

Still looking confused, Zhang Pianpian asked, "Can't you just transfer 500 back to her now?"

"No," Zhang Yu said.

"What about 5,000?"

"This isn't about the amount of money."

He felt even more unsettled. The Zhang Pianpian before him was so unlike the sister from his memories.

Seeing Zhang Yu's insistence, Zhang Pianpian mulled it over for a moment before saying, "White Dragon High School has a limited number of spots. I can bring one person at most."

Zhang Yu's heart sank.

But then Zhang Pianpian continued, "However, if you can pass an assessment."

"Both of you can be protected."

Zhang Yu asked at once, "What kind of assessment?"

"Divine Assistant, or divine ministry outsourcing, as it's also known," Zhang Pianpian said flatly. "As long as you hold a position within a divine ministry, then at least until I enter university, no one would dare to touch either of you, even if you stay at Songyang High School."

"I can be your sponsor for the assessment."

"But you must understand, if you come with me to White Dragon High School, you'll be protected until graduation."

"If you only rely on this Divine Assistant position, however, they won't be so constrained after I go to university."

"And there is only half a year left until I graduate and leave for university."

"Are you sure you want to take this risk?"

Chapter 55: The Divine Assistant Assessment

Listening to Zhang Pianpian's explanation, Zhang Yu asked another question.

"Why is it that if I take the assessment, Zhen will be safe too?"

Zhang Pianpian rested her chin on one hand and said coolly, "I can act as your sponsor and recommend you for the Divine Assistant personnel assessment."

"Once you become a Divine Assistant, you can take on an intern of your own."

Zhang Yu got it. *So a temp worker outsources to an intern, huh.*

Zhang Pianpian continued, "After you become an auxiliary member of the Eight Ministries of Righteous Gods, I'll take you to Songyang High School to have a talk with the student council and back you up."

"For the next six months or so, as long as I'm still in Songyang City and haven't left for university, they probably won't give you two any trouble."

Talk to them at Songyang High School? Back us up? What's your status? What are your scores? How much money do you have? Can you really pull that off?

As if sensing Zhang Yu's doubts and worries, Zhang Pianpian didn't elaborate, only stating calmly, "I am the current number one third-year at White Dragon High School, and I am also the strongest high school student in Songyang City."

The strongest high school student in Songyang City!

If the Zhang Yu from his past life had heard these words, he would have just thought, *Oh, not bad, pretty impressive.*

But now, hearing Zhang Pianpian's statement, he felt as though his sister was radiating a blinding light.

Anyone who had gone to high school in Songyang City knew the weight those words carried.

That title was an honor earned only after enduring countless rounds of soul-crushing, self-destructive cultivation, shedding buckets of blood and tears, and trampling over the corpses of innumerable high school students.

And so, Zhang Yu asked, "So, what does this Divine Assistant job actually entail?"

"Work?" Zhang Pianpian tilted her head. "You don't actually have to do any work. With this status, you just collect a paycheck on time every month."

Zhang Yu understood at once. *Isn't this a damn no-show job? Has such a good thing finally happened to me?*

Zhang Yu quickly asked another question, "So what's on the assessment?"

Zhang Pianpian shook her head. "The specific content of the assessment is randomly generated, so I don't know either."

"But based on my understanding of the Divine Assistant, the higher your Dao heart and the stronger your willpower, the better."

"Dao heart and willpower?" Zhang Yu mused, nodding slightly. "Is the assessment held in the Spirit Realm?"

"Correct." Zhang Pianpian stood up, saying as she walked toward the exit, "The assessment is held in the Spirit Realm."

"I'll send you the address for the assessment registration in a moment."

"If you register today, you should be able to take the assessment tomorrow."

"Remember to ask for a day off from school tomorrow."

"Also, I'll have someone send over a spiritual interface mask for you to borrow for the exam."

With that, Zhang Pianpian had reached the doorway.

"Finally, remember not to reveal our sibling relationship to anyone. If someone asks, just say that I admire your talent."

Watching Zhang Pianpian's departing figure, Zhang Yu thought for a moment before sending a message to Su Haifeng to ask for a day off.

Then, without waiting to see if it was approved, he put his phone down for the time being and began to consider what preparations he should make next.

Dao heart? Willpower? And the test is in the Spirit Realm?

Zhang Yu decided to trust what Zhang Pianpian had said, his mind turning to follow her guidance.

To improve my Dao heart and willpower, the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art is definitely the most effective.

I'll push myself to advance this cultivation technique tonight.

However, considering the importance of this matter and its bearing on his and Bai Zhenzhen's future, Zhang Yu planned to up the ante and go all out, pushing the cultivation technique even harder tonight.

He picked up his phone and contacted Wang Hai.

"Teacher Wang, I'd like to buy some drugs."

Wang Hai was overjoyed to hear this, nearly bursting into laughter.

Finally! The body tempering genius, the Golden Core disciple of my class, is finally willing to buy drugs from him!

At this moment, Wang Hai felt a deep sense of relief, as if he were seeing a failing student who had lost his way finally return to the proper path.

He thought for a moment and said, "What kind of drug do you need?"

Zhang Yu replied, "Something that will let me train all night without rest."

"The side effects and damage to my body need to be as minimal as possible."

"The quality has to be good; a higher price doesn't matter."

"I only need enough for one night, so the dose doesn't have to be large."

Zhang Yu thought that although his body's previous owner had overdosed, he had been recuperating for so long and his physical strength had greatly improved. Taking a single dose to go all out for tomorrow's assessment shouldn't be a major issue.

On the other end, as a prime purveyor of alchemical enhancers who both used and sold his own supply, Wang Hai knew his products inside and out.

Although he was a little disappointed to hear Zhang Yu only needed enough for one night, it made him all the more eager to show Zhang Yu the benefits of using them, hoping he would become a repeat customer.

"Wait a moment…"

Wang Hai immediately wracked his brain, and considering Zhang Yu's physical strength, he ultimately drew up a list that included painkillers, a focus enhancer, stimulants, and a stamina injection.

He sent the list to Zhang Yu and added, "This is all top-shelf stuff, with the minimal side effects you asked for. If you want it, I'll give you a ten percent discount."

Looking at the list, which totaled five thousand eight hundred yuan, Zhang Yu sighed internally.

Good alchemical enhancers really aren't cheap. It's a good thing I only need them for one night.

After his recent expenses on food, transportation, and extended time with the Heavenly Spiritual Root, plus the new month's fifteen-thousand-yuan loan payment, fifteen hundred in rent, and a few hundred for utilities, Zhang Yu's savings had dropped to just over forty-five thousand.

Now, with another 5,800 deducted, he would only have a little over thirty-nine thousand left.

Sigh, I'm so poor.

Zhang Yu transferred the money to Wang Hai and waited for the delivery.

With Songyang City's delivery efficiency, he would probably receive the package within the hour.

Just then, he received a message from Zhang Pianpian. She had sent him the URL for the assessment application.

"Songyang City Inspection Department, Divine Assistant Recruitment Registration…"

The Inspection Department was one of the Eight Great Divine Ministries.

Zhang Yu saw that the site also listed the recruitment requirements, job description, and compensation.

He met all of the recruitment requirements.

The job description mentioned things like patrolling, inspections, and maintaining public order—all rather vague. Zhang Yu had no idea what it actually entailed.

And the compensation…

"Required weekly work hours: 18. Salary: 1,000 yuan per month?"

An hourly wage of less than fourteen yuan.

A job like this requires an assessment? Zhang Yu was thankful he was the one getting a no-show job.

However, from his understanding of Kunxu, the prestige of a job could be judged entirely by its hourly wage.

A position that paid less than fourteen yuan an hour… could that truly shield him from the student council? The wage itself reeked of poverty and insignificance.

Fearing that Zhang Pianpian had sent him the wrong link, he couldn't help but send her a message voicing his concerns.

Zhang Pianpian's only reply was, "No matter how low the status, it still falls under the Eight Ministries of Righteous Gods. Besides, the usefulness of a position depends on the person using it."

"The monthly pay is a little low, but some hidden benefits aren't mentioned in the recruitment notice."

"For example, you can get a work-issued Talisman Tome for free after joining."

"And after becoming a Divine Assistant, you can get a discount if you study talismans."

Zhang Yu's eyes lit up at her words, a thoughtful look on his face. With these additional benefits, the job was indeed quite extraordinary.

He submitted his application on the website, writing Zhang Pianpian's name in the sponsor field.

A moment later, Zhang Yu received a notification to attend the assessment at 9:00 AM the next morning.

After finishing all of this, Zhang Yu couldn't help but feel a little emotional.

The channels, the jobs, the statuses, the information… everything Zhang Pianpian had told him today was something he had been completely oblivious to in the past.

It reminded him of the original Zhang Yu's memories—attending the high school interview almost completely ignorant, only to discover a vast chasm between himself and the city's students, not just in wealth, talent, and ability, but also in information and intelligence. He hadn't even known what he should be striving for.

Gathering his thoughts, Zhang Yu began to wait for the delivery, meditating and cultivating the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra.

Since the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art required him to practice its forms while circulating the heart art, he primarily cultivated the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra when he was in his rented room.

In the blink of an eye, more than forty minutes passed. The spiritual interface mask sent by Zhang Pianpian's people and the alchemical enhancers packaged by Wang Hai arrived one after the other.

Zhang Yu grabbed the bag of drugs and was about to head to the abandoned building to train.

But then he considered the value of the spiritual interface mask and decided to bring it with him.

He arrived at the abandoned building.

Zhang Yu took the painkillers, focus enhancer, and stimulants that Wang Hai had prepared for him one by one, then injected a syringe of the stamina solution into his arm.

A moment later, Zhang Yu felt his entire body grow hot, the vital energy and blood within him erupting like flowing magma. He felt as if his stamina was now endless, that he possessed an inexhaustible strength.

Boom!

With a punch, he began to furiously practice the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art.

It originally took him fourteen minutes to complete one set of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, but now, pushed by the drugs, Zhang Yu's hands and feet became a blur of afterimages. He finished all nine sets of martial arts in just six minutes.

Moreover, throughout the process, he felt no soreness in his muscles, nor was he even slightly out of breath.

During his cultivation, Zhang Yu had only one thought.

This is insane! Wang Hai's drugs are absolutely insane! This 5,800 yuan was well spent!

Teacher Wang! Taking drugs really is better than training naturally!

For one hour, Zhang Yu trained frantically.

After two hours, Zhang Yu was still training.

After five hours, Zhang Yu still hadn't stopped.

He trained with vigor and vitality all night without any rest, until 7:00 AM, when he was suddenly hit by a wave of exhaustion and could no longer continue.

He collapsed onto the ground, his heart pounding as if it would leap from his chest. A dull pain pulsed through his internal organs, only gradually subsiding after more than ten minutes.

"The effects have worn off."

Recalling the pain that had just coursed through him, Zhang Yu thought to himself, *That kick was too strong. My organs haven't fully healed; I definitely can't take these drugs often.*

However, the results of such a frenzied night of cultivation were substantial.

Not only had his physical strength increased from 1.33 to 1.35 and his Dao heart risen to level 3 (5%), but most crucially, his Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art had advanced to level 6 (3/60).

Now, when Zhang Yu circulated the Martial Ascension Will, he felt all fear and hesitation vanish. No matter how perilous the path ahead, he would forge through to the very end, tearing a way forward with his own two hands.

He ate breakfast, returned to his rented room, and rested until 8:50 AM.

Zhang Yu put on the spiritual interface mask, activated the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, and then connected to the assessment website.

When the time reached 9:00 AM, Zhang Yu perceived a flash of light in the darkness, and then he found himself in another world.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 56: Passing the Assessment and Heading to Songyang

"Zhang Yu!"

"Zhang Yu!"

"Zhang Yu!"

Pulled from his stupor by the repeated calls, Zhang Yu abruptly awoke to the sound of giggles filling the classroom.

Looking up at the podium, he saw the teacher glaring at him coldly.

"Get out and stand in the hall."

Zhang Yu stood up helplessly and walked out of the classroom.

Day after day of this high school life, yet he felt not a sliver of hope.

His grades worsened, his rank plummeted, and he had dropped from the model class to the very worst one. Students and teachers alike looked at him as if he were a bucket of trash.

Meanwhile, the various loans he had taken out to cultivate the Immortal Dao were piling up, suffocating him.

Finally, one day, he walked to the school's rooftop.

Just as he was about to take a step out, his cell phone rang.

Zhang Yu answered the call, and a voice on the other end said, "Hello? Hi, is this Mr. Zhang Yu? There's a new cemetery plot that just opened in the northern suburbs. For only two hundred thousand, you can enjoy our post-mortem corpse-refining service, giving you a chance to live again…"

Zhang Yu let out a dry laugh. "Your big data is really something else, isn't it? It even guessed I was preparing to jump off a building? Too bad it didn't calculate that I'm completely broke and can't afford your tomb."

The person on the other end continued, "If you're penniless, then wouldn't you want a chance to turn your life around? Our company has a 'Heaven Mending Plan.' If you're interested in learning more, I can send you the details…"

Zhang Yu hung up and continued to stare down at the abyss-like darkness below his feet.

"Turn things around…"

After a moment of silence, he ultimately opened his phone again and looked at the website the person had sent him.

A teddy bear on the screen began to speak, "Make a wish to the gods."

"Simply perform a ritual for me, and all your wishes will be granted in five minutes."

"Completely free, no requirements, and absolutely no hidden charges."

"One click, and your life will be transformed…"

Watching this, Zhang Yu felt something—a painful memory—darting through his mind, but he couldn't quite grasp it.

It was the rage of being constantly forced, endlessly tormented, of having his head held down and made to suffer.

And just before those painful memories could break free, his emotions and instincts had already reacted.

"Fuck!" Zhang Yu roared, hurling his phone away before flipping his middle finger. "Hahaha, think you can fool me?"

"Try again in your next life!"

Zhang Yu's consciousness stalled, and the next moment, he awoke in the classroom once more.

But the memories and emotions concerning the evil god were growing more intense, causing him to gradually remember something.

"I remember now. I'm taking the assessment for the Divine Assistant personnel."

"This assessment seems to be related to an evil god?"

Zhang Yu felt he now understood the key to the assessment and decided he would perform his best.

...

Sun Jia'yi was immensely proud.

Because he was not a man, but a god.

Although he was just one of the Inspection Department's 480 million minor Duty Gods, he was a god nonetheless, possessing the authority to review mortals.

Though he only reviewed the assessment for an outsourced job with an hourly wage of fourteen yuan, he had always been diligent and serious in his work.

This was a god.

A god, however humble, never dares to forget the woes of Kunxu!

At this moment, rows of lit screens appeared before Sun Jia'yi, each continuously playing the content of one assessment after another.

It was an instinct-based test of the applicants' reactions to the temptation of an evil god within an illusionary landscape in the Spirit Realm.

And for the outsourced staff members applying to the Inspection Department, whether or not they could withstand this evil god's temptation within the illusion was the key to passing the assessment.

"This candidate from Taitian City, what's the meaning of listing all his family's assets and background on his resume?"

"So what if he's worth over a hundred million? If you can't pass, you can't pass. Did he really think I would bend the rules for his family background?"

Sun Jia'yi sneered, dismissing it with contempt. Seeing the applicant hesitating in the illusion, he directly failed him.

"Weak-willed. Unqualified."

Sun Jia'yi was a proud god, and the more privileged the students he failed, the more he could feel his divine pride and enjoy the satisfaction that came from his conscientiousness.

His thoughts turned to the next candidate, one from Hong'an City.

The applicant's resume was filled with all kinds of honors from his first and second years of high school. He was the top student of his grade, a regular in competitions, with dazzling talent, outstanding ability, and infinite potential. It was highly likely he would get into a top university in the future, or even join a major sect.

But watching the applicant struggle back and forth in the illusion, taking a full ten minutes before finally managing to reject the evil god's temptation, Sun Jia'yi still mercilessly chose to fail him.

"Hmph, does he think a promising future and a shiny resume will make me show mercy? I'm not one of those commoners who only cares about scores."

"Even if he were a true prodigy, a favored son of heaven like a university student, if he lands in my hands, he doesn't pass if I say so."

"To take so long to refuse is a clear sign of a weak will. How could I possibly let you pass?"

His thoughts turned again, and this time, Zhang Yu's file and assessment content appeared before him.

"Mm, he decisively threw the phone away on the rooftop. Not bad."

"The difficulty increases next. Let's see how he fares."

The scene on the screen then shifted repeatedly as various methods of temptation by the evil god were presented to Zhang Yu one after another.

A beautiful admirer asked Zhang Yu to make a wish to the evil god with her; Zhang Yu kicked her aside and fled at top speed.

He was being hunted with no way out when the evil god offered salvation; Zhang Yu sneered, turned, and threw the evil god doll at his enemies, shouting, "Good stuff! You can wish for anything from this thing!"

When a giant ragdoll chased him, threatening him with terrifying power to form a contract, Zhang Yu ran while calling the police, and after the constables arrived, he even wanted to charge forward with them to fight the evil god.

But… Sun Jia'yi, sitting before the screen, was no longer watching his spirited performance, because someone had contacted him.

Seeing Zhang Pianpian's name pop up in the contact window, along with her title as the acting vice-captain of the Songyang City Inspection Department's patrol team, he frowned slightly.

"What is it, colleague?"

Zhang Pianpian said, "There is a candidate named Zhang Yu, I hope…"

Sun Jia'yi was about to wave his hand in refusal when he saw she had already activated a Talisman Tome and cast a talisman.

"You dare cross the Spirit Realm and cast a talisman on me, a magnificent Duty God?"

"What audacity!"

But upon seeing the specific talisman she cast, Sun Jia'yi immediately relaxed.

"A Favorability Talisman?!"

A Favorability Talisman was a type of spell that could quickly increase a god's goodwill.

Its principle of operation required no name, no information, and no account number; as long as it was activated while in contact with the target, money could be sent directly into their account with the transaction record automatically hidden.

Recognizing the effect of the Favorability Talisman, Sun Jia'yi's originally stern expression softened.

"I didn't expect a mere mortal from the lower realm like you to be so knowledgeable about talismans, to have even learned the Favorability Talisman."

And after noticing the number in his account change, a smile spread across his face as he remarked, "For a high school student to be so reverent toward the gods truly shows the firmness of his faith."

"What is it you require of me?"

Zhang Pianpian was not surprised by this.

Based on her two years of experience using the Talisman Tome and studying talismans, raising one's faith level relied on payments, learning talismans relied on payments, and hiring a righteous god for tutoring relied on payments… therefore, the art of talismans was simply the art of payment!

However, making payments to gods also required specific methods. Channels like Talisman Tome payments, private transfers, public transfers, and Favorability Talismans were worlds apart, and this was where the skill level in the art of talismans came into play.

Zhang Pianpian said, "I must trouble this great god to lower the difficulty of Zhang Yu's assessment just a little…"

Sun Jia'yi said dismissively, "Hah, a job that pays fourteen yuan an hour, how difficult can the assessment be?"

…

Inside the illusion.

Zhang Yu looked at the world before him, his gaze filled with bewilderment.

He now found himself in a white room.

In the center of the room floated a line of text: An evil god tempts you. Will you accept?

Below it floated two options: Accept and Decline.

Wait… this has to be a trick question, right?

Because the question seemed far too simple, Zhang Yu was unable to answer.

After thinking for a full ten minutes and being genuinely unable to spot the trap, Zhang Yu nervously chose "Decline."

The next moment, a notification that he had passed the assessment appeared before him.

With a bewildered expression, Zhang Yu withdrew from the Spirit Realm, still not quite understanding what had just happened.

Just then, his cell phone rang.

Zhang Yu answered the phone, and Zhang Pianpian's voice came from the other end.

"You should have passed the test by now, right?"

Zhang Yu immediately voiced the confusion in his heart.

Zhang Pianpian explained, "Oh, I sent some money to the minor Duty God on watch and had him lower the assessment difficulty a bit."

A bit?

This is a god?

Zhang Yu was shocked. "You can bribe a god with money?"

Zhang Pianpian replied, "How could that be possible."

Zhang Yu was about to breathe a sigh of relief when Zhang Pianpian continued, "Spending money only makes it *possible* to bribe a god. It really depends on how much you spend and how you spend it. That's where skill with talismans comes in."

Zhang Yu said, "But… that's a god!"

"In Kunxu, gods get things done for money. That's what 'money moves the gods' means," Zhang Pianpian said as if it were obvious. "Without money, how could the Eight Ministries of Righteous Gods operate Kunxu? How could they manage the world?"

Zhang Yu was speechless once again; he could only say that he had gained a much deeper understanding of Kunxu.

Remembering what she had said before, Zhang Yu asked, "Didn't you say this assessment tested one's Dao heart and willpower?"

Zhang Pianpian said lightly, "Yes, it does. You need a strong enough Dao heart and enough willpower to hold on until… I can find the on-duty Duty God responsible for your assessment in the Spirit Realm and then use a talisman to transfer money into his account."

She continued, "Alright, I've brought your work ID and work Talisman Tome. Let's meet at the gate of your high school."

"Now… we can go have a talk with the student council of Songyang High School."

Zhang Yu quickly dragged his exhausted body onto a bus and arrived at the school stop an hour and a half later. From a distance, he could see Zhang Pianpian standing at the intersection.

She handed Zhang Yu a black-and-white object that resembled a manual.

"This is your work Talisman Tome. You have permission to use one talisman for free each day, and you can get a discount when learning the Inspection Department's talismans through this tome..."

She then pointed to a strange symbol on the Talisman Tome and said, "This is the mark of the Inspection Department. You can show it if you run into trouble."

Zhang Yu carefully took it in his hands, thinking, *So this is a Talisman Tome. Even the cheapest one must cost close to a hundred thousand, right?*

The Talisman Tome was crucial for learning the art of talismans, which in turn affected one's Daoist art grades in high school. Zhang Yu had even heard of students mortgaging their own organs to buy one.

They actually give these out as soon as you join? The Inspection Department is really rich.

If Zhen saw this, wouldn't she get on her knees and call me 'daddy'? Beg me to let her play with it for a bit?

Chapter 57: Upperclassman

Songyang High School.

The students of first-year Class 1 filed into the training hall, preparing for today's martial combat class.

As she walked, Bai Zhenzhen wondered, *What is Yu-boy up to? I can't even reach him.*

Sick leave? What high schooler even gets sick leave?

Could he have buckled under the pressure?

Just as Bai Zhenzhen's thoughts were running wild, she suddenly noticed a large group of people standing in the training hall, in addition to the martial arts teacher, Lei Jun.

Her gaze fell upon the students behind Lei Jun and suddenly sharpened as she noticed the tallest one. *The human door plank?*

Looking at the students surrounding the 'human door plank,' Lan Ling, Bai Zhenzhen immediately recognized them as second-years.

The extra year of cultivation had made the second-years a full size larger than the first-years; their secondary sexual characteristics had all but vanished, and their exposed arms were covered in a dense pattern of pinpricks…

Every one of these marks of cultivation spoke to the power and diligence of the second-year students.

Bai Zhenzhen wasn't the only one who recognized them, of course.

Soon, students began to approach the second-years to greet them.

Zhao Tianxing was the first to bow to the martial arts teacher, Lei Jun, before turning to the second-years and bowing again, saying deferentially, "Greetings, upperclassmen!"

Zhao Tianxing, who normally weighed over three hundred pounds, looked like a corgi standing before Lan Ling.

Only after Lan Ling gave a slight nod did Zhao Tianxing cautiously retreat.

This was the dynamic in high school—the deference lowerclassmen had to show their seniors.

A full year of cultivation separated each grade—first, second, and third—which often resulted in an absolute disparity in power.

It had even led some to classify the three grades as the early, middle, and late stages of Qi Refinement, just to emphasize the distinction.

At Songyang High School, for instance, underclassmen were expected to greet their seniors proactively; if a senior was standing, a junior could not sit; in the restroom, a junior had to let a senior relieve himself first; and when using alchemical enhancers in the same room, the senior always went first…

Rules like these had long been integrated into the students' daily routines.

Of course, Songyang High School was more humane than the three elite academies. It was said that at White Dragon High School, seniors could even force their juniors to kneel and kowtow.

Fortunately, the vast differences in curriculum and teaching locations between grades, coupled with immense academic pressure, meant that juniors and seniors rarely crossed paths.

A true cause for celebration, indeed.

Now, in the training hall, every arriving student proactively bowed to greet Lan Ling and his group.

This only made one person's behavior stand out all the more.

Zhao Tianxing watched Bai Zhenzhen, who still hadn't greeted the seniors, and grew anxious on her behalf.

What's gotten into Zhen? She's going to get targeted by the upperclassmen if she keeps this up.

He could already feel several of the second-years glancing her way, and just imagining himself in her position made him feel a wave of vicarious embarrassment and tension.

Once all the first-years from Class 1 had assembled, Lei Jun addressed them.

"Today, the upperclassmen from second-year Class 1 have graciously set aside one of their periods to provide you with some combat guidance. Let's have a round of applause to welcome them!"

What? We get to be beaten up by the second-year elites?

Hearing this, the students burst into excited applause.

"Thank you, upperclassmen!"

One of the top students was already grinning, thinking gleefully, *These are students from the second-year model class. If you wanted to hire them for combat practice on the outside, wouldn't a single session cost over a thousand?*

A student eager to improve his combat scores could hardly wait, thinking, *A pointer from a second-year elite would be worth it even if I got my arm broken!*

Qian Shen's gaze was fixed on the towering, door-plank-like form of Lan Ling.

Lan Ling, ranked second overall in the second year last month, and first in the physical education competition. The ace of the second-year athletic competition team. But…

"Pointless," Qian Shen thought, turning away. *"Comparing scores across grades is meaningless. These second-years from the model class have an entire extra year of cultivation… any one of them would be invincible to a first-year. To us, it makes no difference who we face."*

He Dayou simply smiled and nodded at the second-years, which served as his greeting. As the Son of the School Director, he was, after all, acquainted with many of the top students from the upper grades.

Lei Jun looked at the eager expressions on most of the students' faces, pleased with their morale.

"Excellent. You're all full of spirit."

"Daoist arts require money—the more you spend, the more powerful you become."

"If you want to excel in the martial arts, you have to take a beating. The less you fear losing, the less you fear pain, the less you fear being utterly crushed, the faster your combat skills will improve."

"Only by being beaten down, crushed, and forcing yourself back to your feet time and time again can you truly improve your combat experience."

Seeing the students below already raising their hands impatiently, Lei Jun was about to pick someone to begin the sparring when Lan Ling leaned in and whispered something in his ear.

Lei Jun nodded, his gaze shifting to Bai Zhenzhen, who was hiding at the back of the crowd.

"Bai Zhenzhen," he called out, "you're up first. Go a round with an upperclassman and set an example for your classmates."

"Lan Ling, this is Bai Zhenzhen, the top combatant among the first-years. Give her some proper guidance."

Lan Ling slowly walked onto the floor, curling a dumbbell in his right hand, and addressed Bai Zhenzhen gently, "Junior sister, shall we have a little spar?"

Bai Zhenzhen's expression darkened. She walked forward slowly under the envious gazes of the crowd, though in her mind she was already cursing the human door plank to high heaven.

This damn creep. I knew he was up to no good. He's just using the contract as an excuse to beat up a junior, isn't he?

She guessed this wouldn't be a simple spar; he would undoubtedly use this chance to teach her a harsh lesson.

The best defense is a good offense!

The moment she stepped onto the floor, Bai Zhenzhen shot forward, aiming a kick straight at the vital point in Lan Ling's lower abdomen—his dantian.

Yet he didn't even try to dodge, simply letting her foot connect with a heavy thud.

Even though she had clearly kicked a vital point, his expression remained unchanged, and he didn't retreat a single step, as if nothing had happened at all.

Bai Zhenzhen, on the other hand, felt as if she had kicked a block of granite; the bones in her foot felt like they were about to shatter.

Is the gap between me and a second-year really this huge?

Just as she tried to retreat, an iron pincer of a hand clamped down on her ankle.

Gripping her ankle, Lan Ling smiled. "Junior sister, it seems you've underestimated me."

As the two fought, Lei Jun provided commentary for the students on the sidelines.

"A good surprise attack! Remember this—a surprise attack is a profound skill in real combat, and it's the best option for the weak to defeat the strong."

"However, Bai Zhenzhen knows far too little about Lan Ling."

"Lan Ling underwent the 'absolute' sterilization procedure long ago. Not only does he no longer possess any sexual characteristics and is unaffected by hormones, but he has also eliminated many conventional weak points…"

"Now Lan Ling has her locked down. She keeps kicking and striking, trying to break free, but Lan Ling's physical strength is above level 6, while Bai Zhenzhen's is only about 1.4, isn't it? Once you're caught, it's over…"

Midway through his commentary, a loud bang erupted from beneath Lei Jun's feet as his figure shot out like a bolt of lightning.

At the same instant, a deafening boom echoed through the air.

To the astonishment of the crowd, Lan Ling had violently flung Bai Zhenzhen through the air, sending her hurtling toward the training hall wall as a series of afterimages.

But just an instant before her head made impact, Lei Jun appeared behind her, and the two of them crashed through the wall together, flying out of the training hall with a tremendous roar.

A moment later, Lei Jun returned to the training hall with a limping Bai Zhenzhen, his expression grim as he looked at Lan Ling.

"Don't you think that was a bit much?"

Bai Zhenzhen was one of the best first-year martial combatants; if she were seriously injured, it would reflect poorly on Lei Jun's performance record.

Lan Ling offered a placid smile. "I had faith that with you here, Teacher, she would be perfectly fine."

"This was also a good opportunity to teach our junior sister a lesson about underestimating an opponent in a real fight."

With that, he turned to Bai Zhenzhen. "Junior sister, have you committed this combat lesson to memory? Shall we continue?"

Seeing his renewed invitation, fury flared in Bai Zhenzhen's eyes. A long-suppressed power stirred within her, ready to burst from its cocoon.

No, she thought frantically, *I can't reveal it. If I reveal it here, it's all over…*

Lei Jun was about to intervene but was stopped in his tracks by a single look from Lan Ling.

"Don't worry, Teacher. I'll be more measured this time."

Though Lei Jun had his suspicions before, this single moment confirmed them.

He recalled the student council's previous demand to bar Bai Zhenzhen and Zhang Yu from the martial arts competition and understood that today's events were also at their behest.

Thinking of the student council at Songyang High, he could only sigh to himself before issuing a warning.

"This is my class. Don't take it too far."

Lan Ling smiled. "Rest assured, Teacher. Student Bai Zhenzhen is a high-value asset to the school. I certainly won't let her get seriously injured."

By now, the other first-years had also sensed that something was wrong with the atmosphere, but none of them could figure out what was happening.

He Dayou's eyes shifted. As the Son of the School Director, he could already see what was going on.

They're trying to suppress Bai Zhenzhen? Is there a problem with the contract negotiations? Are they trying to lowball her?

The thought made him regret that Zhang Yu wasn't present; it would have been a fine chance to see the poor bastard squirm.

Just then, a male voice called out from the training hall's entrance.

"Hey, are you bullying my intern?"

Amid looks of shock and surprise, Zhang Yu strode in from the entrance, raising his right hand as he spoke, his fingertips flashing across a black-and-white Talisman Tome.

Detainment Talisman—activate!

In the next instant, countless points of golden light flashed into existence around Lan Ling, coalescing into giant, golden hands that shot toward him.

Lan Ling had barely begun to move when nine giant, golden hands seized him, pinning his head, shoulders, arms, legs, and torso.

"The Detainment Talisman?"

That pauper Zhang Yu… where did he get a Talisman Tome to cast the Detainment Talisman?

Feeling the nine giant hands crushing him, trying to force him to the ground inch by inch, Lan Ling grew enraged.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 58: Pressure

Roar!

With a furious roar, Lan Ling's muscles bulged. A terrifyingly immense force erupted from within him, forcibly resisting the pressure of the Detainment Talisman.

"So strong, are you?" Zhang Yu slowly walked up to Lan Ling, watching as his opponent's power surged, bit by bit breaking free of the Detainment Talisman.

Zhang Yu brandished the Talisman Tome bearing the Inspection Department's mark and said with a smile, "The Inspection Department is on official business, by divine authority. You wish to resist? To make an enemy of the gods?"

Staring at the Inspection Department's Talisman Tome, Lan Ling's eyes suddenly narrowed, a flash of disbelief in their depths.

This poor bastard joined the Inspection Department?

The next moment, he shattered the Detainment Talisman with a deafening crack but did not move rashly again. He simply stared at Zhang Yu with a scrutinizing gaze, as if seeing him for the first time.

Seeing that Lan Ling was no longer fighting, Zhang Yu shot a smug smile at Bai Zhenzhen, who was a short distance away, thinking to himself, *I must look cool as hell today.*

Bai Zhenzhen stared intently at the Talisman Tome in Zhang Yu's hand, thinking, *Where did Yu-boy get a Talisman Tome like that? ...I have to borrow it for a bit.*

Meanwhile, the crowd looked on in astonishment as Zhang Yu suddenly appeared and repelled Lan Ling with a single Detainment Talisman.

He Dayou watched the scene unfold, his expression a mixture of shock and suspicion.

How did Zhang Yu get into a divine ministry?

Zhao Tianxing's heart was filled with both nervousness and fear.

Zhang Yu actually bought a Talisman Tome? Did he take the day off to sell an organ?

But in the next moment, he shook his head violently, ashamed of his own train of thought.

Is this really the time to be thinking about that? How did Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen get into a conflict with a second-year senior? That's the real problem here.

Even so, a hint of envy still surfaced in Zhao Tianxing's eyes as he looked at Zhang Yu, and an irrepressible thought bubbled up within him.

Going head-to-head with a second-year senior like that… is actually kind of cool.

Qian Shen stared at the Talisman Tome in Zhang Yu's hand, utterly astonished.

Zhang Yu's Daoist art exam score is going to skyrocket!

Just as Zhang Yu and Lan Ling were locked in a stare-down and the atmosphere grew increasingly tense, the temperature of the entire training ground suddenly began to plummet.

A cloud of white vapor even rose from Lan Ling's body, which had been in strenuous motion just moments before, due to the sudden temperature change.

He gave Zhang Yu a cold snort, then slowly backed away, turning his head toward the main entrance.

"President."

All eyes turned in the direction he had spoken.

Accompanied by a set of footsteps, Zhou Chechen walked over slowly, frost spreading from beneath his feet.

Zhou Chechen, Vice President of the Student Council; the man who had spoken as the student representative at the start of the school year and whose name and face appeared on screen and over the broadcasts month after month for his litany of outstanding achievements.

He was the model student, the ultimate senior, and his very presence silenced the entire hall.

He Dayou was the first to react, bowing to Zhou Chechen and saying, "Greetings, senior."

This seemed to flip a switch, and nearly all the first-year students present bowed in unison, saying together, "Greetings, senior."

The second-year students, for their part, also bowed and called out, "Greetings, President."

Although he was nominally the Student Council Vice President, the third-year president was busy preparing for the college entrance exams, so all practical matters of the student council were, in fact, decided by Zhou Chechen.

In strength, academics, wealth, and authority… he was the school's uncrowned king.

Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen looked at Zhou Chechen as if they were watching a king receive the adulation of his court. They were the only two students in the entire hall who had not bowed their heads.

Zhou Chechen did not address Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen first, instead turning his gaze upon the second-year students as the frost emanating from his body grew ever denser.

"Shuang Youpeng, you ranked first in overall score and first in practical combat as a first-year. What did you think of the fight between Bai Zhenzhen and Lan Ling just now?"

From behind the group of second-year students, a second-year boy with a relatively smaller build stepped forward.

Under the crowd's watch, his hands seemed to have a mind of their own, fidgeting with his hair and picking at his ear, his eyes full of fear as he looked at Zhou Chechen.

He said very cautiously, "She was careless, arrogant, and underestimated her opponent, failing to recognize the disparity between them."

Seeing Shuang Youpeng's cowering appearance, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen felt like they were watching a dog wagging its tail and begging for scraps before Zhou Chechen.

Shuang Youpeng, once the top-ranked first-year student, now showed none of his former spirit.

Zhou Chechen nodded slightly and said, "From what I've seen, this year's strongest first-year combatant isn't as clever a fighter as you were."

Shuang Youpeng hurriedly waved his hands. "You flatter me, President. You flatter me."

Zhou Chechen then turned back to the first-year students and asked faintly, "Have you expressed your gratitude for your senior's guidance?"

The first-year students immediately bowed and said, "Thank you for your guidance, senior."

In a few short moments, Zhou Chechen had become the center of attention, holding every student captive with his every move, word, and glance.

It was only then that Zhou Chechen finally looked Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen in the eye, saying coolly, "Zhang Yu, the match between Bai Zhenzhen and Lan Ling was a normal instructional spar. Why did you attack a senior with a Detainment Talisman?"

As he spoke, he slowly raised his palm, from which streams of ice-blue mist emerged, causing the surrounding temperature to plummet once more.

Zhou Chechen continued, "As Vice President of the Songyang High School Student Council, I can tolerate neither the use of a Detainment Talisman on school grounds nor such disrespectful behavior toward a senior."

Zhang Yu's eyes shifted as he raised the Talisman Tome in his hand.

"Zhou Chechen, do you intend to attack a Divine Assistant of the Inspection Department?"

Zhou Chechen's eyelids lowered slightly, the corners of his mouth seeming to curl into a faint smile.

In his vision, the Heaven's Eye Talisman had already revealed the information hovering above Zhang Yu's head.

Songyang City Patrol Unit Outsourced Employee (Expand for details)

A mere outsourced contractor for the Patrol Unit, a position no bigger than a grain of rice, dares to run wild at Songyang High School?

Just as the frigid energy in Zhou Chechen's palm was about to erupt, a warm breeze suddenly swept in from all directions, not only dispersing the cold but also restoring the temperature to normal.

Zhang Pianpian entered the training ground through the main gate, accompanied by another young man.

"Are you trying to attack my temp?"

Zhou Chechen snapped his head around, and his gaze froze the moment he saw her face.

Zhang Pianpian? Why is she here? Is she going to back Zhang Yu?

Zhang Pianpian? Zhang Yu? Their surname is Zhang… are they related?

But Zhou Chechen recalled checking Zhang Yu's file; he didn't have any relatives this powerful.

If Zhang Yu really had such a powerful relative watching his back, dealing with him wouldn't have been so simple.

Zhou Chechen then wondered, *Or perhaps… Zhang Yu found a higher bidder and has become Zhang Pianpian's dog?*

Seeing the lingering chill in Zhou Chechen's palm, Zhang Pianpian continued walking toward the center of the room.

"Hm? Did you not hear me?"

"Or is it… you wish to make an enemy of me?"

As Zhang Pianpian spoke, she gently lifted her right index finger, and a Talisman Tome flew naturally to hover before it.

The next moment, Zhang Pianpian's fingertip traced across the Talisman Tome at high speed.

Bai Zhenzhen watched in surprise, her eyes flicking to the school uniform Zhang Pianpian wore.

White Dragon High School? What is she doing? Is she about to fight Zhou Chechen?

Zhang Yu was also startled.

She's going to attack right away? What kind of talisman is she preparing? Another Detainment Talisman?

As everyone watched with bated breath, Zhang Pianpian finished drawing the talisman, and a wave of mana pulsed from it.

Talisman of Dominance—activated!

Two lines of text suddenly materialized above Zhang Pianpian's head.

The first line read: **White Dragon High School Third-Year Monthly Exam Total Score: 699**

The students staring at this score instantly widened their eyes, falling into a state of profound shock.

A 699 on a third-year monthly exam? Qian Shen screamed internally. *That's a god! A future god of the college entrance exams!*

Before the crowd could even process that score, the second line of text began to materialize above Zhang Pianpian's head.

Bank Balance: 2

At first, it was just a 2, but a 5 quickly appeared after it.

And so it went, with another digit materializing every second.

25,000?

250,000?

2,500,000?!

By the time the number jumped to 25,000,000, the students present could feel their breathing quicken.

The students were now beginning to understand what kind of talisman Zhang Pianpian had used.

The Talisman of Dominance—a spell that called upon divine power to display one's scores and bank balance as a form of intimidation.

When the number leaped to 250,000,000, the crowd felt their own vitality begin to surge uncontrollably.

And when the number finally stopped at 2,500,000,000, combined with the 699-point score above it, everyone felt an oppressive weight slam into them, like a great mountain pressing down on their chests.

This was merely her bank balance!

The thought of the assets and the power of the Immortal Dao that this number represented stirred their hearts.

Even He Dayou couldn't help but be shocked.

Her bank balance alone is 2.5 billion? Just what is this woman's total net worth?

He couldn't help but take out his own Talisman Tome and activate a Heaven's Eye Talisman, wanting to see her background for himself.

But all he saw were three large words hovering over her head.

You Are Not Worthy

She had used a talisman to conceal her background, making it completely impossible for him to investigate.

Upon seeing those words, He Dayou's body trembled and his face went pale, as if he had been struck by lightning. It was as if he were seeing a great chasm stretching out between himself and Zhang Pianpian, one he could never hope to cross.

Zhao Tianxing stared intently at the string of digits above Zhang Pianpian's head, trying to count them again and again, but felt like he kept losing his place.

When he finally confirmed the number was 2.5 billion, he couldn't help but gasp.

So rich, she's just so incredibly rich. The pressure from a wealthy person is really intense!

In that moment, Zhao Tianxing was overwhelmed by a sense of inferiority, feeling as though he wasn't even worthy to stand in the same room with her.

Zhang Yu was equally stunned.

This is my wealthy older sister?

That's not right. I don't remember our family being wealthy at all.

In fact, you could say we were dirt poor. So… where did Zhang Pianpian get all this money?

Something's wrong… This is all wrong…

The questions that had been nagging at him since the Divine Assistant assessment now crescendoed.

How did she go from being penniless to a billionaire?

I… want to learn how, too.

Zhang Yu couldn't understand the reason, but no matter what…

Sister, why did you leave us? Mom and I are your real family!

Meanwhile, Zhou Chechen slowly dissipated the frigid energy in his palm.

His gaze swept imperceptibly over the score, the bank balance, and the words 'You Are Not Worthy' above her head several times.

Finally, he looked at Zhang Pianpian politely and said, "Senior Zhang, you've misunderstood. I was not aware that Zhang Yu was your subordinate. Had I known, why would I have made things difficult for him?"

Seeing her Talisman of Dominance had stunned the entire crowd, Zhang Pianpian nodded in satisfaction.

"Very good. I hope you remember what you've said today."

"Don't let me hear about you causing any trouble for my subordinate. Otherwise, I'll use this pocket change above my head to buy you."

"I'm sure your father would be more than happy to make the sale."

Hearing this, the corner of Zhou Chechen's eye twitched, and for a moment, he was rendered speechless.

Just as a hush fell over the hall in the wake of her words, the young man who had entered with Zhang Pianpian laughed heartily.

"Pianpian is only joking. Don't take it to heart, Junior Brother Zhou."

The speaker was none other than Songyang High School's top third-year student and the true president of the Student Council, Chu Chengxuan.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 59: The Strongest First-Year

Bang!

Zhou Chechen slammed his palm down on the office desk, killing intent surging from his eyes, so palpable it seemed real.

He bit out each word, "Zhang Pianpian, that woman treats Songyang like it's nothing!"

After being intimidated by Zhang Pianpian today, he felt as if he could already see the gloating in the eyes of the underclassmen and his peers, and sense the severe blow to his own prestige.

Zhou Chechen whipped his head around to face Chu Chengxuan, the student council president, and asked, "President, are you just going to stand by and watch that woman run wild in Songyang?"

Chu Chengxuan, while reviewing a textbook, said nonchalantly, "That woman, Zhang Pianpian… her background is a mystery, her wealth is inexplicable, and she's a lunatic. Why provoke her?"

"In a little over half a year, she'll be off to university, and the senior students from the upper echelons will deal with her then."

Seeing that the other was still engrossed in his book, Zhou Chechen understood that Chu Chengxuan was completely preoccupied with the college entrance exams, university admissions, and interviews; he had no intention of clashing with that madwoman Zhang Pianpian on his behalf.

But at his words, a cold glint flashed in Zhou Chechen's eyes. "Half a year?"

"Then I'll just wait half a year before I deal with Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen."

But for now, in Zhou Chechen's eyes, both Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen were nothing more than dead bones in a barrow, living only under Zhang Pianpian's protection. Once that half-year was up, he would strike with a vicious hand.

The one Zhou Chechen had truly set his sights on was still Zhang Pianpian.

As boundless hatred and shame filled him, a thought surfaced in his mind.

University lasts for ten years; the one-year gap between grades won't be nearly as significant as it is in high school.

Zhang Pianpian, I truly, truly hope… you last until I get into university and catch up to you.

Outside Songyang High School.

Inside a private room in a teahouse.

Zhang Pianpian surveyed the room and said, "There are no issues. We can speak freely here for the time being. There are a few things I need to go over with you."

"Sis!" Zhang Yu exclaimed, excitedly grabbing Zhang Pianpian's arm. "You're really my sister! Having a big sister is the best!"

Just then, a thud echoed.

Zhang Pianpian turned to see Bai Zhenzhen kneeling on the floor.

Bai Zhenzhen declared solemnly, "For this immense kindness today, if Sister will not cast me aside, I am willing to take you as my adoptive mother. From this day on, I am yours to command."

"Wait… she's my sister."

"It's fine, Yu-boy. I don't mind the formalities. From now on, I'll call her adoptive mother, and you can call me Mom."

As Bai Zhenzhen and Zhang Yu bickered, Zhang Pianpian said flatly, "That bank balance was fake."

Huh?!!

As the two whipped their heads around to stare, Zhang Pianpian swiped her finger again, casting another talisman, but this time, the balance that appeared over her head was only two hundred and fifty thousand.

She explained flatly, "The Talisman of Dominance I used earlier was one I modified myself. It can display a fake bank balance."

Zhang Yu was stunned. *You can modify talismans like that? To show a fake bank balance? How come I never heard of anything like this in my Daoist art class? Aren't you supposed to use them exactly as they were handed down by the Eight Ministries of Righteous Gods?*

Going from 'my sister is a billionaire' to 'my sister is pretending to be a billionaire' made Zhang Yu's heart sink.

Seeing their stunned expressions, Zhang Pianpian continued, "You need to remember, if you want to deal with the wealthy, you must understand how they think."

"The rich rely on their money, so they best understand its power. They are the easiest to motivate with money, and the easiest to intimidate with it. This is what's known as using wealth to control wealth."

"The foundation for these tactics is information. To obtain, alter, and intercept that information… you need sophisticated talismans."

"Talismans are the most powerful tool you can learn in high school. Remember this: talismans are the most useful and powerful things there are! No Daoist art or martial skill is as useful as a talisman…"

Zhang Yu looked at Zhang Pianpian, who had begun to seriously hype up talismans, and could almost see the words 'Talisman Shill' materializing above her head.

Even though the two-point-five billion had shrunk to a mere two hundred and fifty thousand, Bai Zhenzhen was still all smiles as she hugged Zhang Pianpian and asked sweetly, "Mom, what's our next move?"

Watching Bai Zhenzhen's excessively sweet display from the side, Zhang Yu felt his skin crawl, as if he were watching a thousand-year-old zombie awaken.

Zhang Pianpian said calmly, "The college entrance exams are in six months. Once they're over, I'm heading to university on the second layer of Kunxu."

"Which means I can only protect you for the next six months."

"After those six months, without my protection, the student council at Songyang High School will undoubtedly make a move against you."

"And there's one more point."

"You need to understand, the reason I can protect you right now is because they think I'm rich, just like them."

"They think I've signed you, that you won't be trying for the Ten Greats."

"The moment they find out you're aiming for the Ten Greats, they won't care about my protection anymore, and the measures they take will be a hundred times more ruthless than what you've seen."

"So…"

As she spoke, Zhang Pianpian stared directly into Bai Zhenzhen's eyes, as if trying to pierce all her innermost thoughts.

"What are your plans?"

"Wait to die? Prepare to flee Songyang City? Or risk being crushed to dust to try for the Ten Greats?"

Bai Zhenzhen met Zhang Pianpian's gaze without flinching, her expression turning serious. "I want to get into a top university of the Ten Greats."

Zhang Pianpian then turned to Zhang Yu.

Zhang Yu said, "Sis, stop keeping us in suspense. Zhen and I both have wills of steel, and we're determined to get into a top university of the Ten Greats."

"Just tell us what we need to do."

Zhang Pianpian nodded slightly, then continued, "You're too weak."

Seeing their indignant expressions, Zhang Pianpian said flatly, "If you want to get into the Ten Greats as penniless nobodies, your current strength is far from sufficient, to say nothing of breaking through the blockade set up by the wealthy."

"First, become the strongest first-years in Songyang City."

"Once the two of you have taken the top two spots in every remaining first-year competition and have become Songyang's strongest first-years, then I'll tell you the next step."

Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen were both stunned.

All the remaining first-year competitions?

Does that mean they have to surpass every first-year student, including those from the three major schools, in Dao heart, physical strength, martial arts, and Daoist arts?

Especially the Daoist art competition… that thing is practically designed to crush the poor.

But thankfully, the Daoist art competition is at the very end of the first year. The next one up is the martial arts competition, where they both had a slight advantage.

Next, Zhang Pianpian had Bai Zhenzhen sign an intern contract with the Songyang City Patrol, and after officially confirming her status as a member of the patrol, she sent the two of them on their way.

Bai Zhenzhen, however, remained behind, wringing her hands with an embarrassed look on her face.

"Um… about that…"

Zhang Pianpian asked, puzzled, "What about it?"

With a sweet smile, Bai Zhenzhen gestured with a crooked finger toward Zhang Yu, who was fiddling with his Talisman Tome.

"That Talisman Tome… do interns get one?"

Zhang Pianpian shook her head.

"The Patrol Department isn't extravagant enough to issue Talisman Tomes to interns. By the way, don't tell anyone about my relationship with Zhang Yu. Also, I've already arranged for Mom and Dad to move to a safe village, so you don't need to worry about them."

Hearing this, Zhang Yu froze for a moment before nodding.

Finally, after urging Bai Zhenzhen and Zhang Yu to hurry back to their studies and cultivation, Zhang Pianpian watched them leave from a distance, then made a phone call.

A woman's voice came from the other side of the line.

"Hello? Pianbao? Is something the matter?"

"Lend me some money."

"Aren't you saving up to buy a Heavenly Spiritual Root? Are you asking me for a loan because you've finally got enough?"

"Something came up today. I spent some money on a divine consultation, and now I can't make the interest payment on my loan for this period."

"Oh? What was so important that you needed a divine consultation?"

"I helped that guy out. I originally just thought he had a good disposition, that he could live a life beyond the ordinary, but I never intended to go this far. However…"

Zhang Pianpian's gaze swept over Zhang Yu's head.

Songyang City Patrol Outsourced Employee (Expand Details)

Songyang City Patrol Outsourced Employee | Ascetic | Athlete | Extremely Impoverished Resident of Songyang City | Debt-Slave | Card-Slave | ???

When Zhang Pianpian focused her attention on the '???', she received a single piece of feedback: Unknown potential, indefinable.

Zhang Pianpian then shifted her gaze to Bai Zhenzhen.

Songyang City Patrol Intern (Expand Details)

Songyang City Patrol Intern | Sword Freak | Fist Freak | Palm Freak | Blade Freak | Spear Freak | Booster Freak | Score Tyrant | Loan Slave | Card Slave | Proponent of Daoist arts' Uselessness | Songyang Hater | She is very poor…

Then, with a few quick swipes of her finger, she cast two consecutive spells, and a new line of text appeared above 'Songyang City Patrol Intern' over Bai Zhenzhen's head.

Unknown Spiritual Root: Hidden, Evolving Type. No current data.

As Zhang Pianpian's finger moved, motes of light flashed across the Talisman Tome floating beside her.

When the spell was complete, both the '???' above Zhang Yu's head and the 'Unknown Spiritual Root' above Bai Zhenzhen's had vanished, completely concealed from view.

Meanwhile, Zhang Pianpian continued speaking into the phone, "They're even more exceptional than I anticipated."

"Maybe… they'll be able to keep up with me."

On the other end of the line, the woman said in surprise, "Oh? I've never heard you praise anyone so highly. Now I'm even more excited to meet them."

Chapter 60: Talisman Tome

On the street.

Bai Zhenzhen kept bumping Zhang Yu with her shoulder, a fawning look on her face.

"Yu-boy, you've been playing with that for a while now."

"Let me have a turn."

"This thing is worth a hundred thousand! A hundred thousand!" Zhang Yu clutched the Talisman Tome tightly. "You're so strong, what if you accidentally break it? You could never afford to replace it."

"And wipe your drool, you're about to get it on my Talisman Tome."

Bai Zhenzhen watched with longing eyes as Zhang Yu breathed on the Talisman Tome and polished it.

"Let's trade," she said, trying to curry favor. "You let me play with the Talisman Tome, and you can play with anything of mine you want."

Seeing that Zhang Yu was still engrossed in his Talisman Tome, Bai Zhenzhen grew angry and grabbed his hand. Then, she put on a sweet smile and shook his arm.

"Brother Zhang Yu~ Please let me play with it."

Zhang Yu quickly covered his eyes, feeling as if he had just stared directly at an elder god.

"Stop it, you're grossing me out."

"Hmph! Your weakness is exposed." Bai Zhenzhen quickly snatched the Talisman Tome from his loosened grip.

Zhang Yu rolled his eyes. "Fine, you can play with it for a bit. Just give it back when we get to the station."

Bai Zhenzhen shook her head and sighed. "A man with roots is a man with weaknesses."

"Just look at Door-plank—he was completely unassailable today."

"Yu-boy, I suggest you get snipped. Erase that weakness of yours…"

Zhang Yu snorted coldly. "Do you still want to borrow my Talisman Tome?"

When they reached the station, Zhang Yu parted ways with a reluctant Bai Zhenzhen under her lingering gaze and started for home.

At this very moment, in another part of the city.

A figure answered a call from Su Haifeng.

Su Haifeng's voice came through the line, "…That's the basic situation. He has become a Divine Assistant under Zhang Pianpian's protection, so the usual methods at school are off the table for now."

"Also, he has a Talisman Tome. As a temporary worker for the Inspection Team, he gets at least one free talisman a day…"

Zhou Tianyi nodded slightly and said faintly, "I understand. I have to make my move before he becomes familiar with the Talisman Tome and its spells. He also happened to use his one free talisman for the day… so today is the best opportunity, isn't it?"

Su Haifeng urged, "If you're going to do it, do it fast. You should go find him right now."

Zhou Tianyi nodded. "I know. I'll go find Zhang Yu as soon as I'm done with what I'm doing."

Su Haifeng was perplexed. "Is there something so important it can't wait?"

Zhou Tianyi shook his head. "Some things cannot be delayed by a single second."

"Don't worry, it won't take long. It won't affect my plans for Zhang Yu."

After hanging up, Zhou Tianyi's figure blurred into motion. A gale seemed to erupt from under his feet as he shot down the street ahead.

He tightened the delivery bag on his back, and with a loud crack, the pavement beneath his feet fractured as he accelerated again.

While dealing with Zhang Yu was important, his customer had paid for guaranteed on-time delivery, so he had to finish his current order before he could go after his target.

Ever since an evil god had unlocked his potential, Zhou Tianyi had discovered a unique trait: the more urgent his pace, the faster his mana recovered, the stronger his body became, and even the cultivation speed of his leg techniques would increase.

Thus, to cultivate and earn money simultaneously, he had chosen to hide his identity and work as a delivery driver.

He still remembered his first day on the job, when the soups and drinks in his delivery bag had spilled everywhere. He was not only chewed out by the customer but was also docked several hundred in fines by the platform.

Back at the station, his manager poured him a cup of water and told him to carry it in his hand on his deliveries; as long as the water didn't spill, the food would be safe.

From that day on, the number of orders he delivered daily grew, and his rating on the platform climbed higher and higher.

Then, at some point, Zhou Tianyi began to notice that everything on the road seemed to be slowing down. He later asked his manager about it and learned it wasn't that the world was slowing down, but that he was getting faster.

If he were not hiding his true strength, he was confident he could place first in the entire grade every single month in their exams.

After completing his last delivery and seeing the payment arrive in his account, Zhou Tianyi let out a soft sigh of relief.

"Right then… time to find Zhang Yu."

A short while later, Zhou Tianyi arrived downstairs from Zhang Yu's apartment building.

According to Zhang Yu's own words, he can't cultivate in his rented room. He has to go to that abandoned building nearby to practice every day, he thought.

Then I just need to wait for him to head to the abandoned building before I strike.

…

Upon returning to his apartment.

Zhang Yu washed his face, then began to fiddle with the Talisman Tome in his hands, intending to study its functions properly.

After all, even though he had used a Detainment Talisman earlier, the entire process had been too rushed. He had been so busy with one thing after another that he hadn't had a moment to himself to properly examine the tome.

He pressed his palm against the Talisman Tome, and with a surge of mana, his fingerprint, palm print, and mana signature were successfully identified.

A golden light flashed across the tome, revealing a yellow background like a sheet of talisman paper. By simply tracing a finger across its surface, he could draw various talismans.

Then Zhang Yu gently lifted his hand, and the Talisman Tome floated up with it, hovering just before his palm.

Zhang Yu waved his hand from side to side, and the tome drifted back and forth, closely following his palm's every move.

"This follow-mode is pretty useful. I don't need to hold it, I can just focus on drawing."

He tapped the very bottom of the Talisman Tome's display and swiped upward. The talisman paper background changed, replaced by rows of data.

[Follower Name: Zhang Yu]

[Realm: Qi Refining]

[Overall Faith Level: 1]

Zhang Yu looked further down and saw the names and symbols of the Eight Great Divine Ministries, with their respective faith levels listed next to them.

Because Zhang Yu had never done anything to raise his faith level, his standing with all Eight Great Divine Ministries was still at the default Level 1 that came with the tome.

He casually tapped on the first one listed, the Department of the People, and the image on the Talisman Tome shifted, displaying a divine hall in the Spirit Realm.

Past layers of red walls and golden tiles, celestial dragons danced and phoenixes circled. A great god, shimmering with five-colored light, stood majestically in the hall, one hand forming a Daoist seal. A compassionate aura washed over him, and the god's slightly closed eyes seemed unable to bear the sight of the world's suffering.

This was the first righteous god of the Department of the People, the All-Beings Innate God.

Three options appeared on the Talisman Tome.

1. Worship God
2. Make an Offering
3. Consult

Below the "Consult" option was a shroud of gray mist, hiding further options that were presumably locked due to his insufficient faith level.

Looking at the three options, Zhang Yu wondered, *What does 'Worship God' do?*

He tapped it curiously, and a line of text appeared on the tome: The All-Beings Innate God has felt your reverence.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 61: Worshipping a God

"Huh?" Zhang Yu stared at the screen.

Is this some kind of remote, online god-worshipping?

Just then, he felt his phone vibrate.

Department of the People - All-Beings Innate God

Payment: 1000

Holy hell!

Zhang Yu was stunned; he never imagined that one tap to worship a god would cost him 1000.

But what he found even more unacceptable… was that he had never even set up a payment account for the Talisman Tome. It had just debited the money directly from his bank card?

Back at Songyang High School, when he had used the Detainment Talisman, Zhang Yu had been using the single free daily use granted to temporary members of the Investigation Team.

He tried to find a refund or customer service option, but his search turned up nothing.

Worried he might accidentally make another payment, he decided to contact Zhang Pianpian to ask about it.

After hearing Zhang Yu's story, Zhang Pianpian replied, "That's how worshipping a god works. One tap is one prayer, and it costs one thousand. A long press lets you pray continuously."

Zhang Yu said, "That's not… I get that I have to pay now, but the problem is I never set up a payment account. How can it just take money from my bank card without even asking me?"

Zhang Pianpian stated matter-of-factly, "That is the might of the gods. They can move funds from billions of accounts every second of every day."

"If they couldn't even withdraw money directly from your account, what right would they have to be called gods?"

She added a word of caution, "So, you can owe anyone money, but you must never, ever owe money to a god."

What the hell…

Hearing this, Zhang Yu was speechless for a moment before he could only mutter, "The Eight Ministries of Righteous Gods are really something else."

Zhang Pianpian said, "But you don't need to be afraid. The Eight Ministries of Righteous Gods have their own rules; they won't act recklessly."

"This time, it only charged you 1000 because you chose to worship a god yourself."

Zhang Yu sighed internally and asked, "Sis, can you just walk me through the functions of the Talisman Tome? I'm afraid I'll get charged again by accident."

Zhang Pianpian explained, "Daily worship of a deity is the most fundamental way to raise your faith level. The longer your continuous streak of worship, the greater the increase to your faith level with each prayer."

"But if you miss a single day, you have to start all over again."

"For those with a high faith level or experts in the Dao of talismans, daily worship is a mandatory practice."

Zhang Yu understood now.

So it's a daily check-in, is that it? Except the minimum cost for checking in each day is 1000.

Zhang Pianpian continued, "As for making offerings to a god, there are different methods like lighting incense, raising merit banners, and establishing memorial tablets. The more expensive the offering, the better the effect on your faith level. It can also grant miraculous effects like increasing the power of your talismans or granting special talisman privileges."

"You can tap on 'Make Offering' to take a look. It won't charge you for just looking at the options."

That instant 1000 charge had genuinely spooked Zhang Yu. Hearing her reassurance, he cautiously tapped on the option to make an offering.

He saw a price list for various items like lighting incense, hanging a merit banner, setting up a memorial tablet, and chanting scriptures, with costs ranging from the hundreds to the tens of thousands.

After reading through the descriptions for a moment, it suddenly dawned on him… these all seemed to be remote offerings, where paying money would manifest the effect in a temple in the Spirit Realm.

Don't tell me these are all virtual items!?

Zhang Yu finally understood how the Eight Ministries of Righteous Gods got their money. Every single one of these gods was practically raking in cash while lying down.

Zhang Pianpian went on to explain, "Consult a God, as the name implies, is for seeking guidance on the Dao of talismans. The costs here are very high, and your faith level is too low right now, so you don't need to spend any money here."

"The options further down, the ones shrouded in mist that you can't see, all require a higher faith level to unlock. Don't even think about them for now…"

After ending the call with Zhang Pianpian, Zhang Yu stared helplessly at the Talisman Tome, a bitter feeling welling up in his heart.

"This talisman stuff… is really too difficult."

"How much money would it cost to win first place in the Daoist art competition?"

Just as Zhang Yu was lost in thought for a moment, the ritual countdown in his mind started blaring again, reminding him not to daze off and to get back to training.

Zhang Yu had no choice but to put these thoughts aside for now. He first mixed a cup of demonic beast meat powder for himself and drank it, then headed to the abandoned building, intending to start today's practice.

In any case, the Daoist art competition was still months away; the most immediate event was the martial arts competition.

And when he thought of martial arts, Zhang Yu's confidence instantly returned.

I have level 5 Freehand Combat, level 10 Limitless Cloud Hand, and level 6 Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art. If I go all out in a combat competition, I'll have a huge advantage. The problem is…

Zhang Yu thought to himself, *I have to keep these trump cards hidden.*

Especially the level 10 Limitless Cloud Hand, which was a cultivation technique he had just obtained from the Mana Competition.

If he were to use a level 10 Limitless Cloud Hand in the martial arts competition just over a month later, he was afraid it would attract far too much attention, to the point where not even Zhang Pianpian could protect him.

In the martial arts competition, I have to hide my high-level cultivation techniques, so for now, I need to focus on improving my fundamental attributes.

Arriving at the abandoned building, Zhang Yu once again began practicing the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art.

As the martial will in his sea of consciousness erupted, he began performing the nine disciplines of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, both internally and externally.

Under the effects of the art, Zhang Yu felt his blood boil and his body surge with motivation, a will to battle heaven and earth urging him to train relentlessly.

And just as Zhang Yu was wholeheartedly immersed in his training, relentlessly practicing the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art.

In the shadows of the abandoned building's stairwell, a figure was silently observing the ascetically training Zhang Yu.

Zhou Tianyi thought to himself, *I can't give Zhang Yu any time to use his Talisman Tome.*

I have to wait until he's at his weakest, most powerless moment, and succeed with a single sneak attack…

After waiting for about two more hours.

Watching Zhang Yu's movements gradually slow down, Zhou Tianyi held his breath and began to draw upon the mana in his dantian… he was preparing to strike.

Swoosh!

The instant Zhang Yu turned his back, Zhou Tianyi shot forward like a gale, pushing his level 5 Rushing Wind Leg Technique to its absolute limit as he aimed a kick at the center of Zhang Yu's back.

Seeing that he was already within three meters of Zhang Yu and his opponent had yet to fully turn around, a glint of triumph flashed in Zhou Tianyi's eyes.

He was confident that with the power of his kick, he could knock Zhang Yu down the moment it connected.

Zhou Tianyi had already planned out the next few moves to follow up with after knocking Zhang Yu down, ensuring his opponent would be rendered completely unconscious.

In the very next instant, however, a burst of white, misty astral qi erupted from Zhang Yu's back.

Bang!

Zhou Tianyi's heart lurched as he felt his kick land as if on a wad of cotton, light and completely devoid of impact.

But a moment later, an overwhelming force rebounded violently with the white astral qi, slamming heavily into the sole of his foot.

Chapter 62: Annihilation, and a Friend

Inside the abandoned building, Zhou Tianyi, after a bitter wait of over two hours, believed he had finally found an opportunity to ambush Zhang Yu.

But his lightning-fast strike was unexpectedly thwarted by a surge of astral qi erupting from Zhang Yu's back.

Having thrown the kick, Zhou Tianyi was left standing on only one leg.

The sudden rebound from the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi threw him off balance, sending him flying backward.

"What!"

Zhang Yu has been learning the Limitless Cloud Hand for less than a month! How can he already emit astral qi from his back?

Shock flooded Zhou Tianyi's mind as he felt the immense power contained within that surge of astral qi.

But before one shock could subside, another took its place; just as he tumbled to the ground and snapped his head up.

A figure radiating a murderous aura had already closed the distance, appearing directly before his eyes.

Before, when watching Zhang Yu train from a distance, Zhou Tianyi had only thought he looked imposing.

Now, face-to-face, he truly understood what that aura was.

It was a berserk killing intent, an endless will to fight. Watching Zhang Yu charge him like a vengeful demon under the influence of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, he felt an overwhelming impulse to turn and flee.

But just as Zhou Tianyi took an instinctive step back, Zhang Yu unleashed his full power.

Facing the masked man who had tried to ambush him, Zhang Yu, under the influence of his Martial Ascension Will, had entered a complete combat state.

Fight! Fight! Fight! I will grind any and all enemies to dust!

He unleashed his level 10 Limitless Cloud Hand with everything he had.

Zhang Yu thrust out a palm, and mana surged wildly from his dantian, oscillating seven times in a single instant before transforming into a torrent of Formless Cloud-Astral Qi that poured forth.

As the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi rushed at him, Zhou Tianyi knew this was a matter of life and death; with a roar, he stomped his foot and kicked out with all his might.

Boom!

The moment the two forces collided, Zhou Tianyi felt his mana give way; the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi struck him like a freight truck, sending him flying into a concrete wall not far behind.

The impact punched a hole straight through the wall.

Zhou Tianyi collapsed to the ground amidst a pile of shattered concrete and brick.

He tried to struggle to his feet, but a wave of excruciating pain shot through him, and he had no idea how many bones and muscles were broken as he collapsed to the ground once more.

Zhang Yu slowly approached him, still immersed in the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art and radiating a vicious aura. He stared coldly at the masked Zhou Tianyi and asked, "Who are you? Why did you attack me?"

Zhou Tianyi did not answer, instead assessing his injuries as despair washed over him.

With injuries this severe, he had no idea how much money it would take to recover; it would be a catastrophic setback to his Immortal Dao cultivation, and might even destroy his path completely.

While he was lost in his thoughts, Zhang Yu grabbed his mask and tore it away.

A flicker of astonishment crossed his face when he saw who was beneath it.

"Zhou Tianyi?"

Zhou Tianyi's mind raced, and he looked at Zhang Yu, saying, "Zhang Yu, do you know why you were admitted to Songyang High School?"

Seeing Zhang Yu was listening, Zhou Tianyi continued, "It's because your physical body is highly compatible with certain wealthy individuals, so they selected you to be cultivated at the high school."

"Just like many of the other poor students at Songyang High, physical compatibility has always been a hidden criterion, right alongside academic performance."

Zhang Yu frowned, not immediately believing Zhou Tianyi, and asked, "Then why recruit them into Songyang High School? Couldn't they be trained somewhere else?"

Zhou Tianyi sneered. "What do you think Songyang High School is? It has a dark and complex side that is far beyond your imagination."

"At Songyang High, the poor can be their dogs, or they can be a bank of spare parts. Of course, they need to be trained uniformly, to undergo the same cultivation as their masters."

Zhang Yu suddenly recalled the Heavenly Demon Parasitic Art.

Could it be that a student at Songyang High is really practicing that cultivation technique?

Zhang Yu stared at Zhou Tianyi. "So, you were sent by the student council?"

"Like I said, Songyang is complicated…" Zhou Tianyi shook his head, then suddenly coughed up a large mouthful of blood.

Under the influence of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, Zhang Yu had shown his attacker almost no mercy, striking with lethal force.

Zhou Tianyi could feel how severe his injuries were. He knew if he didn't get treatment soon, not only would his Immortal Dao cultivation suffer, but his very life would be at risk.

A flicker of desperation appeared in his eyes, and Zhou Tianyi began speaking faster.

"Zhang Yu! An evil god awakened your potential and granted you some kind of power, didn't it?"

Zhang Yu's gaze sharpened, but he remained silent; he could never reveal anything about himself or the evil god ritual.

Zhou Tianyi said, "You don't have to deny it. You…"

A sickly flush crossed his face, and a spasm of pain from his internal injuries left him momentarily speechless.

"Zhang Yu… we're… on the same side…"

"Take… take me to a clinic nearby."

Seeing Zhang Yu still motionless, feeling his life slipping away, Zhou Tianyi grew more frantic and finally blurted out, "I… I also serve an evil god, and that entity… is very interested in you…"

Just then, his body temperature began to rise, and pinpricks of light, like sparks, appeared on his cheeks.

A flicker of terror crossed Zhou Tianyi's eyes, and he roared, "I didn't mean to say it, I didn't really say it! Wait, I was just using him…"

As the light showed no sign of stopping, Zhou Tianyi finally couldn't help but scream, "Idiot!"

"That idiot!"

The next moment, crimson flames erupted all over his body.

Zhang Yu's brow furrowed deeply as he watched Zhou Tianyi turn to ash in the blink of an eye.

Zhou Tianyi was working for an evil god?

But when he thought about how the Eight Ministries of Righteous Gods demanded your money, while the evil gods only demanded your life, Zhang Yu suddenly realized that the evil gods… weren't without their advantages.

After all, Kunxu was full of poor people who had nothing but their lives to give.

Come to think of it… maybe followers of evil gods aren't that rare in Kunxu.

Watching the ashes on the ground gradually disperse, he wondered, *Was that a backlash from some kind of ritual power?*

Definitely feels like the work of some idiotic ritual.

Thinking back on what just happened, Zhang Yu wondered, *Have I been making too much noise lately, enough to attract the attention of an evil god? No, Zhou Tianyi knew me long before this. Could I have been targeted a long time ago?*

His heart sank, knowing this was something he couldn't discuss with anyone.

The three great academies, the student council, the evil gods… recalling the opponents he would have to face, Zhang Yu sighed to himself.

Ultimately, I just have to get stronger.

He especially thought about his fight with Zhou Tianyi; if he hadn't been strong enough, he would have been the one defeated.

He thought back on the day's events: advancing and retreating during the illusionary landscape assessment, receiving Zhang Pianpian's open protection, and defeating Zhou Tianyi with his own martial strength…

At that moment, a realization seemed to dawn on Zhang Yu, and he suddenly broke into a smile.

Before, whenever he switched between the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra and the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, he had felt a kind of mental conflict.

But now he suddenly thought, *Fight when you should fight, retreat when you should retreat. Face different situations with different mindsets. Why was I ever conflicted over such a simple truth?*

In that instant, Zhang Yu felt his Martial Ascension Will operate more harmoniously and smoothly, and switching to the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra became effortless, without the slightest hint of sluggishness.

Time to keep training.

Whether it was enemies in the shadows or rivals from Songyang High and the three great academies, Zhang Yu needed to grow even stronger.

The night passed in a flash, and Zhang Yu's Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art reached level 6 (41/60).

Meanwhile, nside an office at Songyang High School.

Su Haifeng listened to the voice on the other end of the line, his own voice laced with surprise.

"He died from the backlash? Did he betray us?"

Listening to the response, Su Haifeng nodded repeatedly. "I will cooperate with you to process Zhou Tianyi's withdrawal."

"Rest assured, no one at the school should notice anything unusual."

"But what's the plan for Zhang Yu?"

"Honestly, between the school board, the student council, and the patrol teams… I think he's already attracting too much attention. Since our hidden asset Zhou has failed, it's too risky for any of our remaining people to make a move and risk exposure. Maybe we should leave Zhang Yu alone for now and look at the other candidates."

"After all, that Zhang Pianpian can only protect him for half a year at most…"

…

Songyang High School.

A calm, scholarly atmosphere still permeated the school grounds.

Zhang Yu took in the peaceful scene, watching the students focus on their textbooks and cultivation, and it felt as though the violent conflict on the training grounds yesterday had never even happened.

Even Zhou Tianyi's disappearance today went largely unnoticed by the class. They only heard that someone had processed his withdrawal, just like Liang Qin before him, causing almost no ripples. After all, students withdrawing was hardly a rare occurrence at Songyang High School.

It wasn't like someone jumping off a building, which might at least give the students something to talk about over a meal.

But Zhang Yu could still sense a few subtle differences.

For instance… no one was willing to come near him anymore.

The classmates who used to greet him, ask him questions, or seek his advice on cultivation… had all vanished.

It was as if an invisible wall now surrounded him, keeping everyone else away.

Of course, he knew why.

Are they so afraid of being associated with the student council's trouble that they don't even dare to speak to me?

Clatter!

Bai Zhenzhen casually set her tray down and sat opposite Zhang Yu.

Looking at Zhen, Zhang Yu sighed. At least he still had a good friend like her.

Bai Zhenzhen scarfed down her food while looking at Zhang Yu.

"Yu-boy, let me borrow the Talisman Tome for a few days."

Zhang Yu retracted his previous thought. *I don't have friends who ask to borrow something worth a hundred thousand the moment they sit down.*

Clank.

Qian Shen also placed his tray on the table, sitting down beside Zhang Yu.

Zhang Yu smiled. Old Qian might have a lower score than him, be a bit prejudiced, and look down on lower-scoring students, but it seemed he was a reliable friend nonetheless.

Qian Shen shoveled a few mouthfuls of food into his mouth, then suddenly asked, "Um… that Zhang Pianpian who scored a 699 yesterday, do you know her well?"

"Could you introduce me? I want to add her as a friend…"

Zhang Yu shot Qian Shen a glare.

He retracted his previous thought.

This guy!

I treat you like a brother, and you're trying to make a move on my sister?

Doesn't he see there's no room for him on that golden thigh?

But then Zhang Yu had another thought. He remembered that Qian Shen was also without any backing, and saw the look of pure adoration in his eyes.

Zhang Yu understood. *So he's just a superfan who wants to be on her friends list?*

Zhang Yu said, "Adding her as a friend shouldn't be a problem."

"But a spot on her friends list costs 3,000. You can just pay me."

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 63: Changes

Songyang High School.

Inside the cafeteria during lunchtime.

Zhao Tianxing held his meal tray, somewhat hesitant.

The campus now seemed tranquil, as if nothing had changed.

But the conflict on the training grounds yesterday had already spread throughout the campus.

Nearly every student knew that Zhang Yu of Year One, Class 1, had sided with White Dragon High School, clashing with student council vice president Zhou Chechen and a group of second-year seniors.

Based on Zhao Tianxing's observations of the various student cliques, the general consensus was simple.

The Songyang loyalists' take was: "What is he, if not a traitor to our school? A turncoat to our class? Siding with White Dragon for personal gain makes him a Songyang defector! He should be expelled!"

The jealous students wondered: "First Li Xuelian, now Zhang Pianpian. How does Zhang Yu keep attracting these rich girls? We strongly suspect his surgery wasn't thorough; the school needs to investigate him."

Anger, jealousy, and a hidden undercurrent of envy coalesced into pure, undisguised malice.

Most students, afraid of trouble, didn't dare get anywhere near Zhang Yu, fearing they'd be targeted by the student council and the Songyang loyalists.

Zhao Tianxing was no different; he was terrified that getting too close to Zhang Yu would put a target on his back.

After all, bullying was not unheard of at Songyang High School.

Zhao Tianxing had heard a story about Shuang Youpeng from the previous year, who had taken first place in the monthly exams as a first-year and was considered a rising star.

But upon entering his second year, his grades started falling behind those of the wealthy students, and that was when the torment began.

They forbade him from doing homework, from using alchemical enhancers, from training, and from pulling all-nighters to study.

They even forced him to eat fried chicken, french fries, beer, and desserts every day, making him watch as his stomach bloated, fat accumulated, and the hard-earned muscle he had trained so diligently wasted away.

They forced him to watch videos, read novels, and play games every day, to see his grades plummet point by point, and to feel his very Dao heart writhe in agony.

Only when he finally broke and begged for mercy did Zhou Chechen let him go.

Just imagining the ordeal made it hard for Zhao Tianxing to breathe.

So when Zhang Yu invited him to eat today, he had panicked and claimed he had something to do, saying he would go to the cafeteria later.

Weighed down by hesitation, Zhao Tianxing got his food and, holding his tray, instinctively averted his eyes when he saw Zhang Yu looking his way again.

That single act of avoidance made Zhao Tianxing's heart sink.

"Sigh, I guess Zhang Yu and I aren't friends anymore."

He wandered aimlessly through the cafeteria for a few steps, tray in hand, but couldn't resist looking back toward Zhang Yu's table.

When he saw Bai Zhenzhen and Qian Shen sit down with Zhang Yu, a flicker of envy appeared in his eyes.

"Bai Zhenzhen, Qian Shen… how can they be so bold? Aren't they scared at all?"

"If only I could be like them and just do what I want."

Although he always overthought things, Zhao Tianxing hated this about himself; he wished he could stop worrying so much about what others thought, but he just couldn't.

Just then, Zhao Tianxing subconsciously tightened his grip on his tray, wanting to walk over to Zhang Yu's table, but he felt the eyes of the students around him, both consciously and unconsciously, fixed on him, as if sitting next to Zhang Yu would make him an outcast to the entire school.

Of course, he was just overthinking; with so many people in the cafeteria, almost no one was paying him any special attention.

Watching Zhang Yu, Qian Shen, and Bai Zhenzhen chat cheerfully, Zhao Tianxing felt an unconscious yearning in his heart.

After returning home yesterday, he couldn't stop replaying the image of Zhang Yu standing his ground against Zhou Chechen, not yielding an inch.

He envied Zhang Yu for being able to do that, and desperately wished he could face any pressure with the same effortless composure.

Just as Zhao Tianxing was hesitating, stuck in his indecision, he suddenly saw Zhang Yu wave him over.

"Old Zhao! Over here!"

Zhao Tianxing froze for a second. *Does Zhang Yu think I just couldn't find him?*

He gritted his teeth and strode quickly over to Zhang Yu's side, taking a seat.

In that moment, he felt like everyone in the cafeteria must be staring at him, and all he wanted was to sit down as fast as possible so Zhang Yu would stop calling out.

This time, he wasn't imagining it; many people were indeed watching Zhang Yu, Bai Zhenzhen, Qian Shen, and him.

But in that instant, Zhao Tianxing also felt cool, perhaps as cool in others' eyes as Zhang Yu had been yesterday.

He was wrong; to most students, Zhao Tianxing now looked like a clown, equally branded as an untouchable.

Just as Zhao Tianxing sat down, Zhang Yu received a message back from Zhang Pianpian.

Zhang Yu's message to Zhang Pianpian had read: "Sis, I have a classmate who's really dedicated to his studies and wants to add you as a friend."

Zhang Pianpian: "What's his score?"

Zhang Yu: "His highest was over six hundred and twenty."

Zhang Pianpian: "Too low. Not happening."

Zhang Yu: "Huh?"

My sister is seriously discriminatory about scores, Zhang Yu thought.

He suddenly remembered the phone calls Zhang Pianpian used to make to him. Back then, with a score below 600, he must have seemed like walking trash in her eyes… no wonder she was so blunt.

Then again, considering the environment at White Dragon High School, Zhang Yu felt that… well, it was perfectly reasonable for the top-ranked student there to act this way.

Looking up at Qian Shen's expectant face, Zhang Yu said apologetically, "I… she said your score of over 620 is too low, so she won't add you."

Qian Shen looked stunned for a moment, then his face flushed red as he reminded Zhang Yu not to forget the last digit.

"My highest was 626!"

But after saying this, Qian Shen's head dropped, his expression crestfallen.

Zhang Yu felt as though a thousand thoughts had crossed Qian Shen's mind in that instant, before he finally nodded and said, "My score really is too low."

Then Qian Shen looked up again, his face full of admiration.

"As expected of someone with a 699. Even her way of choosing friends has so much class."

"Please tell her I'll study harder, raise my score, and earn the right to be her friend."

"Also, even though I'm at Songyang High School, I've always admired White Dragon High. I even tried to test in before, but I just missed the cutoff for their model class…"

Zhang Yu got it. Qian Shen was a White Dragon wannabe, through and through. The damn air at White Dragon High must smell sweeter to him or something.

With a look of disgust, he relayed the message to Zhang Pianpian.

Zhang Pianpian: "In the future, don't bother relaying messages from peole scoring 620-something. Their grades are too low. They can't keep up with us."

Looking at Qian Shen's newly determined expression, Zhang Yu thought for a moment and decided he couldn't bring himself to repeat her words.

...

During the afternoon class.

The literature teacher was lecturing at the front of the room.

Bai Zhenzhen was at her desk, diligently practicing her mana control.

Just then, her phone buzzed softly. Picking it up, she saw it was a message from Mo Tianyi.

Mo Tianyi: "Bai Zhenzhen, have you and Zhang Yu thrown in your lot with Zhang Pianpian from White Dragon High?"

Zhen froze for a second. She understood immediately but was unsure how to respond.

Zhang Pianpian, the top third-year at White Dragon High, was the epitome of a wealthy student in the eyes of Mo Tianyi and his circle of poor students.

From their perspective, Zhang Pianpian taking Bai Zhenzhen and Zhang Yu under her wing... could only mean she had forcibly poached them from Songyang High School.

What other reason could there be? Bai Zhenzhen couldn't possibly tell Mo Tianyi that Zhang Pianpian simply admired her and Zhang Yu's talent and wanted to support their bid to enter the Ten Greats.

As for Zhang Yu and Zhang Pianpian's sibling relationship, she had promised to keep it a secret. She wasn't a gossip like Zhou Tianyi, so that was out of the question.

But then, it dawned on her. Why explain at all?

If she explained too much, would she have to tell them they hadn't signed anything? Would she have to reveal that she and Zhang Yu planned to aim for the Ten Greats under Zhang Pianpian's protection?

What if Mo Tianyi and their leader then wanted Zhang Pianpian's patronage as well… what would she do?

Or worse, what if Mo Tianyi's group let it slip, and the wealthy students found out? That would just create unnecessary complications.

It was a good thing that everyone currently assumed they had been recruited by the wealthy Zhang Pianpian and would no longer aim for the Ten Greats.

If they really made it into the Ten Greats, she could repay the tens of thousands Mo Tianyi and the others had invested in them, and maybe even help them reach the second layer of Kunxu.

Ultimately, for Yu-boy and me, just as for Mo Tianyi, getting into the Ten Greats is all that matters.

Therefore, any choice that increases our chances of success is the optimal one.

With that decided, Bai Zhenzhen replied immediately.

"Yes. I'm sorry, we couldn't handle the pressure anymore. We're not aiming for the Ten Greats. We've already signed with Zhang Pianpian."

A moment later, Mo Tianyi replied, "Sigh, I don't blame you. I heard about the pressure Songyang High put on you. It's understandable that you couldn't take it. But please, I hope you and Zhang Yu will keep our business a secret and not tell anyone."

"Don't worry. Even though we've given up, we're still rooting for you. You're the last hope for us poor students. Go for it!"

…

In the Spirit Realm.

Mo Tianyi read Bai Zhenzhen's sincere reply and breathed a small sigh of relief, though a flicker of regret crossed his mind.

Both Zhang Yu's fourth-place finish in the Mana Competition and Bai Zhenzhen's previously demonstrated willpower had led him to believe the two of them might actually have a chance at the Ten Greats.

But now, it seemed…

"In the end, they couldn't handle the pressure."

He then felt a pang of regret for the money sent to Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, all of it now wasted.

"If I'd known, I never would have sent them the money. It would have been better to save it for our leader."

He sighed internally.

"In the end, the one who can get into the Ten Greats, the one who can lead us in shattering this ceiling above our heads, has to be our leader…"_

Just then, a line of text flashed before his eyes: "Work has been idle for more than one minute. Please return to your station immediately."

Mo Tianyi quickly shook himself from his thoughts, reopened his connection to the Spirit Realm, and resumed his work.

Unlike other schools, soul cultivator students at Mount Mang High School were required to participate in work-study programs from their first year.

Soon, dialogue boxes began popping up in front of Mo Tianyi. Today, he was working as a customer service representative for a tutoring agency.

Customer: "My son already had the sterilization procedure, but his high school application was rejected. Now the girls' schools and soul cultivator programs are also rejecting him for being 'physically incomplete.' What can I do?"

Mo Tianyi replied: "Girls' schools and soul cultivator programs have lower entry barriers, so they're always highly sought after. Physical 'incompleteness' is an easy reason for disqualification. However, there is a possible solution. You could have your son undergo a sterilization reversal surgery and then re-interview."

Mo Tianyi: "If that fails, he can repeat the year and undergo the sterilization procedure again. A two-time sterilization is a major bonus on a resume. It demonstrates a resolute Dao heart, and he would almost certainly be admitted next year."

Mo Tianyi: "We have partner hospitals we can recommend…"

Beside Mo Tianyi, a dozen identical copies of himself were simultaneously handling different customer dialogue boxes.

These copies of Mo Tianyi existed within the Spirit Realm, confined to a ten-square-meter room containing nothing but themselves and the dialogue boxes.

After eighteen consecutive hours of work, he was finally granted a five-minute break.

Looking at the wages he had earned, Mo Tianyi immediately transferred the money to his leader.

Our leader really needs the money right now.

The thought that his earnings for the day would give his leader a slightly better chance of getting into the Ten Greats filled Mo Tianyi's heart with satisfaction and hope.

You have to succeed, leader. You're the only poor student in all of Songyang City with a chance of getting into the Ten Greats.

You're our only chance to escape this life…

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 64: Martial Arts Tutoring

"Mo Tianyi contacted you?"

In the school hallway, Zhang Yu listened to Bai Zhenzhen's explanation and finally nodded slightly.

"You're right. There's no need to tell them the truth right now."

Bai Zhenzhen continued, "Besides, there's something strange about their leader."

"I told you I was going to try and find out who he is, right?"

"According to Mo Tianyi's group, this leader of theirs also placed in a competition during his first year."

"I spent weeks looking into it, even going over the first-year competition results from the three major schools for the past few years. Only two of the winners could be considered poor students."

"But from what I've gathered, both of them have already signed contracts with White Dragon High, so there's no way they could aim for the Ten Greats."

Zhang Yu asked, "So, you're saying Mo Tianyi and his group have been scammed?"

Bai Zhenzhen shook her head, a strange look on her face.

"According to them, their leader signed a contract with them, witnessed by the Heavenly Covenant God, promising to get into the Ten Greats and to bring them to the second layer when he is able."

"In any case, I just don't understand the situation."

As they spoke, they arrived at the training grounds.

...

On the training grounds.

Their martial arts instructor, Lei Jun, was already there, waiting to begin their tutoring session for the upcoming martial arts competition.

Ever since Zhang Pianpian's visit to Songyang High the day before, the two had been allowed to participate in the martial arts competition again, and their tutoring had resumed.

It was three sessions a week, at a cost of 3,000.

While this was a cheap rate for the instructor, it was still a significant expense for Zhang Yu.

Paying this week's 3,000 fee brought Zhang Yu's savings down to a little over 35,000.

On the training grounds, Lei Jun was wearing a tank top with the characters for "The Grand Use of Martial Arts" printed on the front, and he was diligently performing his warm-up exercises.

Apart from Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, there were no other students around.

They were the only two first-years participating in the martial arts competition.

Unlike the mana competition, where one could participate just for the experience even without hope of placing, the martial arts competition was different.

In the martial arts arena, there was a real risk of being permanently disabled by a student from one of the three major schools.

For poor students, especially, there was the added risk of being driven to financial ruin by the fight.

After all, the costs of on-site first aid, hospitalization for serious injuries, and subsequent treatment would increase exponentially with the severity of the wounds.

Therefore, any first-year who felt they had no chance of placing, rich or poor, chose not to waste their money on the martial arts competition.

Seeing Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen arrive, Lei Jun called out, "I've already registered both of you."

He then sent them a web link. "First thing's first, get your insurance sorted out today."

Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen both understood; the first rule of combat was to get insurance.

However, after looking at the price list, they both chose the cheapest plan.

It wasn't that they couldn't afford a premium plan, but that the basic one offered better value for the money.

After all, they would rather spend their money on improving their strength to achieve a higher rank in the competition than on insurance.

Lei Jun reminded them, "That plan only covers up to one hundred thousand in medical fees. If your injuries are more severe, you'll have to pay the rest yourself."

"When you fight, do your best to avoid injury, or at least keep it minimal."

Zhang Yu wholeheartedly agreed. First place in the martial arts competition was only worth a 50,000 prize and the rights to an expert-level martial art. It wasn't worth sustaining injuries that could cost over a hundred thousand to treat.

Lei Jun sighed. "You have it easy now. Back in my day, weapons were allowed in competitions. Even with referees, every year students would either die in the ring or drop out of school under a mountain of debt."

"It got so bad that one year only seven people competed, so the old geezers finally changed the rules to forbid weapons."

"Now the competitions are bare-handed, but you still need to be mindful of whether you can afford the medical bills afterward."

"Alright, that's enough talk. You've bought your insurance, so let's warm up."

Once they had finished warming up, Lei Jun beckoned them over.

"The three major schools have access to Immortal Dao technologies that we don't, and they invest an amount of capital you can't even compare to."

"Things like Heavenly Spiritual Root cultivation, the latest alchemical enhancers from their labs, and even body modification surgeries are all commonplace for them."

"I've looked up the data for the top students from those schools who compete. Their physical strength averages above level 2, and their mana is over 25. And that's before you factor in the alchemical enhancers, combat spiritual roots, and other things they might use during a match…"

"Their stats will inevitably be far superior to yours."

"They're stronger, faster, and have deeper mana reserves."

As Lei Jun spoke, a question arose in Zhang Yu's mind.

If the three major schools have such a huge advantage, how does our school ever win prizes in these competitions? What's their secret? Is Wang Hai really that good?

Meanwhile, Lei Jun continued, "…but in a real fight, the person with the better stats doesn't always win. Otherwise, there'd be no point in having practical exams."

Lei Jun said gravely, "So, from now on, you need to get used to fighting opponents who are stronger than you, and you need to learn how to avoid injury as much as possible."

As he spoke, a powerful aura began to emanate from him, washing over Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen.

"To give you more practical training time, you two will fight me together from now on."

"I will do my best to fight you using the strength and speed of a level 2 physique and a mana level of 25."

A moment later, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen shot forward from the left and right, rushing toward Lei Jun.

Bang!

With the sound of impact, Lei Jun's hands shot out to his sides, blocking a kick from Bai Zhenzhen and a palm strike from Zhang Yu.

In the next instant, the three figures became a blur of motion, engaging in a high-speed battle across the training grounds.

But Zhang Yu didn't feel like he and Bai Zhenzhen were ganging up on Lei Jun at all.

Lei Jun's combat experience was already immense, and now, with superior strength and speed, he effortlessly neutralized his attacks, struck his openings, and even cut off his coordination with Bai Zhenzhen.

It made Zhang Yu feel as if he were facing Lei Jun's oppressive presence all by himself.

Zhang Yu couldn't help but wonder, *"Are all my opponents in the martial arts competition going to have stats so much higher than mine?"*

Zhang Yu realized he had been underestimating the competition. Having to conceal his trump card, the level 10 Limitless Cloud Hand, meant the challenges he would face would be far greater than he had anticipated.

A moment later, with a resounding bang, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen were sent flying.

In contrast to the two of them, who were panting heavily, Lei Jun wasn't even flushed or out of breath; he looked as if he had just gone for a walk.

Lei Jun said, "Rest for five minutes, then we continue."

Old Lei is so strong, Bai Zhenzhen thought. *He saw through every move I made. Just how many martial arts does he know?*

Old Lei seems to have a level 10 Dao heart, 100 mana, and level 10 physical strength, Zhang Yu thought. *He's also mastered at least a dozen martial arts to level 10. He's at the absolute peak of the Qi Refinement realm.*

"So why hasn't he advanced to Foundation Establishment?"

He then voiced his curiosity.

"Instructor Lei, are you still in the Qi Refinement realm? You haven't reached Foundation Establishment?"

Lei Jun's expression darkened at the question. "Foundation Establishment isn't that easy."

Seeing their curious expressions, Lei Jun sighed and said casually, "You have to pass a certification exam for Foundation Establishment. There's one for Golden Core, and another for Nascent Soul. You can't just break through to the next realm whenever you feel like it."

"Uncertified Foundation Establishment is a criminal offense, punishable by death by the Eight Ministries of Righteous Gods and the Ten Great Sects. The Ten Great Sects are extremely strict about this."

"You can only take the Foundation Establishment certification exam after you get into a university."

"If you don't get certified before you graduate, you lose your chance for life."

Recalling his own university days, a shadow passed over Lei Jun's eyes.

He remembered that during the years he was trying to get his certification, the number of available slots was drastically reduced.

He recalled how, in just a few short years, the minimum requirement for the spiritual root alone had skyrocketed from 'Human' all the way to 'Heavenly,' a level of competition that had driven him to despair.

In contrast, returning to his hometown of Songyang on the first layer, where he only had to work and cultivate twenty-four hours a day to pay off his loans… felt much more relaxed.

Lei Jun said reflectively, "Having that Foundation Establishment certificate makes all the difference in the world."

"Without Foundation Establishment, ten years of university life is just a fleeting dream. You can't stay up there; you eventually have to come back down to the first layer of Kunxu."

Turning to look at Bai Zhenzhen and Zhang Yu, he thought to himself, *Cherish these easy high school days. Once you get to university, you'll miss how simple things were.*

A few minutes later, Lei Jun said, "Rest time's over. Get up."

In the next instant, the three were a tangled mess of combat once more.

After the day's tutoring session, Zhang Yu returned to the abandoned building to continue his practice of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art.

This cultivation technique improved both his Dao heart and his physical strength, offering comprehensive benefits that made it his primary focus.

The Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art was especially valuable as it incorporated nine different martial styles, including fist, leg, and palm techniques,

deepening his understanding of both the fundamentals and practical application of various martial arts.

And so, the following days were spent with Zhang Yu dividing his time between studying, cultivating, and attending Lei Jun's tutoring sessions with Bai Zhenzhen.

Eleven days passed in the blink of an eye.

…

That night, in the abandoned building.

As Zhang Yu executed the final form of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, he at last raised the cultivation technique to level 10.

In that instant, the nine martial styles—fist, leg, palm, and more—became as natural to him as breathing, and the combat mindset inherent to the Martial Ascension Will became something he could control at will, granting him boundless fighting spirit and courage while ensuring he remained calm and composed, never succumbing to reckless impulse.

"As expected of a heart art designed for combat, especially its level 10 effect…"

As Zhang Yu's gaze focused, everything around him seemed to slow down a beat.

Even the motion of him raising his own hand appeared to be in slow motion.

It wasn't that everything had actually slowed, but that the level 10 effect of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art had caused his focus and concentration to surge instantaneously, creating the illusion of time dilating.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 65: Exhausting the Savings

With the 10th-level effect of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, Zhang Yu could feel his grasp of combat becoming far more refined. Any subtle change in his opponent's moves could not escape his observation, and he could more precisely mobilize every ounce of his strength to fight. His practical combat ability had skyrocketed.

However, this state also consumed a great deal of stamina, and after maintaining it for one minute, Zhang Yu began to feel dizzy.

This state of total concentration should be reserved for critical moments in battle, not used carelessly.

The 10th-level Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art gave Zhang Yu a much higher degree of confidence for the martial arts competition.

But it's still not enough…

Thinking of the unfairness and injustice of the Mana Competition, and of what Zhang Pianpian had said about taking first place in the martial arts competition, Zhang Yu wanted to secure an even greater advantage.

So, he once again opened the shopping platform and looked at the cultivation techniques he had bookmarked over this period.

Zhang Yu had already considered what he would cultivate after reaching the 10th level of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art.

At this moment, he was looking at an expert-level martial art called the Imperishable Seal Art, along with its 30,000-credit price tag after a fifty-percent discount, its user reviews, and the description of its 10th-level effects.

This Imperishable Seal Art, like the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, was an expert-level cultivation technique.

It was a technique that targeted an enemy's mana, allowing for mana redirection and reflection.

Not only was it exceedingly difficult to learn, but mastering it was even harder. The user review section was filled with comments about the technique's difficulty, stating that anyone who bought it would have to spend money hiring a tutor.

One-star review: Avoid at all costs! You can't learn it on your own at all, and hiring a tutor cost me tens of thousands.

Two-star review: I bought it at the original price of sixty thousand, only to come back and see it was on sale.

One-star review: I'll come back and leave a good review once I reach level 10.

Zhang Yu guessed that its difficulty, which led to poor sales, was likely the reason the technique was discounted.

But this was not a problem for Zhang Yu, because he discovered that this Imperishable Seal Art had only four stances.

Furthermore, he would be able to fully utilize the technique's 10th-level effect in the upcoming martial arts competition, and it would complement his Limitless Cloud Hand.

Although the Limitless Cloud Hand can redirect force and use an opponent's strength against them, the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi has a weakness: it's vulnerable to specialized mana disrupting the astral qi.

But if I use the Imperishable Seal Art in coordination with the Limitless Cloud Hand, I'll be able to redirect or even reflect the opponent's specialized mana.

Combined with the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method constantly replenishing my mana, and the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art allowing me to observe the entire field and grasp every detail…

My combat system will become more complete, better suited for defeating stronger opponents, and better at… avoiding injury while securing victory.

In the martial arts competition, when facing opponents with higher stats, avoiding or minimizing injury was crucial for a poor student like Zhang Yu.

Therefore, compared to more aggressive, wild, and domineering offensive techniques, Zhang Yu leaned toward a defensive, counter-attacking style.

And the only drawback of this Imperishable Seal Art… was its price. Even after the discount, it still cost 30,000 credits, and Zhang Yu now had only a little over that amount in his account.

In other words, buying this technique would leave him broke.

But when he thought about becoming the strongest first-year in Songyang, about his goal of getting into the Ten Greats…

I must get into the Ten Greats, I must take the competition championship. Besides, the first-place prize for this competition is 50,000 credits. If I can't win, then holding on to these 30,000 is useless.

At this thought, Zhang Yu gritted his teeth and spent the 30,000 credits in his account in one go.

In the blink of an eye, he received the e-manual for the Imperishable Seal Art.

After a quick review, the technique appeared in his Feathered Tome, and he switched it to his specialization.

As a technique that specialized in mana redirection and reflection, the most crucial aspect of the Imperishable Seal Art was control over mana; its external martial forms consisted of only four simple stances.

Thus, in less than a minute, Zhang Yu had cultivated the technique to level 1.

Instantly, memories of practicing the Imperishable Seal Art over and over again flooded his mind.

Zhang Yu felt his control over mana become increasingly refined. He could even temporarily convert an opponent's incoming mana into his own and then unleash it.

Of course, this process also consumed mana, but the amount he expended was less than the mana of his opponent's attack.

Zhang Yu nodded to himself.

As long as I continue to level up the Imperishable Seal Art, I'll be able to manipulate more of my opponent's mana with less of my own.

According to the website's description, once the Imperishable Seal Art reaches level 10, redirecting 10 units of mana will only cost me 3 units, a thirty-percent ratio.

With this in mind, Zhang Yu nodded to himself and continued his ascetic training of the Imperishable Seal Art.

…

In the blink of an eye, another two days passed, bringing them to the day before the martial arts competition.

Figures flew across the training ground as Lei Jun took on two opponents at once, guiding Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen.

Witnessing Zhang Yu's and Bai Zhenzhen's rapid progress over this period, Lei Jun grew more and more astonished.

These two kids… their understanding of various martial arts deepens by the day, and their combat experience is increasing so quickly.

Over the past few days, while maintaining an output equivalent to level 2 physical strength, Lei Jun had been forced to use increasingly advanced combat techniques to consistently suppress Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen.

But that was not what surprised him most. Instead, it was…

Through their daily ascetic training and our repeated spars, these two have gradually developed their own distinct fighting styles.

Lei Jun threw a punch, only to have it blocked by a mass of white astral qi under Zhang Yu's control. He felt the force of his blow scatter, the vast majority of it deflected.

That kid Zhang Yu, his use of that Limitless Cloud Hand is getting more and more ingenious. He's like a slippery ball; I strike with ten parts of force, and he can deflect seven or eight of them. I always have to use specialized mana to break through his astral qi first, which inevitably turns the fight into a battle of mana attrition.

And now he's recently mastered that technique called the Imperishable Seal Art, making his defense even more seamless.

Hmm… I don't have to worry about him getting beaten into bankruptcy in this competition.

Lei Jun then turned, blocking Bai Zhenzhen's sword-finger with his palm, and thought to himself, *Bai Zhenzhen… she's a true martial arts genius.*

In just two short weeks, she has already begun to keep up with my changing moves, see the flaws in my attacks, and force me into a position where I must defend.

But her fighting style… it's too dangerous.

Boom!

As Lei Jun once again increased his power output, a wave of mana oscillation swept out, sending them both flying.

"That's all the time for today's tutoring."

He sighed with a smile. "You two have made tremendous progress during this time; you've improved about as much as you can for now."

"In tomorrow's competition, remember that safety comes first. Put your own safety above all else, don't push yourselves too hard, and don't force anything."

Bai Zhenzhen had grown familiar with Lei Jun over this period and replied directly, "Got it, old Lei. What place do you think we can get?"

Lei Jun thought for a moment and said, "There's a chance for the top ten."

"Only top ten? And only a chance?"

Lei Jun smiled helplessly. "The three great schools have too many methods that are beyond the standard curriculum, and even their conventional methods are things you could never afford. The top students' stats are also higher than yours. You're not starting on the same line. You two should be happy just to have a chance at the top ten."

"That's enough talk. Go back and prepare. And don't forget to bring your competition alchemical enhancers tomorrow."

"We'll meet at the entrance of White Dragon High School at midnight."

The venue for this martial arts competition was, in fact, White Dragon High School.

Zhang Yu was momentarily stunned. "Midnight?"

Lei Jun said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, "White Dragon High School has classes during the day, so the competition is scheduled for midnight."

Zhang Yu could only think that this was so typical of White Dragon High School; they never disappointed when it came to being unreasonable.

Zhang Yu asked again, "How do we get there?"

"Take the subway on your own. Only two of you are participating in the martial arts competition. Did you expect the school to charter a bus?"

Zhang Yu could only think that this, too, was typical of Songyang High School, never disappointing him, just like White Dragon High.

Watching the two of them leave, Lei Jun sighed inwardly.

If those two had been born into wealthy families, perhaps they would have had a chance to test into the Ten Greats.

…

That night.

After another two hours of intensive ascetic training, Zhang Yu finally raised the Imperishable Seal Art to level 10.

His body jolted as he felt his meridians, as if they had been tempered a thousand times over, suddenly become much tougher and more capable of handling the flow of various types of specialized mana.

At the same time, all his experience with mana redirection and reflection fused together in his mind, completing some sort of sublimation and culminating in a new enlightenment.

Now, when he used the Imperishable Seal Art, Zhang Yu was confident he could directly convert an opponent's mana to replenish his own.

This meant that with the Imperishable Seal Art at level 10, he could grow stronger as he fought, using the mana from his opponent's attacks to restore his own.

Of course, this absorption and replenishment naturally had its limits.

In a single battle, I can supplement a maximum of 30 units of mana this way. Any more than that… and my current meridians won't be able to take it.

Thinking of this, Zhang Yu looked at his Feathered Tome again. After two weeks of ascetic training, his base stats had also improved significantly.

[Zhang Yu]

[Dao heart: Level 3 (53%)]

[Mana: 21.8]

[Physical Strength: 1.51]

Sigh, it's a shame I didn't learn the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method a month or two earlier. If only I'd had more time to raise my physical strength…

After returning home and taking a quick shower, Zhang Yu hurried to catch a bus, setting off on the road to White Dragon High School.

…

11:31 PM.

The moment Zhang Yu stepped out of the subway station, he saw a building roughly thirty stories tall, which he knew to be White Dragon High School.

But he had no time to admire it, because at this moment Zhang Yu was very, very, very hungry.

Where's Zhen?

I have to find her and borrow some money for dinner. How am I supposed to compete if I'm starving?

As for Zhang Yu's own money, that was, of course, long gone.

The Imperishable Seal Art alone had wiped out the thirty thousand credits in his account.

The little that was left over had been spent on food, drinks, and alchemical enhancers over the last few days.

Just as Zhang Yu was looking around anxiously, a hand slapped him firmly on the shoulder.

Zhang Yu turned his head, a pleased surprise on his face.

"Zhen? Quick…"

"Yu-boy, lend me some money," Bai Zhenzhen said weakly, clutching her stomach. "I don't have money for dinner, I feel like I'm going to collapse."

Zhang Yu was aghast. "You spent all your money too?"

Seeing Zhang Yu's reaction, Bai Zhenzhen cried out in anguish, "You're broke too? What are your spending habits like? How do you blow through money so fast you can't even afford dinner?"

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 66: The Competition Begins

Just as Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen stood in speechless despair, contemplating asking Lei Jun for a loan, a familiar voice called out.

"Zhenzhen, Zhang Yu, you're already here."

The two whipped their heads around, and the sight of Zhao Tianxing emerging from the subway station was like that of a savior. They rushed forward like a pair of zombies, throwing their arms around him.

Zhao Tianxing had come today specifically to watch their competition.

Zhang Yu said, "Old Zhao, lend us some money. We need to buy dinner."

But after a moment, Zhao Tianxing only managed to transfer 10 credits, saying with a helpless look, "My mom's afraid I'll spend money recklessly, so this is all she lets me carry when I go out."

Useless mama's boy. I'm ashamed to be associated with you.

But ten credits were better than nothing. Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen could only drag their famished bodies to a nearby convenience store and buy a few buns.

However, with their current cultivation levels and physical conditioning, a few buns were nowhere near enough to quell the hunger gnawing at them.

Bai Zhenzhen's eyes gleamed as she stared at the convenience store, and she suddenly said, "Yu-boy, let's rob the place."

Zhang Yu nodded. "Sure. You do the robbing, I'll be in charge of disposing of the loot."

Bai Zhenzhen then asked, "Do you think White Dragon High School will provide free food?"

Zhang Yu replied, "Free? We'll be lucky if they don't charge us double."

Just then, both of their eyes lit up.

A familiar figure was standing before the main gate of White Dragon High School, gazing at the school sign with reverence as he snapped pictures with his phone.

"Old Qian!"

Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen hurried over, grabbed Qian Shen's hand, and said, "Treat us to dinner. We're too hungry to compete."

Qian Shen looked at them quizzically, opened his phone, and asked, "Is 300 enough?"

Holy crap! Zhang Yu was stunned.

He then began to reflect on what he had been doing for the past two months.

Befriending a debt-ridden person like Bai Zhenzhen? Befriending a mama's boy like Zhao Tianxing?

Old Qian! You are my, Zhang Yu's, one true friend!

Thanks to Qian Shen's treat, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen devoured twelve 10-credit meal sets at the convenience store, costing Qian Shen 120 credits.

Patting her slightly bulging stomach, Bai Zhenzhen said with satisfaction, "This should be enough. We have to compete soon, so being half-full is perfect."

Zhang Yu nodded in agreement and said to Qian Shen, "Don't worry, Old Qian. After the competition, as soon as we get the prize money, we'll pay you back."

Qian Shen, however, didn't seem concerned about that. He suddenly scratched his head and asked, "Um… will the 699-point Zhang Pianpian be coming to watch you compete today?"

Zhang Yu cast a pitying glance at Qian Shen.

Ah, poor fool, utterly captivated by a high-scoring student.

Zhang Yu really wanted to tell him that with his score of six hundred twenty and her six hundred ninety-nine, the gap between them was simply too vast for them to ever be friends.

But feeling the meal settling in his stomach, Zhang Yu said, "Probably not. She's extremely busy, how would she have time to watch a first-year competition?"

Qian Shen nodded, seeming to be lost in thought.

"That's true. She's a third-year now, so she must be busy preparing for the college entrance exams and university interviews, right?"

Zhao Tianxing, who had been standing to the side, kept glancing nervously at the time on his phone.

"Didn't you guys arrange to meet Teacher Lei at midnight? It's almost time, shouldn't we head over?"

So, the group of four made their way back to the main gate of White Dragon High School. Seeing that Teacher Lei Jun hadn't arrived yet, Zhang Yu suggested they wait inside.

However, the moment the four of them came within a meter of the gate, they seemed to trigger some kind of sensor.

A warning voice sounded from a nearby electronic screen: "Non-White Dragon High School personnel, please do not enter."

The four turned to see the screen displaying a message:

To tour the school, please scan the code to purchase a visitor's ticket.

Single-person 12-hour tour ticket, access to floors 3 and below, price: 500.

Those with monthly exam or college entrance exam scores of 660 or above may enter for a free tour.

Those with scores below 550 and those without a high school education are prohibited from entry.

What the hell… No underachievers allowed, is that it? Banning those below 550 is one thing, but why do you need a 660 just for free entry?

Zhang Yu looked at the information on the screen, then at his friends.

He felt that in that instant, all four of them were being thoroughly looked down upon by White Dragon High School.

And as for buying a ticket… where was he supposed to find 500 credits in his bank account?

Was he really going to be eliminated outside the school gates by a 500-credit fee before the competition even began?

Zhang Yu could only turn his head in embarrassment and look toward Qian Shen again, only to find that Bai Zhenzhen was doing the exact same thing.

Qian Shen, however, was gazing at the gates of White Dragon High School with a look of pure yearning.

"It's true what they say," he sighed. "Not just anyone can walk through the gates of White Dragon."

With that, he prepared to scan the code and buy a ticket.

Just as Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen were about to ask to borrow money, Teacher Lei Jun finally arrived.

"You two don't need to buy tickets," Lei Jun said, waving them over. "We're here for the competition; White Dragon High sent us tickets."

After receiving the electronic tickets from Lei Jun, the group finally entered White Dragon High School, leaving only a mortified Zhao Tianxing standing outside the gate.

Under their collective gaze, Zhao Tianxing scratched his head furiously.

"You guys go on ahead," he said repeatedly. "I'll call my mom for money. I'll buy a ticket and come find you."

Lei Jun knew that Qian Shen and Zhao Tianxing were here to watch the competition, so he nodded.

"The venue is on the first basement level. You can make your own way there."

The moment Zhang Yu and group stepped into the White Dragon High School building, he noticed a peculiar scent in the air.

Beside him, Qian Shen took a deep breath.

"Do you smell that?" he said in awe. "That sweet fragrance in the air? White Dragon High adds a special intellect-enhancement agent to its air circulation system. It boosts concentration and neural excitability. They've also added a hint of fruit and floral scents…"

Zhang Yu was speechless. *Holy crap, the air in White Dragon High School really is scented.*

The group continued forward, where they saw the corridor floor divided into white and red lanes.

The white lane ran down the middle, inscribed with the words: For students of this school with scores of 660 and above only.

The red lanes flanked the sides, marked with: For students of this school with scores below 660 only.

Zhang Yu paused for a second, then let out an exasperated laugh.

Unbelievable. So if your score is below 660, you have to walk along the edges?

Qian Shen explained from the side, "All the different areas and facilities in White Dragon High have score-based standards for student access. Students must stay within the areas designated for their score range."

Zhang Yu was speechless again. *Hey, why are you explaining all this? Qian-boy, you're from Songyang, how do you know so much about White Dragon? Planning to transfer?*

They proceeded down the corridor to the elevators, intending to take one to the basement, only to find a sign that read: Students with scores below 660 are prohibited from using the elevator.

Zhang Yu was starting to get it. At White Dragon High, if your score was below 660, you weren't treated like a person; you could barely move.

Fortunately, as visitors, they didn't have to abide by the rules meant for the school's own students.

The group took the elevator down to the first basement level, and in an instant, a massive gymnasium, ten meters high and covering over ten thousand square meters, appeared before them.

The venue was filled with high school students milling about. Clearly, the contestants from many schools had already arrived.

But as Zhang Yu looked around, nearly all the competitors were from the three great schools. He could barely see anyone from the other high schools.

Compared to the Mana Competition, this martial arts competition has practically become an internal league for the three great schools.

In the surrounding spectator stands, apart from a few scattered students from various schools, there were three large, organized blocks of students sitting bolt upright, like phalanxes.

Zhang Yu looked at the students sitting in neat rows and at their uniforms, surprised.

"Are those students from the three great schools?"

He found it astonishing.

"Students from the three great schools aren't using every single second to study, and are here watching a competition instead?"

He especially noticed the students from White Dragon High, who were wide-eyed and ramrod straight, their faces glowing with an energetic fervor, as if they were on stimulants.

Just then, a male voice sounded from nearby.

"They are all first-year students from the three great high schools. After all, observing the battles of powerful peers also helps one improve their own practical martial arts skill, recognize the gap between themselves and the strong, and further strengthen their Dao heart."

Zhang Yu and the others turned toward the source of the voice.

Lian Tianji from Purple Cloud High School was walking slowly toward them, a smile on his face.

"I guessed you would participate in the martial arts competition," he said to Zhang Yu. "And I was right."

He then glanced at Zhang Yu's small group, surprised. "Is this everyone from Songyang?"

A moment later, he nodded thoughtfully. "Then again, it's understandable. This is Songyang, after all."

Zhang Yu felt his Songyang uniform being subtly insulted once again.

However, Zhang Yu was no die-hard patriot for his school. What did Songyang being looked down on have to do with him? His real identity was as a contract employee of the Songyang City Patrol.

So, Zhang Yu asked curiously, "How many people came from the three great high schools?"

Lian Tianji pointed toward one side of the arena. "Look, they're all over there. Purple Cloud, White Dragon, and Red Pagoda—each school sent a full team of

ten. We already had a preliminary round at our own schools; only the top ten finishers could come compete."

After they parted ways with Lian Tianji, Lei Jun said, "Let's go. We need to check in at the contestant rest area. Qian Shen, you go find a seat in the stands."

Zhang Yu and his group arrived at the rest area assigned to their school.

Zhang Yu looked at the rest areas for the three great high schools, the key high schools like Songyang, and the other ordinary high schools.

How to describe it.

Zhang Yu felt the three types of rest areas were like the difference between a "VIP lounge," a "sun tent," and a "straw mat."

The "VIP lounges" for the three great schools had sofas, reclining chairs, drinks, fruit, and snacks.

The "sun tent area" for the key high schools had a row of chairs and a case of water.

And the "straw mat area" for the ordinary high schools had just a row of benches.

It's like White Dragon is terrified the riff-raff from the ordinary high schools will come and freeload.

"This is completely discriminatory."

Meanwhile, after watching the three of them leave, Qian Shen made his way up into the spectator stands alone.

Just as he was looking for a place to sit, he noticed that the person sitting in front of him looked very familiar from behind.

He walked up quickly and saw that the person was wearing a hat, sunglasses, and a mask, and immediately turned their head away when they saw him.

Qian Shen looked at the top of the person's head, then at their face, and said with a jolt of recognition, "You… are you the 611-point He Dayou?"

A 611-point He Dayou was worthy of sitting with him to watch the competition.

He Dayou really hadn't wanted to be recognized, especially by people from his own school. He didn't want anyone to know he had come to watch the martial arts competition, and he particularly didn't want anyone thinking he was here for Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, which was why he had come in disguise.

But now, having been identified by Qian Shen, he could only turn his head back reluctantly.

"Yeah, you're here too, Qian Shen."

Qian Shen asked curiously, "Are you also here to watch Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen compete?"

He Dayou gave a dismissive laugh. "Their skill level… isn't even average in this competition. What's there to watch?"

"Actually, a friend from my middle school is competing and specially invited me to come."

Qian Shen sat down beside He Dayou and asked, "Which high school is your friend from? What's their score?"

He Dayou turned his head away, looking as if he didn't want to speak.

…

On the other side of the arena.

The contestants first gathered together to listen to the organizers announce the rules.

"To prevent powerful contestants from being eliminated too early, this competition will begin with a seeding round."

"Based on the scores from this round, all contestants will be divided into eight groups. They will then compete within their groups via random pairings. The winner from each of the eight groups—a total of eight contestants—will advance to the final elimination tournament…"

Just as everyone was wondering how the seeding round would be scored…

With a series of heavy thuds, a two-meter-tall golden figure slowly strode into the arena.

The referee at the front announced, "For the seeding round, each of you will take turns fighting a Yellow Turban Strongman."

"The average physical strength level of the contestants in this competition is 1.98, so the Yellow Turban Strongman will maintain a physical strength output of 1.98 and will fight each of you for one minute."

"Afterward, a panel of judges will score your performance during that minute."

"The specific scoring rules are as follows..."

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 67: The Gap, The Scoring

Zhang Yu listened for a while to the specifications of this scoring competition and quickly got the gist of it.

"So they'll stick sensor patches all over my body, and on the Yellow Turban Strongman as well, and then the number of times each sensor patch is hit will be recorded."

"For example, hitting the sensor patch on the Yellow Turban Strongman's back is worth five points, the chest is three points, and an arm is one point."

"Conversely, if the sensor patch on my back gets hit, five points will be deducted…"

"The final tally will be the total score within a one-minute combat period."

"Of course, there's another method: directly knocking the Yellow Turban Strongman out of bounds, which adds 300 points in one go."

Zhang Yu understood that the purpose of this scoring competition was to prevent high-scoring contestants from being grouped together in the subsequent group stage, lest they be eliminated too early.

"This way, no powerful contestant should deliberately hide too much of their strength, because that might land them in the same group as another strong fighter."

Thinking this, Zhang Yu nodded slightly and turned his gaze toward the Yellow Turban Strongman.

It was a humanoid figure over two meters tall, clad in golden armor and a golden faceplate, with slabs of exposed muscle that looked like marble, inscribed with dense, overlapping runes.

"Hmm… feels like it's missing a little something…"

Just as Zhang Yu was thinking this, a staff member came over and sprayed advertisements on the Yellow Turban Strongman.

On its chest was 'Oasis Foods, for the healthy diet of all Kunxu people', and on its back was 'The ultra-potent, ultra-fierce, world-dominant Wilan Pharmaceuticals'.

Seeing this, Zhang Yu finally nodded, thinking to himself, *I knew something was missing. Now that's more like it.*

He remembered that this Oasis Foods was the company that promoted synthetic food, and it was backed by the Netherworld Palace, one of the Ten Great Sects.

Wilan Pharmaceuticals, on the other hand, was different from Purple Cloud Supplements; it was a company more focused on combat-use drugs and was also a sponsor of this martial arts tournament.

Meanwhile, Bai Zhenzhen, standing to the side, looked at the Yellow Turban Strongman and commented, "Songyang High School is so much worse than White Dragon High. Look, they get to use Yellow Turban Strongmen for exams and competitions, while we still have to make students beat each other up."

Zhang Yu nodded and said, "The realism of this model of Yellow Turban Strongman is very high; it almost looks like a real person."

It was also Bai Zhenzhen's first time seeing a Yellow Turban Strongman in person, and she agreed, "The hobbies of the rich are just like this; they love making valuable things look cheap."

"Like making designer clothes look like garbage bags, or making a Yellow Turban Strongman look like a person like this."

Zhang Yu suddenly had an idea. "Then do you think our school could hire someone to play the part of a Yellow Turban Strongman?"

Just then, Lei Jun, who was behind them, spoke up. As the martial arts combat teacher and the organizer of Songyang High's combat exam, he said with a dark expression,

"Someone who could act as a Yellow Turban Strongman… would their fee be cheap? Who do you think will pay for hiring someone? Are you hoping to pay a fee to take the monthly exams?"

At this, Lei Jun snorted coldly and jutted his chin toward the ring.

"The first round of the scoring competition is about to start. Watch carefully and learn. Don't embarrass me when you get up there."

When the contestants had gathered earlier, White Dragon High School, as the host, had already distributed contestant numbers and tags; they would go up to fight the Yellow Turban Strongman according to their numbers.

Under everyone's watchful eyes, the announcer walked onto the ring and stood beside the Yellow Turban Strongman.

"Welcome, everyone, to this year's Songyang City First-Year Martial Arts Championship, jointly sponsored by Oasis Foods and Wilan Pharmaceuticals."

"Delicious and all-natural, wellness through nature. All meals at this event are provided by the Oasis Group."

Hearing this, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen both made a sound of disgust.

Synthetic food? Not even a dog would eat that.

The announcer continued, "A thousand-year heritage, an essential for any outing. Whether it's a tournament in the ring or a brawl on the streets, Wilan Pharmaceuticals is your trusted assistant... Any contestants wishing to purchase alchemical enhancers may do so at the pop-up pharmacy next to the arena."

Finally, after the announcer finished all the sponsor advertisements, the first round of the scoring competition was about to begin.

"Now, let's welcome our first contestant to the stage!"

A contestant wearing the White Dragon High School uniform walked onto the ring and, following a countdown of 3, 2, 1, engaged in a fierce battle with the Yellow Turban Strongman.

Zhang Yu could tell that this White Dragon student's strength and speed were on par with the Yellow Turban Strongman's 1.98-level physical fortitude.

Every punch and kick followed a fierce and powerful style, directly blocking the Strongman's attacks while striking the sensor patches on its body to score points.

From a distance, it looked like two giant bears tearing at and fighting each other on the ring; the sound of every impact was like the clash of metal, shaking the heart of everyone watching.

When the one minute was up, the White Dragon student had earned a total of 128 points.

The next few contestants who took the stage were from either White Dragon High, Purple Cloud High, or Red Pagoda High.

The more Qian Shen watched, the more alarmed he became.

"Every single one of these top students from the three great high schools has a physical fortitude that would place them as the absolute number one in Songyang's first year. Is the gap really this big? Are these the kind of people Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen have to face today?"

He Dayou, however, was completely unsurprised by this.

"Unless you can join our school's athletic competition team and receive the special training program, it's impossible to surpass this batch of freaks from the three great high schools in terms of physical fortitude."

"Not to mention the gaps in other areas like mana, martial arts, and spiritual roots. When combined in actual combat… it's even more despairing."

As the Son of the School Director, He Dayou knew all too well the gap between Songyang High and the three great high schools.

When it came to the admission slots for the Ten Greats' top universities each year, the top students of Songyang High could often only fight for the leftovers with White Dragon High's second-tier experts after White Dragon's absolute top students had taken their pick.

Just then, a White Dragon student who was over two and a half meters tall, resembling a titanic giant, slowly walked onto the ring.

Standing in front of this student, even the Yellow Turban Strongman seemed almost delicate by comparison.

And as this student appeared, the White Dragon students in the audience, who had been sitting upright and proper, suddenly all stood up to applaud and cheer.

Zhang Yu, however, was more focused on the opponent's current hairstyle.

"Isn't that Song Hailong? Why did his hairstyle change?"

Song Hailong was White Dragon High's number one first-year, the contestant with a large '1' displayed on the chest and back of his uniform.

Zhang Yu still remembered that when he participated in the Mana Competition last time, he had long hair that shot up toward the sky.

Today, however, it was a short buzz cut.

Song Hailong smiled faintly, reached out a hand toward the audience, and pressed down. In the next moment, the cheering and applauding White Dragon students immediately sat back down, silent and still.

Watching this scene, Zhang Yu was suddenly reminded of the legendary low-score slavery system at White Dragon High. Those White Dragon students in the audience truly gave Song Hailong their absolute obedience.

Bai Zhenzhen, at his side, stared at Song Hailong's new hairstyle and said, "He definitely changed his external spiritual root again!"

"His last external spiritual root was obviously one that affected spiritual energy, meant for mana cultivation."

"Since this is a martial arts combat competition, that Song Hailong must have switched to a combat spiritual root."

With that, Bai Zhenzhen turned her head to look at Zhang Yu and urged, "Yu-boy, Yu-boy, quick, take out your 100,000-credit Talisman Tome and use a Heaven's Eye Talisman to check out Song Hailong's details."

Over the past two weeks, besides focusing on martial arts, Zhang Yu had also been familiarizing himself with the Talisman Tome from time to time.

But he didn't dare touch any of the paid features inside, only daring to use the single free daily attempt to practice talismans.

The two talismans he practiced the most were the Detainment Talisman and the Heaven's Eye Talisman, which were taught in school.

At this moment, Zhang Yu carefully took out the Talisman Tome, his fingertip swiping quickly across the screen. As the Heaven's Eye Talisman activated, he immediately felt the whole world change.

For a non-clerical professional, this was the enhanced view one got after paying.

For a short period, component evaluations floated above each person's head. Having practiced this several times, Zhang Yu was already used to this perspective and now focused his gaze on Song Hailong in the ring.

Elephant Tendon Body (Expand Details)

Elephant Tendon Body | Demon Slayer | Heavenly Spirit Embodiment | Unyielding Battle Spirit | White Dragon Slave Master | The King Son of the Family

At the same time, Song Hailong on the stage let out a wild laugh, grabbed the Yellow Turban Strongman's large hand, and then, under the shocked gazes of everyone present, sent the Yellow Turban Strongman flying out of the ring with a deafening boom.

In less than a single second, the battle was already over.

Song Hailong, 300 points.

The White Dragon students in the audience immediately erupted in fierce applause and cheers.

And watching Song Hailong slowly walk off the stage, the many contestants felt as if they weren't looking at a person, but at a ferocious, giant beast.

Qian Shen gasped, watching this scene. "Song Hailong, 683 points on the last monthly exam… Seeing him in action in person is just as shocking as that score."

On the other side, Zhao Tianxing had just entered the arena and was still looking for Qian Shen in the audience when he saw the scene on the stage.

"Too brutal. Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen have to fight this kind of monster?"

A trace of worry couldn't help but surface. "Will they really be okay? They won't get seriously injured, will they?"

Meanwhile, Zhang Yu stared at the long string of component evaluations above Song Hailong's head.

"What is all this stuff?"

After he read them out, Bai Zhenzhen, who was next to him, explained, "I know about Heavenly Spirit Embodiment. It should refer to an Embodiment Spiritual

Root. It's a combat-type spiritual root within the Heavenly Spiritual Root category. The spiritual energy meridians formed by the spiritual root will entwine around the entire body, comprehensively increasing the user's strength, speed, stamina, and resilience."

Zhang Yu couldn't help but give Bai Zhenzhen a second look.

This girl, Zhen… it was the same last time with the external spiritual root. She recognized it at a glance.

She clearly can't afford a spiritual root, so how does she know so many of them?

While Bai Zhenzhen was unsure about the other component evaluations, Lei Jun, from behind them, suddenly spoke.

"Implanted with elephant demon muscle, has long-term combat experience against demonic beasts, rarely shows negative emotion, a top student of White Dragon, and the Song family's ace son for this generation."

Zhang Yu was surprised. *Old Lei, you understand the Heaven's Eye Talisman too?*

Seeing their surprised looks, Lei Jun said calmly, "If a Daoist art could be used for free like you do, it would be quite useful indeed."

Old Lei! You have betrayed the martial path!

With Lei Jun's explanation, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen also gained more information from this round of the scoring competition.

On the ring, more powerhouses began to display their strength.

First was Lian Tianji from Purple Cloud High, whose fists and feet were like a torrential storm, completely suppressing the Yellow Turban Strongman whose physical fortitude was maintained at level 1.98, wildly scoring 261 points.

Not long after, a student from Red Pagoda High who looked like a brown bear took the stage, instantly tackled the Yellow Turban Strongman to the ground, and then threw it out, scoring 300 points.

Soon after, Le Mulan from Purple Cloud High made her appearance. With just one hand, she pressed the Yellow Turban Strongman to the ground, completely subduing it.

Then, the woman kicked the sensor patch on the center of the Yellow Turban Strongman's back again and again until she reached 305 points, deliberately

stopping only after surpassing Song Hailong's 300. She then gave Song Hailong a glance and walked off the stage.

And from the moment Le Mulan appeared, the Purple Cloud students in the audience remained completely silent, a field of stillness.

Zhao Tianxing found this strange.

Upon hearing his question, Qian Shen explained as if he were an expert, "At Purple Cloud High, scores are updated daily based on students' classroom performance, and the grade ranking is also updated daily. The number one student of the grade each day can set a grade-wide rule for one day, as long as it doesn't disrupt the educational order."

"As far as I know, since the first day of school, Le Mulan has always been number one in Purple Cloud's first year."

"And the daily rule she sets has never changed."

"That is, all first-year students must remain silent in her presence, and plebeian students with scores below 650 are not allowed to speak to her without her permission."

Plebeian students below 650? Hearing this, Zhao Tianxing instantly felt as if he had been insulted as well.

But then he considered that Qian Shen, who was speaking, hadn't reached 650 either, and his mood immediately stabilized.

Zhao Tianxing asked, "How do you know so much?"

Qian Shen gave a faint smile. "I've done a bit of research on matters concerning the three great high schools."

In the contestant area on the other side, the provoked Song Hailong burst out laughing.

"Le Mulan, I'll be waiting for you in the finals!"

Chapter 68: Grouping

For this martial arts competition, each school could send a maximum of ten participants.

After arriving at the venue, Zhang Yu discovered that there were only just over forty contestants in total, thirty of whom belonged to the three great high schools.

The remaining dozen or so contestants were all from other regular and key high schools.

They might not have understood the state of the martial arts competition, perhaps they lacked channels for information, or maybe they came with a sliver of hope, wanting to see the world or try their luck.

But as the powerhouses from the three great high schools took the stage one by one to display their strength, the students from the other high schools gradually began to have second thoughts and started to withdraw from the competition.

Of course, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen did not back down.

Zhang Yu recalled the rules, knowing that the contestants would be sorted into different tiers based on their scores.

Then, after a random draw, contestants of the same tier would be assigned to eight different groups for the group stage elimination rounds.

This was to ensure as much as possible that each group contained contestants from all tiers, from high to low, and to prevent multiple high-tier contestants from being eliminated prematurely in the same group.

Zhang Yu thought to himself, *If I don't want to be grouped with that batch of most formidable students, then I have to get as high a score as possible.*

Only then can I avoid facing tough opponents in the group stage and better secure a spot in the top eight.

Looking at the Yellow Turban Strongman on the stage, a battle plan gradually formed in Zhang Yu's mind.

A short while later, it was finally Zhang Yu's turn.

…

In the audience.

Zhao Tianxing, Qian Shen, and He Dayou were sitting together.

Aside from He Dayou, who had a look of utter disgust on his face, Qian Shen was watching the ring intently.

Zhao Tianxing, however, kept feeling that the students from the three great high schools not far away were looking at him, and felt a bit awkward that a Songyang student like himself was here watching the competition with them.

He also felt that the Songyang High School uniform he was wearing… seemed so rare and out of place here in the hallowed halls of White Dragon High, and he felt that the people around him had strange expressions when they saw the Songyang uniform on him.

Of course, Zhao Tianxing was actually overthinking it. To the vast majority of students from the three great schools…

Songyang High School? Do the students there even understand cultivation? What's there to see? We're here to watch the competition.

But just then, a student wearing a White Dragon High uniform walked over, looked at He Dayou, and said, "Dayou, you really came to watch my match?"

He Dayou looked at him, wondering why his sunglasses and mask were so useless.

"Yeah," He Dayou nodded and said, "I came to see what the overall level of the three great schools is like this year."

Chu Qiuhe from White Dragon High chuckled and said, "I saw that your Songyang High School actually sent people to compete. What were you thinking? Aren't you afraid of being beaten into bankruptcy?"

Although he knew there was indeed a gap between Songyang and the three great schools, as the Son of the School Director, He Dayou still felt a primal discomfort hearing this.

To insult Songyang in front of the Son of the School Director, you've already found your path to death.

But he also understood that there was indeed a tiny bit of a gap between Songyang and White Dragon.

And even though he and Chu Qiuhe had been middle school classmates, their friendship had gradually soured after he was admitted to Songyang and the other to White Dragon High.

In front of the other boy, He Dayou always felt a sense of inferiority.

Even now, Chu Qiuhe was only looking at his middle school classmate, He Dayou, treating Qian Shen and Zhao Tianxing beside him as if they were thin air.

After all, Songyang High School… Heh.

At this moment, He Dayou said lightly, "Who knows. Anyway, that guy got fourth in the last Mana Competition, so maybe he wanted to try his luck again this time."

Hearing the title of fourth in the Mana Competition, Chu Qiuhe was momentarily choked up and gave an awkward laugh.

"Martial arts combat is different from the Mana Competition. Martial combat is about comprehensive strength; the gap between White Dragon, Purple Cloud, Red Pagoda, and the other high schools will be stretched very wide."

As he spoke, he looked toward the ring and said, "Perfect timing, someone from your school is up. Let me help you see what his level is like…"

Meanwhile, seeing that it was a student from Songyang High School who was taking the stage, many in the audience also expected a tough fight.

But then they saw Zhang Yu clash with the Yellow Turban Strongman, and with a bang… the Yellow Turban Strongman was thrown out of bounds.

Zhang Yu, 300 points.

The entire arena was suddenly in an uproar, as no one had expected that a student from Songyang High School could achieve this.

Chu Qiuhe was also stunned. Seeing the Yellow Turban Strongman thrown out by Zhang Yu before he had even finished his sentence, he asked in astonishment, "300 points? Your Songyang can produce a student like this?"

That tone… it was as if he had just seen a flower bloom on a pile of cow dung.

Although he hated Zhang Yu, He Dayou had to admit that at this moment, seeing Chu Qiuhe's astonished expression, he felt a slight sense of satisfaction. He nodded reservedly, "Our year is quite formidable."

Qian Shen, beside him, also said, "Zhang Yu does have a score of 653, after all. He's very strong."

Zhao Tianxing, seeing the uproar in the arena, subconsciously puffed out his chest, feeling that the Songyang uniform on his body didn't seem so humble anymore.

…

When Chu Qiuhe returned to Song Hailong's side, he saw the competition coach reviewing the slow-motion replay with a few others.

The coach analyzed, "This Zhang Yu positioned himself at the edge of the ring right from the start."

"This was to make the Yellow Turban Strongman take the initiative to come to the edge of the ring after it attacked."

"Then, he used an ordinary straight punch, and this is where it gets interesting."

In the footage, Zhang Yu, as if he had predicted it, intercepted the Yellow Turban Strongman's move in advance.

The competition coach continued his analysis, "In that instant, he determined the Yellow Turban Strongman's attack, then interrupted it early, and then used the Limitless Cloud Hand to redirect the Strongman's power, ultimately throwing it several steps away."

"And because of his positioning, several steps away was right outside the boundary."

"From start to finish, every move was calculated to perfection…"

After hearing this analysis, Song Hailong's initially intrigued gaze instantly faded, and he turned his head away with a bored expression.

"I thought this kid was a dark horse like he was in the Mana Competition and would have some real strength."

"Turns out he just likes to use these clever little tricks. How boring."

The competition coach didn't refute Song Hailong's words, because he was both the dominant number one student of the year and undeniably wealthy, so as long as he didn't insult the teacher, he could say whatever he wanted.

Besides, the coach also knew that this ace son truly didn't need to consider a contestant of Zhang Yu's level.

But the competition coach still looked at the other students and reminded them, "Don't underestimate him. Although there's an element of trickery, to be able to make that judgment in that instant means either his reaction time and concentration are exceptionally strong, and his understanding of martial arts is very deep…"

"Or he observed the Yellow Turban Strongman for a long time beforehand and figured out some of its attack patterns."

"Although his various stats are likely not as high as yours, this kind of opponent is very capable of defeating a stronger foe with a weaker force. If you encounter him, you must not be careless."

"Anyone who loses to an opponent from outside the three great schools today will be fined ten thousand credits and will have to kneel through class for the rest of the month."

The students immediately responded with a loud "Yes, sir."

Listening to the coach's analysis, Chu Qiuhe thought to himself, *So that's how it was.*

When he first saw Zhang Yu instantly defeat the Yellow Turban Strongman, he thought the guy was a powerhouse on the same level as Song Hailong.

But now, after hearing the explanation, he felt that with some preparation, it seemed like something he could do as well.

…

On the other side, in the Purple Cloud High School preparation area.

Lian Tianji laughed. "Zhang Yu is really impressive."

Le Mulan, who was next to him, glanced over and said indifferently, "He can't even afford to rent the most basic combat spiritual root. Poor people are truly pathetic."

"But even though he's already so poor, he still insists on risking bankruptcy to participate. I really can't understand it."

Le Mulan turned her head to look at Lian Tianji, asking with a curious and uncomprehending expression, "You're so much poorer than me. Can you understand what they're thinking?"

Lian Tianji gave an awkward laugh, at a loss for words for a moment. He could only comfort himself in his heart, *The divine number one is just being blunt, she's not intentionally looking down on me. I shouldn't take it to heart.*

…

And not long after Zhang Yu left the stage, it was finally Bai Zhenzhen's turn.

In the audience, Qian Shen and Zhao Tianxing were originally looking forward to Bai Zhenzhen's performance.

Who would have known that moments later, they would find Bai Zhenzhen fighting a difficult battle on the ring, desperately dodging the Yellow Turban Strongman while barely finding openings to touch the sensor patches on its body.

"Bai Zhenzhen is struggling this much?"

He Dayou watched the spirited Bai Zhenzhen who had beaten him up now being pushed into a corner by the Yellow Turban Strongman's attacks. He suddenly found that he felt no pleasure in his heart, but rather a kind of bitterness.

And this bitterness was less because of Bai Zhenzhen and more because of the version of himself who had once been beaten by her.

Qian Shen, at his side, frowned. "Bai Zhenzhen's fighting style doesn't seem well-suited for dealing with the Yellow Turban Strongman."

Zhao Tianxing said worriedly, "At this rate, isn't she going to be placed in a group with a high-scoring contestant? It's very likely she'll be eliminated in the group stage."

…

As Bai Zhenzhen's difficult fight on the ring dragged on, the audience and other contestants quickly lost interest.

Song Hailong had long since closed his eyes in boredom, seemingly feeling that watching such a fight for even another second was a waste of time.

On the other side, Lian Tianji also felt a sense of surprise.

That girl who came to compete with Zhang Yu… it seems she was with Zhang Yu at the last Mana Competition too.

She's clearly so weak, why does she insist on accompanying Zhang Yu to compete? Could it be… she's Zhang Yu's slave at Songyang High? Has Songyang started playing that game too?

Lei Jun, watching this scene, said thoughtfully, "It seems Bai Zhenzhen realized her fighting style is not suited for fighting the Yellow Turban Strongman and decided to hide her strength."

As the teacher who had tutored Bai Zhenzhen for two weeks, Lei Jun knew that her true strength was far beyond what she was displaying on the stage at this moment.

Zhang Yu folded his arms across his chest, watching the figure on the ring, and gradually understood her plan as well.

Although the Yellow Turban Strongman was only outputting at a physical fortitude of 1.98, its own material composition was unchanged; it was still an indestructible object for students.

And Bai Zhenzhen's fighting style had always been to attack the enemy's weak points. Facing an opponent like the Yellow Turban Strongman that was impervious to blades and spears and required a head-on clash, it was obvious that she would easily be at a disadvantage.

Zhang Yu thought to himself, *My goal is to avoid strong opponents in the group stage as much as possible, to guarantee a spot in the top eight.*

It looks like Zhen knows she can't get a high score, so she's simply hiding her strength, planning to give her opponent a surprise when she encounters a powerhouse in the group stage?

In the end, Bai Zhenzhen scored 89 points.

(End of chapter)

Chapter 69: Hidden Spiritual Root

Soon after, the last contestant stepped down from the arena, and the scoring for all participants was complete.

During that time, two more contestants from other high schools withdrew, leaving a total of 33 participants to be divided into eight groups for the elimination tournament.

Seven of these groups had four contestants each and would proceed with one-on-one duels determined by a draw, eliminating combatants until only one remained.

The remaining group, however, consisted of five contestants; after the draw, one would receive a bye while the others fought one-on-one, again eliminating combatants until a single victor emerged.

The sole survivor from each of the eight groups would form the final top eight of the competition.

After the scoring round, there was a break. Zhang Yu stretched and decided to find a restroom with Bai Zhenzhen.

But after searching for a long time, they couldn't find a single one anywhere near the venue.

Spotting Song Hailong walking by, Zhang Yu couldn't help but ask, "Do you know where the restrooms are?"

Song Hailong smirked arrogantly. "White Dragon High School has no restrooms."

"What?" Zhang Yu was shocked. "You just go wherever you want?"

Song Hailong's face darkened. "The teachers and students of White Dragon High School have all undergone digestive system modification surgery," he

said coldly. "We have no need for such backward, filthy, and time-wasting places."

Zhang Yu was speechless. "Then what are we supposed to do?"

"Go look on the first floor," Song Hailong said dismissively. "There might be some restrooms there reserved for the lower class."

So, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen finally found two makeshift restrooms outside a hallway on the first floor, which charged ten yuan per person.

After borrowing money from Qian Shen again, the two of them finally used the facilities, grumbling the whole time.

By the time they returned to the arena, the eight groups had already been finalized.

Eight massive arenas rose into view, ready to host the elimination matches for all eight groups simultaneously.

Zhang Yu looked at the bracket and breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

Thank goodness Zhen and I aren't in the same group.

But her group…

Seeing the high-scoring contestant in Bai Zhenzhen's group, Zhang Yu frowned slightly.

They're very strong.

It was a demon-kin contestant from Red Pagoda High School.

He had a humanoid body but the head and striped fur of a tiger, looking like some kind of anthropomorphic tiger.

Previously, when Zhang Yu had used his Heaven's Eye Talisman to investigate, a series of component analyses had appeared over the contestant's head.

Conservation | Dragon-Tiger Demon Blood | Alchemical Vat | Steel Bones

Zhang Yu recalled Lei Jun's translation: "From a demon conservation, a tiger-demon bloodline mixed with dragon's blood. He's consumed a lot of alchemical enhancers and has undergone some kind of skeletal modification surgery."

I remember he scored 266 in the evaluation round, right? Zhang Yu thought. *That's the second-highest score among the Red Pagoda High School students.*

Based on his performance in the scoring round, Zhang Yu's assessment was that this demon-kin, named Hu Yuntao, was a well-rounded fighter with high strength, agility, offense, and defense, showing no obvious weaknesses in combat.

This guy didn't participate in the last Mana Competition, so he's probably not good at mana control.

But the fact that he's in the Martial Arts Tournament means his practical combat skills must be exceptional.

Zhang Yu's gaze swept over the sharp, gleaming claws on his hands.

Shouldn't demons have to get declawed to compete? It's like bringing your own weapons. What a cheat.

This has to be the kind of opponent Zhen hates most.

With a trace of concern, Zhang Yu walked toward his own group's designated area.

Don't go broke, Zhen. I don't have any more money to lend you.

…

Bai Zhenzhen arrived at her group's competition area.

The other three contestants were already there, hailing from White Dragon High School, Purple Cloud High School, and Red Pagoda High School.

The most conspicuous among them was the contestant from Red Pagoda High School, whose tiger-headed appearance hardly seemed human.

The four of them then drew lots, and Bai Zhenzhen was matched against Hu Yuntao.

After their one-on-one match, the victor would face the winner of the other pair to determine who would advance from the group.

Bai Zhenzhen touched her lower abdomen, feeling the power latent within as she slowly walked onto the arena.

I've held back for so long. Finally, I have a chance to use you.

Today, it's finally my turn to soar to the heavens and astonish everyone!

Across from her, Hu Yuntao ambled onto the stage, seemingly paying her no mind as he casually glanced around.

…

Hu Yuntao, like Xiong Bufan from the Mana Competition, came from the breeding center in the demon-kin conservation area.

But Hu Yuntao had never been ashamed of his origins, nor did he consider his demon-kin status inferior; on the contrary, deep in his bones, he held a profound pride in his race and bloodline.

For he possessed the blood of dragons; the draconic lineage flowed within him, making him far nobler than any mere mortal!

In the conservation area, his 'Father,' the director of Red Pagoda High School, would inseminate gestating females of every race each month, ensuring the mothers in the breeding center would conceive 'Father's' children.

Every month, hundreds upon thousands of demon-kin were born in the center, each bearing the dragon's blood of their 'Father' and thus destined for greatness.

From the moment of conception, these children were constantly injected with a variety of alchemical enhancers and subjected to adaptive training.

The weak work, the strong study—this was the principle Hu Yuntao learned as he grew.

Those who failed to adapt to the enhancers from a young age were sent to work in the food processing plants.

Later on, those found lacking in intelligence became workers in the ecological preserve.

And as they grew older still, those deemed to have insufficient potential were sent to work in garment factories, tanneries, textile mills, and the like.

Only by passing trial after trial, escaping one 'work opportunity' after another, could one finally reach the paradise known as Red Pagoda High School.

There, they would sign a contract with 'Father,' becoming one of his truly acknowledged sons.

Only then did they earn the opportunity to continue their studies and test into a university.

I don't want to work! I want to study! This was the cry in the heart of every demon-kin in the breeding center.

And Hu Yuntao was one such son of the School Director, having passed through countless trials to study at Red Pagoda High School.

He had endured innumerable tests, breaking free from the divergent path of labor time and again, to finally earn the right to attend high school and test for university.

Now, he would use the bloodline his father had bestowed upon him to defeat every opponent in this competition and make his father proud!

…

On the arena stage.

As the referee counted down—three, two, one—Hu Yuntao shot forward with a whoosh, his claws trailing a foul wind and a cold light, slashing toward Bai Zhenzhen like razor-sharp blades.

The woman before him was his inferior in size, strength, and speed. Hu Yuntao was confident he could shred her hands, tear open her throat, and claim total victory in the next instant.

This one strike will cost you at least 600,000 in medical bills.

But in the next moment, a powerful sense of danger welled up within him, causing him to instinctively halt and leap backward.

He looked at Bai Zhenzhen again and sensed wisps of spiritual energy in the air surging toward her, even beginning to condense at her fingertips into what looked like a faint sword-light.

Hu Yuntao's eyes shifted. "A combat spiritual root?"

…

In the spectator stands.

Qian Shen looked toward Bai Zhenzhen's arena and asked curiously, "What kind of spiritual root is that? I don't think I've ever seen it before. But the way it's

drawing in spiritual energy is impressive. It must be a Heavenly Spiritual Root, right?"

Zhao Tianxing added, "No wonder Zhen didn't have money for food. She must have spent it all on renting a combat spiritual root. It looks like she's dead set on winning."

Considering the travel time and the hours the tournament would last, Zhao Tianxing figured the rental fee for the combat spiritual root had to be at least tens of thousands. He was secretly astonished; this Martial Arts Tournament was a truly expensive endeavor.

…

On the arena stage.

Feeling the spiritual energy suffusing her body, Bai Zhenzhen thought, *They must all think I rented a combat spiritual root for the Martial Arts Tournament.*

But she knew that wasn't the case.

She would rather spend money on alchemical enhancers and cultivation techniques than on renting a spiritual root.

After all, she had a spiritual root of her own.

In order to hide this spiritual root, Bai Zhenzhen felt as if she'd been holding in the urge to use the restroom since childhood, and she had been holding it for ten years now.

"Zhen, you must control yourself. Don't absorb spiritual energy. Don't let anyone discover you have a spiritual root."

This was the first thing Bai Zhenzhen heard every single morning for countless years.

"Zhen, hold it in! Don't cause a spiritual energy disturbance. Don't let anyone discover you have a spiritual root."

Countless nights, she would be woken up and forced to regain control over her spiritual root, forcing it to cease its activity.

"Zhen, I know it's difficult, but we can only return to Songyang when you have it under control, when no one can discover your spiritual root."

It was like being surrounded by air but unable to breathe, finding water but unable to drink, or feeling the urge to relieve oneself but being denied a restroom.

Don't let them find the spiritual root!

Don't let them find the spiritual root!

Don't be discovered!

Don't be discovered!

Bai Zhenzhen held it in and held it in… until one day, she felt as if her spiritual root had been suppressed out of existence.

That was the happiest day of her life since she was old enough to understand.

After nine years of suppression, nine years of hiding, the troublesome thing was finally gone. She didn't have to hold back anymore.

But she soon discovered it hadn't disappeared, only hidden itself away. And it wasn't just the spiritual root that was hiding…

After "holding her breath" time and time again, the spiritual root had hidden her along with it.

She became like a ghost, and no one could see or perceive her… or perhaps, everyone else became like ghosts to her, and no one paid her any mind or spoke with her.

That night… it seemed as if she were the only person left in the entire world.

Until she found a way to make herself seen again.

…

Seeing the spiritual energy surging toward Bai Zhenzhen with increasing intensity, Hu Yuntao decided not to give her any more time and charged forward with a roar.

But in the next instant, Bai Zhenzhen vanished before his very eyes.

Hu Yuntao's eyes shot wide as he scanned the entire arena.

Nothing!

Nothing!

Nothing!

A stealth-type combat spiritual root?

To find her, he quickly retreated to a corner, his eyes scanning the entire stage before him, but he couldn't see the slightest trace of her.

Could it be…

In the next moment, he snapped his head up toward the sky, but still saw nothing!

An instant later, an extreme sense of danger washed over him.

Bai Zhenzhen had reappeared right in front of him, her finger jabbing toward his dantian.

Though the attack was sudden and perilous, Hu Yuntao's reaction was incredibly fast; the instant Bai Zhenzhen appeared, he swiped a claw toward her extended finger with lightning speed.

"Hmph! Weak and slow. Even with the element of surprise, how could you possibly beat me?"

But in the next moment, as if she had already seen through his movements, Bai Zhenzhen altered her finger-sword's path and retreated.

Hu Yuntao moved to pursue, only to feel a sharp pain at his feet as he was tripped.

It was all so perfectly timed it was as if he had actively charged forward to trip himself.

With a soft thud, Hu Yuntao watched himself tumble off the stage, his heart filled with indignation.

Roar!

"I don't accept this! I wasn't even using my full strength!"

Watching the flailing Hu Yuntao being dragged away by the scruff of his neck by the referee, Bai Zhenzhen nonchalantly flicked her fingertips.

"What an idiot. I wasn't using my full strength either."

In this match, Bai Zhenzhen was victorious!

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 70: Suppression

Having defeated a powerful opponent, Bai Zhenzhen glanced around, expecting her victory over a top student from Red Pagoda High School to have stunned the entire crowd.

But as she looked up, she realized almost no one was paying attention to the fight in her corner of the venue.

The vast majority of the audience was watching Song Hailong, Le Mulan, and the 300-point Zhang Yu.

Damn it! Bai Zhenzhen thought. *A bunch of fools blinded by scores, unable to open their eyes and see the real championship contender.*

Still, Bai Zhenzhen believed that as time went on, more and more people would surely take notice of her accomplishments.

Meanwhile, the other two students in Bai Zhenzhen's group had watched her fight against Hu Yuntao intently from start to finish.

Their original intent had been to observe Hu Yuntao, since Bai Zhenzhen's performance in the scoring round had been so poor; he was the opponent they were focused on.

They hadn't expected Hu Yuntao to inexplicably run to the edge of the stage and then get tricked out of the ring with a single careless move.

From their perspective, it was clear that Bai Zhenzhen hadn't disappeared at all.

Suddenly, they recalled the 300-point Zhang Yu, who had used a similar tactic to get the Yellow Turban Strongmen out of bounds.

A thought occurred to them both: *Is this a new tactic developed by Songyang High School?*

Using underhanded tricks to push people out of the ring, allowing the weak to defeat the strong?

The quality of these low-scoring students from other schools is just so poor.

Low-scoring students are of poor quality; the pair felt this accepted theorem of the three major high schools had once again been proven true.

However, despite their contempt, they both raised their guard, silently warning themselves not to be careless and suffer an embarrassing defeat if they faced Bai Zhenzhen later.

Just then, Bai Zhenzhen noticed Zhao Tianxing in the stands, waving and giving her a thumbs-up.

Hmph, that old Zhao. Bai Zhenzhen waved back in his direction, thinking, *As expected, you get plenty of emotional validation from these low-scoring students.*

…

In the spectator stands.

Zhao Tianxing beamed while giving a thumbs-up. "Zhen saw us."

"I can't believe she beat that Hu Yuntao from Red Pagoda High School so easily."

"At first, I was honestly worried he was going to eat her."

He Dayou commented dismissively, "Just luck. That tiger-demon is a classic case of high scores but low ability. Getting tripped out of the ring like that… even I could probably beat him."

Though he had felt for Bai Zhenzhen when she struggled against the Yellow Turban Strongmen, seeing her smug look after defeating Hu Yuntao was even more vexing to him now.

Qian Shen said, "I feel… it wasn't that simple."

"Why did that tiger suddenly run to the edge of the stage?"

Just then, Zhao Tianxing pointed toward Zhang Yu. "Zhang Yu's about to go up."

Zhao Tianxing remarked with a sigh, "Good thing Yu-boy and Zhen are in different brackets, one in the upper and one in the lower. They won't have to face each other early on."

He Dayou muttered darkly, "Maybe Zhang Pianpian pulled some strings."

He thought about how he, as the son of the School Director at Songyang High, could slightly rig the lottery for the practical exams.

For a super-tycoon like Zhang Pianpian, with over 2.5 billion in savings, arranging a small convenience for her people would be nothing.

Just then, Qian Shen asked in surprise, "Dayou, look. Isn't Zhang Yu's opponent that old classmate of yours from junior high?"

He Dayou started and quickly looked toward the stage.

When he saw Zhang Yu and Chu Qiuhe walk onto the stage together, He Dayou's brow furrowed.

Zhang Yu… He Dayou definitely didn't want this poor kid who had instantly defeated him to win.

But Chu Qiuhe… He Dayou didn't particularly care about his former classmate who had always looked down on him, but if he were to defeat a contestant from Songyang High School, that would also make him deeply uncomfortable.

Damn it… caught between a rock and a hard place. Couldn't they both just be eliminated?

…

On the arena stage.

Chu Qiuhe walked to the center of the stage first, ensuring he wouldn't be too close to the edge and get carelessly pulled off.

As he walked, Chu Qiuhe could feel the vital energy surging wildly through his body. His heart pounded, and the veins on his temples bulged, all of which pointed to one thing—he had used an alchemical enhancer.

The words of his competition coach echoed in his mind: "This is the latest combat supplement. It will enhance your muscle strength and stamina, temporarily boosting your physical fortitude to a 2.2 level."

Chu Qiuhe had hesitated. "Is that really necessary?"

"Although this Zhang Yu's stats are all inferior to yours," the coach had said, "his martial skill is decent, and he's good at developing tactics. Besides… do you really think a student from a school like that wouldn't use enhancers to beat one of us?"

Now, on the stage, feeling the enhancer's power spreading through him, invigorating every muscle and ounce of vital energy, Chu Qiuhe felt better than he ever had before.

This new enhancer is incredible!

I don't care about your techniques or tactics. Today, I'll crush you with absolute power.

With the countdown of three, two, one, the match began.

Chu Qiuhe lunged at Zhang Yu like a ferocious beast, leaving a trail of afterimages in his wake.

Boom!

He threw a punch, his entire body radiating a savage aura as he charged Zhang Yu like a massive truck.

Expert-level technique—Truck-Charging Fist! Level 2 Propulsion!

In ancient times, martial arts masters created techniques by observing flying birds, running beasts, mountains, rivers, the sun, and the moon.

Now, in this modern era, masters created techniques by observing bustling traffic and towering skyscrapers.

The Truck-Charging Fist was said to have been created by a martial arts master who spent three months observing a highway, grasping the artistic intent of a truck's impact and infusing the momentum of multi-ton heavy trucks into his fist style.

As a strength-based body tempering practitioner, Chu Qiuhe had chosen to cultivate the Truck-Charging Fist to perfectly leverage his natural power.

Now, as he unleashed the level-two Truck-Charging Fist with all his might, he truly seemed to transform into a terrifying hundred-ton truck, the stage groaning under his weight as he barreled head-on toward Zhang Yu.

Faced with this attack, Zhang Yu has only one option…

Chu Qiuhe was confident that Zhang Yu could not possibly meet his strength head-on; his only choice was to dodge.

But the Truck-Charging Fist had a counter for that.

Once he dodges, I'll follow up with the 'Truck's Sharp Turn,' adding the force of this punch into a high-speed shift. The fist's momentum will increase by another fifty percent.

I'll send you flying out of the ring with a single punch!

But in the next moment, to Chu Qiuhe's surprise, Zhang Yu met his charge head-on with a palm strike wreathed in white astral qi.

Boom!

As Chu Qiuhe's fist slammed into the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi, Zhang Yu felt a force like a stampeding herd of wild boars surging through it, threatening to tear the astral qi apart and send him flying.

Level 10 Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art—Total Concentration!

Everything around him instantly slowed to a crawl.

Watching Chu Qiuhe's fist sink into the astral qi inch by inch, Zhang Yu clearly and keenly discerned the trajectory of the incoming force, then slowly swirled the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi, guiding his opponent's power…

Thwack!

Chu Qiuhe felt his punch connect with the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi as if he were striking a slippery ball; his fist was guided aside, striking nothing but the air beside Zhang Yu.

But in the next instant, with a furious roar, Chu Qiuhe used his raw physical power to halt his momentum and launched another fierce punch at Zhang Yu.

Thwack!

But this punch was also deflected, leaving Chu Qiuhe wide open as he watched Zhang Yu slip inside his guard.

With a rapid-fire crackle, Zhang Yu landed three successive blows to Chu Qiuhe's chest, ribs, and abdomen.

Roar!

The combat supplement prevented Chu Qiuhe from feeling any pain. Instead, with blood rushing to his head, he forcefully brought his arms together, intending to crush Zhang Yu in a grapple.

With my strength, if I can just grab him, I can crush him…

But Zhang Yu seemed to anticipate his move, dodging the grapple by the narrowest of margins.

Chu Qiuhe threw another punch, only for its force to be deflected again before two more blows landed on his chest.

Damn it… just one punch!

With his physique, if I can just get my Truck-Charging Fist past that astral qi and land a single solid hit on his body, I can definitely crush him!

He felt certain that all he needed was one solid hit to win.

Roaring, Chu Qiuhe unleashed a relentless, stormy barrage of attacks.

And yet, he was the one being suppressed.

Zhang Yu was like a winged ball, dancing amid his attacks, either dodging his grapples by an impossible margin or deflecting his fists with the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi.

He keeps hitting me…

Am I… being suppressed?

He's using pure technique to suppress me, even though I'm stronger, faster, and have more stamina?

Chu Qiuhe couldn't believe what was happening, and in the next moment, the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi slammed into his abdomen again.

Although he still felt no pain, his seemingly endless stamina was interrupted, and his entire body froze for a fraction of a second.

Not good… I think I'm bleeding internally.

And Zhang Yu seized that momentary stiffness immediately.

Upper abdomen… chest… shoulder… waist…

Zhang Yu struck Chu Qiuhe's body repeatedly, interrupting every attempt he made to exert force with a heavy blow.

In that moment, he felt like a giant sandbag, allowing Zhang Yu to unleash his power upon him until he collapsed limply to the floor.

I… I lost?

Lost to a student from outside the three major high schools?

At that moment, Chu Qiuhe felt he could never face his classmates at White Dragon High School again.

He could already see his social standing plummeting, being ridiculed by the entire school, becoming a slave to his countless classmates. He wished he could just jump from the roof of the thirty-story White Dragon High School building…

And then, the horror of this dark future caused him to faint dead away.

With this, Zhang Yu was victorious!

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 71: Quarterfinals

Watching Chu Qiuhe fall at Zhang Yu's hands, Qian Shen said in astonishment, "Zhang Yu won."

Zhao Tianxing had also been observing the fight, but he hadn't understood it at all, asking in confusion, "How did he suddenly win? It felt like Zhang Yu was being completely suppressed."

Qian Shen replied thoughtfully, "Although Zhang Yu was being suppressed, if you think about it carefully… he actually blocked almost all of Chu Qiuhe's attacks. On the other hand, Chu Qiuhe, relying on his superior physique, was all offense and no defense."

He continued, a little uncertainly, "And then it seems Zhang Yu managed to land a direct hit on a vital point?"

"I heard that the old college entrance exams were purely arena battles, but combat has too many random factors. You can't select the most outstanding talents through fighting alone, which is why it was gradually revised into the current six-subject, 700-point system."

He Dayou gloated, "With this loss, Chu Qiuhe is finished at White Dragon High School."

Zhao Tianxing said, "He just lost one fight, that's a bit of an exaggeration, isn't it?"

He Dayou: "What would the consequences be if you lost to an ordinary high school?"

Zhao Tianxing's brow immediately furrowed. "What do students from ordinary high schools know about immortal cultivation? How could I possibly lose to them?"

He Dayou said flatly, "But what if you did lose?"

The sky would fall, it would be the shame of Songyang, the entire school would ridicule him, he'd end up on a rooftop… Just the thought of it sent a wave of darkness through Zhao Tianxing's mind.

Seeing the change in his expression, He Dayou let out a chuckle. "So you get it now, don't you?"

But then his eyes fell on Zhang Yu walking down from the stage, and his brow couldn't help but furrow again.

As much as Chu Qiuhe's loss secretly thrilled him, Zhang Yu's victory pained him.

…

Meanwhile, in another part of the arena.

The unconscious Chu Qiuhe was carried back to the White Dragon High School preparation area.

The competition coach glanced over but didn't rush to wake him up for a round of humiliation.

After all, only Chu Qiuhe had returned so far; the other competitors were still at the stages continuing their matches.

Of course, it was best to wait until everyone was back before making Chu Qiuhe kneel before all the students for a thorough shaming.

"To actually lose to someone from Songyang High School."

The mere thought of it made the coach's anger smolder. His upcoming bonus and performance review would be docked, he'd probably be laughed at by the other teachers, and get chewed out by the school leadership…

Just as the coach was thinking about this, another student from White Dragon High School was suddenly carried over.

The coach looked at the student on the stretcher and frowned. "And what happened to you?"

The student's face was pale as he stammered, "I beat the guy from Purple Cloud, but then Songyang High School's Bai Zhenzhen beat Hu Yuntao, and then she fought me… I lost to her."

As soon as he finished speaking, he felt the temperature around him drop by ten degrees, and he couldn't help but start trembling.

The coach said in a frigid tone, "How did you lose?"

The student lowered his head. "That Bai Zhenzhen rented a stealth-type spiritual root. She could flicker in and out of my perception."

The coach said coldly, "Her stats are so much lower than yours. Even with the element of surprise, it should have been very difficult for her to defeat you."

A trace of confusion flashed in the student's eyes. "I… I don't know either. Suddenly, she hit a vital point, and I just blacked out."

On the other stretcher, Chu Qiuhe, who had woken up long ago but had been feigning unconsciousness, suddenly breathed a sigh of relief, thinking to himself, *Thank goodness I'm not the only one who lost.*

In that instant, another thought suddenly surged in Chu Qiuhe's mind.

Zhang Yu… you'd better win a few more matches for me!

It would be best if you beat a few more people from White Dragon High School.

As long as Zhang Yu won enough, Chu Qiuhe felt his own loss wouldn't look so bad.

As for the wins and losses of his other classmates?

A classmate's victory couldn't be written on his resume, but a classmate's defeat would do more to preserve his own dignity.

At the same time, the battles on the various stages were all drawing to a close.

On one stage, Song Hailong let out a wild roar, grabbed his opponent, and unleashed a terrifying burst of strength, flinging the person away like a ball. The opponent crashed into the ten-meter-high ceiling with a thunderous boom, a feat that stunned the entire audience.

The White Dragon High School spectators in the stands erupted in frenzied applause, which only ceased in an instant when Song Hailong raised his right hand and clenched it into a fist.

On another stage, Le Mulan pointed a delicate finger, and streams of ice-blue mana shot out like sharp swords, piercing toward her opponent three meters away and carving out a series of sword marks.

No matter how desperately the opponent fought back, he was consistently intercepted by the ice-blue sword-light, kept at a distance of three meters. Not a single drop of his own splattered blood could get within three meters of Le Mulan.

Watching her opponent finally pass out from excessive blood loss, Le Mulan turned and slowly walked off the stage.

The Purple Cloud High School spectators in the stands were completely silent, not daring to make a sound. But the cheers for Song Hailong from the distant White Dragon section made Le Mulan frown.

"So noisy."

In the blink of an eye, all eight groups had determined their winners, and the top eight of the martial arts competition were officially decided.

Besides Zhang Yu, Bai Zhenzhen, Song Hailong, and Le Mulan, the top eight also included Lian Tianji, two students from Red Pagoda High School, and another student from White Dragon High School.

Zhang Yu looked at the match schedule for the quarterfinals.

"My first fight is against Lian Tianji, and after that, I'll have to face… the winner between Song Hailong and the other Red Pagoda student."

By Zhang Yu's own judgment, the Red Pagoda student was likely no match for Song Hailong.

This meant that if he wanted a shot at the championship, he would have to defeat Lian Tianji first, then Song Hailong.

But by comparison, Zhen's side of the bracket is even more difficult.

Zhang Yu glanced at the lower half of the bracket. Bai Zhenzhen needed to first defeat the top-ranked 300-point student from Red Pagoda High School, and then overcome Le Mulan from Purple Cloud High School, just to meet him in the final for the championship.

There wasn't much time for Zhang Yu to reflect, as the quarterfinal matches began almost immediately.

The number of stages in the arena was reduced from eight to four.

Zhang Yu walked onto the stage and saw that Lian Tianji was already waiting there.

Upon seeing Zhang Yu, Lian Tianji's eyes lit up. "Zhang Yu, I saw the replay of your last fight. It was a spectacular battle."

"To be able to use technique to suppress an opponent superior in strength, speed, and stamina—your understanding of the martial Dao has already surpassed my own."

"However, real combat is never just a contest of a single dimension."

With that, he swung the backpack from his back to his front. "And out of respect for you, I will now fight you with my full strength."

As soon as he finished speaking, Lian Tianji pulled a bottle of alchemical enhancer from his backpack and prepared to drink it.

Zhang Yu was already used to the sight of his opponent preparing to use enhancers. This was just how things were in Songyang City; this was the full strength of a high school student!

But just then, the referee on the side walked over and actually stopped Lian Tianji from drinking.

Now it was Zhang Yu's turn to be surprised. *Are enhancers banned in this competition?*

Is this still Kunxu?

However, after the referee inspected Lian Tianji's backpack and confirmed that all the drugs were compliant with regulations, he simply said, "Everything is fine, you may continue."

So, Lian Tianji first drank a bottle of enhancer, then swallowed a few capsules, and then began to pull out a syringe to inject into his arm.

As the drugs entered his system, Lian Tianji's body underwent a noticeable change.

His muscles seemed to swell, green veins bulged on the surface of his skin, and his breathing became deeper and heavier…

Watching his opponent continuously take more and more enhancers, Zhang Yu was speechless.

Seriously… could you please stop respecting me? Can't you just look down on me and underestimate me?

Then Zhang Yu gradually noticed something was off.

As Lian Tianji was injecting the enhancers, he was also reciting something to the side.

"I've been on this combat stimulant for three months. The effects are fantastic. It rapidly unleashes muscle potential, suppresses pain…"

Zhang Yu looked at another person from Purple Cloud High standing nearby, filming Lian Tianji with a phone, and couldn't help but ask, "Are you guys filming a commercial?"

Lian Tianji replied, "I often share my study and cultivation routines online and through live streams. I'm taking this opportunity to recommend some reliable and effective combat enhancers to my fans."

He then added, "Student Zhang Yu, you shouldn't be so dismissive of this."

"On the long road of the Immortal Dao, learning to earn money, and having the ability to earn money, is a very important matter."

"As the saying goes, 'Wealth is the path up the mountain of books, and riches are the boat on the endless sea of learning.' Those who only know how to spend money but not how to make it will not go far on the path of cultivation."

Zhang Yu looked at the referee and asked, "Can we start now?"

The referee shot him a sideways glance. "You want to start before he's even done taking his enhancers? Don't you think that would be an dishonorable victory?"

What the hell… Zhang Yu was completely done. "Fine, fine, take all you want."

A moment later.

"My apologies for the wait." Lian Tianji cupped his fist toward Zhang Yu. "Then… let us begin."

As the referee's countdown of 3, 2, 1 finished, both of them shot forward like lightning and collided with a thunderous boom.

Every clash between Lian Tianji's fists and Zhang Yu's Formless Cloud-Astral Qi produced a deafening sound.

Zhang Yu could feel an explosive force contained within his opponent's punches. The moment it made contact with his astral qi, it would detonate, scattering his Formless Cloud-Astral Qi and forcing him to constantly draw on his mana to replenish it.

This was Lian Tianji's expert-level cultivation technique—Explosive Wave Fist! Level 3 Push!

This fist art, inspired by the explosion of dynamite and the shockwaves of airflow, converted mana into a specialized form known as explosive fist-force. It could detonate the projected mana upon impact, not only doubling its power but also making it unpredictable and incredibly difficult to redirect.

Lian Tianji thought to himself, *The Limitless Cloud Hand excels at using the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi to borrow and redirect force.*

But my Explosive Wave Fist is an explosive force. The Formless Cloud-Astral Qi can't redirect it; it will just be blasted apart.

Zhang Yu's strength is less than mine, and his mana is not as abundant. He shouldn't be able to hold out for much longer.

In theory, that should have been the case.

But to Lian Tianji's astonishment, not only could Zhang Yu block his moves at the last possible second with perfect timing, but he was also gradually beginning to redirect his explosive fist-force, using it against him.

It was Zhang Yu using the Imperishable Seal Art to channel and shift Lian Tianji's mana.

"He can actually redirect my fist-force? This means that in addition to the Limitless Cloud Hand, he is also skilled in another profound martial art that can leverage an opponent's mana."

At this thought, Lian Tianji burst into laughter. "Zhang Yu, you truly have not disappointed me."

Just then, the person from Purple Cloud below the stage said, "Lord Lian Tianji, the sponsor said that if you can't defeat your opponent within a minute, they're going to dock your pay."

Lian Tianji's face darkened. "I know."

Zhang Yu felt his opponent's demeanor shift abruptly. The smile was gone, and his eyes now held faint traces of killing intent.

At the same time, the spiritual energy in the air began to churn and roil.

Zhang Yu's eyes narrowed.

Did Lian Tianji also bring a combat spiritual root to the competition?

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 72: A Bloody Battle

The fight could be taken slowly; Lian Tianji was in no hurry.

Although Zhang Yu's formidable technique compensated for much of the physical gap between them, Lian Tianji was still confident he could defeat him.

He was more than willing to spend a little more time fighting, to confront and learn from Zhang Yu's powerful techniques in the heat of battle.

After all, a martial arts competition was not a true life-or-death struggle. Absorbing nutrients during combat and becoming stronger was, in Lian Tianji's view, equally important.

But since the sponsor required him to finish the opponent quickly to showcase the effectiveness of the combat enhancers, he could no longer afford to drag things out.

Although both learning through combat and earning money through advertising could make one stronger…

Ultimately, the power of money was more important.

"My apologies, Zhang Yu."

"Though I'd like to exchange pointers with you a while longer, the sponsor's request cannot be ignored."

So, Lian Tianji directly activated the combat spiritual root he had rented. As the spiritual energy in the air stirred, it began to converge upon his hands.

Combat Spiritual Root—Surge.

Spiritual energy would continuously flood his body, actively participating in his mana circulation during combat to amplify the power of his martial arts.

It had a particularly miraculous effect when paired with his Explosive Wave Fist.

At this moment, he once again threw a punch at Zhang Yu, the surging force of the blow rushing forward.

The strike detonated the spiritual energy surrounding his fist, creating a shockwave that slammed mercilessly into Zhang Yu.

This method not only increased the power of the Explosive Wave Fist but also expanded its attack range several times over.

This meant Lian Tianji's fist didn't even need to touch Zhang Yu or his Formless Cloud-Astral Qi; the explosive shockwave could bombard Zhang Yu from a distance.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

One punch after another, Lian Tianji seemed to transform into a human cannon, relentlessly bombarding Zhang Yu.

The surging waves of energy instantly engulfed Zhang Yu's figure.

But just as Lian Tianji thought this series of attacks would be enough to defeat him.

To his astonished gaze, Zhang Yu, who was already covered in blood from the blasts, suddenly smashed through the shockwave, his hands wreathed in layers of white mist, and charged violently toward him.

"You're still fighting when you're this badly injured?"

"Aren't you afraid of going bankrupt?"

Though he didn't understand Zhang Yu's choice, Lian Tianji's fighting spirit soared with the advertisement running, and he wouldn't hold back in the slightest while on camera.

And so, the two unyielding fighters crashed into each other.

Fist-winds and palm-shadows devoured one another.

Amidst the deafening explosions, Lian Tianji felt his fists repeatedly hammering into Zhang Yu's body, while Zhang Yu's hands, coated in Formless Cloud-Astral Qi, also slammed into his own body again and again.

This left Lian Tianji even more bewildered.

Has he lost the focus to maintain his technique?

He's actually choosing to trade injuries with me in a brawl?

Smack! Smack!

Watching Zhang Yu's skin split open and blood erupt under the force of his Explosive Wave Fist, Lian Tianji predicted that his opponent couldn't last much longer.

But ten seconds later… the opponent was still trading blows with him.

Twenty seconds later… there was still no sign of him stopping.

"How is this possible!"

Lian Tianji stared at Zhang Yu, who, despite being covered in blood, was still as fierce as a dragon. In contrast, he himself had been hit in more and more places, and his injuries were gradually starting to warp the form of his fist technique.

At this moment, Lian Tianji found it utterly unbelievable.

What kind of enhancers did he take?

Meanwhile, inside Zhang Yu's body, astral qi rolled and surged, flowing like a great river through his entire being.

After his Limitless Cloud Hand reached level 10, Zhang Yu could already generate Formless Cloud-Astral Qi from any part of his body.

This meant he could circulate the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi to any location in his body without causing the slightest harm to himself.

So, after deciding to hide his level 10 Limitless Cloud Hand, he had devised a new tactic, which he called—Subcutaneous Astral Qi.

He circulated the Formless Astral Qi to various parts of his body but kept it hidden beneath his skin, not letting it erupt outwards.

Right now, the Formless Astral Qi was like a suit of armor worn under his skin, absorbing the various injuries that penetrated his flesh.

This was why, although Zhang Yu appeared to be drenched in blood, his wounds were merely superficial, without any real damage to his muscles or bones.

Conversely, as Lian Tianji traded blows with Zhang Yu, he was repeatedly rocked by the backlash from the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi, his own strength rebounding against him.

In particular, the more impatient he became, the more forcefully he struck, the more ferocious his attacks, the more tumultuous and overwhelming was the force that returned from Zhang Yu's body.

It was only the painkillers that suppressed these sensations, allowing him to continue fighting at full power.

But after the injuries steadily accumulated…

Oomph!

Lian Tianji suddenly coughed up a large mouthful of blood, feeling his body begin to tremble slightly.

"My strength, speed, and stamina are all clearly superior to his."

"In a close-quarters brawl, I'm actually losing?"

Looking at the blood-soaked Zhang Yu, who was obviously more heavily injured than he was, Lian Tianji couldn't understand why he hadn't collapsed yet.

"What's the point of winning like this? Can you even afford the medical fees?"

Just then, the person from Purple Cloud below the stage shouted, "Lord Lian Tianji, the sponsor is very displeased. If you can't defeat Zhang Yu in the next 30 seconds, they're pulling the ad and canceling all future collaborations…"

Pull the ad? Cancel collaborations?

Hearing these words, Lian Tianji's fighting spirit instantly surged. Like a startled beast, a new wave of strength emanated from his body.

"Must! Immediately! Now! Defeat! Zhang! Yu!"

Explosive Wave Fist! Self-Destruct Mode!

Using both spiritual energy and mana to fuel the explosion for this punch.

Accepting grievous injury to his arm in the pursuit of the absolute limit of his power.

In this moment, Lian Tianji unleashed his ultimate strength.

His right arm swelled violently as spiritual energy and mana poured into it.

Bang!

As Lian Tianji stomped his foot, the entire stage shook violently.

The next moment, his right arm, wrapped in a thick mist of blood, hurtled toward Zhang Yu with power that surpassed all limits!

Facing this ferociously powerful punch, Zhang Yu dared not be the least bit careless. The astral qi within him surged as he simultaneously activated the Limitless Cloud Hand and the Imperishable Seal Art.

The Formless Cloud-Astral Qi, now stained a crimson red with blood, met Lian Tianji's attack head-on.

In the next instant, their fist and palm connected. A violent explosion erupted from the stage, reverberating throughout the entire arena like a string of muffled thunder, drawing the attention of countless spectators.

Zhang Yu's entire body was once again blasted by the force, turning an even deeper shade of red.

The power crashed against him like a tidal wave, pushing him toward the edge of the stage.

Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!

But after four consecutive steps, to Lian Tianji's disappointment, he stood his ground firmly.

"You managed to neutralize even that punch? Your martial technique…"

Zhang Yu smiled faintly and said, "Thank you for the pressure you gave me in this fight. It finally allowed my Limitless Cloud Hand to break through its limit and reach level 4."

Hearing that Zhang Yu had achieved a breakthrough in the middle of their fight, Lian Tianji gave a bitter smile and finally collapsed to the ground.

At this moment, Lian Tianji's right arm was severely injured, and the pain from his other wounds flared up all at once, leaving him completely unable to fight on.

Lian Tianji said, "It's probably not just the Limitless Cloud Hand, is it? That art alone couldn't have held me off for so long."

Zhang Yu nodded, giving his prepared response. "I also trained in the mana-redirecting Imperishable Seal Art, and a body-hardening martial art."

Pretending to have trained in a body-hardening art to conceal the effect of his Subcutaneous Astral Qi—this was Zhang Yu's plan.

Lian Tianji nodded in understanding, his gaze toward Zhang Yu now filled with an incredibly complex mix of emotions.

"With Songyang High School's resources, you were actually able to master three such martial arts in just half a year of school, enough to close the gap in physical strength between us… Your talent for the martial Dao is something I truly envy."

The first-aid team quickly rushed onto the stage, lifted Lian Tianji onto a stretcher, and carried him away for treatment.

The blood-soaked Zhang Yu was also being carried away, but as soon as he saw a medic approaching, he quickly raised a hand to stop him, shouting, "Wait! First, tell me how much it'll cost to treat these injuries! And how much will insurance cover?"

Zhang Yu was genuinely afraid of winning on the stage only to be bankrupted off it and forced to withdraw.

The emergency medic frowned. "You're this injured and you have time to worry about that?"

In the medic's eyes, the blood-drenched Zhang Yu wasn't bleeding blood; he was bleeding money.

Injuries this severe? If he didn't charge at least a few hundred thousand, it would be a disgrace to his medical license.

The medic began his examination, saying, "With injuries this severe, if we don't treat them immediately…"

He suddenly paused. "Huh? There don't seem to be any major injuries?"

Protected by the Subcutaneous Astral Qi, combined with his extreme focus and precise control, Zhang Yu had constantly avoided having his vital points attacked and prevented repeated blows to the same areas… This made his injuries far less severe than they appeared.

"They're just superficial wounds?"

The medic said in surprise, "Five thousand for the examination, fifteen thousand for treatment, and another ten thousand for alchemical enhancers. These are all standard items, covered by insurance. Shall we begin?"

Hearing the quote, Zhang Yu was stunned. "That expensive?"

The medic said impatiently, "If you don't get treated properly, how are you going to participate in the next matches? It's all covered by insurance anyway, what are you afraid of?"

"Fine, fine, treat me."

Zhang Yu sighed internally. *Ugh, my insurance premiums are going to go up now.*

...

In the White Dragon High School rest area.

"This Lian Tianji has some skill."

"The physical strength he's displaying must be around 2.3, right?"

"That fist art is formidable. Paired with his combat spiritual root, his overall combat strength at Purple Cloud High should be second only to Le Mulan's..."

"That student from Songyang High is being completely suppressed. He should be losing soon..."

But a moment later, to the utter shock of the White Dragon High School students, it was Lian Tianji who lay defeated on the stage while Zhang Yu remained standing, completely upending their expectations.

"Lian Tianji actually lost?"

"This Zhang Yu managed to bridge such a massive gap with just martial skill..."

"And the enhancers! He must have taken some incredibly potent combat enhancers to last until the end."

"Looking at it this way, Old Chu losing to this Zhang Yu doesn't seem so outrageous after all."

On his stretcher, Chu Qiuhe, who had been feigning unconsciousness, felt his eyelids twitch slightly. He thought to himself, *Go for it, Zhang Yu!*

At this moment, Chu Qiuhe desperately wanted Zhang Yu to keep winning. Though he knew it was impossible, he couldn't help but hope that Zhang Yu would somehow blast Song Hailong off the stage and take the championship.

He felt that he was probably the one person in the entire arena who most wanted Zhang Yu to win, since it was directly tied to his own reputation and status at White Dragon High School for the next two and a half years.

After all, losing to someone from Songyang? That was just pathetic.

But losing to the champion of the martial arts competition? Well, that would just mean the opponent was too strong, and it was hardly his fault for losing.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 73: A Raging Storm

Just as Zhang Yu and Lian Tianji were walking onto the arena stage.

On another stage.

Bai Zhenzhen sat cross-legged, awaiting her opponent from Red Pagoda High School, Xiong Wenwu, a demon-kin student over 2.7 meters tall and weighing nearly a ton; like Song Hailong and Zhang Yu, he was also a high schooler who had achieved a score of 300.

At this moment, the demon-kin student was in the Red Pagoda High School rest area, glaring at Hu Yuntao.

"You lost? Why did you lose? And to someone from Songyang?"

Xiong Wenwu slapped Hu Yuntao's forehead again and again, and the same Hu Yuntao who was so ferocious on the stage was now like a little kitten, obediently squatting before him for a scolding.

However, the tail swishing restlessly behind his backside betrayed the impatience in his heart.

With deep disappointment, Xiong Wenwu said, "Failing to even pass the group stage means you don't get a ranking at all, and that's one less good result on your resume."

"Do you have any idea that this one missing result could get you rejected from your university interviews?"

"If you can't get into a good university, Father will disown you and send you straight to the factories to work!"

Disowned! Sent to the factories!

Hu Yuntao, who had been listening obediently, couldn't help but stiffen at these words.

Why did so many demons from the conservation area have no fathers? It was because demons who couldn't succeed in their studies and could only work were directly disowned by their fathers.

"Do you know what working in a factory means?"

Xiong Wenwu continued his tirade, "It's hard for demons to find jobs, so you'll have no choice but to work in Father's factory, where you'll undergo modification and be grafted onto the assembly line, eating, drinking, and defecating there until you die, just like those ox demons, horse demons, and monkey demons, spending your entire life paying off your breeding loan."

Hu Yuntao's fists clenched as he recalled a factory he had once visited, where countless workers were fused with an assembly line forged from the flesh and blood of a great demon, working day and night without rest. The thought of all the demon-kin seniors on those lines—those who had almost finished elementary school, middle school, or high school—filled his heart with a surge of fear.

"After more than ten years of difficult study to get into high school, is your final destination really the factory?"

Xiong Wenwu continued to berate him, "If you reach the peak in university, with a degree from a prestigious school in hand, who would dare disown you? Who could drag you off to a factory?"

Hu Yuntao's face was filled with shame. "Big Brother, I know I was wrong. In the next competition, I'll give it my all and won't be the least bit complacent again."

Xiong Wenwu sighed, "I just don't want to see your years of hard study go to waste, to see you unable to attend university and instead be grafted onto an assembly line for the rest of your miserable life after graduation. Father would lose a good son, and I would lose another brother."

"What happens from here on out depends on your own performance."

"As for today's matter, I'll start by avenging you."

With that, he turned and strode quickly toward the arena stage.

Hu Yuntao called out a reminder from behind him, "Big Brother, that girl has a stealth-type spiritual root that can reduce an opponent's perception. You have to be careful…"

Xiong Wenwu waved his hand dismissively, then broke into a sprint and leaped, his nearly one-ton body descending like a small mountain, causing the entire stage to boom and shake violently.

"Woman, I never know what it means to hold back in a real fight. If you feel like you're about to die, just hurry up and surrender."

After saying this, Xiong Wenwu took out three syringes and jabbed them forcefully into his own neck.

With a hissing sound, three tubes of alchemical enhancers were instantly pushed into his veins, causing every hair on his body to stand on end and the muscles on his bear-like face to bulge.

Just looking at her opponent's height and weight, Bai Zhenzhen could feel the astonishing power he contained.

And based on Lei Jun's prior assessment, Bai Zhenzhen knew that this demon-kin student, Xiong Wenwu, likely possessed the greatest physical strength among all the first-year high school students present.

Approximately between 2.5 and 2.6.

Hooo…

Exhaling deeply, Bai Zhenzhen also felt the release of the spiritual root within her.

At this moment, she felt as if a restraint on her mind had been lifted, and countless martial arts moves she had learned and witnessed surged through her thoughts, coming alive.

Ever since entering high school and beginning her martial arts training.

She, who had once only known how to use her spiritual root for concealment… had started to gain a deeper and deeper understanding of martial arts after being exposed to them, not only learning them faster and faster but also gradually being able to see the flaws in various techniques after actual combat.

3, 2, 1, begin!

As the referee's whistle blew, Xiong Wenwu leaped up abruptly, diving forward like a cannonball.

I can't block it head-on, I can only retreat first.

Bai Zhenzhen shot backward, and at the same time, a flicker of spiritual energy appeared at her fingertips as a sharp sword qi burst forth from her body.

Expert-level cultivation technique—Body-Piercing Sword Qi, Level 3.

A foot-long blade of sword qi extended from Bai Zhenzhen's fingertip, stabbing toward the freshly landed Xiong Wenwu.

But as a flurry of fur scattered through the air, Bai Zhenzhen felt as if her sword had struck a steel plate. After cutting through the fur and outer skin, it struggled to penetrate deeper into the muscle.

A protective cultivation technique? And the effect of a combat spiritual root, plus immense physical strength…

Bai Zhenzhen's brow furrowed, and in the next moment, her figure vanished from Xiong Wenwu's sight.

But Xiong Wenwu was prepared for this. Without the slightest hesitation, like a rampaging beast, his claws glinted with a cold light as he attacked the spot where Bai Zhenzhen had disappeared, relentlessly and without pause, like a raging storm.

While attacking, Xiong Wenwu was also sniffing the air wildly with his nose, apparently trying to determine Bai Zhenzhen's position by scent.

Bai Zhenzhen's eyes widened as she watched his movements. With the enhancement of her spiritual root, she could clearly see the spiritual energy fluctuations caused by his every action and every move.

She could even faintly predict his subsequent attacks based on the flow of this spiritual energy in the air.

But even when combining this with her stealth ability, after a series of last-second dodges, wounds began to appear on her arms, thighs, and waist.

The claws swept past her skin and muscle like a searing blade slicing through butter, easily leaving behind terrifying wounds with flesh curling at the edges.

In contrast, her Body-Piercing Sword Qi could only ever shave off some of his fur, leaving behind a few insignificant scratches.

There's just too great a difference in power and speed.

At most, I have another four or five seconds before I'm defeated.

Despite this, Bai Zhenzhen felt incredibly calm at this moment.

As her opponent executed more and more moves and the surrounding spiritual energy grew denser, his techniques and body became clearer in her eyes.

In her vision, Xiong Wenwu was like a gigantic furnace, with more and more spiritual energy and mana condensing within him, burning fiercely to power his formidable physique.

Beyond that, Bai Zhenzhen could also see that Xiong Wenwu's skin was densely covered in spiritual energy, as if he were wearing it like a suit of armor.

No weaknesses anywhere on his body… No, there are weaknesses.

As another set of claw marks, deep enough to reveal bone, was carved into her calf, Bai Zhenzhen gradually saw her opponent's flaws.

Flaws in his techniques… flaws in his body…

Finally, she took a step, like a butterfly dancing gracefully in a storm.

Step by step, she passed through the biting cold that rushed toward her, step by step, she evaded the deadly sharpness.

I don't want to be stuck on the first floor working for the rest of my life…

I want to get into one of the Ten Greats!

I want to walk further on the path of cultivation!

The sword qi at Bai Zhenzhen's fingertip roared as she slashed toward the flaw in her vision.

…

In the spectator stands.

Qian Shen and the other two stared wide-eyed at the clash between Xiong Wenwu and Bai Zhenzhen.

Xiong Wenwu's assault was too fierce, his movements too swift, pressing down on Bai Zhenzhen like a clap of thunder.

It was so intense that the three of them couldn't spare a single thought to speak, and even from a distance, they felt the illusion of being crushed by his presence.

Bai Zhenzhen's figure appeared especially tiny in front of Xiong Wenwu, giving off a feeling of being far too fragile.

Qian Shen thought to himself, *He's too ferocious. Just a glancing blow breaks the skin, and if she takes a direct hit, Bai Zhenzhen will be severely injured, if not dead.*

She's going to lose…

Seeing a spray of blood erupt from Bai Zhenzhen's calf as another wound was added, the three of them couldn't help but feel their hearts sink, as if they could already see her mangled body.

But in the very next moment, they watched in shock as Bai Zhenzhen passed through the storm of claw shadows, then sent a reverse slash of sword qi outward.

Xiong Wenwu's figure seemed to pause slightly, and then a great spray of blood erupted from his back.

Zhao Tianxing said in astonishment, "Did she break through his defense?"

He Dayou added, "She couldn't even get through Xiong Wenwu's muscles before, how did it suddenly work now?"

Qian Shen frowned in deep thought. "Could it be that she struck a flaw in his cultivation technique?"

Watching the blood gushing more and more violently from Xiong Wenwu's back, gradually resembling a fountain, Qian Shen exclaimed in shock, "Did she hit an artery? The amount of blood is terrifying!"

In the arena on the other side.

Lei Jun watched Xiong Wenwu, who was hemorrhaging from behind, and as he looked at the location of the bleeding, his eyes suddenly lit up.

"It's a hemorrhoid! And an external one!"

"That's right, most of the demon clan originally walked on all fours. After taking human form to study and cultivate, they have to sit for long periods every day, so their hemorrhoids must be more severe and larger."

"Especially an external one that's already outside the body, unprotected by his body tempering cultivation technique!"

"On top of that, Xiong Wenwu was just moving violently and took so many potent drugs, his whole body is engorged with blood, making this hemorrhage even worse."

Lei Jun grew excited. "To think she could find such a weakness! It really wasn't a waste of my time tutoring you for so long…"

But in the next moment, Xiong Wenwu's eyes on the stage turned crimson, and he let out a furious roar like that of a dying beast.

Xiong Wenwu roared in his heart, *I want to study! I don't want to die on an assembly line! I want to always be my father's son!*

In the next instant, as Xiong Wenwu spun at high speed, a sky full of blood and claw shadows shot out in all directions.

"Not good!" Lei Jun's gaze hardened. "This demon has gone berserk! He's attacking completely at random…"

Looking at Bai Zhenzhen, whose leg was injured and who was now caught in Xiong Wenwu's onslaught, he knew that with her movements restricted by her injury, it would be extremely difficult for her to dodge such a chaotic, patternless attack.

By the time Lei Jun reached the side of the stage.

He saw that Xiong Wenwu had already collapsed to the ground, covered in blood.

Nearby, Bai Zhenzhen stood gasping for breath, and besides the scratches all over her body, there was nothing below her right elbow.

Her right arm had been torn off by the frenzied Xiong Wenwu.

Bai Zhenzhen wins!

Lei Jun quickly picked up her severed arm and carried Bai Zhenzhen to the first-aid area.

The emergency doctor took one look and couldn't help but laugh internally, but when he turned to see his colleague taking over Xiong Wenwu's case, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy.

Massive blood loss, cultivation overexertion, organ failure, plus hemorrhoid surgery, and his physical strength is so high… that bear demon will cost at least several hundred thousand.

With a sigh, he turned his attention back to Bai Zhenzhen.

But just as he was about to act, Bai Zhenzhen struggled and said, "How much is it? Is it covered by insurance?"

The emergency doctor said flatly, "Examination, basic treatment, and reattaching the arm will be eighty-eight thousand for you. The remaining thirty thousand for other procedures isn't covered by insurance, you'll have to pay out of pocket."

"Out of pocket?" Bai Zhenzhen said angrily, "I have insurance and you want me to pay thirty thousand out of pocket?"

The doctor ignored her and simply urged, "If you want treatment, do it now. If the arm becomes severely necrotic, I won't be able to treat it here. By the time you get to a hospital, it might cost you upwards of three hundred thousand."

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 74: Poor, The Semifinals

In the semifinals, Xiong Wenwu's massive blood loss was clearly the most eye-catching event.

Many spectators looked over because of all the blood on the ground, then were surprised to find that a student from Songyang High School had actually defeated Red Pagoda High School's strongest contender this time.

Hu Yuntao rushed over immediately, taking Xiong Wenwu for treatment.

When he heard that Xiong Wenwu's hemorrhage was caused by a hemorrhoid, Hu Yuntao subconsciously clenched his buttocks.

What do I do about this? Does it mean relying on surgery? Go to the hospital for hemorrhoid surgery every time it recurs?

The thought of the repeated surgical fees made Hu Yuntao's heart ache.

Damn it! Why do I also have external hemorrhoids! Why couldn't they be internal! If they were internal, they would be protected by my body tempering cultivation technique, and I wouldn't have to spend money on surgery.

The competition coach at his side patted his shoulder and smiled.

"Silly boy, what do people do when they discover their head is being targeted as a weakness?"

"They practice Iron Head Kung Fu, of course!" Hu Yuntao's eyes lit up. "Are you saying?"

"That's right." The coach's gaze suddenly turned cold, and looking at Hu Yuntao and the now-bandaged Xiong Wenwu, he said frigidly, "Prepare for ascetic training as soon as you get back to school. School Director Long is extremely dissatisfied with your performance this time."

The emergency doctor, listening to their conversation nearby, couldn't help but think, *The head is a vital point. Couldn't he just wear a helmet?*

…

In another part of the first-aid area.

Hearing the doctor's price, Bai Zhenzhen's expression darkened. After asking a few more times, she suddenly said, "For these scratches on my body, don't worry about cosmetic repairs or preventing scars. Just use the fastest and simplest treatment method. That should all be covered by insurance, right?"

The emergency doctor sighed helplessly. "Fine, fine. Then ninety-eight thousand covered by insurance, but these wounds on your body will definitely leave scars…"

As he spoke, the doctor circulated his mana, his hands a flurry of afterimages as he began cleaning, reattaching the arm, suturing, stopping the bleeding… applying various medicines… and finally infusing a type of healing mana into Bai Zhenzhen's body to accelerate her wound recovery.

Although the fee wasn't cheap, the doctor's skills were indeed excellent.

After just over half an hour, Bai Zhenzhen felt that the majority of her injuries had already healed.

However, scars were left on her arms, thighs, calves, and waist.

After being sent back to the rest area, Bai Zhenzhen swung her arm and smiled. "His technique isn't bad. I feel like using it at eighty or ninety percent strength won't be a problem."

As for the scars on her body, Bai Zhenzhen naturally didn't care.

Procedures like cosmetic surgery and scar removal were things only rich people did; they had nothing to do with her.

Lei Jun, however, looked at Bai Zhenzhen with a complex expression and said, "Are you planning to continue competing?"

Bai Zhenzhen smiled. "Of course. As long as I beat that Le Mulan in the next match, I can meet Yu-boy in the finals, right? Then we'll get first and second place, and you'll look good too, Old Lei."

Lei Jun sighed. "But you've already used up most of your insurance coverage. I've seen Le Mulan's fighting style; her sword qi is sharp and has a wide attack range. If you fight her… the medical bill could easily climb to over a hundred thousand, or even several hundred thousand."

Bai Zhenzhen fell silent at his words.

Lei Jun said, "You've already made it to the top four, which is an excellent achievement to put on your resume. Why risk continuing the competition?"

What he left unsaid was… *After all, you aren't aiming for one of the Ten Greats, so winning first place in the martial arts competition isn't that important for you.*

Lei Jun continued to persuade her, "Your fighting style makes you prone to injury. If you had a few hundred thousand on hand and didn't have to worry about post-match treatment, I would never advise you against it."

"But are you sure you want to take on a debt of over a hundred thousand, possibly even several hundred thousand, for this martial arts competition?"

Seeing that Bai Zhenzhen was still silent, Lei Jun advised helplessly, "Zhen, we're different from those rich people. When we compete, we also have to consider the cost-effectiveness."

Just then, a figure limped over in pain. It was Zhang Yu, who had just finished his treatment.

Seeing Zhang Yu covered in injuries, Lei Jun sighed inwardly. *It seems Zhang Yu won't be able to continue competing either.*

However, Zhang Yu stretched his arms and legs and said, "Don't worry, Old Lei, I was careful during the fight. I didn't injure any vital points, it's all just superficial wounds."

"Plus, I just mastered a new body hardening technique yesterday, so the injuries only look serious. The insurance only cost me thirty thousand…"

Lei Jun was skeptical at first, but after checking Zhang Yu's condition, he looked at him in surprise.

"You kid, you really didn't get hurt much, did you?"

"I'll go get you two something to eat and drink. You guys hurry up and rest."

Not long after Lei Jun left, Zhang Yu, while looking at his phone, said to the silent Bai Zhenzhen beside him,

"Zhen, I heard what you guys were talking about. You know I've maxed out all my available credit, so I can't get much more, but I can borrow some from my sister."

"But it's not easy for my sister either. I asked, and I can borrow at most two hundred thousand from her. Do you think that's enough for your next match?"

Bai Zhenzhen replied, "I'll borrow from my godmother myself and pay it back myself. You don't need to borrow for me. But I've watched that Le Mulan carefully. She's a bit tricky to fight and it's too easy to get injured. To beat her… it might cost four hundred thousand to get patched up."

Bai Zhenzhen sighed and said, "Yu-boy, don't you wish we were rich?"

Having lived two lives, Zhang Yu was rendered speechless by her words.

He hadn't been born into a wealthy family in either of his two lifetimes, so what could he possibly say?

…

A short while later, after all the quarterfinal matches had ended and the contestants had received proper treatment, ensuring their lives were not in danger.

The list of the four semifinalists was announced to the entire venue: Zhang Yu, Song Hailong, Le Mulan, and Bai Zhenzhen.

The upcoming semifinal matches would be Zhang Yu versus Song Hailong, and Le Mulan versus Bai Zhenzhen.

Finally, the winners of these two matches would fight to determine the competition champion.

And perhaps because the semifinals were considered to be of greater interest, the two matches would not be held simultaneously but one after the other.

After the referee drew lots for the match order, the first match was Le Mulan versus Bai Zhenzhen, and the second was Zhang Yu versus Song Hailong.

…

On the stage.

Le Mulan looked at Bai Zhenzhen before her, and her brow furrowed slightly as her gaze swept over the ugly scars on her opponent's hands and feet.

She asked in confusion, "Why do you have scars on your body?"

Bai Zhenzhen shrugged. "No money to fix them."

Le Mulan was shocked. Although she knew that poor people were very poor, the fact that someone couldn't even afford to have the scars on their body repaired struck her as 'appalling'.

Is this what it's like to be poor? How terrifying.

Facing an opponent who couldn't even afford proper treatment, her fighting spirit instantly diminished, and a trace of pity even arose within her.

Although her opponent had managed to seize Xiong Wenwu's weakness to win as the underdog, Le Mulan wasn't concerned.

Because when facing any first-year high school student, Le Mulan had absolute confidence… that she had no weaknesses.

With the countdown, 3, 2, 1, begin!

Le Mulan's fingertips tapped repeatedly, and sharp blades of sword qi slashed out through the air, flying directly towards Bai Zhenzhen's position.

It was the Stardust Swordplay that Le Mulan had painstakingly cultivated to the fifth level.

At the fifth level, the Stardust Swordplay could already injure an enemy from a distance of five meters.

Seeing this five-meter-long sword qi, Bai Zhenzhen's expression changed, and she hurriedly activated her own Body-Piercing Sword Qi to block.

But Bai Zhenzhen soon discovered that Le Mulan's Stardust Swordplay was not just about sharp sword qi. Each strand of qi seemed to be part of a military formation, interconnected in a complex manner, always managing to besiege her from various angles.

And if Bai Zhenzhen tried to break through the obstruction of this sword qi, she would feel her opponent's attacks grow more concentrated with every step she took.

She felt as if she were in a large array, her space for movement constantly being compressed by Le Mulan's continuous stream of sword qi, and the situation was becoming increasingly dangerous.

She tried to enter a stealth state, but her position was quickly revealed by the collision of her blocking sword qi with the incoming attacks.

Her opponent's sword qi was simply too fast and dense; with her speed and explosive power, she couldn't rely solely on movement to dodge.

As for waiting for the opponent's mana to run out? Bai Zhenzhen could see that the mana within her opponent's body was incredibly turbulent, showing no signs of depletion. If she tried to exhaust her opponent's mana, her own would likely run out first.

Bai Zhenzhen sighed inwardly.

Sigh… using stealth on the stage is really disadvantageous. It's only most effective the first time you use it. Afterwards, when opponents are prepared, it's not as useful.

Le Mulan, however, was not at all surprised to see Bai Zhenzhen struggling.

My Stardust Swordplay forms its own array. The sword qi is disciplined and orderly, and the techniques are flawless.

Unless someone with a powerful protective cultivation technique forces their way through, it's impossible for an expert of the same level to get close to me.

And in Le Mulan's eyes, Bai Zhenzhen was by no means on the same level.

There are weaknesses, Bai Zhenzhen thought to herself. *But my own stats aren't high enough. If I force it, I might win, but I'll be severely injured, right?*

This single sword strike could cost three or four hundred thousand…

Should she risk several hundred thousand?

Bai Zhenzhen felt herself hesitate.

She had the courage to break through Xiong Wenwu's storm-like assault and strike at the flaw in his body.

But when it came to gambling several hundred thousand for a victory, she hesitated.

And it was this very hesitation that made her understand that this sword strike would be difficult to succeed with, because she no longer had the determination to press forward at all costs.

Sigh…

And so, a few seconds later, seeing that she was about to be completely surrounded by sword qi, Bai Zhenzhen chose to surrender.

As she walked off the stage, a flicker of relief crossed her eyes.

In the end, my strength is still insufficient, and I'm too poor.

Forget it. I'll just tell Yu-boy about this weakness. Let my good son teach this woman a lesson for me. It shouldn't cost him that much money.

With Le Mulan's victory, the semifinals moved on to the second match—Zhang Yu versus Song Hailong.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 75: Dragonback Mountain Toppler

Le Mulan returned to the rest area for Purple Cloud High School and saw Lian Tianji kneeling on the ground.

She walked over to him and, treating him like a small stool, sat directly on his back.

This was his punishment for failure. For the next three days, whenever he appeared before her, he would have to serve as her bench.

Lian Tianji asked, "Is it over already?"

He had reviewed the fight between Bai Zhenzhen and Xiong Wenwu. Although Bai Zhenzhen's stats were lacking, her practical combat ability was exceedingly strong, and she could always perceive her opponent's weaknesses. Lian Tianji had originally thought Bai Zhenzhen would be able to force a few more moves out of the hallowed grade-level number one.

Le Mulan frowned, kicking Lian Tianji's side with her raised right foot.

"A bench shouldn't speak," she said coolly.

Lian Tianji immediately shut his mouth.

However, Le Mulan added another sentence, saying, "She ran out of money for treatment, though it would have just wasted a bit more time even if she had it."

Lian Tianji understood instantly. That was how the world worked—money was a part of one's strength, and a lack of money was a reflection of weakness.

Bai Zhenzhen was poor, and…

Lian Tianji thought to himself, *It's only natural for the poor to lose to the rich.*

Just then, Zhang Yu and Song Hailong ascended the stage.

Lian Tianji slowly turned his head, his gaze fixed on the fighting ring.

After being defeated, a person often had two ways of coping.

Either claim they were careless.

Or praise the opponent for being too strong.

The former was more disgraceful, while the latter allowed one to save face.

Therefore, Lian Tianji also wanted to choose the latter.

If Zhang Yu beats Song Hailong, I might even be able to get my advertising partnership back…

After all, if that happened, his situation would change from 'defeated by a Songyang student' to 'a narrow loss to a finalist'.

"You can do it, Zhang Yu!"

Also cheering for Zhang Yu in his heart was Chu Qiuhe, back in the White Dragon High School rest area. He couldn't even stop himself from secretly cursing Song Hailong.

Although, as a White Dragon student, he knew full well how terrifying Song Hailong was, a sliver of fantasy still welled up in his heart.

Maybe? Maybe if he gets careless, he'll lose by accident? Song Hailong… only if you lose can the rest of us save face.

As Song Hailong spread his arms and raised his hands high on the stage, a tsunami of cheers erupted from the audience.

"Song Hailong! Number one!"

"Song Hailong! Number one!"

Listening to the perfectly synchronized shouts from the White Dragon contingent, Zhao Tianxing felt that Zhang Yu looked utterly isolated and helpless on the stage.

He couldn't help but think, *Shouldn't we be cheering for Zhang Yu, too?*

But when he voiced this idea, he saw He Dayou, who was beside him, quickly turn his head away and pretend he hadn't heard.

Qian Shen also spoke with some difficulty, "Let's just forget it. This is White Dragon's home turf, after all."

Watching the imposing, unified cheers of the White Dragon students, Zhao Tianxing's initial desire to cheer for Zhang Yu gradually faded.

As he thought about how nervous he felt just watching from afar, he found it impossible to imagine the pressure Zhang Yu must be under, standing on the stage himself.

...

On the stage.

As Song Hailong's right hand clenched into a fist, the cheers from the audience instantly died away, and the entire venue fell silent once more.

Song Hailong looked at Zhang Yu and laughed heartily.

"I really didn't expect a kid from Songyang to be able to fight his way past so many opponents and reach the semi-finals."

"As a reward, I'll help you lower the difficulty of this match."

As he spoke, Song Hailong ran a hand through his spiky hair, and in the next moment, a string of digits appeared on his forehead.

10,000,000?

Just as Zhang Yu was wondering, Song Hailong directly answered his unspoken question.

"This is a built-in feature of my external spiritual root. It displays my medical insurance coverage limit."

"My current limit is ten million. If you can burn through this entire ten-million treatment budget, I'll admit defeat."

Of all the nerve... you actually just displayed your own health bar, didn't you.

Zhang Yu stared intently at the number, beginning to contemplate its impact on the coming fight.

But the thought that his opponent had insurance to cover ten million while he only had enough for a hundred thousand... no, now only enough for seventy thousand worth of injuries, filled Zhang Yu with a sense of helplessness.

In the next instant, however, he had already activated the heart art of the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, suppressing all his negative emotions and mustering his will to fight, dedicating himself wholeheartedly to the battle before him.

Meanwhile, in the audience, because Song Hailong's physique was so formidable, his voice always resonated throughout the arena, allowing the spectators to hear and see everything. His display now sparked a wave of gasps and praise.

"As expected of White Dragon's number one! His insurance coverage is a full ten million!"

"He's so rich! No wonder he's so good!"

"Obviously. How could a poor person be as outstanding as Song Hailong?"

"Song Hailong has the highest scores on the monthly exams and he's so wealthy. I think they should just give him the martial arts competition championship directly!"

And on the stage, Song Hailong beckoned to Zhang Yu.

"You go first. If I make a move, you might not get the chance."

Seeing Song Hailong's completely unguarded posture, Zhang Yu sent a probing palm strike, empowered by Formless Cloud-Astral Qi, slamming it fiercely into his opponent's chest.

With a crackling boom, the palm, powerful enough to shatter stone monuments, landed on Song Hailong's body, yet Zhang Yu felt as if he had struck a massive rubber tire.

Not only did his opponent's body not budge an inch, but the ten million on his forehead only decreased by 300.

Zhang Yu recalled what Lei Jun had told him about the Elephant Tendon Body.

"This Song Hailong has been implanted with elephant demon muscle. Mana channeled through the elephant demon muscle can be used to directly fortify the physical body, making his strength and damage resistance incalculable by normal standards."

On top of that, his physical strength is already far beyond mine, and he has the protective effect of the external 'Embodiment Spiritual Root'...

Clearly, because of Song Hailong's powerful physique, he had taken Zhang Yu's palm strike without suffering any significant injury.

At the same time, Song Hailong shook his head and said, "That palm only cost me 300. It's far too weak."

"Put some fire into it, kid. At this rate, even if I just stood here and let you hit me, how long would it take you to burn through this ten million?"

Several more palm strikes slammed into Song Hailong's vital areas, but it was still like hitting a rubber tire. Although Song Hailong's body trembled slightly, the total reduction to the number on his forehead… was only another 2,000 or so.

What was even more astonishing… was that in the next moment, the number on Song Hailong's forehead actually began to recover.

The initial reduction of over 2,300 gradually reverted to just over 2,000.

Seeming to notice the change in Zhang Yu's gaze, Song Hailong laughed aloud, pointed to the number on his forehead, and said, "See? It's going back up."

"My apologies, my apologies. The combat spiritual root I'm using this time isn't an ordinary Embodiment Spiritual Root, but the deluxe edition."

"Besides enhancing my physical strength and damage resistance, this spiritual root can also continuously absorb spiritual energy from the air, allowing my injuries to gradually heal on their own."

Seeing Zhang Yu's expression grow increasingly grave, Song Hailong boomed with laughter.

"Still not going to make a move? If you don't hurry up, it'll be back to ten million."

Hearing Song Hailong's loudly proclaimed words, everyone—from the audience to the contestants from the various schools around the arena—felt as if they were witnessing an insurmountable wall of money standing between the two combatants.

It made everyone feel as if that ten million was an impenetrable city wall blocking Zhang Yu's path, leaving him without a single shred of hope for victory.

"If you won't come to me, then I'll come to you."

The two-and-a-half-meter-tall Song Hailong spread his massive hand, swiping at Zhang Yu like a dragon's claw.

Mana coursed through his elephant demon muscle, directly amplifying his strength and physique, to the point where he hardly needed any complex techniques; this brute force alone was enough to sweep through the entire first year.

Feeling the overwhelming force of the claw attack, Zhang Yu showed no hint of panic.

The difference in our stats is too great. It'll be difficult to defeat him with my own power alone.

The only way is to borrow his strength to defeat him. A defensive counterattack is my only strategy.

Just as Zhang Yu was thinking this, raising his arms wreathed in Formless Cloud-Astral Qi to block Song Hailong, he saw his opponent's claw attack shift, transitioning into a set of grappling techniques.

Grappling?

It's more than that…

In a state of total concentration, Zhang Yu watched every minute change in his opponent's attack, quickly dodging while parrying with his Formless Cloud-Astral Qi.

He soon realized that Song Hailong was executing a martial art focused on grappling and throwing.

It was the expert-level martial art cultivated by Song Hailong, the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand, level 1, activated!

This was an expert-level martial art that used pure physical violence to power grappling and wrestling techniques.

And for Song Hailong, implanted with elephant demon muscle and using all his mana to fortify his body, this martial art that relied purely on physical violence was a perfect fit.

Although Song Hailong's martial skill wasn't his strong suit due to focusing his energies elsewhere, and this technique wasn't particularly difficult, it was still only at a mere level 1.

But relying on his incredibly powerful physique, combined with this level 1 grappling and wrestling art, was more than enough for Song Hailong to crush other experts of the same level.

Zhang Yu could feel that pressure now. In his state of total concentration, he could feel his opponent's hands moving like a great net, slowly closing in to envelop him completely, intending to slam him to the ground and utterly subdue him.

He wants to wrestle with me? Play a ground game?

With no related skills of his own, Zhang Yu was naturally unwilling to be taken to the ground to grapple with his opponent, where the fight would be decided by physical strength and ground techniques.

He was like a small, slippery fish, repeatedly making narrow, difficult escapes from under Song Hailong's all-encompassing net.

But finally…

"Got you."

Song Hailong's hand clamped down on Zhang Yu's arm, a slight smile touching his lips.

But just as he and Zhang Yu both exerted their strength, Zhang Yu let out a furious roar.

The Formless Cloud-Astral Qi, which had previously only covered his palms, suddenly surged, extending all the way to his elbows. He then slipped from Song Hailong's grasp like an eel.

Below the stage, Lian Tianji's body jolted.

In a desperate situation, his Limitless Cloud Hand broke through again? he thought in shock. *Level 5? This Zhang Yu is truly a martial arts prodigy.*

Chapter 76: The Final Two Emerge

Feeling the 'chair' beneath her tremble, Le Mulan didn't reprimand him, because she too had been taken aback by Zhang Yu's breakthrough just now.

"To achieve a breakthrough in a martial art in the middle of a fight is truly impressive. No wonder Lian Tianji lost in a real battle."

"But this alone is not enough. The gap between him and Song Hailong is still too vast."

A level 5 Limitless Cloud Hand was clearly not enough to close the gap between them, and the situation on the stage seemed to be unfolding exactly as Le Mulan had predicted.

The breakthrough of Limitless Cloud Hand only served as a minor surprise for Song Hailong. As he unleashed his Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand, his overwhelming advantage in strength and size allowed him to ultimately slam Zhang Yu to the ground.

"It's over."

Le Mulan knew that for someone unskilled in grappling and wrestling, being thrown to the ground and entangled by an opponent was a hopeless situation, with absolutely no chance of victory.

But in the next moment, something unexpected happened once again.

Zhang Yu had also begun using the 'Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand' against Song Hailong.

...

On the stage.

After watching Song Hailong execute the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand several times, and then seeing the same technique appear in his Feathered Tome,

Zhang Yu knew that his only chance of victory now was to learn this martial art himself.

…

Below the stage.

Le Mulan thought to herself, *Has he gone mad? Does he really intend to learn grappling and wrestling on the spot to fight Song Hailong on the ground?*

Le Mulan felt Zhang Yu must have been beaten senseless. Over the next few moments of the fight, however, she could see that… although the grappling techniques Zhang Yu used were crude and distorted, they always managed to delay his defeat at critical moments, staving off the inevitable.

This was especially true when combined with his Limitless Cloud Hand, which allowed him to leverage his opponent's strength against them during the grapple, redirecting attacks and putting up an increasingly fierce struggle.

"He truly is a martial arts prodigy. The moment he encountered grappling, he was able to grasp its principles and combine it with his own martial arts to find the key points of applying force."

"But he's only delaying his defeat…"

Le Mulan felt as though Zhang Yu was dancing on a razor's edge. She knew that while the grappling on the ground might look clumsy, it was exceptionally dangerous. The moment Song Hailong locked one of his joints or vital points, it would mean snapped tendons and fractured bones—a crippling injury.

The same Zhang Yu who was full of life one moment could be crushed into a formless pulp by the immense force in Song Hailong's hands the next.

But in the following instant, Le Mulan shot to her feet.

On the stage, Zhang Yu's technique had suddenly transformed. It went from crude to proficient, from chaotic to orderly. He was actually using the 'Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand' to fight Song Hailong head-on.

He learned it?

No… he's already mastered it?

It wasn't just Le Mulan who was astonished; even her stool, Lian Tianji, stood up in surprise.

"Mastering an opponent's martial art in the middle of a fight? That kind of talent…"

His expression was a mixture of excitement and fear.

This terrifying level of martial arts talent was something he had never even witnessed. In recent years, even if someone possessed such a gift, they would never dare to use it so openly.

Lian Tianji murmured, "Isn't he afraid of bankruptcy? This is cracking a martial art and using a pirated copy in broad daylight."

At the same time, on the other side of the arena, Bai Zhenzhen snatched Zhang Yu's phone.

Lei Jun's face was also a mask of excitement and terror.

"Do you know the password?" he asked solemnly.

Bai Zhenzhen nodded as she quickly worked the phone.

"I helped Yu-boy borrow money once, so I know his password."

Lei Jun reminded her, "The technique is called Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand. Just search for Dragonback…"

Bai Zhenzhen quickly found 'Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand' on a shopping website, but her face fell.

"It costs forty thousand," she said in a panic. "He doesn't have enough."

Just then, the notification sound of a money transfer rang in Bai Zhenzhen's ears like heavenly music.

Received a 40,000 transfer from Zhang Pianpian.

As the digital manual and usage rights were sent to Zhang Yu's account, Bai Zhenzhen finally let out a sigh of relief.

She and Lei Jun looked back at the stage, and it was as if they were watching two dragons, one large and one small, wrestling on the ground.

Although Song Hailong held the absolute advantage, he was unable to completely suppress Zhang Yu.

And as the two continued to clash, Song Hailong suddenly felt his opponent's technique improve yet again. He was now able to intercept his attacks time after time and was even beginning to lock Song Hailong's own body in return.

What!

His Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand has surpassed mine?!

If it had been a head-on brawl, a trade of fists and palms, then even if Zhang Yu surpassed Song Hailong with the same technique, Song Hailong would have been hard to defeat.

But in a ground grapple using the same 'Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand,' even with Song Hailong's physique, it would be dangerous if he were completely locked down.

This was especially true since at the same time Zhang Yu's 'Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand' surpassed his, a level 5 Formless Cloud-Astral Qi was also erupting from his arms.

This caused every one of Song Hailong's grabs and throws to be redirected and broken, while his opponent's attacks, once launched, required even more of Song Hailong's strength to counter.

Fine, I'll just wear him down! With my physique, his stamina will soon give out…

The two rolled and grappled continuously. With his technique now a step behind, Song Hailong had to focus all his attention on countering Zhang Yu.

Just then, he felt his opponent's strength begin to wane.

A flicker of joy lit up Song Hailong's heart. *My chance to win is here.*

But in the next moment, Song Hailong suddenly felt the ground beneath him vanish.

Having focused all his energy on the ground battle without paying attention to his surroundings, he had unknowingly rolled to the edge of the stage with Zhang Yu.

And then he was thrown out of bounds.

Thud!

As his feet landed heavily outside the ring, Song Hailong's mind was still a complete blank.

I lost?

Suddenly realizing he was outside the arena boundaries, a flash of fury crossed Song Hailong's eyes. His muscles bulged as he prepared to charge back onto the stage.

But in an instant, three figures appeared before him.

Three referees simultaneously placed a hand on his shoulders, their presence gradually calming him down.

He took a deep breath, looked at Zhang Yu on the stage, and said slowly, "You won."

With that, Song Hailong squared his shoulders. "Let go of me. I'll walk on my own."

The three referees withdrew their hands, watching as a stone-faced Song Hailong walked back to the White Dragon High School rest area.

On the stage, another referee had already stepped up.

"Song Hailong's Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand," he asked. "Do you have the usage rights for it?"

Clearly, Zhang Yu's display of learning and using the technique on the spot had raised suspicion of him having cracked a martial art and using a pirated version.

Just then, Bai Zhenzhen rushed over, holding Zhang Yu's phone.

"He bought it, he bought it! He bought the usage rights for Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand. Here's the order."

While showing the order on the phone to the referee, Bai Zhenzhen also took out the Talisman Tome that Zhang Yu had left offstage and flashed the Investigation Department's mark on it.

Seeing the order and the Talisman Tome, the referee took no further action, merely giving Zhang Yu a word of caution before departing.

Only then did Bai Zhenzhen breathe a sigh of relief. She turned to Zhang Yu and complained, "What in the world were you thinking? Cracking a martial art right on stage? Learning and using it on the spot? If the company finds out, they'll sue you into bankruptcy!"

Zhang Yu helplessly scratched his head. "Sigh, I got carried away in the heat of the moment. My mind was so focused on winning that there was no room for anything else."

Then he smiled at Bai Zhenzhen. "Besides, I just knew you guys would have my back."

Bai Zhenzhen rolled her eyes. "This Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand cost forty thousand! If you don't win this championship, you can pay off the debt with your own part-time work."

After saying that, she asked, "Are you hurt anywhere?"

Zhang Yu shook his head.

Although the close-quarters battle had been incredibly dangerous, apart from a few bruises, Zhang Yu was largely unharmed.

The real issue was the mental exhaustion…

Right now, Zhang Yu was continuously rubbing his head. The prolonged state of total concentration, the close-quarters combat on the verge of bankruptcy, and the all-out effort of battle cultivation… he hadn't felt it while it was happening, but now that it was suddenly over, his head felt like it had turned to mush.

"Zhen, help me back so I can rest. I'm so dizzy."

Bai Zhenzhen snorted, then simply scooped Zhang Yu into her arms and started walking toward the Songyang High School rest area.

As she walked, she said, "We've invested way too much in this martial arts competition. You have to beat that witch Le Mulan in the next fight."

Zhang Yu closed his eyes, slowly letting his mind rest, and hummed softly in agreement.

Bai Zhenzhen then whispered, "Let me tell you where Le Mulan's weaknesses are…"

…

Meanwhile, with Song Hailong's return, the atmosphere in the White Dragon High School rest area instantly grew heavy.

The competition coach cleared his throat and said, "This Zhang Yu is indeed very impressive. His stats aren't high, but his martial arts talent is astonishing, and he can even achieve repeated breakthroughs in battle. He certainly has what it takes to defeat a stronger opponent."

"Sigh, really, Hailong, your true strength is still greater than his. If it weren't for the arena rules, his defeat would have only been a matter of time."

There are two ways to rationalize a loss.

One is to say you were careless; the other is to praise the opponent for being amazing.

Clearly, the competition coach was now using both methods.

In truth, if any other student had lost, this coach wouldn't have gone to such lengths; he would have made them kneel first.

But when the richest and best-performing student in the class lost, he obviously couldn't do that.

The other students quickly chimed in with their agreement.

"That Zhang Yu is pretty amazing."

"Big Brother Hailong just wasn't watching his feet, and the stage was too slippery today. Otherwise, how could he have lost with his strength?"

"Who could have expected him to have repeated breakthroughs in battle? And even learn Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand?"

"By the way, does he have the usage rights? Couldn't we get him disqualified…"

"The referee already checked. If there's no problem, then there's no problem."

The White Dragon students' attitude toward Zhang Yu was contradictory.

Because they didn't believe Zhang Yu's true strength surpassed Song Hailong's—his stats were even lower than theirs—they were all a bit unconvinced by the result.

But Zhang Yu had also achieved something they absolutely could not do through his profound martial arts skill and talent, which stirred a faint sense of admiration within them.

And on a nearby stretcher, Chu Qiuhe, who had been feigning unconsciousness, was secretly delighted.

That's right, keep praising Zhang Yu.

The more they hyped up Zhang Yu's strength, the more justifiable his own defeat would seem.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 77: The Most Powerful Move

In the rest area for Purple Cloud High School.

Le Mulan had already reseated herself on Lian Tianji's back.

She watched Bai Zhenzhen hurry over to the arena, explaining the usage rights to the referee with her phone, and commented, "Bai Zhenzhen can actually use Zhang Yu's phone for purchases? Does she know his phone password and payment password?"

"Those two must be friends willing to die for each other."

Watching Zhang Yu slowly walk back to the rest area, Le Mulan patted Lian Tianji's head and said, "I remember you're friends with this Zhang Yu, right?"

...

The moment Zhang Yu returned to the rest area, he downed all the alchemical enhancers he had bought before the match to restore his stamina, mana, and energy.

Feeling the rapid recovery of his strength, he felt a little more at ease.

The organizers had provided a half-hour break before the final match, which Zhang Yu felt was enough to recover eighty or ninety percent of his stamina and mana.

Bai Zhenzhen said from the side, "...Did you remember everything I just told you?"

Seeing Zhang Yu nod, she then continued, "Then that's all. Rest well and prepare for the next battle."

Not long after Bai Zhenzhen left, Zhang Yu felt his phone vibrate slightly. He opened it to see that Lian Tianji had recommended a friend to him.

"Le Mulan?"

Unsure why Le Mulan would want to add him, Zhang Yu simply chose to accept for the time being.

He then saw a message pop up directly from Le Mulan: Let's meet. There's something I want to discuss with you.

Zhang Yu went to a deserted corridor outside the competition grounds and saw Le Mulan already waiting there gracefully.

This top student from Purple Cloud High School was beautiful, with an icy temperament, and seemed to be the focus of everyone's attention wherever she went, drawing the eyes of others.

Upon seeing Zhang Yu arrive, she said bluntly, "Two hundred thousand. I'll buy your loss. How about it?"

Zhang Yu was slightly taken aback. "You want to buy the competition championship?"

Le Mulan said nonchalantly, "Wealth is power, and money is a part of strength. The Martial Arts Competition selects the strongest, so why can't I use money to buy it?"

Zhang Yu stared at her and snorted. "You're not confident you can beat me?"

Le Mulan shook her head. "I just think that fighting you might cost more than two hundred thousand. I find it a very good deal to spend this two hundred thousand for a guaranteed victory."

Seeing Zhang Yu fall silent, Le Mulan added, "If two hundred thousand isn't enough, then let's make it four hundred thousand. But that's my limit. I won't agree if you try to raise the price any further."

Zhang Yu swallowed. He had to admit that the four hundred thousand yuan Le Mulan was offering right now was more powerful than any move he had encountered in all his consecutive arena battles.

Four hundred thousand—what kind of cultivation technique could that buy? For how long could he lease a spiritual root? How much cultivation equipment could he purchase? And how much could he improve his talismans?

Zhang Yu even felt that if he had this four hundred thousand, the boost to his cultivation would far exceed the championship's fifty-thousand-yuan prize and an expert-level cultivation technique.

After all, in Kunxu, as long as you had money, you had potential, you had aptitude, and you could advance by leaps and bounds on the Immortal Dao; even righteous gods had to serve people.

Zhang Yu opened his mouth and said, "Alright, transfer it directly to my card."

Le Mulan spread her fingers, and a purple, jade-like Talisman Tome materialized in her palm.

"Sign a contract with me under the witness of a righteous god, and I'll transfer the money to you immediately."

Seeing Zhang Yu fall silent instead of agreeing, Le Mulan was surprised.

"You're actually hesitating over four hundred thousand?"

She found it very strange.

"I heard from Lian Tianji that a few hundred yuan is enough to hire you as a security guard, right?"

"You poor people fight tooth and nail every day for a few hundred or a few thousand, so why are you hesitating now that four hundred thousand is right in front of you?"

"With your background, it's impossible for you to get into one of the Ten Greats. Is winning the Martial Arts Competition really that important?"

There was not a trace of mockery in Le Mulan's tone; she seemed genuinely, truly puzzled by Zhang Yu's current behavior.

Shaking her head, she turned to leave.

"Since you can't decide right away, I'll be going. However, you can come get this four hundred thousand anytime before the finals begin. But this is the absolute maximum; I won't raise the price again."

Watching Le Mulan depart, Zhang Yu used his phone to ask Zhang Pianpian: *Sis, if I don't get first place in the Martial Arts Competition, only second, how much will it affect my chances of getting into one of the Ten Greats?*

Zhang Pianpian: *For the connections I found for you, the better your first-year results and the higher your competition ranking, the higher the chance of being selected. First place in the competition naturally has a better chance than second.*

Zhang Yu understood. That meant if he took the four hundred thousand, it wasn't as if he couldn't get into the Ten Greats, but the probability would just be a little lower…

But just as the thought of agreeing to Le Mulan's offer truly began to surface in his mind, that damn ritual started clamoring at him again.

I knew it.

You idiotic thing are really afraid I won't get into the Ten Greats, aren't you.

As he felt the four hundred thousand slip away, a heart-wrenching pain rose in Zhang Yu, a pain more intense than when he had traded blows with Lian Tianji or grappled with all his might against Song Hailong.

Is this the heartache of losing a huge sum of money?

Immediately, Zhang Yu activated the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, severing all distracting thoughts.

At this moment, only one thought remained in his mind.

He was going to pin that rich girl Le Mulan to the ground in the arena and beat her senseless.

…

The final match began.

Le Mulan and Zhang Yu stepped onto the arena simultaneously.

The Martial Arts Competition had finally reached its last stage.

Streams of blue-white sword qi erupted from Le Mulan's body in an overwhelming tide, slashing ferociously toward Zhang Yu.

Once Le Mulan's Stardust Swordplay was unleashed, it was relentless and imposing, like a military formation that was difficult to break through.

Watching Zhang Yu dodge left and right under her sword qi, occasionally using his Formless Cloud-Astral Qi to block the strikes, Le Mulan felt as if she were watching a cornered rat.

"Are you trying to exhaust my mana?" Le Mulan laughed. "Do you think you can?"

The next moment, as Le Mulan's sword qi erupted, the mana within her grew increasingly turbulent, like a surging river, powerful and unending. The force of her mana had already surpassed that of every other contestant present.

At the same time, a female voice sounded from within her body.

"Welcome to the Purple Cloud Replaceable Inner Core system."

"Remaining mana balance: eight million."

Le Mulan touched her lower abdomen, then looked at Zhang Yu before her.

"This replaceable inner core inside me… I've charged it with a total of eight million yuan worth of mana."

Simultaneously, a line of text appeared on her wrist, a number counting down from eight million.

Evidently, as she continuously unleashed her mana and sword qi, the mana charged into the inner core was constantly being consumed. But at a rate of only a thousand yuan per second, the full eight million was still a very long way from being depleted.

But this also meant that for every second Le Mulan fought, she was spending over a thousand yuan.

Le Mulan flicked her fingertips, and streams of sword qi shot toward Zhang Yu like a tempest. Forget getting close, he was being forced bit by bit toward the edge of the arena.

"And if you're worried that my meridians can't withstand this surging mana, you don't have to be."

"My 'Mana-Vein' combat spiritual root has already protected all my meridians, allowing me to maintain a high mana output indefinitely without fear of wear and tear."

Meanwhile, watching Le Mulan's extravagant display in the arena—a seemingly inexhaustible bombardment funded by eight million yuan worth of mana—the audience grew excited.

This was far more impressive than Song Hailong's ten-million-yuan insurance policy, because that ten million belonged to the insurance company, whereas the money Le Mulan was throwing around was her family's own cold, hard cash.

One spectator looked at Le Mulan spending money like water and praised, "So beautiful. The way she spends money like it's nothing is just so beautiful."

Another spectator was filled with envy. "It must be so amazing to be rich, so blissful."

A third spectator had an epiphany. "As expected, if you want to go far on the path of the Immortal Dao, you have to throw money at it. When I get home today, I'm going to squeeze my old man for every coin he's got. I have to take another step forward on the Immortal Dao."

Le Mulan frowned slightly at the noise from the audience.

She continued to fire off sword qi as she looked at Zhang Yu and said, "Did you hear that? Although they're a bit noisy, they're not wrong. Money is the foundation of cultivation."

"As a poor person, if you had earned that four hundred thousand today, you could have gotten a tiny bit closer to me."

"It's a pity you actively gave up this chance to become stronger."

She looked in Zhang Yu's direction and asked with a sincere expression, "I'm very curious. You're clearly so poor, yet you're unwilling to make money. Why is that?"

It seemed that after saying so much, all Le Mulan wanted was an answer to this question that piqued her curiosity.

Zhang Yu looked at her sincere inquiry and suddenly felt the urge to laugh out of anger.

So the rich young lady is here to observe the life of a poor wretch, is that it?

He snorted coldly. "You set the price at four hundred thousand because you thought that's the most it would take to beat me?"

Le Mulan nodded. "Correct. I calculated that your defeat is worth at most four hundred thousand. Spending a single cent more would be a waste."

At the same time, under the constant bombardment of sword qi, a crack finally appeared in the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi, and a sword slash cut across Zhang Yu's palm.

Zhang Yu said flatly, "Then what if you add in the blood of this poor wretch?"

Blood dripped into the astral qi, dyeing the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi with wisps of crimson.

But faced with the wound on his hand, Zhang Yu showed no panic at all. Instead, as if he had been prepared, he violently flung his blood-covered hand toward Le Mulan's position.

Le Mulan, who had remained motionless from start to finish, always forcing her opponents back with sword qi, now actually shifted her feet slightly, deliberately dodging the splattering blood.

With Le Mulan's dodge, a clear flaw immediately appeared in her Stardust Swordplay.

Zhang Yu shot forward like a bolt of lightning, intending to break through the layers of sword qi and get close to Le Mulan.

At the same time, Bai Zhenzhen's words flashed through Zhang Yu's mind.

…

"This Le Mulan's first flaw is that she… seems to have an obsession with cleanliness."

"I suggest you spit directly at her, preferably phlegm. Not only will she dodge, but I bet she won't even be willing to use her sword qi to block it."

Chapter 78: Champion

Although Bai Zhenzhen's suggestion was to spit phlegm, Zhang Yu still felt it would be beneath his dignity as a contracted member of the Inspection Team, so he chose to use his own blood.

And as expected, the blood of a 'poor wretch' like him equally disgusted Le Mulan, who would rather dodge than let her sword qi touch it.

On the other side, Le Mulan saw Zhang Yu seizing the opportunity to charge and let out a cold snort. She flicked her sword-fingers, about to block him with sword qi, only to find that Zhang Yu's speed was astonishingly fast.

This was because Zhang Yu's weighted clothing had already been torn to shreds over the past few fights.

Facing Le Mulan in this battle required him to unleash his full speed, so he had simply taken off the weighted suit before the fight began and spent about ten minutes adapting.

After the battle started, he deliberately held back his full speed, partly to lull Le Mulan into a false sense of security, and partly to continue warming up.

He needed to adapt to the speed of Le Mulan's sword qi, and he also needed his body and blood to grow warmer, hotter, and more ignited!

...

Bai Zhenzhen: "Her Ice-Skinned and Jade-Boned body should be a special constitution. I don't know if it's innate or acquired, but because of it, her mana doesn't need any special conversion. It's directly a low-temperature, specialized mana. The moment it's refined, it's a cut above the rest."

"After this low-temperature mana is infused into her sword qi, any collision with it will lower your body temperature, slowing your nerve reactions and muscle speed..."

"You have to get your body scorching hot to resist this low-temperature mana for a short period."

…

At this moment, Zhang Yu's full-speed sprint was like a clap of thunder and a flash of lightning. It couldn't be said that it was too fast for Le Mulan to react, but it was certainly faster than she had anticipated.

His full speed is this fast? He was holding back before?

Did the low-temperature mana not work?

This series of surprises slowed Le Mulan's sword qi reaction by another fraction of a second. In the end, she could only slash all of them in front of her, trying to stop Zhang Yu in his tracks.

Facing more than a dozen streams of sword qi rushing toward him, Zhang Yu thrust out his right palm, wreathed in crimson astral qi, choosing to meet the sword qi head-on.

This was the other flaw Bai Zhenzhen had mentioned about Le Mulan.

Although the Stardust Swordplay was sharp, Le Mulan had ultimately not cultivated this sword art to the absolute limit possible in the Qi Refinement realm.

Her immense mana allowed her to shoot out sword qi with impunity, but her mana control was simply not refined enough to maintain fine control over so many streams of sword qi for an extended period.

Therefore, after fighting for a while, if multiple streams of sword qi struck at once, they would actually interfere with each other and weaken in power due to her insufficient control.

In an instant, Zhang Yu's right arm had clashed with the dozen or so streams of sword qi.

Just as I thought, it's not as powerful as it looks.

Using the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi in conjunction with the Imperishable Seal, Zhang Yu shattered most of the sword qi, though his palm was cut by several more slashes. The splashing blood dyed his astral qi an even deeper crimson, wreathing his arm like fire.

But Zhang Yu's steps did not pause for a moment. He had already rushed to within half a meter of Le Mulan and reached out to grab her arm.

"Ah!" With a roar, Le Mulan unleashed dozens of streams of sword qi from her two fingers, all slashing toward Zhang Yu.

Zhang Yu's expression remained unchanged. Shielded by his Subcutaneous Astral Qi and the Imperishable Seal, he endured the sword wounds and splattering blood to seize Le Mulan's right arm.

At that moment, Zhang Yu had finally closed the distance.

Bai Zhenzhen's words once again flashed through his mind.

…

"I can feel that her sword qi's primary goal isn't to injure me, but to force me back."

"Her final flaw is likely that, due to her obsession with cleanliness, she is not skilled in close-quarters combat."

"After all, it's only been half a year since high school started. Even for a rich person like her, I don't believe she could have truly mastered every aspect of combat."

…

At this very moment, facing Zhang Yu at close range, Le Mulan—who had watched his fight with Song Hailong—instantly felt a profound sense of danger.

Le Mulan's first reaction was to slash out with streams of low-temperature sword qi, trying to force Zhang Yu back.

But from within Zhang Yu's now scorching body, power was erupting ceaselessly, and his Formless Cloud-Astral Qi, mixed with the hot blood flowing from his body, blasted forward viciously.

For a time, within that half-meter distance, the ice-blue sword qi and the crimson astral qi clashed brilliantly.

But Le Mulan felt as if the close-range Zhang Yu had transformed into a fiery storm, continuously devouring her sword qi and threatening to swallow her whole.

The sword qi was deflected by the astral qi and repelled by the Imperishable Seal.

At the same time, the level-two Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand activated fiercely. With a single move, he slammed Le Mulan brutally to the ground, leaving her head spinning.

The next moment, seeing the bloody, dirty, and smelly Zhang Yu sit right on top of her, Le Mulan's face filled with horror, and she roared, "Get…"

Simultaneously, the sword qi within her body was about to erupt again.

But halfway through her roar, before her sword qi could be fully unleashed, she heard a strange sound from her hands. Zhang Yu had already used a heavy technique from the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand to dislocate her wrist joints.

The drugs she had taken prevented her from feeling any pain, but she could no longer unleash sword qi from her fingers.

Le Mulan looked at Zhang Yu, both shocked and furious, not expecting that a single dodge, a moment of carelessness, would be seized upon by him so completely.

It had left her in this predicament without even having had the chance to fully display her abilities.

Filled with indignation and rage, she kicked her legs to struggle further, only to hear Zhang Yu's cold voice by her ear.

"You said you're very rich, and that money is a part of your strength."

Amidst a series of sickening cracks, Zhang Yu dislocated the joints in Le Mulan's legs one by one.

"Well, I'm about to destroy you now. Let's see you try and stop me with your money."

At that moment, Le Mulan felt as if she had become a toy in Zhang Yu's hands. As he employed the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand, her joints were broken one after another, and she soon lost all mobility, lying on the ground, unable to move.

Le Mulan stared daggers at Zhang Yu, as if she wanted to slice him into a thousand pieces.

Zhang Yu said flatly, “One last thing.”

“Bai Zhenzhen was the one who saw all these flaws of yours and told me about them.”

“If it weren’t for her insurance premiums being too low.”

“She could have beaten you too.”

Boom!

Grabbing Le Mulan’s head, Zhang Yu swung her off the arena, tossing her to the ground like a piece of trash.

Looking at the blood-covered Zhang Yu standing alone on the stage, the entire venue fell silent.

No one could have thought, no one could have predicted, no one could have even imagined that the winner of today’s Martial Arts Competition would be a poor student from Songyang High School.

Xiong Wenwu, defeated.

Song Hailong, defeated.

Le Mulan, defeated.

One by one, the top students and wealthy scions of the three major high schools had all been defeated—defeated by a poor student, defeated by someone from another high school.

The poor won? The rich lost?

In the moment that countless students from the three major high schools were lost in silence and shock…

Zhao Tianxing suddenly began to clap excitedly.

He had no ulterior motive, nor was he trying to show off; he simply saw Zhang Yu’s achievement today and subconsciously, irresistibly, began to applaud him.

At that moment, the tattered Songyang High School uniform on Zhang Yu’s body seemed to become grand and noble in Zhao Tianxing’s eyes.

But the lonely applause sounded so abrupt in the vast, quiet hall that after a few claps, Zhao Tianxing stopped in fear.

But soon, Bai Zhenzhen, cheering from below the stage, also began to clap.

Beside Zhao Tianxing, Qian Shen also began to clap, his eyes filled with shock as he looked toward the arena.

He Dayou, the Son of the School Director, also clapped lightly.

"You're impressive. You've brought great honor to Songyang."

From Purple Cloud High School, Lian Tianji also applauded slowly, thinking to himself that his advertisement would probably be back.

Song Hailong looked at Zhang Yu with a complicated gaze, then suddenly began to clap. His applause led all the White Dragon students to join in.

Even Chu Qiuhe, who had been lying on a stretcher feigning unconsciousness, had at some point propped himself up and was now clapping furiously.

Amidst the applause from the entire venue, Bai Zhenzhen laughed and jumped onto the stage.

"Champion! Champion! We're the champions!"

"I told you that Le Mulan was no good! She can't fight up close, doesn't have the skill."

She pulled Zhang Yu's hands up high, looking out over the entire crowd with pride, the Songyang High School uniform on her body seeming to shine even more dazzlingly.

She then shouted, "Anyone looking for advertising or endorsements can contact us! My brother here is not only the Martial Arts Competition champion, he's also fourth place in the Mana Competition…"

Beside her, Zhang Yu looked out at the crowd, but his vision began to blur.

Although he hadn't been seriously injured in the last fight, the intense concentration, the consecutive use of several martial arts, and the amount of blood he'd lost, on top of the exhaustion from previous battles, made him feel dizzy once again.

He reached a hand out to Bai Zhenzhen.

"Zhen, I'm dizzy. Help me to a doctor."

Bai Zhenzhen said excitedly, "Wait, wait, just stand here a little longer! The whole crowd is watching us."

Zhang Yu sighed. "To help you teach that Le Mulan a lesson, I risked bankruptcy, fought with my life, and shed my blood. It's one thing that you won't call me 'dad,' but now that your dad is feeling unwell, you won't even lend a hand?"

Bai Zhenzhen felt that Zhang Yu would be able to brag about this for the rest of his life.

But she was still dissatisfied that he hadn't precisely followed her strategy, criticizing, "Didn't you bleed so much because you insisted on looking cool? According to my plan, spitting phlegm, blowing snot, and just spitting would have been safer and much more effective than splattering blood, wouldn't it?"

Lying on the ground nearby awaiting medical attention, Le Mulan's eyelids twitched, a flicker of shock in her eyes. A realization dawned on her.

The depths these two poor people will sink to… are immeasurable.

Bai Zhenzhen had already picked up Zhang Yu and was carrying him toward the first aid area, wanting to stop the man from bragging in front of her any longer.

Lei Jun followed behind them, his face full of concern.

The mere thought that Zhang Yu had won first place in the Martial Arts Competition made his heart surge with emotion.

Chapter 79: Song Hailong Wants Me to Be His Coach

Lei Jun's heart was pounding. He was thrilled about his impending bonus, raise, and the prestige of his teaching achievements, but even more than that, he felt a wave of nostalgia for his past.

Once upon a time, Lei Jun had also been a spirited high school student, dreaming that one day he could defeat all his rivals with his iron fists, crush the top students and the wealthy beneath his feet, and stand at the very pinnacle of all the high schools in Songyang City.

"A single punch worth a hundred million! That is the ultimate realm pursued by generations of martial artists!"

But reality soon slapped him across the face.

His monthly exam scores left him feeling powerless to catch up.

The fierce, advanced competition in the tournaments made him feel as if he and those wealthy prodigies were not even in the same dimension—like a mayfly gazing upon the vast blue sky, the gap was one of despair.

Only then did he understand that the path of the Fist, the Sword, or of Qi… none could compare to the path of Money; the reality was that a hundred million could shatter all arts.

He came to understand a simple truth: only with money could one's fists be strong. The larger the bank balance, the greater the power of the punch.

But today, his student had defeated numerous powerhouses with a frail body, using supreme talent and skill to compensate for physical weakness and the disparity in healthcare and wealth, completely overwhelming the prodigies from the famous schools.

He had accomplished something Lei Jun had once dreamed of, but later dared not even consider.

Sigh, to defeat money with one's own fists… this is the realm our generation of martial artists should strive for. Even if it was just in a first-year tournament, this is something I'll remember for the rest of my life.

Meanwhile, the paramedic before him said nonchalantly, "It's nothing serious. He just lost a lot of blood and is feeling faint. A transfusion will fix him right up."

"I'll also prescribe some enhancers to restore his stamina, mana, and energy…"

Lei Jun pulled out a few boxes of alchemical enhancers.

"No need. He can have mine. These should work, right?" He figured this might keep his insurance premiums from rising so much next time.

The paramedic curled his lip, thinking to himself that it was truly difficult to squeeze any extra money out of these three paupers.

A moment later, the referee came over, first inquiring about Zhang Yu's condition before asking Bai Zhenzhen if she wished to fight Song Hailong for third place.

Bai Zhenzhen naturally declined; Song Hailong's style as a muscle-bound monster and super tank was a perfect counter to her own.

And so, a moment later, the top four of the martial arts tournament were finalized: Zhang Yu, Le Mulan, Song Hailong, and Bai Zhenzhen, in descending order.

Over on the other side, Le Mulan had also recovered her mobility after receiving medical treatment.

After a brief rest, Zhang Yu joined Le Mulan and Song Hailong on the winners' podium to receive their respective champion, runner-up, and third-place medals.

However, while Zhang Yu was all smiles, Le Mulan and Song Hailong both wore gloomy expressions, looking as if they were constipated.

Cheers—and jeers—erupted from the audience.

Someone from Red Pagoda High said, their face contorted with jealousy, "This Zhang Yu's talent is absurd! If he can learn martial arts just by watching others, he should have to pay for it! Otherwise, he's just a martial arts thief!"

A student from Purple Cloud High wailed, "That Zhang Yu actually sat on our sacred number one! I wouldn't dare do that even in my wildest dreams! Damn it, this is worse than death!"

Someone from White Dragon sighed, "The winner stands, the loser kneels. I never thought Songyang High would have a prodigy worth kneeling for."

'Worth kneeling for' was the highest praise a high-scoring prodigy could receive at White Dragon High School.

In front of the podium, Lei Jun beamed as he took out his phone to record the moment.

Beside him, Bai Zhenzhen snapped a few photos before switching to video, her mind already racing with ideas on how to leverage their tournament fame for advertising deals.

As she filmed, she called out to the trio on the podium, "Come on, smile! You look awful with those long faces. Not you, Zhang Yu. Tone it down a bit; don't look so smug."

Lei Jun added from the side, "I'll treat you all to a meal after this. Go ask Qian Shen and the others if they want to come, and figure out what you'd like to eat."

...

In the Purple Cloud High School rest area.

Le Mulan walked back slowly, holding her second-place medal.

She had already changed out of the school uniform that had been stained with blood during her fight with Zhang Yu.

The complex emotions of fury, anger, and indignation that had twisted her features after the battle had vanished, and her serene expression made it seem as if nothing had happened at all.

Upon returning to the rest area, however, her brow furrowed slightly when she saw Lian Tianji kneeling on the ground.

"Get up. I'm revoking the stool punishment."

Lian Tianji looked up in surprise, his eyes filled with a hint of confusion. This was the first time he had ever seen Le Mulan go back on her word.

Le Mulan said calmly, "I've already lost. What right do I have to punish you?"

"If you were to become my stool, should I, who also lost, become your stool? Or should I go be Zhang Yu's stool?"

As she spoke, she turned her head slightly to look in Zhang Yu's direction, her tone complex.

"Your failure this time wasn't your fault. That Zhang Yu is truly formidable."

"Although I still don't understand why he's unwilling to earn more money, he certainly made me aware of my own weaknesses."

Le Mulan was already planning a future training regimen focused on close-quarters combat.

Initially, in her post-match analysis, Le Mulan believed she had been too confident and had underestimated her opponent, thinking a single dodge would be enough to secure an easy victory. She never expected him to capitalize on such a minuscule opening.

However, upon reviewing the entire fight, she suddenly realized he had come prepared; not only had he identified her subtle weaknesses, but he also had the ingenuity and capability to exploit them.

Beyond that, she naturally also considered her aversion to Zhang Yu's blood.

I should have some appropriate contact with the poor…

Le Mulan couldn't help but frown again at the thought. It created an uncontrollable, awkward feeling—a kind of mental discomfort.

It conflicts with my heart art. Changing one's way of thinking is truly not easy.

Suddenly, she remembered she had added Zhang Yu as a friend.

Perhaps I'll start by looking at a poor person's social media feed… she thought.

Lian Tianji climbed to his feet with a smile.

"This defeat will make us stronger. The next time we face Zhang Yu in a tournament, we'll definitely beat him."

"The next tournament?" Le Mulan said. "You mean the physical tournament? There's no sense of accomplishment in beating him in that."

Lian Tianji paused for a moment before nodding in agreement.

"That's true," he said with a sigh. "His physical strength is already so far behind ours. In two months, by the time of the physical tournament, the gap will probably be even wider."

"Unless he can join Songyang's tournament team and undergo their so-called special training program…"

…

In the White Dragon High School rest area.

Now awake and surrounded by his classmates, Chu Qiuhe lamented, "It was only after waking up and carefully reviewing the fight that I realized how terrifying Zhang Yu is. I'm afraid there isn't a single first-year student in all of Songyang City who can surpass him in practical combat skill."

Someone from White Dragon retorted unconvinced, "That's an exaggeration. I think Big Brother Hailong just slipped off the stage because he was sweating too much. He just needs to use some antiperspirant before the next match."

Chu Qiuhe pointed at him. "What are your scores? What's your rank? Kneel before you speak to me."

Only after the student knelt did Chu Qiuhe continue slowly, "You can't fully comprehend how terrifying Zhang Yu is unless you've actually fought him…"

Just then, Song Hailong returned, and the crowd immediately fell silent.

Song Hailong casually tossed the third-place medal into his bag without a second glance.

Song Hailong understood that while third place in the martial arts tournament was an honor for others, for him, it was a disgrace.

Just then, his phone rang. A mature male voice came from the other end.

"I saw your match. The two people who placed ahead of you are not stronger than you."

"You lost to people weaker than you. Father is very disappointed in you…"

Hearing this, Song Hailong grew flustered. "Brother, I was just careless…"

"Don't make excuses," the man on the other end said coldly. "You know how much Father despises excuses for failure."

Song Hailong took a deep breath and said softly, "I'm sorry."

The two-and-a-half-meter giant, listening to the reprimand, looked as anxious and flustered as a schoolboy.

After hanging up, Song Hailong looked toward Zhang Yu, his expression simmering with anger.

Since he had lost, he would have to find a way to redeem himself—in a way only the wealthy could.

He strode over to the Songyang High School rest area, his oppressive frame immediately casting a shadow over Zhang Yu.

As Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen watched him warily, Song Hailong asked coldly, "How much?"

"What's your price to be my combat sparring partner?"

As someone with absolute wealth, the natural response to being defeated was to spend whatever it took to hire your opponent as a training partner, practicing relentlessly until you could crush them in turn!

Whoever defeated you, you paid them to learn everything they knew!

Hearing Song Hailong's words, both Bai Zhenzhen's and Zhang Yu's eyes lit up, and the boy in front of them suddenly seemed much more impressive.

Zhang Yu cleared his throat. "I'm very expensive, and very busy. I'll have to check my schedule to see if I'm available."

Bai Zhenzhen nodded eagerly beside him. "Yes, yes! I'm Zhang Yu's agent. You can discuss the financial arrangements with me! I also made the top four in the tournament, and I'm Zhang Yu's combat coach. I was the one who guided him in that final fight against Le Mulan. Do you want to hire me, too?"

After adding both Bai Zhenzhen and Zhang Yu as contacts, Song Hailong looked at them and said, "Work out the exact price between yourselves and let me know."

"But there's one thing…"

Looking at Zhang Yu's frail physique, Song Hailong said with dissatisfaction, "You'd better find a way to increase your physical strength."

"Because I'm only going to get stronger and faster. I can't wait for you to catch up. If your stats are too low, I'll be able to crush you with pure strength, and then there'd be no point in training together."

Watching him walk away, Zhang Yu knew he was right.

Whether it was for the sparring money, the physical tournament in two months, or even for his future college prospects, he needed to work harder to raise his physical strength.

I have to catch up to Song Hailong and Le Mulan.

A moment later, Zhao Tianxing, Qian Shen, and He Dayou came down from the stands to see Zhang Yu.

"That was so cool, Yu!" Zhao Tianxing said excitedly. "I took some pictures of you on the stage, take a look…"

Qian Shen remarked with feeling, "The tournament is on a whole other level, far beyond the standard curriculum. It's like a test from another dimension. A perfect score of 100 in combat is no longer enough to represent your achievements."

Bai Zhenzhen asked, "Old Lei is treating us to a meal soon. Are you guys coming? Any preferences?"

Zhao Tianxing replied, "What should we eat? I'm fine with anything, but something healthy like boiled chicken would be best."

Bai Zhenzhen nodded, making a note on her phone. "Okay, Zhao Tianxing is easy."

He Dayou stated flatly, "I don't eat peasant food. If the restaurant isn't expensive enough, I'm not going."

Bai Zhenzhen nodded and made another note. "He Dayou isn't coming."

Qian Shen said, "I know a good place. Drinks are on me."

Bai Zhenzhen noted, "Qian Shen's treat."

…

Inside a downtown restaurant.

As soon as Zhang Yu walked in, he announced, "Do you have king crab? We'll take ten."

Following behind him, Lei Jun's face darkened. *Is he trying to eat me into bankruptcy?*

Qian Shen interjected, "This place doesn't have seafood. Besides, it's not very nutritious and isn't suitable for high school students."

"This place specializes in authentic pre-packaged meals. There are no extra seasonings, so you get to taste the food in its purest form."

"The meals are also incredibly nutritious. Each dish contains over ten thousand clean calories. I often eat here after working out."

Lei Jun nodded to himself. Qian Shen was a considerate kid, mindful of his teacher's budget.

Qian Shen turned to the waiter. "Do you have any pre-packaged meals with demonic beast meat? We're all top students from Songyang High School here today. Do you have any dietary supplements on the menu?"

Lei Jun sighed. So much for Qian Shen being considerate. He wasn't a Daoist art instructor; didn't the boy know how limited a martial arts teacher's salary was?

Not wanting to let the students order recklessly, Lei Jun said directly, "I only brought 6,000. If we go over, we're all washing dishes."

A moment later, the group was seated together, raising their glasses of beast protein milk.

"Cheers!"

They were health-conscious high school students and a teacher, after all. Of course they would drink healthy and nutritious beast protein milk.

Besides, school would be starting soon after their meal, so it wouldn't be wise to drink anything that might affect their performance in class.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 80: Cultivation Technique, Cultivation

Inside the restaurant.

Lei Jun stood up and said, "I'd like to say a few words."

"I never expected such an incredible outcome in this martial arts tournament."

"Honestly, given Songyang's resources, I would have been satisfied just to snag tenth place."

"But with Zhang Yu taking first and Bai Zhenzhen fourth, it just goes to show that my teaching methods are pretty effective…"

Seeing Lei Jun's triumphant expression, Bai Zhenzhen thought to herself, *So Old Lei can be a real braggart.*

Old Lei smiled at Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen and continued, "Of course, the two of you, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, made indispensable contributions."

"In all my years of teaching at Songyang, I've never seen martial arts talent like yours. As your teacher, I have to thank you for this achievement."

He then pointed to Zhang Yu, who was taking advantage of the moment to practice the Desolate Ox Soul-Suppressing Mantra.

"Look at Zhang Yu. He uses every spare moment to cultivate. I haven't seen that kind of diligence and self-discipline in years."

Zhang Yu shook his head inwardly with a sigh. If this ritual wasn't constantly nagging him, who would want to cultivate while eating and walking?

Old Lei continued, "Finally, I hope you'll keep up the hard work and get into a university you're happy with."

After his speech, Old Lei downed his milk tea in one gulp, and the atmosphere at the table grew more lively.

With Lei Jun present, Zhao Tianxing seemed a bit reserved. He raised his glass to Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen.

"Yu-boy, Zhen, congratulations on your great results in the tournament."

Qian Shen pointed to a dish. "This is their specialty. You have to try it."

As the dishes arrived, the group, none of whom were ordinary, fell upon the food like a whirlwind, their chopsticks a blur as they devoured one plate after another.

Just then, Zhang Yu's phone buzzed.

He took it out and saw it was a message from Zhang Pianpian.

Zhang Pianpian: Little brother, congratulations on first place in the martial arts tournament. You're one step closer to your goal.

Zhang Pianpian: And don't forget to pay back the forty thousand you borrowed.

Looking at her last message, Zhang Yu sighed to himself, *My dear sister, she's not exactly rolling in money either.*

Just then, Qian Shen asked curiously, "What did Le Mulan mean on the stage, talking about you and making money?"

So Zhang Yu briefly explained the situation with Le Mulan and the 400,000.

This was the first Lei Jun had heard of it. His eyes widened as he looked at Zhang Yu.

"So you chose to take first place? To beat her on the stage?"

Zhang Yu declared proudly, "How could a martial artist of my caliber bow down for a mere four hundred thousand?"

Lei Jun pointed at Zhang Yu, his heart aching. "Foolish! Utterly foolish!"

Zhang Yu isn't even trying to get into the Ten Greats, he thought.

He sighed aloud. "How can first place in the martial arts tournament compare to four hundred thousand?"

"Money is power, potential, and the future. Even though you had to sacrifice first place, with your talent, that four hundred thousand could have helped you place in many more tournaments to come."

Beside him, Zhao Tianxing couldn't help but sigh. "Four hundred thousand… that's a steep price for first place in a martial arts tournament."

Seeing the regretful looks on Lei Jun's and Zhao Tianxing's faces, as if they themselves had lost the money, Zhang Yu was speechless. And yet… this was Kunxu. It was perfectly normal.

Besides, Zhang Yu knew that, in a way, they were right. Whether it was for the upcoming physical tournament or the talisman tournament, money would be incredibly useful to him.

Just then, his phone buzzed again. He opened it and saw a message from the tournament organizers.

First, the 50,000 in prize money was being processed.

Second, he needed to choose his prize: an expert-level cultivation technique.

Zhang Yu immediately focused on the list of cultivation techniques they had sent.

As he read, he considered the cultivation techniques he had already mastered.

For my Dao heart, I have the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art. For mana, I have the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method. For combat, in addition to the Limitless Cloud Hand and the Imperishable Seal Art, I've now also learned the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand.

Dao heart, mana, combat… I already have expert-level techniques for all of those. The expert-level technique I need most now, especially for the physical tournament in two months, is a body tempering art.

Although the effectiveness of techniques like the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art and the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method would diminish as his stats increased, they were still sufficient for now.

His current method for body tempering, the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms, was far too basic in comparison.

He filtered the list of rewards to show only the body tempering cultivation techniques. There were three options: Dragon-Elephant Might, Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi, and Tendon-Shifting Marrow-Swapping.

After looking them over, Zhang Yu still wasn't sure which to choose, so he decided to ask Lei Jun for his opinion.

Lei Jun listened and nodded slightly. "You're right, what you need most now is a body tempering cultivation technique."

As a veteran teacher, although Lei Jun didn't teach physical education, he was still quite knowledgeable about body tempering cultivation techniques.

He glanced at the three techniques Zhang Yu had picked out and immediately had a good sense of them.

He said, "This Dragon-Elephant Might, as its name suggests, is a strength-based technique. It's the best for increasing physique, but it has high requirements for alchemical enhancers; it's hard to make progress without a dozen injections a day. The result… is something similar to Song Hailong."

A human tank, in other words. Zhang Yu recalled Song Hailong's two-and-a-half-meter frame and nodded in understanding.

Lei Jun continued, "Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi is a more balanced body tempering cultivation technique. It focuses on internal refinement, building power in the tendons and bones for explosive strength. It's best practiced in conjunction with alchemical enhancers and dietary supplements."

A bruiser, Zhang Yu judged. *Half tank, half damage-dealer.*

"Finally, this Tendon-Shifting Marrow-Swapping is definitely not for you. It focuses more on flexibility and the body's ability to contort, and it's meant to be used in conjunction with other specialized techniques."

At this point, Zhang Yu had narrowed his choices down to Dragon-Elephant Might and Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi.

But both techniques had their pros and cons, and he couldn't immediately decide.

Lei Jun added, "I'd recommend Dragon-Elephant Might. For one, it's a relatively simple technique. For another, it fits well with Songyang's style of body tempering. You can even ask Wang Hai for some pointers."

"That Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi emphasizes internal refinement, which is extremely difficult. Without guidance from a master teacher, not only is it hard to master, but you can also easily injure yourself. Injuries sustained while practicing this art are so common that insurance policies don't even cover them."

Suddenly, an idea struck Zhang Yu.

"Teacher," he asked, "how many forms does each technique have?"

Lei Jun thought for a moment. "I don't remember for Dragon-Elephant Might. A few dozen, probably. But each form is simple and unadorned, progressing step-by-step. It's not hard to learn."

"I remember Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi, because the entire technique consists of a single standing stance. But don't underestimate it. That one stance requires the perfect coordination of your entire body. It's extremely difficult and makes you prone to injury. It's not suitable for you right now..."

Zhang Yu's eyes suddenly lit up. He knew which one he would choose.

Zhang Yu immediately sent his selection to the organizers. Soon after, the digital manual and usage rights for Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi were delivered to him.

Before long, Zhang Yu and the others had eaten their fill. Seeing that it was almost six-thirty, they decided they couldn't be bothered to go home and wash up, so they headed straight for the school.

...

Meanwhile.

Early in the morning at Songyang High School.

Zhou Chechen frowned at Lan Ling. "What did you say?"

Lan Ling could only repeat himself. "Zhang Yu took first place in the martial arts tournament."

"Zhang Yu? First place in the martial arts tournament?" Zhou Chechen asked in disbelief. "Did White Dragon, Purple Cloud, and Red Pagoda not even send any contestants?"

Lan Ling had no choice but to take out his phone. "He defeated Song Hailong from White Dragon High School, then beat Le Mulan from Purple Cloud High School to take the top spot."

Zhou Chechen took the phone and watched the video of Zhang Yu's fight. After a moment, he looked up, a surprised expression on his face.

"The weak defeating the strong… No, his stats may be lower, but considering his martial skill and combat performance, at the moment of victory, he was indeed the stronger one."

"I never would have thought… truly, never, that our own Songyang could produce someone like him."

"Zhang Pianpian must have invested a small fortune in this Zhang Yu to get him this far."

At this thought, a dark expression flickered across Zhou Chechen's face. Zhang Yu should have been his to sign, but now he was under Zhang Pianpian's protection.

It was as if a promising project he had scouted was snatched from under his nose, and now its value was skyrocketing.

For a wealthy man like Zhou Chechen, earning less was the same as losing money, to say nothing of missing out on such a promising asset.

He could only tell himself that in another six months, he would be able to snatch both Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen back. When that time came, he would be sure to recoup all his lost potential earnings from the two of them.

Just then, Lan Ling reminded him, "What about Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen's application to join the physical tournament team?"

Zhou Chechen snorted. "Rejected."

Lan Ling said, "Wang Hai is very keen on having them join. He's mentioned it several times."

"And then there's Zhang Pianpian's inspection team… without a valid reason, it might be difficult to justify."

The thought of Zhang Pianpian causing another scene at Songyang High School, potentially embarrassing him publicly, made a flicker of anxiety cross Zhou Chechen's eyes.

Then Zhou Chechen said calmly, "Each school can send five people to the physical tournament."

"Then tell them this… in one month, if Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen can place in the top five among first-years in physicals, they can join the competition. If their stats aren't good enough, they'll have no one to blame but themselves. It will have nothing to do with us."

Lan Ling's eyes flickered. He knew that with their current physical scores, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen would have no problem maintaining a top-five rank.

Unless, of course, another group of first-year students was chosen to participate in the special training program to completely eclipse Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen in terms of physical strength.

Zhou Chechen made a quick calculation. "In one month, based on their current rate of progress, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen's physical strength will only reach between level 1.8 and 2.1."

Zhou Chechen picked up the student files from his desk and said calmly, "It's been half a year since the semester started. The first-years have a solid foundation. Let's start a bit early this year. Recruit these five into the special training program and have them participate in the physical tournament."

"In one month, we'll use the special training program to boost their physical strength to level 3.0 or higher. That will push Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen out of the running, and then even Zhang Pianpian won't have anything to say about it."

He looked at the student files in his hands. In addition to the five first-years—Qian Shen, He Dayou, Zhao Tianxing, and two others—there were also more than a dozen second-year students, paired up to correspond with each of the five first-years.

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 81: Competition Slots

Songyang High School.

Inside the classroom.

School life remained as tranquil as ever, and the students' enthusiasm for learning was as high as usual.

The language teacher explained the text from the podium with a complete lack of presence, while below, students were practicing forms, meditating, taking alchemical enhancers, and some had even started fighting… that was combat training.

This was the typical classroom atmosphere in an key high school.

First-year students, still bound by their middle school habits, would hold back a bit right after school started, but now, half a year in, everyone had revealed their true colors as Immortal Dao aces.

The language teacher didn't mind any of it; after all, whether it was practicing forms, meditating, or fighting, taking, popping, or injecting alchemical enhancers, or any other form of Immortal Dao cultivation, it was all far more important than her trivial language class, as long as the students didn't come after her.

As far as she knew, general education teachers at Songyang High School already held good status. Her classmate who had gone to teach at White Dragon High School was often used by the school leadership as an example to lecture students: if you don't get into a good university after the college entrance exams, you'll end up as useless as your high school language teacher.

Thinking of this, the language teacher sighed inwardly.

Alas, if it weren't for the sects and the municipal government's requirements, the key high schools would probably have cut general education class time down to nothing.

Just then, the language teacher heard a student's phone ring.

She was finally losing her patience and wanted to speak up: Student, please put your phone on vibrate during language class so you don't disturb the other students' self-study.

But when the language teacher looked up, she saw that the phone belonged to none other than Zhang Yu.

Although she was just a teacher of a mere general education course, she was well acquainted with this campus celebrity's reputation.

Grade One Study Demon, Songyang School Traitor, the Impure, Moocher… she had heard all of Zhang Yu's various nicknames.

She heard he had even taken first place in the martial arts competition last night, and no one dared to say a word when he was two minutes late for school today.

Considering he was someone with a rich benefactor from White Dragon High School who could stand up to the Student Council, how could a mere general education teacher like her dare to tell him to put his phone on vibrate.

So, the language teacher quickly lowered her head and pretended she hadn't heard a thing.

Zhang Yu had been cultivating his heart art to improve his Dao heart when he picked up his phone and saw that the prize money from the martial arts competition had arrived.

The money's a bit low, but at least it arrived quickly.

Although 50,000 had been deposited, after paying back the 40,000 to Zhang Pianpian and repaying the meal money he had borrowed from Qian Shen and Zhao Tianxing, Zhang Yu's account was once again left with less than 10,000.

Zhang Yu knew that Bai Zhenzhen's fourth-place prize was 10,000, so the number in her account was probably about the same as his right now.

But when Zhang Yu thought about how the next month was only two weeks away, and he would have to pay loan interest, plus rent and utilities, he felt a wave of annoyance.

Right, I also need to buy a new weighted suit, and if I focus on body tempering for the next two months, my daily food expenses are probably going to increase…

The more Zhang Yu thought, the more expenses he realized he had.

Good thing there's that income from Song Hailong.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the classroom, Bai Zhenzhen also received the notification that her prize money had arrived.

In addition, she also received a message from Zhang Pianpian.

Zhang Pianpian: You don't use your spiritual root often enough, so you're not very skilled with it, are you? Otherwise, you should have been able to go further in the martial arts competition.

Zhang Pianpian: From now on, just rent a spiritual root every day. Just say I'm investing in you and paying for it.

Zhang Pianpian: An evolutionary spiritual root only gets stronger the more you use it.

Seeing Zhang Pianpian's messages, Bai Zhenzhen was first startled, then immediately realized.

She saw that I have a spiritual root? She wants to give me cover to use my spiritual root?

Bai Zhenzhen was very aware of her spiritual root's condition; she would secretly use it to cultivate every day after returning home.

But because she was constantly worried about someone discovering she possessed such a 'great treasure,' she never dared to use this spiritual root to aid her cultivation every day in a public place like school.

After all, if something like this became known, just the various banks offering mortgages, casino marketers, and scammers would be enough to drive her crazy, to say nothing of what the wealthy might think.

So, after being exposed so directly by Zhang Pianpian, Bai Zhenzhen's first feeling was one of instinctual panic, a fear that had accumulated in the deepest part of her heart since childhood, like having a shameful secret she'd hidden for a decade suddenly exposed.

However, thinking of Zhang Pianpian's care during this time, of Yu-boy's sibling relationship with her, of how she had frankly revealed her own status as a fake rich girl, and of her score of 699, Bai Zhenzhen gradually calmed down.

I should trust Zhang Pianpian.

Then it occurred to her… if she could use Zhang Pianpian's name as an excuse to rent a spiritual root every day, she could then openly use her own spiritual root to cultivate at school every day.

If I do that, my cultivation time using the spiritual root could increase by at least ten hours a day.

I won't be so constrained in the next competition.

Recalling the martial arts competition, although Bai Zhenzhen had taken fourth place, she constantly felt a sense of frustration, the uncomfortable feeling of being cut off in the middle of a grand display.

Because her various stats were inferior to her opponents from the three great high schools, and because the numbers in her bank account were smaller than her opponents', she was always forced to be more hesitant in her actions, and in the end, she even had to concede.

And now, with the ability to use her spiritual root more for cultivation, she immediately felt a renewed confidence that she could catch up to those top students from the famous schools.

Yu-boy stole the show in this competition, but next time, it'll be my turn.

Although it's nice to have my son take first place, it would be even more satisfying to crush him underfoot and take the championship myself.

…

During PE class.

The smells of sweat and alchemical enhancers mingled, creating an aroma unique to the Immortal Dao of Songyang.

The clang of equipment and the groans of human bodies sounded continuously—the sounds of students struggling valiantly on the Immortal Path.

But some people cast glances toward Bai Zhenzhen not far away, sensing the spiritual energy surging in the air, their minds filled with different thoughts.

Some were envious, "To rent a spiritual root for Bai Zhenzhen to use every day, that Zhang Pianpian is too good to her, isn't she?"

Some thought of a plan:, "I can love White Dragon High too! I want to be Zhang Pianpian's dog!"

And others let their imaginations run wild, "Bai Zhenzhen became Zhang Pianpian's dog and gets to rent a spiritual root every day. If I become Bai Zhenzhen's dog, I wonder if she'd let me borrow the spiritual root for an hour a day?"

On the other side, Zhang Yu was not training his body intensely like the students around him, but had gone into a small side room to study the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand he had newly acquired yesterday.

After all, since he had switched the Feathered Tome's specialization to this grappling technique yesterday, the 24-hour cooldown had not yet passed, so the only thing he could rapidly improve right now was this practical combat skill.

I'll practice this for now. After the cooldown ends tonight, I'll switch back to Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi.

Zhang Yu's hands moved in a flurry of afterimages as he began to practice the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand.

Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand Lvl. 2 (4/20)

This martial art, powered purely by physical violence, had a total of eighteen moves. Although the number of moves wasn't small, each one was extremely short, all of them methods for breaking tendons and fracturing bones, throwing an opponent to the ground, or trapping them in a submission hold in an instant.

The art of grappling emphasized speed and ferocity. On average, each move took less than a second to execute, and in a flash, Zhang Yu had completed the entire set of Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand.

Recalling the several martial arts he had cultivated before, Zhang Yu felt a sense of understanding.

"The moves in martial arts are often required to be simple and fast, which is why practicing a full set is so quick."

Zhang Yu understood that if it weren't for this, he wouldn't have been able to learn and even surpass Song Hailong's Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand on the tournament stage.

A few minutes later, Zhang Yu felt a jolt in his mind as countless experiences with the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand emerged, and the martial art had been upgraded from Level 2 to Level 3.

If I keep cultivating at this speed, I should be able to raise the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand to Level 10 today.

While Zhang Yu was diligently cultivating his martial arts in the small room, the PE teacher, Wang Hai, called Qian Shen, He Dayou, Zhao Tianxing, and two other students aside.

"The school plans to select a group of promising first-year students to join the sports competition team for training."

"Are the five of you willing to go?"

Before anyone else could react, Qian Shen asked directly, "Just the five of us? Aren't Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen going?"

Wang Hai said, "The school leadership feels that those two need to settle down a bit more."

Qian Shen was perplexed, "Their monthly exam scores are first and second in the grade, and they need to settle down? But we get selected?"

Wang Hai certainly couldn't say that it was all because of the Student Council, so he could only offer another reason.

"Because they're too poor."

Seeing the five students slightly stunned, Wang Hai continued, "They can't even afford the competition team's tutoring and nutrition fees. How can they join the team?"

Not only did the other four find this perfectly reasonable, but now even Qian Shen was at a loss for words.

Especially when he remembered how Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen had to borrow money from him for dinner, he understood that their financial situation must be dire.

After recruiting the five students into the sports competition team, Wang Hai went to find Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen.

"Your applications for the sports competition have been rejected again."

Wang Hai looked at the two with some regret, "You should know what this is about."

Wang Hai had previously thought Zhang Yu was a Golden Core disciple, but after Zhang Pianpian came to Songyang High School to back him up and clashed with the Student Council, he became a little less certain.

But regardless of whose disciple he was, Wang Hai could sense that Zhang Yu's aptitude was extraordinary and that he had the potential to compete for a top spot in the sports competition.

He thought to himself, *What a pity. The Student Council isn't giving them a chance at all.*

Hearing Wang Hai's words, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen of course understood, knowing that this was certainly the Student Council's doing.

Wang Hai continued, "But you're not completely out of chances. If, in one month, your PE scores can remain in the top five of the grade, you can represent the school in the sports competition."

Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen exchanged a strange glance, confusion rising in their hearts.

As if understanding their confusion, Wang Hai continued, "The school has selected five first-year students to join the sports competition team."

"In one month, if you can keep your PE scores in the top five while competing against them, you can represent the school in the sports competition."

Now Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen understood. It was obvious the Student Council believed that after these five students joined the competition team and received training, their physical scores would completely surpass their own.

Seeing the fighting spirit burning in Zhang Yu's and Bai Zhenzhen's eyes, Wang Hai sighed inwardly.

As Songyang High School's ace PE teacher, he knew the competition team's training methods all too well.

This so-called opportunity to compare after a month is just an excuse from the Student Council, a way to legitimately squeeze Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen out of the competition so that even Zhang Pianpian can't say anything.

Based on Zhang Yu's and Bai Zhenzhen's rate of progress, raising their physical strength to 2.1 or even 2.2 in a month would be their absolute limit.

But the competition team, with their special training program, can raise He Dayou and the others' physical strength to over 3.0 in just one month.

This has nothing to do with talent; it's purely a massive gap in Immortal Dao technology. If Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen were to join the special training program, their improvement in a month would probably be even greater…

It was because he knew all this so clearly that Wang Hai understood… the moment Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen failed to be selected for the special training program, they had already lost any chance of catching up to the competition team members in physical strength, let alone any chance of participating in the sports competition.

(Chapter End)

Chapter 82: Level 10, Part-Time Job

In the small garden behind the academic building.

Accompanied by the whistle of displaced air, Zhang Yu was practicing the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand, move by move.

Just then, a teacher suddenly darted out from the side and looked at Zhang Yu, saying, "What grade and class are you in? What's your name? Why are you here during class time? Are you skipping?"

Zhang Yu answered calmly, "I am Zhang Yu from Grade One, Class One. I came out to practice some martial arts during math class."

Upon hearing the name Zhang Yu, the teacher's imposing manner immediately faltered.

And when he heard Zhang Yu was skipping math class, even the slightest hint of a stern expression vanished from his face.

Skipping math class counted as skipping class?

If you haven't even skipped a general education course like math for the sake of your Immortal Dao cultivation, can you even be called an ace of Songyang High School?

Thus, after checking that Grade One, Class One was indeed having math class at this time, the teacher nodded and said, "There are still 27 minutes left. Remember to head back as soon as class is over, don't be late for the next one."

After the teacher left, Zhang Yu once again silently cultivated the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand.

Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand Lvl. 9 (89/90)

The reason he wasn't cultivating the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand in the math classroom was simply that his progress in this martial art was too fast, and he didn't want to attract attention in the classroom.

As he executed the final move, the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand instantly advanced to Level 10.

In that moment, countless martial arts experiences and practice memories surged forth from Zhang Yu's mind, bringing his understanding of the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand, of grappling, and of throwing to a new peak.

At the same time, he could feel the Level 10 effect of the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand.

When he performed this martial art again, he could accurately sense his own center of gravity.

Zhang Yu realized that if he wished, he could also sense his opponent's center of gravity and even use the techniques within the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand to instantly shatter their balance and throw them to the ground.

I get it. Whoever I trip, falls.

Truly a pure combat martial art.

And it feels like it pairs quite well with my Limitless Cloud Hand and Imperishable Seal Art…?

As streams of white astral qi erupted from his palms, with his Level 10 mastery of the Limitless Cloud Hand and Level 10 Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand, he faintly felt that he could combine the two martial arts.

If I substitute the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi for the explosive power of my hands, I can execute grappling and throwing techniques from a distance.

A sudden flash of insight crossed Zhang Yu's mind.

Although the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand is powered by pure physical violence, that's not a flaw, but rather an advantage.

Because it means a cultivator can later integrate all kinds of powerful forces, whether it's astral qi, palm force, or fist strength, into the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand.

This martial art is like a grand framework that can accommodate many different combat techniques…

At this moment, Zhang Yu sensed the foresight in Song Hailong's cultivation of this Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand. Not only was it suitable for Song Hailong to use immediately, but it also laid the groundwork for future combat power growth.

I wonder if he thought of this himself, or if it was designed for him by his family or private tutors behind him.

...

Dinnertime.

In the cafeteria.

Every student was shoveling down their food with focus. After all, whether it was the three great schools, the key high schools, or the regular high schools, there wasn't a single high school student who wasn't enthusiastic about eating.

However, one could faintly sense a miasma of resentment floating above the cafeteria today.

It was the resentment of dissatisfaction with the cafeteria's food.

Bai Zhenzhen walked through the cafeteria hall with her tray. Although her appearance was striking, her ice-cold demeanor made many students feel she was unapproachable.

The moment she sat down, Bai Zhenzhen was heard complaining, "Half the windows have switched to selling synthetic food, and the prices for all the remaining pre-prepared meals have gone up. What a bunch of animals!"

Clearly, with the momentum of the Oasis Group, synthetic food was being continuously promoted in Songyang City and had imperceptibly made its way into the high school cafeteria.

Bai Zhenzhen looked at Zhao Tianxing and Qian Shen and said, "We must absolutely not buy synthetic food. We have to boycott it fiercely and make them lose their shirts!"

"Is synthetic food even fit for human consumption?"

"Besides, who knows what they put in it..."

Just as Bai Zhenzhen was speaking, she saw Zhang Yu carrying a large plate of a paste-like substance and sitting down under the astonished gazes of the three of them.

Bai Zhenzhen exclaimed in shock, "Yu-boy! Why are you eating this stuff? Weren't you against eating synthetic food?"

Zhang Yu said matter-of-factly, "The cafeteria is having a promotion today. Free tasting for synthetic food."

Bai Zhenzhen immediately stood up, "I want to see for myself just how bad this synthetic food is."

She walked over to the synthetic food window and heard the cafeteria lady in front introducing, "This is meat paste, this is vegetable paste, and this is rice paste. After you choose, you pick a flavor profile: Mapo Tofu flavor, Kung Pao Chicken flavor, Seafood Medley flavor…"

A short while later, Bai Zhenzhen returned to her seat with the free synthetic food she had received and, after one bite, her face showed utter shock, "This is synthetic food?"

It was impossible to know what kind of Immortal Dao technology was used, but when Bai Zhenzhen took a bite, she found that not only the taste and aroma but even the texture was seventy to eighty percent close to that of real pre-prepared meals.

Bai Zhenzhen remembered clearly that the cafeteria lady had scooped up various pastes, but after being mixed with different flavorings, they acquired all sorts of textures; some were like fatty meat, some like vegetable leaves, and some like fish…

This was a completely different thing from the synthetic food she had eaten in the past.

Bai Zhenzhen said in astonishment, "Has there been a breakthrough in the relevant Immortal Dao technology?"

Zhang Yu sighed from the side, "As expected, these big corporations don't make losing deals. They dare to push this stuff out to compete with pre-prepared meals because they have the confidence to back it up."

"This stuff doesn't taste bad, it's convenient and cheap. In the future, I'm afraid there will be fewer and fewer places selling pre-prepared meals in Songyang City."

Zhao Tianxing sighed, "Doesn't that mean a lot of pre-prepared food factories will go out of business? And a lot of people will lose their jobs again."

The group talked as they ate, and Zhang Yu noticed that Qian Shen and Zhao Tianxing seemed to have something on their minds, so he asked.

Qian Shen sighed and told them about how he, Zhao Tianxing, and three other first-year students had been recruited into the competition team.

Qian Shen said with a look of shame, "Sigh, we got into the sports competition team first even though our scores are lower than yours. I feel unworthy."

Zhao Tianxing also looked nervously at Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen.

Among classmates, getting into the competition team or not was another layer of the campus hierarchy, enough to turn the closest of friends against each other.

And if a lower-scoring student snatched a spot from a higher-scoring one, that was the grudge of obstructing one's academic path, enough to trigger a vicious campaign of school bullying that could very well end with one party jumping off a building.

Ever since PE class, Zhao Tianxing had been worried that Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen would hold it against them.

Especially as someone who genuinely cared about what others thought, Zhao Tianxing was very worried that people might mistakenly think he had used some despicable means to steal the competition spot.

But listening to the two of them, Zhang Yu simply smiled, "It's fine. We already know about this. It's just that bunch of rats from the Student Council pulling strings."

He then told them about the competition in one month's time.

Zhang Yu continued, "From here on, let's just focus on our own cultivation. In a month, we'll compare our PE scores and see who gets to go to the competition."

Hearing these words, and knowing that in the end, it would still come down to scores, both Qian Shen and Zhao Tianxing felt a great sense of relief.

The two thought to themselves, *As expected, we high school students should let our scores do the talking.*

…

After finishing dinner, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen left the school together, preparing to take the subway to White Dragon High School.

On the way, Bai Zhenzhen said, "I've settled it with Song Hailong. We go twice a week, two hours a day. For each two-hour visit, you get 5,000, and I get 2,000."

Hearing this, Zhang Yu's spirits lifted, "5,000 a session, twice a week is 10,000. Isn't that 40,000 a month? Damn it, these rich people are so damn rich."

Bai Zhenzhen added, "But he also made a condition. If on any given day of our combat training with him, we can't win a single match in two hours, then he won't need us anymore."

After saying that, Bai Zhenzhen looked at Zhang Yu and said, "Yu-boy, are you up for it?"

Although Zhang Yu had defeated Song Hailong in the martial arts competition, that had relied on the out-of-bounds rule.

And if his physical strength couldn't keep up with Song Hailong's, or if the gap between them widened even further, it would be even harder to win.

"Of course I'm up for it," Zhang Yu said. "Little Song just relies on his thick skin and brute strength. Once my physical strength starts to catch up to his, he won't be able to win a single match."

"But what about you, Zhen? Are you up for it?"

Bai Zhenzhen snorted and patted her lower abdomen, "I asked my godmother to lend me a sum of money so I can rent a spiritual root to cultivate with every day. My rate of progress from now on… might just shock you, Yu-boy."

Speaking of renting a spiritual root, Zhang Yu felt a surge of curiosity, "What kind of spiritual root did you rent exactly? When are you going to let me play with it?"

Bai Zhenzhen subconsciously touched her stomach, "Let you play with it?"

Zhang Yu said as if it were the most natural thing in the world, "We're brothers in arms. Can't you let me play with the spiritual root you rented?"

Bai Zhenzhen frowned and said, "Let me think about it."

She thought to herself, *Can I lend my spiritual root to Yu-boy? Can I? It seems… it's not entirely impossible…*

Zhang Yu said from the side, "So stingy. I even let you play with my Talisman Tome, which is worth 100,000, several times."

Bai Zhenzhen said, annoyed, "You have the nerve to bring that up? You only let me touch it each time, you barely let me tap it."

Zhang Yu said helplessly, "I'm afraid you'll accidentally bankrupt me by tapping it. Fine, you can play with it on the way there today."

The two got on the subway, luckily managing to grab two seats this time.

Zhang Yu, still under the urging of the ritual, began to cultivate his heart art, racing against time to improve his Dao heart.

Bai Zhenzhen leaned against his back and curiously began to explore the Talisman Tome.

Half an hour later, the two arrived at White Dragon High School, showed the monthly passes Song Hailong had arranged for them, and headed to the designated training room.

"Yu-boy, look, so many of them are kneeling in class. What are they doing?"

"Who knows? Maybe it's a White Dragon custom."

Opening the door to the designated training room, they saw Song Hailong was already inside doing warm-up exercises.

Upon seeing Zhang Yu arrive, Song Hailong's eyes lit up, and he pointed at the floor, saying, "Lie down."

(Chapter End)

Chapter 83: Part-time Job, Moments

"Lie down."

Hearing Song Hailong's words, Zhang Yu turned to look at Bai Zhenzhen beside him.

"Lie down? Does my job description cover that much? Is this five thousand yuan really that hard to earn?"

Song Hailong cracked his neck and said, "I mean let's hurry up. We'll start with ground combat in a bit. That's where I lost, so of course I'm spending money to win back my pride there."

With that, Song Hailong walked over to a switch on a nearby wall and asked, "What scent do you like?"

Zhang Yu looked at the switch on the wall, assuming it was for the air conditioner, and asked in confusion, "You mean the AC scent? An air freshener?"

Song Hailong was speechless. "I'm talking about the intellect-enhancement agent scent, of course. I'm more used to peach or mint…"

Seeing the blank look on Zhang Yu's face, Song Hailong remembered the other boy was from Songyang High School and said casually, "Never mind, let's go with mint."

As he pressed the switch a few times, Zhang Yu gradually began to smell a minty aroma wafting through the air, while his blood slowly started to race and his mind grew excited.

Song Hailong then pointed to a faucet nearby and said, "The pipe on the right is all energy drinks. If you run low on stamina later, just drink from it directly."

Zhang Yu was already at a loss for words, thinking to himself, *Stimulants in the AC and Red Bull in the water, is that it? Damn… they're too rich.*

Seeing Zhang Yu's astonished expression, Song Hailong said with a hint of pride, "You don't need to be so surprised. After all, White Dragon High is known to many outsiders as a place flowing with potions and needles; you can even detect traces of Dao heart buffer in the shower water."

"A few years ago, a group of poor people even snuck into the sewers over here, trying to steal the water our school discharged to drink it, hehe… a bunch of people who failed to get into a high school Immortal Dao program, thinking they could achieve immortality by drinking a little of our wastewater."

"Some people's bodies did improve, but others couldn't handle the potency and died on the spot, which was discovered after the fact."

Zhang Yu felt increasingly speechless.

Mortals stealing immortal elixirs, is that the deal? But he couldn't help asking, "This stolen water was?"

Song Hailong smiled. "Just wastewater from the restrooms, bathhouses, and the like. It often has some residual potion components, which those lawless paupers stole for their own use."

Zhang Yu said, "It's a good thing they were caught. There won't be any more victims in the future, right?"

Song Hailong nodded, smiling faintly. "Yes, the school later decided to sell the gutter water to those poor people themselves. The sewers have never been burgled since."

Damn it… so in the eyes of White Dragon High, the only victim was White Dragon High itself, huh? Zhang Yu was speechless for a moment, then simply started his warm-up.

A short while later, seeing that Zhang Yu had finished warming up, Song Hailong added a few more rules for the training.

As he began to speak on the topic of training, the smile on his face vanished instantly, replaced by a serious expression.

"No need for lethal force in training. As long as you can control me, I lose. If the fight continues until your strength wanes and you're no longer at your peak, and I still haven't controlled you, that also counts as my loss."

"If I can control you, then I win."

"If you fail to win against me even once within these two hours, then this tutoring session is over, and you don't need to come back in the future."

Zhang Yu understood. Little Song wanted to defeat him at his peak in a head-on confrontation.

Next, Song Hailong said to Bai Zhenzhen, "As for you, Bai Zhenzhen, it's as you said: either you fight me, or you stand aside and offer me guidance."

"But if you can't beat me, or if I find your advice useless, then you don't need to come back in the future either."

Then Zhang Yu walked over, and in the blink of an eye, he and Song Hailong were once again locked in ground combat.

Their hands collided and grappled, constantly using the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand to counter and exchange moves, each trying to lock the other's body.

By now, Zhang Yu had already advanced his Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand to level 10.

Even though he didn't reveal it, still maintaining the appearance of a level 2, his understanding of this martial art, of grappling and wrestling, was far beyond anything Song Hailong could compare to.

In particular, Zhang Yu had also tried to integrate the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand into the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi of the Limitless Cloud Hand, using the astral qi to assist in completing various grappling and wrestling techniques.

Song Hailong felt as if his every move had been completely seen through by Zhang Yu. That white astral qi could not only deflect his power but could even execute techniques similar to the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand.

And so… almost as soon as the fight began, Song Hailong was already at a disadvantage, able to rely only on his brute strength and physique to forcibly break his opponent's techniques.

This left Song Hailong utterly astonished.

This Zhang Yu… his technique is much stronger than yesterday.

How could he have improved so much in just one day?

A flash of insight suddenly struck Song Hailong.

This kid, he must have practiced the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand like crazy after he went back, all for the sake of beating me again right now.

Why would he think that?

Because ever since the match ended yesterday, Song Hailong himself had been finding people to train his Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand relentlessly.

He even had his meals for the day injected directly into his stomach and veins to absorb them, all for the sake of making valiant progress and closing the technical gap with Zhang Yu as quickly as possible.

At this moment, sensing Zhang Yu's improvement, Song Hailong thought to himself, *He thought the same way I did? As expected of the man who barely defeated me.*

At this thought, a competitive expression appeared on Song Hailong's face. The vital energy in his body surged, and a torrent of mana endlessly reinforced his physical form, allowing him to continuously erupt with ferocious power as he gritted his teeth and resisted Zhang Yu's assault.

He felt as if he had been plunged into a stormy ocean. Zhang Yu's hands were like a series of undercurrents, and the astral qi was like wave after wave, constantly dragging him down into the depths.

As for Zhang Yu's side… he felt like he was trying to bind a furious dragon. Even when he managed to restrain it with chains time and again, his opponent would always manage to break them with sheer, savage force.

And Song Hailong's technique? To Zhang Yu, it was…

Was there any improvement? Perhaps it's just too minor compared to mine for me to notice.

Meanwhile, Bai Zhenzhen stood to the side watching the two fight, sighing in her heart.

Of these two, one has an absolute physical advantage, and the other has an absolute technical advantage.

Song Hailong's moves are often countered by Zhang Yu's technique.

And Zhang Yu's moves are often broken by Song Hailong's superior strength.

She couldn't help but frown.

There's no martial arts tournament ring or out-of-bounds rule today. Yu-boy can't win with a clever trick.

I'm afraid this will go on until Yu-boy runs out of stamina.

Just as Bai Zhenzhen had thought, about three minutes later, Song Hailong suddenly stopped. "Your strength has weakened; you're no longer at your peak. I lose this round. Take a rest and prepare for the next one."

While the two rested, Bai Zhenzhen began to analyze their fight, pointing out their respective flaws.

At first, Song Hailong was somewhat dismissive, but he soon began to listen intently, his gaze toward Bai Zhenzhen changing slightly.

This woman's insight is truly sharp. I originally thought she was just a freebie, but now it seems inviting her wasn't a waste after all.

During the break, Zhang Yu curiously turned on the faucet to his side and took a few sips of the energy drink. He instantly felt a fire ignite in his stomach as his stamina rapidly recovered.

"It works this well?"

Zhang Yu had already made up his mind: the next time he came to White Dragon High, he would definitely bring a basin to fill up.

They continued to fight and rest intermittently. Zhang Yu and Song Hailong grappled repeatedly, but almost every encounter ended with Zhang Yu's stamina giving out. Only once did Zhang Yu win by controlling Song Hailong's joints.

Zhang Yu rubbed his sore hands, thinking, *Although he says he lost, if this were a real fight to the finish, the one losing would be me after my stamina declined, wouldn't it?*

This Song Hailong is just too tough. Without the out-of-bounds rule of the ring, it's very difficult for me to defeat him before my stamina drops.

I really do need to increase my physical strength.

At that moment, Zhang Yu felt an even greater urgency to make his physique stronger.

Before leaving White Dragon High, Song Hailong transferred the payment to the two of them, then looked at Zhang Yu and reminded him, "I won't stop improving my physical strength just for the sake of our training."

"In two months, when the sports competition officially begins, my physical strength will be at least level 4.0 or higher."

"So… I hope you can work hard to keep up. Otherwise, if the gap in our physical strength becomes too large, the training will be meaningless."

The moment they stepped out of White Dragon High's gates, Bai Zhenzhen grabbed Zhang Yu and they started running towards the subway station.

Zhang Yu asked in confusion, "Zhen, what's the rush?"

Bai Zhenzhen said, "I drank too much of that energy drink, I need to use the restroom!"

"That trash White Dragon High, they charge ten yuan to use the restroom, making me hold it until now."

…

While Zhang Yu and Song Hailong were wrestling.

In a quiet room at Purple Cloud High School.

Le Mulan slowly dispersed the Purple Saint Heart Art that had been circulating in her mind, doing her best to halt the thought that 'the rich are holy, wise, good, and strong, while the poor are filthy, foolish, evil, and weak'.

Under the effect of the Purple Saint Heart Art, she normally only had to look at her bank balance or the profits on her stocks. The larger the numbers, the smoother the heart art would circulate, the greater the benefit to her Dao heart, and the calmer and more stable her spirit would become.

But in contrast… this also caused her aversion and disgust towards poverty, and even the poor, to grow ever stronger.

However, the former Le Mulan didn't think there was any problem with this. Whether it was poverty or poor people, money could shield her from them.

Until she encountered Zhang Yu in the ring.

Thinking of this, she took a deep breath and opened Zhang Yu's social media feed.

Le Mulan encouraged herself internally, *A poor person's social media feed, here I come.*

The first thing that met her eyes was a selfie of Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen standing at the gate of White Dragon High School.

The accompanying text read: Back at White Dragon High again. Song Hailong, the number one first-year, invited us for instructional guidance. If any other friends would like some guidance, feel free to get in touch.

"Song Hailong actually paid the poor Zhang Yu for guidance?"

Seeing this, Le Mulan's eyes lit up slightly.

He didn't want the 400,000, but he's willing to be paid for lessons?

Chapter 84: Transplant

"In that case, could I also pay some money to have this poor person let me get close to him… to touch him?"

But just the thought of touching him made Le Mulan recall the scenes from the ring, and a wave of revulsion washed over her. The dormant heart art seemed to stir on its own, wanting to activate again to save her from this torment.

If the former Le Mulan could still talk to Zhang Yu normally despite her inner disgust, then ever since the events in the ring, she felt a strong, physiological aversion to any contact with him.

"No, I must change my way of thinking, overcome this weakness."

"How can a rich person be afraid of a poor person?"

With this thought, Le Mulan steeled her resolve and once again suppressed the heart art.

"But I can't start too intensely; it has to be gradual."

"Maybe I can observe their training? No… watching from a close distance is still a bit nauseating. It needs to be even more gradual."

"Or perhaps I should give up on human contact for now and try buying some of Zhang Yu's clothes?

The clothes, covered in his dead skin flakes, oils, scent, sweat, and other filth—the mere thought was too foul for Le Mulan.

"No, that's still disgusting. It needs to be even more gradual."

After mulling it over, Le Mulan decided to download the photos from Zhang Yu's social media feed and start by simply looking at a poor person's picture every day.

"Once looking at his photo doesn't sicken me, maybe I can level up and try making contact with his clothes."

…

On the way back, after receiving the 5,000 yuan, Zhang Yu first bought a new weighted suit, as his original one had been damaged during the martial arts competition.

His savings decreased by 2,000, leaving him with just under 13,000.

After receiving the weighted suit at home, Zhang Yu quickly changed into it and returned to the abandoned building to cultivate.

Late that night, as the 24-hour cooldown period ended, he was finally able to switch the Feathered Tome's specialty to the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi.

This Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi had only one move, but this single move required the coordination of every muscle and tendon in the body, with every muscle fiber and major tendon stretching or contracting in unison, demanding an extremely high level of physical control from the cultivator.

But for Zhang Yu…

"Difficult?"

"The more difficult, the better. Otherwise, how could it highlight the difference in talent between me and others?"

Zhang Yu stood his ground, his feet shoulder-width apart, arms hanging naturally at his sides. Then, following the instructions in the digital manual, he began to move all the muscles and tendons in his body.

However, on his first attempt, it was impossible for him to achieve this. He felt a scattered mess throughout his body, either missing the muscles in his legs or the tendons in his arms.

Had it been the original Zhang Yu, self-studying this Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi would have likely required training and subduing the muscles of each body part one by one, finally completing the overall integration training, a process that could easily take several months.

But the current Zhang Yu only needed to practice it roughly once before he felt a jolt run through his entire body, as a flood of memories and experiences on how to control every muscle and tendon poured into his mind.

Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi, mastered!

At that moment, he felt his control over his body's muscles and tendons reach an unprecedented level.

Inside the abandoned building, as Zhang Yu exerted force again, a loud thud seemed to echo from within his body; it was the sound of all his muscles and tendons stretching in unison.

In that instant, Zhang Yu's entire frame seemed to shoot up by several inches, as if a ball had been inflated with a puff of air, and that air was the force generated by his muscles and tendons.

"Too easy. Again."

Delighted, Zhang Yu exerted force once more. With each contraction of his muscles and tendons, the vital energy in his body grew hotter, and steam began to rise from his body in the cold night.

He knew this was the effect of the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi: using the muscles of the entire body to drive the vital energy, and the vital energy to drive the bone marrow, ultimately strengthening the muscles and bones, and increasing physical strength and explosive power.

In a flash, after 10 consecutive exertions, he had raised the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi to level 2.

But Zhang Yu also felt a wave of exhaustion wash over him, as if he had just fought another great battle with Song Hailong.

"Body tempering cultivation techniques are indeed more troublesome to practice than combat techniques."

"Each practice of this body tempering Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi is like a full-power explosion from every bit of flesh and blood in my body. The stamina consumption is immense."

Zhang Yu had no choice but to sit down, focusing on cultivating his heart art to enhance his Dao heart while recovering his stamina as quickly as possible.

More than half an hour later, feeling his strength return, he stood up and once again began to practice the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi.

In the blink of an eye, a night passed. Although he had to rest for a period after every dozen or so repetitions, Zhang Yu still managed to intermittently raise his Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi to level 6 (43/60).

At this moment, Zhang Yu's body trembled, and the vital energy within him surged, creating a sound like crashing waves.

Zhang Yu let out a long breath, feeling a wave of weakness throughout his body.

"I'm dead tired."

"And starving!"

...

Songyang High School.

The cafeteria.

Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen were wolfing down synthetic food.

As for their former disdain, all they could say now was how delicious it was.

After all, the current synthetic food was not as unpalatable as it used to be, and it was cheap, convenient, and nutritious. For Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, who were now focused on body tempering, it was simply too suitable.

But compared to the heartily eating Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, Qian Shen and Zhao Tianxing, who were sitting opposite them, looked gloomy, and even their food didn't taste good.

This was because they had attended the remedial class for the sports competition team after school yesterday, and after signing various confidentiality agreements, they finally learned what the special training program was all about.

At this moment, whenever Zhao Tianxing recalled what he had learned yesterday, he felt a sense of suffocation.

The so-called special training program involved senior students providing muscle fibers, which were then transplanted into junior students using Songyang High School's advanced Immortal Dao technology, fusing with their original muscle fibers.

With the support of this Immortal Dao technology, not only could physical strength be immediately enhanced after fusion, but the fused muscles could also continue to be trained, constantly increasing physical strength.

In other words… muscle fibers from second-year students would be transplanted into Zhao Tianxing and the others, fusing with their original muscle fibers, allowing them to gradually possess a portion of the powerful physique that the second-year seniors had spent an extra year cultivating.

To put it another way… first-years could buy the flesh of poor second-years, and second-years could buy the flesh of poor third-years.

This was the special training program, a plan that Zhao Tianxing found incomparably cruel and brutal.

He felt even more horrified when he saw the price list yesterday.

The names of second-year students, accompanied by the values and prices of different body parts like the trapezius, deltoids, supraspinatus, biceps, were all listed line by line, looking just like a menu at some restaurant.

Zhao Tianxing even saw Shuang Youpeng, the former first-in-grade, on the list.

All of this made Zhao Tianxing feel as if his mental state was on the verge of collapse.

He still remembered his and Qian Shen's conversation with Lan Ling.

Lan Ling, the top athlete in the second year, was also a member of the sports competition team and one of the executors of the special training program.

In comparison, Wang Hai was only responsible for the daily training of the competition team and had no say in the special training program, only holding the title of ace sports teacher thanks to the team's results.

…

Zhao Tianxing: "If we buy their flesh, what happens to them?"

Lan Ling said nonchalantly, "Don't worry, we'll leave them the root. They can eat, exercise, and it will grow back."

Zhao Tianxing's breathing quickened. "Just grow flesh, cut flesh, grow flesh, cut flesh… isn't that just like cattle and sheep?"

Lan Ling smiled. "Humans are still much more expensive than cattle and sheep. They make a good profit at this price."

"This isn't a matter of price." Qian Shen, who was beside him, couldn't help but say, "Buying flesh directly like this, isn't it just buying physical strength? It's equivalent to buying sports points with money, isn't it?"

Lan Ling, however, said as if it were the most natural thing in the world, "Yes, you could indeed say it's buying points with money."

Qian Shen questioned, "How can you buy points with money?"

Lan Ling said flatly, "Of course you can buy points with money."

"Otherwise, where do you think your cultivation came from? The enhancers you've been injected with, the cultivation techniques you've practiced, the knowledge you've learned… where did it all come from?"

"It was bought with money."

"And why do you think you are standing here, and not Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, who have better grades than you?"

"It's only because you are richer than them, because your parents could afford the sponsorship fee."

"Money can indeed get you better grades. It can buy you points."

"Sponsorship fee?" Zhao Tianxing was slightly taken aback. Thinking about his parents' recent talk of selling their house, he instantly understood something.

But Qian Shen still looked as if he couldn't accept it.

He Dayou, who was standing nearby, tried to persuade him, "Come on, Qian Shen, this is just how the world works. Money is the most important thing. If you're afraid of others knowing you bought flesh, you can rest assured. Everyone has signed a confidentiality agreement in the presence of a righteous god; no one will talk."

As the Son of the School Director, who had long been aware of this, He Dayou smiled and said to Lan Ling, "Senior, I've made my choices. After signing the contract, can the transplant surgery begin today?"

To officially begin the special training program and start the muscle transplantation, a contract naturally had to be signed first, which of course included the school and the Student Council's right to decide the signatory's future university and major choices.

He Dayou was, of course, not worried about this.

As the Son of the School Director, he had no restrictions on his choice of university and major.

However…

He subconsciously glanced at Zhao Tianxing next to him, knowing that if the other party wanted to join the competition team and accept the special training program, his university choices would definitely be restricted.

This was simply because his family was not wealthy enough; they had only just barely managed to pay the sponsorship fee.

He Dayou thought to himself, *A minor household, still a long way from the truly wealthy circle of Songyang City.*

Hearing He Dayou's question, Lan Ling nodded and said, "From now on, a small part of the transplant will be performed every day. You will feel your physical strength increasing dramatically at all times."

(End of chapter)

Chapter 85: Competing, Advertisement

Inside the cafeteria.

Zhang Yu looked at Qian Shen and Zhao Tianxing with confusion, wondering why the two of them looked like they had failed an exam.

"What's wrong with you two?"

Upon hearing Zhang Yu's curious inquiry, neither Qian Shen nor Zhao Tianxing could answer, because they had both signed confidentiality agreements and could not reveal any information about the special training program.

Zhao Tianxing shook his head with a bitter smile and said, "It's nothing, just… the pressure from the competition team is a bit high."

At the same time, a trace of pity flickered in his eyes as he looked at Zhang Yu.

Zhao Tianxing thought to himself, *He Dayou and the others already started their transplant surgeries yesterday. Their physical strength is going to skyrocket, isn't it?*

Yu-boy and Zhen are talented, but they can't possibly beat the school's Immortal Dao technology.

So on the path of the Immortal Dao… money really is the most important thing, isn't it?

…

During physical education class that day.

He Dayou, physical strength level 1.56.

Li Xianglu, physical strength level 1.55.

Wang Wenjie, physical strength level 1.53.

Overnight, after undergoing transplant surgery, the three of them had each made considerable improvements.

Watching the three of them effortlessly handle various equipment, and looking at their physical strength test data, the surrounding students couldn't help but show envy in their eyes.

"The sports competition is truly our Songyang's ace program. He Dayou and the others are improving so fast."

"They've only been there for a day and they're already this strong? Teacher Wang Hai really knows his stuff."

But He Dayou wasn't interested in what these students were saying or seeing. He turned his head to look for Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, only to find that they didn't seem to have come to PE class at all. Even the small room nearby was empty of Zhang Yu's presence.

"Hmph, no matter. There will be plenty of opportunities in the future." He Dayou could already see himself in the coming month, his physical strength skyrocketing daily, eventually trampling both Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen under his feet.

"From now on, I will improve faster and faster, until my physical strength approaches the level of a second-year."

"My score will ultimately surpass yours."

…

Where had Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen gone?

Both of them had applied to Wang Hai to be excused from PE class.

Zhang Yu's thought was: *My Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi is improving at a flying pace. It's better to hide and practice on my own, to avoid any traces being seen.*

Bai Zhenzhen, on the other hand, thought to herself: *My spiritual root has too many functions. Since I already have the cover of renting out my spiritual root and don't need to worry about attracting attention, I might as well practice alone to avoid any abnormalities being noticed in a crowd.*

And so, on the school's rooftop.

Zhang Yu looked at Bai Zhenzhen before him and smiled.

"Zhen, what a coincidence. You're skipping PE class too?"

Bai Zhenzhen looked at Zhang Yu before her and also smiled.

"Yu-boy, what a coincidence. You came to the rooftop to practice too?"

Zhang Yu thought to himself, *Zhen must have her cheat active. That's why she doesn't want to be seen and has come to the rooftop to practice alone.*

Bai Zhenzhen thought to herself, *Yu-boy must have his cheat active. He wants to train in secret, hide his strength, and then pull off a big reveal in a month. That's why he's on the rooftop.*

Zhang Yu smiled. "Then let's practice together on the rooftop."

Bai Zhenzhen also smiled. "Yes, let's practice together."

Zhang Yu thought to himself, *I can still trust Zhen. This time, I'll let her witness my talent and make her completely submit.*

Bai Zhenzhen thought to herself, *There are no secrets between a mother and son, especially not cheats. After holding back for over a decade, I can finally show someone my astonishing potential. Hahahaha, I can already see the look of envy, jealousy, and hatred on Yu-boy's face.*

And so, the two of them exchanged a smile, each walked to a spot, stood firm, and began to cultivate separately.

Thus, on the rooftop, Zhang Yu began to train diligently in the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi.

He stood his ground, and as his body vibrated time and again, it gradually emitted a rumbling sound, like waves repeatedly crashing against a reef.

Bai Zhenzhen turned her head and looked at Zhang Yu, whose face and hands were gradually turning red from the surging vital energy, and felt a jolt of shock.

Then, she thought with a face full of jealousy, *Could that be that… Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi? Yu-boy has already mastered it? He's started using this technique for body tempering?*

Suddenly, the spiritual root in her stomach didn't seem so impressive anymore.

She felt her current mood was like being woken up in the middle of the night by a classmate's breathing exercise.

Or seeing a classmate in the morning with the packaging of a potion they had secretly consumed.

Or seeing a few more needle marks on a classmate's arm than usual during PE class.

Bai Zhenzhen quickly released the restraints on her spiritual root, preparing to begin her body tempering.

"A child showing off is nothing compared to a couple showing off together!"

"I'll keep surpassing him! My physical strength next month must continue to be above Yu-boy's!"

With that, she released the restraints on the spiritual root in her body and began body tempering.

After practicing for a dozen or so repetitions, Zhang Yu felt his body grow weak. He intended to sit down and rest for a while, taking out the energy drink he had prepared for a few sips.

"As expected of the energy drink I got from White Dragon High. Free stuff just tastes better."

Just then, sensing an anomaly in the ambient spiritual energy, he turned his head in Bai Zhenzhen's direction.

He saw that Bai Zhenzhen was also cultivating a body tempering technique. Zhang Yu couldn't tell what technique it was, but he could faintly feel wisps of spiritual energy flowing into Bai Zhenzhen's body, seemingly nourishing her flesh and blood.

"That must be the effect of her spiritual root, right? Something like the Muscle-Growth Spiritual Root that can strengthen the body?"

Zhang Yu thought with a face full of jealousy, *Having a spiritual root is so great. I'll definitely have to borrow it from Zhen to play with in the future.*

Then Zhang Yu noticed another anomaly.

With his experience of having multiple martial arts at level 10, he could spot subtle differences in others' techniques.

And now, looking at Bai Zhenzhen, Zhang Yu could feel that her body tempering technique was clearly being adjusted with each repetition, making it feel more comfortable and smoother, as if Bai Zhenzhen was naturally… constantly adapting to this set of body tempering techniques.

"Could it be that when Zhen practices martial arts, she makes adjustments and improvements with every repetition?"

It sounded ordinary, but upon deeper thought, Zhang Yu felt how formidable it was.

Zhang Yu was shocked. *Isn't this the same as my Feathered Tome, where techniques can also advance quickly?*

She wasn't this formidable when she practiced before.

She's definitely been secretly using her cheat!

The thought of her secretly using her cheat and working hard where he couldn't see motivated Zhang Yu. After a short rest, he got up and continued to push himself to cultivate the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi.

And so, for the rest of the time, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen diligently tempered their bodies, primarily for the sake of keeping each other company.

When the bell for the end of class rang, Zhang Yu had already raised his Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi to level 7 (15/70). He felt that as his muscles moved, his internal organs were also engaged, being tempered with each repetition of his cultivation and emitting strange sounds of their movement.

On the other side, Bai Zhenzhen was steaming from head to toe, sweat constantly dripping down her flushed cheeks. She felt the muscles all over her body growing and strengthening under the catalysis of her spiritual root.

As the bell rang, the two looked at each other and smiled.

Zhang Yu smiled. "Amazing, Zhen."

Bai Zhenzhen also smiled faintly. "You're not bad either, Yu-boy."

Zhang Yu thought to himself, *I'm not showering when I get home tonight, just going straight to training! I have to get Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi to level 10.*

Bai Zhenzhen secretly vowed, *I'm not even going to take a shit when I get home! I'm gonna work this body! All the way till dawn!*

And so, for the next few days, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen seized every moment, moving between one deserted corner of the campus and another, leaving behind pools of diligent sweat as they madly pushed their bodies to their limits.

During PE class, He Dayou felt excited about his daily increase in physical strength, yet was repeatedly disappointed at not seeing Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen.

But he endured it all.

He constantly reminded himself, *Isn't this the result I anticipated long ago?*

Talented poor people are only impressive at the beginning; in the end, they will lose to the rich.

After completing the transplant, as the newly integrated muscles continue to fuse with my body, my physical strength is now growing rapidly every day.

The later Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen come to witness my strength, the more despairing the gap they will feel.

With a hint of anticipation, He Dayou continued to train seriously in PE class.

And in the same PE class, not far away, Zhao Tianxing secretly glanced at He Dayou, his gaze always carrying a hint of envy and hesitation.

"Qian Shen has already quit, saying he won't participate in the competition team. Lan Ling has chosen another student to join."

"But… should I quit too?"

"I don't like this way of improving my score, but He Dayou and the others' physical strength is increasing really fast. At this rate… I'll never be able to catch up to them."

But the thought of his parents planning to sell their house for him to get into the competition team and improve his score made Zhao Tianxing hesitate again.

…

In a small grove before school let out for the day.

Zhang Yu sat cross-legged, but his whole body was constantly emitting white steam in the cold wind. He was cultivating the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi, which he had already pushed to level 10.

At this moment, his muscles, internal organs, and bone marrow were all engaged in unison, being tempered with each exertion of force.

In addition to this, there was the effect of reaching level 10 in the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi.

Zhang Yu's physical structure had become more rational and complete. Every muscle in his body fit together perfectly, like intricately constructed parts assembled flawlessly.

This post-level-10 adjustment to his body structure also caused his physical strength to skyrocket on the spot. Coupled with the past few days of arduous training, his physical strength had increased to level 1.67.

Besides that, his digestive ability and metabolic rate had also increased.

Zhang Yu felt that he was hungry all the time now, a feeling of hunger that came from every piece of flesh in his body.

"My daily food expenses have already risen to over 600. This body tempering is really expensive."

But even so, Zhang Yu could feel that his body was still not satisfied.

"I probably need to start taking boosters, right?"

The Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi could be cultivated in conjunction with boosters, but the recommended booster was called the Primordial Pill. Zhang Yu looked it up online; it cost 30,000 per pill.

"Damn it… this Purple Cloud Pharmaceutical Company is robbing people!"

With the sharp increase in food expenses and the need for boosters, Zhang Yu felt an ever-growing shortage of money.

Although he had given Song Hailong another lesson yesterday and received another 5,000 yuan, Zhang Yu still felt that the balance of less than 16,000 in his account was not enough.

Fortunately, another money-making opportunity had arrived today.

As the dismissal bell rang, Bai Zhenzhen finished her exercise and looked at Zhang Yu, saying, "Let's go, Yu-boy. Time to shoot the commercial."

(End of chapter)

Chapter 86: The Photoshoot and a Lesson for He Dayou

Several days after the martial arts competition had ended, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen finally landed an advertisement—a group commercial featuring several of the contestants.

Walking down the road, Zhang Yu couldn't help but ask, "Did you hear what Song Hailong said yesterday? Why did he, the third-place winner, get a solo ad while we only got a group one?"

Bai Zhenzhen pursed her lips and said, "I asked around, and the general consensus is… it's been half a year since school started, and in another six months, we'll be second-years."

"No one's offering us solo ads because they're afraid our public image will collapse."

Hearing Bai Zhenzhen's answer, Zhang Yu was completely baffled. "Collapse? How could our image possibly collapse? Are they worried we'll mess around with our fans?"

Bai Zhenzhen shot Zhang Yu a sidelong glance, stating the obvious, "What nonsense are you talking about? Messing with fans is nothing. They're worried our grades will plummet once we become second-years. We're the poor kids, after all."

Zhang Yu understood instantly. For a top student in Kunxu, a collapsed image meant falling grades. It made perfect sense.

But then, anger flared within him. "Does being poor automatically mean our grades will collapse in our second year? We're already poor enough, and now it's even harder for us to make money than a rich kid like Song Hailong. He can get a solo ad, but we can't. Speaking of which, why did they ask us to be in the group ad then? Aren't they afraid our images will collapse?"

Bai Zhenzhen looked at Zhang Yu as if he were an idiot. "Are you stupid? In a group ad, if our images collapse, they can just edit us out."

A little over half an hour later, the two arrived at a photography studio and saw that many familiar faces from the three great high schools were already there.

But at that moment, all of them were, intentionally or not, glancing at a certain teenager who was surrounded by a dozen staff members.

Bai Zhenzhen asked, intrigued, "Who's that? He's got quite the entourage."

Zhang Yu was also curious. "Isn't this supposed to be a group ad for the top eight from the martial arts competition? I don't think he was one of them."

Lian Tianji popped up from behind them and said, "That's Yu Xinghan, True Monarch Xinghou's final disciple, whom he found in another city. He's probably transferring to White Dragon High School soon."

Looking at the boy who was the center of everyone's attention, surrounded by assistants, makeup artists, and directors, Bai Zhenzhen's gaze shifted.

"True Monarch Xinghou? You mean that washed-up Golden Core?"

Lian Tianji nodded at her words. "According to True Monarch Xinghou, this Yu Xinghan is to be his final disciple, inheriting his entire legacy and fortune. He's predicted to be Songyang City's future top scorer on the college entrance exams."

"It's because of his title as a Golden Core's disciple, along with such high praise, that the Immortal Resonance Group brought him in for this ad."

"Look at Song Hailong, hehe… his eyes are practically shooting sparks. After all, this Yu Xinghan is transferring to White Dragon High School and will inevitably compete with him for the top spot in their year."

Zhang Yu looked at Song Hailong, who resembled nothing more than a stressed-out calico cat, his back arched and fur on end as he stared daggers at Yu Xinghan.

A thought flickered in Zhang Yu's mind, and he suddenly said, "So this Yu Xinghan will have to participate in the upcoming competitions, right?"

Lian Tianji nodded. "Of course. In the next athletics competition, he'll likely be a strong contender for the championship."

As he looked toward Yu Xinghan, a flicker of challenge ignited in his own eyes.

While Lian Tianji was talking with Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, a pair of eyes was quietly watching the three of them.

The owner of that gaze was none other than Le Mulan from Purple Cloud High School.

Originally, Le Mulan had no interest in this kind of advertisement shoot, but she had come for two reasons. First, the Golden Core's disciple, Yu Xinghan, would be participating, and she was curious about him.

Second… was because of the only two poor students among the contestants, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen.

As she watched the two, Le Mulan thought to herself, *I've been looking at the photos he posts online every day, and I don't find them as disgusting as I used to. This is a good opportunity to take things a step further.*

But the mere thought of approaching Zhang Yu brought back the image of him sitting on top of her, the dirty, hot, reeking blood splashing all over her body, and an involuntary shudder sent goosebumps across her skin.

Forget it, I'll start with the easiest step first.

Besides, I'll have to get close to them during the actual shoot anyway.

So Le Mulan silently observed the pair, her gaze continuously drifting in their direction.

…

The commercial they were filming involved the various contestants recommending the Immortal Resonance Group's tutoring agency.

During the shoot, people constantly found opportunities to approach Yu Xinghan to chat and add him as a friend, giving Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen a firsthand taste of how incredibly popular a true Golden Core's disciple was.

As for the central focus of the entire advertisement, that was completely occupied by Yu Xinghan, with the other contestants arranged around him like green leaves encircling a flower.

However, the top three from the martial arts competition—Zhang Yu, Le Mulan, and Song Hailong—were the leaves right beside the flower. Fourth place, Bai

Zhenzhen, was like the stem beneath the leaves, and those ranked even lower, like Lian Tianji, were the dirt beneath the flower.

According to the director, the words "Final Disciple of a Golden Core True Monarch" would eventually fill the entire screen; he was the undisputed star.

During the shoot, Zhang Yu felt that Le Mulan, who was standing beside him, was acting strangely. One moment she would take a deep breath, the next she would be trembling slightly. He finally couldn't help but ask, "What are you doing?"

Seeing Zhang Yu turn his head, Le Mulan instinctively took a step back.

"You… I'm fine. Mind your own business."

Zhang Yu cursed her as a psycho in his head and decided to ignore her.

Le Mulan, however, was covering her nose, thinking, *He smells awful… is this what Mom called the 'subway smell' that poor people have?*

It was definitely the right decision to come today. I can already feel myself slowly getting used to it.

After four hours, the commercial was finally finished. Zhang Yu took his 30,000 yuan and Bai Zhenzhen her 8,000, and they each went home.

But not long after he got home, Zhang Yu's newly acquired 30,000 yuan transformed into a Crimson Marrow Primordial Pill, which he swallowed in one gulp.

Feeling a violent medicinal power coursing through his entire body, Zhang Yu immediately seized the opportunity to begin cultivating the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi.

As the power of the pill spread through his limbs and organs, Zhang Yu felt every muscle, organ, and even bone in his body, like parched earth receiving sweet rain, begin to frantically absorb the medicinal energy as he circulated the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi.

A full half-hour passed before the medicinal power slowly dissipated within him.

But Zhang Yu knew it wasn't truly gone; it had been temporarily absorbed into his muscles, organs, and bones.

At that moment, although Zhang Yu didn't feel any increase in his physical strength, he felt vigorous and brimming with inexhaustible energy.

He knew that over the next few days, the medicinal power he had absorbed would continue to take effect, enhancing his cultivation of the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi and further increasing his physical strength.

He eagerly continued to cultivate the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi.

As the entire night passed, with Zhang Yu frantically cultivating the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi, he would train until he was completely exhausted, collapse, and the moment the ritual urged him on, he knew he could train again and would get back up to continue.

Under such extreme training, his physical strength level jumped from 1.67 to 1.70.

"What a good booster, a truly good booster. It's expensive for a reason."

...

For the next few days, Zhang Yu seized every second to cultivate the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi, trying to increase his physical strength as much as possible before the medicinal power completely faded.

At times, Zhang Yu couldn't help but feel a sense of wonder. "Kunxu, you really turn people into monsters. I'm actually pushing myself this hard now. I haven't heard the ritual's nagging for three straight days."

And during this training process, Zhang Yu could feel his body growing stronger, bit by bit, every single moment.

After all, fully utilizing a level 10 Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi is something that, by all rights, only a top third-year student should be capable of.

But now I'm using it to enhance my level 1.7 physical strength. It's like a max-level character returning to the newbie village to level up. The progress is truly astounding.

In just three short days, as the medicinal power was depleted, his physical strength increased continuously, rising from level 1.70 to 1.87.

At this moment, Zhang Yu stood in the classroom, feeling the last of the medicinal power being completely wrung out of him. He sighed inwardly, his craving for money growing ever stronger.

In Kunxu… you really can't get anywhere without money.

Just as he was thinking this, the voice of the combat instructor, Lei Jun, broke through his reverie.

"Zhang Yu, He Dayou, you two will spar."

Zhang Yu was slightly taken aback. In combat class, he was almost always paired with Bai Zhenzhen. Why was he with He Dayou this time?

A King-tier player versus a Stubborn Bronze? What was Old Lei thinking?

Lei Jun's intention was simple: he hoped Zhang Yu would teach He Dayou a lesson. He Dayou's performance in combat class recently had been far too arrogant.

He just rampages around with his newly increased physical strength, completely disregarding the combat techniques I've taught.

And so, Lei Jun dispatched his top general, Zhang Yu, intending for him to show He Dayou the importance of combat techniques and martial skills.

He Dayou approached Zhang Yu with a dark expression, thinking, *After this period of implantation and adaptation training, my physical strength should be far superior to Zhang Yu's. But this kid's combat skills are too strong…*

While He Dayou was still scheming, he saw Zhang Yu strike out with his palm.

He subconsciously raised a hand to block, only to find that Zhang Yu had grabbed his hand and was challenging him to a contest of strength.

"What!" He Dayou was first shocked, then overjoyed. "You dare to compete in strength with the me of today?"

He Dayou's other hand shot out to grab his opponent, and their hands locked together. As their mana clashed, they each unleashed the power of their bodies.

With a furious roar, He Dayou intended to lift Zhang Yu up and hurl him out of the designated area.

But in the next moment, He Dayou felt as if his opponent's hands were carved from rock; under his full force, they didn't move an inch.

Chapter 87: Negotiating with the Evil God

Facing He Dayou's burst of power, Zhang Yu smiled faintly, already clear on the situation.

He thought to himself, *The competition team really is impressive. They've improved so much in just these few days. He Dayou's physical strength is even a little bit higher than mine, but…*

Zhang Yu had chosen to compete in raw strength precisely because he wanted to test the results of his recent training.

At this very moment, as Zhang Yu's muscles tensed up all over, his body seemed to twist together like a single rope. Individual muscles pressed and leveraged against each other, ultimately transforming into a terrifying explosive force that was channeled from his entire body into his hands.

Under the enhancement of the level 10 Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi, with Zhang Yu's control over his entire musculature, the instantaneous physical power he could unleash… far surpassed that of an opponent with a similar level of physical strength.

With a loud bang, He Dayou felt an irresistible force slam into his body, sending him flying through the air before he crashed onto the ground with a thud.

Again, the familiar disorienting shift in perspective, the hard and cold floor, the pain spreading through his entire body.

He Dayou dazedly pushed himself up.

This feeling was so familiar.

Had he been defeated in an instant again?

Just like his last fight with Zhang Yu, after his physical strength had greatly increased, he had lost again?

He snapped his head up, his widened eyes staring at Zhang Yu in disbelief as his mind still struggled to accept it.

How can his strength possibly be so much greater than mine? Has his physical strength already surpassed my own?

Not far away, Qian Shen and Zhao Tianxing were also watching, their eyes filled with amazement as they saw He Dayou thrown to the ground.

Qian Shen said, "Has Zhang Yu improved even more than He Dayou?"

Zhao Tianxing thought, *How did he do it? Just how much has Zhang Yu increased his physical strength in such a short time? It's even more effective than the special development program?*

After school that day, He Dayou went to the sports competition team's training ground and told Lan Ling what had happened.

Lan Ling frowned. "His physical strength couldn't possibly be higher than yours."

"The reason he was able to defeat you is likely because his power-generation technique is superior to yours, while you…"

Lan Ling glanced at him, then casually lifted and shook He Dayou, who instantly felt as though he had lost all control over his own muscles.

Placing him back down, Lan Ling said coolly, "Your control over your own muscles, especially the transplanted ones, is too poor. You haven't been able to unleash your true strength at all."

"Continue with the upcoming surgeries and training. Once you have more muscle fibers transplanted and can utilize more of their power, you won't lose to Zhang Yu again."

…

At the same time, after school, Zhang Yu was walking toward his rented apartment, circulating the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi as he went.

But the moment he pushed open the door, he froze at the sight of the tattered rag doll sitting on his bed.

"Evil god?"

It was a raggedy, dilapidated doll. Its two button eyes looked like a pair of dark, empty sockets, and they were staring intently at Zhang Yu as he opened the door. It was none other than the evil god from whom he had made a wish.

As Zhang Yu stood there, momentarily stunned, the rag doll spoke.

"My good servant, kneel before me. This is my wish."

With the ritual's nagging cry echoing in his mind, Zhang Yu had no choice but to drop to one knee with a thud.

The doll on the bed cackled. "Unexpected, truly unexpected."

"In just two or three short months, a pawn I casually placed has actually managed to grow up."

"If I hadn't heard the news that a student from Songyang High School had won first place in the martial arts competition, I would never have imagined you would improve so quickly…"

As she said this, much of the gloom in her heart seemed to vanish.

She had come back to find Zhang Yu partly because of his performance, but also for another reason… she had discovered that she couldn't go back.

She thought of how she had once stood at the apex of all evil gods, having achieved both financial freedom and freedom in her cultivation. Yet, due to a failed investment after her retirement, she had been forced to re-enter the workforce and return to the front lines.

But she hadn't cared at first. If she couldn't stay at the peak, she would simply walk the path again!

With her years of expertise in the scamming industry, she had expected it to be the tale of a supreme evil god's stroll through the mortal world, a story of a max-level character coming to whip the workplace into shape.

Who could have known that the major sects' anti-fraud measures were improving day by day, causing even a treasure of the evil god world like herself to suffer heavy losses? Compounded by betrayal, she was now stranded on the first layer of Kunxu, her power at rock bottom, with no way to turn the tide.

Dammit… if I'm caught and deported, it's all over… who betrayed me?

My power is draining so quickly, and my intelligence feels like it's dropping again. If this continues… I'm really going to become a mindless toy.

And so, at this very moment, she had found Zhang Yu again, intending to use this promising asset to rise once more.

To win first place in the martial arts competition with the identity of a poor kid, I must have unlocked some incredible potential within him.

Hehe… I thought it was a losing proposition, but it turns out I managed to buy a rising stock at its lowest point.

And when she thought about the wish Zhang Yu still owed her, the doll's heart swelled with even more excitement.

But in the next moment, she froze. Zhang Yu, who should have been kneeling on the ground after she made her wish… was slowly standing up?

"What are you doing?"

"Are you insane? Get on your knees, now! Or do you want to die from the ritual's backlash?"

Zhang Yu, however, was silently sensing the changes in the ritual's power within his body.

After she had made the wish for him to kneel, the chill from the ritual had indeed dissipated as he knelt.

But just a few seconds after he had knelt, that idiotic ritual had started nagging him again.

Zhang Yu was momentarily stunned, then he understood.

Is it urging me to cultivate?

But the other wish is for me to kneel.

Is this a conflict between wishes?

Zhang Yu grew curious. *So… in this situation, which wish takes priority?*

He tried to stand up, and immediately, a voice from the ritual sounded, urging him to kneel down at once.

Zhang Yu could feel the ritual's power splitting into two currents. One was urging him to cultivate immediately, while the other was urging him to kneel at once.

So it is a conflict.

And when he circulated the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi and entered a state of cultivation, all the nagging cries stopped.

But in the end, cultivation took precedence over kneeling. Is it because… of the order the wishes were made?

Seeing Zhang Yu stand up, the doll initially thought he had gone mad and no longer valued his life.

But seeing his composed expression, she immediately realized that something was wrong.

However, the doll was not like Zhang Yu, who had been accompanied day and night by the ritual, receiving its 24-hour, intimate attention for the past two months.

Although the doll remembered the two wishes she had given him, she didn't immediately consider that the ritual's operations had integrated the plan to fulfill those wishes—get into a good university, join a major sect, work hard to earn money, and then buy the antiques in his shopping cart—into every single moment of Zhang Yu's life.

But… even though she didn't immediately grasp the details of the situation or the conflict that had arisen with the 'kneel' wish, the moment she sensed something was amiss, she immediately made another wish.

"I command you not to harm me!"

But just as the doll spoke those words, a roar echoed through the air as a large hand, wreathed in layers of white astral qi, had already seized the doll.

The doll raged, "I command you! Release me immediately."

Zhang Yu's grip loosened slightly, but in the next instant, an even more ferocious tide of astral qi swept over it, squeezing and kneading the doll like a training implement.

As Zhang Yu felt the shifting chill within his heart, he thought, *So, when wishes conflict with each other, the key is the order in which they were made?*

Studying, training, getting into a university, joining a major sect… this series of plans, triggered by the initial wishes, has priority over subsequent wishes because of its sequence.

In other words, as long as I maintain a state of studying and cultivating, then any subsequent wishes that contradict that state… can be temporarily suppressed…

And at this moment, Zhang Yu was using the rag doll as a prop to practice his Formless Cloud-Astral Qi. Under these circumstances… he found that the ritual was not urging him to kneel, nor was it telling him to release the doll.

With this thought in mind, Zhang Yu looked at the doll, who was still trying to speak, and said coolly, "Shut up."

The Formless Cloud-Astral Qi pulsed, gently pressing on the doll's surface, seeming as if it could tear the doll to shreds in the next moment.

At the same time, Zhang Yu's voice continued.

"What you just said was not to harm… you."

With the grinding of the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi, the doll felt the pressure on its body gradually intensify, as if in the next moment it would be truly harmed, truly attacked.

"So that means if I destroy this doll right now, I'll be able to harm you, correct?"

Feeling Zhang Yu's gaze, which was filled with killing intent and battle spirit, yet remained incredibly calm, the doll's heart sank.

Dammit… how did he react so quickly? Wait, could it be that my intelligence has dropped again?

The doll quickly issued a warning. "Zhang Yu, if you actually harm me now, you will undoubtedly be killed by the ritual's backlash!"

"You should be able to feel it, right? The ritual's power is already monitoring you."

Zhang Yu said nothing, but his recent test had shown him that as soon as he had the intention of harming the doll, the ritual would start its nagging cries again.

Zhang Yu thought, *It seems the rule against harming the evil god has an even higher priority than the wishes.*

But he understood that this was the worst possible time to show any weakness. He immediately began to circulate the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art at full power, erupting with the aura of one prepared to fight to the death.

He had to adopt an attitude of being willing to tear down the roof, just for the chance to ask for a window to be opened.

And so, Zhang Yu continued, "Then we'll just perish together. Otherwise, what's the point of living my whole life as your servant?"

Feeling the death-defying aura radiating from Zhang Yu under the effect of the level 10 Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art, the doll's heart sank even further.

In his gaze, she could genuinely sense a will to fight to the death.

Chapter 88: The Dark World of Tutoring

Faced with Zhang Yu's aura, brimming with fighting spirit and the will to battle, the doll thought, *It's only been a little over two months since I last saw this Zhang Yu, yet even his willpower and spirit have changed so drastically. What kind of potential did I actually unlock in him?*

If it were the doll of the past, she wouldn't have cared in the slightest about Zhang Yu's threat; she had countless ways to deal with him.

But now, she was extremely weak, and furthermore, she was consumed by the desire to climb Kunxu once more and reclaim everything that was hers.

The doll sighed inwardly. *Sigh, beggars can't be choosers. There's no need to get into a life-or-death struggle with a poor kid from this layer. I'll just use a clever little trick, dangle a carrot in front of him to keep him moving forward.*

After a moment's thought, the doll's tone shifted, becoming soft and gentle.

"Don't be so tense, Zhang Yu. I've come to you because a heavenly fortune has just fallen into your lap."

Zhang Yu, however, asked a question that had been on his mind for a long time.

"Was Zhou Tianyi sent by you?"

"Zhou Tianyi? Who's that? Never heard of him."

The doll seemed to have no idea who Zhang Yu was talking about, nor did she seem to care, as she continued with her previous topic.

"It was only after I unlocked your potential that you were able to achieve what you have today. Don't you want to enhance your potential even further?"

Enhance his potential again?

Zhang Yu's mind immediately flashed to the table of contents in the Feathered Tome. He had suspected before that the current version of the tome was merely a prologue, implying that there was more to come.

Now, hearing what the doll was saying, his suspicions seemed to be confirmed.

Zhang Yu thought to himself, *So my potential really is greater than this. If the Feathered Tome hadn't failed to fully unleash my potential, my scores and my performance in the competition would be even higher by now.*

Sigh, in the end, I'm still being held back by the Feathered Tome.

To the doll, Zhang Yu's slight silence was a clear sign of interest.

So she quickly added, "Let's cooperate, we can climb Kunxu together. With my assistance, you will surely be able to stand at the very pinnacle of Kunxu in the future, become an immortal, achieve financial freedom, and freedom in your cultivation."

Zhang Yu was wary of this evil god through and through; he wasn't so easily swayed by her words.

He was more concerned about the wishes.

"Can the wishes be revoked?"

The doll, of course, immediately said no, but Zhang Yu didn't believe her.

After a bit of back and forth, with Zhang Yu constantly threatening mutual destruction, he finally said, "This ritual's power is so rigid and inflexible, like some idiotic program. There's no way you didn't leave yourselves a backdoor."

The evil god let out a quiet sigh. "Then you should also know that if I were to revoke the wishes, I would be completely at your mercy."

"Do you really think I would agree to that? Stop making such unrealistic demands. We're in the same boat now, let's talk about something practical."

After that last exchange, the doll understood that the current Zhang Yu was not nearly as easy to handle as he once was.

The Zhang Yu of today was no longer that helpless student she could bully at will. Not only was his will as hard as steel and his actions decisive, but he also

held the means to perish together with her and possessed more than enough power to carry it out.

The doll understood… under the current circumstances… he had earned the right to negotiate with her. And so, she decided to make some concessions.

The doll said, "How about this. As a sign of my sincerity, I will retract the wish I just made for you to kneel."

Zhang Yu said, "And the wish to release you."

The doll replied, "Fine, fine, I'll retract them both."

It was unclear what the doll did, but a moment later, when Zhang Yu exited his cultivation state, he indeed found that those two wishes no longer bound him.

The doll then continued, "Now you can put me down so we can have a proper talk, right? Holding me in your hand like this is very disrespectful."

Zhang Yu chuckled. "Holding you in my hand is the only way I have to threaten you. Do you think it's appropriate for me to let go?"

The doll sighed internally. *He really hasn't let his guard down one bit.*

Zhang Yu continued, "Since you're unwilling to retract the wishes and still want to use the ritual to control me, then from now on, I'll just have to carry you with me, to ensure that I can perish with you at any time."

The doll said, "You…"

In the next moment, she was jolted with shock as she saw streams of Formless Cloud-Astral Qi emerge from Zhang Yu's body, pouring out from within him like banks of fog.

The doll exclaimed in astonishment, "This is the sign of a level 10 Limitless Cloud Hand! Your Limitless Cloud Hand is at level 10? It's only been two months, how is that possible?"

Zhang Yu said flatly, "I hope you understand that with this technique, as long as you are near me, I can attack you with the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi at any moment."

The way the doll looked at Zhang Yu became even more different.

This boy's potential seems to be even more terrifying than I had originally estimated. But in that case… good. With his help… I might really be able to get to the upper levels and retrieve my things.

If Zhang Yu were still his original, weak and incompetent self, then even if the doll could obtain his absolute loyalty, she wouldn't have given him a second glance.

But now that Zhang Yu had displayed his strength and potential, even though she couldn't completely control him, the doll held him in much higher regard.

And so, she proposed her plan of cooperation once more.

"I will help you enhance your potential and climb Kunxu, and all you have to do is take me up with you along the way."

Zhang Yu squeezed the doll in his hand and said, "Is there a way for me to carry you around?"

The doll chuckled, and her form began to shrink, and shrink, and shrink again, until the cat-sized rag doll had transformed into a black prayer bead about the size of a thumb.

Zhang Yu found a piece of string, looped the thumb-sized black bead onto it, and hung it around his neck.

He then asked, "You won't be detected as an evil god, will you?"

The doll laughed heartily.

"Although I am not in my peak state, when it comes to the art of concealment, my skills are not something the riffraff on the first layer can see through."

Only then did Zhang Yu nod. He then said, "Alright, let's do it. Enhance my potential."

The doll gave an awkward laugh. "Well, it's not something that can be done just by saying so. But it's not too difficult, either. You just need to help me hunt another evil god on this layer. After I devour its power, I'll be able to enhance your potential."

Zhang Yu slapped his palm over the doll. "Are you messing with me? I'm only a first-year, and you want me to deal with another evil god?"

The doll quickly explained, "I'm not asking you to do it right away. You can build up your strength a bit more, and then you can take action when you're powerful enough."

But Zhang Yu's curiosity was piqued. "Where is this evil god? What's its specific strength? Does it have any followers?"

"There should be one hiding behind Songyang High School, and probably one at White Dragon High School as well."

"As for their strength, the most powerful evil god kings are all receiving faith on the eighteenth subterranean level. The evil gods that crawl up get stronger the higher they go. The ones lingering on the first layer can't be that powerful."

"However, the specific details about the evil gods hiding in those two high schools, like where they're hiding and who their followers are, that's something we'll have to investigate together."

Zhang Yu rolled his eyes. This evil god opened with a grand promise to enhance his potential, but then she wanted him to deal with another evil god and investigate the situation himself.

This evil god is full of hot air, I really can't trust her so easily.

And so, Zhang Yu stopped listening to her grandiose talk and instead opened his phone, intending to hurry up and find some work to earn money.

After experiencing the effects of the Crimson Marrow Primordial Pill, Zhang Yu no longer wanted to go back to "bare" cultivation without any supplements.

If I had the money to use Crimson Marrow Primordial Pills every day, the speed of my physical strength improvement would be at least eighty or ninety percent faster than before.

The difference is too great. How could I go back to ascetic training with a clear conscience?

He sighed inwardly.

It truly is difficult to go from a life of luxury back to one of simplicity.

The evil god chattered on for a while before realizing that Zhang Yu was no longer paying attention to her. She simply climbed up onto his shoulder to see what he was doing.

The doll thought, *This won't do. I need to make Zhang Yu rely on me more, to make him realize my importance. Only then can I move forward with the rest of my plan.*

After watching for a while, the doll suddenly said, "You want to make money?"

Wasn't that obvious? Who in all of Kunxu didn't want to make money? Zhang Yu gave a noncommittal grunt in response.

The doll asked again, "Hehe, do you think it's so easy to make money through legitimate channels? You'll just be toyed with by those big corporations, skinned alive, forced to toil your whole life, only to be left with a few scraps at the end."

"If a poor person wants to get rich, they have to break the rules. They have to walk the dark path."

Zhang Yu's brow furrowed. "The dark path?"

His mind filled with all sorts of sordid, violent, and vicious images.

Just as Zhang Yu was about to refuse outright, he heard the doll continue, "I have connections in the dark world of tutoring. Want to give it a try?"

"The dark world of tutoring?"

Zhang Yu hesitated. "How can tutoring be dark? Scamming students? Taking their money and running? Making students take out loans to sign up for packages?"

The doll scoffed at Zhang Yu's suggestions. "What the hell is that? Is there a single tutoring center that hasn't done that kind of thing?"

"When I talk about the dark world of tutoring, I'm talking about illegal tutoring!"

"Dammit, they don't buy the dissemination rights for cultivation techniques! They don't buy the teaching rights! They don't buy any rights at all, they just take the money and teach the students directly!"

"Illegal tutoring… even though the price for their classes is much lower than legitimate tutoring centers, because they don't buy any dissemination or teaching rights… they actually earn more!"

"You have a level 10 Limitless Cloud Hand. In terms of skill, you're definitely qualified to tutor others in it."

"But you normally wouldn't dare to reveal your level 10 Limitless Cloud Hand, right? The dark world of tutoring is perfect for you. You can hide your identity and sell your lessons there."

But Zhang Yu was no longer the naive newcomer to Kunxu that he had once been; he had a decent understanding of how many things in this world worked.

Hearing this, cold sweat began to bead on his forehead.

"Are you insane? This kind of dark tutoring, without buying the dissemination rights… wouldn't that mean offending the major tutoring institutions and the cultivation technique development companies? Dammit, even going out and robbing someone would feel as safe as a picnic compared to this."

The doll, however, sounded completely unconcerned, chuckling as she said, "In Kunxu, if you're not willing to take risks, how can you ever make big money? Can the profits from mere robbery even compare to illegal tutoring? Or do you want to be a poor laborer for the rest of your life?"

"I'm telling you, among the major players in the dark world of tutoring, there are quite a few who earn over ten million a year."

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 89: The Dark Side of Kunxu

The large number that came from the doll's mouth made Zhang Yu's heart skip a beat, a flicker of desire in his eyes. He was desperate to make more money right now.

After all, in Kunxu, money was potential, a future, and power. Without it, he couldn't even pay next month's loan interest. A poor man had no sense of security whatsoever.

The doll continued its persuasion.

"Besides, this matter isn't as risky as you think."

"The only reason you feel it's dangerous is because of corporate propaganda, which constantly drills ideas like 'never make an enemy of the corporations' and 'the consequences for opposing the corporations are dire' into your mind."

"The dark world of tutoring has its reasons for existing..."

Only after listening to the doll's subsequent explanation did Zhang Yu gain a deeper understanding of the situation.

The major corporations had an iron grip on the first layer of Kunxu and could even petition the Eight Ministries of Righteous Gods to help them investigate all sorts of information.

But not every place in the world was under their absolute control, nor was there a lack of powers capable of obscuring the probes of the Eight Ministries of Righteous Gods.

"The poorer the place, the more destitute people there are, the fewer cultivators you find—that's where the infrastructure is the worst. There are barely any surveillance cameras, making it the easiest place to evade corporate oversight."

"As for the Eight Ministries of Righteous Gods and the municipal government, which of the large gangs doesn't pay taxes according to the law and maintain a pious faith? They have righteous gods watching over them all the same."

Zhang Yu was speechless.

"Pay taxes and be piously faithful, and that gives you a license to break the law?"

The doll stated it as if it were obvious. "Pay taxes and be piously faithful—and you still can't break the law?"

"Furthermore, every major gang is backed by other large corporations. Gangs are just one of the tools corporations use against each other. After all, the Ten Great Sects may monopolize Kunxu, but the corporations beneath them… they still have to compete."

"Gangs are the corporations' chamber pots; they have their own space to exist."

"Listen to me. If you were an ordinary first-year high school student, I would never recommend this, but you've mastered a level 10 cultivation technique. You're perfectly suited to hide your identity and do some illegal tutoring!"

"Besides, we're in the same boat now. If you get into trouble, I'll suffer right along with you. Why would I trick you?"

In the past, Zhang Yu had heard some vague rumors about gangs, but this was the first time he had heard so much inside information.

And though it all sounded plausible, Zhang Yu still couldn't bring himself to fully trust the evil god before him. He sent a message to Zhang Pianpian, asking her about the dark world of tutoring.

Zhang Pianpian: Why did you suddenly think to ask about this?

Zhang Yu: A friend of mine mentioned it. I'm short on cash, aren't I? Just looking for a way to make some money.

Zhang Pianpian: Mmm, taking first place in the martial arts track does give you a certain amount of capital.

Zhang Pianpian: Go to this address and give it a try. If you can do it, do it. If you can't, just keep building up your strength.

Then, a video call from Zhang Pianpian came through.

After Zhang Yu accepted, he saw her draw a talisman with her fingertips, and a concealment talisman shot through the network and settled upon his head.

Zhang Pianpian: "Alright, this concealment talisman will prevent others from discerning your background for twelve hours, helping you hide your identity."

"Beyond that, if you want to conceal your face and figure, you can also try using that Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi you've recently learned."

Zhang Yu watched the process of Zhang Pianpian drawing the talisman with curiosity and asked, "This skill of drawing a talisman through the net—what faith level do you need to achieve that?"

"Don't even think about it right now. Just focus on the task at hand."

After hanging up, he looked at the address Zhang Pianpian had sent. It was a place nearly seventy kilometers from the center of Songyang City—the remote outskirts of an already remote suburb.

Mulling over Zhang Pianpian's words, a thought stirred in Zhang Yu's heart.

Sis knows about the dark world of tutoring, but she doesn't seem to think I'll be able to land a gig?

Is it because she doesn't know I already have several level 10 cultivation techniques, so she thinks I won't be able to make it in the dark world of tutoring?

Zhang Yu's trust in Zhang Pianpian was, without a doubt, greater than his trust in the doll.

He glanced outside. The night was deep, and the glow of neon signs hung high in the sky. It was the perfect time to head out, and he even had a concealment talisman to mask his identity.

But if I'm going into the dark world of tutoring, I really do need to hide who I am. Sis said I could try using the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi?

At this thought, Zhang Yu's eyes shifted.

Does she mean I should control my muscles to alter my appearance?

Just as Zhang Yu was pondering how to use the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi to change his appearance, the doll hanging from his neck exclaimed in surprise,

"You have such a powerful woman looking out for you? To be able to draw a talisman through the network, her skill in talismans is quite high."

Zhang Yu ignored the doll, instead attempting to shift the muscles in his face.

With his mastery of Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi at level 10, his control over his body's musculature had already reached a peak he had never before imagined; he simply hadn't realized he could use this ability to change his appearance.

With a slight effort, he saw his reflection in the mirror transform dramatically. From elegant and handsome, he became utterly ordinary. After extending control over all the muscles in his body, even his height seemed to shrink. He looked like a complete and total stranger.

...

More than half an hour later, the closer Zhang Yu got to the location, the worse the infrastructure on the roads became. When he was still more than ten kilometers away, even the bus stops disappeared.

Zhang Yu had no choice but to rely on his own two feet to run the rest of the way. Fortunately, with his current physical conditioning, he was neither slow nor easily tired.

But along this path, the buildings grew shorter and the roads rougher. The side alleys were pitch-black and silent, with barely a light to be seen.

Zhang Yu felt as if he had journeyed from a futuristic metropolis to a dilapidated county town.

Compared to this place, Zhang Yu felt his own rented room could be considered luxurious.

Seeing such a quiet night made him feel a little out of place.

That's right. The people who live around here are all mortals, so nighttime is naturally for sleeping.

Sleep. The word was gradually becoming a distant concept for Zhang Yu, and for a moment, he felt a wave of wistfulness.

But it's precisely because this place is poor enough that it lacks surveillance and management. The corporations are unwilling to invest much in construction here, which must be what gives the gangs room to survive.

He continued onward. Just as Zhang Yu felt his body begin to warm and a light sweat form, he finally arrived at the location on the address.

An imposing gate, cars frequently entering and exiting, a security booth by the entrance, and a sign that read 'Songyang North Moon High-Tech Service Industry Park'… all of it was completely different from the dark, damp gang headquarters Zhang Yu had imagined.

Zhang Yu said, surprised, "This is the territory of a gang involved in illegal tutoring? It looks far too legitimate."

The doll said, "They pay their taxes and are piously faithful. They are a legitimate gang, after all."

Zhang Yu frowned, having never imagined the words 'gang' and 'legitimate' could be used together.

Zhang Yu asked doubtfully, "Shouldn't gangs be all about fighting and killing, skulking in the shadows?"

The doll let out a soft laugh. "The ones you're talking about are the low-level thugs at the very bottom, disposable tools to be used and thrown away. Success in this world is about money and connections. If all you know is how to fight and kill, you'll end up dead on the street sooner or later."

The doll seemed to know this world like the back of her hand.

"You see this service industry park? This is the Dark Learning Gang's turf. They specialize in illegal tutoring, cracking and modifying cultivation techniques, distributing pirated arts, and all sorts of other business. The corporation backing them is the Deep Sea Education Group."

Zhang Yu was surprised yet again. "The Deep Sea Education Group?"

He remembered that the tutoring center his predecessor had found was registered under the Deep Sea Education Group's name.

Zhang Yu asked, confused, "I thought the Deep Sea Education Group was an educational conglomerate that develops its own cultivation techniques and runs tutoring centers. Why would they support the Dark Learning Gang?"

The doll laughed again. "Isn't it obvious? They aren't the only company in the education business. The Dark Learning Gang is the tool they use to crack their

rivals' cultivation techniques, assist with experiments on those techniques, and strike at hostile gangs… In short, it's a tool for doing all their dirty work."

As they spoke, Zhang Yu had already walked into the park. Following the address Zhang Pianpian had provided, he found the number plate of a small building.

Along the way, the park's security guards were polite and the roadside scenery was pleasant. Zhang Yu couldn't see a single thing that suggested this was a gang's territory.

Looking at the small building before him, Zhang Yu pushed the door open. After a moment's thought, he followed the phrasing Zhang Pianpian had taught him and said to the receptionist, "I'm here to offer a class."

The receptionist smiled. "Of course, sir. Please wait for a moment in room 105. Our sales representative will be with you shortly."

Zhang Yu walked in the direction the receptionist indicated. As he passed several rooms, he heard the faint sounds of arguments from within.

"Damn it… To sell this one martial art, two of my brothers were fined into bankruptcy, and another was dismembered and sold off by a corporation, and you're still trying to lowball me?"

"You dog-eyed bastard, getting fierce with me won't do you any good. These are the gang's rules. This is the price for offering a level-seven class."

"Rules! Rules! When I went to smash the Golden Class Gang's operations by myself, I took out sixteen of their underground tutoring centers single-handedly! Why didn't you talk to me about rules then? Now that I'm old and can't learn anymore, you want to talk to me about rules…"

Sensing that someone was approaching, the door to the room was shut, and Zhang Yu could no longer hear the commotion inside.

After entering room 105 and waiting for a short while, a well-mannered, middle-aged man walked in, closed the door, and asked politely, "How can I help you, sir?"

Just then, the doll's voice echoed in Zhang Yu's mind.

"Tell him I have a batch of classes to offer, and that he should inspect the goods first. You don't understand the local gangs. Do as I say. Don't let him take you

for a rookie. Let me handle the price negotiations for you; I can definitely earn you more."

Zhang Yu was slightly taken aback, not expecting the doll to be able to transmit her voice directly into his mind.

But he felt there was nothing wrong with what the doll wanted him to say. He decided he would use the information the doll provided to guide his conversation with the man.

Zhang Yu lowered his voice and said, "I have a batch of classes to offer. You can inspect the goods first."

With a tremor, streams of milky-white astral qi surged from Zhang Yu's body, instantly transforming into a swirling mist that enveloped him.

It was the level 10 Limitless Cloud Hand.

Chapter 90: Fast-Learning Martial Arts

When the middle-aged man saw Zhang Yu display a level 10 Limitless Cloud Hand, a trace of respect entered his eyes.

"Level 10 Limitless Cloud Hand… Such high-quality goods are a rare sight indeed. Impressive, most impressive."

In the middle-aged man's mind, anyone who could cultivate a combat art like Limitless Cloud Hand to level 10 had to be at the peak of Qi Refinement. It would require money, leisure, and the dedication to study such a practical martial art after graduating from high school.

After all, most people believed it was impossible for someone to neglect their Dao heart, mana, and physical body just to raise Limitless Cloud Hand to level 10.

Anyone with the time to raise Limitless Cloud Hand to level 10 would most likely have pushed their other attributes to the absolute limit of the Qi Refinement stage as well.

The man thought to himself, *He might be a martial arts teacher from one of the high schools, secretly moonlighting for some extra cash.*

However, he had no intention of digging deeper. Prying into the secrets of others was the biggest taboo in this line of work.

The middle-aged man spoke again. "I'll need to register your information, if you don't mind. Just a few questions."

Seeing Zhang Yu nod, the man asked, "Are you looking for part-time or full-time work?"

Zhang Yu: "Part-time."

The middle-aged man: "And what is your teaching experience?"

The doll's voice sounded in his head. "Tell him you have ten years of teaching experience. Trust me on this."

Zhang Yu considered it for a moment. Since he was hiding his identity anyway, he said, "Ten years of teaching experience at a key high school."

The middle-aged man nodded slightly, as this confirmed his initial guess. He made a note and continued, "Do you have any areas of specialty?"

Under the doll's guidance, Zhang Yu was gradually getting the hang of how to answer.

"I specialize in teaching cultivation techniques. Besides the Limitless Cloud Hand, I have many other level 10 arts."

The middle-aged man asked another question. "In your classroom, how do you typically improve student engagement and focus?"

Zhang Yu: "The most basic method is to make underperforming students kneel during class while the top students ridicule them. Different performance in the classroom is met with different treatment."

The middle-aged man nodded in satisfaction and then asked, "Are you willing to accept clients with relatively low intelligence?"

Zhang Yu was taken aback by the question.

"Relatively low intelligence?"

The middle-aged man gave a helpless smile.

"We are, after all, targeting the lower end of the market. The students who buy our classes are generally average, with a combined score below 450 across the six subjects. Their intelligence isn't high, so teachers need to be exceptionally patient and speak in very simple terms. It's quite different from teaching at a key high school."

Good grief, Zhang Yu thought, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. *So in your view, students and graduates from regular high schools are just idiots?*

He nodded and said, "I'm very good at teaching slackers."

The middle-aged man added, "Also, our clients here are quite poor, so teachers are tasked with promoting financial services. Would you be open to that?"

Zhang Yu frowned. "Financial services?"

The middle-aged man smiled. "Things like promoting tutoring loans, installment plans for course fees, that sort of thing…"

Seeing Zhang Yu's silence, the man smiled again. "No matter. As long as your teaching quality is exceptional, it's fine even if you don't promote financial services."

Then the middle-aged man asked, "During a tutoring session, if you are attacked by corporate security teams or other gangs, are you willing to participate in the fight? And if you fight, are you willing to kill?"

Zhang Yu fell silent at the question, thinking to himself that this was indeed the dark world of tutoring. A teacher had to consider combat and killing on top of their lessons.

To his slight relief, however, the man was at least considering his feelings by asking if he was willing. It showed a sliver of morality, at least.

The middle-aged man continued, "We understand your hesitation. After all, fighting and killing can be costly. But please rest assured, according to the rules of the Dark Learning Gang, we will reimburse you for any and all fines and compensation fees incurred from fighting or killing during a tutoring session."

Zhang Yu retracted his feeling of relief. So they just thought the price wasn't right. Gang warfare was that mundane to these people?

Naturally, Zhang Yu couldn't agree to such terms. Although he had several cultivation techniques at level 10, his mana and physical strength were still at the level of a first-year high school student. He wouldn't dare take part in any gang fights.

Hearing Zhang Yu's refusal, the middle-aged man nodded in understanding. After another series of questions and answers, he smiled at Zhang Yu.

"I've recorded all the necessary details. However, what kind of classes we can arrange for you and how we price your courses will have to be decided after your trial lesson."

The so-called trial lesson was an opportunity for Zhang Yu to teach a sample class, after which the Dark Learning Gang would determine his course assignments and pricing based on his teaching quality.

The middle-aged man added, "…Although your Limitless Cloud Hand is formidable, the market for pure combat arts isn't as large as the market for health, academic, and work-related techniques."

The man was concerned that this 'suspected high school teacher' might be limited by his experience teaching at a key high school and wouldn't be able to accurately grasp the demands of the lower-end market.

So, the middle-aged man continued, "Of course, I'm not saying that Limitless Cloud Hand is bad. There will certainly be people willing to pay to learn it. It's just that our clientele is often more interested in more foundational techniques…"

Hearing his words, Zhang Yu was suddenly reminded of the rankings he had seen when purchasing cultivation techniques online.

Zhang Yu spoke. "The Health-Preserving and Sickness-Dispelling Art, Excavator Palm, Crane Claw, Sports Car Legs… these have a larger market?"

The middle-aged man smiled faintly. "Indeed, the demand for tutoring in those types of techniques is the highest. Although the fee per student is lower, a single class can often accommodate dozens, or even hundreds, of students at once. In the end, they earn more than high-end, small-group courses like Limitless Cloud Hand."

"Besides those, there are the basic high school cultivation techniques, such as Freehand Combat, Basic Swordsmanship, and Basic Breathing Exercises."

Hearing this, Zhang Yu's eyes flickered as a thought took shape in his mind.

Excavator Palm and Crane Claw have the biggest market? Perhaps I can use the Feathered Tome's specialization to raise these arts to level 10 in a short period and then teach them.

The middle-aged man continued, "Let's schedule a time for the trial class, then. I still need to arrange for teachers to observe. Are you free in five days?"

After a quick mental calculation, Zhang Yu nodded. "No problem. Five days from now is fine."

The middle-aged man asked again, "Besides Limitless Cloud Hand, what else do you plan to teach during the trial class? We'll need to arrange for teachers who have studied in that area to observe and give you a rating."

Zhang Yu thought to himself, *The Health-Preserving and Sickness-Dispelling Art is an expert-level technique. It's not cheap, it involves the entire body with complex movements, and it likely won't be fast to master.*

On the other hand, advanced-level techniques like Excavator Palm, Crane Claw, Sports Car Legs, and Elevator Leap are inexpensive and have simple forms. They should be much faster to learn, just like a martial art like the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand.

To be on the safe side, however, he mentioned fewer than he planned.

He said, "In addition to Limitless Cloud Hand, I can also teach Excavator Palm and Sports Car Legs."

This demonstrated he could teach both high-end and low-end classes. The middle-aged man smiled and nodded.

"We look forward to your performance in five days, then."

"Oh, by the way, would it be convenient for you to leave a method of contact?"

After confirming that Zhang Yu was unwilling to leave his phone number, the man said, "In that case, could I trouble you to download a game called Kun Shen World? Add me as a friend, and we can discuss course details in the game from now on."

…

On the way out of the park.

The doll couldn't help but ask, "You've practiced Excavator Palm and Sports Car Legs as well?"

She found it impossible to imagine that a student from a key high school would practice such blue-collar arts.

She had originally thought that Zhang Yu could leverage his level 10 Limitless Cloud Hand to sell some high-end, small-group classes.

She never expected that he would also plan to teach low-end, large-group courses like Excavator Palm and Sports Car Legs.

Zhang Yu opened a shopping website on his phone and, while purchasing Excavator Palm and Sports Car Legs, said casually, "I've never practiced them, but five days is enough time for me to learn."

Zhang Yu knew that since he would be spending every moment with the doll from now on, certain things would be impossible to hide.

The doll frowned. "How is five days enough? And even if you do learn them, with all the teachers from the dark world of tutoring in the Dark Learning Gang, how can you possibly compete with them when you've only been learning for five days?"

"You should stop messing around with all this and just focus on teaching Limitless Cloud Hand."

Zhang Yu naturally paid no mind to the doll's skepticism. With the purchase of Excavator Palm and Sports Car Legs, his account balance dropped by another 3,500, leaving him with a little over 12,000.

After returning to the unfinished building, Zhang Yu immediately began to practice his newly acquired cultivation techniques.

First up was Excavator Palm.

This palm art was a power-based technique that mimicked an excavator, allowing the user to condense a thread of bucket force to dig materials and level ground.

Because it was a purely work-oriented palm technique, containing no combat or body tempering elements, the moves were very simple, consisting of only three: the forward shovel, the reverse shovel, and the sweeping shovel.

Zhang Yu nodded to himself, thinking, *I should be able to run through a full set in just a few seconds. This ought to be easy to learn.*

After briefly scanning the manual, he switched the Feathered Tome's specialization to this cultivation technique.

He immediately saw his palms striking out through the air, sending forth waves of formless power that seemed to build momentum, only to lose control the next moment and dissipate into the air.

Seeing Zhang Yu standing there, stunned and without any effect after completing a full set of the Excavator Palm, the doll sighed.

"I told you that you were wasting your time. You think you can master this technique in such a short time and compete with teachers who have taught for years? How could you…"

But before she could finish, Zhang Yu, who had been frozen in place, moved again.

This time, as he struck, his palms created a whistling sound, as if a gigantic excavator bucket were actually scooping through the air.

The doll stared, dumbfounded, at the scene.

"Wait… he learned it just like that?"

"He learned it that quickly?"

"And from the looks of it… it's as if he's been practicing for a long, long time."

"Is this the potential I unlocked in this kid? The ability to rapidly learn cultivation techniques?"

But what happened next shocked the doll even more.

In just over an hour, she watched in utter disbelief as Zhang Yu's Excavator Palm progressed by leaps and bounds. He went from a complete novice who had never learned it before to an expert whose palm strikes flowed like water, looking as if he could level the entire unfinished building.

Chapter 91: Dark Learning Gang, Trial Class

Inside the unfinished building.

Zhang Yu stood silently in the vast, empty hall, his mind repeatedly replaying the effects of the Excavator Palm after it reached level 10.

With a single palm strike, my control over the bucket force has deepened. The area I can shovel has doubled, hasn't it?

Zhang Yu struck out with his palm again. The bucket force whistled through the air as it slowly blasted forward.

Although this Excavator Palm can unleash tremendous power, its wind-up is too long, and its movements are too slow and clumsy. It's truly unsuitable for combat.

If I'm not on a construction site, it's not very useful.

He shook his head with a sense of helplessness. He knew these blue-collar techniques would do nothing to help his college entrance exam scores.

It doesn't matter. Sharpening my axe won't slow down the woodcutting.

As long as it helps me earn more money, wasting some time to cultivate these martial arts is acceptable.

But since he had already cultivated the Excavator Palm to level 10 today, Zhang Yu naturally wouldn't continue practicing it.

And because the Feathered Tome was still on cooldown, he resumed his practice of the level 10 Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi, striving to increase his physical strength.

...

In the blink of an eye, five days had passed.

During these five days, Zhang Yu had not only mastered Excavator Palm and Sports Car Legs to level 10, but he had also purchased and cultivated Crane Claw and Elevator Leap to level 10 as well.

Factoring in his expenses for food, transportation, and other costs over the five days, Zhang Yu's savings had steadily declined. Fortunately, he had taught Song Hailong twice more, which allowed him to keep his savings just above 15,000.

At this moment, after asking Zhang Pianpian for another concealment talisman and altering his physical form with Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi, Zhang Yu set off for his trial lesson.

Unlike the last time, when he had to run the final stretch, this time Zhang Yu used the Sports Car Legs technique for his journey.

Mana roared within his body, emitting a low hum like a car engine.

Infused with mana, his feet moved at an incredible speed, his entire body dissolving into a series of afterimages as he sped away.

Compared to Excavator Palm and Crane Claw, Sports Car Legs and Elevator Leap are far more useful.

He recalled how a level 10 Excavator Palm could shovel twice the amount of material and a level 10 Crane Claw could lift heavy objects with both hands simultaneously… and Zhang Yu felt a sense of speechlessness.

Just like Excavator Palm, it has a long wind-up and slow movements. It's not suited for combat, just another laborer's art designed for work.

In comparison, the cost-effectiveness of Sports Car Legs and Elevator Leap was much higher.

As a common technique among couriers, Sports Car Legs channeled mana into the legs to accelerate movement, allowing one to run like the wind. Without the need for a car or an electric scooter, it enabled couriers to navigate the city quickly and arrive at their destinations on time.

Elevator Leap, meanwhile, used mana to constrict the muscles, allowing the body to explode with the force of a coiled spring, generating incredible jumping power. This meant that when couriers faced buildings without elevators, they didn't have to despair. They could simply leap up to the target floor, arriving with the package in hand.

Speaking of which, this is the first time I've ever cultivated a movement technique. This stuff really makes daily life much more convenient.

Thinking of the level 10 effects of these two techniques, Zhang Yu couldn't help but smile slightly, marveling at their practicality.

A level 10 Sports Car Legs could protect the soles of his shoes with mana, reducing wear and tear and lowering the frequency of needing replacements.

A level 10 Elevator Leap could even convert a vertical high jump into a horizontal long jump, which had helped countless couriers leap over red lights and traffic jams to deliver their goods on time.

At that moment, mana surged from Zhang Yu's dantian, infusing his legs and waist. With a sudden contraction of his muscles, he leaped into the air, clearing a distance of over twenty meters to soar over the red light ahead.

With Sports Car Legs and Elevator Leap, I can probably reach my tutoring sessions in about thirty to forty minutes.

And as my mana grows more abundant and my physical strength increases, my speed and jumping distance will become even greater. I'll be even faster then…

The doll hanging from Zhang Yu's neck witnessed this, her mind still reeling with disbelief.

Wait… the doll thought to herself. *Even if these four martial arts are simple, he raised all of them to level 10 in such a short amount of time?*

Is this boy's potential really something I stimulated?

In that case, I'd fucking love to do it to myself. How in the world did he achieve this?

Over these five days, apart from cultivating these four new martial arts, Zhang Yu had spent most of his time diligently practicing the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi.

Unfortunately, without the boost from the Crimson Marrow Primordial Pill and with his focus divided, his physical strength had only risen to level 1.98 after five days.

I really want a Crimson Marrow Primordial Pill. Cultivating without an alchemical enhancer feels like I'm practicing at a loss.

…

He arrived once again at the small building within the park.

The middle-aged man who had received Zhang Yu before was already waiting. Seeing him, he smiled.

"You've arrived."

"Come to think of it, I still don't know how I should address you, sir."

Zhang Yu replied casually, "Just call me Ma Yunteng. And you? How should I address you?"

The man replied, "You can call me Black Crow. Now, please follow me. The other teachers are already waiting for you."

Zhang Yu followed him through a hidden door and into an underground tutoring base. He saw that there were guards stationed almost every five steps, with posts every ten. Security seemed to be everywhere.

However, one could tell from the various tattoos on the guards—phrases like 'Class Every Day,' 'Secret Study,' and 'Everyone Tutors'—that they were all members of the Dark Learning Gang.

What struck Zhang Yu as odd was the number '0' displayed above each gang member's head. He wondered what it could possibly mean.

Suddenly, a guard with '-122' floating over his head ran past, the number continuously changing from -122 to -123, and then to -124.

Finally, Zhang Yu couldn't hold back his curiosity.

"What do the numbers on their heads mean?"

Hearing the question, Black Crow smiled brightly.

"This is a post-monitoring system developed in cooperation with the righteous gods after the gang underwent corporatization. If you're away from your post for longer than the allotted time, your pay gets deducted. He's been docked so much… perhaps he has an upset stomach?"

Zhang Yu's lip twitched. "Isn't that a bit too strict?"

Black Crow smiled faintly. "These days, anyone with a bit of ambition is drowning in debt, aren't they? A small pay deduction from work is just a trial all young people must endure."

Zhang Yu gave an awkward laugh. "Heh, being in this gang really is just like working a regular job."

Black Crow's eyes lit up. "Thank you for the compliment. The boss has always been committed to the formalization and corporatization of the Dark Learning Gang. Our future goal is to become a new corporation and expand into the city proper."

He sighed and added, "After all, if not for the inability to find a good job, how many people would willingly join a gang? Once you've joined a gang, your resume is permanently stained. You'll never have a chance to get into a major corporation again."

Good grief… so I get it now, Zhang Yu thought. *Gangs are for people who can't find jobs? This place is a support group for the unemployed, isn't it?*

Black Crow gestured ahead. "The tutoring classrooms are up ahead. Restrooms are to the left and right. Further down the stairs, there are training halls, shower rooms, a cafeteria…"

Just as Black Crow was introducing the facilities, a noisy argument erupted from a nearby classroom entrance.

Zhang Yu turned to look and his eyes first fell upon a poster. It read: **Enroll in the White Dragon Teaching Class and enjoy the academic life of the number one high school all night long. By day, you may be an ordinary student at an ordinary school, but at night, you can become a White Dragon and feel the thrill of your grades soaring.**

Below the poster, a student was complaining, "The teacher is so gentle that underachievers don't even have to kneel! What kind of White Dragon class is this? I paid money specifically to experience the teaching quality of a prestigious school! What you're doing here is no different from what I experience at my regular high school during the day…"

Zhang Yu was shocked.

There are people who pay money to experience the academic life of White Dragon High School?

But in the next moment, he found his own shock laughable.

Isn't it obvious? With my understanding of the obsessed students and parents in Songyang City… if you could pay to experience White Dragon High School's teaching

style, even if it's just an advertising gimmick, there would definitely be people lining up to hand over their money.

…

Meanwhile, in another classroom.

Several teachers were chatting while wreathed in smoke.

An old man with white hair and a tattoo on his arm that read 'A Class a Day' took a deep drag, then exhaled a cloud of smoke from a Dao heart buffer.

The Dao heart buffer, an important drug for enhancing one's Dao heart, was widely circulated throughout Kunxu due to its highly addictive properties and was often processed into cigarettes, alcohol, beverages, and other forms for consumption.

The old man took a few more puffs before speaking.

"What's this new teacher like? I heard he might be from a key high school."

Across from him, a middle-aged woman with a scar on her face said coldly, "What kind of academic prodigies do the key high schools accept? Those students are already rich and smart. A teacher who's used to teaching students like that—does he know how to teach slackers? Has he ever even encountered a failure who scores below 450?"

"Given the grades of most of our students, if you threw them into a key high school… they'd be considered school traitors. Can he even teach them properly?"

Another man, over three meters tall, was practicing his martial arts with rigid precision. His exaggerated muscles were covered in pinpricks, the tell-tale sign of a body tempering expert.

The towering man snorted. "A teacher from a key high school wants to teach Excavator Palm and Sports Car Legs? Has he ever worked on a construction site? Has he ever delivered takeout? Does he even have the ability to teach them? I mixed concrete on a construction site for eleven years, and you, Che Nu, have eight years of experience delivering food. Is it possible he knows these two martial arts better than we do?"

The old man, however, didn't share their strong opinions. He smiled. "He is, after all, a master who managed to cultivate Limitless Cloud Hand to level 10. Let's watch him first before we say anything more."

A moment later, Black Crow entered with Zhang Yu and introduced him to the group.

"This is Ma Yunteng, Teacher Ma, who is here for the trial lesson today."

Black Crow pointed to the old man. "This is Cai Tou, who has taught Limitless Cloud Hand."

"This is Che Nu, level 10 in Sports Car Legs."

"And this is Da Chan, level 10 in Excavator Palm."

Zhang Yu understood immediately. The three of them were using nicknames, just like him. They were clearly hiding their identities, and it was possible that even their current appearances weren't their real ones.

Zhang Yu nodded slightly. "I leave myself in your hands."

The three-meter-tall Da Chan curled his lip. "Everyone's time is precious. Let's just get on with the class."

Zhang Yu couldn't agree more. He immediately activated the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi. In an instant, his entire body was shrouded in a swirling mist, giving him the appearance of an immortal.

"Then let me begin by speaking on the Limitless Cloud Hand."

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 92: Advanced Experience from a Key High School

Zhang Yu's willingness to teach a trial class stemmed from his confidence in his instructional abilities.

This confidence came not only from the fact that the three techniques he was to explain—Limitless Cloud Hand, Excavator Palm, and Sports Car Legs—had all reached level 10.

It was also rooted in the exquisite understanding of mana control he had gained after advancing both the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method and the Limitless Cloud Hand to level 10.

And then there was the profound understanding of physical structure and muscular exertion he had acquired after his Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms and Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi reached level 10.

Of course, the experience and insights gained from level 10 techniques like Limitless Cloud Hand, the Imperishable Seal Art, the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand, and the Martial Ascension Heart-Tempering Art had also caused his own martial arts skills to rise steadily.

Without even realizing it, Zhang Yu's control over his mana, his body, and his martial techniques had already reached a level he had never dared to imagine before.

Furthermore, all of these breakthroughs had been achieved within the last two months.

This meant that, at this very moment, he still vividly recalled the feeling of advancing each of these techniques from level 1 to level 10.

He still remembered the many difficulties, questions, and points of confusion he had encountered as a novice cultivating these arts.

Thus, with his current perception and experience, when he now explained the various techniques within the Limitless Cloud Hand, he could often pinpoint the essentials in just a few words, casually offering insights that would take others years of effort to comprehend.

Cai Tou, who had 'Daily Lesson' tattooed on his arm, had only cultivated the Limitless Cloud Hand to level 8. After listening to Zhang Yu for just a few minutes, he felt a sense of sudden enlightenment, as if a great weight had been lifted from his mind, and even had the urge to begin cultivating right there on the spot.

In particular, Zhang Yu's guidance and insights regarding the level 8 Limitless Cloud Hand made Cai Tou feel as though he were speaking directly to his heart.

"Excellent, truly excellent. That was an incredible explanation," Cai Tou said, his face alight with excitement. "If Teacher Ma ever offers a course on the Limitless Cloud Hand, I will definitely sign up."

Nearby, Da Chan and Che Nu exchanged a glance, a flicker of surprise in their eyes; they hadn't expected Cai Tou to hold this Ma Yunteng in such high regard.

After receiving Cai Tou's praise, Zhang Yu looked toward Che Nu and said, "Then I will next explain Sports Car Legs..."

But just then, Black Crow, who was standing to the side, suddenly interjected, "Teacher Ma, your lecture is excellent, but if you could add just one more little thing, it would be even more popular here."

Zhang Yu asked curiously, "Add what?"

Black Crow replied, "A little of the key high school teaching style."

As Zhang Yu was wondering what a key high school's teaching experience entailed, the doll hanging on his chest explained, "Just treat them the way your teachers treated you when you were at a key high school. Bring out the experience of how you were educated there."

Zhang Yu grew thoughtful, then looked at the few people before him and asked, "When I was in key high school, I taught only sterilized students. I was wondering, are the three of you teachers currently in a sterilized state, or have you already undergone reversal surgery?"

Cai Tou spoke with some embarrassment, "We all attended regular high schools; sterilization wasn't required back then."

Zhang Yu let out an "oh."

And as Cai Tou, Che Nu, and Da Chan looked at Zhang Yu, who presumably had been sterilized, and then at themselves, who had not, they suddenly felt as if they were a class below him.

Zhang Yu decided to draw upon his experiences from White Dragon High School as well, asking, "I see we have restrooms here. Do teachers and students need to use them? Is it necessary to consider students' restroom needs during class?"

The three exchanged glances before nodding in unison.

Zhang Yu asked with curiosity, "There's another question I've always wanted to ask. Can't you choose the flavor of the intellect-enhancement agent here? I don't think I've ever smelled it."

Cai Tou replied, a bit awkwardly, "Our facilities are limited. We don't add intellect-enhancement agents to the air circulation system."

Black Crow, however, watched with gleaming eyes, thinking to himself, *Yes, yes, that's the vibe. The smell of a key high school humiliating its students.*

Subsequently, Zhang Yu became increasingly adept at integrating the high school teaching experience into his lessons.

He thought to himself, *Hmm, it's not too difficult. I just have to repeat how the teachers at Songyang High School normally discriminate against low-scoring students, and how the people from White Dragon and Purple Cloud speak to those from Songyang.*

And as Zhang Yu continued to explain Excavator Palm and Sports Car Legs.

Che Nu and Da Chan discovered that Zhang Yu's understanding of Excavator Palm and Sports Car Legs was in no way inferior to their own, and that he possessed a unique comprehension of muscular exertion and mana circulation.

What surprised them even more was that Zhang Yu knew all the various key points for cultivating these two techniques from level 1 to level 10 by heart, as if he had only just recently broken through.

But the two of them knew, of course, that it was impossible for him to have just recently cultivated these level 10 techniques. The only explanation was that

his teaching experience was exceedingly rich, that he had guided all sorts of students through breakthroughs at different levels of these two techniques.

Che Nu cupped her hands, her previously cool expression vanishing as her face filled with admiration.

"Your teaching quality is exceptionally high, and your teaching style is mature. You are more than qualified to teach here."

Although Da Chan, standing to the side, did not speak, he nodded slightly, endorsing Che Nu's statement.

After all, in the dark world of tutoring, teaching quality was king, and everyone in the gang admired those with strong lecturing skills.

As for Zhang Yu's teaching style, it was so authentic it needed no further comment. Just the aura of someone who could weave the score-based hierarchy into his conversation, the casualness of his words, showed that he not only had a high level of martial arts but was also a graduate of a proper key high school.

Black Crow thought to himself, *If we advertise him under the banner of a retired key high school teacher, we could definitely recruit a lot of students.*

But the most surprised person on the scene, from beginning to end, was certainly not these three teachers from the Dark Learning Gang, nor was it Black Crow off to the side.

It was the doll hanging on Zhang Yu's chest.

This guy only learned Excavator Palm a few days ago!

It seems he doesn't just learn techniques quickly; it's not just about speed, but a true and thorough comprehension. He can even fuse various techniques into one, truly mastering the power within.

Damn it… the doll thought inwardly. *How on earth was this potential unlocked? Could it be that, without my knowledge, I have actually, inadvertently, mastered such a terrifying method for stimulating potential, and in doing so, created this peerless prodigy, Zhang Yu?*

Doesn't that mean I have the aptitude to become an evil god king?

Could that be the very reason why I was betrayed by others?

Zhang Yu then briefly demonstrated his teaching proficiency in the Crane Claw and the Elevator Leap, which were naturally met with approval, causing everyone to admire the breadth of his knowledge even more.

After seeing off Cai Tou and the other two, Black Crow began to discuss the specific details of the classes with Zhang Yu.

In the end, a course schedule was determined based on Black Crow's suggestions, the doll's experienced input, and Zhang Yu's own considerations.

But the first thing Black Crow brought up was the issue of taxes.

He explained, "It's no problem if you wish to remain anonymous. You don't have to purchase the rights to disseminate or teach the techniques, but taxes must be paid. We will withhold them on your behalf."

"It's just that taxes are too important. In the past, some gangs didn't bother with it, letting teachers file their own taxes. But then they encountered some daredevil who secretly evaded them. He was eventually discovered by a righteous god, and the entire gang was captured as one. The whole gang went bankrupt and was saddled with a lifetime of fines they could never repay. They're still working overtime in a corporation to pay off the debt. I hear their overtime is already scheduled out for the next 200 years..."

As Black Crow spoke, a trace of fear showed in his eyes.

"So, we cannot be careless when it comes to paying taxes. My gang will take full responsibility for paying them for you, so you won't have to worry about it."

"The tutoring fees we calculate for you are always figured after our commission and taxes."

Aside from the Limitless Cloud Hand, the most profitable courses were naturally Excavator Palm, Crane Claw, Sports Car Legs, and the Elevator Leap.

Black Crow said, "So, Teacher Ma, when would be a convenient time for you to start teaching?"

Zhang Yu replied, "The sooner, the better."

Black Crow smiled slightly. "Alright then. I happen to have an Excavator Palm class that needs a teacher. There are currently 59 students enrolled. Each class is 60 minutes long, and we will pay you 6,500 per class. For now, we'll schedule 10 classes a week. How does that sound?"

Hearing this, Zhang Yu's heart skipped a beat, and he couldn't help but feel his breath catch in his throat.

He thought to himself, *Ten classes a week, that's 65,000? Damn, the dark world of tutoring is really lucrative!*

But Black Crow, seeing Zhang Yu remain silent, assumed he thought the amount was too low. After all, an expert who could cultivate multiple martial arts to level 10, someone at the absolute peak of Qi Refinement, would surely have high income and expenses.

So Black Crow said, "You are new here, after all. Once your teaching quality is recognized, we can definitely arrange more classes and more students. Your income will certainly see a big increase then."

Zhang Yu nodded in agreement, suppressing the eagerness in his heart.

"When do the classes start?"

"Tomorrow."

…

That evening, after leaving the compound, Zhang Yu let out a slight sigh of relief.

He thought to himself, *This way, I'll have an income of 65,000 a week. If I do well and more classes are arranged, my income could be even higher.*

At this thought, Zhang Yu truly breathed a sigh of relief, feeling a great deal of the financial pressure on his shoulders lift.

"With this, I'll have the money to eat Crimson Marrow Primordial Pills, and my body tempering can finally improve quickly. Participating in the sports competition shouldn't be a problem anymore."

Just then, the doll on his chest spoke up, "Well? I didn't lie to you, did I? What kind of legitimate job makes money as fast as running with the underworld?"

"And I know this Kunxu's various underworlds and dark worlds like the back of my hand. With me helping you, your chances of climbing higher will only increase."

Zhang Yu did not reply, but he had to admit that learning about the dark worlds through this evil god was indeed beneficial to his path of the Immortal Dao.

On the way back, the doll, in an effort to show its presence or perhaps to continue demonstrating its importance to Zhang Yu, reminded him.

"Remember this, Zhang Yu. In this illegal tutoring business, the most important thing is that you can't trust anyone. Also, since you're in this line of work, don't you ever feel sorry for the people who buy your courses."

"Almost everyone who comes to the dark world of tutoring to buy courses is dirt poor, but don't you mind whether their money comes from loans, selling their house, or mortgaging their organs. They buy, we sell. It's not like we forced them. If they go bankrupt or jump off a building later, that's their own fault for being poor and still trying to cultivate…"

Over the next few days, Zhang Yu cultivated at school during the day, and at night he either cultivated in the abandoned building or taught classes at the Dark Learning Gang's compound. He finally saved up enough money to purchase another Crimson Marrow Primordial Pill, gradually beginning a routine of consuming one every few days.

Chapter 93: Zhang Yu's Secret

That night, as he swallowed the Crimson Marrow Primordial Pill, its potent medicinal power once again drilled into his limbs and bones.

Zhang Yu immediately activated his Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi, causing the muscles, organs, and bones throughout his body to exert their full strength, striving to absorb the surging medicinal power.

At moments like these, Zhang Yu could always feel distinctly that the 30,000 he spent on the alchemical enhancer had not vanished, but had instead integrated into his body, ultimately becoming a part of his own vital energy.

A night passed in a flash. Zhang Yu looked at the Feathered Tome, which displayed a body tempering level of 2.08, and a satisfied smile appeared on his face.

Two weeks had now passed since the martial arts competition.

There were still two weeks until the confirmation of the top five sports scores, which would determine whether Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen were qualified to join the sports competition team.

There were still six weeks until the start of the sports competition.

And although Zhang Yu had focused his main efforts on his physical strength during this time, with the support of his heart art and passive breathing exercise, his Dao heart and mana had naturally improved as well.

The Feathered Tome showed Dao heart level 3 (93%) and mana 25.5.

"The improvement of my Dao heart and mana seems to have slowed down just a little, but it's not a major issue for now. I don't need to consider changing to a more powerful cultivation technique yet. For now, I'll keep my attention on my physical strength."

"With my current income, not only can I maintain a steady supply of Crimson Marrow Primordial Pills, but if my income increases a bit more in the future, I can even add more dietary supplements."

"If I continue to increase my physical strength with the level 10 Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi like this, then entering the top five in two weeks shouldn't be a problem, and it might not be impossible to reach level 4.0 or higher for the sports competition in six weeks."

Thinking of this, Zhang Yu looked at his savings.

During this period, although he had tutored Song Hailong again and taught at the compound, with the arrival of a new month, after deducting 15,000 for loan interest, just under two thousand for rent and utilities, and expenses for Crimson Marrow Primordial Pills, food, and so on, Zhang Yu now had only a little over five thousand left in his account.

"Sigh, I'm still poor. I hope they arrange more classes for me soon."

The thought flashed through his mind as Zhang Yu hurried to the school.

Upon arriving at the school gate, Zhang Yu saw the results of the monthly exam displayed.

On this day of the monthly exam results, the teachers and students within Songyang High School were in a jubilant mood, cheerfully welcoming the new scores.

And thinking back to the exam two days prior, Zhang Yu sighed slightly, "What a pity. If the monthly exam had been a few days later, after I took this second Crimson Marrow Primordial Pill for body tempering, my score would have been a bit higher."

"But it's not a big problem. My sports score should be higher on the next monthly exam."

After a casual glance at the monthly exam rankings, Zhang Yu headed towards his classroom.

For him, the monthly exam was long since something to pay only slight attention to; the competition was what he truly valued.

He still clearly remembered the words Zhang Pianpian had told him.

Zhang Yu murmured to himself, "If you want to get into a top 10 university, then win all the remaining competitions in your first year and become the strongest first-year student in Songyang City."

But just as Zhang Yu was about to step into the academic building.

With a loud bang, a figure fell from the sky, plummeting toward the ground.

Zhang Yu instinctively dodged, then reached out to catch the person. As white Formless Cloud-Astral Qi surged forth, it generated a gentle force that caught the figure falling from the sky, deflecting the downward momentum.

Looking at the person he had saved, Zhang Yu was momentarily stunned. "You're… Shuang Youpeng?"

He still remembered this student, once the top scorer of the first year and now a second-year, being obediently reprimanded by the Student Council vice president, Zhou Chechen, during combat class.

"There's a fine for jumping off buildings at school. It's a good thing I saved you."

"Besides, at your level, a fall from this height wouldn't kill you, would it? Wouldn't it be worse to get seriously injured and need treatment?"

But in the next moment, Zhang Yu realized something was wrong.

Although Shuang Youpeng's face hadn't changed much, the feeling he gave Zhang Yu was… light, incredibly light.

It was as if more than half of the vital energy beneath his clothes had vanished, not at all like the robust strength a second-year student should possess.

Facing Zhang Yu's questioning gaze, Shuang Youpeng said nothing. He neither thanked him for the rescue nor blamed him for it; he simply stood up silently and walked toward the academic building.

Zhang Yu opened his mouth, but was at a loss for words.

He sensed a kind of dead-hearted numbness from the other boy.

Finally, Zhang Yu said, "Are you okay?"

Shuang Youpeng's steps paused, and he said faintly, "I'm fine now. It was a moment of weakness. I still have debts to repay; I won't jump again. Regarding

what happened today, please don't tell anyone, otherwise the school will fine me."

At this point, Shuang Youpeng fell silent for a moment before saying, "That sports competition… you'd better give up. It won't end well for you."

…

Inside the classroom of first-year, class one.

Several students were gathered around He Dayou, congratulating him.

"Dayou, you've improved so much lately! You actually got first in the year on this monthly exam."

"662 points! With a score like that, you could probably get into White Dragon High School for a tour for free."

"General Knowledge 49, Dao Heart 130, Mana 143, Sports 150, Martial Arts 95, Daoist Arts 95… Only the top students from the three major high schools could match these scores, right?"

He Dayou looked at these sycophants who flocked to whoever had the best scores, a disdainful smile flashing across his lips.

In the martial arts combat exam of this month's test, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen had been assigned to the same group, allowing He Dayou to finally achieve a score befitting his skill level.

"I've finally gotten the score I deserve in martial arts."

As for Daoist arts, that had always been his strong suit, and his sports score, after his recent training with the competition team, had become the highest in the grade.

Just then, his phone vibrated; the information he had asked another student to find had arrived.

It was Zhang Yu's current body tempering level.

"That kid Zhang Yu, always skipping sports class. In this monthly exam, I can finally see his body tempering level measured on the test field yesterday… 2.05, is it?"

"As expected of Zhang Pianpian's dog. He must have been fed a lot of things to reach this level."

"However… it's still a far cry from my 2.3 body tempering level, and from now on, the gap between us will only grow wider."

Seeing Zhang Yu's body tempering level, He Dayou finally let out a breath, feeling that all the effort and money he had poured into the competition team had not been in vain.

"Zhang Yu, from now on, you will experience what it feels like to give your all and still be unable to catch me."

In contrast to He Dayou's excitement, Zhao Tianxing felt utterly miserable.

"Have even Yu-boy and Zhen been completely surpassed by He Dayou?"

Although he was somewhat envious of He Dayou and the others, Zhao Tianxing, like Qian Shen, ultimately quit the sports competition team. He watched as another student was brought in to fill the spot, and then that student's body tempering level skyrocketed, and their monthly exam score surpassed his own.

Zhao Tianxing thought to himself, *Qian Shen disdains using money to buy strength, using money to buy points. That's why he quit the competition team.*

After Zhao Tianxing had also quit, he could feel that Qian Shen regarded him with more respect.

But he knew that his situation was completely different from Qian Shen's, and he possessed none of Qian Shen's coolness or decisiveness.

He knew that he had chosen to quit the competition team simply because of his own weakness.

He wasn't confident that he could achieve sufficiently outstanding results after his parents had spent half their life's savings on him.

"The sponsorship fee to join the competition team would require my mom and dad to sell our house."

"This is only the first year. What if it costs more money in the future?"

"With my talent, after spending so much money, will I really be able to earn it back in the future?"

Zhao Tianxing had no confidence at all. He was afraid of wasting his parents' savings, afraid of being saddled with huge debts while accomplishing nothing. In the end, he chose to give up.

I'm such a waste. And I even told Qian Shen that I was like him and didn't want to buy my score, when the truth is I both want it and am afraid of failure.

...

In the cafeteria, Zhao Tianxing put down his tray, his face clouded with gloom.

He saw Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, as if in a competition, voraciously devouring the synthetic food before them.

Sigh, Yu-boy and Zhen are always so optimistic. They don't seem the least bit discouraged even though their rankings were surpassed in this month's exam. I wish I could be like them.

Bai Zhenzhen, while eating, glanced at the protein milk in Zhang Yu's hands and thought, *Yu-boy has been eating better and better lately. Did he find money? Or did he sell something he shouldn't have?*

Zhang Yu, while eating, looked at the mush on Bai Zhenzhen's tray and thought, *Zhen needs to improve her body tempering too. Money must be pretty tight for her recently, right? I wonder if she'd be interested in the dark world of tutoring.*

The doll hanging on Zhang Yu's chest was also observing Bai Zhenzhen, and after several days of observation, she had come to a conclusion.

So the doll transmitted a message to Zhang Yu's mind, "Hey, Zhang Yu, do you know there's something in that woman's belly?"

"Pfft!"

Zhang Yu felt himself choke, almost spitting out the food in his mouth.

He turned away, lowered his voice to a level only he could hear, and said to the doll, "Zhen's pregnant?"

On the other side, Bai Zhenzhen looked at the mush Zhang Yu had spat into her bowl, and she was genuinely furious.

"Are you trying to die, Zhang Yu? Using such a low-down trick to steal food? I'm going to piss in your bowl!"

The doll said in Zhang Yu's mind, "The thing I'm talking about is a spiritual root. There's a spiritual root in this woman's belly."

Zhang Yu rolled his eyes. "No kidding. Zhen rented a spiritual root."

The doll, however, chuckled. "Really? According to my observations, the spiritual root in that woman's belly should be her own. It's just that this spiritual root is extremely good at concealing itself. If you weren't with her every day, and if she didn't always use that spiritual root so freely in front of you, I wouldn't have been able to notice it."

Zhang Yu looked at Bai Zhenzhen in shock, thinking to himself, *A spiritual root is growing in Zhen's belly?*

Bai Zhenzhen said irritably, "What are you muttering about? Hurry up and go buy me a new lunch!"

Zhang Yu's mind was still on the matter of the spiritual root as he grabbed his student card and ran off to buy Bai Zhenzhen's meal.

Bai Zhenzhen watched as Zhang Yu's phone, left on the table, vibrated softly as a message came in.

Lian Tianji: The clothes you've worn, sell me one.

When she saw this message, Bai Zhenzhen fell silent. She quietly turned off the screen of Zhang Yu's phone.

"No wonder I felt like Yu-boy had money recently."

"So, without me even realizing it, he has already gotten this far ahead?"

Yu-boy! For money, for the Immortal Dao, you've already gone to such lengths?

Chapter 94: Zhang Yu's Temptation

At Purple Cloud High School, a photograph was currently displayed on Le Mulan's phone screen.

The photo showed a smiling Zhang Yu standing at the entrance of a general store, giving a thumbs-up to the camera.

The text below the photo read: Gaofeng Stationery, the best stationery store at the entrance of Songyang High School. The owner is super nice, the items are great value for money, and I strongly recommend everyone to check it out.

Two slender fingers pressed against the screen and stretched, enlarging the photo until Zhang Yu's image filled the entire display.

After a long moment, her fingers swiped, and a new set of photos appeared.

She tapped open the first photo, which showed Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen with their arms slung around each other's shoulders, taking a selfie in front of the White Dragon High School gate.

The second photo was of Bai Zhenzhen hugging an oversized bottle filled with an energy drink.

The third photo showed Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen sitting back-to-back, surrounded by a circle of drink bottles, with a speechless-looking Song Hailong at the edge of the frame.

The text below read: At White Dragon High School again. The energy drinks here are really potent and delicious. I have to bring back several full barrels every time I come. I'm a White Dragon monthly subscriber, so contact me directly if you want me to bring some back.

The slender fingers once again enlarged the images of Zhang Yu in the photos, lingering for a long time before swiping to the next set of pictures.

This set of photos captured the night view of Songyang City, apparently taken from a tall building in the suburbs.

The center of the shot was the Central Tower, soaring into the clouds as if reaching for the heavens. Not far from it stood the Oasis Tower, currently under construction. Surrounding them were various skyscrapers shimmering with neon lights, which gradually faded into the darker suburban areas… a progression from light to dark that outlined the nightscape of Songyang City.

The text below read: Songyang at 4 AM. You can choose to mess around for 3 years, or you can choose to struggle for 3 years. If you mess around for 3 years, you might have to struggle for the next 100-plus years. But if you choose to struggle for 3 years, ultimately get into a university, and successfully achieve Foundation Establishment, then you can continue to struggle for another 200-plus years.

With a soft chuckle, the slender fingers continued to scroll down Zhang Yu's feed, but just then, a message popped up at the top of the screen.

Lian Tianji: The hallowed first place, are you joking with me? You want me to buy what from Zhang Yu???

Slender fingers tapped rapidly across the phone screen, beginning a reply.

Le Mulan: I'm not joking. Please, I can give you more money.

Transfer 2000

Transfer 2000 accepted

Lian Tianji: This isn't about the money. Besides, you can ask him yourself. Why do you need me to go to him?

Le Mulan: If you're unwilling, I'll just step on your head during class every day.

Lian Tianji: Do you need it delivered by courier or in person?

Looking at Lian Tianji's reply on the screen, Le Mulan nodded slightly.

"As expected, being a bit forceful is more effective when talking to classmates with lower scores than me."

Returning to view Zhang Yu's feed, Le Mulan murmured, "Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, those two poor people are truly inseparable."

However, she was not concerned about this; it was merely an observation made while scrolling through Zhang Yu's posts.

And under the glow of the phone screen, Le Mulan's lips gradually curved into a satisfied smile as she continued to look through Zhang Yu's photos.

"My hard work these past few days has not been in vain. Now when I look at Zhang Yu's photos, I basically feel nothing anymore."

"Next, I just have to wait for Lian Tianji to deliver Zhang Yu's clothes."

"Once I get used to the clothes as well, I probably won't feel so uncomfortable when I run into Zhang Yu."

Le Mulan thought to herself that then would be the time to face the poor Zhang Yu directly and completely overcome the weakness in her heart.

...

In the cafeteria.

Bai Zhenzhen's mind kept replaying the message Lian Tianji had just sent to Zhang Yu.

And as Zhang Yu brought the newly purchased meal to Bai Zhenzhen's table, his mind was once again contemplating talking to Zhen about the illegal tutoring.

He, however, failed to notice the peculiar glint in the way Bai Zhenzhen was looking at him.

After the meal, Zhang Yu said to Bai Zhenzhen, "Zhen, come with me to the rooftop. There's something I want to talk to you about."

So, the two of them went to the rooftop.

This was one of their secret training bases within the school. Over the past few days, they had shed countless beads of sweat here, witnessing each other's growth.

Arriving here again today, Zhang Yu spoke first, "Zhen, there's something I want to tell you. You can probably sense that I've been earning a little money recently, right?"

I can more than sense it, I freaking saw the message from your client!

Hearing Zhang Yu's words, Bai Zhenzhen's expression turned slightly bitter, and her heart jolted in shock.

Is Yu-boy going to tell me the secret of his recent earnings? His secret with Lian Tianji?

Bai Zhenzhen knew that every year, some high school students, under financial pressure, walked down this path.

Some people looked down on these students who were willing to sell themselves for the pursuit of the Immortal Dao, thinking, why should poor people even try to cultivate? Others admired them, believing they possessed a strong Dao heart for pursuing the Immortal Dao.

But Bai Zhenzhen had never expected that Zhang Yu would also walk down this path, and that he would walk it right up to Lian Tianji.

Yu-boy, you've gone too far. I can't keep up.

And if you were going to do it, why Lian Tianji? He only made it to the top eight in the martial arts tournament. He's not worthy of you.

Couldn't you find some real top students? Even if you went to Song Hailong… no, Song Hailong's body tempering is too high, the medical fees probably wouldn't even cover the damages.

If it were Le Mulan paying, even I, your mother, would be more accepting!

Although her mind was racing, Bai Zhenzhen quickly regained her composure.

She controlled her expression as best she could and said slowly, "So what you want to talk about… is related to how you've been making money recently?"

Zhang Yu nodded and said, "Yes, I have a way to make money that I want to bring you in on. The place is in the far suburbs. I've been there many times, and it seems to be fine…"

Bai Zhenzhen's expression changed abruptly, her face scrunching up like a bitter melon as she looked at Zhang Yu, thinking, *Yu-boy wants to pull me into this line of work too?*

At this moment, Bai Zhenzhen found herself completely unprepared. Her first reaction was to refuse.

Thinking of this, she couldn't help but look at Zhang Yu with a hint of admiration.

Yu-boy's grades are already better than mine, yet after school, he's earning money in another field, 'tutoring' at Lian Tianji's place, working hard to save up cultivation resources. I admit my Dao heart is not as strong as yours. You win this time.

She took a deep breath and patted Zhang Yu's shoulder, saying, "Thanks, my good brother, but really, you don't have to. A good money-making path like this, you should just enjoy it yourself. I haven't reached that step yet."

"Lian Tianji's body tempering isn't low either. Be careful not to get injured and end up at the clinic."

Zhang Yu was puzzled. "What does Lian Tianji have to do with this?"

Bai Zhenzhen sighed softly, turning her head away with a look of resignation.

"This afternoon, I accidentally saw the message Lian Tianji sent you."

"But don't worry, I turned off your phone screen for you. Only I saw it. Qian Shen, Zhao Tianxing, and the others don't know."

"I will keep this secret for you."

Zhang Yu frowned and took out his phone. The moment he saw Lian Tianji's message, he felt like smashing the device.

"Devil incarnate! This devil incarnate! I thought of Lian Tianji as a friend! And he's got his mind on me?"

Then Zhang Yu thought of Bai Zhenzhen's recent behavior and quickly explained, "Nothing happened between him and me!"

He held up his phone screen to show Bai Zhenzhen his chat history with Lian Tianji.

"Look, it's perfectly clean. Nothing happened."

Bai Zhenzhen unconsciously let out a sigh of relief, then asked curiously, "Then why does Lian Tianji want to buy your worn clothes?"

"Who the hell knows what's going on in his head?" Zhang Yu viciously picked up his phone and began to reply. "First I'll ask him what he's offering. My response will depend on the price."

Unconsciously, Zhang Yu had grown more and more accustomed to the lifestyle of Kunxu, developing the habit of reacting differently to different numbers.

Bai Zhenzhen also watched from the side with curiosity.

On the phone screen, Zhang Yu typed: What price?

Lian Tianji: Any piece of clothing you've worn will do. 2,000.

Bai Zhenzhen said from the side, "Try asking for 5,000."

After Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen waited for a moment, they saw that Lian Tianji had sent a reply agreeing to the price.

Bai Zhenzhen laughed beside him. "Haha, you can earn 5,000 that easily?"

But Zhang Yu still felt strange. "What is he going to do with my clothes?"

Bai Zhenzhen patted Zhang Yu's shoulder and said, "This is 5,000 for one piece of your clothing. Who cares what he plans to do with it?"

Zhang Yu's eyes lit up. "Right, I almost forgot what I was telling you. I wanted to introduce a money-making opportunity to you today."

Just then, the doll that had been quietly staying on Zhang Yu's chest, silently disguised as a black prayer bead, began to speak.

The doll's voice entered Zhang Yu's mind, reminding him, "Zhang Yu, I warned you. In this business, the most important thing is to trust no one. Even a son can betray his own father. Are you sure you want to tell the woman in front of you?"

Zhang Yu, however, said to Bai Zhenzhen without any hesitation, "Zhen, have you heard of the dark world of tutoring?"

After Zhang Yu's explanation, Bai Zhenzhen finally understood that the money he had been earning recently was from tutoring.

For a moment, Bai Zhenzhen's expression became complicated.

Good news: her son wasn't selling his body.

Bad news: her son had joined a gang and was working a job more dangerous than robbery.

Bai Zhenzhen was, after all, a proper, poor, high-achieving student from a key high school. Not only did she respect copyrights, but her reverence for corporations had been ingrained in her since childhood.

Now, hearing that Zhang Yu wanted to bring her into a gang, she also became a little nervous.

"Is this really not dangerous? If we're discovered by the corporations, won't we be captured and forced to be work-slaves for life?"

Zhang Yu explained, "I had the same worries as you at first, but after I went, I discovered that the Dark Learning Gang is a legitimate, large gang that pays taxes according to the law and has all its members worship the gods. If you work part-time, you only need to worry about teaching. We don't need to consider things like fighting or killing."

"And the pay is really good. I can make 6,500 an hour there."

At this point, Zhang Yu paused, then added with some helplessness, "Besides, in this Kunxu… it's too hard for poor people like us to earn money in legitimate businesses. Only a place like the dark world of tutoring can give us a relatively decent income and a better chance of getting into a top 10 university."

When Bai Zhenzhen heard '6,500 an hour,' she felt her heart race, and she suddenly understood why some people joined gangs.

And when she heard Zhang Yu's final lament, she nodded in even greater agreement, thinking to herself, *That's right. For poor people like us, if we don't do something that involves risking our necks… how can we climb up?*

So Bai Zhenzhen also nodded firmly and said, "Okay, I trust you. Just tell me what you want me to do."

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 95: Preparation, Dropping the Class

Upon hearing Bai Zhenzhen agree, Zhang Yu said, "I asked around, and there's still a shortage of teachers for basic high school cultivation techniques. I've been watching you train recently. Your level in those techniques shouldn't be low, right?"

More than two months ago, all of Bai Zhenzhen's basic high school cultivation techniques had already reached level 4 or 5.

And during this time, for the first time in her life, Bai Zhenzhen had gradually released the restraints on her spiritual root, using it to cultivate with wild abandon.

This brought her an unprecedented experience. As the spiritual root worked on her body twenty-four hours a day, it became more and more attuned to her, its effects growing ever greater.

Now, her basic high school cultivation techniques had almost all reached level 9 or 10.

Such astonishing progress was enough to attract the attention of countless experts, and even the companies.

So… should she tell Zhang Yu?

But then she thought about how Zhang Yu had been honest with her about something as perilous as the dark world of tutoring. As partners who had sworn to get into the Ten Greats together, wouldn't it be disloyal of her to keep hiding this?

Zhang Pianpian already knows anyway.

Besides, I've been trying to see if I can lend it to Yu-boy to play with recently, so he'll find out sooner or later…

Thinking this, Bai Zhenzhen immediately leaned close to Zhang Yu and whispered into his ear, "I've basically trained all the basic cultivation techniques from the first year of high school to level 9 or 10."

Although he had long known Zhen was using a cheat, Zhang Yu was still slightly stunned when he heard these words.

He then recalled what the doll had said about the spiritual root during lunch and thought to himself, *Could this be related to the spiritual root in Zhen's stomach?*

And when the doll heard what Bai Zhenzhen said, it was also shaken. *Heavens! Where did this monster come from? Could it be that someone unlocked her potential too?*

Seeing Zhang Yu in a daze, Bai Zhenzhen first smiled smugly, then, with a desire to show off, she leaned in and whispered in his ear again, "Do you want to know how I did it?"

Zhang Yu rubbed his slightly itchy ear and said, "You can tell me whenever you want. It's fine if you don't want to, either."

It's just a cheat, right? As if I don't have one.

Zhang Yu then continued speaking about the dark world of tutoring, "I'll go ask again tonight which high school basic courses are the most popular and which are most in need of teachers. You should prepare well these next few days, and I'll take you for a trial lesson then."

Bai Zhenzhen looked at Zhang Yu in surprise, thinking, *Isn't Yu-boy the least bit curious how I managed to raise all my basic cultivation techniques to level 9 and 10 so quickly?*

She had been planning to tell him, but seeing Zhang Yu's nonchalant expression was like a child wanting to show off a treasured toy, only to find the adult completely uninterested, instantly draining all her enthusiasm for showing off.

Hmph, just wait until my spiritual root can be taken out for you to use. Let's see if you beg me then.

With this thought, Bai Zhenzhen held her breath and went to the side to engage in ascetic training.

For the next few days, aside from preparing for the tutoring lessons with Bai Zhenzhen, Zhang Yu spent most of his time wholeheartedly cultivating the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi.

On this day, Zhang Yu was cultivating with Bai Zhenzhen on the rooftop, a low hum emanating from his muscles and sinews.

He continuously tempered his muscles, internal organs, and even his bones and marrow, feeling his physical strength increase bit by bit under the nourishment of the Crimson Marrow Primordial Pill's medicinal power.

Zhang Yu could feel that this kind of cultivation was not just improving his physical strength; the foundation of his physical body, his natural talent… also seemed to be growing more profound under the infusion of the Crimson Marrow Primordial Pill.

Although on the first layer of Kunxu, the Ten Great Sects stipulate that no one can truly begin cultivating until high school—otherwise it's illegal cultivation punishable by death.

But those rich people aren't like the original Zhang Yu, who lived in poverty until his first year of high school.

Zhang Yu now knew that the wealthy in Songyang City began training from a young age; although they didn't truly start cultivating, they underwent modification surgeries, took medicinal supplements, used dietary supplements, and various other methods to enhance their potential and foundation before high school.

Even someone like Zhao Tianxing, whose family was far less wealthy, Zhang Yu had heard him say that his parents had been feeding him various supplements since elementary school.

It could be said that the vast majority of students at Songyang High School were not like the original Zhang Yu, who went into high school cultivation with a completely natural and untouched body.

Zhang Yu guessed inwardly, *Perhaps it's precisely this gap that led to the original's insufficient drug resistance, which is why taking the enhancers caused problems with his internal organs.*

And now, after cultivating the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi during this period, especially after taking the Crimson Marrow Primordial Pill for training,

Zhang Yu felt that his entire body of flesh and blood, from his internal organs to his marrow and bones, was gradually beginning to possess a fundamental strength.

It was no longer just about getting stronger through attrition, like when he practiced the Thirty-Six Body-Strengthening Forms in the past.

Instead, under the scouring of the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi combined with the medicinal power of the pill, he felt his internal qi and blood becoming more vigorous, his digestive ability growing stronger, his metabolism increasing, and even the hidden waste and toxins within his organs being gradually expelled.

If I continue to strengthen my foundation like this, my body's potential will be greater, and it will be easier to increase my physical strength in the future.

Especially with my internal organs feeling more and more comfortable… if this continues, I should be able to take more body tempering enhancers for cultivation in the future, right?

Just then, his phone rang. Zhang Yu answered and saw it was a call from Song Hailong.

Song Hailong said, "Zhang Yu, I'm calling to inform you and Bai Zhenzhen that the future training sessions are canceled."

"Huh?" Zhang Yu said, surprised. "Are you sure?"

Song Hailong said, "Thank you for your hard work during this time. You've helped me improve a lot in ground-based combat."

"But you should have felt it too. My physical strength is improving faster and faster. You won't be able to keep up."

Zhang Yu thought to himself that he could now take Crimson Marrow Primordial Pills continuously and that his physical strength would definitely be able to keep up with Song Hailong's in the future. He was just about to persuade the other party to continue paying for lessons.

But then he heard Song Hailong continue, "You are excellent, but I've found an even more excellent combat practice partner. And my time is very limited, so I can only terminate our collaboration."

Zhang Yu asked curiously, "Who is it?"

He wanted to see who was stealing his business.

Song Hailong gritted his teeth and said, "Yu Xinghan."

Listening to Song Hailong's voice, Zhang Yu could almost picture the other's ferocious expression, veins bulging on his forehead.

Song Hailong continued, "He was first in the first-year class in the recent monthly exam."

"Heh," Song Hailong laughed sarcastically. "He needed to find a sparring partner and thought I was the most suitable in White Dragon's first year, so he hired me as his combat sparring partner for ten thousand an hour."

"I don't care about the money, but challenging this guy every day and surpassing him step by step—that really suits me."

"Alright, that's all. You should cultivate hard too. Don't let me not even see you at the sports competition…"

Hearing Song Hailong's words, Zhang Yu could only suppress his original intention to persuade him.

What else could he say?

Good grief, his own client had now become someone else's employee. Someone stronger than him was paying to fight Song Hailong; how could he possibly compete with that?

Zhang Yu could only hang up the phone silently and relay the tragic news to Bai Zhenzhen.

Bai Zhenzhen sighed upon hearing it. "Damn, our income has dropped again. It seems tutoring for the Dark Learning Gang is unavoidable now. I'll prepare a bit more, and we'll go in two days."

Bai Zhenzhen thought about how she and Zhang Yu were doing gang business, fighting for a tutoring fee of a few thousand an hour.

Meanwhile, Song Hailong could earn 10,000 an hour while challenging a strong opponent and training in combat.

Bai Zhenzhen couldn't help but lament, "Damn it, how do these rich people make money so easily?"

…

Another two days passed.

Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen met at the agreed-upon subway station.

Under the circulation of his Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi, Zhang Yu had once again transformed into the image of Teacher Ma.

And as he looked at the girl before him—who, after taking off her mask, had a face, arms, and neck covered in tattoos and a head of long golden hair—he had to check his phone to confirm that it was Bai Zhenzhen.

What the hell? How did Zhen become a rune warrior? Some kind of punk?

Seeing Zhang Yu's surprised look, Bai Zhenzhen said with a face full of disdain, "Didn't you say we needed a disguise? You have your Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi to change your shape, so I can only use some tattoo stickers, a wig, and padding to change my appearance. I'll wash it off when I get home."

"With a mask on like this, no one should be able to recognize me, right?"

"And I don't look like a high school student now, do I? Otherwise, how would I get through the interview?"

Only then did Zhang Yu's gaze shift from the tattoos on Bai Zhenzhen's body to her chest, butt, and shoes.

He thought to himself, *So she's wearing padding? No wonder her figure looks a size bigger. Paired with the tattoos and wig, she really doesn't look like a high school student at all.*

But thinking about the interview for the tutoring position today, Zhang Yu subconsciously said, "With so many tattoos, will there be a problem with the interview for a tutoring position?"

Bai Zhenzhen, however, retorted, "What kind of damn gang interview would disqualify someone for tattoos!"

"Besides, I think this style is exactly what the Dark Learning Gang is looking for. Look at the words I've stuck on; don't they show my determination to be an illegal tutor?"

Zhang Yu looked at the phrases 'The Sea of Classes is Boundless' and 'Attend Class Every Day' on her face, along with tattoos of desks, chairs, classrooms, and blackboards, and suddenly felt that this was indeed the style he had seen at the Dark Learning Gang.

The doll commented, “With my many years of experience in the underworld, her tattoos are definitely a plus for the interview. At least from the outside, she looks more like a member of the Dark Learning Gang than you do, giving off the vibe of a high school teacher who fell into massive debt and was forced to sell lessons.”

“Alright then,” Zhang Yu nodded, leading the re-masked Bai Zhenzhen towards the Dark Learning Gang’s campus.

However, because he was with Bai Zhenzhen this time, Zhang Yu first took the subway.

After getting off the subway and thinking about the considerable distance remaining, Zhang Yu said, “There’s still a long way to go. I can carry you.”

(End of Chapter)

Chapter 96: What Got In?

"No need, my running speed isn't slow," Bai Zhenzhen said, waving her hand and starting to warm up, her long, slender thighs continuously tensing and relaxing, displaying curves honed by long-term training.

"My Sports Car Legs is already level 10."

Then, to Bai Zhenzhen's astonishment, a roar of mana suddenly erupted from within Zhang Yu's body. The next moment, he shot out several dozen meters, then zipped back in front of her with a gust of wind.

"My movement technique has now reached the level of a first-class delivery driver."

What does it feel like to see your good buddy suddenly have level 10 Sports Car Legs, running faster than an electric scooter?

Bai Zhenzhen's first feeling was, of course, surprise.

I've never seen Yu-boy practice Sports Car Legs! Is he secretly delivering food every night?

Her second feeling was like seeing a buddy buy a new car; she thought, your ride is so fast, can you give me a ride?

Bai Zhenzhen suddenly leaped onto Zhang Yu's back, her arms wrapped around his neck and her legs clamped around his waist as she said, "Yu-boy, take me for a spin!"

In the next instant, Zhang Yu was already carrying Bai Zhenzhen as he shot off like an electric current, rushing towards the Dark Learning Gang's campus amidst the whistling wind.

Bai Zhenzhen rested her face against Zhang Yu's back, watching the surrounding streetscape fly past, and said with some excitement, "A'Yu, you're so fast."

"Am I?"

Although Zhang Yu had mastered many level 10 cultivation techniques, he had never dared to show them off easily.

Now, having a rare chance to show off his level 10 Sports Car Legs in front of Zhen, Zhang Yu's mood became unusually cheerful.

Amidst the howling wind, Zhang Yu chuckled and said, "This isn't even my full speed."

"Really? A'Yu, you're amazing!"

"Heh heh, look, am I faster now!"

"So fast, so fast! A'Yu, can you go even faster?"

"Haha, watch me accelerate again!"

With a loud bang, Zhang Yu activated Elevator Leap and flew across the traffic light ahead in a single bound.

Bai Zhenzhen smoothed down her golden wig, which was flying up and down in the wild wind, and watched Zhang Yu run faster and faster amidst her praise, thinking to herself, *Riding a buddy is really exhilarating. No wonder so many people would rather hit a person than hail a cab.*

Leaning against Zhang Yu's back, feeling the rolling heat of qi and blood coming from his body, Bai Zhenzhen thought, *It's just that I can't turn off this heater. I feel like my whole body is being cooked…*

The next moment, with a light splash, a puddle of water exploded under Zhang Yu's foot, drenching Bai Zhenzhen's leg.

"Zhang Yu, are you trying to kill me! Why did you step in a filthy gutter!"

Zhang Yu said helplessly, "This stretch of road in the suburbs often has no streetlights, I can't see clearly. Help me out with your phone's flashlight."

Bai Zhenzhen took out her phone and turned on the light to illuminate the road ahead for Zhang Yu.

On the dark path, the two of them pressed forward under the illumination of the faint light, moving farther and farther away from the neon city behind them.

Zhang Yu suddenly exclaimed, "Why is there something hard pressing against me from down there?"

For a rare moment, Bai Zhenzhen's face turned red as she said irritably, "That's the spiritual root!"

"It's all because you wanted to borrow it to play with. I've been trying it out recently, which has caused this spiritual root to keep poking me in the stomach."

Zhang Yu suddenly remembered something. "Right, don't forget to request a concealment talisman."

Seeing the constantly bobbing Bai Zhenzhen and the tattoos all over her face on the screen, Zhang Pianpian asked in confusion, "What are you doing?"

"Godmother, Zhang Yu is carrying me to the Dark Learning Gang campus. I'd like to ask you to cast a concealment talisman for me."

After a moment of silence, Zhang Pianpian said, "It's very good that you two can earn money by tutoring at a gang as a work-study program. But you two… are you planning to come to me every day from now on to have me cast concealment talismans on both of you?"

As she spoke, Zhang Pianpian asked again, "Doesn't Zhang Yu have the Talisman Tome? Hasn't he learned the concealment talisman yet?"

Zhang Yu took the phone and said while running, "I've just started tutoring to earn money, so funds are still a bit tight. I'll be able to afford to learn the concealment talisman after a while."

"But I still don't know how to draw talismans remotely, so Zhen will still need your help, sis."

Zhang Pianpian said flatly, "Why don't you two just live together?"

"Find a place to rent together between the Dark Learning Gang and Songyang High School. You can save on rent, it'll be convenient for school and work, and the two of you can share the Talisman Tome to cast talismans."

Zhang Yu's mind immediately started calculating the time and cost, and his eyes lit up. He realized that this was indeed a very cost-effective solution that could save a lot of money.

There was just one problem. Zhang Yu asked Bai Zhenzhen, "Zhen, do you rent your place?"

Bai Zhenzhen nodded. "Duh. If my family could still afford to buy a house, how would we have the money to support my cultivation?"

Bai Zhenzhen then continued, "Godmother has a point. If I can get a class at the Dark Learning Gang, let's rent together. It's indeed more cost-effective. My parents are working out of town anyway, so I've always lived alone."

In the blink of an eye, the two arrived at the Dark Learning Gang's campus.

Bai Zhenzhen was introduced to Black Crow by Zhang Yu to attend her interview, while Zhang Yu went to his own class.

Walking into the classroom, his eyes were met with rows of muscular men sitting in their seats. They were burly, with dark skin and faces that showed a weather-beaten weariness.

These were the students who came for the Excavator Palm course. Almost all of them were from construction sites, hoping to be more competitive in their job search, which was why they came to learn and improve their Excavator Palm.

Zhang Yu heard that as more and more high school students graduated each year, the competition for jobs on construction sites was becoming increasingly fierce. The recruitment requirements for positions related to the Excavator Palm… had been raised to level 6 or above just to get an interview.

Through a few days of teaching and casual chats during breaks, Zhang Yu had also gotten to know his students, who had an average height of 2 meters and an average weight of over 200 kg.

Some students had very large, round bellies like big rubber balls; Zhang Yu knew this was from undergoing gastrointestinal modification surgery, allowing them to survive on grass alone.

Some students had very large, dark, and round pupils; this was to compete for night-time construction site jobs, for which they had undergone night vision surgery.

Most of them had flushed faces, rapid breathing, and optimistic but low-IQ personalities—a side effect of long-term use of inferior stimulants at work.

It was said that when Purple Cloud Company found out, they had wanted to improve this defect in the stimulant, but it was kept because the drug was too popular on the market.

There was even a construction site that secretly put this stimulant in the employees' drinking water, claiming that it could improve work efficiency while effectively preventing employees from running away and avoiding wage arrears. Although the supervisor in charge was fired and bankrupted, it was still cited by many companies as a classic case study in corporate management.

At this moment, as Zhang Yu walked into the classroom, many students were still talking loudly.

Some were complaining about the price increase of synthetic food. After all, the synthetic food they used to eat was disgusting, but at least it was cheap.

Some were discussing going to other cities to work. It was said that the corporate wars in the north had triggered a new wave of infrastructure boom, a place where everything was waiting to be rebuilt, jobs were easy to find, overtime was easy to get approved, and rent was free. It was a good place where everyone had a job and a place to live.

Others were excitedly talking about the high wages at the Oasis Tower construction site, saying that the Oasis Tower was going to be built to 1,111 floors, becoming the new tallest building in Songyang City, which caught the attention of a group of students around them.

But with a cough from Zhang Yu, most of the students in the classroom fell silent. Zhang Yu didn't mind the few who were still talking foolishly.

Zhang Yu didn't blame them. They weren't stupid; their intelligence had just been worn down by work.

"Alright, be quiet, class is starting. Otherwise, if I have to wait for you to quiet down, the time missed will not be refunded."

Zhang Yu knew that for these students from construction sites, money was the most effective motivator. After all, apart from their spending on Dao heart buffers, most of them were extremely frugal.

As expected, the moment he mentioned this, the room immediately fell silent, with only the sound of Zhang Yu's lecture spreading through the air.

The quality of Zhang Yu's lectures was naturally beyond question. Especially considering that these students' intelligence had been worn down by work, he

explained things in an even more simple and easy-to-understand manner. Combined with his deep understanding of muscles and sinews, the students gained a lot after each class.

After class, Zhang Yu went outside the small building and saw Bai Zhenzhen practicing her techniques while waiting for him.

Seeing Zhang Yu appear, Bai Zhenzhen said with a smile, "The teachers available for trial lessons happened to be here today, so they gave me a trial lesson. I can start teaching tomorrow. They're paying me 2,000 per class."

Although the pay was much less than Zhang Yu's, Bai Zhenzhen was still very excited. After all, this was a long-term part-time job, and it was the highest-paying long-term meal ticket she had ever had in her life.

Zhang Yu was also happy to hear this. If Zhen could earn more money, her chances of improving her physical strength and participating in the sports competition would be greater.

On the way back, Zhang Yu once again carried Bai Zhenzhen as they ran.

Bai Zhenzhen had one arm around Zhang Yu's neck and was holding her phone in the other, searching for rental information while leaning against his back.

She frowned and said, "It's hard to find a place that meets the requirements."

Zhang Yu asked curiously, "What are your requirements?"

Bai Zhenzhen listed them one by one, "First, it has to be small and cheap enough. After all, the place is just for storing things, and we won't be spending much time there."

"Second, it must at least have electricity and internet, otherwise it's too inconvenient."

"It would be best if it's a basement, so it would be convenient for training without worrying about disturbing the people downstairs..."

"Damn it, these good places are too popular, it's so hard to find one."

Just then, the sky had unknowingly started to brighten. The sun gradually rose from the direction of downtown Songyang City, illuminating the road ahead for Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen.

"It's already dawn without us realizing… right, today's tutoring session was later."

Mortals also began to appear one after another on the roadside in the suburbs.

Zhang Yu saw the long lines in front of the stalls distributing synthetic food, and memories from this body's past also surfaced in his mind.

His and Bai Zhenzhen's figures flashed past the eyes of these mortals like a gust of wind, stirring a trace of envy in their eyes.

Zhang Yu thought to himself, *If the original Zhang Yu hadn't been admitted to high school, he would probably be like these people now, or like his former middle school classmates, living day by day receiving relief food and doing low-income mortal jobs, just waiting to die, right?*

But as the images of mortals lining up for food flashed through his mind, he suddenly recalled the students in his class today, and for a moment, he couldn't tell which group—these middle schoolers or those high school graduates from his class—was happier.

Bai Zhenzhen's focus was still on finding a house, her mind occupied with what kind of requirements the house should have if she were to live and eat with Zhang Yu, go to school and work together in the future.

As she was constantly thinking about these things, she suddenly felt a sense of emptiness in her lower abdomen.

Bai Zhenzhen was suddenly shocked. *What the hell! My spiritual root is gone!*

At the same time, Zhang Yu, who was carrying Bai Zhenzhen and running at high speed, was also startled. *What the hell! What just drilled into me from behind?*

Chapter 97: Borrowing Zhen's Spiritual Root

Zhang Yu only felt a chill on his lower back as something drilled into his dantian's sea of qi and then began to take root and sprout.

Zhang Yu was no stranger to renting spiritual roots; almost the instant he felt the change in his dantian, he thought of a spiritual root.

How did a spiritual root suddenly appear in my dantian?

Immediately after, he felt… that after the spiritual root rapidly took root and sprouted, it spread throughout his entire body, covering every inch of his flesh and blood like a nervous system, as if it had always been a part of his body.

Even as his Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method performed its passive breathing exercise, these spiritual roots that had spread throughout his body also inhaled and exhaled with it, quickly drawing the spiritual energy from the air to surge towards him.

"Hiss!"

Like sweet rain after a long drought, as streams of spiritual energy poured into his body, Zhang Yu felt every fiber of his being desperately crave the incoming spiritual energy.

After all, for Zhang Yu, who was cultivating without a spiritual root, his body was in a state of spiritual energy deprivation most of the time.

Now that spiritual energy was suddenly pouring in from all over his body, Zhang Yu immediately felt a sense of comfort throughout his entire being, and the operation of his level 10 Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method became even more turbulent, stirring the surrounding spiritual energy to swarm towards him.

And this state of Zhang Yu's immediately caught Bai Zhenzhen's attention.

Especially since she could faintly sense that her spiritual root was currently inside Zhang Yu's body.

My spiritual root went into Yu-boy's stomach?

A trace of surprise appeared in Bai Zhenzhen's heart.

What's going on? I wanted to lend it to Yu-boy to play with, but that was supposed to be after he got on his knees and begged me like 'Mom, please!' Why did you, spiritual root, run over on your own?

Thinking of this, Bai Zhenzhen felt a surge of annoyance. She reached out and fumbled around Zhang Yu's stomach, trying to pull her spiritual root back out.

Feeling Bai Zhenzhen's hand groping his lower abdomen, sending waves of ticklish sensations, Zhang Yu quickly said, "What are you doing, Zhen! Stop groping! We're going to have a traffic accident! We can't afford to pay if we kill someone!"

Zhang Yu came to a halt, his Sports Car Legs decelerating rapidly, finally stopping by the roadside as he set Bai Zhenzhen down.

Having failed to retrieve her spiritual root, Bai Zhenzhen said unwillingly, "Did my spiritual root run into your stomach?"

Zhang Yu subconsciously touched his stomach and said, "This is your spiritual root?"

Didn't that evil god say… this is Zhen's own spiritual root, not a rented one? How can it end up in my stomach?

The doll, disguised as a prayer bead, was also astonished at this moment. *This woman's spiritual root can be transferred?*

Bai Zhenzhen naturally didn't know the thoughts in Zhang Yu's mind. After all, from her perspective, Zhang Yu shouldn't know the secret of her spiritual root yet.

And now that her spiritual root had already drilled into his body, Bai Zhenzhen decided to stop being secretive.

She nodded directly and then said through gritted teeth, "This is the spiritual root I've nurtured for over a decade. Does it feel good to use?"

Zhang Yu wanted to say that it did indeed feel great, but seeing Bai Zhenzhen's angry expression, he refrained from saying it.

He just touched his stomach and asked curiously, "Why did your spiritual root come to me?"

"Actually, I've had a spiritual root in my stomach since I was a child," Bai Zhenzhen sighed, then continued, "This thing is different from ordinary spiritual roots; it seems to grow along with me."

"In the last two years, it has even started to adapt and grow in different directions according to the thoughts in my mind."

"Like when you mentioned borrowing a spiritual root last time, I was wondering if it was possible."

"And today, this damned thing just drilled into your stomach on its own!"

Hearing Bai Zhenzhen's words, Zhang Yu's face couldn't help but show a look of shock. *No way… there's such an outrageous spiritual root?*

But the mention of the spiritual root jumping into Zhang Yu's stomach infuriated Bai Zhenzhen, and she reached out to grope his stomach again.

Then, a look of contempt appeared on her face as she tutted, "Not being neutered is really a hassle. How can you get a reaction from just a few rubs on the stomach? Do you need some time to take care of it?"

Don't you damn well know how vigorous my qi and blood are these days before you go groping? Zhang Yu suddenly felt like a good friend had barged into his room and seen him with one hand holding a tissue and the other in his pants.

It was also at this moment that Zhang Yu suddenly gained a profound understanding of Songyang High School's sterilization policy.

If they weren't sterilized, a group of hormonal teenagers who worshiped scores and money would be messing around together every day. After three years of high school… wouldn't their scores drop?

Under Bai Zhenzhen's contemptuous gaze, Zhang Yu retreated several steps and said, "Don't be anxious. Think carefully about how the spiritual root got into my stomach just now."

So, after some discussion and research, Bai Zhenzhen had Zhang Yu carry her on his back again.

As Bai Zhenzhen hugged Zhang Yu from behind and repeatedly chanted in her mind for the spiritual root to return, she felt a sudden warmth in her stomach the next moment—her precious spiritual root was back.

And with the return of the spiritual root, a surge of spiritual energy also poured into Bai Zhenzhen's body, drilling into her limbs and bones.

"Hiss!"

She sucked in a cold breath, shocked. *How does it feel like this thing is absorbing spiritual energy more powerfully than before? And it's even gathering in places where I don't usually circulate my mana?*

But soon, the spiritual root seemed to be re-adapting to Bai Zhenzhen's body condition and returned to its usual state.

A thought suddenly occurred to Bai Zhenzhen. *Could it be that after entering Yu-boy's body, it actively adapted to his physique and took on his shape… and that's why the change happened?*

But it returned to normal after a short while, reverting to my shape… is it because the time it spent in Yu-boy's body was too short?

Bai Zhenzhen suddenly became curious. *If it stays for a longer time and adapts more to Yu-boy's body… what will happen?*

On the other side, as the spiritual root in his dantian disappeared and the feeling of abundant spiritual energy faded, a trace of disappointment welled up in Zhang Yu's heart.

Just then, he heard Bai Zhenzhen say, "Yu-boy, I'll try passing the spiritual root to you again. Get ready to receive it."

The next moment, Zhang Yu felt the spiritual root return to his body, once again taking root and sprouting in his dantian.

Spiritual energy from the air whistled as it poured into his body, making Zhang Yu feel a sense of fulfillment.

As expected, a cultivator just needs a spiritual root to feel right.

Although he felt great, Zhang Yu understood that the spiritual root in his stomach was the key for Bai Zhenzhen to become stronger and get into the Ten Greats.

So Zhang Yu suppressed the reluctance in his heart and said, "Alright, Zhen, take this spiritual root back quickly. Don't damage it by moving it in and out."

Hearing this, Bai Zhenzhen replied, "It's fine, leave it with you for a few hours. I have an idea I want to test."

"Huh?" Zhang Yu said with delight. "Then… then I'll lend you my Talisman Tome to play with."

"Give it here!" Bai Zhenzhen reached into Zhang Yu's robes and snatched the Talisman Tome. "My spiritual root is worth at least several hundred million. This Talisman Tome will be collateral with me for now."

Then she patted Zhang Yu's shoulder and said, "Hurry up and get to school, don't be late and get chewed out by that devil incarnate Su Haifeng."

So, Zhang Yu carried Bai Zhenzhen all the way to school.

On the way, Bai Zhenzhen hugged Zhang Yu, leaning against his back, playing with the Talisman Tome while occasionally telling him about the current functions of the spiritual root.

Zhang Yu suddenly said, "Calling it 'spiritual root' all the time feels like it could get confusing with other spiritual roots in conversation. Shouldn't we give it a name?"

Bai Zhenzhen was slightly taken aback. Since she was a child, she had only thought about hiding the spiritual root. After entering high school, she would never mention the spiritual root in her stomach to anyone.

So, all this time, she had simply called it 'spiritual root' in her mind, since she naturally knew which spiritual root she was referring to.

Hearing what Zhang Yu said now, Bai Zhenzhen couldn't help but nod slightly.

"Hmm… then what should we call it?"

"This is your spiritual root, so let's call it the Zhenzhen Spiritual Root."

"That's so lame," Bai Zhenzhen pouted. "Let's just call it the True Spiritual Root. By the way, when we get back, we'll tell everyone that I've lent you my rented spiritual root."

Bai Zhenzhen smiled. "Heh heh, that will further solidify the fact that this spiritual root of mine is a rented one."

So, for the rest of the journey, Bai Zhenzhen continued to tell Zhang Yu about the various wonderful uses of the True Spiritual Root.

Concealing the spiritual root, concealing herself, accelerating martial arts cultivation, seeing through flaws in combat, accelerating mana refinement, and the body tempering assistance function she had been using recently.

Zhang Yu's eyes lit up as he listened, wishing he could start ascetic training immediately.

And this entire process, including the conversation between Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, was naturally witnessed and heard by the evil god doll disguised as a prayer bead.

Her evaluation of this was, of course, only… foolish.

Idiot! Idiot! Zhang Yu is an idiot! With such a heaven-defying spiritual root, you should kill her and take it immediately! I have a hundred damn ways to help you dispose of Bai Zhenzhen's body, I guarantee you won't be discovered.

With the help of this heaven-defying spiritual root, forget about getting into the Ten Greats, you'd even have a chance at graduate school… no, a Ph.D.!

If you don't act now, you might be backstabbed by this woman in the future! How could she possibly tolerate such a huge secret being in someone else's hands forever?

But seeing Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen's trusting appearance, the evil god knew that even if she said it, he wouldn't listen, and it would only increase Zhang Yu's dislike for her.

Damn it, this is the inherent flaw of the poor, always believing in ephemeral things like friends, feelings, and trust… these things are completely useless, they only hinder you from making money!

Money! Only money is the most important thing!

After returning to school, apart from the general knowledge courses for all three years of high school that he had already mastered, like Chinese and Math, Zhang Yu simply skipped his mana and combat classes as well.

The mana teacher, Teacher Yan, and the combat teacher, Teacher Lei, were old acquaintances of Zhang Yu's and knew his level in mana control and martial combat. The first-year courses were indeed of little help to Zhang Yu, so they both approved his absence.

In this way, in addition to the physical education class he was already skipping, Zhang Yu could surprisingly use more than half of his school day for free ascetic training.

Chapter 98: Yu-boy, I've Decided Not to Rent an Apartment!

In a small grove on school grounds, the moment Zhang Yu activated his Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi, waves of spiritual energy immediately began to wash over his flesh and blood.

This was especially true once the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi began to temper every bit of his flesh, internal organs, and bones.

The True Spiritual Root also seemed to be adapting to the situation, continuously channeling spiritual energy into every part Zhang Yu trained, coordinating with the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi to accelerate the robust growth of his physical body.

In ancient times, immortal cultivation was a path for those who possessed spiritual roots.

Now that he was truly using a spiritual root to cultivate, Zhang Yu deeply felt the difference between the two states, sensing the extra boost to his physical growth as surging spiritual energy infused his flesh in concert with his body tempering.

And beyond that…

"Hm?" Zhang Yu sensed wisps of spiritual energy pouring into his spine and the surrounding areas, as if countless tiny hands were stimulating and nourishing something.

Is this… my nerves? Is the spiritual energy stimulating and nourishing my nerves?

But my Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi shouldn't have this nerve-tempering effect, right?

Is it an inherent effect of the True Spiritual Root?

Zhang Yu was naturally delighted to gain an additional body tempering effect while cultivating his Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi.

Even when Zhang Yu was not actively cultivating the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi, the spiritual root was still constantly infusing his physical body with spiritual energy.

And perhaps because he had used it for a sufficiently long time, when Zhang Yu returned the spiritual root to Bai Zhenzhen after school, he could feel his body continuing to grow at an accelerated rate for some time, just as it had when he used the Muscle-Growth Spiritual Root.

After Bai Zhenzhen took back the spiritual root, she first felt a noticeable discomfort, as if something of a mismatched shape had been stuffed into her stomach.

At the same time, Bai Zhenzhen felt spiritual energy being poured into all her muscles, organs, and bones, nourishing her vital energy according to a special frequency, causing her muscles, organs, and bones to gradually grow stronger.

The spiritual energy is being channeled to places I don't normally train…

This isn't my style of body tempering at all; it's more like the effect of Yu-boy's Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi.

Just as I thought, the True Spiritual Root adapted to Zhang Yu's body and underwent a change…

Bai Zhenzhen tried to circulate her own body tempering cultivation technique, the Thunderclap True Body.

For the sake of her Immortal Dao cultivation, besides loan repayments, drugs, and food, Bai Zhenzhen had spent almost all of her money on cultivation techniques.

This Thunderclap True Body was a body tempering cultivation technique she had spent a full one hundred and twenty thousand to acquire, capable of condensing mana into lightning to temper the body.

It was a body tempering method that, while increasing physical strength, focused on enhancing the cultivator's nerve response, movement speed, and explosive power.

And now, as Bai Zhenzhen once again circulated the Thunderclap True Body, she felt the True Spiritual Root similarly guiding an infusion of spiritual energy, assisting in the cultivation of her technique.

"It can do this?"

A trace of delighted surprise flashed through Bai Zhenzhen's eyes.

While adapting to Zhang Yu's body, the True Spiritual Root is also adapting to mine. Does this mean the spiritual energy infusion phenomenon from when Zhang Yu cultivates his Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi… is being superimposed onto me?

At that moment, Bai Zhenzhen felt that after her body tempering, in addition to the effects of the Thunderclap True Body, her muscles, organs, and bones had all gained an extra layer of enhancement.

Then conversely, if I lend the spiritual root back to Yu-boy, he should be able to superimpose some of my technique's effects, right?

If we exchange it back and forth like this every day to cultivate, will this adaptive stacking effect build upon itself and grow stronger and stronger?

In that case, wouldn't it be like one person having the cultivation effect of two?

Then won't my scores and competition rankings soar?

I'll thrash Song Hailong and crush Le Mulan, and dominate Songyang High School with Yu-boy!

At this thought, Bai Zhenzhen's heart began to pound with excitement.

But to do this conveniently, we'll still have to rent a place together and then go to school and work together every day so we can swap the spiritual root whenever we want.

With that, Bai Zhenzhen made her decision.

"Alright, I'll go look for an apartment tomorrow!"

The next day after school, Bai Zhenzhen began taking Zhang Yu to look for apartments.

Taking Songyang High School in the city center as their starting point and the Dark Learning Gang campus in the far suburbs as their destination, they began their search along this straight line from the city outwards.

In a basement on the city's edge, a real estate agent said, "This basement is a hot item. It's got power, internet, and water. Climb out of the sewer and you're at the subway. You don't even have to worry about sunlight interfering with your cultivation. The rent is just a bit steep, twenty thousand a month…"

Continuing toward the suburbs, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen saw another decent-looking garage.

The landlord said, "This is a prime spot. The rent was originally five thousand a month, but seeing as you're both students, I can waive the rent if you're serious. You'll just need to put down a one-million-yuan deposit."

"Don't have that much? You can get a loan. Or you're from Songyang High School, aren't you? If you're each willing to put up an arm as collateral, that would work too."

Continuing their search toward the city's periphery, they arrived at an apartment building.

The landlord, jingling a large ring of keys, said impatiently, "Aren't you just renting a place to store your things? It's not for you to cultivate in. If you want to cultivate, go to a gym or a training ground. The rent is non-negotiable. I have to support my son through university, you know? He's a university student!"

Outside a construction site hut made of shipping containers, the ground was littered with cigarette butts and empty bottles.

Before they were even close, Zhang Yu smelled the strong odor of Dao heart buffer, a clear sign that the residents here were all heavy users.

Zhang Yu shook his head. "No good. I've already kicked the habit. If we lived here, I'm afraid I'd get addicted again."

As the two walked along an overpass, Bai Zhenzhen suddenly said, "Yu-boy, poor people can't afford to be careless with money."

"But from these dozen or so years of being poor… I've learned one thing. The more you want a satisfactory place, the more you get ripped off. To avoid being ripped off, there's only one way…"

Zhang Yu asked curiously, "What way?"

Bai Zhenzhen's face was set with determination. "Yu-boy! I've decided not to rent an apartment!"

Zhang Yu was taken aback. "If we don't rent, where will we live?"

Bai Zhenzhen pointed to a small stream beneath the overpass ahead.

"Can't people live in under the bridge?"

"Huh?"

"We don't have to pick this bridge. We can just stay wherever we feel like. I've thought it through. Water… we can get it from school and bring it with us. Electricity… we can charge our devices at the Dark Learning Gang or at school. Food… we're just buying synthetic food from the cafeteria anyway."

"We don't need to sleep, and as for bathing, a river next to a bridge like this will do just fine."

"This overpass in the suburbs has big trucks driving over it all day. It's loud and noisy, so we won't have to worry about the commotion from our training bothering anyone."

"We'll train and rest here, go to school during the day, and to the Dark Learning Gang at night. What do you think?"

The more Bai Zhenzhen spoke, the more animated she became. "Instead of handing our money over to landlords and agents, we're better off buying more food. We won't give those rich people a chance to exploit us."

"We cultivators should take the sky as our blanket and the earth as our mat! We should live in under the bridges, sleep in forests, and occupy abandoned buildings, investing our limited funds into our cultivation! I've wanted to do this for a long time!"

Zhang Yu considered the feasibility of her plan. "But what about our belongings? If we just leave them here, someone might take them, right?"

Bai Zhenzhen said, "We'll carry our important and frequently used items in our backpacks."

"The unimportant, less-used things can either be sold or stuffed into a box and left in the classroom. The classrooms have surveillance cameras, anyway. The students at school wouldn't stoop to stealing."

Zhang Yu had to admit that after hearing her out, it made a certain amount of sense.

Both he and Bai Zhenzhen were high school students who no longer required sleep, and they possessed very little. They could absolutely cultivate and rest wherever they happened to be.

And so, a few days later, Bai Zhenzhen and Zhang Yu both gave up their rented rooms.

Every day after school, they would bring their synthetic food, fill a few bottles with water, and find a random spot to cultivate until it was time to tutor at the campus at night, before heading to school the next day.

The days passed just like that, one after another…

In the small grove on the Dark Learning Gang campus.

Zhang Yu was cultivating the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi. Spiritual energy surged toward him in torrents, strengthening his muscles, organs, and bones with each exertion, while also nourishing his nervous system bit by bit.

At the same time, the fierce medicinal power of the Crimson Marrow Primordial Pill continuously nourished Zhang Yu's physical body, allowing his Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi to circulate with ever-increasing smoothness.

With the aid of the True Spiritual Root and the Crimson Marrow Primordial Pill, Zhang Yu felt his physical strength had been advancing by leaps and bounds during this period.

Just then, his phone alarm rang. *Is it time for class?* Zhang Yu thought.

To make the most of the True Spiritual Root, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen had arranged for the Dark Learning Gang to stagger their class schedules as much

as possible, so that while one was teaching, the other could use the spiritual root to cultivate.

At that moment, in a classroom at the Dark Learning Gang, Bai Zhenzhen eagerly walked out the moment her class ended.

Che Nu, seeing her in the hallway, greeted her, "Teacher Le, going to find Teacher Ma again? You two commute together every day. Have you considered buying a car?"

Le Mulan was the alias Bai Zhenzhen used in the dark world of tutoring.

Bai Zhenzhen waved her hand dismissively. "Buy a car? Riding him is fast and saves money. I refuse to be exploited by those corporations!"

Bai Zhenzhen found the small grove and rushed over as soon as she saw Zhang Yu, her heart singing with joy. *My precious spiritual root, here I come!*

She ran up behind Zhang Yu and gently pressed against his back. Feeling a warmth in her stomach, she knew the True Spiritual Root had transferred into her body, and a wave of comfort washed over her.

Zhang Yu rubbed his now somewhat empty stomach and waved to Bai Zhenzhen, who had already begun her training. "I'm off to class, then. Seize the time and practice hard."

Under the bridge culvert.

The moment Bai Zhenzhen dismounted from Zhang Yu (her ride), she eagerly leaped into the nearby river for a bath.

Zhang Yu, meanwhile, took off his clothes and began to pack them up. They were to be shipped to Lian Tianji tomorrow.

Although his income from tutoring was not low, his expenses were even greater, so he still had to hold on to the income from selling clothes to Lian Tianji.

The next day.

Le Mulan opened the safe and looked at the clothes inside. She sniffed lightly, her brow furrowed. "Lately, the clothes always seem to carry the scent of another person."

In the cafeteria.

Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen were each holding a large bucket, gorging themselves on the mush inside. Following the rapid improvement of their physical strength, their food expenses had also risen sharply.

Nearby, Zhao Tianxing watched the two with a hint of envy. "Zhang Yu and Zhen go to and from school together every day now. I heard they even train together after school, swapping their rented spiritual root. They have such a good relationship. I wish I had a beautiful friend I was that close with."

Although he had been sterilized, a student like Zhao Tianxing still possessed an appreciation for beauty.

Qian Shen was also watching them with envy. "I'm so jealous of Bai Zhenzhen, getting to cultivate every day with Zhang Yu, who's first in the martial competition and fourth in the Mana Competition. If only I had such an outstanding study partner."

As for the new top student in their grade, He Dayou? Qian Shen had nothing but disdain for that pile of useless muscle bought with money.

But despite his disdain, Qian Shen had to admit that He Dayou's current physical strength surpassed that of every other first-year student at Songyang High School.

Even someone like Zhang Yu probably won't have a chance to catch up until his second year, right?

Time flew by. In the blink of an eye, a month had passed since the martial arts competition, and the day agreed upon by the Songyang High School competition team and Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen had arrived—the day to decide the spots for the competition.

After school that day, several physical education teachers, including Wang Hai, and several students from the Student Council's sports department, including Lan Ling, would gather at the stadium to witness the gap between He Dayou's group of five and Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen.

Chapter 99: The Appointed Time, Vying for Competition Spots

Under the bridge culvert, beside the riverbed.

Amidst the rumble of heavy trucks passing over the viaduct, faint booming sounds echoed from beneath the bridge.

A deliveryman on an electric scooter was heading toward the culvert; he was from the nearby slum for mortals.

From a distance, he thought he could faintly hear the sound of impacts, but by the time he arrived under the bridge, he could only see Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen standing opposite each other.

"Your delivery."

The young deliveryman handed a package to them. When his gaze swept past Bai Zhenzhen, a blush crept up his face.

This high school girl was too beautiful, too delicate for him.

Recalling the class beauty and school belle from his own middle school days, the young man thought to himself, *High school students really are a different breed, the chosen ones… Their temperament and looks are on a completely different level than middle schoolers.*

But he immediately averted his eyes, afraid of angering them.

It wasn't the first time the young man had delivered here; he vaguely knew that this pair of high school students often did something mysterious here at night.

He also knew that a group of local thugs used to hang around this area, but they had cleared out immediately after discovering the high schoolers' presence.

After all, high school students… they were the cream of the crop, people who could get jobs in the city center. They weren't comparable to mortals like him. Even their delivery fees were much higher.

With a final, envious glance at Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, the deliveryman rode off on his electric scooter.

Zhang Yu tore open the package and said to Bai Zhenzhen, "It's the synthetic food and beast protein milk you ordered. I wonder how it compares to the cafeteria's."

Bai Zhenzhen was unconcerned. "It's cheap enough. As long as it doesn't taste worse than crap, I'll take it."

After the deliveryman was completely gone, Zhang Yu smiled faintly. "Let's continue."

Zhang Yu stood his ground as wisps of white mist began to rise from his body.

With the growth of his mana, when Zhang Yu now used the Limitless Cloud Hand, his Formless Cloud-Astral Qi was far more turbulent, completely shrouding his body until only a blurry human figure was visible within the large cloud of white mist.

At the same time, Bai Zhenzhen's figure flickered at high speed around Zhang Yu, constantly creating thunderous booms, like lightning darting through the clouds. This was Bai Zhenzhen, whose cultivation of the Thunderclap True Body had progressed by leaps and bounds during this time.

In terms of long-distance travel, Bai Zhenzhen was naturally no match for Zhang Yu with his level-ten Sports Car Legs.

But in the short-range sprints, footwork, positioning, dodging, and reflexes of combat… the current Bai Zhenzhen was far more agile than Zhang Yu.

Bai Zhenzhen's fists plunged into the mist time and again, colliding with Zhang Yu's Formless Cloud-Astral Qi and producing a series of sharp, crackling sounds.

The next moment, as the mist formed by the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi spun rapidly like a vortex toward Bai Zhenzhen's striking fist, she felt her center of gravity wobble, and her entire body was flung away.

However, Bai Zhenzhen's body twisted in mid-air with incredible speed, and she deftly stabilized her center of gravity, landing steadily on the ground.

She looked at Zhang Yu, who was still completely enveloped in the thick fog, and thought, *As Yu-boy's mana deepens, this Formless Cloud-Astral Qi is getting denser, and its area of effect is expanding. He's becoming harder and harder to deal with.*

She recalled the sensation of repeatedly charging into that dense fog…

With the combination of the Limitless Cloud Hand and the Dragonback Mountain Toppler Hand, not only were Zhang Yu's form and movements nearly impossible to track, but a variety of forces assaulted her from all directions—crushing, throwing, coiling, vibrating, rebounding… all attempting to shatter her balance, or even trap her within the mist.

And with the combination of the Limitless Cloud Hand and the Imperishable Seal Art, whenever Bai Zhenzhen attacked with her Body-Piercing Sword Qi, the mist would actually expand further, gathering power to rebound her own attack, making the fight increasingly frustrating.

Under these conditions, she also had to be constantly vigilant for a sudden strike from Zhang Yu's physical body, hidden within the mist.

"I'm done, I'm done," Bai Zhenzhen said, waving her hands. "Your Formless Cloud-Astral Qi is now a perfect offense and defense, like a turtle shell covered in spikes. Plus, you're using my spiritual root, so I can't find a single opening. This isn't effective training anymore."

During this period, besides their individual ascetic training, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen had also sparred frequently to improve their practical combat abilities.

With no third person watching, the two no longer had to worry about exposing their high-level cultivation techniques. They took turns unleashing their various level-ten arts, making their combat training far more effective than any they could get at school.

At this moment, hearing Bai Zhenzhen call it quits, Zhang Yu dispersed the Formless Cloud-Astral Qi around him.

From their practical training over this period, Zhang Yu had gradually gotten a clear picture of the situation.

If the True Spiritual Root is in my body, I am invincible.

If the True Spiritual Root is in Zhen's body, our fights are an even match.

Of course, these conclusions were reached under the condition that neither Zhang Yu nor Bai Zhenzhen was fighting with lethal intent.

After all, without enough spare cash for clinic visits, neither of them was willing to get injured during a training session.

The moment Bai Zhenzhen called a halt, just as Zhang Yu dispersed his Formless Cloud-Astral Qi, a figure shot toward him like a bolt of lightning, ran behind him, and leaped up to wrap him in a hug.

Bai Zhenzhen laughed. "My turn to use it!"

As her body pressed against his, the spiritual root returned to her own body.

With the constant exchange of the spiritual root over this period, they had both become extremely familiar with the motion.

Watching Bai Zhenzhen, who had already begun her ascetic training, Zhang Yu smiled faintly and turned his attention to his Feathered Tome.

Although he had primarily focused on his physical strength, his Dao heart and mana had also seen steady improvement.

His Dao heart had reached level 4 (28%), and a level-four Dao heart gave him increasingly precise control over his body and mana, allowing him to execute his martial techniques with greater skill than ever before.

With the help of the True Spiritual Root, his mana had grown even more rapidly, now reaching 34.8, which made his Formless Cloud-Astral Qi all the more formidable and turbulent when unleashed.

But recently, as my mana gets higher, the rate of mana refinement has started to slow down. It seems the effectiveness of the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method is diminishing. I might be approaching a bottleneck.

As a technique aimed at beginners, the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method naturally had its limits. Zhang Yu estimated that its upper limit was probably around 50 points of mana.

To possess even more abundant mana, I'll eventually have to switch to an expert-level breathing exercise.

As for his physical strength, which had been his main focus during this time, it had now reached level 3.21, a meteoric rise compared to the martial arts competition a month ago.

Of course, such a significant improvement had also cost Zhang Yu a considerable amount of money.

Although he had his income from tutoring, supplemented by the occasional sale of clothing to Lian Tianji, which had earned him over a hundred thousand yuan during this period.

However, the thirty-thousand-a-piece Crimson Marrow Primordial Pills, along with the skyrocketing food expenses that came with his increased physical strength, had caused Zhang Yu's expenditures to mount. Now, his savings had dwindled to less than twenty thousand.

As the sky began to lighten, Zhang Yu watched the gradually rising sun and said, "Zhen, time to get ready for school."

"You remember what day it is, right?"

Bai Zhenzhen's face was still flushed from her workout. She wiped the sweat from her forehead. "Of course. Today is the big day we go show off for the sports competition team!"

Inside the stadium.

As training commenced, students began opening large bottles and gulping down Dao heart buffer.

During the subsequent training, one student's arm suddenly twitched as a wave of weakness overcame him.

Wang Hai walked over, grabbed the student's arm to inspect it, and frowned. "Did you drink enough Dao heart buffer yesterday?"

Seeing the student hesitate, Wang Hai snorted coldly. "You've all been through the special training program, which makes your physical strength liable to exceed your Dao heart's control. That's why your daily dose of Dao heart buffer must be increased to over five times the normal amount. Any less could cause you to lose control of your physical power."

"We make you drink Dao heart buffer not so the school can make a quick buck, but for your own good."

"After spending so much money and enduring such grueling training, you want to lose your spot in the competition just to save a few mouthfuls of buffer?"

Seeing the student lower his head in shame, Wang Hai finally let the matter drop.

He then turned to look at He Dayou training nearby, his expression complex as he sighed internally. *He Dayou has completely left Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen in the dust, hasn't he? Alas, with the advancements in Immortal Dao technology, individual talent and effort have become worthless.*

At that moment, He Dayou was slowly lifting a heavy and enormous barbell.

Simultaneously, the Demonic Parasite Art within him circulated, accelerating the fusion of his transplanted vital energy during this strength training, allowing him to exert his power with greater freedom and control.

After all, transplanted vital energy could not be controlled with ease from the very beginning.

He Dayou still remembered how, after his first transplant surgery, he felt as if he were wearing a suit of iron armor, his entire body constrained and his movements awkward.

But later, through his efforts, even as the surgeries continued, the 'iron armor' on his body grew lighter and thinner with his relentless training.

It went from iron armor to a heavy coat, then from a coat to an undershirt. Now, He Dayou could barely feel any restraint. The transplanted vital energy felt like a nearly imperceptible layer of skin that he could command completely.

Excellent. If I can maintain this state, I can undergo the next stage of surgery in a few days.

Then I'll continue to train hard. It's not impossible to push my physical strength above level 4.0 before the competition.

Just then, accompanied by a chorus of "Senior! Senior!", He Dayou turned his head to see Lan Ling arriving at the gymnasium with several other second-year students from the sports department.

Lan Ling scanned the surroundings and frowned. "Are Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen not here yet?"

He Dayou knew that today was the day to decide the final spots for the sports competition a month from now, and also the day Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen would come to humiliate themselves.

Those two have been skipping class so often, I wonder how much they've actually improved.

But it doesn't matter. No matter how much they've improved, it's impossible for them to surpass me, not when I'm in the special training program.

He Dayou continued his training in silence. Ever since surpassing Zhang Yu in the last monthly exam, he had gradually stopped paying any mind to his former rival.

A person has to look forward. My future rivals are the top students from White Dragon High, Purple Cloud High, and Red Pagoda High.

Meanwhile, Lan Ling had already turned to He Dayou and the other four who were training. "Since Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen haven't arrived, you five can test your physical strength first. When they get here, we'll test them, and that will settle things."

In Lan Ling's mind, no further comparison was necessary. Physical strength alone would be enough to eliminate those two paupers.

First Place: He Dayou, Physical Strength Level 3.07

...

Fourth Place: Li Yong, Physical Strength Level 2.96

Fifth Place: Ye Haitao, Physical Strength Level 2.94

Looking at the physical strength values of the five, Lan Ling nodded slightly. "He Dayou, you're improving very quickly. Keep this up, and securing a rank in the sports competition will be no problem."

"Ye Haitao, you were the last to join the team, so you need to pick up the pace. It will be difficult to place with this value..."

Faced with the critique from Lan Ling, a second-year Student Council officer, the first-year students present all accepted it with grace, bowing in acknowledgment.

Just then, under the watchful eyes of everyone present, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen walked in.

Lan Ling shot them a cold glance and said flatly, “Test your physical strength first. If you can exceed level 2.94, you can have a competition spot.”

A few moments later, Zhang Yu’s and Bai Zhenzhen’s physical strength values appeared on the large screen, added to the rankings.

First Place: Zhang Yu, Physical Strength Level 3.21

…

Fifth Place: Bai Zhenzhen, Physical Strength Level 2.98

Please vote with monthly tickets.

Chapter 100: A Comparison of Strength—Join the Special Training Program?

Staring at Zhang Yu's physical strength of level 3.21, He Dayou's eyes filled with utter disbelief.

He couldn't accept that after spending so much money and training so arduously every day, he had ultimately been surpassed by Zhang Yu by such a wide margin.

He roared internally, *How is this possible? How could this happen?*

What on earth did Zhang Yu do? Why did his physical strength increase more than mine in a single month?

Is it some new alchemical enhancer or technology? But where did he get the money?

Nearby, Lan Ling's gaze also sharpened. *Did Zhang Pianpian intervene on Zhang Yu's behalf? To achieve such an improvement, what did that woman do? Could she have used White Dragon High School's Immortal Dao technology?*

Wang Hai was even more curious about how Zhang Yu had managed such a monumental leap. *Which alchemical firm? Which corporation's new technology? Are they trying to promote a new product through Zhang Yu?*

He observed Zhang Yu carefully, noticing that his temples were not bulging from injections, nor were there any training marks at the common injection sites on his arms.

Logically speaking, a high school student like this did not seem like a body tempering expert.

Wang Hai thought, *The injection sites must be somewhere I can't see. The Heavenly Demon Needle Art? Or the Blood Corpse Needle Art? What method did he use?*

Meanwhile, Zhang Yu felt a chill run down his spine under Wang Hai's scrutiny. *Old Wang must be suspecting me of using enhancers again,* Zhang Yu thought.

How many times do I have to say it? I've always been a natural body temperer.

Demonic beast meat powder? What body temperer doesn't eat some?

The side effects of beast protein milk were virtually non-existent.

And the Crimson Marrow Primordial Pill certainly didn't count as technological doping.

I take the sky as my blanket and the earth as my mat every day. This is truly pure, natural cultivation.

Zhang Yu looked at the broad-shouldered Lan Ling, thinking to himself that this was a true "alchemical man," a condensation of the very essence of Immortal Dao technology.

Zhang Yu spoke up. "Well? Is there still a problem with us joining the competition team?"

Lan Ling's eyelid twitched. "According to our agreement, you may…" he said, his tone dripping with sarcasm.

Meanwhile, in stark contrast to the crowd's disbelief, surprise, and curiosity, the original fifth-place holder, Ye Haitao, was filled with despair.

With the addition of Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, her fifth-place rank had plummeted to seventh, completely erasing her chance to participate in the sports competition.

Thinking of the immense sum her family had invested for her to join the competition team and the special training program, of the debts they had incurred… and now, to lose her spot in the competition, Ye Haitao felt as if her world was collapsing.

Her legs went weak, and she collapsed to the ground, her limbs beginning to twitch as if she were losing control.

Wang Hai's gaze sharpened. "Her Dao heart is unstable. Get her Dao heart buffer and pour it into her mouth."

On the other side, Li Yong, who had been fourth and was now sixth, found the result even harder to accept, especially since his physical strength was only 0.02 levels lower than Bai Zhenzhen's.

To get me through high school, to earn money for me to compete, to let me have the benefits of the special training program, my parents have already shouldered far too much…

To make money, Li Yong's father had joined a gang and smuggled children's flying swords, risking execution to pay for his son's tuition.

His mother had joined a food gang, producing counterfeit pre-made meals in an underground workshop, constantly facing the dangers of gang warfare and corporate raids. Now, with the squeeze from synthetic food, she was even facing the risk of being laid off by the gang.

This was Li Yong's family—a gang family with an income higher than a city white-collar worker's, yet constantly facing the risks of death, bankruptcy, and crushing debt.

And as a second-generation gangster, Li Yong's dream since childhood had been to get into a university.

I am my family's hope. Only by getting into a university can I change our family's fate, launder our past, and leave the gang life behind…

To keep up with the training here, I take over twenty different drugs every day, eat every two hours, and have suffered multiple fractures during extreme muscle training. Now, the moment I stop the painkillers, my entire body aches as if I'm dying…

My family has sacrificed so much, and I have sacrificed so much. On what grounds should I lose?

Is it just because Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen became the lackeys of some tycoon? Just because they received an investment and have money, a poor person like me has to lose to a rich man's dogs?

Evidently, in the eyes of many students, Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen, who swapped a spiritual root between them every day, were already considered to be backed by a wealthy patron and firmly in the camp of the rich.

So, upon hearing Lan Ling agree to let Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen join the team, Li Yong stepped forward.

He stared daggers at Bai Zhenzhen and said, "There's only a 0.02 level difference in our physical strength. That's not a decisive gap in a sports competition. I want to challenge you!"

Through his recent training, Li Yong had learned that the sports competition was not an event where victory was decided simply by comparing physical strength numbers.

Otherwise, they could just rank all the high school students in Songyang by their numbers and be done with it. Why even hold a competition?

The physical strength number was just a foundation. What the sports competition truly tested… was how effectively a student could utilize their flesh and blood.

Bai Zhenzhen has the support of a tycoon like Zhang Pianpian, so her funding is surely more abundant than mine. But I refuse to believe her training this past month has been more diligent or focused than mine. Her control over her body's strength might not even be as good as mine.

Plus, in the special training program, my fascial self-limitation was surgically released. My muscles can burst with overloaded power… I can definitely beat her!

As he hyped himself up internally, Li Yong pointed at Bai Zhenzhen. "I want to compete with you to see who is stronger. Do you dare?"

Before anyone else could speak, Bai Zhenzhen was already smiling with anticipation, shouting a resounding "yes" in her mind. *Today is my stage. It's not Yuboy's turn to show off.*

But the thought that Zhang Yu couldn't continue his show of dominance because his score was too high for anyone to challenge made her feel a little less gleeful.

She looked at Li Yong, adopting the cool, unapproachable demeanor of an ice queen, and said flatly, "How do you want to compete?"

Li Yong strode forward. "Alright, then we'll compete by…"

"Insolence," Lan Ling snapped. "This is to decide the school's competition spots, not a childish game for the two of you. The specific event will be decided by me and the teachers."

And so, after a brief discussion, it was decided that Bai Zhenzhen and Li Yong would compare their physical strength through barbell weightlifting.

Of course, as in all sports competitions, the use of mana was forbidden. The contest was one of pure physical power.

Consequently, both of them had detection patches placed on their bodies to monitor any mana circulation.

Zhang Yu watched this scene unfold and thought, *Looks like I'll have to stop the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method during the competition. It's a shame to lose that period of passive breathing.*

Zhang Yu could, of course, stop the passive breathing of the Celestial Cycle Qi-Gathering Method at will. After all, it was a breathing exercise he had mastered.

On the other side, Li Yong approached a 1500-kilogram barbell. He gripped the bar, and with a thunderous roar and a face flushed crimson, he heaved the barbell into the air.

After holding it for five seconds, the 1500-kilogram barbell slammed back to the ground with a deafening crash, bouncing several times.

Li Yong looked at Bai Zhenzhen with a grave expression. "Your turn."

Under the gazes of everyone present, Bai Zhenzhen walked to the barbell. Her body gave a slight shudder, and as her muscles tensed, her entire frame seemed to swell.

Her muscles coiled and pushed against one another, seeming to merge into a single, unified whole.

Her training with the Thunderclap True Body had already significantly strengthened her nervous system, giving her powerful control over muscle recruitment and force.

And after cultivating with the shared spiritual root, her body tempering had taken on some of the qualities of the Crimson Marrow Primordial Qi, making her coordination and explosive power even stronger.

Now, Bai Zhenzhen gripped the bar, and without her face turning red or her breath catching, she effortlessly lifted the 1500-kilogram barbell.

While holding it aloft, her expression remained unchanged as she said coolly, "This is too easy. Let's try something more challenging."

After five seconds, Bai Zhenzhen casually dropped the barbell where she stood and strode toward another one weighing 2000 kilograms.

Then, to the astonishment of the crowd, a faint blush appeared on her cheeks. With a low shout, her arms bulged with power as she violently hoisted the barbell over her head.

Lan Ling's eyes narrowed. *Impressive explosive power and muscle control. This probably isn't even her limit. Zhang Pianpian really spared no expense.*

He Dayou had initially shared Li Yong's thoughts, believing that since Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen's physical strength had skyrocketed in a short time without their participating in the special training program, their control couldn't possibly match theirs.

Now, seeing Bai Zhenzhen effortlessly lift the 2000-kilogram barbell, a shadow of gloom crossed his eyes.

But the person in the worst mood at the scene was, naturally, Li Yong.

His previous limit had been just over 1900 kilograms, and Bai Zhenzhen's performance had clearly far surpassed that.

Rationally, he should give up.

But he was unwilling to concede.

I've sacrificed so much to get this far. Am I really going to surrender just because of some rich person's money?

So Li Yong walked up to the 2000-kilogram barbell, took a deep breath, and lunged for the bar.

His muscles tensed violently. The 2000-kilogram barbell stood before him like an immovable mountain, barely budging despite his explosive effort.

Li Yong screamed in his mind, *I want to go to a university!*

I don't want my parents to stay in the gang!

Get the hell up!

As his entire body trembled and blue veins bulged on his crimson forehead, the 2000-kilogram barbell actually began to rise, inch by agonizing inch.

"Roar!"

With a furious cry, Li Yong looked at the barbell held high above his head, a faint smile gracing his lips.

But in the next instant, soft popping sounds echoed from his arm.

Then, before his stunned eyes, blood sprayed from his right arm.

As his grip went slack, the barbell he had just held aloft came crashing down.

Wang Hai's expression tightened. He rushed forward, catching the two-thousand-kilogram barbell with one hand while supporting Li Yong with the other.

Li Yong desperately tried to control his right arm, wanting to raise it, but found the muscles twitching uncontrollably.

"Teacher… what's wrong with me?" Li Yong asked in a panic.

Wang Hai understood the situation at a glance and sighed. "After you had the fascial de-limitation surgery, your muscles can expand beyond their normal limits."

"But your body hasn't adapted to the overloaded exertion of your arm muscles. The tissue has torn."

Wang Hai knew this was one of the drawbacks of the special training program. The body's muscles were not a single, integrated unit. When transplanted muscle fibers unleashed their violent power, if the original flesh and blood couldn't handle the load, a collapse would occur.

Hearing this, Li Yong grew even more panicked. "Can I recover? Can I still participate in the special training program?"

Wang Hai comforted him, "It's alright, it's alright. Just get some treatment and rest for a few days, and you can continue training…"

Lan Ling didn't spare the defeated Li Yong a single glance. He simply looked at Bai Zhenzhen and Zhang Yu and said in a professional tone, "Then, as agreed, your results are sufficient for you to join the sports competition team."

"You will participate in next month's sports competition along with He Dayou and the other two."

"As for the subsequent training sessions for the competition team, your attendance is optional."

Zhang Yu, however, asked curiously, "Then… what about that special training program? Can we participate?"

Both Zhang Yu and Bai Zhenzhen had long been intensely curious about this so-called special training program, the method that had allowed He Dayou and the others to rapidly increase their physical strength in just one month.

Lan Ling looked at them and sneered, thinking, *Could it be that Zhang Pianpian has also taken an interest in Songyang High School's transplant technology? Is that why she had these two join?*

He stated in a businesslike manner, "The special training program is led by the Student Council with the school's cooperation. Participants are selected according to specific criteria."

"You two do not meet the selection criteria. You are not qualified to participate in this program."