

Information

Table of Contents URL: <https://www.botitranslation.com/book/22206-weight-exchange-system-the-fat-girl-s-comeback-plan>

Chapter 1: Weight Exchange System

"Name: Shang Yechu

Age: 20

Weight: 110kg (medication effects | pathological obesity)

Height: 155cm

IQ: 78 (medication effects | borderline intellectual disability)

Beauty value: -30

.....

....."

Shang Yechu stared blankly at the panel that had suddenly appeared before her, unable to comprehend what was happening.

Shang Yechu weighed over two hundred pounds, her body thick and barrel-like. Her skin was dark and sallow, oily and shiny, covered with fat pimples and unidentified bumps.

Her hair was greasy, lying flat and limp against her scalp. Layers of fat circled her neck, trembling with each breath.

"This system is designated 103, full name 'Weight Exchange System.' The host can exchange their body weight for IQ, beauty value, height, lifespan value—as long as it's your own attribute, this system can exchange it."

After introducing itself, System 103 urged: "Host, you may begin exchanging now."

Shang Yechu looked at the values on the panel, taking a long moment to process that she had been struck by a heaven-sent jackpot.

"So I have borderline intellectual disability, no wonder the director always called me stupid," Shang Yechu murmured.

The system impatiently cut her off: "Host, you have been reborn. There's no director here to scold you. Hurry up and exchange."

Shang Yechu glanced at the panel, about to say something more—

"You fat pig! What are you spacing out for here!"

A furious shout startled Shang Yechu. Before her consciousness could react, her body had already jumped up.

"Mom!" Shang Yechu rushed out of the room, stumbling and rolling into the living room, panting heavily: "Mom—"

"Smack!"

Shang Yechu's large face received a heavy slap. Ji Ya looked at her disappointing daughter with disgust, wiping her hand on her clothes in revulsion.

Her face burned with pain, but Shang Yechu seemed not to feel it, staring blankly at her youthful-looking mother: "Mom, what's wrong?"

"What's wrong? You have the nerve to ask what's wrong?" Ji Ya roared. "Are you a pig brain? I told you to watch the soup in the kitchen, what were you doing? The pot caught fire!"

Shang Yechu belatedly smelled something burning, but she had no memory of Ji Ya telling her to watch any soup.

Seeing her stupid expression, Ji Ya grew even angrier, slapping her across the face again: "Worthless! What can you actually do?!"

Shang Yechu's face stung as she looked around, feeling even more confused. Why was Ji Ya so young? Why was this house so shabby?

Ji Ya fumed: "I told you half an hour ago, and you can't remember in thirty minutes? No wonder you scored so poorly on the college entrance exams! Aren't you ashamed!"

What college entrance exams? She distinctly remembered taking them many years ago...

Ji Ya pushed her away in disgust: "Get out! Don't annoy me here. One daughter scored over six hundred, the other barely over one hundred—it's embarrassing to even mention it!"

Shang Yechu was too fat and sturdy for Ji Ya to push effectively, which only increased her disgust and anger.

"Get out! Don't let me see you again! If you step foot in this house again, I'll break your legs!"

Then Ji Ya caught the sour, stinky sweat odor coming from her and was immediately too disgusted to care about anything else.

"Why are you so filthy! Being stupid is bad enough, but you're also dirty and smelly! You don't even bathe! Are you a pig?"

Shang Yechu instinctively replied: "It's not that I don't bathe... Jiayu has been soaking in the bath. After he finishes, Xiaoqiu and Xiaozhu want to bathe too... I didn't... have time..."

Ji Ya flew into a rage: "You're useless yourself, yet you dare blame your younger siblings! Worthless! Get out of here!"

With that, Ji Ya grabbed a broom and began beating Shang Yechu like raindrops!

Although Shang Yechu didn't understand why the situation was so strange, she at least knew to fear pain and immediately fled out the door.

Shang Yechu sat on the curb, staring blankly at the time displayed on the large screen of the building across the street.

The time on the screen ticked faithfully, but Shang Yechu was shocked to discover that it displayed the date from ten years ago!

It was already evening, and the streets were bustling with pedestrians. Most people showed disgusted expressions when they saw a fat person sitting on the curb spacing out, detouring around her.

The system finally couldn't help but remind her: "Host, have you decided what to exchange?"

Shang Yechu finally snapped back to reality: "Exchange what?"

103 repeated impatiently: "Weight Exchange System, using weight to exchange for your own attributes. Only after you start exchanging can the main quest begin. I don't want to delay with you."

"What main quest? What's going on?" Shang Yechu stared at the system in the void, her tone confused and panicked. "Why have I returned to ten years ago?"

The system had no heart or emotions, so 103 simply said coldly: "You'll understand all that after you start exchanging."

Though not smart, Shang Yechu knew how to read situations: "Alright then. I'll start exchanging."

The system immediately perked up: "Excellent, host. What would you like to exchange? Height, intelligence, beauty, combat ability, lifespan, etc., etc.—your choice."

Shang Yechu fell silent for a moment.

The system thought she would exchange beauty or height, since Shang Yechu's current appearance was quite unappealing by human standards.

Unexpectedly, after some thought, Shang Yechu said: "I want to become smarter."

The system was somewhat surprised: "Why?"

Shang Yechu shook her head: "I don't know either. My memories aren't clear right now, and my mind isn't sharp, but..."

Shang Yechu hesitated before saying: "I just feel like I've already suffered plenty from being foolish."

103 didn't ask further, instead saying: "Then it's IQ. 1kg of weight can be exchanged for 1 IQ point. How much would you like to exchange?"

Shang Yechu didn't have a clear concept, so she tentatively asked: "I want to exchange 200 pounds?"

The system fell silent.

"...Host, I'm a Weight Exchange System, not an Ashes Exchange System."

Shang Yechu: "Huh? I didn't ask you to exchange ashes?"

System: "..."

The system finally realized that with Shang Yechu's current IQ, she probably couldn't understand indirect sarcasm and metaphors.

System: "Your current weight is 110kg, which is 220 pounds. If you exchange 200 pounds, you'll only have 20 pounds left. What, do you want to be cut down to just a head?"

Shang Yechu understood this time and was immediately disappointed: "Oh... I see. Then exchange as much as possible. Convert all exchangeable weight into IQ."

System 103 sighed in relief: "The maximum weight the host can currently exchange is 60kg, convertible to 60 IQ points. Confirm exchange?"

"Only sixty IQ points? Will that really make me smarter?" Shang Yechu sounded somewhat disappointed.

The system said coldly: "Host, your current IQ is 78. After adding sixty points, it will become 138. The human definition of genius is 'IQ above 140.'"

Shang Yechu raised her eyes, which were squeezed into slits by fat: "Huh?"

System: "...Meaning, after this exchange, the gap between you and genius will be minimal."

Shang Yechu repeated: "Minimal?"

The system abandoned rhetoric entirely: "It means you'll become very smart, smarter than most people in the world."

Shang Yechu's eyes lit up: "That's great! I want to exchange now!"

System: "There are too many people here. Can't let others see. Find a restroom."

Shang Yechu was very obedient, turning left and right until she found a dirty public toilet and locked herself in a stall. Her bulky body almost filled the entire compartment.

"Exchange beginning."

"Three—"

"Two—"

"One."

A faint glow invisible to the naked eye flashed by. Shang Yechu only felt her body become burning hot, the temperature quite frightening.

A terrifying emotion enveloped Shang Yechu, followed immediately by intense pain!

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

The system said indifferently: "Once exchange begins, it cannot be reversed. Rest assured, it won't cause damage to the host's body."

Sweat covered Shang Yechu's entire body as she uncontrollably let out scream after scream of agony. But no matter how much it hurt, she never said the word "stop."

After one minute, the screams gradually quieted. After another minute, they completely ceased.

The system calmly asked: "Host, how do you feel?"

"..."

Shang Yechu didn't answer.

Shang Yechu's body was drenched in sweat, as if just pulled from hot water. She breathed lightly. Suddenly, she pushed open the stall door and rushed out!

Shang Yechu looked at the person in the mirror.

The reflection showed an utterly ordinary woman, with plain features and a weary expression. Someone who would disappear in a crowd.

Looking closer, her skin was still dark and sallow, but the nauseating oiliness had vanished without trace, leaving her complexion somewhat dull instead. The fat pimples had shriveled up considerably, leaving only empty skin sagging on her face.

Anyone seeing this appearance wouldn't think there was anything to be happy about. Yet Shang Yechu stared blankly at the reflection, suddenly covered her mouth tightly, and two streams of hot tears rolled down as she sobbed.

"Ah...!"

That fat! The fat that had haunted her for two lifetimes! Those persistent nightmares!

Shang Yechu hurriedly looked down, seeing that the excess flesh on her waist, stomach, and legs had completely disappeared. Her abdomen was flat, her legs well-proportioned. Though her waist couldn't be called particularly slender, she had already escaped the "fat person" category.

What delighted Shang Yechu most was that this exchange left no traces! She had been worried that after the fat disappeared, her stomach would be left with loose, sagging skin!

Her current figure was quite well-proportioned and firm!

"Host, how do you feel?" the system asked calmly.

"...I feel wonderful."

Shang Yechu murmured as if in a dream.

"Never in my life since I was born have I felt this good."

Those days climbing stairs while people behind muttered "Kinder Surprise egg";

Those days when her heart couldn't handle the burden of her obese body, often aching at night;

Those days when even slight exercise made her sweat profusely, leaving her covered in stench and sour odor;

Those days when just walking a few steps or bending slightly left her panting heavily!

"Hahahahahahahahahahahahaha..."

Shang Yechu suddenly burst into laughter, her eyes gradually filling with tears as she laughed.

"I remember now... I've already died once."

That was her previous life.

She was crossing the road.

Though in a bad mood, she was still following traffic rules.

It was the car that violated traffic rules.

The driver was drunk, recklessly speeding down the road. Pedestrians scattered to avoid it, but Shang Yechu, clumsy and slow, was directly hit and sent flying.

Before dying, she heard someone say: "So fat! She put a huge dent in the car!"

She died, and then she was reborn.

After rebirth, she was muddled and confused, not understanding why she had suddenly returned to her old home, not understanding why Ji Ya said "just finished college entrance exams." After wandering around the house like a useless fool for half a day, she suddenly awakened the Weight Exchange System.

Shang Yechu had never felt the world so clearly before, as if an old Nokia's picture quality had suddenly transformed, skyrocketing to a noble camera's 270 million pixels. She even felt she could see through the truth of the world at a glance.

System: "Host, what will you do now? Return home?"

Shang Yechu glanced at the mirror again, shook her head, and said decisively: "No."

She remembered. She remembered everything.

Those days of being bullied at will, devoid of warmth. Those days of being ridiculed, ordered around, and mocked.

In her parents' eyes, she was a burden; in her siblings' eyes, she was a clown and a servant.

That place was not her home.

Shang Yechu pushed open the restroom door, about to leave, then suddenly stopped.

"System, there are no surveillance cameras around here, right?"

System: "Rest assured, host, there aren't. And no one saw you."

Shang Yechu took a deep breath and pushed open the door.

She looked so utterly ordinary, even somewhat ugly. Yet her heart was filled with unprecedented confidence, clarity, and lightness.

New world, here I come.

Chapter 2: Past Life and Present Life

Shang Yechu opened her wallet and was surprised to find two one-hundred-yuan bills inside.

Ji Ya and Shang Hongxuan—her parents—never gave Shang Yechu pocket money. Yet her younger brother, Jiayu, who was only in middle school, got five hundred yuan a month in allowance. Her two younger sisters, Shang Lingqiu and Shang Mengzhu, each got two hundred yuan a month.

Shang Yechu thought for a moment and remembered. In her previous life, at this point in time, her second younger sister Shang Lingqiu had done very well on the college entrance exam and brought great honor to the family. Shang Hongxuan, drunk and boastful, had promised to rent a hotel and throw a big graduation banquet. He sobered up and regretted it, so he changed his mind and said they would just set a table at home.

That two hundred yuan... was the money Shang Hongxuan had told Shang Yechu to go out and buy groceries with. Unfortunately, soon after he gave the instruction, Shang Yechu was reborn into her current body and completely forgot about it.

Shang Yechu: "..."

Without batting an eyelash, Shang Yechu pocketed the money. There was even better news: her ID card was in the wallet. It must have been left there since the college entrance exam.

That meant she no longer needed to return to the Shang household for any last practical reason.

This two hundred yuan was the seed money for her career.

After working unpaid at the Shang family business for two lifetimes and taking only two hundred yuan as her pay, Shang Yechu felt like a living saint.

Her clothes were loose and soaked with a sour, rank sweat. Shang Yechu first went to the wholesale greenhouses at the vegetable market, spent eighty yuan on a new set of underwear, a short-sleeve top and shorts, and cheap sandals. She haggled so much her lips blistered; the vendor grew a headache from her negotiating and threw in a colorful pack of rubber bands as a bonus.

With her brand-new outfit in hand, Shang Yechu rushed to the public bathhouse. She spent twenty yuan on a towel, a bar of soap, and a toothbrush and toothpaste set, then spent another twenty yuan vigorously scrubbing herself until her skin felt like it might peel.

After all this, Shang Yechu changed into her new clothes and felt completely renewed inside and out. But she was left with only eighty yuan.

System 103 watched coldly the whole time. Once Shang Yechu finished dressing, System 103 suddenly spoke: "Host, why don't you use weight exchange to convert some of your weight into money?"

"Huh?" Shang Yechu raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you say 'weight can only be exchanged into my own numerical stats'? External things like money shouldn't be exchangeable, right?"

"I was just confirming that the intelligence you exchanged for has indeed been credited." System 103 breathed a sigh of relief.

"...You're really boring." Shang Yechu rolled her eyes.

She tossed her old clothes into a trash bin and headed to the train station, spending forty yuan on a ticket to Heng City. While waiting for the train, she bought a bottle of mineral water and a large steamed bun.

The train arrived.

The carriage was hot and crowded. Shang Yechu had bought a hard seat and, of all things, ended up squeezed between two uncles, nearly flattened.

At mealtime the carriage filled with the smell of old pickled cabbage instant noodles, men's sweat and smelly feet, and the odors of various ready-to-eat and cooked foods. It was nauseating.

Shang Yechu washed down four large steamed buns with the mineral water.

The man sitting beside her was stunned—he hadn't expected this plain-looking girl to be such a hearty eater.

While chewing, Shang Yechu asked System 103 in her mind, "System, do you offer any compulsory hypnosis services?"

System 103: "We do. And it's free. But it's not very safe."

Shang Yechu asked, puzzled, "What's unsafe about it?"

"This sleep is a true deep sleep. Unless the allotted time is up, the subject will not wake. No amount of calling will rouse them."

In other words, with so many people around, sleeping that deeply would be unsafe.

Shang Yechu was unconcerned. "So what? Theft of appearance? I'm ugly. Theft of money? I only have a few dozen yuan on me."

Her attitude of throwing caution to the wind left System 103 speechless. After a moment, 103 said, "Fine. How many hours do you want to sleep?"

Shang Yechu yawned. "There are a little over four hours left on the train. Four hours, then."

The system complied.

Shang Yechu felt an irresistible wave of drowsiness flood her brain; her eyelids grew unbearably heavy. She barely had time to say another word before plunging into deep darkness.

From then on, no matter how noisy the carriage became, not even her eyelashes twitched.

Shang Yechu had a very long dream.

Forced hypnosis shouldn't allow dreams, but she dreamed anyway—because it wasn't a dream. It was her previous life.

In her past life, Shang Yechu was a laughingstock.

She was obese, 155 centimeters tall yet weighing over two hundred jin, looking from afar like a legged water jar. From childhood to adolescence she had neither playmates nor friends. Her family despised her, relatives mocked her, and classmates bullied her. It wasn't until high school that she made her first so-called good friend, Chulan.

Chulan had a pretty face, gentle and intelligent, a wealthy background, and was the school beauty in high school. Looking back, she wasn't really a friend—Chulan didn't speak up to stop the bullies, but at least she didn't join in either.

That small kindness made Shang Yechu pour her heart out to Chulan.

Later, by chance, Shang Yechu entered the entertainment industry and played some bit parts. Not long after, she learned that Chulan had also gone into the entertainment world.

Thrilled, she immediately contacted Chulan, and the two quickly resumed their "friendship," becoming a well-known sister act in the industry.

Shang Yechu had limited talent but was humble and hardworking. She threw herself into playing ugly, stupid, or comic supporting roles with dedication. The entertainment world was never short of beautiful people, but actresses willing to stoop and be utterly self-effacing for comedy were rare.

Through steady effort, though still fat and ugly, she occasionally landed roles. Gradually her recognition even surpassed Chulan's.

Then, perhaps the heavens pitied her misfortunes, because after countless bit parts, villains, and walk-on roles, Shang Yechu received an invitation from "Happy Chips"!

Happy Chips was a nationally famous comedy troupe known for commercial comedies, responsible for training many famous comic stars. Their cumulative box office reached into the tens of billions!

Happy Chips invited Shang Yechu to play the second female lead in their new film!

This was the biggest role she had ever been offered since entering showbiz. With it, she might finally shake off being an extra, a cannon fodder, or a background character and become a recognized comedy actress.

Shang Yechu was ecstatic and the first person she wanted to tell was Chulan. She video-called Chulan, crying and laughing incoherently as she shared the news.

Now, thinking back, how could she have been so naive? How had she failed to see Chulan's true colors? How could she have believed they were from the same world?

Even after getting the invitation, Shang Yechu still had to audition. Her status was too low to be taken at face value. A few days later, on the eve of her audition, Chulan called and invited her to a high school reunion.

Shang Yechu had poor memories of her classmates, but she couldn't refuse Chulan's repeated invitations. She didn't want to embarrass her, so she donned her best outfit—she had saved up specifically not to be looked down upon.

What followed was the most unforgettable, deeply humiliating moment of Shang Yechu's life.

Those so-called classmates had clipped all the vulgar, stupid, disgusting, and ugly scenes from Shang Yechu's appearances and made a polished MV that they played on the hotel's large screen.

They curated many funny clips of pigs, edited Shang Yechu's pig-like gestures alongside them for a side-by-side effect. Shang Yechu's fat body and the pig grotesquely mirrored each other; she looked exactly like a sow.

The MV's soundtrack was the internet-popular "Piggy Song," booming through the hall.

The ringleader of the reunion was Chulan's boyfriend, Chu Qingfeng. He stood at the front, clapping and keeping time. Midway through the beat, the pig on the screen and Shang Yechu did a midair leap in sync. Chu Qingfeng was in hysterics, bent double with laughter, while Chulan laughed, covering her mouth and patting his back.

Shang Yechu felt dizzy, the world spinning; blood rushed to her head. Wearing the best dress she could afford, she became the evening's clown. The entire universe seemed to mock her existence, coldly announcing that her ten years of hard work, her friendships, and her whole life had been a joke.

Chulan wore her usual gentle smile. What was in her eyes? Mockery? Pity? Shang Yechu couldn't tell.

There was one person... sitting in a corner.

He was still so clean, so indifferent, so unattainably aloof.

Time had left no mark on him; he sat expressionless and watched the farce with cold eyes. Shang Yechu's gaze slowly shifted, and somehow she made eye contact with him.

That indifferent look bore no emotion whatsoever. Neither Shang Yechu nor the chaotic scene could ruffle him. He resembled a god above it all, proudly enjoying the idiots' comedy.

Under that gaze, Shang Yechu's last psychological defenses collapsed. Her dignity—so painfully maintained all those years—crumbled in an instant. She let out a coarse, animal-like wail and bolted from the luxury hotel reunion, running into the street.

A luxury car came speeding. The drunk driver hit her at full force.

Shang Yechu's soul wandered the world as the at-fault party compensated her parents with five hundred thousand yuan, then, with practiced ease, shifted the blame onto her—saying she had suddenly run a red light and caused the accident. The compensation was framed as humanitarian relief and her parents were made to sign a guarantee admitting Shang Yechu's full responsibility. Her parents, who had never been close to their eldest daughter, signed the papers as readily as tearing toilet paper—money solved everything.

Shang Yechu's death trended briefly on social media but was soon buried beneath several trending celebrity fashion and romance scandals. Only a few gossip accounts reposted and offered condolences while reminding followers to obey traffic rules.

Her funeral was sparsely attended. The Shang family sat at the funeral, shelling seeds and counting Shang Yechu's meager savings. The floor was littered with seed shells. Her brother Jiayu complained that after years in the entertainment industry, Shang Yechu had far less savings than expected and they still had to pay for a burial plot.

Chulan did attend, said a few words to the Shang family, dabbed two tears before Shang Yechu's portrait, and had her photographer snap shots—constantly reminding her to look sorrowful but still aesthetically pleasing. Those photos would be tomorrow's trending material.

That was the end of Shang Yechu's life.

Heng City was the largest film and cultural industry hub in the Dragon State. It could be called the cornerstone of the country's film industry. Countless dreamers came here to scrape by in the movie town, hoping to become famous overnight and transform into phoenixes that land on high branches.

System 103 had expected Shang Yechu to head straight for the film city. Instead, after stepping off the train, she went first to a pedestrian street and entered an unremarkable bookstore.

The shop looked aged; the sign had faded to white, and it seemed to have few customers.

The system scanned in 0.5 seconds. Contrary to the old sign, the bookstore's collection was surprisingly rich. There were lots of new books and many rare secondhand volumes. The owner clearly didn't manage it well, so both new and old books carried a musty smell.

The shop owner was an elderly lady wearing bifocals, nodding off crookedly in a chair. She didn't even notice Shang Yechu come in.

103 noticed that when Shang Yechu saw the old woman, a strange expression crossed her face. Analysis showed a mix of sadness, joy, and nostalgia.

Human emotions were truly complicated, System 103 thought.

Shang Yechu stepped forward and knocked on the counter.

"Hm?" The old woman woke up. "Oh, oh, little girl, what do you want to buy? Pick whatever you like."

"I'm not here to buy anything." Shang Yechu smiled. "Grandma, I want to work here."

Half an hour later.

103 asked, "Host, did you know the shop owner in your previous life?"

"You noticed." Shang Yechu was strolling around the film city. "Artificial intelligence is sharp."

"I recognized it the moment you entered that bookstore. Can you tell me what your relationship is?"

Shang Yechu showed a nostalgic look. "That shopkeeper's surname was Hu. In my last life I called her Grandma Hu."

"In my previous life I left home much later than I did this time."

"But, like now, I was penniless. I got lost in the big city and stumbled into that bookstore."

"Grandma Hu took me in for a month until I got my first extra gig in the film city."

"When I received my first paycheck, I wanted to repay Grandma Hu's living expenses."

"She refused. She said, 'Who hasn't had hardships? You're a small actor; earning money isn't easy. When you become famous later, come back and pay me then.'"

At these words, Shang Yechu closed her eyes. After a long moment she continued, "I remembered that. After a long, long time, when I had barely gained some recognition, I returned."

"But Grandma Hu's bookstore was gone."

"I asked around, but the old neighbors on that street had long moved away. Only after a long search did I find out from the corner barbecue stall owner what had happened to her."

"Grandma Hu had a terminal illness. Her son and daughter-in-law refused to treat her. A perfectly good old lady simply withered away."

"After she died, the bookstore was sold."

Shang Yechu opened her eyes.

That was the end of the story.

In her previous life, Grandma Hu had been one of the rare people who showed her warmth. She was Shang Yechu's first kindness in that strange city.

But reality was not a fairy tale. Good people didn't live long. Instead, the Shang family—wolf-hearted and ungrateful—had benefited from Shang Yechu's previous life in many ways.

"I see." The system couldn't understand human feelings, but seeing that Shang Yechu was clearly upset, it hesitated and said, "Host, my condolences."

That's what humans usually said in such situations, right?

Shang Yechu couldn't help but let out a snort-laugh. "Condolences? For what? Grandma Hu is perfectly fine now. This time, I won't let her suffer the same fate."

She had met Grandma Hu earlier this time; Grandma Hu had taken her in.

Just now she had come to terms with Grandma Hu. From now on she could live in the bookstore. Grandma Hu would watch the shop during the day, and after eight in the evening Shang Yechu would take over.

Grandma Hu wouldn't pay Shang Yechu wages, but she would provide meals and room. Board and lodging—so it wasn't unpaid labor.

Shang Yechu had no objections. The bookstore didn't do much business and needed no employee. Keeping Shang Yechu was purely out of kindness.

After securing a place to stay, Shang Yechu skillfully found the film city.

She first went to the actors' union and spent ten yuan to get an actor's card. Thank goodness it wasn't a few years later, when getting an actor card would be a hassle, requiring an ID, a bank card, and joining a group chat via QR code. That would have baffled her—she didn't even have a phone.

The deep sleep System 103 provided was no joke; although she had been sitting on a train, the sleep quality was better than in both her lifetimes combined. Shang Yechu felt refreshed, light, and had never felt so sharp.

She stretched and suddenly thought of something. "System, what are my current stats?"

The system silently pulled up her records.

"Name: Shang Yechu

Age: 20

Weight: 51 kg

Height: 155 cm

IQ: 138 (Excellent)

Beauty: 0 (Can't find in a crowd)

Health: 41 (Subhealthy)

Combat: 0

Temperament: 0

..."

It seemed that after losing 120 jin, even without converting weight to beauty, her beauty stat had risen significantly. Though it only returned to zero from negative, Shang Yechu was a little pleased.

System 103 added, "Host, your original health value was 30. After losing weight it rose to 41."

A bargain—buy one, get two free. Shang Yechu was quite satisfied.

She scrolled further and was surprised to find a few more stat items she hadn't seen yesterday. "Why weren't these stats here yesterday?" she asked.

103: "Because with your intelligence yesterday, you couldn't understand the meaning of these stats."

Shang Yechu: "..."

She finished getting her actor card and wandered the film city a few more times. Even though she had just had deep sleep and had lost much weight, she still grew tired quickly.

Yawning, she made her slow way back to the bookstore.

The pedestrian street where Grandma Hu's bookstore was located was close to the film city, so Shang Yechu arrived quickly.

When she returned the old woman was wearing bifocals and reading a book. Seeing Shang Yechu come back, she smiled, "You're back? I saved you some food."

Shang Yechu saw two steamed buns and a bowl of pickled cabbage and pork stewed with glass noodles. There was also a watery bowl of soy milk—probably leftover from a nearby breakfast stall. Though it was leftovers, steam still rose, so it had likely been microwaved.

Shang Yechu was silent, as if she could picture Grandma Hu shivering as she went next door to beg the leftover soy milk. After getting the leftovers Grandma Hu would force a smile and ask the breakfast stall owner to microwave the food for her.

These scenes played clearly in Shang Yechu's mind—not from this life, but from last life.

Grandma Hu's shop didn't do good business. Though she had a pension, most of it was taken by her useless son. She lived frugally—why would anyone do this to her?

Grandma Hu smiled and said, "Good you're back. I'll head home. Eat while it's hot."

Then she pointed to the innermost storeroom. "I left you a bedding set in my home, put over there. Eat and get to bed early."

Shang Yechu muttered a low, "Thank you, Grandma."

Grandma Hu thought the girl was familiar and forward for a youngster but didn't think much of it. She walked away cheerfully with her cane.

Shang Yechu watched her trembling figure walk off and didn't accompany her.

She knew Grandma Hu's home wasn't far from the street. Grandma Hu lived with her son and daughter-in-law; thanks to the pension she wasn't mistreated terribly, but she certainly wasn't respected.

If Shang Yechu had walked Grandma Hu home and been seen by the sharp-tongued daughter-in-law, who knew what trouble Grandma Hu would have faced.

Shang Yechu sat down and lowered her head, biting into a steamed bun with force.

The bun was soft and fragrant, steaming and chewy. She chewed slowly with her head bowed.

103 suddenly noticed a drop of water appear on the snow-white bun.

"Grandma Hu." Shang Yechu ate quietly and said in a small voice, "I'll become famous. I'll be very, very rich."

Chapter 3: Accumulation

Shang Yechu finished all the steamed buns and dishes. Not only did she drink all the soybean milk, but she even finished the leftover soup from the dishes.

After eating, Shang Yechu wiped her mouth and put away the bowls and chopsticks. She took out her set of cheap toiletries.

There was a narrow little bathroom in the bookstore, containing only a toilet and a sink. It was relatively clean. After washing her face and brushing her teeth there, Shang Yechu went to the storage room.

Sure enough, it was still that same bedding set.

Before her was a set of clean blue-flowered bedding on a white background, and the most common buckwheat hull pillow found in rural areas. Both were quite old, having been washed until the colors faded. However, they were very clean and emitted a faint scent of mothballs.

Shang Yechu recognized this bedding set. This was what Grandma Hu and her deceased husband used to use in the countryside. The pattern was long out of fashion now, and the cotton had aged considerably.

It was precisely because this bedding set was so worn-out that Grandma Hu's stingy daughter-in-law had reluctantly agreed to let it be moved to the bookstore.

Shang Yechu silently spread out the bedding. The quilt was thick, filled with substantial cotton. Though old, it must have been quite good quality in its day.

The storage room wasn't large to begin with, and after being filled with books, it became extremely cramped and narrow. Shang Yechu's bedding was laid out right in the storage room's only pathway - if she turned over even slightly while sleeping, she might kick the stacks of books on either side.

This was absolutely not like a room, but more like a box.

The storage room's only light was dim and yellowish, barely adequate for seeing.

After arranging her floor bed, just when the system thought she was going to sleep, she turned around and went back into the bookstore.

Shang Yechu surveyed the bookshelves, looked for a long time, and finally pulled out a copy of "Xinhua Dictionary."

The System: "..."

Shang Yechu sat in Grandma Hu's spot, opened the Xinhua Dictionary, and began reading from the first character.

In her previous life, her IQ wasn't high, and she couldn't remember anything she learned. Because of this, after she gained some minor fame later on, marketing accounts frequently mocked her as "the one who missed nine years of compulsory education."

In this life, although she had obtained intelligence comparable to a genius, Shang Yechu clearly knew that she currently didn't have the corresponding life experience and knowledge base to match. This 138 IQ was just an empty shell.

She needed to start learning from the most basic knowledge, step by step filling her brain.

The system was surprised by Shang Yechu's self-awareness. However, still speaking from a humanitarian perspective, it asked: "Host, aren't you going to sleep now? It's already very late."

Outside the bookstore, the streets were brightly lit as if it were daytime, but there were very few people left on the pedestrian street.

"It's fine, I have you anyway." Shang Yechu said without looking up.

The system fell silent.

Shang Yechu turned the dictionary pages one by one, growing more astonished the more she read.

An IQ of 138 was truly... astounding.

Every character she read seemed to stick firmly in her mind like double-sided tape. When she closed her eyes, she discovered she could accurately recall which page and which line those characters were on.

This was genuine photographic memory.

Not just the degree of memorization, but her reading speed had also reached the astonishing rate of ten lines at a glance. Dictionaries are quite boring things. After reading one-fifth of it, Shang Yechu looked up at the clock hanging in the bookstore.

Only an hour and a half had passed.

This meant she only needed less than eight hours to finish reading this dictionary, even memorize it.

Shang Yechu was secretly amazed. After reading for another four hours, it was already 1 AM. Shang Yechu had finished most of the dictionary. She felt an explosive headache, her eyes sore and stinging as if filled with vinegar, yet she still greedily continued reading.

She had never felt so exhilarated before. She even felt like her empty brain was gradually being filled with substance, squeezing out all the previous ignorance and foolishness.

She absolutely refused, absolutely refused to live the kind of life she had in her previous lifetime. She would seize knowledge with all her might.

The system finally couldn't help speaking up: "Host, your health value has dropped to 38, changing from sub-healthy to frail."

Shang Yechu said in a hoarse voice: "One more hour."

By 2 AM, Shang Yechu already felt her vision darkening. It was as if little mosquitoes were flying in circles before her eyes. She had to stop this frenzied reading.

Shang Yechu felt ravenously hungry, but there was no food available, so she had no choice but to fill a water bottle with water from the store's dispenser and gulp it down.

Her head felt like it was about to explode, and her heart was pounding heavily. Feeling heavy-headed and light-footed, she returned to the storage room and collapsed onto her floor bed.

"Forced sleep." Shang Yechu told the system. "Wake me at six tomorrow morning."

Just as the system was about to activate, Shang Yechu added: "Wait."

"What else do you need, Host?"

"What's my current weight? I want to exchange."

System: "52kg. Maximum exchangeable amount is 2kg."

"I want to exchange..." Shang Yechu yawned.

System: "Host, your current health value is extremely low, which might affect your tasks. Perhaps—"

"I want to exchange for beauty points. Exchange 2kg." Shang Yechu interrupted him.

Beauty points were what Shang Yechu needed least right now. However, women often can't resist this kind of temptation. Without saying more, the system directly exchanged them for her.

Shang Yechu felt her body slightly heating up, though compared to the first exchange, it was much better now, almost negligible. It seemed the degree of heating during exchange was related to the total weight exchanged. Shang Yechu noted this point.

Shang Yechu really wanted to see what changes she had now, but she was too tired.

The system manipulated the electrical circuits to turn off the light for Shang Yechu and performed forced sleep on her.

The next morning at six, Shang Yechu eagerly got up and went to the bathroom to look in the mirror.

The reflection showed almost no changes. Her skin was still dark and yellowish, her facial features still ordinary. Shang Yechu moved closer to the mirror for a careful look. Finally, she noticed a slight change.

The acne scars on her face seemed to have faded just a tiny bit.

Shang Yechu: "..."

For 2 beauty points, this was already quite good. Shang Yechu comforted herself.

After finishing her bathroom routine and coming out, Grandma Hu had already arrived at the bookstore. She was reading a morning newspaper.

"Oh, Little Chu, you're up?"

Grandma Hu adjusted her reading glasses, looking quite cheerful.

She was a bright and cheerful old lady.

Shang Yechu said politely: "Good morning, Grandma."

Grandma Hu said with a smile: "I finally got a good night's sleep last night. I used to always worry about thieves breaking into the bookstore at night, but with you here, I feel much more at ease."

Shang Yechu smiled wryly. She knew Grandma Hu's words were purely meant to comfort her - the bookstore had a rolling shutter door, so even without Shang Yechu, no thieves would get in.

Grandma Hu seemed to read her thoughts and added: "Besides, with Little Chu here, I can go home early to take care of my grandson. I used to have to stay until ten."

This part was true. From 8 PM to 10 PM was when the film city workers finished their shifts and got off work, which was the peak foot traffic time on the pedestrian street and also the bookstore's busiest period of the day. Closing early would be a pity.

Only then did Shang Yechu show a smile: "I'm glad I can be of help to you, Grandma."

Grandma Hu gestured with her chin toward the table: "Breakfast, eat up."

Breakfast consisted of two large steamed buns and a cup of soybean milk. Shang Yechu was so hungry her eyes were practically green. Without further ceremony, she grabbed one bun and, standing there, devoured it in three or four bites.

It was a meat bun, with delicious juices and fragrant filling. With something in her stomach to cushion it, Shang Yechu couldn't bear to wolf down the second one as ravenously. Instead, she ate it slowly, chewing carefully.

Grandma Hu looked at her with surprise and said: "How did you get so hungry? Eat slowly, be careful it's hot. If it's not enough, I'll bring you more at noon."

Shang Yechu swallowed a mouthful of bun and quickly said: "Grandma, you don't need to save lunch for me. I won't be back at noon."

"Not coming back? Where will you go?" Grandma Hu was extremely surprised.

Shang Yechu smiled shyly: "I'm going to the film city."

Grandma Hu was stunned for a moment and couldn't help sizing up Shang Yechu.

Grandma Hu: "..."

Grandma Hu hadn't expected such an unattractive girl to also have acting dreams. She had run a bookstore near the film city for decades and had seen many young people carrying starry-eyed dreams - some beautiful, some plain, but none as completely ordinary as Shang Yechu, the kind who would disappear into a crowd in the blink of an eye.

Grandma Hu was quite worldly. She had lived through the era of Chow Yun-fat and Stephen Chow, Jackie Chan and the Four Heavenly Kings. She knew actors could be devastatingly beautiful, or under special circumstances tragically ugly, but they absolutely could not have an average face.

With that kind of face, one was destined to be an extra for life.

Grandma Hu hesitated, wanting to speak but stopping, unable to bear crushing this plain girl's self-esteem, yet also unable to watch her jump into a pit of fire.

Struggling for a long time, Grandma Hu said: "Child, I know what you mean. But how difficult is this industry nowadays? Out of ten thousand people, not even one becomes famous! Listen to your grandma's advice - you're still young, and you look... not too bad. Find a proper job."

Shang Yechu had long understood what Grandma Hu was thinking. Because in her previous life, she had advised herself the same way.

Shang Yechu said with a smile: "Grandma, thank you. Really, thank you. But my mind is made up."

Good advice is hard to give to those determined to fail. Grandma Hu sighed: "Alright. Go ahead. At least you can earn a bowl of rice to eat."

She had seen too many young men and women throwing themselves at the flame like moths, refusing to turn back until they hit the wall, not giving up until they reached the Yellow River. They wouldn't wake up until they fell and were battered and bruised.

Shang Yechu said: "Grandma, don't worry. I will definitely become a big star."

With your looks, you want to be a big star? Grandma Hu felt speechless inwardly. But in the end, she didn't say it out loud. She just nodded weakly.

Just as Shang Yechu was about to leave, she suddenly remembered something, turned back and asked: "Grandma, can I take a book with me? I promise I won't dirty or bend it. If it gets damaged, I'll compensate at full price."

Grandma Hu thought to herself that this child wasn't completely hopeless after all, so she pointed to the innermost shelf and said:

"You can take any books from those shelves. Those are secondhand books anyway, hardly any sell in eight hundred years. Just remember to bring them back."

Shang Yechu walked over and looked at that row of shelves. Sure enough, they were some shabby old books. They smelled musty, some had turned yellow. The genres were quite mixed too, randomly piled together without classification. There were world classics as well as outdated romance novels, books on Zhouyi divination alongside reference books, some old magazines, and even a few old almanacs.

Shang Yechu glanced through them and pulled out a copy of "How the Steel Was Tempered," put it in the plastic bag that had held the steamed buns yesterday, and took it with her.

Chapter 4: Day 1

Heng City Film and Television City never lacked fresh blood.

Countless young people carrying dreams were like moths, throwing themselves recklessly into this place. They became busy worker ants, becoming the foundation stones of this magnificent base.

Among them, only a handful could stand out, becoming chosen ones, becoming "so-and-so's girl" or "so-and-so's young man" favored by some director or talent scout. Soaring to success in one leap.

Shang Yechu's starting point was even more difficult than in her previous life.

In her previous life, although Shang Yechu was exceptionally ugly, she had the advantage of being memorable, unforgettable at first glance.

In her previous life, the foolish Shang Yechu came to the film city, disoriented and rotating through various opportunities. Perhaps fools have fortune, as she was spotted by a director.

That director was an emerging director, filming a low-budget comedy at the time. At first sight of Shang Yechu, his eyes lit up, and he coaxed and tricked Shang Yechu into joining the crew.

That was Shang Yechu's first role in her life, playing a fat, obsessed woman chasing the male lead. The obsessed woman chased the male lead for two blocks before being hit by a car and sent flying.

That was her entire screen time.

Thinking about it now, could it be considered an ominous prophecy?

That movie had vulgar humor, but it was very dense. It coincidentally competed with a bunch of educational films during the National Day holiday season, yet unexpectedly achieved decent box office results, becoming moderately popular. The obsessed woman played by Shang Yechu actually gained some minor recognition outside the film—being turned into funny memes by netizens.

From then on, Shang Yechu occasionally received film offers. They were all stereotypical roles: the fat obsessed woman in comedy films, the vicious innkeeper's wife in period films, the fierce, fat female boss in workplace dramas, the shrewish woman, the fierce wife, the mentally disabled girl, the silly girl...

Shang Yechu accepted them all without refusal. She couldn't distinguish between good and bad scripts, and even if she could, she had no power to choose.

Thus she gained some popularity, becoming a famous comedic character in the entertainment industry.

Memories came flooding back. Shang Yechu closed her eyes for a moment.

That was a shortcut, but also a dead end.

She wouldn't walk that path again.

Shang Yechu ran to three different crews consecutively, but no director wanted her. The reason was simple: she was short, ordinary-looking, and among the extras, she was of relatively poor quality.

By the time she reached the fourth crew, it was already noon.

The fourth crew was for a period drama. After much persuasion, Shang Yechu finally convinced the production assistant to allow her inside to distribute bottled water.

This crew was filming a historical drama, and there were indeed many people. Plus, since Shang Yechu said she didn't want payment, just wanted to observe and gain experience, they turned a blind eye and let her in.

They were currently filming a battle scene. It was July, with the scorching sun directly overhead. The extras wearing thick armor ran back and forth, everyone carrying a belly full of hunger and anger.

"Cut! Cut! Cut!" The assistant director wiped his sweat and scolded, "Are you all pig-brained? This is formation! Formation! Run over there! Not there! Raise the flags! Raise the flags, can't you hear?"

This shot had already been filmed over ten times. For historical dramas, large scenes were divided into two groups for filming. This group's assistant director wasn't as professional as the other group's, directing everyone into confusion.

"Hey director! You just said we didn't need to raise flags when turning left!" A bold extra couldn't help shouting.

The assistant director immediately became angry from embarrassment: "Who said that? Who said that? Come out!"

A tall, sturdy extra jumped out from the crowd: "Who's afraid of who! You're incompetent and still blaming others?"

This person was tall and strongly built, quite intimidating. He looked like a reckless brave fool.

The assistant director was furious: "You understand! You understand! Are you the director or am I the director!"

"Pah! Stop pretending a chicken feather is a command arrow!" The tall extra spat, "What do you think you are!"

"What's your name?" The assistant director shouted, "What's your name!"

"Your grandfather uses the same name everywhere! I'm Huang Feizhang! Go report me!" Saying this, Huang Feizhang ripped off his helmet and threw it fiercely to the ground.

"You think you're Huang Feihong or something!" The assistant director cursed, "Get out! Don't think you'll earn a single cent from this crew again!"

"Who wants your stinking money!" Huang Feizhang had already taken off the shoddily made armor on the spot. He left angrily.

The assistant director's face turned purple with rage, shouting: "Film! Continue filming! We're not short without him!"

An assistant approached the director and whispered: "The cast for this scene has already been reduced to the minimum. That position missing one person won't look good."

The assistant director said impatiently: "Are you dead? Isn't the street full of people?" As he spoke, he pointed at Shang Yechu who was placing bottled water on a nearby table: "You, you go up."

The assistant quickly smiled apologetically: "Director, she's female, and short..."

"Who can tell male from female when wearing armor?" The assistant director grew more impatient, "Being short is even better. That tall guy over there, step forward to the front row! You—"

The assistant director glanced at Shang Yechu, who quickly put down the bottled water, picked up the heavy armor, and clumsily put it on herself.

"At least has some awareness." The assistant director's anger subsided slightly, "Stand behind that tall guy!"

Whether it was because her intelligence had increased, Shang Yechu felt her hands and feet had become more agile. After quickly putting on the armor, she swiftly moved to the position the director required.

This scene was extremely exhausting. The director's skills didn't improve much after expelling the troublemaker Huang Feizhang. Several hundred people still ran back and forth under the blazing sun, being tormented endlessly. Everyone was mentally skinning the director with curses.

Shang Yechu was completely drenched in sweat. The armor was very heavy and not breathable at all. She felt dizzy, with darkness before her eyes. What she ate in the morning had long since disappeared. It seemed that even though her weight had decreased, her appetite hadn't reduced.

Shang Yechu gritted her teeth. Her highly precise brain allowed her to respond promptly to the director's commands, but her limbs were already sore and weak, gradually unable to keep up with her brain's pace.

She was about to faint from heat.

The system warned: "Host, health value has dropped to 30."

Shang Yechu: "What's the problem with 30?"

"Generally speaking, only people with chronic illnesses or similar conditions would have their health value drop to this level." The system said coldly.

Shang Yechu: "I'm not sick. No need for concern."

System: "I'm not concerned about you, I'm concerned about my mission. If you die, I'll have a failed mission record."

Shang Yechu turned around panting, raised the flag in her hand, and ignored the system's words.

The host was stubborn, and the system couldn't do anything. It could only help Shang Yechu regulate her body's hormones as much as possible, creating the illusion that "she wasn't that tired."

Shang Yechu suddenly felt her limbs become much lighter, and the soreness in her neck and shoulders faded considerably.

Shang Yechu asked warily: "System, what's going on? Am I having a final rally before death?"

System: "..."

"Cut—"

The director's voice rang out: "This take is good."

"Yay!" The crowd immediately erupted in weak cheers. Everyone eagerly took off their helmets, using their hands to fan themselves.

The assistant whispered with the assistant director for a while. The assistant said something, and the director also felt somewhat guilty about today, so he nodded.

The assistant cleverly said: "Director Yan says, today's boxed meals are all you can eat! If there's not enough, we'll order more from nearby restaurants! Okay! Dismissed!"

"Thank you, boss!" "Thank you, Director Yan!" "Director Yan is generous!" and other sounds filled the scene, this time much louder than before.

The extras scattered like a swarm of hornets, most going to find bottled water to drink.

Shang Yechu removed her helmet and breathed a sigh of relief. She first went to the props department to return the armor.

The assistant gave Shang Yechu a strange look. He had noticed earlier. Shang Yechu hadn't listened carefully to the director's instructions like the other extras, but during filming she could accurately respond, never falling behind, even performing better than those extras who had heard the explanations multiple times.

The director didn't find it remarkable because he was used to experienced actors and considered this a given. The assistant had personally witnessed Shang Yechu's newcomer status, so he couldn't help paying more attention.

Shang Yechu returned the armor and went to collect her boxed meal. The moment she turned around, the assistant's heart immediately became calm as still water.

No matter how talented or aware she was, with that ordinary face, she would never stand out in her lifetime.

The assistant immediately put this person out of his mind.

The crew's boxed meals were quite substantial—fragrant white rice with side dishes of sweet and sour eggplant, scrambled eggs with tomatoes. Director Yan felt guilty and paid out of his own pocket to give each extra in Group B a fried chicken drumstick.

Such high-calorie food would make actors with any reputation wary. But for these hardworking extras, it was just right. Everyone ate ravenously.

Shang Yechu fiercely ate two boxes of meals, two chicken drumsticks, and gulped down two large bottles of water before suppressing that hunger fire.

Her clothes were smelly again. Shang Yechu thought absentmindedly. She started eating her third boxed meal.

A male actor sitting not far from Shang Yechu gave her a shocked look, feeling deep respect for her appetite.

You truly can't judge a book by its cover! Who would have thought this seemingly not very fat short person was such a big eater!

Shang Yechu actually hadn't eaten like this for a long time.

In her previous life, although she was a famous comedic character in the entertainment industry, actors were still actors, with on-camera requirements. Shang Yechu had a constitution that gained weight easily. If she ate her fill every meal, she would quickly lose even the opportunity to play comedic roles.

In fact, ever since gaining some fame, Shang Yechu had been strictly monitored by Ji Ya and had never eaten a full meal again.

But now was different.

Shang Yechu scraped clean the last bite of rice and asked casually: "System, what's my current weight?"

System: "You just ate and drank exactly four jin."

That would be 2kg.

Shang Yechu: "Convert it all to intelligence."

The system had thought she would convert it to health value or beauty points or something, and was surprised by this request: "What do you want to convert intelligence for? Don't you value your life?"

Shang Yechu: "I'm not tired at all right now."

The system thought: "Like hell you're not tired. It's all the numbing effect of hormones."

But this couldn't be said to Shang Yechu. Actually, saying it would be useless anyway—Shang Yechu was more stubborn than an ox, so it definitely wouldn't work.

Moreover, the system had a premonition that once he told Shang Yechu about helping regulate her hormones, Shang Yechu would probably add forced hormone regulation to his duties besides forced dormancy. Then she would more recklessly overdraw her body.

The system changed his approach: "You're already smart enough. Why convert more intelligence points?"

"140 is genius level." Shang Yechu said, "I'm at 138 now. I want to experience what true genius feels like."

The system fell silent.

After a while, Shang Yechu felt her body grow slightly warm and knew the system had complied.

In just an instant, Shang Yechu felt the world before her eyes become clearer again. Although it was only a two-point intelligence difference, it felt like stepping into a completely different world.

Before Shang Yechu could savor the wonders of this new world, a voice reached her ears: "Hey, shorty. You ate so much, be careful not to throw up when running around during formation this afternoon."

Shang Yechu looked up and saw it was the male actor who had been sitting across from her. A middle-aged man with regular features and a kind demeanor.

Shang Yechu smiled: "Thank you, uncle. What should I call you?"

"My name is Qiao Yonghua." Qiao Yonghua laughed heartily, "And you?"

"My surname is Shang. Shang Yechu. Shang as in merchant, Ye as in leaf, Chu as in the beginning of the month."

Qiao Yonghua was momentarily stunned: "That's quite a literary name."

Shang Yechu put on a grateful expression: "Thank you for the reminder, uncle. But I naturally have a big appetite, it's fine."

This was the truth. And it wasn't just because of her large appetite. After the conversion was completed, Shang Yechu felt her stomach become light, and that solid feeling of fullness from earlier had disappeared.

"Is that so? That's good then." Qiao Yonghua didn't press the issue further, instead asking: "I see you're a new face, just arrived?"

Shang Yechu said politely: "Yes. Failed the college entrance exam. Came out to find some work."

This reason was extremely common, and Qiao Yonghua immediately believed it. After exchanging a few more pleasantries, Qiao Yonghua noticed Shang Yechu wasn't very interested and tactfully left.

Extras in the film city usually took their noon breaks directly at the crew. Find a shady spot, roll up some clothes, with the sky as blanket and earth as bed. Shang Yechu searched for a long time, but all the shady spots were occupied by napping extras.

Shang Yechu searched high and low, finally having to find a folding stool and sit in the shadow of the crew's command platform used for formations earlier, starting to read "How the Steel Was Tempered."

The system restrained itself repeatedly but finally couldn't hold back: "Host, given your current physical condition, taking a noon break would be much better."

Shang Yechu was practically treating her body as a consumable item.

Shang Yechu turned a page: "It's fine, I can make up for this sleep tonight."

The system fell silent. For this kind of host who sought her own destruction, he couldn't be bothered to care anymore.

Shang Yechu finished reading "How the Steel Was Tempered" in just one noon. Whether it was because this was the first novel she read after becoming smarter, she felt deeply moved. It was a trembling from the depths of her soul.

Not just the joy of acquiring knowledge.

The intelligence difference between "genius" and "excellent" was only two points, yet the effect was worlds apart.

Shang Yechu clearly felt her reading speed had increased further. Moreover, even with such rapid reading, she could still achieve deep understanding of the text.

Last night when she read the dictionary, it was just mechanically carving those characters into her memory. But today reading this book, she genuinely resonated with it.

If last night was storage, then today was absorption.

Shang Yechu was like a newborn hungry infant, greedily absorbing every drop of knowledge.

Shang Yechu put the book back into the plastic bag and began the afternoon filming.

It had to be said, it was all thanks to the system's forced dormancy. The sleep depth achieved by the system's forced dormancy was something humans could never achieve naturally—it was complete relaxation of all organs and entire spirit. Shang Yechu had been running around all day today, didn't sleep at noon, yet could still be lively in the afternoon, all thanks to forced dormancy.

The day's filming ended. Shang Yechu received one hundred yuan as hard-earned payment. Holding this heavy one hundred yuan in her hand, Shang Yechu felt as if a lifetime had passed.

From rebirth until now, she had finally seen some return on her efforts.

After getting this money, Shang Yechu eagerly found a bathhouse and took a thorough, satisfying bath. Then she went to the department store tent and, following the same pattern, bought a full set of cheap change of clothes from inside out.

From today onward, she was someone with two sets of change clothes!

Chapter 5: Schoolbag

After returning to the bookstore, Grandma Hu had kept dinner for Shang Yechu as usual.

The dinner consisted of a bowl of zhajiangmian, a boiled corn cob, and leftover soy milk generously donated by the neighboring breakfast shop. Grandma Hu was reading a tattered book with a magnifying glass, and when she saw Shang Yechu arrive, her face immediately blossomed into a smile.

"Little Chu. You're here? Quick, look what this is?"

Shang Yechu looked and was immediately somewhat surprised.

In Grandma Hu's hands was a worn canvas schoolbag, its style extremely outdated at first glance, looking like it was only a few years younger than Shang Yechu herself.

Grandma Hu said cheerfully, "This was the schoolbag my son used in high school. I washed and dried it yesterday. Look at you carrying things around in a plastic bag - how inappropriate!"

Shang Yechu silently took the schoolbag and weighed it in her hands. The bag was very old, with a neat patch on the side, and the zipper color didn't match the fabric at all - it seemed the original zipper had broken and a new one had been installed.

However, no matter how old it was, this was a complete, very large, sturdy schoolbag. Washed clean, it carried the fresh scent of laundry detergent.

Shang Yechu... had actually used many old schoolbags before.

The hand-me-downs from her second and third sisters, the ones her younger brother Shang Jiayu had outgrown - most weren't very usable. Either the zippers were broken, the straps were torn, or they were just filthy.

Ji Ya was a loving mother - but only toward her two younger daughters and one son. She would never starch, wash, or mend these things for Shang Yechu. In her words, for a pig-brained person like Shang Yechu, a schoolbag was just for show.

Shang Hongxuan paid even less attention to such matters - the expenses for four children were already substantial enough, and if his disappointing eldest daughter spent even a little extra, he would fly into a rage.

Shang Yechu had no choice but to wash and mend things herself, clumsy-handed, stitching everything into ugly, lumpy knots. She went to school carrying a schoolbag full of lumps and undissolved laundry detergent stains, not knowing how many times she had been laughed at.

Seeing Shang Yechu remain silent, Grandma Hu thought she was dissatisfied and said flusteredly, "Don't mind that it's old. They sell bags on the pedestrian street - so small, yet they cost dozens of yuan! Not worth it."

"Don't judge this bag by its age - it's very sturdy! And large, can hold plenty of things... When you're out and about, you really need a big bag like this..."

Grandma Hu chattered on, seeming somewhat apologetic that she could only offer this ugly schoolbag.

"Grandma," Shang Yechu lifted her face, revealing a smile, "I like it very much. Thank you, it's so practical."

With this capable schoolbag as her new ally, Shang Yechu's life became more convenient.

From that day on, Shang Yechu began a regular two-point life.

During the day, she worked as an extra at the film city.

Bodyguards, palace maids, servants, soldiers, crazy female fans, classmates of the main characters, people on the street - all kinds of background roles. She took whatever was available. Regardless of whether there were lines or if her face would be shown, Shang Yechu accepted everything without complaint, completely indifferent.

Sometimes when luck was good, she could play roles like corpses, mourning sons in hemp clothes, or dead people lying in puddles or pools of blood - then she could get a red envelope of ten yuan or five yuan.

For roles others found unlucky or dirty, Shang Yechu always stepped forward without hesitation. Through wind and rain, exposed to sun and storms, through scorching heat, Shang Yechu remained unfazed.

She practically threw herself into acting as if her life depended on it. Even for the most trivial roles, she gave her all; even as a stationary background prop, she kept her back straight without the slightest slack.

Even so, her pay didn't increase by a single cent. Nor did any director or producer descend from the heavens to suddenly discover she was an uncut jade or anything like that.

After work, she would sit in a corner reading secondhand books brought from the bookstore. They were all common world classics, familiar to everyone. Some were even required reading for elementary school students, yet she read them with such seriousness.

After finishing work, Shang Yechu would mooch boxed meals from the crew. Not every crew had good treatment - some crew meals were terribly unpalatable, some were quite unsanitary, occasionally containing hair or flies.

No matter how bad the boxed meals tasted, Shang Yechu ate them anyway. If she could eat one box, she ate one; if she could eat two, she ate two. Once, an extra personally saw Shang Yechu fish out a ferocious-looking large praying mantis from her boxed meal. Shang Yechu didn't even frown, flicked the mantis away, and continued eating, finishing the entire box clean.

The extra was stunned.

Over time, Shang Yechu gained a nickname among the extras: rice bucket.

However, what surprised the extras was that although she ate more than anyone else, Shang Yechu didn't gain any weight at all - instead, she had become considerably thinner than when she first arrived.

After finishing work at the film city, Shang Yechu went straight to the bookstore, both minding the shop and reading.

Shang Yechu read everything. Starting with the Four Great Classical Novels, other classical novels, foreign classics and novels; later moving on to Tang and Song poetry, foreign poetry. Whatever books could be found in this bookstore, Shang Yechu never picked and chose, reading them all without discrimination.

Those books carved themselves deeply into her mind, remaining fresh and vivid like inscriptions on stone tablets. She could feel her empty brain being filled by these words, stuffing every crevice.

Not enough, far from enough.

Shang Yechu felt a thirst in her soul.

Her brain screamed every moment: "I need sustenance. I need knowledge."

She could feel the extreme mismatch between her intelligence and her experience. She possessed a genius brain, yet this brain had vast blank spaces. Memories from her previous life grew increasingly clear, but she was horrified to discover that within these extensive memories, there were very few traces of knowledge.

The Shang Yechu of her previous life was merely a confused, ignorant, pitiful worm who only knew how to make money by selling ugliness.

Every day, Shang Yechu would read until two or three in the morning, then have the system put her into forced dormancy. She slept until six in the morning, got up punctually, and went to work as an extra with the crew.

That meant she only slept three or four hours a day. The rest of the time, she was either working as an extra or reading.

The system's forced dormancy had excellent effects on relaxing the spirit and body, and the system would secretly adjust Shang Yechu's hormones, numbing her physical fatigue. However, Shang Yechu's approach was still complete overdraft through and through.

After eating three meals a day, Shang Yechu would gain approximately 2kg of weight. Shang Yechu requested the system convert all of it into beauty points.

Since she only gained two points daily, the changes were extremely minute, so no one noticed Shang Yechu's transformation.

The system reminded Shang Yechu more than once to exchange points for health value to improve her physical fitness, but Shang Yechu turned a deaf ear. To her, gaining knowledge, experience, and beauty was most important - as for physical health, as long as she didn't die, it was fine.

Shang Yechu never actively socialized with the other extras. Of course, if extras came to talk to her, she would answer with good temper. Even so, over time, the extras still had considerable criticism of her. Secretly saying she had an arrogant personality, was pretentious, and so on.

Shang Yechu was very diligent, never slacking off, skipping work, or goldbricking, and she was clever, so occasionally directors would praise her a few words. Combined with her dislike for socializing, her reputation among the extras grew even worse.

Another day, Shang Yechu was hiding in a corner reading "Jane Eyre" when she suddenly noticed a shadow falling over her.

Shang Yechu looked up to see the other person dressed flamboyantly, wearing extremely high heels on her feet - it was Luo Qianqian.

Luo Qianqian was somewhat famous among the extras in this area. She had some looks, at least much better than Shang Yechu who would disappear in a crowd.

Compared to Shang Yechu who played corpses and stationary roles all day, Luo Qianqian had more choices. She could play minor palace maids with lines, or courtesans with face shots. Although not particularly respectable roles, they at least offered more hope than ordinary extra work.

Adhering to the principle of avoiding making enemies in the entertainment industry whenever possible, the extras didn't dare offend her. They all politely called her "Sister Luo."

Shang Yechu looked up and asked stiffly, "Hello? Is there something?"

"Oh, reading 'Jane Eyre,'" Luo Qianqian extended two fingers painted with red nail polish and picked up the book from Shang Yechu's hands. She said sarcastically:

"Isn't this required middle school reading? Even top students read this kind of book?"

Shang Yechu's face showed no expression: "Top student? Who?"

"You, of course." Luo Qianqian laughed strangely, "Not taking noon break every day, reading books after finishing scenes. What else if not a top student?"

"I'm not a top student." Shang Yechu said calmly, "I failed the college entrance exam and came here to work."

Luo Qianqian didn't expect Shang Yechu not to get angry but to be so honest, leaving her momentarily speechless.

"Now, can you return my book?" Shang Yechu's tone remained placid.

"Oh, so I'm disturbing you." Luo Qianqian giggled charmingly, "Here~"

As Shang Yechu reached to take it, Luo Qianqian's fingers loosened. The "Jane Eyre" fell to the ground with a "smack."

Shang Yechu finally looked directly at Luo Qianqian.

Luo Qianqian looked back at her provocatively.

Shang Yechu remained silent for a moment, bent down, and picked up the book.

Since she was already sitting on a folding stool, bending down wasn't difficult. After picking up the book, Shang Yechu accurately flipped to the page she had been reading and continued.

Luo Qianqian, seeing that she dared ignore her like this, immediately flushed with anger. She couldn't help but say sarcastically, "Stop pretending! Ugly but ambitious! Still having pipe dreams!"

Shang Yechu acted as if she didn't hear.

"Putting on airs all day! Like an eager dog! You're the most enthusiastic among these extras! Why don't you take a piss and look at your own face in it!"

"Keep pretending! Ugly bitch! You'll never make it in your lifetime!"

Shang Yechu turned another page.

Luo Qianqian, seeing this person was impervious to reason, turned red with anger and stomped away in her high heels.

The system watched the entire scene and couldn't help asking, "Host, why is she bothering you for no reason?"

Shang Yechu turned another page and said slowly in her mind, "Yesterday you told me your computer was the most advanced among systems of the same batch, yet you can't even figure out something like this?"

System: "The system core and computing power are certainly the most advanced. But I don't fully understand human emotions."

Shang Yechu didn't answer, and the system continued: "Humans often do incomprehensible, meaningless things. Even when something brings no benefit to themselves, they'll specifically waste time on it."

Like what Luo Qianqian just did.

"Meaningless..."

Shang Yechu murmured.

Shang Yechu lowered her head. The "Jane Eyre" in her hands was open to the middle section.

Shang Yechu read softly: "Admitting I was good would not bring her happiness, only humiliation."

The system remained silent for a moment, then said: "You're reading page 119 of 'Jane Eyre.' But what does that have to do with our conversation?"

"As expected of a system. Blind in eyes and heart, knowing nothing of human nature."

"....."

The system said coldly: "Host, my 'eyes' can scan your entire world in one second. Much better than your eyes. As for 'heart,' I don't have such a thing. My core is composed of information flow."

Shang Yechu chuckled softly: "Sorry."

She apologized so easily that the system didn't know what to say.

Shang Yechu turned another page and smiled: "Alright, I won't make things difficult for you anymore."

"Luo Qianqian is the mistress of Director Assistant Si from the previous shoot. Assistant Si pulled some strings to get her the role of the tragic maid in that drama."

"This maid is the female lead's sister. Although she only appears in the first episode, it's still more screen time than Luo Qianqian usually gets."

"But right before shooting, the director saw her red nails - she was playing a laundry maid. How could a laundry maid have nails like that?"

"Even though it's just a low-budget web series, such mistakes are unacceptable."

"The director scolded her and replaced her with someone else. Coincidentally, the replacement was her archrival, named Zhao Xueqiao. The two have never gotten along."

System: "The director didn't replace her with you, so why take it out on you?"

"After two scenes, I played a background maid. Stood very straight. The director passed by and praised me, saying 'This is what I call professionalism, much better than those who don't even know what they're playing.'"

"She didn't dare bother Zhao Xueqiao, so she came after me."

The system remained silent for a moment: "Is this what humans call bullying the weak and transference?"

"The word transference isn't quite accurate." Shang Yechu laughed, "Speaking of which, even I saw the director scolding her. Why didn't you see it?"

The system said matter-of-factly: "I'm the host's exclusive system. People unrelated to the host, I don't specifically scan. Unless the host orders me to."

"....."

Shang Yechu murmured: "Saying quite remarkable things."

The system felt its understanding of humanity's ugly side had deepened a bit.

Shang Yechu lowered her head to continue reading, softly reciting: "I felt anger... finally I resolved to conquer her."

After reading this passage, Shang Yechu closed the book and went to collect her boxed meal.

The afternoon shoot began.

Luo Qianqian truly lived up to having some background. Although she lost her morning role, Assistant Si managed somehow to arrange another maid role for her.

This maid was cannon fodder - while searching for something on top of a cabinet, she found evidence of the male villain's crimes. While taking it down to look, the male villain discovered her. After strangling her, he disguised it as a hanging.

Luo Qianqian was short - she could manage in high heels, but after putting on the flat shoes for period dramas, she was somewhat not tall enough. Standing on a stool, she simply couldn't reach the top of the cabinet.

The stepping stool was a fixed prop and couldn't be replaced temporarily.

Assistant Si, seeing no one was paying attention nearby, couldn't help complaining: "Why did you insist on this role? Don't you know how tall you are? The original maid was half a head taller than you and could just reach it. I even sent the wrong message to send her away."

Luo Qianqian's face turned bright red, but she didn't dare talk back.

Assistant Si continued: "The director will scold me again when he comes. I think you should just forget it!"

Luo Qianqian was so anxious she was sweating, afraid the opportunity would slip away again. Fortunately, the director hadn't arrived yet, so there was still time to remedy the situation.

Luo Qianqian looked around and suddenly spotted a thick book placed on a folding stool not far outside the tent.

Luo Qianqian's eyes lit up. She jogged out and brought the book into the tent.

Assistant Si asked: "'Jane Eyre'? Whose book is this?"

"A minor extra's. She's standing around in another group right now. Borrowing it." Luo Qianqian's eyes shone brightly, extremely excited, "If we put this book under my feet, and I stand on tiptoe a bit, won't that make me tall enough?"

Assistant Si hesitated: "If the camera catches this book, won't that give us away?"

"My skirt is long, the hem can cover this book, it won't show." Luo Qianqian didn't bother examining the book carefully anymore, giggling as she placed it on the stool.

The director was about to arrive, and Assistant Si couldn't afford to worry too much. Setting up the camera position, they prepared to start shooting.

This scene wasn't very important, and plus everyone was still somewhat sluggish after noon break, lacking energy. The director waved his hand without paying much attention.

Luo Qianqian stepped onto the book, feeling quite pleased with herself. Both solving the problem and slighting that low-class ugly girl - killing two birds with one stone.

"Action!"

They started filming. Luo Qianqian stood on tiptoe, struggling to reach toward the top of the cabinet.

The prop on the cabinet top was actually easy to reach, but Luo Qianqian, wanting to ruin Shang Yechu's book, deliberately pretended she couldn't reach it, straining to stand on tiptoe, scraping the mud from her shoe seams onto the book's edge. After scraping off mud, still unsatisfied, she gave the book cover a hard rub.

"Crunch" - Luo Qianqian felt her foot slip, suddenly lost balance, and "thump" fell off the stool!

"What happened?" The drowsy director was jolted awake, "Idiot, what's wrong with you? Did you grease your feet?"

Luo Qianqian's butt hurt as if split into four pieces. She looked at the book in astonishment.

It turned out the book was a hardcover edition with a thick cover, but the connection between the cover and spine was already precarious, held together by only a thin layer of plastic film.

When holding it, because the cover was thick, it wasn't very noticeable. But just now when Luo Qianqian deliberately rubbed against it, her foot grinding down, the cover immediately detached, causing Luo Qianqian to lose her balance and fall!

Luo Qianqian stared wide-eyed, looking at the book in disbelief.

The director recognized her as the maid eliminated that morning and became furious: "Why is it you again? Lingering like a ghost? Get lost!"

Such an insignificant scene could also create complications - absolutely annoying!

The director turned and shouted at Assistant Si: "Stop stuffing all kinds of unsuitable people into the crew! If you keep pulling tricks, you can get out too!"

Assistant Si was scared like a quail, not daring to make a sound.

Luo Qianqian was still in shock when the director waved his hand, and two burly men playing guards half-supported, half-forcedly escorted her away.

Luo Qianqian wasn't really injured, since the stool wasn't high. Just a bit sore. So the director didn't pay her any more attention, calling impatiently: "Where's the original actor?"

"Director, I'm here!"

A tall actress in costume came running, panting: "Sorry, I'm late."

The director was in a bad mood, but for the sake of filming progress, had to suppress his anger: "Hurry up!"

The tall actress was named Tan Hua. Although she arrived late, fortunately her costume was already on, so she could start filming directly.

Tan Hua walked to the stool, collected both the "Jane Eyre" cover and book, and placed them in a corner out of camera view. Then she hastily stepped onto the stool.

Tan Hua was familiar with this scene, and it was shot smoothly. The director's anger subsided somewhat, and he praised her a few words.

After the shoot, Tan Hua took the "Jane Eyre" and, after many twists and turns, reached a corner where her eyes lit up.

"Little Shang!"

Shang Yechu was sitting on a folding stool eating her boxed meal. Seeing Tan Hua, she smiled shyly: "Sister Tan."

Tan Hua walked over in a few steps and handed her the book: "Here, your book."

"Thank you." Shang Yechu put down her boxed meal and took the book. Looking carefully, the cover had been taped back together.

"I taped the book back together and cleaned it." Tan Hua brought over a folding stool and sat down with Shang Yechu.

"Thank you." Shang Yechu smiled and thanked her again.

"I should be thanking you." Tan Hua sighed with relief, "Fortunately you notified me this scene was starting, and lent me your costume when I couldn't find mine."

"Thanks to all the maid costumes in our crew being the same style." Shang Yechu put down the book and picked up her boxed meal to continue eating.

"But without a costume, didn't the second director scold you?"

Shang Yechu swallowed a mouthful of rice: "I went very late. By the time I arrived, that standing scene was already finished. So naturally I wasn't needed."

"Ah? Wouldn't the second director scold you to death?"

Shang Yechu said hesitantly: "I told the second director that during lunch when I was eating with you, I heard you answer a phone call. Assistant Si said on the phone that the shooting time changed from two to three, so I thought our scene was changed too. That's why I came late."

After speaking, Shang Yechu carefully glanced at Tan Hua's expression: "Sister Tan, you won't blame me, will you?"

Tan Hua was momentarily stunned, remembering that during lunch today, Shang Yechu had indeed moved her folding stool to sit beside her. And she had indeed received a call from Assistant Si.

Since Shang Yechu had helped her greatly, using this small trick to avoid the second director's scolding was understandable. So Tan Hua didn't mind.

Tan Hua: "Just with that, the second director let you off?"

Shang Yechu said obediently: "The second director and Assistant Si are good brothers. Maybe out of respect for him, he didn't blame me."

Tan Hua sneered: "No wonder, since the second director and that Si are as close as sharing pants!"

Shang Yechu bit her disposable chopsticks: "But this scene wasn't important anyway. Just a standing maid - one more or less doesn't make much difference."

Shang Yechu thought for a moment, then added: "Your scene was much more important, Sister Tan. For such an important scene, Assistant Si actually got the time wrong - truly unprofessional. Fortunately, I saw the tent for that scene adjusting equipment when I went to the restroom."

"Unprofessional? He's too professional!" Tan Hua said through gritted teeth, "For his mistress—"

Shang Yechu asked puzzledly: "What flat top? Does our crew require shaved heads?"

Tan Hua looked at Shang Yechu with frustration: "You need to be more careful! Little Shang, kids like you are most easily deceived! Others could cheat you and you'd still count money for them!"

"I don't have any money, what would others cheat me out of?" Shang Yechu asked curiously.

"Alright, alright." Tan Hua waved her hand, "You wouldn't understand even if I told you. From now on, stick with me and learn more."

Shang Yechu immediately smiled: "Thank you, Sister Tan."

Tan Hua was considered a veteran among extras, with some connections and status. Not inferior to Luo Qianqian.

"It's also heaven having eyes, that mis—" Tan Hua glanced at the innocent Shang Yechu and swallowed the rest of her sentence, "Anyway, serves her right. Without the height, still stubbornly went to step on the stool, fell, didn't she? Just a pity about your book, ruined by those dirty feet."

"Exactly!" Shang Yechu said distressedly, "This book is a secondhand one I borrowed from the bookstore. Now I have to compensate them."

Tan Hua: "Oh! I'll pay for this book! For my sake, you didn't get your afternoon wages and have to compensate the book for nothing. What kind of reasoning is that!"

Shang Yechu said gratefully: "Then thank you, Sister Tan."

Tan Hua stuffed several dozen yuan into Shang Yechu's hand and left. After finishing her boxed meal, Shang Yechu put the book into her schoolbag, humming a song as she returned to the bookstore.

She was tone-deaf, butchering the song into fragments. The system listened silently, thinking it sounded worse than the system's periodic briefings.

Shang Yechu entered the bookstore and said apologetically to Grandma Hu: "Grandma, I accidentally damaged that 'Jane Eyre' book today on set. Let me compensate you."

"How badly damaged?" Grandma Hu put on her reading glasses, "Let me see."

Shang Yechu hung her head: "No need to look. I earned quite a bit from acting today, I'll just compensate you. Actually, I really wanted this book anyway, so consider it bought."

"You child. Not buying new books but secondhand ones. Even with money, that's not how you should use it." Grandma Hu sighed.

She knew that although Shang Yechu seemed obedient, she actually had a stubborn streak. Unable to persuade her. So she didn't say more.

Grandma Hu thought for a moment. Although she was old, her memory was still good.

"That book was ninety percent new. When I acquired it, I think it cost about..."

Chapter 6: Half a Month

Shang Yechu stood in front of the mirror and looked at herself.

Half a month had passed. She had been adding two beauty points to herself every day. By today she had added exactly thirty points, so it was time to see the results.

Shang Yechu leaned in close to the mirror.

Actually, there wasn't anything dramatically different.

Her memory was much better than before, so she remembered her appearance from half a month ago clearly. Spotting changes wasn't difficult.

Her eyes were slightly larger, her unruly eyebrows a bit neater. Her nasal bridge seemed a little higher, at least a faint ridge had appeared.

Before, Shang Yechu had no nasal bridge at all. That area had been as flat as a board. Now that slight rise existed; even though it didn't look hugely different, Shang Yechu was still pleased.

Her lips remained very thick, with a slight underbite. Maybe because the points she'd added were too few, there was no change. They were still thick enough to slice into pieces.

Most of the acne scars on her face had faded. Only some dead skin patches were left, and Shang Yechu planned to let them peel away naturally.

As for her complexion...

She had deliberately reminded the system these days not to alter her skin tone when improving her looks. So her skin was still dark with a yellowish tinge—very dull.

As the saying goes, a fair complexion hides a hundred defects; with a dull complexion and poor skin quality, subtle changes to her features were easily covered up. Half a month had passed and nobody in film city had noticed Shang Yechu's changes.

Only when she carefully examined herself in the mirror could Shang Yechu tell that, although each change was tiny, together her features had improved quite a bit.

System: "Normal human beauty points are around 50–60. Above 60 is moderately pleasing, above 70 is delicate-looking, above 80 counts as pretty."

"I'm at 30 now. What's that level?"

"An extra. Someone you wouldn't notice unless you looked closely, and then you'd find them ugly."

Shang Yechu: "...You really are blunt."

It wasn't just her appearance that had changed—her knowledge base improved too.

Over the past half month, Shang Yechu had read more than twenty literary works. That amount of reading wasn't impressive by most standards, but compared to her previously empty-headed state, it was a huge improvement.

Besides reading, Shang Yechu added a daily practice: handwriting.

Her handwriting was truly terrible. IQ could change, reading speed could be improved, but calligraphy couldn't be rushed.

On the third day she came to the bookstore, Shang Yechu helped Grandma Hu, who had poor eyesight, with bookkeeping. When she wrote out the entry, her handwriting looked like it had been scratched out by a chicken—every stroke bent like a maggot, together resembling a child's writing.

Shang Yechu fell silent, staring at how unchanged and backward her handwriting was compared to her previous life.

Grandma Hu was also silent when she looked at the ledger.

She stayed silent for a long time, finally putting on her reading glasses and copying the ledger over herself.

Shang Yechu was deeply discouraged.

From that day, Shang Yechu went to the wholesale greenhouse and bought a huge bundle of cheap pencils and a thick stack of coarse draft paper. Grandma Hu's bookstore had all kinds of copybooks—works by famous calligraphers and beginner sheets for schoolchildren. Shang Yechu could freely copy from them. She practiced an hour every day.

The system expected Shang Yechu to cut an hour of reading to practice handwriting. Unexpectedly, she pushed her sleep time back another hour instead.

The system fell silent.

Shang Yechu was pushing her body to the limit. All other physical values were rising; only her health value was falling. The system could not force the host to do things, so 103 could only persuade her to redeem some health value. Shang Yechu usually replied, "Thanks, maybe next time."

System: "....."

Anyway, there were the system's forced dormancy and hormone adjustments. Even if her physical condition dropped to the extreme, her brain and hormones would deceive her into feeling a pathological relaxation.

This two-point-one-line life—running extras during the day and reading, reading and practicing handwriting at night—continued for a long time.

To gain weight, Shang Yechu didn't just eat the crew's boxed meals and the food Grandma Hu prepared; she also gorged on cheap compound chocolate and drank huge amounts of sugary sodas.

Film city was quite lively at night. After finishing a scene, if Shang Yechu had spare time she would stroll through the night market.

Whether it was stir-fried, fried, braised, stewed, boiled, or grilled; whether chicken hearts, sheep lungs, or offal; whether egg, gluten, sweet potato, or chestnut; whether it came from the sky, sea, ground, or soil—Shang Yechu ate it all. Whatever was cheap and filling, she ate it.

In short, determined to increase her weight quickly, Shang Yechu ravenously hoarded fats and carbs like a madwoman.

This deliberate, unrestrained, even frantic binge eating put enormous strain on her body.

Although each time she ate she immediately instructed the system to convert the added weight into other values, the damage to her stomach was irreversible.

Life as an extra in the crew was also miserable. Shang Yechu was short and ugly, so she could only get thankless roles.

In a pole-standing scene she played a background maid—so distant her face didn't even show—yet she had to stand motionless for hours;

On a suspense set, she acted as a corpse in the morgue. In that sweltering heat her face was covered with thick makeup, suffocating her, just to look convincingly dead;

In August's blistering heat she dressed in heavy linen to play the old, weak, sick and disabled people hunted by soldiers. Hooves kicked up dry dirt and smoke as she panted and ran, sweating profusely;

When the rain scene came—of course it was artificial rain—she played flood victims, wading through a pool with a prop baby, crying and pleading. The filthy water splashed into her mouth; it was cold and dirty;

When the scene finished she climbed out of the water, soaked through, teeth chattering with cold. Extras had no convenient changing rooms. This water-scene had many actors, and the big changing tent was crowded; Shang Yechu couldn't get inside. She wore her wet clothes and dried under the hot sun.

A gust of wind blew; a summer breeze that would normally feel pleasant now made her shiver. She couldn't wait, so she ate her boxed meal in wet clothes, planning to change afterward.

That night she caught a cold.

After a night of binge eating, Shang Yechu returned to the bookstore and ate the dinner Grandma Hu had left.

The food tasted good, but she couldn't taste it. Her nose was blocked; she couldn't smell the aroma. Her tongue felt numb, as if she were chewing cotton.

Grandma Hu noticed her pale face and fretted, "Little Chu, are you coming down with a cold?"

"No." Shang Yechu smiled, "We filmed a water scene today. I got a bit chilled. A good sleep and I'll be fine."

Grandma Hu still wasn't reassured. "Really? You're not lying to me?"

"Of course not." Shang Yechu showed Grandma Hu the clean bottom of her bowl. "If I were really ill, would I still have such an appetite?"

Grandma Hu reluctantly believed her but couldn't stop worrying. She rummaged around and found a packet of old brown sugar, then went to a snack stall on the pedestrian street to ask someone to help boil a big bowl of hot brown sugar water.

Shang Yechu, committed to gaining weight, certainly wouldn't refuse. She gulped down the whole steaming bowl.

Grandma Hu watched her finish and then saw Shang Yechu crawl into bed. Only then did she relax, draw the roller blind, and totter home.

The system thought its host would finally get more than eight hours of sleep and breathed a sigh of relief—then saw Shang Yechu sneakily climb out of bed.

Shang Yechu went back into the main room of the bookstore, pulled a copy of Dream of the Red Chamber off the shelf, sat in Grandma Hu's seat, and began reading.

The system choked: "You..."

"What's wrong with me?" Shang Yechu asked casually.

The system didn't know what to ask. It ended up saying dryly, "Haven't you already finished Dream of the Red Chamber?"

"Different editions. A few days ago I read the Cheng-Gao edition; today I'm reading the Zhiyan commentary edition." Shang Yechu rubbed her temple. "This book needs to be read at least five times."

The system didn't know what to respond. It had no grasp of human emotion and couldn't understand Shang Yechu's life-risking persistence. It also didn't get why the book needed five readings—in Shang Yechu's case with her intelligence, two or three reads would probably let her memorize it.

Shang Yechu felt a splitting headache, dizziness, and chills.

She knew her body had already triggered warning bells.

"System, what is my health value now?"

"Twenty-five. It has already reached the 'on the verge of collapse' category."

"That's okay." Shang Yechu breathed easier. "I thought it might be much worse."

The system suspected its auditory sensors: "What do you mean by 'okay'?"

Shang Yechu turned a page: "It just means I can still endure. On the verge of collapse, on the verge of collapse—doesn't mean I'm completely out."

The system was almost furious at this twisted logic, although it didn't actually experience "anger."

Shang Yechu was already buzzing in her ears; her movements paused and she said, "System, why aren't you adjusting my hormones for me anymore?"

System: "....."

The system fell strangely silent for a moment. "When did you figure it out?"

"The second time you did it," she replied.

Shang Yechu pressed the book to her face and rested with her eyes closed for a short while. "At that time I was exhausted like a dog, but then suddenly felt a lot lighter. My brain practically yelled in line: 'I'm not tired, I'm not tired.' That can't be explained by 'science,' right?"

The system didn't answer.

Shang Yechu continued, "Since the only existence in this world beyond 'science' is you, can I assume you helped?"

The system silently thought: its host had gotten smarter and also harder to deal with.

"Help me completely—send the Buddha all the way to the West." Shang Yechu put the book down, revealing that unremarkable face, though her eyes shone with determination.

"I know why you've been secretly helping me without telling me."

"But adjusting once or twice is one thing; adjusting a hundred or two hundred times is another. Help me again today."

The system had expected this would happen sooner or later. It felt as if it had already seen the endless pit ahead: System, adjusting a hundred times or two hundred times is still adjusting; adjust ten thousand times or twenty thousand times—help me again today? System system system system...

A faint warm current seeped through Shang Yechu's organs and limbs. Her headache instantly eased by more than half; for her that was almost negligible. Her body felt warm, though the warmth carried a false soothing tinge.

Shang Yechu perked up and said "Thanks," then dove back into her reading.

The system sighed inwardly and said, "Don't make it a habit."

It wasn't clear who the warning was aimed at.

Shang Yechu stubbornly read until two in the morning, then practiced handwriting another hour. Her hands trembled when she finally lay down.

She didn't even have time to command the system to force dormancy before she fell asleep.

The system dutifully turned off the lights and carried out forced dormancy. In the end it spent five energy points from its own reserves to secretly raise Shang Yechu's health value back to twenty-eight.

The system's rules strictly prohibit spending the system's savings on the host because that would create unfairness and undermine the mission's purpose. Five energy points was the maximum permissible expenditure. Any more would cause energy fluctuations that might alert the main world.

The system did not know why it had done this.

But with a host like this, what else could it do?

Chapter 7: Conflict

The next day, Shang Yechu got up and felt much better than yesterday.

Although her body still ached and her head was still foggy, Shang Yechu felt she could fight through another 500,000 words!

Today was a big day: Shang Yechu's beauty points were breaking through 50. That meant she was finally leaving the ranks of the ugly and entering the realm of normal people.

She hurried to wash her face, dried it, stood in front of the mirror, and examined her face carefully.

The girl in the mirror had single eyelids, a flat nose bridge, thick lips, and a flat, round face. She was basically a collection of every facial flaw. Yet somehow those ordinary—almost ugly—features combined into a strange kind of harmony.

Shang Yechu could see more with her eyes.

Her eyes were bigger, her nose bridge stood straighter, and her underbite had eased. The acne scars were all gone. Up close, her skin was still dark and yellowish and not very refined, but the bumpy, uneven texture was gone.

Now, Shang Yechu still looked like someone you wouldn't pick out in a crowd. But on closer inspection, nobody would call her "ugly."

Just ordinary. Very ordinary.

She was reasonably satisfied.

She told the system in her mind, "Starting today, help me improve my skin tone and texture."

The system complied.

Shang Yechu thought of something else and added, "Also, I'm too short. From today on, every... three days, exchange 1 centimeter of height for me."

System: "At that rate, gaining 2 centimeters a week might be too fast. You're already twenty years old, not in puberty anymore."

Shang Yechu smiled and said, "Twenty-three, still shooting up. I'm only twenty; it'll be fine."

After breakfast, she arrived at the set. Lately she'd been lucky—she'd gotten a long-term gig as a foot soldier in a historical costume crew.

Film city always lacked male extras; they often needed a hundred but could only recruit forty. This large historical production needed even more people.

Battle scenes can have distant shots composited, but you can't have a bunch of low-quality dummies slugging it out up close. When men were short, they filled spots with women.

Shang Yechu was hardworking and quick-witted. The director said left and she didn't go right; she followed orders like clockwork. Most importantly—she had an androgynous, hard-to-pin-down kind of ugly face. So even being short, she could secure a somewhat steady paycheck with this crew.

It was almost September and still blisteringly hot. Shang Yechu wore thick armor and ran around with the main force.

Her being sharp didn't mean everyone else was. The group of soldier extras she was in had a few leaders who clearly weren't very bright and couldn't grasp the director's intentions or instructions.

The group buzzed like flies; an otherwise tight formation turned into a herd of grazing sheep across a plain.

The director flew into a rage and cursed nonstop.

Shang Yechu was drenched in sweat and panting. The sun's heat and the salt from her sweat were soaking her; she was parched and her lips were split.

The director shouted, "Are your brains made of wood?! North! North!"

Shang Yechu recognized his voice.

It was the same director who had clashed with Huang Feizhang that day. Still as hot-tempered and foul-mouthed as ever.

His surname was Yan, and he lived up to it—severely strict. Seeing the extras scattering like headless flies, his temper flared instantly.

"What the hell are you doing! Can't you understand me!? Don't understand?!" Director Yan shouted into the megaphone. "If this keeps up, no one's eating today!"

The extras buzzed even louder and grew more chaotic.

Shang Yechu felt her throat burning; her breathing grew ragged—huff, puff. A thousand voices clamored around her, making her head throb.

The system adjusted her hormones, but thirst couldn't be fixed that way. If this were any other day, she'd grit her teeth and tough it out. But she'd had a day-long cold yesterday and hadn't treated it, plus she'd stayed up late. Her body simply couldn't take the strain.

"Unqualified! How many times did I tell you to keep your eyes forward?! Who fights with their head down on the battlefield?!" Director Yan shouted.

"What fight you're doing with heads down! Aren't you afraid of being trampled by horses!"

"You told us to run according to the arrows on the ground!" someone among the extras yelled.

"Are you an idiot who needs arrows to remember? Can't you put it in your head?"

Shang Yechu felt like she had salt smeared on her and was being baked alive. Yet cold crept into her bones, a chill that seeped everywhere.

The extras and Director Yan argued. They'd all had enough of this hot-tempered, foul-mouthed director. These past few days were the last straw.

"To hell with it! A few lousy coins and you think you're something!"

"Stupid director!"

"You call us trash, but you're even trashier!"

"Who wants to be in your crew! Bad luck put me on your set!"

Director Yan's face turned purple with rage: "A bunch of—" He swallowed the profanity. No matter how upset, he knew some lines couldn't be crossed.

"Director, why don't we call it for today?" Assistant Ni pleaded, sweating. "It's too hot today. At least let people rest and drink water."

Saying that only made Director Yan angrier: "Drink what? There's no water in their brains!"

The extras exploded: "Fuck you! Who are you calling that?"

"You're the only mouth here!"

"Fat pig! Today I'll teach you who's boss!"

Suddenly the set erupted: shouting, people trying to break things up, others taking advantage of the chaos, and a few utterly clueless. The noise was deafening.

The heat already had everyone on edge. With Director Yan's usual foul mouth and unprofessional attitude, the extras had long been resentful. Today he'd lit a fuse, and everyone blew.

A few extras surged forward as if to fight Director Yan. Other crew members panicked and rushed in to pull people apart.

Director Yan was sweating profusely; his face and hair slick with oil, but he still barked, "Revolt! Revolt!"

Shang Yechu was jostled and shoved, becoming dizzy, her throat burning from thirst, sweating profusely and trembling with cold all at once.

A month of physical overexertion and binge eating had finally caught up with her; she felt the world spin and sway like a running camera shot, making her nauseous.

She gaped, but nothing came up—she had already exchanged everything this morning.

The system alerted in her mind: "Host, host, are you okay?"

Shang Yechu opened her mouth to speak. She was feverish and muddled and didn't realize she could directly speak to the system in her head. Still, nothing audible came out.

"Host! Host! Shang Yechu!"

She could no longer hear the system.

Dizziness, nausea, heat, cold, headache, and thirst washed over her. Shang Yechu swayed and then—thud—collapsed to the ground!

The crowd continued to roar. Suddenly someone shouted, "She's dead!"

The crowd instantly parted with a rush of feet, creating a wide empty space in an instant.

In the center of that space lay the fainted Shang Yechu.

"What happened?" Director Yan was terrified—if someone died during shooting because of this conflict, he'd be ruined.

"I don't know!" the extras said, not bothering to retort with the director anymore. "She just collapsed!"

"Did someone hit her?" an assistant asked, frightened.

"No!"

"Don't bullshit! Who would beat her for fun?"

"Maybe she fainted from heatstroke?" a cameraman with some experience suggested. "Someone go check."

Everyone backed away farther.

Why would anyone go up to touch a stranger? If someone actually died, who would want that trouble?

The crowd argued and nobody stepped forward. Shang Yechu lay motionless like she really was dead.

At that moment, a tall figure pushed through the crowd, took three strides forward, and scooped Shang Yechu into his arms!

People tensed, uncertain, because he kept his head down and his face was hidden.

His movements were professional and swift, like a medical robot.

When the man finally lifted his head, the noisy scene went silent and everyone sucked in a breath.

He was an astonishingly handsome man—perhaps "beautiful" was a more fitting word. Every feature on his face was perfect, as if measured to the smallest fraction by the most precise instrument, with no flaw.

Strangely, though his looks were delicate to an extreme degree, he gave off no feminine vibe.

What was odd was that his face showed no human emotion. He moved quickly, but there was no trace of anxiety.

The unnamed man scanned the crowd; when his glassy, inorganic eyes swept over them, a chill ran through people's hearts.

The set grew even quieter.

The man carried Shang Yechu with precision and walked toward a single direction.

Only after he had completely exited everyone's sight did those present dare to exhale.

"Who was that?"

"I've never seen him."

"Must be some big star."

"No way! A celebrity that looks like that would already be famous. I've never seen him on TV even once."

"He's so handsome... I've never seen anyone like him."

"Who did he pick up?"

"Some extra, I guess."

"Who is he?"

Director Yan gaped, and it took him a long moment to close his mouth.

Having seen many stars in the entertainment industry, he was still stunned by this man.

He had never seen anyone so—so...

He couldn't find words.

Assistant Ni smacked his lips and said, "He's really tall. He passed right by me—at least 1.9 meters."

Being short, the assistant often focused on height rather than faces.

Director Yan snapped back to himself and, thinking of the earlier chaos, said angrily, "Who said she was dead? She just fainted from heat!"

The crowd realized their mistake and looked around sheepishly, wondering why they'd lost their heads just now.

A male extra stepped forward and awkwardly scratched his head. "Director, we've been filming so many battle scenes these days... I've died over a dozen times. Seeing her drop just made my mouth run away."

Laughter erupted: "Hahahahahaha..."

"You brat!"

"You scared us to death!"

"You can scare people to death!"

The set burst into laughter and the tense, irritable atmosphere eased considerably.

In heated arguments people often lose their cool; after hearing that extra's line, everyone viewed the incident as a prank and the misunderstanding deflated.

With this small twist, the conflict cooled. The assistant quickly smoothed things over and spoke soothingly.

Director Yan was a bit shaken, and more importantly, his head was full of that mysterious man—so he offered a perfunctory apology and promised to shoot the scene another day.

The previously raucous set quieted down. People dispersed, most talking about the man who had just appeared.

Wiping his sweat, Director Yan thought: someone that good-looking appearing in film city must be an actor. But why had he never seen him before?

If he was an undiscovered gem, an anonymous talent, then this was an opportunity to discover him. This person would surely become a star; he needed to find him and get ahead as someone who gave him his first break.

But how to find him? Wait—he had taken away the fainted extra, so that extra must have some special connection to him.

With that thought, the director beckoned the assistant: "You go ask who fainted just now."

The assistant agreed.

Just as the assistant left, Director Yan suddenly tapped his forehead.

Huh? What did that man look like just now?

No—what had just happened?

There had been a squabble, someone fainted, and something else occurred in between?

Director Yan suddenly couldn't recall.

It was as if some powerful force was erasing and blurring his recent memory without a trace. Unfortunately, Director Yan didn't notice this. Neither did the people who had left.

By the time Director Yan stood up, all memory of that man had already vanished.

Over on the other side, the cameraman who had broken up the fight returned to his station and was astonished to find the camera still on!

He hurried to check the footage; if the conflict had been recorded, that could be trouble...

He watched the playback; indeed, the clash had been recorded. He was about to delete the clip when he saw a man in the footage who looked so perfectly handsome he seemed unreal. Even though the crowd partially obscured him, the face was still visible.

The footage captured the entire moment from the man's arrival to him carrying Shang Yechu away.

The cameraman froze.

Was there really someone like that just now? Why couldn't he remember?

Why would he forget someone like that so instantly?

That same powerful force had affected the cameraman's memory too. He stared dumbfounded at the man in the footage—his eyes told him this was a face unique in the world, breathtaking and unforgettable—yet his brain kept urging: forget him! forget him! forget him!

After a stunned pause, a sudden inspiration hit. He pulled out his phone and used it to record the segment of video from the camera showing the man's appearance.

After recording, he put his phone away. The camera suddenly went black.

The cameraman blinked.

After a moment, he realized the shoot had ended; he felt relieved and became happy: so he had been the one who turned off the camera after all!

Chapter 8: Rest

Shang Yechu slowly woke up, first seeing the snow-white ceiling.

She moved slightly and discovered her body felt incredibly relaxed. She was so clear-headed and refreshed that it almost didn't feel like her own body.

Shang Yechu sat up and found herself in what seemed to be a small hotel room. The room was tiny, but relatively clean and hygienic.

Shang Yechu looked around but didn't see anyone.

"System, what's going on? How did I get here?"

The system replied coolly, "Host, your health value dropped to 24, and you fainted on set."

Shang Yechu: "I feel great now, genuinely great, not that artificial good feeling from hormonal adjustments..."

Shang Yechu became alert: "System, what happened? You didn't exchange all my convertible body weight while I was asleep, did you?"

System: "..."

The system said incredulously, "Even at a time like this, you're still worried about your convertible body weight?"

Shang Yechu lifted her arm to look and immediately turned pale with shock.

Her arm had become skin and bones, like a dry twig wrapped in skin. Although she wasn't overweight before, she was never this emaciated!

"System? What's going on? Didn't you say before that 50kg was my limit? Didn't you say this 50kg was my base weight and couldn't be exchanged? How could it decrease further?"

The system said, "The system originally determined that 50kg was just right for your current height. Any thinner would affect your long-term health."

"But under emergency circumstances, with the host fainting and unable to immediately gain weight, long-term health had to be considered later. I could only use your base weight to exchange for health value."

"I exchanged a total of 10 health value points for you, just to wake you up."

In other words, Shang Yechu now weighed only 80 jin.

"But host, this must not happen again. Your weight has now reached the absolute minimum. If such extreme circumstances occur again next time, would you have me scrape your bones for exchange?"

What the system didn't mention was that he had contributed 5 points himself.

Although the system didn't have emotions like "anger," Shang Yechu still keenly detected a hint of trouble. To be honest, this feeling was quite novel, but... well, her intuition told her it would be better not to tease the system further.

So, Shang Yechu waved her skeletal-thin arm and changed the subject, asking about the current situation:

"Where is this? Who brought me here?"

System: "This is an hourly room in a hotel. Two hours were booked for forty yuan total. The money was taken from your backpack's side pocket."

Shang Yechu turned her head and saw her backpack indeed placed by the bed.

System: "As for who brought you here, of course it was the film city staff. They deal with this kind of thing every day and are quite experienced."

Shang Yechu asked doubtfully, "Then why bring me to an hourly room instead of calling 120 directly?"

System: "Calling 120 costs seven hundred fifty yuan each time."

Shang Yechu: "Oh, I understand."

Shang Yechu immediately felt relieved and even silently thanked those staff members in her heart. If she had to pay seven hundred fifty just for heatstroke, Shang Yechu might faint again.

System: "You only had ordinary heatstroke. Cooling down and sleeping a bit more would fix it. So they brought you to this nearest hotel."

After feeling relieved about saving her money, Shang Yechu still felt something was off.

She thought for a moment and asked again, "The money in my backpack's side pocket was for buying snacks tonight. How did they know I kept money there?"

System: "Don't you humans only have a few places to keep money? Anyway, they wouldn't pay for you."

Shang Yechu thought that made sense. The logic was sound, so she didn't probe further. After all, the system wouldn't lie to her.

The clock on the wall showed it was almost one o'clock. The morning filming had certainly ended, but there should still be time to get the leftover boxed meals from the crew.

Shang Yechu absolutely couldn't miss the boxed meals!

Just as she was about to get out of bed, the system said, "Host, this hourly room was booked for two hours. You've only been here for half an hour."

The system added, "The money has been paid and cannot be refunded."

Shang Yechu immediately became as quiet as a chicken and quickly climbed back into bed.

Compared to boxed meals worth over ten yuan, the forty-yuan hourly room was more valuable!

Even in the hotel, time shouldn't be wasted. Shang Yechu picked up her backpack again, preparing to take out books to read.

"Host, why don't you rest for a while?" The system remained silent for a moment before asking, unable to hold back, "If what happened today occurs again, wouldn't the gain be not worth the loss?"

Shang Yechu paused her movements.

What followed was a long silence.

Just when the system thought she wouldn't answer, he suddenly heard Shang Yechu's voice.

"Because, if I don't work harder, it will be too late..."

Too late for what?

The system really wanted to ask, but Shang Yechu had already put down her backpack and lay on the bed.

"You're right too. I should rest for a while. System, initiate forced dormancy on me."

Although he didn't understand human emotions, the system suddenly understood that Shang Yechu didn't want to talk about this matter. So he didn't ask and initiated one hour of forced dormancy for Shang Yechu.

After waking up, Shang Yechu was ravenous. She went out, found a small convenience store, gritted her teeth, painfully bought two packs of plain compressed biscuits, and ate them all with mineral water.

That dry, bean-powder-like texture seemed to suck all the moisture away. Eating while drinking water made her stomach feel extremely bloated. Shang Yechu exchanged them immediately after eating, and the bloated feeling disappeared.

With the system watching closely like a hawk, Shang Yechu obediently exchanged the increased weight for one health value point. After recovering some energy, she returned to the set.

As a long-term extra in this drama, a mere heatstroke was nothing. The afternoon filming was about to begin, and Shang Yechu hurriedly changed into her costume. No one expressed any concern about her fainting incident.

While mocking her own lack of popularity, Shang Yechu also felt relieved. Not having to deal with all those fake concerns was truly liberating.

In her previous life, Shang Yechu had been a fool. No matter who it was, they all seemed wonderful in her eyes. She mistook sarcasm for concern, bullying for friendship, and ultimately deserved that ending.

In this life, she had become more silent. Not because she was bad at socializing, but because she disdained it.

After finishing her scenes, Shang Yechu specifically inquired about the location of the film city volunteer service station and expressed her gratitude to the staff there.

Recently, many people had suffered heatstroke, and indeed two people had been carried away due to heatstroke that morning. With so many people in the film city, plus Shang Yechu having quite an ordinary face, the staff couldn't clearly remember who this extra was, and thus vaguely accepted her gratitude.

Chapter 9: House Fighting Drama

Time flew by swiftly. In the blink of an eye, two months had already passed since Shang Yechu's rebirth.

Today's filming was for a historical romance drama centered on harem conflicts.

Historical romance and harem struggles—when these two elements came together, it usually signaled a terrible production. This drama was titled "Deep Mansion Moonlight," telling the love story between a young lady who came from afar seeking shelter at the Marquis' residence and the eldest young master of the household.

The lead roles were played by rising star Jiang Zhiyuan and third-tier actress Chu Hanyue. The director was a female director named Jiang Lei who frequently directed historical romance dramas.

Jiang Zhiyuan and Chu Hanyue had played supporting male and female roles respectively in their previous fantasy drama. That production had a massive budget but completely bombed in ratings. While the lead actors' efforts came to nothing, the pairing between the second male lead and second female lead gained some modest popularity.

At this time, large-scale marketing campaigns focused on shipping celebrity couples hadn't yet become widespread on the internet. However, some producers still seized the business opportunity and brought the two together for a second collaboration.

For these two newly rising actors, this was undoubtedly an opportunity they couldn't resist. Therefore, without much hesitation, they seamlessly joined the cast of this low-budget historical romance drama.

Whether it was second-tier or third-tier actors, good productions or bad ones—none of this concerned Shang Yechu. Today, she was lucky enough to land a minor servant role.

The plot went like this: shortly after the female lead entered the mansion, she was betrayed by her personal maid. The head wife falsely accused her of stealing the old madam's bird's nest and selling it to an outside medicinal shop.

To prove her innocence, the female lead summoned the medicinal shop owner for a direct confrontation.

The shop owner, having been bribed by the head wife, stubbornly insisted that the female lead had sold him the bird's nest at a low price. The female lead found it impossible to defend herself, until the male lead appeared.

The male lead asked the shop owner several sharp questions in the main hall. The shop owner's answers were full of holes and inconsistencies, eventually revealing flaws that restored the female lead's innocence.

Shang Yechu played a minor servant who did miscellaneous work in the outer courtyard. Her only scene involved digging up some gold and silver buried under a tree, carrying it to the main room, and saying: "Old Madam, we found these under the tree."

Just this single line of dialogue already represented one of the more substantial roles among the extras Shang Yechu had played so far.

She only managed to land even this small role because she had always been clever and diligent on set, and today they happened to be short of male extras.

Shang Yechu seriously completed her part, vividly portraying a minor servant who accidentally got caught up in the conflicts among the masters, full of anxiety and unease.

After presenting the gold and silver, Shang Yechu retreated to the side, minimizing her presence as she quietly watched the major drama unfolding in the main hall.

[Chu Hanyue, playing the female lead, had red-rimmed eyes but an utterly stubborn expression: "Old Ancestor! I didn't do it!"

"Miss of the Chu family," the head wife said with a sarcastic tone, "If every matter could be resolved by simply saying 'you didn't do it' or 'I didn't do it' without evidence, then what would we need government offices for?"

"You!" Chu Hanyue exclaimed angrily, "Aunt, clearly someone is maliciously framing me!"

Upon hearing this, the medicinal shop owner immediately became displeased: "Miss Chu! Are you saying my Tian Family Medicinal Shop would use our decades-old reputation to harm you?"

Chu Hanyue quickly responded: "I don't mean that! It's just... if someone tampered with something, making Shopkeeper Tian mistakenly believe I was the one who delivered the bird's nest, that possibility can't be ruled out..."

The plot was utterly boring. Although Shang Yechu was observing carefully, she felt quite speechless internally.

A prominent Marquis' household, making such a fuss over a few ounces of bird's nest, arguing noisily and turning the entire mansion upside down, even holding a public confrontation—this storyline was truly too...

Director Jiang Lei was also shaking her head.

Amid the noisy commotion, the female lead appeared helpless and flustered, her eyes red-rimmed, looking pitiful and delicate.

Chu Hanyue belonged to the fresh and charming type. When her eyes reddened, it immediately evoked protective feelings in people.

This was the same acting approach she used for her supporting female role in the previous drama.

That supporting character was exactly this type of fresh, innocent fairy—naive with a touch of pure temptation—that won abundant audience sympathy.

But while a supporting female character could be played this way, a female lead absolutely could not.

Audiences had much stricter requirements for female leads because they served as the focal point of the drama, bearing the brunt of scrutiny.

As the female lead in a harem struggle drama, Chu Hanyue's performance came across as too weak and incompetent.

Director Jiang Lei shook her head but didn't call cut.

After all, she was someone the investors had decided on. As just a hired director, she would let it be. Perhaps the acting would improve in future scenes.

Just as Chu Hanyue was being rendered speechless by Shopkeeper Tian's accusations, the male lead Jiang Zhiyuan made his grand entrance.

Jiang Zhiyuan appeared in flowing blue robes, elegant and handsome, the perfect image of a refined young noble. The moment he appeared, he delivered clever remarks one after another, making Shopkeeper Tian break out in sweat.

The camera crew went wild filming Jiang Zhiyuan—full-body long shots, close-up special shots, everything was arranged. Multiple camera angles aimed to showcase his 360-degree handsome appearance without any dead angles.

Jiang Zhiyuan was indeed very handsome, fitting the currently popular sunny and robust type.

Next, Jiang Zhiyuan stepped closer to Shopkeeper Tian step by step, staring directly into his eyes, about to break through the shopkeeper's psychological defenses!

The camera gave many close-ups of Jiang Zhiyuan's eyes, determined to capture the male lead's sharp gaze and intelligent brilliance.

Of course, this intelligent brilliance would require some post-production enhancement, since Jiang Zhiyuan also came from a popularity background, and his acting skills were roughly on par with Chu Hanyue's.

Director Jiang Lei shook her head again as she watched.

Jiang Zhiyuan's problem was the same as Chu Hanyue's—he retained his acting approach from the previous drama. In that show, he played a charmingly wicked and unrestrained demon general, and now he brought that same wild arrogance into this noble young master character.

A perfectly good young noble ended up being portrayed by Jiang Zhiyuan like a villain.

Just then, Jiang Zhiyuan's agent suddenly approached and whispered something to Jiang Lei.

Director Jiang Lei frowned.

"Cut!"

The actors on set were confused.

What happened? They hadn't made any mistakes. Did Shopkeeper Tian miss his lines?

Director Jiang Lei frowned deeply, saying weakly: "Everyone, take a break for now."

The assistant director approached, puzzled: "Director Jiang, what's wrong?"

Jiang Zhiyuan's agent smiled apologetically: "It's our Zhiyuan, there's a bit of a situation."

The assistant director glanced back at Jiang Zhiyuan—he wasn't missing any limbs, so what could possibly be the situation?

A flicker of impatience showed in Jiang Lei's eyes as she said quietly: "Look at Shopkeeper Tian's height, then look at Jiang Zhiyuan's."

The assistant director opened the recently recorded footage, and after just a couple glances, he understood.

Oh!

It was simply that Shopkeeper Tian was a whole head taller than Jiang Zhiyuan!

In Jiang Zhiyuan's previous fantasy drama, there were no strict requirements—they just dressed him in whatever looked handsome. Jiang Zhiyuan wore the tall crowns of demon realm inhabitants, with flowing robes and cloud-patterned shoes that made him appear much taller visually.

But this harem struggle drama had historical background, so naturally they couldn't use those flashy headpieces and shoes.

Chu Hanyue had a petite figure, so Jiang Zhiyuan wouldn't appear too inadequate standing beside her.

But now, standing before Shopkeeper Tian, even with height-increasing insoles, Jiang Zhiyuan was still a head shorter than the other man.

The male lead was actually a whole head shorter than a cannon-fodder extra!

How could this be acceptable?

Where was the imposing presence needed to interrogate the villain? Where was the dignity befitting a male lead?

Because of this, Jiang Zhiyuan's agent urgently called for a stop to communicate with the director.

Chapter 10: A Timely Help in a Snowstorm

The agent said: "Our Xiaoyuan makes his living as an idol! What is an idol? Someone who fulfills fans' fantasies!"

The agent said sharply: "Xiaoyuan stands there, and even a medicine seller towers over him by a full head! How can fans maintain their fantasies then?"

Director Jiang Lei began to feel a headache coming on.

Seeing this, the assistant director quickly said: "What should we do then? How about having the actor playing Shopkeeper Tian hunch over to appear shorter?"

The agent immediately put on an ingratiating smile: "That would be perfect."

The assistant director glanced at Jiang Lei, and seeing her nod in agreement, had no choice but to go over himself.

Shang Yechu watched from a distance as the assistant director said something to the actor playing Shopkeeper Tian. Shopkeeper Tian's expression changed, looking quite displeased, but he still nodded and agreed.

Shang Yechu asked curiously: "System, what is the assistant director saying to Shopkeeper Tian?"

103 responded coldly: "I only interface with the host. Others are not within my monitoring scope."

Shang Yechu wasn't annoyed, just kept watching Shopkeeper Tian and the others: "It's fine if you don't want to watch. I can figure it out by observing how they perform for a while."

The second take began, starting from the confrontation between Jiang Zhiyuan and Shopkeeper Tian.

Shopkeeper Tian hunched over, looking miserable as he exchanged lines with Jiang Zhiyuan. He was an experienced actor with good line delivery skills and decent acting ability.

But his posture was truly awful to look at. At first glance, it didn't look like a medicinal shopkeeper speaking with a young master from a noble household, but more like a local landlord scolding his tenant farmer who had bent his back from hard labor.

Director Jiang Lei frowned deeply and couldn't take it anymore: "Cut!"

She simply couldn't stand it! The entire scene lacked any aesthetic appeal! What should have been an intense confrontation over false accusations had turned into some kind of countryside farm amusement!

The assistant director, having worked with her many times, immediately understood why Jiang Lei had called cut and quickly approached to offer suggestions:

"How about this? Don't have Shopkeeper Tian and Jiang Zhiyuan in the same frame? Whichever character is speaking, the camera focuses on their face? Then finish with an eye close-up?"

Jiang Lei said impatiently: "What kind of mess would that be with the camera shaking around! Besides, audiences have sharp eyes! Cutting back and forth like that, anyone could tell the height difference between one-sixty and one-seventy!"

"Then what should we do!" The assistant director also had his temper: "This doesn't work, that doesn't work. Sister Jiang, this is..."

The assistant director didn't finish his sentence, but Jiang Lei knew he meant "this is someone the investors approved, we can't afford to offend them."

Jiang Lei was also getting a headache.

Seeing this situation, the agent stepped forward: "In that case, why not just replace him with a shorter actor?"

Worried that the actor playing Shopkeeper Tian might be unhappy and damage Jiang Zhiyuan's reputation if word got out, the agent added:

"Of course! We won't let the Shopkeeper Tian actor perform for nothing! He'll still get his pay, we'll cover the cost, no need for the production team to pay out of pocket, how about that? Plus a ten percent bonus!"

Jiang Lei really wanted to curse out loud.

Was this about money? Actors aren't that easy to find!

Shopkeeper Tian wasn't some ordinary maid or servant with just one or two lines that any random actor could muddle through.

Shopkeeper Tian had a whole string of lines, needing to confront Jiang Zhiyuan while portraying that shrewd, worldly-wise character along with the guilt of being exposed - where could they find someone like that on such short notice?

If they couldn't find an actor, this scene would have to be postponed, disrupting today's entire shooting schedule!

Shang Yechu squinted as she watched the commotion in the distance, then suddenly smiled: "I know what they're arguing about."

The system said disinterestedly: "What?"

Shang Yechu chuckled softly: "Shopkeeper Tian is too tall, wounding Jiang Zhiyuan's fragile ego."

103: "Oh."

Shang Yechu was already used to the system's coldness and wasn't annoyed. She just assessed the situation for a moment, then walked back to get the complete script for this scene from the table.

Shang Yechu scanned through the script rapidly, the lines imprinting firmly in her mind as if printed there.

Soon, Shang Yechu finished reading the script, and over there, the assistant director had successfully persuaded the actor playing Shopkeeper Tian.

Shopkeeper Tian's expression was certainly not happy, but how could small-time actors like them stand up against the main cast? Plus he was getting extra money, so despite his displeasure, Shopkeeper Tian left straightforwardly.

Jiang Lei sighed, about to announce "this scene will be postponed to such-and-such date for shooting," when suddenly a shadow fell over her.

Jiang Lei looked up to see an ordinary-looking actor dressed as a laborer standing before her.

At first glance, it appeared to be a man; upon closer look, one could tell this person was actually a girl.

Probably another case of the production team not being able to find suitable male extras and making do with whatever was available.

Jiang Lei never had the patience to teach extras how to act, and being in a bad mood at the moment, she was about to say "go back to your place" when the young extra in front of her said:

"Director, I'd like to try out for the Shopkeeper Tian role."

Jiang Lei widened her eyes in surprise: "What did you say?"

Shang Yechu said patiently: "I said, I'd like to try out for the Shopkeeper Tian role."

"Oh?" Jiang Lei said curiously, "How did you know?"

Shang Yechu said quietly: "I saw the Shopkeeper Tian actor seemed to leave because he wasn't feeling well, but since Shopkeeper Tian isn't that important of a role, our shooting schedule shouldn't be delayed because of him! So I thought I'd come try out."

Of course Shopkeeper Tian hadn't left because he was unwell, but the girl phrasing it this way showed good emotional intelligence.

Jiang Lei didn't become more patient with the girl because of her emotional intelligence.

Jiang Lei scanned her: "You? Do you know how to act? Being on camera and doing odd jobs are completely different things! Just memorizing Shopkeeper Tian's lines would take you a day or two, and in the time I wait for you, why wouldn't I just find a newcomer?"

Jiang Lei's tone was sharp, but Shang Yechu wasn't annoyed. She immediately began: "On the seventeenth, a servant-looking person came to our medicinal shop asking about the price of bird's nest. I said, our shop's bird's nest prices are the most fair. One tael of bird's nest costs only two taels, seven qian, and three fen of silver. The servant said, he wasn't asking about the selling price, but the buying price. I showed him a number from my sleeve, and then he took out a large package of bird's nest..."

The more Shang Yechu spoke, the more surprised Jiang Lei became. By the end, her eyes were wide open!

Everything Shang Yechu was saying were Shopkeeper Tian's lines!

And they matched the script word for word!

Even more astonishing was that Shang Yechu's tone was thoroughly worldly-wise and slick, fluent and familiar! Just listening to the voice, no one would doubt she was an experienced medicinal shopkeeper!

Shang Yechu's voice was actually somewhat hoarse, not unpleasant to hear, just ambiguous in gender. Combined with the tone she had just used, she wasn't any worse than the experienced actor who had left!

This was truly timely assistance in a snowstorm!

Chapter 11: Extras in a House Fighting Drama

Jiang Lei looked Shang Yechu up and down, then asked, "What's your name? How do you know Shopkeeper Tian's lines?"

Shang Yechu lowered her head shyly and said, "You can call me Little Ye. The senior actor playing Shopkeeper Tian is very experienced, and I wanted to learn from him. So when he was memorizing his lines, I often lingered around him. Before I knew it, I had learned them."

Shang Yechu didn't plan to reveal her true abilities right now. She was still too insignificant in the entertainment industry, her status even smaller than a sesame seed. Being too conspicuous wouldn't be good for her.

Jiang Lei breathed a sigh of relief. She had almost thought Shang Yechu had memorized all the lines after hearing Shopkeeper Tian say them just once.

Thinking of this, Jiang Lei couldn't help but chuckle. Shang Yechu looked quite young, probably hadn't even attended university. If she truly had a photographic memory or the ability to remember everything after hearing it once, why would she have dropped out of school to come here?

Jiang Lei nodded and said, "Just knowing the lines normally wouldn't be enough, but since you have this determination, let's give it a try."

This scene was meant to be the male lead's shining moment, and dragging it out like this wasn't a solution.

The production assistant immediately took Shang Yechu to change clothes. Shang Yechu had a petite figure, and when she put on Shopkeeper Tian's costume, it looked like a child wearing adult clothes.

The Assistant Director frowned at Shang Yechu's appearance, not thinking she was any better than the older actor from before.

However, Jiang Zhiyuan's agent was quite satisfied. The reason was simple - Shang Yechu was only about 160 centimeters tall, standing before Jiang Zhiyuan like a little chick, making Jiang Zhiyuan appear exceptionally tall and imposing.

Over these past days, Shang Yechu had been exchanging for one centimeter of height every three days, slowly accumulating to reach 162 centimeters.

This height wasn't particularly outstanding in the entertainment industry, but it was definitely much better than Shang Yechu's previous mini stature.

Shang Yechu stood opposite Jiang Zhiyuan.

As soon as Shang Yechu took her position, the cameraman was slightly surprised.

The reason was simple - the spot where Shang Yechu stood showed remarkable awareness.

As the saying goes, laymen watch the excitement while experts watch the technique. In television production, positioning naturally has its own techniques.

The position where Shang Yechu stood neither stole Jiang Zhiyuan's visual focus nor was too offset to make the frame appear unbalanced. Instead, it created a beautifully balanced symmetry in the composition.

To put it another way, if Jiang Zhiyuan was like a lonely artificial flower, then Shang Yechu's presence as the green leaf lifted this flower to just the right position, giving the artificial flower a touch of genuine charm!

But this plain-looking little extra was just a background actor - how could she have this positioning awareness that only experienced actors possess?

These thoughts flashed through his mind only briefly. The cameraman had filmed more actors than there were grains of sand on a beach, and in the blink of an eye, he dismissed these distracting thoughts.

Who cared whether it was intentional or unintentional? Finishing early and getting off work was what really mattered!

Although Jiang Zhiyuan wasn't yet a top-tier star, he already had the temper of one. Seeing that Shang Yechu was already in position, he said impatiently, "Can we start now? We've already wasted half the day."

Just before filming began, Shang Yechu suddenly made a small gesture.

Shopkeeper Tian's costume was several sizes too big for her body. Other aspects were manageable, but the sleeves were simply too long, hanging down and completely covering Shang Yechu's hands.

Shang Yechu slowly rolled up both sleeves, revealing her hands.

This action was quite inconspicuous, and originally no one on set would have noticed it. Only because the cameraman had become somewhat attentive to Shang Yechu due to her positioning did he capture this small movement.

"Action!"

As the word rang out, the expression on Shang Yechu's face instantly transformed!

The dullness and shyness belonging to a small extra vanished completely, replaced by an appearance of extreme obsequiousness and slickness.

This obsequious slickness wasn't merely a superficial expression, but a quality that permeated her entire face. Although Shang Yechu still looked just as young, her demeanor suddenly matured by twenty or thirty years, and even the wrinkles on her face seemed to have multiplied.

Shang Yechu slightly narrowed her eyes, her small eyes gleaming with shrewd business acumen. Combined with the deliberately exaggerated ugly smile she put on, every wrinkle seemed to ooze slickness, making her instantly appear ten times more experienced than before.

Even Jiang Zhiyuan was slightly startled.

Although Jiang Zhiyuan had no acting skills, he had eyes and a brain. He could see Shang Yechu's ability to transform her expression in an instant.

Nevertheless, Jiang Zhiyuan wasn't about to be shaken by a mere background actor. He collected himself and said with a smile, "Shopkeeper Tian, would you be willing to repeat what you just said before the Old Madam and the others?"

Shang Yechu paused slightly, instinctively wanting to glance at the Head Wife who had instructed her, but wisely stopped herself from doing so.

Shang Yechu replied with an ingratiating smile, "Oh my! Young Master! Even if you asked this humble one to repeat it ten times, it would be exactly the same."

Director Jiang Lei nodded. The original line was "Even if you asked this old man to repeat it ten times, it would be exactly the same," but since Shang Yechu wasn't old, she had improvised and changed "old man" to "humble one." Quite clever.

Jiang Zhiyuan snorted, "If I tell you to say it, then say it. What, can the Old Madam and the wives hear it, but I cannot?"

Shang Yechu bowed slightly toward Jiang Zhiyuan, "How would I dare, how would I dare."

Shang Yechu turned around, facing the Old Madam and the others, and said respectfully:

"On the seventeenth, someone who looked like a servant came to our medicinal shop, inquiring about the price of bird's nest. I said, our shop's bird's nest is priced most fairly. One tael of bird's nest costs only two taels, seven mace, and three fen of silver. The servant said he wasn't asking about the selling price, but the buying price. I gestured a number to him from within my sleeve—"

At this point, Shang Yechu suddenly paused slightly and made a somewhat surprising move.

Shang Yechu gave her right hand a slight flick, causing the rolled-up sleeve to fall down. Then, she made several gestures within the sleeve before casually rolling the sleeve back up!

The entire sequence of movements was very casual, harmonious, and natural. While performing these actions, Shang Yechu continued speaking her lines without interruption. No one found her small movements abrupt.

However, the cameraman's eyes widened slightly!

In traditional society, merchants had a trade term called "swallowing gold in sleeves." In industries like medicinal herbs or antiques, prices were often secret. To prevent outsiders from knowing the prices, merchants would negotiate within their sleeves. Making a few gestures in the sleeve, feeling each other's hands, they could determine each other's price ranges.

This method of transaction was called "swallowing gold in sleeves," also known as "business in the sleeve pipes."

What this little extra had just performed was exactly the "swallowing gold in sleeves" gesture!

With just this one skilled movement, an experienced medicinal shop proprietor came vividly to life on camera. Even though Shang Yechu still had that young face, no one present would think she was just a greenhorn anymore.

Beyond that, there was an even more important implication.

These two long sleeves were originally due to ill-fitting costumes from the last-minute actor change. But after this little extra performed this sequence of movements, audiences would only think the sleeves were intentionally lengthened for the medicinal shop proprietor to conduct business!

Those unaware would probably even praise the costume department for their attention to detail!

With just one inconspicuous action, she had transformed the mundane into the magical, turning the production team's mistake into a brilliant stroke that enriched the character!

The cameraman was both astonished and doubtful. If the earlier positioning was a coincidence, then could this "sleeve maneuver" also be a coincidence?

The cameraman was a veteran in the entertainment industry, and he was quite certain he had never seen this little extra's face on camera before.

Could it be that there truly existed natural-born actors in this world?

Chapter 12: The House Fighting Drama is Over

Shang Yechu had no idea what the cameraman was thinking, continuing her scene with Jiang Zhiyuan.

Director Jiang Lei hadn't called cut yet, apparently quite satisfied with this take. While she might not have noticed the intricacies of the sleeve price negotiation technique, as a director she could certainly recognize good acting.

The scene proceeded smoothly. Next came the climax of this storyline: Shopkeeper Tian being exposed, with Jiang Zhiyuan pressing him to reveal who was behind it all. Just as Shopkeeper Tian was about to name the Head Wife, the Head Wife suddenly reached out and picked up a piece of osmanthus sugar cake from the table.

This action silenced Shopkeeper Tian, because osmanthus sugar cake was his youngest son's favorite treat. The Head Wife's gesture was clearly threatening his family.

Realizing he had made a deal with the devil with no way back, overwhelmed by grief and indignation, Shopkeeper Tian drew a dagger from his robes and slit his own throat.

Before dying, Shopkeeper Tian cast one last resentful, despairing glance at the Head Wife, haunting her nightmares for days afterward.

Yes, the plot was this absurd and illogical. A simple medicinal shop owner would carry a dagger on his person? And the prestigious Marquis' estate wouldn't search visitors before allowing them audience, letting Shopkeeper Tian bring a weapon inside!

Although this scene was designed to showcase the villainous Head Wife's sinister cruelty, Shang Yechu suspected it might actually be trying to expose how feudal society devoured people—how just a few ounces of bird's nest could drive a shopkeeper with decades of heritage to suicide. Plus the importance of security measures.

Plot decisions were the director and screenwriter's concern; a minor extra like Shang Yechu had no say. After this scene finished, filming paused briefly as the props department handed Shang Yechu a spring-loaded dagger before resuming.

Shopkeeper Tian turned pale, casting a pleading look toward the Head Wife, hoping his master would offer him a way out.

The Head Wife rotated her prayer beads, her expression benevolent like a chanting bodhisattva.

This gesture shattered Shopkeeper Tian's last hope. He knew he had become a disposable pawn.

Fine beads of sweat appeared on Shopkeeper Tian's forehead.

Normally the makeup team would need to spray water on Shang Yechu's forehead for this effect, but unexpectedly this minor actor had actually sweated naturally, looking more authentic than any artificial application. The makeup artist took a small break.

Shopkeeper Tian's sweat droplets and the Head Wife's prayer beads created a visual symphony. As the beads rotated, the sweat trickled down.

Jiang Zhiyuan continued pressing Shang Yechu: "Oh? Shopkeeper Tian, what couldn't possibly be said?"

Rarely encountering a supporting character shorter than himself, Jiang Zhiyuan deliberately moved closer, trying to emphasize his height advantage.

Behind the monitor, Jiang Lei shook her head.

Jiang Zhiyuan's approach was becoming excessive. With Shopkeeper Tian practically wearing "I have no choice" on his face, the Young Master's aggressive manner made him seem like someone reveling in petty triumph.

But the worst was yet to come. Jiang Zhiyuan moved closer and closer until, whether intentionally or not, he ended up blocking half of Shopkeeper Tian's face!

This was a serious blocking error. Director Jiang Lei frowned, the word "cut" on her lips, when she suddenly paused.

Shopkeeper Tian seemed terrified by the Young Master, instinctively stepping back, then slipping and collapsing to his knees on the floor!

This movement brought Shopkeeper Tian's face back into frame while perfectly conveying his panicked, chaotic state of mind!

"Excellent!" Jiang Lei silently praised.

Though directors constantly shout "cut, cut, cut," they're actually the last people who want to stop filming for mistakes. Most cuts mean failure and trouble. Jiang Lei greatly appreciated those who saved her headaches.

Only the costume designer watching from the sidelines winced, sucking air through her teeth.

Summer costumes were thin, and since the script didn't include Shopkeeper Tian kneeling in fear, the costume department hadn't provided Shang Yechu with knee pads...

She had just dropped straight to her knees! The movement was smooth and fluid, without the slightest hesitation! Were her knees made of iron? Or did she feel no pain?

What made the costume designer gasp even more was that after kneeling, Shopkeeper Tian didn't just stay put but crawled several steps toward the Head Wife on his knees!

The costume designer couldn't bear to imagine what state this extra actor's knees would be in.

Jiang Lei frowned briefly but didn't call cut, focusing intently on Shopkeeper Tian's movements. She didn't realize she had become completely captivated by this minor supporting character, even forgetting about the male lead's crucial scene.

Crawling on his knees while pressing one hand to his waist, Shopkeeper Tian cried out: "Old Madam, Madam, show mercy!"

Halfway through his crawl, Shopkeeper Tian suddenly froze, lifting his head with a flash of despair in his eyes.

Director Jiang Lei's eyes lit up—she understood what this extra was trying to convey!

Shopkeeper Tian knelt at a distance from the Head Wife that was delicate—from the side camera angle, the composition looked perfectly balanced.

With a loud cry, Shopkeeper Tian drew the dagger from his waist and stabbed his own neck!

The spring-loaded dagger retracted, requiring special effects to be added later.

Shopkeeper Tian collapsed heavily to the ground.

The script called for "the corpse's eyes gleaming with an eerie light," leaving the specific eeriness to the actor's interpretation.

Most actors facing such ambiguous direction would simply roll their eyes and call it done. After all, post-production would add bloodshot effects and creepy background music. With enough atmosphere, even cross-eyed staring could be made terrifying.

But Shang Yechu rejected such superficial acting choices.

Shang Yechu gasped with her mouth wide open, breathing laboriously. Instead of rolling her eyes, her gaze remained stubbornly focused, staring fixedly at the Head Wife's fingers, her vision concentrated into a single point.

The actress playing the Head Wife trembled slightly at her fingertips.

Shang Yechu's stare remained fixed, her pupils dark as inkwells reflecting the Head Wife's image.

"Cut!"

As Jiang Lei's voice rang out, Shang Yechu quickly scrambled to her feet, blinking rapidly.

She had kept her eyes wide open playing dead until Jiang Lei called cut. Not blinking for so long was genuinely uncomfortable.

Everyone held their breath, waiting for Director Jiang Lei's verdict.

Jiang Lei walked over to Shang Yechu, patted her shoulder, and praised: "Good performance."

Only then did everyone relax. Shang Yechu's interpretation differed somewhat from the script, and they had all worried the director might make them reshoot.

Jiang Lei was quite tolerant of Shang Yechu's improvisation. After all, Jiang Zhiyuan had blocked her face with his erratic movements—how could anyone deliver lines with half their face obscured? Not even rural romance dramas would film that way, let alone historical idol dramas.

Shang Yechu's minor adjustments not only preserved the scene but enhanced its dynamism. Far better than the original script's static delivery. Of course, Jiang Lei didn't think Shang Yechu had done this intentionally—someone so young couldn't possibly have much acting experience. She attributed it to fortunate coincidence.

The tension eased, and the veteran actress playing the Head Wife approached to say: "Young one, quite skilled! You really startled me when you crawled over like that."

Shang Yechu smiled shyly without responding.

Instead, Jiang Lei added: "We'll film one more scene of you being stopped by guards. Plus some close-ups of your hand pressing the dagger at your waist."

Shang Yechu nodded. The Assistant Director approached: "What exactly are we reshooting?"

In good spirits, Jiang Lei explained: "If Shopkeeper Tian had the courage to conspire with the Head Wife to frame the Marquis' daughter, why would he obediently kill himself without resistance? I want close-ups suggesting to the audience that he originally intended to kill the Head Wife, but was stopped by guards, driving him to suicide in despair."

The Assistant Director had an epiphany: "So that's what that earlier... that..." He trailed off, having forgotten Shang Yechu's name.

"Little Ye," Shang Yechu politely supplied.

"So that's what Little Ye's actions meant!" The Assistant Director nodded vigorously. "I'll go prepare immediately."

Jiang Lei added: "Tell post-production not to have Shopkeeper Tian's blood splatter on the floor—change it to stain the Head Wife's skirt. Little Ye's falling position was perfect for that."

"Genius!" The Assistant Director, being close friends with Jiang Lei, praised unabashedly.

Rather than joining the flattery, Shang Yechu simply said: "I'll go prepare for the reshoot then. Thank you, Director."

Jiang Lei had quite a favorable impression of this quiet, perceptive actress: "Go ahead."

Chapter 13: Phone Number

After the scene, Shang Yechu didn't leave; she stayed on set to help tidy up things and the like.

Shang Yechu was sweeping when she suddenly heard Director Jiang Lei's voice not far away—she was on the phone.

"Where am I supposed to find an actress for you?" Jiang Lei's tone carried a hint of impatience, yet she still used polite language, which suggested the person on the other end was of higher status or older than her.

"Tell me—why are you picking a fight with him? Of all days, you had to clash with him on the same day of shooting? He's been preparing for so long; what have you been preparing, a few days?"

"You know I'm shooting an idol drama. Idol drama and serious actors—do those six words even belong together?"

"Please don't make things hard for me." Jiang Lei pleaded, "You two elder masters duel, don't let this little witch of mine suffer..."

The person on the other end seemed to say something, and Jiang Lei's expression grew more incredulous; she looked like she was about to roll her eyes.

Shang Yechu listened for a while, and when the conversation showed signs of ending she slipped away. In the entertainment circle, eavesdropping was common; getting caught eavesdropping was a scandal.

When Jiang Lei finished speaking with the caller, hung up, and entered the main room, she saw Shang Yechu's back sweeping.

Remembering the actress her teacher had just "borrowed," Jiang Lei's eyes lit up.

Shang Yechu turned and politely greeted Jiang Lei: "Director."

When Jiang Lei saw Shang Yechu's ordinary-looking face, her expression sagged again.

Jiang Lei listlessly waved a hand. "Mm."

Shang Yechu lowered her head and resumed sweeping. In the previous scene, everyone had eaten sunflower seeds and pastries, and fake bird's nest had been scattered all over. The floor was a mess.

Jiang Lei, exhausted, sat in the director's chair, worrying about the favor her teacher had just asked of her.

The teacher spoke lightly, but asking her to supply ten actresses who were "serious actors"—hello? Where would she find them? She specialized in historical idol dramas!

Industry consensus said that the acting in idol dramas was like the beef in braised beef noodles: you couldn't say it didn't exist, only that it was barely there.

Even after all these years, the teacher still loved giving her impossible tasks!

Jiang Lei recalled the teacher's exact words: "Looks don't matter! The key is that they must be able to act! I want that Mr. Xu to see that actors who only glare with their eyes won't become great!"

"You just shot some inner-palace rivalry drama, right? Perfect, mine is similar in genre. Send some actors from your show."

"When your palace drama finishes shooting, mine will start and you'll transition seamlessly!"

Jiang Lei's forehead throbbed. The teacher had made many hit dramas and launched many stars. Over the years he had developed a bad habit: treating actors like disposable things. He acted like actors were soybeans to be shifted around at will.

Did he think actors were commodities you could just transfer from one production to another?

Jiang Lei wasn't an internationally famous director; why did he assume these actors would obey her orders?

Shang Yechu dawdled as she finished sweeping in front of Jiang Lei, then started helping arrange the tables and chairs the crew would need tomorrow.

Jiang Lei fretted for a moment, bored, and glanced at Shang Yechu again.

Looking closely, the girl actually wasn't bad. Her features were ordinary but harmonized. Unlike some of the male actors on set, whose faces were strikingly ugly.

Though not tall, her figure was slim and proportionate. When Jiang Zhiyuan spoke, he always tilted his head up because lowering it slightly might show a double chin.

Today, this extra's performance had actually pleased Jiang Lei. Of course, it wasn't dazzling—after all, an old medicine-selling man isn't meant to be stunning—but she had saved the scene, and Jiang Lei's impression of Shang Yechu was good.

Jiang Lei's thoughts wandered further.

The teacher was filming a costume drama; short height wouldn't be a problem—putting on platform shoes or thick-soled shoes would make her taller. This girl's face, though plain, could play a maid or an old woman easily; if necessary, a bit more powder to make her whiter—whiteness covers a hundred flaws!

Most importantly, this girl absolutely met the teacher's "good acting" requirement. Among actors her age, she could easily outperform many.

Despite mentally preparing herself, Jiang Lei still felt uneasy. This extra was unknown and ordinary-looking—would the teacher think she was being given the runaround?

Though the teacher said "looks don't matter, acting does," in the entertainment industry you couldn't take such words at face value. If she dared hand the teacher a couple of pretty-for-show actresses, their mentor-student relationship would be over.

In this world, even "ordinary girls" usually had attractiveness above the public average. The teacher's words were something to listen to, not blindly follow.

Jiang Lei's eyes wandered, and she suddenly noticed the osmanthus cakes at hand.

That plate of osmanthus cakes was a prop; to prevent actors from eating them, they'd sprayed them with something. So although they were real cakes, repeated use had made them dry and hard.

Jiang Lei's gaze narrowed. She saw that the piece of osmanthus cake the Head Wife had just pinched had actually crumbled.

The script didn't call for the Head Wife to crush the cake. There was only one possibility: the actress playing the Head Wife had gotten into character and, intentionally or unconsciously, crushed the cake based on the situation.

Jiang Lei glanced at the hardworking Shang Yechu.

Could this extra have been the one to pull the Head Wife into the scene?

Recalling Shang Yechu's expression and acting when she "died," Jiang Lei made up her mind.

Fine—if she's faking it, so be it. The teacher's junior uncle was recently filming a major production, and the teacher, eager to outdo him, had hurriedly picked up a similar script that was destined to flop. When it came to perfunctory gestures, no one was more perfunctory than the teacher.

If she recommended famous actors, it would be like pushing them into the fire. Better to give this talented extra a chance at employment.

With that thought, Jiang Lei's last reservations flew away. She beckoned Shang Yechu, "Xiaoye, stop tidying for now, come here. I have something to ask you."

Shang Yechu hurried over politely. "Director, what is it?"

Jiang Lei smiled, "Have you taken any roles recently?"

Shang Yechu paused, then embarrassedly said, "Are you joking? For drifters like us, we take gigs day by day."

Jiang Lei nodded; the answer was exactly what she expected.

"My teacher happens to have a production that needs a few roles filled," Jiang Lei said. "Are you interested in trying out?"

Shang Yechu immediately showed a look of being flattered and astonished. "Me?"

Jiang Lei snorted softly, "Yes, you. Of course, don't expect a major role—the teacher's script is a well-known IP. But supporting roles are possible. I'll give you a phone number; contact them yourself."

For such small matters, Jiang Lei didn't need to personally intervene. Giving Shang Yechu a number was already a favor. Many people couldn't even get that far.

Shang Yechu was stunned for a moment, then beamed with joy. "Thank you, Director!"

She quickly took a notepad and pen from her pocket and handed them to Jiang Lei.

Who still wrote phone numbers on paper instead of using a phone? Jiang Lei found it odd for a second but picked up the pen to write.

The notepad contained many Chinese characters; though not very pretty, the handwriting was neat. It was filled with lines from the script.

The extra had been diligent. Jiang Lei felt a little regretful—what a pity.

Jiang Lei briskly wrote down a string of numbers on the paper and returned the notepad to Shang Yechu.

Seeing Shang Yechu's eager face stirred a memory in Jiang Lei of her own early days in the industry—also full of hope and dreams of getting an opportunity...

Jiang Lei sighed and advised, "Dress neatly for the audition, and do something for your skin—whitening. Girls in this industry need to take care of themselves."

Shang Yechu thanked her profusely, making the normally half-hearted Jiang Lei feel oddly embarrassed.

"Alright, stop fussing here. There are cleaners," Jiang Lei said, trying to smile. "Go collect your pay."

Shang Yechu happily accepted and turned to leave the room.

Once out of Jiang Lei's sight, all the pride, surprise, and flattered expression on Shang Yechu's face evaporated in an instant—gone without a trace.

103 lazily remarked, "Your face-changing acting was much better than your earlier Shopkeeper Tian performance."

Shang Yechu said, "You're very free?"

103 replied coldly, "I just find human hypocrisy boring. If you don't like hearing me talk, I won't speak anymore."

After saying that, 103 fell silent.

Chapter 14: Counting Money

"Here." The finance staff member counted out fifteen red bills and handed them to Shang Yechu.

The originally scheduled actor to play Shopkeeper Tian was a mid-level featured actor with a salary of two thousand yuan. Although Shang Yechu had essentially saved the situation, her experience couldn't surpass that of veteran actors, so fifteen hundred was actually quite good.

Going from an extra to a mid-level featured actor in just one day was practically rocket-like advancement speed.

Shang Yechu had arrived late, and there were hardly any people left in the finance office. The finance staff member, playing with their phone while chatting casually with Shang Yechu, said: "Few people take cash payments these days, WeChat payments have become the trend."

Shang Yechu smiled and agreed: "Then it seems I need to keep up with the times too."

In just two more years, it wouldn't be "WeChat is popular" but rather "you can't get anywhere without WeChat."

The finance staff member suddenly remembered something and counted out one more red bill and one green bill to hand to Shang Yechu.

"Almost forgot. The male lead's agent paid out of pocket to give you and Old Song (the originally scheduled actor for Shopkeeper Tian) an extra ten percent bonus. Here."

This was hush money. Once Shang Yechu and Old Song took the money, they had to keep quiet and not reveal Jiang Zhiyuan's last-minute recasting today. But even if they hadn't received a single cent, Shang Yechu and Old Song would still have kept quiet. The entertainment industry only has one standard for measuring right and wrong: status. As long as they had any sense, small actors wouldn't speak out of turn.

Added to the previous fifteen hundred, that made one thousand six hundred and fifty yuan. This amount of money couldn't even buy a loose thread on Jiang Zhiyuan or his agent's shoes. But for Shang Yechu, it was a fortune.

Shang Yechu stuffed the bills into her pocket, thanked the finance staff member, and left the production team.

Shang Yechu found a quiet corner and sat down on a bench. The iron bench was warmed by the remaining sunlight, making it quite comfortable to sit on.

Shang Yechu took out a stack of paper money from a hidden compartment in her backpack. The denominations ranged from one yuan to one hundred yuan, and after counting, it came to roughly over twelve hundred yuan.

This was all of Shang Yechu's savings from the two months since her rebirth. Extras don't get work every day, and Shang Yechu had to desperately eat and drink to gain weight, spending more than the average person.

One mid-level featured actor role had earned back what took Shang Yechu two months of sweating to accumulate.

Shang Yechu began silently planning how to use these over twenty-eight hundred yuan. First, she definitely needed to buy a smartphone - these days you can't get anywhere without a phone. Second, she needed to get some winter clothes - September was coming soon, and winter would arrive in the blink of an eye. She also needed to buy cosmetics - she didn't yet have the confidence to attend auditions completely makeup-free.

Money, money, money. Money flows out like water, but comes in like pulling silk threads.

Sighing, Shang Yechu put the money back into the hidden compartment of her backpack.

Her knees hurt even more than before. The rough fabric of her jeans rubbed against the wounds on her knees, so Shang Yechu pulled up the pant legs, trying to reduce the friction.

She also needed to buy some medicated patches... Shang Yechu thought silently.

Since her rebirth, Shang Yechu's ability to take action had improved significantly - when she wanted to do something, she would do it immediately. After resting for a while, she prepared to go buy a phone.

It was already evening, and the fiery sunset clouds at the horizon were as magnificent as blood. Shang Yechu allowed herself a moment of indulgence, greedily admiring the sky and sunset colors for a while. Just as she was about to leave, she suddenly noticed a small black dot in the distance.

Shang Yechu blinked, and now she could see clearly - it wasn't a small black dot, but a person.

The person seemed to be standing near Echo Lake - Echo Lake was the largest artificial lake in Heng City, teeming with visitors during holidays. Since this lake was very close to Heng City's film city, artists often came to practice vocalization, lines, or singing by the lakeside, hence the name.

Today was a workday, and it was rush hour, so Echo Lake was actually quite empty. At least at this moment, only that small black dot stood by the lakeside.

Shang Yechu initially thought the other person was an artist practicing vocals or something, but when she looked closely, her eyelids jumped.

That person wasn't standing by the lake - they had clearly walked into the lake!

Shang Yechu quickly grabbed her backpack and rushed over!

The person in the lake was still in the shallow water area, their steps weren't fast, and their walking posture was dazed, as if sleepwalking. But Shang Yechu was too far away, making it difficult to stop them before they entered the deep water area.

Shang Yechu didn't shout, just sprinted silently. First, there was no one closer than her around. Second, she was afraid her shouting might instead stimulate the other person to quicken their pace.

Her body was too weak - although she had lost weight, she hadn't strengthened her fitness. After just a few dozen steps, Shang Yechu's throat and lungs felt like they had been rubbed with broken glass. Every breath was torture.

Shang Yechu had to stop. If only she had a phone, if she had a phone, she could call the scenic area staff, or even the film city staff, to ask for backup. - Damn it! Whether she could save this suicidal person today or not, she absolutely had to buy a phone!

Shang Yechu called out: "System! System!"

103 remained silent, as if dead.

Shang Yechu called again: "103! 103!"

103 still showed no response.

Shang Yechu thought for a moment and understood - aside from the pain in her lungs, her forehead also hurt a bit now, from anger.

Shang Yechu had no choice but to say: "Alright! I love listening to you talk, I absolutely adore it, from now on you can talk as much as you want - huff - okay! Now get out here!"

Only then did 103 belatedly appear: "What is it?"

Shang Yechu said: "Adrenaline - or whatever hormones, to let me run to the lake faster."

"You have no convertible weight left, and I have no obligation to help you for someone else's life." 103's tone was flat, radiating a completely inhuman feeling.

Shang Yechu could tell it genuinely didn't think someone dying was a big deal.

Shang Yechu's eyes turned cold. She wasn't some saint, but compared to System 103's indifference to watching someone die before its eyes, she felt practically saintly herself.

Human and system stood in silent confrontation for over ten seconds. Shang Yechu glanced at Echo Lake - the water had already reached that person's chest.

Shang Yechu suddenly said: "There are surveillance cameras around here."

"Hmm?" 103's tone finally showed some fluctuation - confusion.

Shang Yechu spoke quickly, interspersed with panting: "The first time you met me, you mentioned 'main quest.' I never asked you what that was."

"I thought you'd forgotten." 103 said coldly.

"I didn't forget." Shang Yechu said rapidly, "Not only didn't I forget, I also know you absolutely don't want it to fail. Because you're a perfectionist who doesn't want failed task records."

"What does this have to do with our current conversation?" 103 asked indifferently.

"There are surveillance cameras nearby. If I stand by watching that person commit suicide without doing anything, and it results in a death - this naturally wouldn't be illegal, but it would create trouble. When I become somewhat famous someday, people might dig up this past incident and say, 'Look, that's Shang Yechu who stood by and watched someone die!'"

Shang Yechu didn't wait for 103 to answer, quickly continuing: "You sought me out, exchanging intelligence and beauty, even incidentally caring about my physical health. These are all positive forms of assistance."

"Given your attitude toward me, this definitely couldn't be out of kindness, only for your mission - therefore, I don't think you would sit back and watch me acquire unnecessary stains, right?"

Shang Yechu's palms were already sweaty. She had no bargaining chips to negotiate with the system, and could only brazenly voice the speculations she'd had these past days. Talking about emotions, justice, or humanitarian spirit with an artificial intelligence was the stupidest approach - only discussing interests would be effective.

Shang Yechu continued: "Adjusting some hormones shouldn't be difficult for you, right? Compared to potential risks, this small matter is insignificant."

Shang Yechu had gambled correctly. After about a few seconds, she felt all discomfort in her body disappear, that familiar sickly relaxation returning to her body. Artificial, but effective for emergencies.

Shang Yechu twitched the corner of her mouth: "Thanks." Then she sprinted toward the lake.

The back-and-forth with the system had delayed things further. The person in the lake had already reached the deep water area, with water submerging their neck.

Shang Yechu rushed to the lakeside, feeling the hormones' lingering effects, hesitated for a moment, then "splash!" jumped into the water!

Hearing the sound, the person in the lake instinctively turned their head - this slight movement proved disastrous in this moment. Their body suddenly lost balance and slipped underwater!

The person's head was immediately submerged. Shang Yechu cursed inwardly, mustering all her strength to swim toward them!

In her previous life, Shang Yechu had filmed many water scenes.

Those classic comedic movie tropes: the male lead sunbathing on the beach, fantasizing about seeing curvaceous bikini beauties playing in the waves. Just then, he hears splashing sounds nearby. The excited male lead looks over, only to see an infatuated overweight woman batting her eyelashes in the waves: "Oh my, handsome, come play~~~"

This kind of vulgar humor and contrasting effect were staples of many low-budget comedies. Shang Yechu had filmed at least eight, if not ten, such scenes. For safety reasons, she naturally had to learn swimming too. Otherwise, if she drowned, no one in the crew could rescue her.

Of course, Shang Yechu had been foolish, not knowing how many times she choked on water, how many times the coach scolded her mercilessly before she learned the basic dog paddle. But it was sufficient in the stagnant artificial lake.

After a lifetime apart, her body inevitably felt unfamiliar with the movements. Fortunately, the familiarity returned soon enough.

Shang Yechu quickly approached the suicidal person.

Getting closer, Shang Yechu realized the other person was actually a girl. Her black medium-length hair floated in the water like seaweed, or like a sea urchin.

Good, it's a girl. Shang Yechu breathed a sigh of relief. Girls are lighter. If it had been a burly man, Shang Yechu would probably have needed to ask for external assistance and cheat.

One meter, one foot - Shang Yechu finally reached the other person's side. This suicidal person clearly couldn't swim, and had already started blowing bubbles in the water.

Shang Yechu grabbed the other person, pulling hard toward herself -

She couldn't pull her.

So heavy?!

Gritting her teeth, Shang Yechu struggled to swim behind the other person, preventing her from grabbing onto Shang Yechu and dragging them both down if she lost consciousness.

Echo Lake wasn't deep, and the water flow was almost nonexistent. Plus, this suicidal person was unexpectedly cooperative, so Shang Yechu actually managed to laboriously pull her ashore.

Shang Yechu laid the suicidal person by the lakeside, not even bothering that the other's long legs were still immersed in water, and collapsed directly onto the ground.

She was exhausted. After the hormones' effects completely wore off, double the fatigue swept over her.

If she weren't soaking wet, and the lakeside stones weren't too cold and hard, Shang Yechu would have fallen asleep right then.

Her body was wet and cold, her teeth ached, and she felt nauseous. Her lungs felt like they were about to explode, her limbs were tired and sore, and her knees hurt even more after soaking in water - with all these issues combined, Shang Yechu felt she was at her limit.

Wait, was the rescued suicidal person being too quiet?

Alarm bells rang in Shang Yechu's mind. Could the other person have taken pills before jumping into the lake? Then all her efforts would have been wasted! Saving a dead person - just thinking about it made her want to vomit blood.

Shang Yechu moved closer to the suicidal person, first checking their breathing. Hmm, good, still breathing.

The moment she saw the other person's appearance, Shang Yechu froze slightly.

For no other reason than that this suicidal person was too beautiful.

The other had exquisite facial features, skin as pale and flawless as tofu. Her nose bridge was straight, lips full and shapely. Although her beauty was significantly diminished since her eyes were closed in unconsciousness, her long, drooping eyelashes unquestionably indicated how beautiful her eyes must be.

Even Shang Yechu, accustomed to handsome men and beautiful women in the entertainment industry, was momentarily stunned by the suicidal person's beauty.

Such a beautiful girl would actually choose to end her life - Shang Yechu shook her head. She guessed the other might be a newcomer to the entertainment industry who had momentarily lost hope due to excessive pressure.

The sleeping beauty was still unconscious. Shang Yechu bent down and began clearing mud from the other's mouth and nose. Fortunately, Echo Lake was cleaned daily, so the water was relatively clean, and there weren't many foreign objects in the sleeping beauty's mouth and nose.

After cleaning, Shang Yechu recalled the first aid knowledge she'd seen in health bulletins at Grandma Hu's shop and attempted to perform CPR.

They were both girls, so there was nothing to be embarrassed about. Besides, saving lives shouldn't distinguish between genders.

When Shang Yechu's lips were just five centimeters from the sleeping beauty's, the other's thick eyelashes suddenly fluttered.

Shang Yechu paused. In that moment of hesitation, those tightly closed eyes suddenly opened.

Those eyes were black as lacquer, radiating breathtaking magnificence. Shang Yechu was stunned by the gaze.

Immediately after, the awakened sleeping beauty pushed Shang Yechu away, sat up, turned her head, and spat out several mouthfuls of water!

Shang Yechu fell back to the side. Good, she was fine. At least she hadn't saved a dead person.

After confirming the rescue was successful, Shang Yechu's morality temporarily took a backseat as she began calculating what benefits she could gain from this incident.

When saving someone, she acted without hesitation and pure intentions, but when discovering the rescued person might be useful to her, she wouldn't hesitate to take advantage. This was Shang Yechu.

Judging by the sleeping beauty's appearance, she definitely wasn't some unknown - she might even be the ace member of some idol company's girl group.

A life-saving favor is significant anywhere. Even if the sleeping beauty herself didn't acknowledge it, her company would have to. This could count as a connection...

Unfortunately, the idol path didn't align with Shang Yechu's positioning. Well, she might not necessarily be a girl group member anyway. If she couldn't gain connections, some money would be fine too. Shang Yechu couldn't have struggled for nothing.

Shang Yechu silently calculated. Overwhelming fatigue washed over her, gradually dispersing her tightly wound rationality.

After spitting out the water, the sleeping beauty finally had time to see who had meddled and saved her.

Shang Yechu was already so tired she could barely keep her eyes open.

The sleeping beauty leaned over, carefully examining Shang Yechu from head to toe.

Shang Yechu felt the other's gaze and opened her mouth, wanting to say something.

Unexpectedly, the sleeping beauty spoke first, and with shocking words:

"Shang Yechu? Is that you?"

Chapter 15: Old Pigments

Shang Yechu jolted awake, all sleepiness instantly vanishing.

Her appearance had changed so dramatically now, how could someone still recognize her name? Could it be someone from the same production crew?

Shang Yechu sat up, carefully examining the other person.

After opening her eyes, Sleeping Beauty's appearance was even more exquisitely beautiful, stunning beyond words. But Shang Yechu still had no recollection of her.

Shang Yechu was absolutely certain—if she had ever met this person before, not just in this lifetime, but even in her muddled previous life, she would never have forgotten this face.

"Who are you?" Shang Yechu asked hesitantly.

Seeing that Shang Yechu didn't recognize her, a flash of disbelief appeared in Sleeping Beauty's eyes.

She pointed at her own face and said seriously, "Don't you remember me? I'm Sheng Wenzhi!"

Sheng Wenzhi?—That name...

Seeing Shang Yechu still hadn't caught on, Sheng Wenzhi said urgently, "Little Ye! Little Mosquito! Do you remember now?"

The moment she heard that last nickname, Shang Yechu's distant memories finally awakened!

"Little Mosquito... it's you?!" Shang Yechu's expression turned strange as she looked Sheng Wenzhi up and down in disbelief.

She finally understood why she hadn't recognized the other person immediately.

Fifteen years had passed since she last saw Sheng Wenzhi—spanning two lifetimes.

When Shang Yechu was in middle school, because of her obese figure and awkward walking posture, the boys in her class gave her the nickname "Penguin."

The classroom was like a small society, and Shang Yechu was undoubtedly at the very bottom of this microcosm. Some people's malice was completely baseless—they just wanted to bully Shang Yechu, so they did.

Penguin Shang Yechu languished at the bottom for over a year until a transfer student arrived in their class—Sheng Wenzhi.

Sheng Wenzhi's entire family had gone to Wencheng, Shang Yechu's hometown, for vacation when they got into a car accident. Sheng Wenzhi's parents died on the spot, and her own leg was injured, leaving her walking with a limp for a long time.

Orphaned Sheng Wenzhi was placed with relatives in Wencheng and transferred to Wencheng Middle School.

Even in middle school, Sheng Wenzhi was already quite pretty, though far from her current appearance. But appearing in Shang Yechu's class full of misfits and underachievers was like a swan landing in a pile of toads.

Shang Yechu had always been puzzled by her middle school classmates. Logically speaking, pretty girls should be quite popular during middle school years. But the boys in Shang Yechu's class showed extreme hostility toward Sheng Wenzhi.

The usual isolation, overt and covert bullying, and mockery were bad enough, but what was worse was that when they saw Sheng Wenzhi walking with a limp, they gave her the nickname "Duck Leg!"

This malicious nickname stuck even after Sheng Wenzhi's leg recovered. Shang Yechu had vague memories: whenever Sheng Wenzhi walked into the classroom on crutches, dragging her injured leg, the boys in class would erupt in laughter, whistling, clapping rhythms, and chanting: "Duck Leg! Duck Leg!"

If Sheng Wenzhi tried to stop them or fled in panic, they would be delighted, as if they'd gotten free tickets to a clown show. If Sheng Wenzhi ignored their jeers, they would make sarcastic remarks and say things that Shang Yechu only half-understood.

Underachiever classes typically had poor academic performance and even worse discipline. The homeroom teacher always turned a blind eye to these minor disturbances.

Before Sheng Wenzhi transferred, Shang Yechu had been the target of such ridicule. After Sheng Wenzhi arrived, those annoying boys suddenly lost interest in Shang Yechu and turned all their attention to tormenting Sheng Wenzhi instead. With the pressure off her, Shang Yechu felt much more sympathy and goodwill toward Sheng Wenzhi.

So one day during a long break between classes, Shang Yechu cautiously went to talk to Sheng Wenzhi.

After her intelligence increased, Shang Yechu gradually remembered some things from her previous life. She still remembered the scene when she first went to talk to Sheng Wenzhi.

Sheng Wenzhi was sitting at her desk, writing and drawing. During middle school long breaks, students were supposed to go out for group exercises, but due to pathological obesity, Shang Yechu had exemption from calisthenics.

The limping Sheng Wenzhi naturally didn't have to do exercises either, so only the two of them remained in the classroom.

When Shang Yechu approached Sheng Wenzhi, she saw the other writing something on paper—of course Shang Yechu couldn't remember what was written on it, only that the other wrote with beautiful penmanship that deeply impressed the unsophisticated Shang Yechu.

Shang Yechu asked cautiously, "What are you writing?"

Sheng Wenzhi's reply was brief: "Get lost."

Shang Yechu was used to being told to "get lost" by her parents, siblings, homeroom teacher, and classmates, so she wasn't offended. She persisted: "Are you writing a story? That's amazing."

Sheng Wenzhi glanced at Shang Yechu: "Can you understand what I wrote?"

"Ah—no." Shang Yechu said enviously, "I think you're really smart. I wish I were that smart too..."

Sheng Wenzhi simply ignored Shang Yechu. Shang Yechu awkwardly tried to make conversation: "Your name is 'Sheng Wenzhi'? What a strange name."

Sheng Wenzhi impatiently clicked her pen: "Sheng Wenzhi—Sheng as in prosperous age, Wen as in XX, Zhi as in XX..."

Shang Yechu could no longer remember the two example words Sheng Wenzhi used afterward. She vaguely remembered asking foolishly at the time, "Is this Zhi the same as in sesame?"

Sheng Wenzhi had no interest in talking to the fat, ugly, and stupid Shang Yechu. She said impatiently, "Yes, yes, whatever. You can leave now."

Just then, the break ended, and the annoying boys returned to class.

As soon as the boys saw Shang Yechu talking to Sheng Wenzhi, they started jeering again, like a bunch of screeching monkeys. Shang Yechu had long forgotten what those monkeys shouted, only remembering that Sheng Wenzhi's face turned bright red as she shoved Shang Yechu away—of course, she didn't budge her.

Seeing that Sheng Wenzhi genuinely disliked her, Shang Yechu stopped imposing herself and turned to leave. Just then, Sheng Wenzhi grabbed Shang Yechu's arm.

Sheng Wenzhi's pretty face wore hatred and coldness beyond her years. "You want to be friends with me, right?"

Shang Yechu nodded, then shook her head.

Ignoring Shang Yechu's contradictory response, Sheng Wenzhi pointed at the boy who led the jeering and shouted the loudest.

"Make him shut up, and I'll be friends with you."

Shang Yechu actually went—thinking back now, she wanted to punch her past self.

Shang Yechu walked up to the boy, planted her hands on her hips, and said, "You shut up!"

The boy froze for a moment, then burst out laughing: "Ooh la la~ The penguin's coming to defend the duck leg! Is this the legendary fu—"

He didn't finish his sentence before Shang Yechu shoved him hard, sending him tumbling to the ground!

Shang Yechu swore she didn't mean to—at home, her parents and siblings often shoved her like that. Shang Yechu had never been moved by their pushes. Who would have thought that boy would be so fragile, falling to the ground wailing after a light push? Like some underdeveloped water monkey.

The memories after that became chaotic. Shang Yechu vaguely remembered getting into her first group fight in her life, and with the delinquent boys she hated most—most importantly, this battle actually ended with Shang Yechu's overwhelming victory.

Such incidents were too common in underachiever classes. The homeroom teacher handled the matter perfunctorily, calling both sides' parents and punishing everyone equally. Shang Yechu even got a mixed doubles scolding from Ji Ya and Shang Hongxuan. She suffered so much hardship that she'd long forgotten the details.

After this incident, Sheng Wenzhi actually kept her promise and became "friends" with Shang Yechu. Of course, this so-called friendship was really just Shang Yechu following her around unilaterally.

After her famous battle, Shang Yechu's status rose slightly in the survival-of-the-fittest classroom. In the short term, no one dared to call her and Sheng Wenzhi by their nicknames. This was the first time Shang Yechu had used her own strength to protect someone else, and she was excited, presumptuously acting as Sheng Wenzhi's bodyguard.

Sheng Wenzhi enjoyed writing and had good literary skills. After her parents died, she kept trying to submit stories to magazines to earn publication fees to support herself. Unfortunately, she never got anything accepted. For this purpose, she came up with many flashy pen names. When Shang Yechu found out, she eagerly came up with two herself.

"How about 'Little Penguin' and 'Little Duck'?" Shang Yechu suggested at the time.

"Who would want to be called a duck?" Sheng Wenzhi irritably crumpled her manuscript and threw it in the trash. "Call yourself that if you want."

Shang Yechu crouched beside Sheng Wenzhi, dejected. "Ah... then what should we call ourselves? I'm Shang Yechu, you're Sheng Wenzhi, so how about Little Leaf and Little Mosquito?"

"Can you stop causing trouble here?!" Sheng Wenzhi snapped. "Mosquito this, insect that! What serious writer would call themselves that?"

Shang Yechu said "Oh." She might be foolish, but she wouldn't keep getting rejected forever. Seeing that Sheng Wenzhi was genuinely impatient, she stopped bothering her.

Then later...

Then one day later—maybe after a long time, or maybe it was just Shang Yechu's illusion. Once, after Shang Yechu took three days of sick leave and returned to school, she met Sheng Wenzhi on the way.

It was during the scorching summer heat. When Sheng Wenzhi saw Shang Yechu, her expression turned very strange. Not only was she unusually friendly, but she even treated Shang Yechu to ice cream—an unprecedented act of generosity.

The naive Shang Yechu happily ate the ice cream. She had no pocket money—that was the first time she'd eaten ice cream that summer.

Shang Yechu licked her ice cream as she entered the classroom. It was break time, and the classroom was lively. But the moment Shang Yechu stepped inside, the room suddenly fell silent.

Shang Yechu was confused and somewhat uneasy. She even forgot to eat her ice cream.

Suddenly, the entire class erupted in unified laughter—so loud it could have blown the roof off!

What was happening?

Shang Yechu grew anxious. The ice cream in her hand slowly melted, dripping onto her fingers.

The boy Shang Yechu had beaten up before suddenly said, "Leaf, I heard someone your age still sucks their thumb!"

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

This sentence seemed to flip a switch. The entire class burst into laughter again, roaring so loudly the desks shook.

What thumb-sucking? What leaf?

Sheng Wenzhi walked past Shang Yechu, eyes straight ahead as she returned to her seat as if she'd never known Shang Yechu.

Shang Yechu stood bewildered, not understanding what secret signal her classmates were sharing. Finally, when everyone had laughed enough, the student sitting closest to Shang Yechu casually tossed a magazine to her.

Shang Yechu caught the magazine with one hand. Having been passed around many times (one person buying a magazine for the whole class to share was a unique student-era custom), the book was already tattered.

Shang Yechu immediately recognized what magazine it was. This was a well-known local Wencheng humor biweekly. Opening the magazine, the first section [Monthly Trendsetter Selections] prominently featured a short story.

The short story told about a foolish fat woman who wanted to become smart. To become intelligent, she did many stupid things, so ridiculous they made people laugh uncontrollably.

The writing was vivid and lifelike, as if the author had witnessed everything personally. Even the slow-witted Shang Yechu vaguely sensed something.

Many plot points bore shadows of reality, and Shang Yechu even had hazy memories of some incidents. To summarize in one word: déjà vu.

Most importantly, that foolish woman who wanted to become smart was named... Leaf.

So this was what the whole class was laughing about.

After a long time, Shang Yechu's eyes moved, her gaze sliding to the author's name column.

Contributor's byline: Little Mosquito.

The ice cream fell to the ground, spreading cheap artificial coloring everywhere.

Chapter 16: Friends

Memories came flooding back, and for a moment, Shang Yechu froze in place, unable to even muster a proper reaction.

When she realized who she had saved, Shang Yechu's first instinct was to viciously extend her hand and slap the other person across the face!

Sheng Wenzhi's fair face was knocked sideways by the blow. She stared in stunned silence, then erupted in fury: "Shang Yechu, what's wrong with you?"

Without even glancing at the other girl, Shang Yechu stood up, grabbed her backpack, turned and walked away. She feared that if she looked at Sheng Wenzhi's stunningly beautiful face for one more second, she'd push the other girl's head underwater.

"Hey! Wait!" Sheng Wenzhi stumbled as she gave chase, but after just two steps she collapsed to her knees—her leg had cramped up in the water.

Shang Yechu stormed off with forceful strides, desperately controlling the impulse to turn back and give Sheng Wenzhi another slap.

What awful luck! She might as well have fished up a corpse!

Yuck, yuck, yuck! She needed to take a thorough bath to wash off this terrible misfortune!

The thought that she had negotiated with the System, exhausted herself with doggy paddle and frog stroke swimming, only to fish up this particular person made all the blood rush to Shang Yechu's head. She was so angry her vision darkened and her body trembled.

103 remarked coolly: "You're just going to leave that stain lying there?"

"You can speak," Shang Yechu forced the words through gritted teeth, "but don't make a sound."

103 tactfully changed the subject: "Do you want to find somewhere to change clothes? Continuing like this might give you a cold." He really didn't want to front energy points for Shang Yechu again.

"Fine." This suggestion at least made sense, so Shang Yechu didn't object.

Shang Yechu splurged on a taxi that raced all the way back to the pedestrian street.

This was the good thing about pedestrian streets—they contained all the essential industries for human survival: clothing, food, housing, and transportation.

Shang Yechu first went to the "Boutique Women's Store" on the pedestrian street and angrily spent one hundred dollars on a new outfit. Then, carrying her new clothes, she charged into the pedestrian street bathhouse to soak in a hot bath.

Shang Yechu scrubbed her entire body vigorously with hot water, especially those two offending hands that had saved Sheng Wenzhi, wishing she could scrape off a layer of skin.

By the time she was completely refreshed, night had fallen, with just one hour left before she needed to watch Grandma Hu's bookstore. There was no time to buy a phone now, so Shang Yechu changed course to get dinner.

Shang Yechu wandered through the pedestrian street food stalls, looking at all the fried lamb skewers, pork skewers, chicken skewers, stinky tofu, leek and potato balls, cilantro rolls, starch sausages, crispy skin sausages, thick meat sausages, grilled cold noodles, baked sweet potatoes, grilled chicken wing rice wraps, roasted chestnuts, stir-fried rice noodles, stir-fried seafood, beer, cola, juice, soda, milk tea... All these were excellent for gaining weight.

But Shang Yechu only felt a dull heaviness in her chest and stomach, as if she'd suddenly lost her appetite.

103 watched coldly as Shang Yechu passed the barbecue stalls without even glancing sideways and said: "What comforts me is that you've finally learned to care for your health."

No sooner had he spoken than Shang Yechu walked into an ice cream shop and plopped down in a seat.

"Boss, please pack up... ten large boxes of ice cream for me. One of each flavor."

"Huh? Yes, indeed, we're having a class reunion, these ten boxes are for everyone to share."

The owner worked quickly, scooping ten servings of ice cream for Shang Yechu in just a few minutes, packing them into two large bags for her to carry away.

Carrying two large bags of ice cream, Shang Yechu left the pedestrian street, found a random park bench, and sat down.

Shang Yechu randomly grabbed a box of ice cream, scooped up a large spoonful, and stuffed it into her mouth.

The cloyingly sweet taste melted on her tongue, making Shang Yechu almost nauseous.

"This ice cream tastes terrible," Shang Yechu murmured.

Despite saying this, adhering to her principle of not wasting food, Shang Yechu ate box after box of the cheap ice cream. Even when her face turned pale from the cold, she didn't stop.

A figure appeared in front of Shang Yechu, snatching the ice cream from her hand, and said coldly: "Stop eating."

Shang Yechu looked up, gazing mockingly at Sheng Wenzhi who had somehow appeared before her: "Have you been following me all this way, collecting material for your writing?"

Sheng Wenzhi's expression froze, "About that incident back then... I admit I—"

Shang Yechu cut her off with a cold laugh: "Admit what? You're a writer—a 'proper' novelist. Reality is just material for your artistic creations. Even now, standing before me, you're probably thinking about how to write 'Foolish Leaf' version two, aren't you?"

"That's not true!" Sheng Wenzhi felt the frustration of casting pearls before swine, "I just, I only..."

Shang Yechu threw the remaining ice cream onto Sheng Wenzhi's clothes. The pink coloring of the strawberry ice cream meandered then dripped down the black fabric, looking like a clumsy doodle.

Sheng Wenzhi stared in disbelief.

Before she could speak, Shang Yechu said coldly: "I'm leaving first, Ms. Writer. If you want me to pay for your clothes, I live at the bookstore on the pedestrian street ahead. Don't forget to clean up the garbage here."

The city lights glittered brilliantly in the deep night. Sheng Wenzhi quietly watched Shang Yechu's retreating back as she walked away without hesitation, watching for a very, very long time.

Meanwhile, 103 reminded Shang Yechu: "I have to point out..."

"The outfit Sheng Wenzhi was wearing is AmphionMelody's latest summer collection. The market price is enough for me to shoot five mid-level specials, right?" Shang Yechu said nonchalantly.

"Since you knew, why did you—?" 103 once again found humans incomprehensible.

"Precisely because I knew that I did it," Shang Yechu said leisurely. "This way, with back and forth exchanges, we'll naturally become familiar."

"You're exploiting her guilt toward you," 103 stated as a fact, not a question.

"More friends mean more paths; more wealthy friends mean a hundred more paths," Shang Yechu said. "She used me to earn her first manuscript fee, and gained a second life because of me. From this perspective, I'm practically her rebirth parent!"

"Is it wrong for a rebirth parent to squeeze some benefits from her?"

"Fine. Fine. Do as you please," 103 said.

Actually, he had originally intended to remind Shang Yechu about something else, but since her attitude toward Sheng Wenzhi was purely utilitarian, then perhaps that matter didn't need to be mentioned.

Chapter 17: A Few Things About Old Phones and a Makeshift Team

"Little Ye, if you weren't practically my own child, I wouldn't even tell you this!"

The phone shop owner cracked sunflower seeds while speaking to Shang Yechu: "These phone models are all no good!"

The owner's red-polished fingernails gestured over a row of the newest phones displayed in the most prominent counter: "That Little Pepper phone—battery drains crazy fast!

"That Red Cherry phone—the battery swells up after just a few uses!

"That Lightning phone—don't let the name fool you, after some use, opening any app takes a full minute to load!"

Shang Yechu didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Auntie Lu, then what should I buy?"

Shang Yechu had mentioned needing a phone to Grandma Hu this morning, and Grandma Hu had immediately brought her to this familiar phone store on the pedestrian street, specifically asking Owner Lu not to cheat the young girl.

Grandma Hu had been on this street for over ten years, highly respected with excellent relationships. All the neighbors on the old street held her in high regard.

Therefore, even though Shang Yechu looked downright broke, Owner Lu had enthusiastically explained everything in detail.

Owner Lu spat out a seed shell, speaking warmly: "Buying a phone is like finding a man—you absolutely can't judge by appearance alone! Here, let me find you something suitable."

With that, Owner Lu tossed aside the sunflower seeds, went to the back to rummage around for a while, and pulled out an outdated-looking secondhand phone.

Shang Yechu joked: "Auntie Lu, are you finding me a secondhand man?"

Owner Lu scolded playfully: "Such a slick tongue on you youngsters! This is one I used before—a Renxing phone. Don't let the unimpressive name fool you, it works great!"

Shang Yechu paused slightly. She had some recollection of this brand. In about three to five years, this brand would ride the rising tide, soaring upward with its solid quality to break the monopolized domestic phone market and become the largest phone brand in Huaguo.

She remembered that Renxing phone's biggest issue was its tacky design that didn't appeal much to younger demographics...

Shang Yechu took another look at the incredibly dated secondhand phone in Owner Lu's hand that practically screamed "senior citizen phone," her mouth twitching slightly as she acknowledged the truth of that rumor.

She hadn't realized this phone existed this early.

Owner Lu wiped the phone with a cloth, plugged it in to charge, and continued promoting it to Shang Yechu: "The battery lasts forever! Tough, durable! Dropped it several times and the screen never cracked. Used it for two years, never lagged once, super smooth, with a full 32G of storage!"

Shang Yechu smiled. Nowadays 32G was considered large storage, but in a couple years it would be the era of 256G everywhere. Technology replaces phones faster than it replaces people.

But at this stage, Shang Yechu didn't care whether the phone was new—broke people can't be choosers. After charging it a bit, Owner Lu turned on the phone and handed it to Shang Yechu.

Shang Yechu tested it out and had to agree with Owner Lu's judgment.

"How much, Auntie Lu?"

Owner Lu, finally able to get rid of this old companion, beamed with delight: "Just give me four hundred. I'll throw in a charger and put on a good screen protector for you too."

With her new device happily acquired, Shang Yechu immediately went to get herself a SIM card, painfully topping it up with two hundred yuan credit, then promptly stored all the phone numbers from her memory.

Besides the number Director Jiang Lei had given her, there were numbers from various other small directors, assistants, extras coordinators, and Jiang Lei's personal number.

Using the mobile store's WiFi, Shang Yechu started searching online for Jiang Lei's teacher.

Idol dramas, historical costumes—these things had been completely separate from Shang Yechu's previous life. So she really didn't know much about the relationships within Jiang Lei's circle.

After entering the keywords, the interface spun for a couple seconds, and the first search result that popped up was for someone named Zheng Bohan.

Zheng Bohan... that name sounded so familiar.

Shang Yechu clicked into the page to read carefully.

Zheng Bohan, famous screenwriter. Representative works: "Western Garden," "Eastern Tower Secret History," "Legend of Qingyue," "David's Legend: Chronicles of Female Virtue," etc.

Just seeing these drama titles, Shang Yechu knew why this name felt familiar.

Without exception, these dramas had all been former prime-time evening slot champions!

Ji Ya would religiously watch television every night, obsessively following these historical dramas. Shang Hongxuan, while outwardly scoffing at these shows, would actually put down his books and newspapers when they aired to watch them with Ji Ya.

Shang Yechu's two younger sisters at the time were obsessed with the four handsome stars from Treasure Island, clamoring to watch Treasure Island soap operas. Unfortunately, that long-winded romantic series always aired at the same time as these historical dramas, and since her sisters didn't have remote control rights, they had to reluctantly watch what their mother preferred—only to eventually become even more fanatical about them than Ji Ya.

Shang Yechu could still remember the majestic opening theme of "Western Garden": "Northern frontier flowers, southern river snow; Luo River rain, Luzhou moon; the great river flows endlessly scattering romance, the eternal sky never ages yet love remains unbroken..."

When Shang Yechu heard that familiar melody while washing dishes in the kitchen, she knew she needed to hurry up and finish. Otherwise, when the actual episode started, her clattering dishes would make Ji Ya furious.

The scripts for all these shows were actually written by Zheng Bohan?

Zheng Bohan was Jiang Lei's teacher?

Shang Yechu felt something was off. The biography on the encyclopedia couldn't be fake. So Zheng Bohan was undoubtedly a top-tier contemporary screenwriter in the domestic entertainment industry. Someone like that just needed to drop his name, and hordes of popular or semi-popular actors would come flocking for him to choose from.

How could someone like that end up needing his student to recommend actors?

For a project prepared by such a major screenwriter, why would Jiang Lei give the opportunity to a nobody extra like herself?

Had the entertainment industry died out? Everyone arrested? Taken away by the police for drug tests? Why was there no news about this?

Regardless, she had to seize the opportunity. You never know until you try.

Shang Yechu didn't hesitate too long and dialed the number Jiang Lei had given her.

Naturally, Jiang Lei wouldn't have given Zheng Bohan's personal number, but rather his casting assistant's number.

The phone rang for quite a while before being answered, a sleepy voice coming through: "Who?"

After asking, the person even yawned.

Shang Yechu glanced at the sky—it was 11 AM.

Still not awake at this hour... were Zheng Bohan's people even competent?

While mentally complaining, Shang Yechu politely said: "I was referred by Director Jiang Lei..."

"Huh? Oh." The person didn't even let Shang Yechu finish before interrupting: "Then come over. Hengshi Film Base, Willow Catkin Road..."

After hearing the address, Shang Yechu quickly asked: "What's the name of this project?"

"Name?" The assistant paused suspiciously. "You'll know when you get here."

With that, the other party hung up.

Shang Yechu stared speechlessly at the ended call screen, feeling like the world was one giant amateur operation.

Details revealed a lot, and Shang Yechu now deeply suspected whether this phone number actually belonged to Zheng Bohan's team.

At this time in her previous life, Shang Yechu had still been playing a lovesick landlady in a comedy movie, battling wits with the male lead, unable to afford a phone, let alone having time to follow entertainment news. Her usable entertainment industry memories were scarce.

Shang Yechu had considered asking Jiang Lei, but thinking the director was probably busy filming on set, she abandoned that idea.

Reluctantly, Shang Yechu downloaded Weibo, registered an account, and started searching for Zheng Bohan's name, trying to figure out what was really going on.

Weibo had plenty of entertainment gossip accounts—while the information was mixed with truth and falsehoods, you could still find some clues.

If she were an industry insider, she'd have proper channels for information. Unfortunately, Shang Yechu was at best on the industry's periphery now, forced to use these primitive methods.

For a famous screenwriter like Zheng Bohan, if he was really up to something, there would definitely be ripples on Weibo.

Shang Yechu tried various keyword combinations, but the recent real-time results only showed some video marketing accounts posting identical copy—praising Zheng Bohan's talent and such.

This was normal—in the entertainment industry, at least domestically, screenwriters had low status and recognition, with little discussion.

Shang Yechu persistently scrolled further.

She remembered Jiang Lei mentioning on the phone: "How long have they been preparing versus how long have you been preparing," "gods battling," and other phrases. Zheng Bohan was likely competing with a major project; she should look for older, larger projects.

After several pages, Shang Yechu finally found a somewhat valuable marketing post.

[In the entertainment industry, the twin stars Xu Hanwen and Zheng Bohan have long been praised. Both studied under the same master, were classmates, and even dorm mates. Known in the industry as the "Twin Hans"...

Between 1999 and 2014, they successively collaborated on "Western Garden," "Eastern Tower Secret History," "Legend of Qingyue," "David's Legend: Chronicles of Female Virtue," "Three Guns Three Farewells," and many other dramas. Most of these works achieved both critical acclaim and high ratings, great successes...

However, starting last year, after this seemingly perfect director-screenwriter pair unfollowed each other on Weibo, they haven't had any interaction since...

According to reliable sources, they've had conflicts for some time...

How did this teacher-student pair go their separate ways and become like strangers? Click the link below for the full article→]

Shang Yechu's finger froze.

If Zheng Bohan was only "somewhat famous," then Xu Hanwen was practically known by everyone inside and outside the industry!

As a generation-defining television director, Xu Hanwen's name basically guaranteed ratings. His reputation far outshone screenwriter Zheng Bohan's.

Shang Yechu immediately started searching for Xu Hanwen's name.

The search results for Xu Hanwen were much more numerous than Zheng Bohan's. Shang Yechu immediately spotted some gossip posted by a marketing account.

[Rumor has it that Xu Hanwen @WenhaiHaohan's television drama "Legend of Qingyun" will begin filming soon [excited][excited] Looking forward to Director Xu's new work, my remote is ready! [happy][happy]]

"Legend of Qingyun"!!!

Shang Yechu immediately turned off her phone screen.

She remembered now.

Chapter 18: Fraud?

Shang Yechu arrived at the audition venue.

The audition was being held in a casting room at the Heng City Film and Television Base. When Shang Yechu reached the area outside the audition room, she only saw about a dozen actors scattered around waiting. Some were standing, some sitting, and none of them even held number cards in their hands.

A dozen actors might seem like quite a few, but considering Zheng Bohan's reputation, this number was actually quite small.

Without exception, all the people present were female artists. This was normal, since the drama currently auditioning was a palace intrigue series.

The moment she saw "Legend of Qingyun," Shang Yechu's distant memories were finally awakened.

During the year she first entered the entertainment industry, there really had been a hugely popular palace intrigue drama called "Legend of Qingyun." When that drama was airing at its peak popularity, Shang Yechu had been struggling to make a living and had no time to follow television shows, so naturally she hadn't formed much of an impression of it.

At that time, there had been another drama airing simultaneously with "Legend of Qingyun." Coincidentally, this drama shared the same genre—palace intrigue. Both series crowded into the summer broadcast schedule, episode after episode, essentially going head-to-head in direct competition.

Even more coincidentally, that other drama was called "Tale of Cloud Incline"!

Judging from the similarity in their names, it was hard to believe the production team of "Tale of Cloud Incline" hadn't done this intentionally. After all, "Legend of Qingyun" had massive investment and stellar casting. From the very start of filming, they had built tremendous hype, thoroughly whetting the audience's appetite. Not only did it feature top-tier stars, even the extras playing eunuchs were at least third-tier celebrities. Its discussion volume completely overshadowed all other television dramas airing at the same time.

As for "Tale of Cloud Incline"... to be honest, aside from the female lead and Zheng Bohan having some name recognition, even the male lead was practically unknown in the entertainment industry. Even if the highest authority came down to judge, they'd have to admit that ten "Tale of Cloud Incline" series combined couldn't generate the discussion volume of a single "Legend of Qingyun."

This blatant copycat behavior undoubtedly drew unanimous scorn from netizens, and even fans of "Tale of Cloud Incline" were considered inferior at the time. Fans of the two dramas battled across various platforms so fiercely they practically wore down the roads between them.

The spectacle back then was comparable to a civil war. Many casual observers joked that when fans of the two "Cloud" dramas met on a narrow path, they'd probably pull out revolvers and point them at each other, demanding "Which Cloud is yours? The Cloud from Qingyun or the Cloud from Cloud Incline?"

Shang Yechu had never watched "Legend of Qingyun," but after she had some spare money and time, she had watched a few episodes of "Tale of Cloud Incline." The latter had fewer episodes and shorter runtime, making it suitable for Shang Yechu to use during her limited rest time.

However, what truly left a deep impression on Shang Yechu about this drama wasn't its plot, but the controversy surrounding it.

Not long after "Tale of Cloud Incline" began airing, the official account of "Legend of Qingyun" personally stepped in, accusing "Tale of Cloud Incline" of plagiarism and copyright infringement!

Of course, they didn't make plagiarism accusations without evidence—the "Legend of Qingyun" official account extracted certain dialogues and plot points from both dramas, creating numerous comparison charts and color-coded analysis diagrams.

Spectators flocked to the scene, and upon seeing what the "Legend of Qingyun" account had posted—wow, it actually looked quite convincing! Many plotlines, dialogues, and details between the two dramas were remarkably similar!

When netizens dug deeper, they discovered that "Legend of Qingyun" and "Tale of Cloud Incline" had actually started filming on the exact same day!

So who copied whom? This was a sharp question. With so many similarities, it couldn't possibly be coincidence. Since the "Legend of Qingyun" team was so confident they personally stepped in to expose the plagiarism, it was most likely that "Tale of Cloud Incline" was the copycat.

The attitude of the "Tale of Cloud Incline" production team was also quite ambiguous—they neither came forward to clarify nor to admit guilt. They just let things drag on dryly, almost as if they were letting nature take its course. This passive handling naturally made netizens think they had a guilty conscience.

Just as the plagiarism accusations against "Tale of Cloud Incline" were reaching a fever pitch, the "Legend of Qingyun" team stepped in again, releasing portions of their script along with its creation timeline—

Three years ago!

"Legend of Qingyun" was an S-level masterpiece that Rongding Entertainment had carefully polished for three years, with dozens of screenwriters participating in the script creation alone. Every word was carefully considered, every sentence meticulously crafted. They had absolutely no need to covet some three-no production!

This move struck like a thunderbolt, immediately convincing all the wavering viewers and netizens.

Netizens swarmed to the official account of "Tale of Cloud Incline," demanding that the production team also provide the creation timeline of their original script. As expected, "Tale of Cloud Incline" couldn't produce any script materials dating back more than three years—they couldn't even produce a single page of draft notes. There were even rumors that "Tale of Cloud Incline" had taken only three months from conception to the start of filming.

At this point, it became completely clear which work had copied which.

From then on, "Tale of Cloud Incline" was permanently nailed to the pillar of plagiarism shame, and its fans were so suppressed they couldn't lift their heads. For a period of time, if someone was discovered plagiarizing, netizens would use this phrase to taunt them: "Dear Incline, your stuff is pretty good, my Cloud is taking it."

Back when Shang Yechu was unaware of this incident, she had casually commented online that "Tale of Cloud Incline is quite good to watch," only to be chased and criticized across ten blocks by netizens.

This incident left quite an impression on Shang Yechu, which was why the moment she saw "Legend of Qingyun," she immediately remembered the terror of being pursued and blocked by netizens in her previous life.

Combining this with what Jiang Lei had said during their phone call that day... it seemed the drama Zheng Bohan wanted to film was indeed "Tale of Cloud Incline."

Shang Yechu felt a headache coming on.

No artist wanted to be associated with the word "plagiarism." Without knowing the background, "Tale of Cloud Incline" might have been considered at most a low-quality opportunity; but after remembering its future troubles, it could only be seen as a hot potato.

Regardless, she still had to respect Director Jiang Lei's goodwill. Shang Yechu could only go through the motions for now. After all, with her qualifications, Zheng Bohan probably wouldn't be interested in her anyway.

Shang Yechu sat down outside the audition room, and the girl sitting next to her cheerfully leaned over: "You're here to audition too?"

Shang Yechu nodded, first putting on a smiling expression: "Yes. Hello, I'm Shang Yechu. And you are?"

"I'm Li Kui!" the girl exclaimed excitedly. "Not the Kui from Li Kui the hero, but the Kui from sunflower! Your name is really beautiful!"

Shang Yechu smiled: "Really? I never thought so myself."

When Shang Yechu was still in the womb, the name chosen for her was "Shang Yechu," meaning "the first child to inherit the family business." Shang Hongxuan and Ji Ya had been mysteriously confident back then that Shang Yechu would definitely be a boy. They had deliberated for months before settling on this name.

However, after Ji Ya's ten-month pregnancy, what was born was an unexpected girl. Shang Hongxuan was extremely disappointed, his old face greener than tree leaves. When it came time to register the household registration, he still hadn't given Shang Yechu a proper name, so he simply changed one character from the boy's name "Shang Yechu" and used it for her.

Shang Yechu had no particular affection for her own name. She had even considered whether to change to a stage name in the future.

Li Kui was clearly quite talkative—without Shang Yechu needing to break the ice, she chattered away: "I'm here to audition too! But don't worry, I'm not your competitor!"

"Oh?" Shang Yechu said with interest. "Why not?"

Li Kui looked around, making sure no one was paying attention to them, then whispered: "I'm not in the film department—I'm in finance."

Shang Yechu: "..."

Li Kui complained: "I don't even know what I'm doing here. I only joined the drama club to get second classroom credits, then Director Zheng saw me and insisted I was suitable for some role, telling me to come audition—"

"What role could I possibly be suitable for? The accounting clerk?"

Shang Yechu nodded sympathetically, "But you're very cute. Maybe that's exactly what Director Zheng noticed..."

Wait, Director Zheng?

Director Zheng!

Shang Yechu had felt something was off earlier. In her previous life, after the plagiarism scandal broke out for "Tale of Cloud Incline," screenwriter Zheng Bohan didn't seem to be much affected—the discussion about him was strangely minimal. At least in Shang Yechu's memory, there didn't seem to be much backlash directed at him. Given his status in the screenwriting world, this situation was clearly abnormal.

This lifetime was even stranger—even if the preparation was rushed, given Zheng Bohan's reputation in screenwriting circles, he shouldn't have only attracted this meager handful of people!

So Zheng Bohan wasn't the screenwriter—he was the director!

Now everything made sense—Jiang Lei's helpless attitude, the sparse number of artists at the audition venue, why in her previous life nobody targeted screenwriter Zheng Bohan after the "Tale of Cloud Incline" plagiarism scandal, criticizing him for having exhausted his talent...

Because Zheng Bohan had changed careers.

Changed! Careers!

Shang Yechu was practically ready to prostrate herself in admiration of Zheng Bohan.

What kind of competitive spirit would drive a famous screenwriter to personally dive into directing to compete against his own senior fellow apprentice?

Although directors and screenwriters aren't completely separate domains, they also shouldn't be confused with each other. While these two professions can intervene in each other's areas, it's better not to rashly venture into unfamiliar territory.

To put it bluntly, an excellent director might also be an excellent screenwriter, but an excellent screenwriter wanting to become a professional director would require considerable effort.

Not to mention that Zheng Bohan had not only unexpectedly switched from screenwriting to directing without any warning, but he was also competing against his senior fellow apprentice who happened to be a master-level director. While the other spent three years preparing "Legend of Qingyun," he rushed to produce "Tale of Cloud Incline" in just a few months, practically begging to be a copycat!

To use an inappropriate analogy, Zheng Bohan's move was like a first-rate tea master suddenly getting a wild idea to participate in a cooking championship, with his competitor being the previous champion, and the competition category being the champion's signature dish!

No wonder Jiang Lei had been muttering to herself. The fact that she didn't curse outright was this disciple's final respect for her teacher.

In the eyes of outsiders, Zheng Bohan was challenging himself; in the eyes of insiders, Zheng Bohan had clearly lost his mind.

Shang Yechu now felt even more determined to stay away from "Tale of Cloud Incline." During the audition later, she should perform poorly so Zheng Bohan would quickly eliminate her.

Chapter 19: The Audition

While they talked, several performers filed out of the audition room one after another. Shang Yechu glanced over with the corner of her eye and recognized no familiar faces.

This audition was basically a club for has-beens. No, most of the people here didn't even qualify as "has-beens." They were more like a club for also-rans.

The actresses who came out mostly wore disappointed faces. Even a makeshift troupe didn't take just anyone. That was hardly surprising. After all, Zheng Bohan had been around the block; he wouldn't suddenly lower his standards.

It was Li Kui's turn. She greeted Shang Yechu and went into the audition room.

Shang Yechu took out her phone and kept scrolling through search results about Legend of Qingyun. Although that show hadn't started filming yet, a flood of promotional puff pieces had already filled every major platform.

There was so much junk information that after a while Shang Yechu gave up and clicked directly on Xu Hanwen's Weibo to see if there was anything about Legend of Qingyun.

She was disappointed. Xu Hanwen's account was basically dead—only a few posts, all reposts full of troupe-style flavor. The most recent post dated back two years.

Shang Yechu then opened Zheng Bohan's account—wow, it was even worse. Zheng Bohan's Weibo was completely empty; maybe he'd deleted everything, or maybe it was just a shell account.

Tale of Cloud Incline... Legend of Qingyun...

Shang Yechu mulled it over in her head. Tale of Cloud Incline leeching off Legend of Qingyun like this felt less like a bid for attention and more like total desperation.

The entertainment industry is big and small at the same time. Usually, unless two parties are mortal commercial enemies, or one is so washed-up they'll never recover without clinging to trends, things rarely get this ugly.

There had to be something fishy between those two dramas. Or between Zheng Bohan and Xu Hanwen themselves.

Too bad. Comic actors aren't highly regarded in the industry—they're practically their own nation, a circle within the circle. In her past life Shang Yechu had never paid much attention to these "outside" disputes.

While Shang Yechu was lost in thought, Li Kui came back out.

Li Kui's expression made her look like she was sleepwalking. "Oh my, I got it."

Shang Yechu fought the urge to ask, "You got what?" and instead stood up and said, "You were selected? That's good news."

Li Kui grabbed Shang Yechu's hand and said with a miserable face, "But I can't act!"

"No way. Don't be modest." Shang Yechu smiled. "If Director Zheng picked you straight from the drama club, there has to be something special about you."

Li Kui said, "In the drama club we were shooting Thunderstorm and we were short of male actors, so I cross-dressed as Zhou Chong—honestly I don't even know what I was doing! And Director Zheng picked me. What on earth does he see in me?"

Shang Yechu patted her and smiled. "Zhou Chong is a naive, passionate young master. Maybe Director Zheng wants someone to play an innocent, lovable character? What did you audition with?"

"You might be right." Li Kui thought for a moment. "He made me hold a gourd and laugh like an idiot. I laughed for so long I almost burst, and then I passed. Must have looked pretty innocent."

A gourd...

Shang Yechu's mouth twitched as she started scrutinizing Li Kui's face carefully.

"What's wrong?" Li Kui felt unnerved being stared at like that.

"Nothing." Shang Yechu patted Li Kui's shoulder sympathetically. "If you don't want it, you can try to refuse. Director Zheng isn't the kind to force someone."

"It's not like that." Li Kui grinned. "The pay is a hundred thousand yuan! My goodness, I've never seen that much money in my life. I plan to quit showbiz after this anyway—if I only get to play a silly, smiling fool, I don't care."

Hearing that, Shang Yechu didn't stop her.

This slapdash audition continued into the afternoon, and finally it was Shang Yechu's turn.

Shang Yechu entered the audition room, greeted the examiner, handed over her resume, and then said nothing more.

There was only one interviewer—yes, Zheng Bohan himself. This famous writer-director in his early fifties had a long thin face, a shaved head, and a stern expression; he looked like a stubborn old man who'd be hard to please. In person he even seemed harsher than in photos.

Zheng Bohan scrutinized Shang Yechu with a picky gaze. Shang Yechu knew he wasn't very satisfied with her look.

She wasn't wearing makeup. After realizing that the opportunity Jiang Lei had tossed her was a hot potato, Shang Yechu had given up on trying to put on a great performance for Zheng Bohan.

Zheng Bohan slowly asked, "You were recommended by Jiang Lei?"

"Yes." Shang Yechu replied calmly. "Director Zheng."

Zheng Bohan showed little interest in her and casually tossed her a copy of the script. "Pick a role yourself. Whatever you like."

Shang Yechu wasn't bothered by his perfunctory attitude. Perfunctory was fine—less waste of time for both sides.

She opened the script.

She'd read *Tale of Cloud Incline* before and could vaguely recall parts of the plot. She remembered a particularly despicable villain who impersonated someone else to join a beauty selection, and was beaten to death by the emperor's guards.

That villain only appeared in the first episode and had been mocked as a stupid plot point when it aired. Because the palace maids had name tokens, impersonation was hard. People said the scene was unreasonable.

That villain would be perfect.

Shang Yechu flipped through. Sure enough, the script Zheng Bohan handed her was for the first episode. But to her surprise, there was no trace of that impersonating villain scene in the script.

What was going on? Had that scene been added later?

Seeing Zheng Bohan's increasingly impatient expression, Shang Yechu flipped through a few pages and picked a maidservant-type role.

"My lady," she crooned, lowering her voice. "That Zhao Jieyu must be watched carefully!"

Zheng Bohan raised his eyelid and gave her a look, then casually asked, "Yuzhu, what do you mean by that?"

Shang Yechu paused very briefly—so briefly that Zheng Bohan didn't notice.

"For someone ruling a realm, imperial temper is unpredictable. What His Majesty likes or dislikes is not for us to guess." Shang Yechu urged earnestly. "When a beauty first enters the palace..."

"Yuzhu, you're just measuring the gentleman's heart with a petty mind." Zheng Bohan interrupted impatiently. "Last spring, Consort Wang made turtle-jelly and offended His Majesty's taboos; she was demoted, wasn't she? Even her father, who served as prefect and governor, was severely rebuked by the emperor. Every bite and sip the emperor takes is no trivial matter!"

Shang Yechu looked at Zheng Bohan anxiously, a wordless expression on her face.

The performance ended there. The maidservant had no more lines in the script.

Shang Yechu thought her performance had been mediocre. The role left little room to show range. Unexpectedly, Zheng Bohan looked her over twice and his expression noticeably softened.

Wait.

Shang Yechu felt her heart drop.

No way.

Just then Zheng Bohan said, "Not bad. That role is yours."

Chapter 20: One Minute on Stage

There's a saying that actors fall into two types. One type is the naturally gifted actor, the other is the hard-working actor. The former is born with artistic instincts and performing talent; standing in front of the camera, they naturally meld into the role.

That saying is actually a little naive. In reality, even the most gifted actor, without proper guidance and practice, will stand before a lens like a beautiful but bewildered ape.

It has nothing to do with talent. It's like a baby born with a math genius's aptitude who gets abandoned in the mountains, completely cut off from society and illiterate—no matter what, he will never become a Hua Luogeng or a Chen Jingrun.

No matter how much hardship and ridicule Shang Yechu suffered in her last life as a comedy actor, those decades of performing experience genuinely gave her countless lessons. Precisely because she had been clumsy, she had to work twice as hard—mechanical repetition, constant practice—engraving filming experience into every pore.

When the director shouted action, she already knew where to stand; when the co-actor shifted position, she knew exactly how to pick up the cue; she knew when to play a supporting role and when to shine, and which expressions would look emotionally full without stealing scenes...

These things can't be mastered overnight. Performing on a bed sheet at home, crying "All ministers, rise" and coronating yourself in front of your household is essentially acting, but it's not the same as standing beneath a set's countless eyes and performing. One minute on stage takes ten years offstage. Since the moment acting was born, it's required time and hard work.

Put simply, among artists Shang Yechu's age—aside from child stars—few would have richer acting experience than she did.

These abilities had already become her muscle memory. Even if Shang Yechu tried to play it mediocre, in Zheng Bohan's eyes the instant she planted herself there—even without costume—she already looked like a maid. One word, and a worried, loyal servant leapt to life; one lifted glance, and Zheng Bohan felt the person across from him was the thoughtless beauty from the script!

An actor who could flip to a role and be in character within seconds!

Not to mention, Shang Yechu's Mandarin was quite standard; her enunciation was clear, and the tone and stress of each line were handled perfectly. She wasn't particularly beautiful, but her posture was upright and her bearing elegant. Those easily overlooked details were exactly what a seasoned director valued.

Although Zheng Bohan had been recklessly riding on his senior's coattails, he was not utterly foolish. Talented actors protect their reputations; Zheng Bohan knew that since this was his first time switching careers to directing and preparations were rushed, he probably couldn't recruit a top-tier team.

Therefore, he had already lowered his casting standards. Fame and status didn't matter; looks weren't a priority—the entertainment circle didn't really have extremely ugly actresses. As long as they could act, that was fine.

To be honest, Zheng Bohan's casting session was slapdash, like a rural festival stage. He was already surprised to have dug up actors of this quality.

Shang Yechu's idea of "so-so performance" and Zheng Bohan's idea of "performance" were not the same thing at all!

Jiang Lei was reasonably reliable. Zheng Bohan thought, even if the appearance was a bit plain, what did a maid need to be an unparalleled beauty for? After sifting through a bunch of performers with mismatched features, they'd finally met someone halfway decent.

Shang Yechu offered the perfect expression of surprised gratitude and bowed to Zheng Bohan, saying, "Thank you, director! May I take the script now?"

Zheng Bohan twirled the pen in his hand and waved it off: "No need. Go add Xiao Yu's contact next door; he'll notify you when it's time."

Honestly, Shang Yechu suspected Zheng Bohan might not actually have a full script in hand—maybe just one episode.

While inwardly doubting this, she still thanked him and left.

Xiao Yu was the yawning assistant on the phone. When Shang Yechu spoke with him she noticed a paper sign-in sheet with three or four artists' names. Li Kui's name was on it too.

That was Zheng Bohan's entire haul for the day. Shang Yechu thought that given the number of applicants, this acceptance rate was actually rather high.

She tried to draw a few words out of Xiao Yu to find out if the project was Tale of Cloud Incline, but failed. Shang Yechu finally realized the drama might not even have a decided title yet!

Zheng Bohan was still crazier than people thought. Writers are to be feared—they make up whatever they want; if conditions don't exist, they'll invent them just to settle scores!

Shang Yechu told Jiang Lei she'd been selected and thanked her sincerely for the recommendation. Although the WeChat she added was Jiang Lei's work account and the director might not even read her messages, that bit of etiquette had to be done.

She'd got the role, but didn't even know what the script was—an unfamiliar feeling for Shang Yechu.

She couldn't remember the lines a maid had in a drama she'd watched more than ten years ago. From the audition lines, this maid named Yuzhu seemed a bit clever and probably not just cannon fodder.

Li Kui's role, however, Shang Yechu did remember a little. Li Kui's part wasn't small. If Li Kui's pay was one hundred thousand yuan, Shang Yechu guessed she might get five thousand to ten thousand for this drama—oh, before tax, of course.

Whatever the amount, it was still vapor money. Shang Yechu remained a pauper with less than three thousand yuan in assets.

She glanced up at the sky—time had passed. No need to shoot extras today; she deserved a good meal.

Shang Yechu sat at a restaurant near film city and ordered a sweet, greasy braised pork knuckle as a celebration for landing her first non-extra role.

Whether Tale of Cloud Incline was plagiarized remained questionable; everything she'd seen today felt off. For now, dinner was the main priority.

The braised knuckle shimmered with a glossy lacquer. Shang Yechu picked up a piece, chewed, and the flavor was rich, springy, and tender—fat without greasiness.

As she savored the dish, she replayed the audition details in her head.

When she delivered Yuzhu the maid's lines, Zheng Bohan matched the following line almost instantaneously—without any pause, hesitation, or stumble.

This maid's role was whatever page she'd flipped to at random. It was unlikely Zheng Bohan had flipped to the same page. What's more, Shang Yechu had noticed Zheng Bohan's line was offhand; he hadn't been looking at a script!

A director knowing a script well is the baseline requirement, but Shang Yechu had rarely seen anyone like Zheng Bohan who could recite it like that—even directors of short films. A drama claimed to have gone from concept to shoot in only three months and didn't even have its title settled, yet the director spoke the script verbatim...what did that mean?

She chewed slowly on another succulent bite.

A thought suddenly popped into her head.

What if...this script already existed?

Or rather, what if this script had been written by Zheng Bohan himself, possibly a long time ago?

Wait—who was responsible for the Legend of Qingyun script? During the plagiarism scandal in her last life, Shang Yechu had never heard the name of that particular screenwriter.

She called for a bowl of rice. "Boss, a bowl of rice, please. Thank you."

"All right. Big or small?" the owner asked cheerfully.

"Big."

Shang Yechu put down her chopsticks, pulled out her charger, and stole a charge from the restaurant's outlet to power up her old Renxing Phone.

She began searching for "Legend of Qingyun screenwriter" and "who wrote Legend of Qingyun script."

Although the Legend of Qingyun production touted that a dozen writers poured their hearts into the script, that might fool audiences but wouldn't deceive insiders. A drama is a whole; its script is the foundation. Too many cooks on a script make a monster with too many heads and limbs.

When she was small she'd read a story about a mother begging for rice to send her son to school. The cook exploded when he saw the rice—the mother had mixed all sorts: early harvest, late harvest, coarse, fine, old, new. Such a mix couldn't be cooked properly.

Scriptwriting is the same. If a dozen writers stir the pot at once, the result will be a mess.

The production likely used such promotion for a reason. Among those dozen writers there would almost certainly be one with more say—the coordinating writer. That coordinator might lack the pedigree or ability to command respect.

Legend of Qingyun was a big production; Shang Yechu guessed the investment exceeded two hundred million yuan. The pressure on everyone involved would be huge.

If the drama succeeded and became a hit, everyone would celebrate. The coordinating writer could bask in the limelight and profit from marketing—if executed well, they could become a smaller version of Zheng Bohan.

If it flopped—an unlikely but possible outcome—someone had to take the blame for such a large production. Then the coordinating writer could hide behind the collective of writers and feign innocence.

But such luck would require coordination with the director. Who could have the clout to get Xu Hanwen—a big-name director—to greenlight something?

Shang Yechu searched for a long time with no results. The rice arrived, and she decided not to dwell on it; she concentrated on eating.

A figure sat down across from her and watched her in silence.

"You still eat like you do," the figure said.

The sight of this person immediately killed half of Shang Yechu's appetite. "Are you here doing research for an article?"

Sheng Wenzhi replied helplessly, "Do you think writers have nothing to do but field research?"

Shang Yechu frowned and set down her chopsticks. "You came to mooch a meal?"

Sheng Wenzhi glared at the glossy pork knuckle on the plate. "Don't worry. I won't compete with you. I don't eat meat."

Shang Yechu shot back: "If you like meat, this still isn't for you."

Sheng Wenzhi continued: "I live nearby. I come to this restaurant occasionally."

Shang Yechu did a quick calculation of property prices in the area and raised an eyebrow. Sheng Wenzhi had prospered writing? But whether in her past life or this one, Shang Yechu had never heard of this writer—Hu Grandma's bookstore didn't stock her books. Maybe she wrote under a pen name?

"Meeting you today was just a coincidence," Sheng Wenzhi went on.

Shang Yechu gave a perfunctory nod and resumed eating.

Though her table manners weren't barbaric, they were hardly refined.

Sheng Wenzhi couldn't help herself: "Could you pay a little more attention?"

"To what?" Shang Yechu asked, puzzled. "You object to my eating? Then you can stand at attention, about-face, and leave."

Sheng Wenzhi blinked. "You've really changed a lot. Very different from before."

In middle school, Shang Yechu had an ingenuous kindness and gentleness. Even after Sheng Wenzhi had hurt her, she bore no grudge—she simply stopped speaking to Sheng Wenzhi.

Now, Shang Yechu...every sentence came with a barb, which Sheng Wenzhi found disconcerting.

Shang Yechu, upon hearing this, thought of a question: "If I've changed so much, how did you recognize me?"

She believed she looked completely different from her middle school self—so different that even her mother Ji Ya might not recognize her.

Sheng Wenzhi hesitated, then said, "Although you differ a lot from three years ago, I have a habit of recognizing people not by their faces but by details."

Artists and literary people had quirks; Sheng Wenzhi was no exception. Many praised her talent for portraying people because she observed the small details in daily life.

"Details?" Shang Yechu repeated softly. "What detail?"

Sheng Wenzhi pointed to Shang Yechu's forearm from across the table: "You have two thin scars that form an X shape."

Shang Yechu unconsciously touched the scar on her arm. Her younger brother Jiayu had scratched her once when he was little with the sharpened tip of a pencil.

As the older sister, she had to help their parents look after him. After being scratched the first time, she planned to dodge, but Jiayu threatened that if she ran away he would tell their parents she had bullied him.

Shang Yechu was young and terrified of his tattling. So despite tears welling in her eyes, she stayed still, and Jiayu made a second scratch.

Sheng Wenzhi continued, "That scar is rare; I've only ever seen it on you. With that clue, looking at your features again, I could faintly see a shadow of the past."

"I see." Shang Yechu put her hand down and went back to eating.

Seeing the conversation fall into an awkward lull, Sheng Wenzhi said, "How come you didn't recognize me? Three years isn't that long—surely you haven't forgotten me?"

Shang Yechu's chopsticks paused.

How could she explain to Sheng Wenzhi that although they had formally been apart three years, in her memory the last time she'd actually seen Sheng Wenzhi had been fifteen years ago?

She answered vaguely: "You've changed a lot too. You're more beautiful than in middle school."

It was the truth. If middle-school Sheng Wenzhi was a flower bud, now she was a solitary, blooming, intoxicating nocturnal blossom at the height of her beauty.

Sheng Wenzhi's expression twisted. After a long while she said, "I don't find that a convincing reason."

Shang Yechu shrugged in a take-it-or-leave-it way: "Think whatever you want. Consider me both foolish and face-blind."

Chapter 21: Rotten Beginning, Rotten Ending?

Sheng Wenzhi could tell that Shang Yechu wasn't very interested in talking to her. Not nearly as interested as she was in the plate of braised pork hock in front of her.

In Sheng Wenzhi's impression, Shang Yechu was very dull. She could even be called the dullest person Sheng Wenzhi had ever met in her life. Maybe the other woman really just had a poor memory.

After Shang Yechu finished a bowl of rice, she suddenly asked Sheng Wenzhi, "Are you still writing novels now?"

"Of course." Sheng Wenzhi glanced at Shang Yechu. "Why do you ask?"

Shang Yechu put down her chopsticks and said, "Under what circumstances would you insert a completely useless scene into your own work?"

"A completely useless scene?" Sheng Wenzhi repeated the question and shook her head. "Only a third-rate author would do that. Suppose you write at the start of a novel, 'There was a hunting rifle hanging on the wall.' Then before the finale that rifle needs to go off at least once. Otherwise that sentence is meaningless."

Shang Yechu bluntly cut her off. "I'm not taking a writing class. Just answer me: under what circumstances would an experienced, top-tier author do such a thing?"

Sheng Wenzhi had to analyze: "If an author is paid by the word, they might do it to pad the word count. That's the most common reason. But for a top author, they probably wouldn't need to pad words to earn petty cash—because the damage to their reputation would cost far more than that small amount. A good author wouldn't lose the watermelon while picking up sesame seeds."

Shang Yechu nodded and called for another bowl of rice.

Sheng Wenzhi couldn't help but say, "You look a lot thinner than before. How can you still eat so much?"

"That isn't important. Continue." Shang Yechu said.

Sheng Wenzhi felt slightly astonished. Undoubtedly, she felt guilty toward Shang Yechu. During Sheng Wenzhi's lowest low, Shang Yechu had been the only one to reach out. And Sheng Wenzhi had repaid that kindness in the cruelest way, adding an irreparable wound to that already chaotic girl's life.

This was the only thing Sheng Wenzhi had ever done that made her heart ache. After she became an adult and reclaimed her parents' inheritance, the first thing she wanted to do was make amends to Shang Yechu.

But now, facing Shang Yechu, Sheng Wenzhi found the other person had grown into someone completely different from before. There was no space for the "amendment" she had imagined.

So Sheng Wenzhi continued, "Aside from that... it depends on the specifics. If it's a serialized work and a useless scene suddenly appears, the author is probably trying to ride a current event, smuggling a jab at something recent into the story. Authors are human—sometimes they want to voice opinions and stuff private agendas into their works."

The words "jab" and "private agenda" touched a sensitive nerve in Shang Yechu. She lifted her eyes and looked at Sheng Wenzhi. "What if that thing is inserted at the very beginning of the work?"

"At the beginning?" Sheng Wenzhi tugged the corner of her mouth. "That author has clearly lost control of their urge to express themselves."

"Lost control?"

Sheng Wenzhi knew Shang Yechu's intellectual level wasn't high, so she tried to explain in simple terms: "The beginning is very important for a work. In the market, a story with a rotten ending can still limp along; a story with a rotten beginning is dead on arrival."

"If an author inserts a completely useless scene at the start of their work... they are either a fool who doesn't know their own worth and doesn't care about their work, or that inserted section is extremely important to them—far more important than the work itself. That seemingly useless scene could be what they truly want to express."

Shang Yechu's chopsticks paused slightly.

The next second, Shang Yechu suddenly gave Sheng Wenzhi a rather polite smile.

For Sheng Wenzhi, who had received nothing but coldness since their reunion, that phony smile made her feel oddly flattered.

"Thank you for clearing that up for me. Would you like something to eat? My treat." Shang Yechu put down her chopsticks.

"...No." Sheng Wenzhi scanned the restaurant's surroundings with a critical eye and frowned. "Are you seeing me off?"

"Sort of." Shang Yechu said. "Today's meeting was informal. You also don't look like you like this place."

Sheng Wenzhi sighed softly and took out her phone.

"Want to exchange contact info?" Sheng Wenzhi waved her phone. "If you have questions like this in the future, you can contact me."

Back at the bookstore, Shang Yechu helped Grandma Hu tend the shop while she began sketching and scribbling on paper.

In the first episode of *Tale of Cloud Incline*, there was an absurdly stupid villain who impersonated someone to enter a talent contest and ended up beaten to death with a cudgel by the emperor.

Shang Yechu couldn't recall exactly what the villain looked like. She only remembered that, to match the portrait of the contestant, the villain went to ridiculous lengths to make himself resemble the girl he had impersonated—undergoing a ludicrous cosmetic disguise.

The makeover was shown in excruciating detail, including eyebrow shaping, mole application, and even foot binding. The segment about foot binding was denounced by fans of *Legend of Qingyun* as feudal nonsense.

Shang Yechu remembered this plot because it was so awful it left people baffled.

She watched most of the episode's villain makeover at her computer, fully expecting the character to be the protagonist or the big boss who would wreak havoc in the harem. After all, with that kind of transformation, the actor deserved a few more scenes for the silicone-faced effort!

But after the villain finished the makeover and went to audition, a eunuch detected his identity. Whack, whack—ordered by the emperor, he was beaten to death.

What???

That was it.

Just... over.

At that time both the live comments and Shang Yechu had blank faces, wondering what they'd just watched. Even when the villain's corpse was dragged to the communal grave, Shang Yechu couldn't believe what she had seen.

We waited half an episode to see this?

Were the previous twenty or thirty minutes basically product placement for cosmetics by small-time vendors?

The villain died thoroughly and never appeared again. Although the plot after that was fairly interesting, this inexplicable opening still badly damaged Tale of Cloud Incline's reputation from episode one.

The cringe-worthy storyline was torn apart by critics. The Phoenix Daily even ran a mocking piece: Costume Drama Waterloo! Thirty Minutes of Soft Ads Chase Viewers Away!

Of course, some people praised the scene. A few sharp-tongued netizens sarcastically said it was "the only original part of Tale of Cloud Incline, because the rest was imported from Legend of Qingyun; this part shows the true caliber of the screenwriter."

Shang Yechu put a question mark on her paper.

She felt the focus of that scene wasn't the emperor ordering the beating, but rather that long, stinky makeup sequence.

Even if Zheng Bohan was directing for the first time, he couldn't have failed to see how out of place that sequence was. And yet, he filmed it and put it at the start.

Moreover, when auditioning actors, Shang Yechu was certain the original script didn't contain that segment. In other words, this bizarre bit was likely added later.

Tale of Cloud Incline had only been in preparation for a few months and didn't even have an official title yet, but Zheng Bohan knew the script by heart;

Normally auditions have producers, directors, and screenwriters present, but at the Tale of Cloud Incline audition site there was only Zheng Bohan;

Zheng Bohan suddenly had a falling-out with his senior Xu Hanwen, and suddenly wanted to shoot a palace intrigue drama to counter Xu Hanwen's Legend of Qingyun;

Zheng Bohan suddenly, like a man possessed, added a makeup-impersonation villain into his drama...

Shang Yechu felt a jolt.

From her last life, she had a prior assumption that Legend of Qingyun was created before Tale of Cloud Incline, and therefore the latter plagiarized the former.

But if—she emphasized if—could it be that both Legend of Qingyun and Tale of Cloud Incline were created by Zheng Bohan?

Or rather, perhaps the scripts of the two dramas were essentially the same thing?

Suppose two years ago Zheng Bohan wrote the script for Legend of Qingyun and discussed filming it with Xu Hanwen.

Xu Hanwen used his golden partnership with Zheng Bohan to secure investment, and Legend of Qingyun became a major project.

Then last year, the project got hijacked by a rising producer—the so-called "peach-picker" who came with a small team of a dozen screenwriters. He rewrote the script beyond recognition. Zheng Bohan was furious, stormed off, and split with Xu Hanwen.

The project continued without him; Legend of Qingyun quietly proceeded with promotions. Zheng Bohan, burning with resentment, decided to go direct himself, pulling together a team to rework the script and turn it into Tale of Cloud Incline...

That makeup villain in episode one was Zheng Bohan's jab at the crew who had turned his script into the unrecognizable Legend of Qingyun!

Shang Yechu had been spinning speculative thoughts. But as she reached this point, she found, strangely, that aside from not explaining why Zheng Bohan didn't publicly defend himself after his Tale of Cloud Incline was accused of plagiarism, her reasoning had no major logical holes.

Now she only needed to identify that "peach-picker." Once she confirmed that person's identity, Shang Yechu could piece together the origin of the feud between the two dramas.

No rush. No rush, she thought. Legend of Qingyun would soon start filming, and once it began they would announce the main creative team, revealing who the "peach-picker" was.

For the moment, Shang Yechu put aside her analysis of the two dramas and asked 103, "Show me my data panel."

103 popped up the panel.

[Name: Shang Yechu

Age: 20

Weight: 45 kg

Height: 162 cm

IQ: 140

Beauty points: 60

Health value: 40

Combat strength: 0

...

...]

After reading it, Shang Yechu walked to the bathroom and looked at her face in the mirror.

The woman in the mirror still had single eyelids, but her nose bridge had a slight lift and her lips were thinner. Her underbite had withdrawn obediently; now no one would call Shang Yechu "underbite" anymore.

Generally, a beauty score of 60 could be considered plainly attractive. But Shang Yechu looked left and right and didn't feel her face was particularly attractive. Standards for ordinary people differ from entertainment industry standards. Like future pretty internet celebrities: when they stand next to stars in dramas or at events, they're instantly outshone.

Shang Yechu now weighed 45 kg, theoretically. Her limit weight was around 40 kg. If she converted 5 kg into beauty points, that face could look a bit better.

But those 5 kg were Shang Yechu's strategic reserve—saved for emergencies. She wouldn't use that reserve lightly. She's only a maid; a role like this didn't warrant consuming her weight reserve.

Never mind, makeup can make up for lack of looks. On a face with a dull complexion, even exquisite features get discounted. Shang Yechu decided to buy some cosmetics and try whitening her complexion.

There were cosmetics shops on the pedestrian street. Shang Yechu picked and chose, painfully spending five hundred bucks on a set of makeup.

A few years later, retro trends would come back and Hong Kong-style makeup would be popular. Shang Yechu had a shallow understanding of Hong Kong-style looks: darkened brows, red lips, pale face—using high-contrast colors to create a bold, glamorous effect.

In her previous life she had no luck with looks and only studied comedic "disguise" makeup, not female "beauty" makeup. So she bravely, clumsily attempted a Hong Kong-style look on herself.

After finishing, Shang Yechu stared at the woman in the mirror who looked like some water ghost and sank into deep thought.

What exactly went wrong?

Shang Yechu washed her face clean and collapsed exhausted onto the thin mattress.

High IQ didn't save her from being clumsy-handed—she still had a long way to go on the road to makeup.

She was worn out today and a lot of unexpected things happened. Shang Yechu indulged herself and didn't study or practice calligraphy; instead she lay on the soft, thick mattress and let her mind go blank.

The long-overdue rest loosened the taut string. After closing her eyes for a while, Shang Yechu suddenly remembered something.

She took out her phone and searched for "Sheng Wenzhi" in the browser.

Unsurprisingly, there were no search results. It seemed the other woman probably used a pen name.

Shang Yechu opened Sheng Wenzhi's WeChat. Her avatar was blank and her Moments were empty. But her personal signature was interesting: "Tudo o que vês. É tudo nada."

Shang Yechu used a translator app. It meant, "All that you see is all nothing."

Combined with Sheng Wenzhi's act of walking into the water, that signature took on meaning. The person's nihilism and self-destructive tendencies appeared severe—perhaps worse than when she lost her parents in middle school.

Shang Yechu had forgotten to ask Sheng Wenzhi why she wanted to commit suicide...

Before drifting into sleep, Shang Yechu thought of that question.

Luckily, Sheng Wenzhi had seemed stable today and probably wouldn't attempt suicide in the near future.

Shang Yechu fell asleep.

Chapter 22: Filming Imminent

Although the team behind Tale of Cloud Incline was hastily assembled, Zheng Bohan himself was not casual about it. The next day, Shang Yechu received a notice from Assistant Yu telling her to go to the studio for makeup tests.

Shang Yechu rushed over as quickly as she could. By the time she arrived at the studio, about a dozen performers had already gathered. Ninety percent of them were women, clustered in small groups chatting among themselves. Only two male performers stood off in a corner, like two drops of green in a sea of red. Judging by their outfits, their roles were probably two eunuchs.

Shang Yechu scanned the room and didn't recognize anyone by name. That wasn't surprising—the leading actors probably hadn't arrived yet—or rather, whether the leads had even been found was still an open question.

Someone soon led Shang Yechu to get her makeup done. The maid Yuzhu's costume was simple; Heng City film city had standardized maid outfits, and since her character was named Yuzhu, they gave her a set in green.

Once she put on the green palace dress and had a quick bit of makeup applied, Shang Yechu's look was basically finished. She glanced at herself in the mirror—quite all right.

A pale complexion hides a hundred flaws. With layers of powder applied, Shang Yechu now looked fair and slightly flushed. The makeup artist shaped her brows with practiced hands, making them slender and balanced. Her lips were the classic maid-pink—not too deep, not too light. Overall, she could pass as a delicate, modest beauty.

But looking good in person and looking good on camera are different matters. On camera, things compress into “ordinary,” “mediocre,” or even “slightly flat.” The truth is immutable: the camera makes people less attractive. A ninety-point beauty might be reduced to eighty-five; Shang Yechu, who's more like sixty in real life, would probably drop to around fifty on camera. Human technology hasn't solved that problem yet.

Fortunately, Shang Yechu's color scheme was green. That color has a built-in freshening, oil-reducing effect. She was grateful she'd casually chosen the role of Yuzhu. If she'd been assigned Jinzhu instead, she'd probably have been dressed like a walking warm-toned lemon.

When Shang Yechu stepped out of the dressing room in her green outfit, even more people had gathered in the studio.

It was then she understood why she'd been selected: this drama simply needed a huge number of female performers!

From girls around twenty to women in their forties and fifties, Shang Yechu saw almost every age group represented in the small shooting space. Half of them looked worse than Shang Yechu, and, by her estimation, quite a few of them couldn't even be called actors!

Those who knew that this was a palace-intrigue production would understand; those who didn't might think they were filming Daughter Kingdom.

What on earth was Zheng Bohan trying to do?

Shang Yechu had only seen the first few episodes of Tale of Cloud Incline. After netizens called it out as a plagiarized drama, she stopped watching. So she didn't know the later plot. But for a low-budget production, hiring so many actors seemed extravagant.

No wonder Zheng Bohan only dared recruit below-the-line performers. If any actor's rank were even slightly higher, this production might have gone bankrupt before shooting began.

Shang Yechu had come early and finished makeup early. Now she just had to have a photographer shoot a few promotional stills. A little ceremony was still necessary.

The photographer quickly took several shots of Shang Yechu. When she saw them, her eyes stung. The lighting—practically light pollution—and the oversaturated colors... she hadn't seen anything like it in years.

While the set buzzed with noise, Director Zheng Bohan finally arrived fashionably late.

He wasn't alone. Shang Yechu immediately recognized the familiar face behind him.

Next to Zheng Bohan stood a middle-aged man with a square face, regular features, a resolute temperament, and a tall build. When she got a clear look at his face, Shang Yechu froze slightly.

It was Qin Tianye!

Qin Tianye was an industry veteran. There are many seasoned actors in show business, but not everyone earns the title “veteran.” Some simply age while their acting remains as poor as when they were young.

Qin Tianye was unquestionably a genuine veteran. Shang Yechu had grown up watching his dramas. Works like Chasing Light and Three Guns Three Farewells had dominated her childhood. But the most important thing was—

Qin Tianye had been the lead in Zheng Bohan’s signature work Eastern Tower Secret History.

Of course, Eastern Tower Secret History was a hit from over a decade ago, so Shang Yechu shouldn’t have remembered so vividly. But she’d crammed the previous night, reviewing Zheng Bohan’s past works and his circle of collaborators, so she recognized him at a glance.

She wasn’t the only one to recognize Qin Tianye; many actresses—mostly those in the forty-to-fifty age bracket—excitedly crowded over.

“Qin Tianye!”

“It’s Teacher Qin!”

“Lord Yan!” (the character Qin Tianye played in Eastern Tower Secret History)

“Lord Yan, can you sign an autograph?”

“Old Yan! My husband and I both adore you!”

Qin Tianye smiled and greeted his fans. Zheng Bohan looked somewhat tired but didn’t show any displeasure at the middle-aged fangirls’ behavior.

Qin Tianye raised his voice: “Alright, alright, everyone, we’ll be working together. There’ll be time to meet later...”

Those words were like pouring water into boiling oil—the set erupted.

“What role will Teacher Qin play?”

“Oh my! Teacher Qin is so handsome; he must be the emperor...”

Die-hard fans are scary everywhere; the director’s presence didn’t dampen their enthusiasm. Zheng Bohan’s crew wasn’t as strictly disciplined or hierarchical as other productions, and Qin Tianye himself was approachable, so the scene became chaotic quickly.

A few young girls near Shang Yechu whispered among themselves: “He looks handsome for an older guy, but is he really worth this much fanaticism?”

Another girl said: “Oh come on! He’s a dream crush for our moms’ generation. If you met Yingjie or Qisheng, would you not go crazy?”

“I don’t like Yingjie or Qisheng. I only like my little wolf puppy Zhouzhou...”

Shang Yechu listened to their gossip while assessing Qin Tianye.

Qin Tianye’s reputation in the industry was excellent—solid and with few stains. Besides, he had collaborated multiple times with Zheng Bohan and Xu Hanwen and was on good terms with both. That he’d agree to appear in a drama that was apparently competing with Xu Hanwen’s production suggested Xu Hanwen might have done something underhanded.

The question remained: what role would Qin Tianye play? Shang Yechu remembered that Tale of Cloud Incline’s emperor wasn’t played by Qin Tianye but by an unknown young idol with painfully awkward acting—nicknamed “the runaway eyeballs.”

Frankly, with Legend of Qingyun about to start filming and Tale of Cloud Incline not even having a complete script for the actors to see, Qin Tianye’s willingness to participate in such an unreliable production—this kind of loyalty could be called selling a kidney to help a brother. If Zheng Bohan had any conscience, he’d at least give Qin Tianye a decent role.

With such thoughts, Shang Yechu returned to her small bookshop-warehouse nook.

She didn’t need to go do extra work for a couple of days, but she didn’t idle. She scoured the internet for Zheng Bohan’s costume-drama works, selected the best, and pulled out clips showing how characters walked, served tea, and bowed.

She memorized those movements and then...

In the bookshop, every day she practiced the elegant walk of historical ladies, the graceful way of offering tea, and the refined bows.

She couldn’t afford acting classes or posture lessons, so this primitive, low-cost training was all she could manage.

Grandma Hu saw Shang Yechu twisting and walking back and forth in the bookshop and at first thought she was patrolling the store. Looking more closely, she realized Shang Yechu’s twisting looked... how to put it... rather odd.

When Shang Yechu had walked her thirtieth lap, Grandma Hu couldn’t hold back.

“Yezi.” Grandma Hu pushed up her glasses and asked with a puzzled look, “Is your hips twisted?”

Shang Yechu stopped walking: “.....”

Shang Yechu began to eat lunch.

Ever since Shang Yechu could earn money, she no longer needed Grandma Hu to feed her. Still, Grandma Hu occasionally brought something tasty from home to reward her.

Today Grandma Hu had brought homemade chicken soup. Shang Yechu lifted the large bowl with grace, took a dainty sip of the oily soup, and gently tapped a nonexistent lid.

Grandma Hu couldn't help saying, "Yezi, you've got oil at the corner of your mouth."

Shang Yechu: "....."

A customer came into the bookshop. Shang Yechu padded over with small, elegant steps, guiding and ringing up the sale in a soft voice. She politely handed the change back with both hands.

After the customer left, Grandma Hu admonished, "Yezi, he only bought one book. The profit is less than ten bucks. We don't have to serve him like an emperor."

Shang Yechu: "....."

Of course, beyond practice, she didn't neglect reading. Shang Yechu paused her study of primary- and secondary-school core textbooks and started reading materials about historical palace concubines.

Palace dramas center on women, and Shang Yechu wanted to learn about real palace concubines.

Some books were well-researched and reliable. Others clearly flew free of reality. One titled *The Secret History of Ancient Emperors of the Hua Nation* read like cheap scandalous trash, making Shang Yechu frown.

Days passed productively. Finally, Shang Yechu received the contract and deposit for *Tale of Cloud Incline*—yes, the drama's name was only finalized one week before shooting. The balance would be paid after wrap.

As Shang Yechu expected, her fee was six thousand yuan. The deposit was a quarter, one thousand five hundred yuan.

Along with the deposit came a partial script.

So far, no one had seen the full script for *Tale of Cloud Incline*. The script given to Shang Yechu was also incomplete.

Shang Yechu read the portion quickly. Zheng Bohan's skill with the pen had not dulled; even rushed, what he produced could still be called fine work. The script in her hands covered about three episodes' worth, with tight plotting, cliffhangers, and plenty of excitement.

The only problem was that it had no beginning and no end.

Character relationships, historical background, and personal histories were all left blank. The whole thing just dove straight into scheming after scheming—very thrilling.

After reading it twice, Shang Yechu memorized the lines and plot completely. That was her strength; she no longer had to struggle to learn lines like before.

The more she knew the script, the more abrupt it felt. There was a clear sense of "scheming for the sake of scheming."

In the short span of three episodes, aside from the naive Zhao Meiren, every character was scheming and ruthless—either blatantly evil or slyly malicious. Yet even these vicious, festering characters would occasionally spout a philosophically weighty line that sharply summarized or critiqued the previous scene.

When Shang Yechu read those lines, she thought of the reading comprehension exercises from school: "What viewpoint does this passage express? Please summarize in a short paragraph..."

Zheng Bohan's dramatic dialogue was excellent—poetic, richly layered, and full of cutting metaphors. One slap extracted blood, one lash left a scar; the lines were vicious. Such dialogue was abundant in the script in her hands.

The only small problem was... could the largely illiterate, overworked peasantry of a feudal society actually speak like that?

You have to give credit to Sheng Wenzhi—she understood creators well. Zheng Bohan's desire to express himself was overwhelming. There's a saying: "Don't bring a plate when all you need is a bowl of vinegar." Zheng Bohan was "making a bowl of dumplings for a vat of vinegar"!

In the entertainment era, audiences watch dramas to relax, not to be lectured. Zheng Bohan's approach could backfire.

Shang Yechu shook her head.

She contacted Li Kui: [Kui-kui, did you get the script?]

Li Kui replied instantly: [Got it! But I can't really understand it.]

[Oh? How can you not understand it?] Shang Yechu replied. [This isn't your first time facing a script, right?]

Li Kui: [Aiya! I'll film it for you to see.]

A few seconds later, Shang Yechu received an electronic copy of the script from Li Kui. Compared to the dozens of pages Shang Yechu had received, Li Kui's script was much thinner.

Shang Yechu opened Li Kui's script and, after only two glances, understood why the silly girl couldn't make sense of it.

The script read:

[Consort Rong laughs foolishly]

[Consort Rong laughs, eyes flashing with a strange light]

[Consort Rong leans back in the chair and laughs foolishly]

[Consort Rong laughs, holding a gourd in her hand]

...

No cause, no consequence, not even the reactions of scene partners. Li Kui's Consort Rong simply laughed in various ways for three pages!

Zheng Bohan had completely lost his mind.

The script Zheng Bohan had given Shang Yechu at least resembled a story. What he'd given Li Kui was a pile of insane nonsense.

In modern internet language, Shang Yechu felt pretty helpless.

[Kui-kui, I don't have many scenes. I'm not busy once we're on set. Ask me then.] Shang Yechu could only reply.

[Okay!] Li Kui sounded touched. [Thank you!]

And so, Tale of Cloud Incline was scheduled to start filming in a week. Time was tight, the actors uncertain, the script unsettled, and the director—mad.

Chapter 23: Power On

August 26th on the lunar calendar, an auspicious day.

Legend of Qingyun officially began filming!

Legend of Qingyun official blog:

The splendid clouds glow, spreading magnificently. The sun and moon shine brilliantly, day after day.

Today, the television drama #Legend of Qingyun#, produced by @Guanjun Century with Wu Hongjiang as executive producer, commenced filming in Heng City. Key creative personnel attended the opening ceremony.

Chief Director: Xu Hanwen @Wenhai Haohan

Lead Actors: Wang Miyun @Xunyun Cloud

Liao Li @Liao Li

Qi Yan @Aegis-Qi Yan

Special Appearance: Wei Tianchi

Starring: Lu Yuxuan @Lu Yuxuan Xuanxuan

Geng Ziqi @Geng Ziqi

Guest Appearances: @Li Siyuan @Guo Jiawei @Lin Xiaofeng @...

The brilliance of sun and moon converges in one person. Wishing for soaring ratings!

[Award-winning actress Wang Miyun leads the cast! Three generations of award-winning actors passionately join!]

[A woman's magnificent life! An era's elegy depicting all joys and sorrows!]

[True love? Best friend? Archenemy? Who captures her heart, who becomes her final destination?]

[Wei Tianchi makes guest appearance! Returns as domineering emperor after "Secret History of Emperor Wei"!]

[Investment reaches 400 million, setting record for highest single-project investment in Dragon State television history!]

[Lu Yuxuan's first screen appearance after contract termination controversy with Chongshan Media!]

[Qi Yan joins "Legend of Qingyun", agent claims "will bring unexpected surprises to the public".]

[Award-winning actor Liao Li: "After reading the Legend of Qingyun script, I was deeply moved."]

Overwhelming promotional articles flooded all major platforms within two hours. The official announcement from Legend of Qingyun's official blog surpassed 100,000 reposts in just one hour!

Wang Miyun is an A-list actress from the 80s generation, an undisputed top-tier female star with highly loyal and devoted fans. She has already won numerous film awards, and her descent to television drama has attracted even more attention.

Similarly, Wang Miyun's public appeal is unmatched. In Dragon State, if you can afford a television, you definitely know Wang Miyun.

Award-winning actor Liao Li's status is basically on par with Wang Miyun, though this doesn't mean he has won countless awards like her or possesses massive public recognition. He only won Best Actor once. But as everyone knows, male celebrities' commercial value tends to be slightly higher than female celebrities'. During the battle for top billing in Legend of Qingyun, Liao Li's team and Wang Miyun's team secretly competed numerous times, ultimately losing narrowly.

But the loudest voices in reposts and comments didn't come from either of their fans. Instead...

Qiqi's Heart Houses Swallow: The elegant youth adorned with flowers, every smile and frown captivates hearts; the passionate young gentleman, one glance back ruins a lifetime. Whose young master on the path is truly charming? Watch Qi Yan @Aegis-Qi Yan passionately portray the noble Zhu Zhao in Legend of Qingyun!

Xuanxuan's Little Raindrop: Congratulations to Lu Yuxuan @Lu Yuxuan Xuanxuan for successfully terminating contract and gaining new life! Looking forward to Lu Yuxuan portraying Yun Mui in Legend of Qingyun!

Yan Yan's Many Charms: Looking forward to Qi Yan~ @Aegis-Qi Yan

Has Chongshan Media Gone Bankrupt Today: In the northern lands dwells a beauty, peerless and independent. Captivating nations and cities, her name is Yun Mui! Anticipating Lu Yuxuan's brilliant performance!

Qi Yan My Wife: Congratulations to Qi Yan @Aegis-Qi Yan for "Aegis Mystery Case" achieving over 1% ratings for perfect finale! Looking forward to meeting Zhu Zhao in Legend of Qingyun soon!

Feiwu Studio Hanging on Chongshan Mountain: Looking forward to dear Xuanxuan~ kisses~

Qi Yan is currently one of the hottest male traffic stars in the entertainment industry. Debuting from a boy band, his fans are predominantly girlfriend fans who spend real money. However, idols ultimately rely on youth, and Qi Yan has been considering career transition in recent years. Coincidentally, Legend of Qingyun's production team extended an olive branch, which Qi Yan gladly accepted.

Lu Yuxuan's situation is quite similar to Qi Yan's. Coming from a girl group background, she was (according to fans) suppressed by her team, bullied within the group, and maliciously sidelined by Chongshan Entertainment. Her useless studio did nothing, allowing dear Xuanxuan to suffer bullying. Eventually, through fans' efforts, Lu Yuxuan finally went solo, terminating contracts with her bloodsucking teammates, bloodsucking team, and bloodsucking agency. Legend of Qingyun is her first project after contract termination.

For many years, Director Xu Hanwen's serious dramas and palace intrigue series primarily attracted middle-aged and elderly audiences. But with Legend of Qingyun's massive investment, the producers naturally aren't satisfied with only capturing the remote controls of older viewers. The addition of Qi Yan and Lu Yuxuan represents the producers' wink toward the teenage audience.

Judging by the scale of the official announcement day, the producers made the right decision. Before this, no series' official announcement had ever surpassed 100,000 reposts within one hour.

While Weibo was bustling with activity, the Legend of Qingyun filming commencement hot search quickly rose to top trending. Everywhere you looked, it seemed everyone was discussing Legend of Qingyun.

Shang Yechu was also looking at Legend of Qingyun related content. Of course, not just watching the excitement, but checking who the screenwriters were.

Sure enough, after the first Weibo announced the main creative team, the official blog's second Weibo @mentioned all the screenwriters one by one. Shang Yechu frowned deeply looking at that long list of names.

Shang Yechu memorized these names and went online searching for clues.

Most of these screenwriters were experts in specific fields, such as Wei Dynasty history research, Ping Dynasty history research, or specialized researchers of particular concubines or emperors. Others were novel authors and screenwriters of some mediocre television dramas.

After searching extensively, one screenwriter named Gong Sizhe caught Shang Yechu's attention. This screenwriter's works consisted of only one web series and two short films, with a pitifully thin resume. He was also very young, only twenty-three. With his qualifications, serving as Legend of Qingyun's screenwriter sounded as absurd as Shang Yechu starring as the female lead in an American blockbuster.

Online information about Gong Sizhe was scarce. Only one photo and a few lines of text. The photo showed a thin, scholarly young man wearing thick glasses, appearing rather unremarkable.

The low status of screenwriters in Dragon State's film and television industry isn't a secret. Compared to the flourishing momentum like flowers on brocade and fire cooking oil when announcing directors and main cast, the Weibo announcing screenwriters could be described as desolate and neglected. The comments

and reposts praised the production team for selecting so many experts as screenwriters, calling it industry conscience or similar. Nobody paid attention to specific screenwriters.

Shang Yechu tried searching for the works Gong Sizhe had written. The web series was called "Secret Affairs of Xiaogong", a failed web drama with only several hundred thousand views. The poster style appeared to plagiarize Eastern Tower Secret History. The two short films were quite interesting though. One called "Father and Son", another called "The Wrath of Oedipus"...

"Yezi!" Li Kui's voice called out, "Come quickly! Everything's set up!"

Shang Yechu put away her phone and called back loudly: "Coming!"

That's right, today was also Tale of Cloud Incline's opening ceremony. And unluckily, the location was chosen right across from Legend of Qingyun.

Zheng Bohan was a stubborn mule, something Shang Yechu had already learned.

Legend of Qingyun began filming today, and during the opening ceremony, the crew from actors to staff numbered over two thousand people. An imposing massive formation, like dark clouds pressing down on the city. Additionally, reporters and media gathered here, camera flashes flickering constantly, shutter sounds rising and falling. The entire film city was made exceptionally lively.

As for the Tale of Cloud Incline crew where Shang Yechu was... how to put it? Using future internet slang, they were "small, pitiful, and helpless".

Compared to Legend of Qingyun's sky-covering opening posters, Tale of Cloud Incline's poster resembled a precarious butt curtain. Compared to Legend of Qingyun's thousand-strong crew standing tall with vigorous energy, Tale of Cloud Incline's hundred-plus people were truly a makeshift troupe; compared to Legend of Qingyun's crowded media and reporters, Tale of Cloud Incline's crew didn't even have proper photographers - just Zheng Bohan's young apprentice.

The contrast was heartbreaking.

To put it bluntly, Shang Yechu almost thought Tale of Cloud Incline's opening site was Legend of Qingyun's Group B reshoot location!

Heng City film city is huge. Just for historical costume dramas alone, Heng City film city can simultaneously accommodate thirty Legend of Qingyun-scale crews filming together. Meaning, venue shortage problems basically don't exist.

Yet Zheng Bohan insisted on holding the opening ceremony right across from the other crew, like needle point against wheat awn, staking territory right under their noses.

Shang Yechu didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Tale of Cloud Incline's opening ceremony was very traditional - offering sacrifices to deities, burning incense, worshiping gods, unveiling. Then everyone shared roast suckling pig and fruits. Zheng Bohan paid out of his own pocket, giving each crew member a hundred-yuan red envelope.

Shang Yechu had good luck, getting a piece of golden crispy roasted pork leg and a crabapple red apple. There were several roast suckling pig shops near Heng City film city, operating 24/7 with pigs slaughtered on standby, most sold to these film crews.

During the opening ceremony, Shang Yechu finally learned what role Qin Tianye was playing. That's right - the emperor!

This struck Shang Yechu as strange - she clearly remembered that in Tale of Cloud Incline, the emperor was a young fresh meat with extremely awkward acting skills, his eyeballs as stiff as carved wood. How did it become Qin Tianye?

What surprised Shang Yechu even more came later. That was, during the opening ceremony, Shang Yechu didn't see the female lead at all.

Tale of Cloud Incline tells the romantic comedy between a general's daughter and an expressionless emperor. Shang Yechu remembered this clearly. But now filming had started, the male lead was replaced, and the female lead was nowhere to be found. What sense did this make?

"Yezi, it's been three days since filming started, how come I still don't understand what the script is about?"

The speaker was Wan Chen, also the actress playing Zhao Meiren, that is Shang Yechu's mistress in the drama.

Compared to unconventional actors like Shang Yechu and Li Kui, Wan Chen was properly trained from drama school. She was very beautiful, with almond eyes and red lips after makeup, naturally possessing some charming allure. Probably precisely for this reason, Zheng Bohan selected her.

Compared to thirty-sixth-tier actors like Shang Yechu, Wan Chen could be considered eighteenth-tier. Having received no proper roles for half a year, she thought heaven had dropped a pie from the sky when selected by screenwriter Zheng Bohan, happily celebrating for several days.

However, when the pie landed, it turned out to be iron-cored!

Wan Chen said worriedly: "Director Zheng only gave me--"

At this point, Wan Chen glanced around and lowered her voice: "Very little script! And I can't really understand it."

After official filming began, Zheng Bohan established two rules: prohibiting actors from exchanging script content with each other, and prohibiting actors from telling others their script volume.

These two regulations were of course quite unreasonable - since ancient times, what actors don't rehearse together? Without exchanging scripts, would everyone act against the wind?

Unfortunately, the entire crew consisted of eighteenth, twenty-seventh, and thirty-sixth-tier actors who had hit rock bottom, while the only somewhat famous Qin Tianye was in cahoots with Zheng Bohan. The actors' dissatisfaction was easily suppressed by Zheng Bohan.

Wan Chen filmed for two days, growing increasingly uncertain. In her view, the entire crew seemed drunk, swaying unsteadily as if in a dream. What good could such a crew produce?

Shang Yechu played Wan Chen's maid, with the most scenes together. During filming, Shang Yechu's acting flowed smoothly, passing every take in one go. Wan Chen secretly regarded her as a dedicated big sister.

Taking advantage of Zheng Bohan's current absence, she couldn't help complaining to Shang Yechu.

"Is our drama really a satellite-broadcast drama? I feel it's not even as good as web dramas?" Wan Chen said, "Did you see Legend of Qingyun's official announcement momentum? That fiery! Stayed on hot search all day! Now reposts have surpassed five hundred thousand!"

"Then look at our drama - we don't even have an official account. I tried searching our drama's name on Weibo, and there were fewer than ten search results! Can you believe it?"

"And the main cast... besides Teacher Qin playing the emperor, who's confirmed as main cast, I haven't even seen the female lead! Have you?"

Shang Yechu looked bewildered: "I haven't either."

Wan Chen slapped her thigh: "See. And the script... I suspect..."

Wan Chen lowered her voice: "I suspect the complete script hasn't even been written by the screenwriter yet!"

Shang Yechu showed surprised expression: "Ah? Why do you say that?"

Wan Chen wore a "you're too naive" expression: "From filming start until now, have you seen the screenwriter?"

Shang Yechu honestly shook her head.

"Right!" Wan Chen said excitedly, "Probably, the screenwriter is locked in a small dark room by Director Zheng writing the script! The scripts we have are fragmented, I'm sure even if pieced together, it's less than five episodes!"

Wan Chen gestured animatedly, trying to portray a pitiful screenwriter oppressed by evil forces rushing deadlines.

Shang Yechu struggled to suppress laughter. Rumors were getting increasingly absurd - probably in a few more days, Tale of Cloud Incline would be rumored to have gone bankrupt and disbanded.

The reason the screenwriter didn't appear in the crew was simple - because that mysterious screenwriter was probably Director Zheng Bohan himself. For some reason, Zheng Bohan likely couldn't openly serve as Tale of Cloud Incline's screenwriter.

As for the filming approach these past few days, Shang Yechu had some vague guesses, unfortunately these guesses couldn't be shared with anyone. She could only comfort Wan Chen: "Actually I don't understand either, but let's just do what Director Zheng says. For a few thousand yuan payment, why risk our lives?"

Wan Chen didn't expect her dedicated big sister to be so slacking off, momentarily greatly shocked, her filter shattered. She ended the topic dispiritedly.

The turning point came on the fifth day of filming.

Chapter 24: Support

Zheng Bohan was busy every day. Whenever anyone on set saw him, they could always spot him holding a pen, scribbling and sketching.

There's no denying that the saying "each profession has its specialty" is a timeless truth. Zheng Bohan was undoubtedly a great talent in screenwriting, but as a director he could only be considered a junior.

Blocking, lighting, set design, composition—of course Zheng Bohan couldn't be ignorant of these things. But because he had never done the practical work, his knowledge remained theoretical.

Aside from experienced actors like Shang Yechu and Qin Tianye, everyone else on the crew was tormented by Zheng Bohan. A single shot would often be reshaped and fussed over multiple times. Repeated NGs, adjustments, on-the-spot rewrites of lines, missed cues because the acting didn't sync...

Under this atmosphere, Tale of Cloud Incline had been shot for five chaotic days, and the actors' fatigue had reached a breaking point. Zheng Bohan's expression was getting increasingly unpleasant.

That day, after another useless morning of work, Zheng Bohan had no choice but to call for a break. The lazy, dispirited air felt like a lethal toxin spreading across the set.

"Support food truck's here!"

The shout from a crew member snapped everyone's attention. The previously sprawled, scattered crew members sprang up or straightened in their seats and looked toward the sound.

It was only natural they were curious. The production base for Tale of Cloud Incline was here; even if you added up everyone's fans present, they probably couldn't even fund a single support food truck. Could this be a support organized by Qin Tianye's fans? But Qin Tianye's fanbase didn't seem like the type to pull something like this together.

A large food truck in a lotus-pink-and-white color scheme, fresh and pretty, came into view. It injected a touch of coolness into the early-autumn heat.

The truck parked beside the studio. A few burly young men jumped down, opened the doors, and, without looking at anyone, set up the compartments, mounted a lightboard, and arranged shelves as if they owned the place.

In an instant, a massive life-sized standee unfolded at the side of the truck. The woman on the standee smiled coyly, a finger tilted to her lips in a playful blowing-kiss pose.

Above the truck, a lotus-pink and purple lightboard rose. Deep purple fairy lights formed two huge rows of English letters on the board: SUGAR×Overturned palace.

Inside, the truck was styled like a counter but dressed far more exquisitely, with a strong girlish charm. Pink and white flowers and balloons clustered around immaculate glass, giving the whole thing a feel of a moving castle. On the lotus-pink back wall, cute cursive writing declared: "Wishing Tale of Cloud Incline soaring viewership!"

Below that, the counter's lower facade displayed a large pale-purple advertisement. It featured an adorable chibi figure mimicking the pose of the side standee. Beside it were two lines in ornate black script:

[SUGE × Tale of Cloud Incline

Wishing a smooth start!]

Shang Yechu brightened considerably.

The female lead has finally arrived!

After the crew finished setting up the truck, their earlier indifference vanished and they began enthusiastically inviting everyone on set to come and get food.

In South Korea, where entertainment culture was highly developed, "coffee trucks" or "food trucks" frequently appeared at drama shoots, concerts, and fan meetings to provide refreshments to staff and fans.

These trucks could be organized by fans, prepared in advance by the artist's team or company, or sent by friends of the artist, both inside and outside the industry. Whatever the source, they were gestures of goodwill—acts of care and respect.

As the saying goes, when you accept someone's hospitality you should be gracious. When you take food from a fan group or a friend's support, you can't help but be polite on set.

However, in Hua Nation's current entertainment scene, this kind of support was still rare. It would take a few more years before it became widespread. For now, the crew—country bumpkins when it came to these trends—stared in amazement.

This Su Ge's sense of entertainment PR was pretty advanced.

The artists crowded around, gazing at the food truck like it was a rare treasure.

On the counter were bowls of fresh-milk ice cream, small boxes of fruit, slices of cream cake, and cups of chilled fruit tea and milk tea. Set against the delicate display, everything sparkled with an enticing, bling-like effect.

The crew members wore standard service smiles as they explained warmly, "Help yourselves as you need... All these snacks are provided free by artist Su Ge to reward everyone for the hard work these past days..."

When hospitality comes with a smile, resentment is easily soothed. The group's gloom and simmering anger immediately subsided somewhat. Someone even remarked, "So this must be the female lead, right? Pretty and kind!"

Shang Yechu of course knew Su Ge. She was the female lead of Tale of Cloud Incline, playing the general's daughter who falls madly in love with the emperor.

Su Ge's acting paired with that wooden pretty-boy emperor was, in the abstract, a perfect match. But just seeing the standee reminded Shang Yechu of the terror she felt while watching the show—Su Ge's habit of exaggerated leg flashes and glaring expressions that dominated the drama.

The general's daughter and the emperor's romance should have been a classic enemies-to-lovers route, but these two had turned it into a robotic performance.

Two words: disaster.

Such a pair of leads would certainly drag Tale of Cloud Incline's quality down. In the previous life, Zheng Bohan had slyly chosen a light-comedy tone, using jokes and gags to mask the awkwardness these two produced.

Shang Yechu had guessed why Zheng Bohan had chosen this particular male-female lead pairing.

A drama's investment is a big deal. No matter how low the budget, Zheng Bohan couldn't shoulder it alone—he had to bring in investors.

If a screenwriter suddenly decides to direct, any sane investor would be wary. It's obvious they wouldn't attract much funding. So the entertainment market's balancing hand would swing in—

Bring, in, financing, to, the, production.

Su Ge had some fame but not that much; she was at best a second-tier star with a few representative works of mixed success. Bluntly put, she had a fan-visible reputation but no major standing.

Small stars get pushed up; big stars rely on fate. That's the entertainment world.

Shang Yechu guessed Su Ge was in a lull without good scripts; since she had free time anyway and Zheng Bohan's script probably wasn't bad, she simply signed on.

Now they saw the food truck before they saw the person. From the professionalism of the setup, this support truck didn't look like a fan group job but something organized by a proper team.

Everyone gathered at the truck, enjoying the lively scene. Shang Yechu stole a glance at Zheng Bohan, whose face was as green as if he'd swallowed a turtle—confirming Shang Yechu's suspicions.

Of course, Shang Yechu didn't mean to accuse Su Ge of rising through backdoor means. She was more inclined to think Su Ge was the daughter of a wealthy family, playing at stardom.

Su Ge had arrived—so how far off could the other investor-backed playboy heir be?

Chapter 25: Artists, Fans and Age

The actors were enjoying the food truck service, while Zheng Bohan was enjoying his cigarette.

The bitter, spicy taste spread across his tongue tip, making Zheng Bohan feel slightly clearer-headed.

On the sixth day of filming, Miss Su Ge had finally arrived at the production set. Along with her came extravagant and lavish lifestyle habits, along with chaotic work and rest schedules.

The filming schedule had been completely disrupted (though it was already messy enough to begin with), but that was manageable. What made Zheng Bohan even more suffocated was that Su Ge immediately demanded script changes!

As a veteran screenwriter with dignity, Su Ge's demands were practically dancing all over Zheng Bohan's red lines!

"The statistics are out, sir," Assistant Yu said. "Miss Su Ge added five kissing scenes and twelve romantic scenes..."

Zheng Bohan inhaled smoke and nearly choked to death.

"Cough cough... cough! How did she add so much random stuff when she doesn't even have the complete script?"

"When the drama lacks substance, romance fills the gap," Assistant Yu poured Zheng Bohan a glass of water. "Precisely because the script is incomplete, she wants to make it complete."

Zheng Bohan's face had already pulled as long as a donkey's: "Do I need to find her another young pretty boy to act with, accompanying her in all that kissing back and forth?"

"That won't be necessary, sir," Assistant Yu said calmly. "Good news, Miss Su Ge hasn't requested additional actors."

Zheng Bohan breathed a sigh of relief.

Zheng Bohan relaxed—

Zheng Bohan's half-sigh of relief got sucked right back in.

"!!!"

Assistant Yu nodded: "It's exactly what you're thinking."

"Cough cough cough cough cough cough cough cough cough!"

Zheng Bohan coughed violently, with such intensity that it seemed like he was trying to cough his lungs out of his chest.

While patting Zheng Bohan's back, Assistant Yu quietly advised: "Sir! Sir! Meta Pictures' only condition for investing in this drama is that Miss Su can film whatever she wants... If Meta Pictures withdraws their investment..."

Assistant Yu didn't finish the unpleasant truth. But everyone knew what he meant.

Zheng Bohan angrily said: "How was I supposed to know she spent these five days revising the script? If I'd known she would ruin the script like this, I'd rather die than go begging to Meta Pictures!"

Assistant Yu comforted him: "Sir, didn't you make that bold declaration that you'd make our drama's ratings surpass 'that one'? Miss Su is young and knows what young people like. What if young audiences actually enjoy this?"

"Nonsense!" Zheng Bohan snorted. "What kind of person would like this?"

Assistant Yu pleaded bitterly: "At least finish filming the drama first..."

"What's this and that?"

A cheerful male voice came through as Qin Tianye walked in from outside, asking: "What are you talking about?"

Qin Tianye had a tall, sturdy build and walked with commanding presence. He walked over to sit opposite Zheng Bohan, but suddenly paused his movement.

For some reason, he felt Zheng Bohan was looking at him strangely. There was surprise, guilt, and a trace of eerie pity...

"Yezii! Yezii! Director Zheng and Teacher Qin are arguing!"

Shang Yechu was practicing writing block characters when Li Kai's sudden shout made her pencil slip, leaving a streak across the draft paper.

"Let's go quickly! If we're late, we'll miss the excitement!"

"They're arguing?" Shang Yechu asked in surprise as Li Kai pulled her into a jog. "Why?"

"Seems like it's related to the script. I heard Teacher Qin saying things like 'I'm already this old' and 'I still have face to maintain'..."

Shang Yechu frowned in thought, and her expression immediately became wonderfully colorful.

Others didn't have the complete script and could only guess about the causes and effects. But Shang Yechu had watched "Tale of Cloud Incline" in her previous life!

Given: The previous life's "Tale of Cloud Incline" was about the joyful bickering and city-toppling romance between the female general protagonist and the emperor.

Given: The script content probably wouldn't change much between both lifetimes.

Given: The person currently playing the emperor is... Qin Tianye.

Given: Veteran actor Qin Tianye is already forty-five years old this year...

Forty-five-year-old veteran actor Qin Tianye, whose persona is built around tough guy roles, serious dramas, and steadfast determination, was supposed to have a light comedic romance with Su Ge, who's young enough to be his daughter...

Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!

Just imagining that scene made Shang Yechu's mind erupt with overwhelming screams!

No wonder the emperor later became that expressionless young guy - turns out the original emperor Qin Tianye had been scared off by the script's epic, peerless romance!

Shang Yechu was struggling hard to suppress her laughter. She didn't know what was wrong with Zheng Bohan, actually making Qin Tianye, this iron-blooded tough guy, perform light romantic comedy with a young girl.

Maybe he was being pressured by capital, maybe he had to bow to circumstances, maybe he'd lost his mind chasing ratings...

All she knew was that her opportunity had arrived.

"Tangtang, have you seen today's hot searches?"

Su Ge answered without even opening her eyes, her words unclear: "What hot search? I'm on hot search every day."

"The one about you and Qi Sheng. Some paparazzi photographed him holding hands with you on set..."

"Oh, that one." Su Ge gently massaged her face with her fingertips, her pronunciation still unclear. "During rehearsal, I forgot my lines, Qi Sheng got impatient and was about to leave, but I wanted to finish quickly so I could get off work, so I couldn't let him go and pulled him back."

Agent Lin Hui: "... " Qi Sheng recently had a movie that Su Ge's father invested quite a bit in, just to get Su Ge a small role. If she remembered correctly, that role only had three lines.

Lin Hui took a deep breath, reminding herself that the one paying the money was the boss: "Then what about this picture where you two are 'smiling sweetly'?"

"You know what Qi Sheng's face looks like - he's naturally smiley. I was laughing purely because his lines were so stupid, they killed me."

"...But the hot search is now saying you two are dating."

"Let them say whatever they want. Kelly was just complaining yesterday that I hardly have any topics for hot searches anymore." Su Ge carefully smoothed out every wrinkle on her face mask. "Qi Sheng's exclusive fans are probably cursing, right? Whatever. Whether getting praised or cursed, it's all traffic. The traffic from being cursed is even bigger than from being praised."

She said it so easily, but they would have to spend so much effort on anti-black PR!

"This time it's really blown up. You and Qi Sheng holding hands reached number one hot search... See for yourself."

Lin Hui handed the phone to Su Ge, who scrolled a couple times before returning it, then continued hydrating her face while looking in the mirror: "I didn't buy this hot search - the ones I buy don't have this much traffic."

Lin Hui secretly rolled her eyes in frustration: "This isn't about buying or not buying - haven't you seen that the comments and topics have already been overrun by Qi Sheng's fans and your antis?"

"I saw that. Qi Sheng's fans really have some skills. Usually with these kinds of hot searches, my fans and the other side's fans would be evenly matched, but this time I didn't see a single one of my fans."

Lin Hui was about to die from anger: "Haven't you thought about the consequences? How can you still have the leisure to put on a face mask?"

Su Ge said indifferently: "What consequences could there be? Can they crawl through the internet cables? Of course I need to put on a face mask - this afternoon's scene is my first scene with Teacher Qin, I need to face it with my best condition..."

Lin Hui really didn't understand why Su Ge cared so much about "Tale of Cloud Incline," this drama that looked destined to flop. Just as she was about to say something, "Ding dong," her phone rang, forcing Lin Hui to step into the hallway to take the call, temporarily relaxing her control over Su Ge.

Seeing that Lin Hui had left, Su Ge quickly took out her phone and opened Weibo.

Strangely, the account Su Ge logged into wasn't her "Su Ge Sugar" account with ten million fans, but an account with only 1,000 followers. The ID was called "AmanoSong."

Su Ge quickly posted a Weibo:

AmanoSong: Broke 1K followers!

The accompanying image was a screenshot showing one thousand followers.

Su Ge cleared all the red notification dots for the dozens of new messages on the account, then liked several posts from bloggers on her homepage. Immediately after, she quickly replied to comments with both fingers.

■Congratulations Song laoshi!■

——■Thank you (■ω■)■

■Congratulations Song taitai!■

——■Thank you, love you~■

■Wuwu Song taitai the link expired please repost QAQ!■

——■Add group loveqintianye****~■

■Song tai do you have HD resources of Qin die's "First Shot of the Storm"? Kneeling and begging!■

——■Already bought it! Will share with everyone after compressing!■

Just as Su Ge was happily busy, Lin Hui returned.

Su Ge frantically tried to close Weibo, but Lin Hui's next sentence made her freeze in place.

"Tangtang, you don't need to put on a face mask anymore. Director Zheng just told me that Qin Tianye has withdrawn from filming "Tale of Cloud Incline" due to dissatisfaction with his role."

With a "thud," Su Ge's phone fell to the ground.

If Lin Hui had stepped forward to look at that moment, she would have discovered that Su Ge's phone screen was displaying a Weibo account called "AmanoSong."

Below the account verification: ■Qin Tianye Super Topic Host■.

Chapter 26: Good script?

Zheng Bohan was still smoking.

When he first left the Legend of Qingyun project, Zheng Bohan was filled with resentment and determined to faithfully produce the original script exactly as written.

But after repeatedly seeking investments, calling in favors, and engaging in endless negotiations over dinner tables and drinking sessions that dragged on day after day, Zheng Bohan's spirit gradually faded.

"Old Zheng, you're not collaborating with Old Xu on this drama?"

"Old Zheng, it's not that I don't trust you, but our budget for film and television projects is limited recently..."

"Old Zheng, why are you so stubborn?"

"Old Zheng, listen to advice and you'll eat well - isn't it great to just focus on being a screenwriter? Why bother trying to become a director?"

"Old Zheng, Legend of Qingyun is too big of a production for us to touch."

Zheng Bohan's anger hadn't subsided, but his full confidence and ambition had diminished after repeated setbacks.

Initially, he wanted to produce his script faithfully; later, he thought compromising for commercial viability wasn't unacceptable - he'd be satisfied as long as he could restore fifty percent of the script; eventually, he thought everything was negotiable - as long as he could produce a drama of the same genre as Legend of Qingyun and compete directly with Xu Hanwen, showing the other that he could make good films without him, that would be enough.

Zheng Bohan's expectations and bottom line kept lowering, yet no one was willing to invest in his script.

After wasting nearly a year, Zheng Bohan approached Meta Pictures.

Meta Pictures was Guanjun Century's old rival. In the same industry, competitors become enemies, and Meta Pictures and Guanjun Century were particularly bitter adversaries. If Meta Pictures said the sun rose from the east today, Guanjun Century would produce a film called The Day It Rose From the West tomorrow; if Guanjun Century's CEO wore red clothes today, Meta Pictures would release entertainment hot search within three hours: "Explosive! Upright large macaque spotted in urban area!"

Legend of Qingyun was produced by Guanjun Century. Logically, if Zheng Bohan wanted to compete with this drama, Meta Pictures should be his first consideration for external support. But Zheng Bohan had been reluctant to contact his old acquaintances at Meta Pictures.

This wasn't because he had strong principles and refused to stoop to businessmen reeking of money. Rather, it was because Meta Pictures was notorious for forcing actors into film and television projects, with their culture of bringing investments into productions being unparalleled in the entertainment industry. Zheng Bohan knew clearly that once he approached Meta Pictures, this drama would truly be finished. His television series would be filled with various poorly-performing connected individuals!

But there really was no time left.

Three months before Legend of Qingyun started filming, Zheng Bohan stepped through Meta Pictures' revolving door.

When Meta Pictures heard that a gold-medal screenwriter like Zheng Bohan wanted to cause trouble for their old baby Guanjun Century, although overjoyed, they also had considerable concerns and initially only planned to invest a small amount.

To squeeze more resources from the capitalists, Zheng Bohan racked his brains and invoked the name of his old friend Qin Tianye.

Zheng Bohan and Xu Hanwen had collaborated for too many years, and their social circles basically overlapped. After learning that his drama was meant to compete with Xu Hanwen, his former old friends avoided him to prevent conflicts of interest. Only Qin Tianye stepped forward, publicly supported him, and expressed willingness to participate at a lower salary.

Qin Tianye wasn't exactly top-tier traffic. But he had many excellent works and a large general audience. Moreover, his character was solid, with good reputation and connections within the industry. With him supporting the production, Zheng Bohan could somewhat secure more investment.

The investors were noncommittal, only saying they needed to hold a small meeting to discuss.

Zheng Bohan thought it was hopeless. Who would have thought that the next day, the situation would turn around, and Meta Pictures' investor proactively contacted Zheng Bohan!

Meta Pictures was willing to invest thirty million in this drama!

Zheng Bohan was nearly overwhelmed by this number, but fortunately he was past his naive years and quickly calmed down, asking what conditions came with it.

Sure enough, there's no such thing as a free lunch. Meta Pictures demanded that the female lead of Zheng Bohan's television drama must be played by an actress named Su Ge. Additionally, Su Ge would have a certain degree of script modification rights and actor decision rights.

Zheng Bohan certainly knew who Su Ge was. Zheng Bohan knew even better that the "certain degree" mentioned by capitalists had considerable flexibility. If he agreed, he would probably lose the most basic control.

Meta Pictures also knew Zheng Bohan's temperament, so they additionally offered many benefits. For example, Su Ge's salary was low, basically at the same level as Qin Tianye's; for example, Meta Pictures' filming locations were available for Zheng Bohan's use; for example, subsequent official promotion on Meta Video...

Under such persuasion, Zheng Bohan didn't hold out for long and quickly agreed.

He was old, no longer having the confidence of his youth to publicly challenge capital to prevent his preferred female lead from being replaced.

Now he just wanted to finish filming this drama.

A burning sensation came from his fingers, and Zheng Bohan realized the cigarette was almost burned out.

Zheng Bohan discarded the cigarette butt and silently looked at the revised script his assistant had delivered.

Qin Tianye had left. The only old friend who supported Zheng Bohan was gone.

Qin Tianye's attitude was firm. Throughout his life, he had played chivalrous heroes, iron-willed soldiers, and majestic generals. Although he had filmed some romantic dramas, that was over a decade ago, different from these sticky, life-and-death storylines nowadays.

Qin Tianye didn't want to ruin his late-career reputation, playing in idol dramas at his age and romancing actresses young enough to be his daughter!

Zheng Bohan was his friend. But Qin Tianye didn't consider himself a Buddha who would cut flesh to feed an eagle, sacrificing his audience appeal and reputation for an old friend.

"Good that he left, good that he left..." Zheng Bohan murmured.

Zheng Bohan's fingers traced over the script line [The empress and emperor gaze deeply at each other, ultimately exchanging a deep kiss], and he gave a bitter smile.

Since this drama had already become an unrecognizable mess, it was better that Qin Tianye left. At least he wouldn't be tarnished by such plotlines.

Zheng Bohan closed the script and said to his assistant, "Please invite Miss Su Ge in, we need to discuss script matters."

Speak of the devil. As soon as Zheng Bohan finished speaking, Su Ge had already burst into the room!

This room was a rest area next to the filming location, with a row of identical small rooms that were hard to distinguish from each other, yet Su Ge had managed to find her way here!

"Teacher Qin left?" Su Ge completely failed to notice Zheng Bohan's expression, asking while panting.

Zheng Bohan didn't expect her to care about this matter and couldn't help but glance at Su Ge in surprise.

Su Ge said urgently, "Director Zheng? Has Teacher Qin left?"

Zheng Bohan shook his head.

Su Ge's eyes lit up, then she heard Zheng Bohan say, "He's waiting in the studio, we'll discuss the contract termination later."

Su Ge's face froze.

Su Ge said incredulously, "Why?"

Zheng Bohan almost wanted to laugh coldly - you ask why!

"Because of the role requirements," Zheng Bohan said lightly. "Please rest assured, Miss Su, I'll quickly find a male actor to fill Teacher Qin's position. We'll minimize the impact on the filming schedule."

Meta Pictures had already forced a female lead into the production, so they probably wouldn't mind forcing in a male lead too. Zheng Bohan had already reached the point of despair.

Su Ge almost wanted to cry - who wanted to act alongside those unattractive actors in the entertainment industry!

Su Ge asked persistently, "Did Teacher Qin refuse because there's too much romance? Actually, I can accept appropriate reductions..."

Better to see but not get than have her idol grow wings and fly away entirely - having less romance was better than none!

Zheng Bohan had already decided to let Qin Tianye leave this mess, so he responded perfunctorily, "It's not entirely about the romance. Miss Su should know what this drama is being made for."

"Huh?" Su Ge asked puzzled, "For what?"

She had rushed over as soon as she heard Qin Tianye was participating, not caring why Zheng Bohan had suddenly decided to direct. Who cared?

Zheng Bohan took a breath and said, "I had some disagreements with Legend of Qingyun's director, and I'm making this drama to compete..."

Su Ge was the privileged princess forced in by investors, so there was no need to hide these matters from her. Even if he tried, he couldn't hide them.

"Oh, oh." Su Ge nodded, "What does this have to do with Teacher Qin?"

Zheng Bohan had given up on educating Su Ge and said directly, "Old Qin is also friends with Legend of Qingyun's director. He doesn't want to make things too awkward with his friend, so he withdrew."

This reason sounded quite reasonable. Su Ge immediately deflated like a wilted eggplant: "That's true... we can't make things difficult for Teacher Qin."

Zheng Bohan breathed a sigh of relief, thinking he could finally send this young lady away. Talking with her was mentally exhausting.

Zheng Bohan didn't consider at all that "Su Ge might be Qin Tianye's fan." Because few young people liked Qin Tianye nowadays. After all, when Qin Tianye appeared in online compilation videos, he was usually labeled as "childhood idol."

Su Ge's concern about the actor change - due to his bias against traffic stars, Zheng Bohan subconsciously believed this was just hypocritical behavior from someone afraid of damaging their reputation.

Just then, Su Ge suddenly raised her eyes again and asked, "Then will Teacher Qin still watch Tale of Cloud Incline?"

Zheng Bohan found it strange that Su Ge would ask this, but didn't think too much about it, casually saying, "Yes. We're old friends too, he usually supports my dramas."

Teacher Qin will watch Tale of Cloud Incline...

Su Ge bit her lip and nodded, listlessly standing up to leave.

In that very moment when Su Ge stood up, a figure suddenly pushed the door open!

Both Zheng Bohan and Su Ge looked up in surprise. Instantly, Su Ge's eyes lit up while Zheng Bohan showed astonishment.

The newcomer was actually Qin Tianye!

Qin Tianye completely failed to notice there were others in the room, striding purposefully toward Zheng Bohan. As he walked, he said:

"Old Zheng! Tale of Cloud Incline is actually such a good script? Why didn't you tell me earlier!"

Chapter 27: The Real Script

"A good script?" Zheng Bohan was stunned. "Old Qin, you..."

Qin Tianye was about to speak when he suddenly noticed there were others in the room. He quickly turned around, sized up Su Ge twice, and said, "Miss Su Ge...?"

Su Ge smoothed her hair, stepped forward, and smiled. "Teacher Qin... long time no see."

Qin Tianye was confused. Had he met Su Ge before?

Su Ge quickly corrected herself, "What I meant was, it's been a long time since I've watched your television dramas."

"So that's what you meant." Qin Tianye instinctively felt somewhat awkward, especially since he had recently learned he might have to film a kissing scene with this young junior actress. Seeing how young she actually was made that strange feeling even more pronounced.

"I haven't had any new works for two or three years now," Qin Tianye politely extended his hand to Su Ge. "Pleased to meet you."

Su Ge quickly shook Qin Tianye's hand, then pulled back as if she'd been burned.

Qin Tianye didn't mind, politely nodding to Su Ge. "Regarding this drama, Director Zheng and I still need to discuss some details. Would Miss Su like to listen?"

Qin Tianye's intention to see her out was already quite obvious. Unfortunately, Su Ge wasn't someone with much social awareness. She immediately nodded emphatically: "Okay!"

Qin Tianye's breath hitched, and a vein twitched at Zheng Bohan's temple.

Zheng Bohan had no choice but to invite both of them to sit down. After they were seated, Zheng Bohan asked, "Old Qin, you just mentioned the script for Tale of Cloud Incline... what did you mean by that?"

Zheng Bohan hadn't given the complete version of the Tale of Cloud Incline script to anyone. Because the complete version bore too much resemblance to Legend of Qingyun, and Zheng Bohan didn't exclusively own the copyright to Legend of Qingyun. Filming an identical version would likely lead to lawsuits. Zheng Bohan had actually been gradually revising the script recently. The parts he'd given Qin Tianye only accounted for about one-third of the total scenes.

Qin Tianye raised his sharp eyebrows and cast a meaningful glance in Su Ge's direction. The meaning was clear: Could we ask this young lady to leave? What I'm about to say isn't very pleasant.

Zheng Bohan glanced at Su Ge, who clearly had no awareness of being unwelcome. At that moment, she was staring unblinkingly at Qin Tianye, ready to receive his teachings at any moment.

Zheng Bohan showed a tolerant expression. The one paying the money was the boss—if she wanted to listen, then let her listen.

Under Qin Tianye's scrutinizing gaze, Zheng Bohan gave an almost imperceptible nod.

Fine. If Zheng Bohan didn't care, why should Qin Tianye worry about it?

Qin Tianye began speaking: "Why didn't you tell me this drama's theme is anti-feudalism?"

Like a thunderclap from a clear sky!

Zheng Bohan abruptly stood up, exclaiming involuntarily: "What did you say?"

"Am I wrong?" Qin Tianye looked directly at Zheng Bohan. "Isn't that what you intended?"

Zheng Bohan realized he had lost his composure. With trembling hands, he felt for the chair behind him and sat down while supporting himself on it.

"You—" Zheng Bohan said hoarsely, "How did you figure it out?"

"So it's true." Qin Tianye's sharp features looked particularly imposing when he focused intently on someone.

"You—first tell me, how did you figure it out?" Zheng Bohan weakly picked up his teacup and took a sip of cold tea.

Seeing this, Qin Tianye snatched the cold tea from Zheng Bohan's hand, poured it out, and poured him a fresh cup of hot tea.

After pouring the tea, Qin Tianye suddenly felt an intense gaze. Turning his head, he saw Su Ge staring at him with wide eyes, not missing a single detail.

Qin Tianye thought to himself that this young person was quite studious, so he poured a cup of tea for Su Ge as well.

After completing these tasks, Qin Tianye cleared his throat and said seriously, "Actually, it wasn't me who figured it out."

"Not you?" Zheng Bohan felt his throat tighten. "Then who?"

Qin Tianye said, "I was on set and heard several actors discussing the script... among them was a young girl who kept praising your script."

As Qin Tianye narrated, a scene of actors discussing the script slowly unfolded before Zheng Bohan's eyes.

"The weather was too hot, you as the director were nowhere to be seen, and I as the lead actor had quarreled with you. The actors were all feeling somewhat lax.

"I heard this young girl encouraging everyone, constantly praising your script and such. At first, I thought she was deliberately buttering you up in front of me. But as I kept listening, I realized... what she was saying had substance."

Zheng Bohan urgently asked, "What did she say?"

Qin Tianye was a veteran actor with years of memorizing lines, so his memory was excellent. He repeated verbatim what that minor actress had said.

"She said, 'We're filming a work unlike any before. Its perspective, depth, and themes are completely different from previous palace intrigue dramas. If this work succeeds, domestic dramas of this genre might enter a new era!'"

Zheng Bohan's lips trembled slightly: "And then?"

"Then someone asked her, 'Why? We're dawdling here every day like we're drunk—I don't see any new era.'

"That young actress retorted: 'That's not true! Can't you all see it? What we're filming is an anthology series!'"

Zheng Bohan's expression froze. On his typically stern face appeared an expression as if he'd been struck by lightning!

Palace intrigue dramas and anthology series—these two terms were as different as night and day.

As a major category in historical dramas, domestic palace intrigue dramas were invariably long-form productions, often running seventy or eighty episodes. Palace intrigue dramas weren't action-packed stories where a female protagonist fought her way from minor villains to the final boss. They involved the subtlest emotions and conflicts of interest between people, the female protagonist's growth, the evolution of palace struggle tactics, and the shifting positions and emotions among characters. A palace intrigue drama was both a growth story of the female protagonist and a history of love and hatred between characters. Therefore, narrative continuity was crucial.

And what was an anthology series? As the name suggested, anthology series were composed of independent units, typically completing a story in one or two to three episodes. One episode of an anthology series was like a shorter film, with clear cause and effect, main and supporting characters, beginning and end. Even if viewers didn't start from the first episode but picked one randomly from the middle, it wouldn't affect their understanding of the plot and character relationships at all.

Were anthology series good? Of course, they couldn't be called bad. There were many enduring works in the anthology format, such as American shows "Friends" and "The Big Bang Theory," domestic dramas "Wulin Alliance" and "The Jianghu Isn't Just Fighting," and Hong Kong productions "Crime Scene Unit 26"

and "The Hilarious Detective."

But look at these anthology series. What were their genres? Comedy, comedy, crime drama, detective comedy—still comedy!

Comedy plots were relatively less complex, while crime dramas had clear main storylines and generally didn't involve emotional entanglements between the main characters (i.e., the investigative team). From this, it was evident that the shorter format of anthology series was indeed more suitable for these types of scripts.

So, for a palace intrigue script, could Zheng Bohan film it as a comedy or a suspenseful detective drama?

This was pure nonsense!

Although Su Ge was only a half-baked actress who couldn't articulate systematic theories, she could still sense something was wrong.

"Huh?" Su Ge questioned, "Anthology series? Tale of Cloud Incline? How is that possible?"

Afraid Qin Tianye might misunderstand, Su Ge quickly added, "I'm not doubting you, Teacher Qin! I mean, could that actress have been mistaken?"

Even Su Ge, an outsider, didn't believe it. Yet the screenwriter-director himself—Zheng Bohan—showed a thoughtful expression.

"Anthology series... come to think of it, it could actually be considered that way—and the anti-feudalism part, did she mention that too?" Zheng Bohan murmured.

Qin Tianye watched Zheng Bohan. Having been friends for many years, he was quite familiar with the other's microexpressions.

The effect of retelling ultimately couldn't match hearing it directly from the person. Qin Tianye took the opportunity to say, "It seems you'd very much like to speak with this actress?"

Zheng Bohan abruptly snapped out of his contemplation: "Who is she?"

"I've already brought her here." Qin Tianye pointed toward the door. He was always thorough in his work and wouldn't do things halfway. "Do you want to meet her?"

"Let her come in." Zheng Bohan said eagerly. Then he suddenly remembered there was still an important person in the room and cast an inquiring glance at Su Ge.

As the financial backer, Su Ge's importance was undeniable. If she insisted on staying, Zheng Bohan couldn't kick her out.

Noticing Zheng Bohan's action, Qin Tianye turned to Su Ge politely and said, "Miss Su, would you be interested in running lines with me?"

Qin Tianye's intention was to use his status as a senior to provide an excuse for Su Ge to leave gracefully. Who would have thought she would leap up from the sofa without hesitation and say, "Of course! Teacher Qin, where should we go to practice lines?"

Qin Tianye felt pleased by Su Ge's diligence. Although her taste in scripts was somewhat questionable, overall, she seemed like an aspiring junior.

Qin Tianye said kindly, "I'll go outside to call that young actress in, then we can go to the studio to practice lines."

After saying this, Qin Tianye walked toward the door. After he turned around, Su Ge gently covered her chest as if her heart were about to leap out.

Zheng Bohan couldn't wait to see this mysterious actress and quickly stepped forward to stand behind Qin Tianye, peering out the door.

Standing at the doorway was a young girl wearing light green palace attire. She was fairly attractive, standing in a proper posture, holding a script in her hand.

When he saw her in person, Zheng Bohan paused slightly, taking a moment to recall who she was: "You're Yuzhu?"

Shang Yechu smiled shyly: "I'm the actress playing Yuzhu. My name is Shang Yechu. Director Zheng, you can call me Little Ye."

"Oh." Zheng Bohan squinted as he examined Shang Yechu. The surprise and anticipation in his heart faded, leaving only astonishment and suspicion.

He remembered this actress—she was recommended by Jiang Lei. Her acting was quite polished, and her performance during filming was very good. But, but...

Zheng Bohan turned back to Qin Tianye and said, "Old Qin, is it really her?"

He didn't avoid letting Shang Yechu hear this.

Qin Tianye raised his eyebrows displeased, "Old Zheng, what do you mean? Would I lie to you?"

"Don't be like that." Zheng Bohan waved his hand. "It's just that she—"

"What about her? Do you look down on minor actors, or do you look down on female actors?" Qin Tianye said bluntly. "You weren't this narrow-minded before. Have you lost your ability to recognize talent since parting ways with Xu Hanwen?"

These words undoubtedly hit Zheng Bohan's sore spot. Zheng Bohan immediately stopped arguing and waved to Shang Yechu, "Little Ye, come in."

While the two men were exchanging barbs, Shang Yechu had been pretending not to hear anything. Qin Tianye was upright and straightforward by nature, and he didn't stand on ceremony with his old friend Zheng Bohan. But Shang Yechu couldn't do the same.

Meanwhile, Su Ge also bounced over to the doorway. She glanced at Shang Yechu's face, then lost interest and looked away. She wasn't as pretty as Su Ge herself.

"Teacher Qin, shall we go?"

Qin Tianye nodded and left with Su Ge.

Inside the room, Shang Yechu sat nervously before Zheng Bohan, her expression and posture perfectly matching that of a novice actress just starting out.

"Explain yourself." Zheng Bhan examined Shang Yechu, his fingers lightly tapping on the table. "Why did you say Tale of Cloud Incline is an anthology series? And why did you say its theme is anti-feudalism?"

Shang Yechu cleared her throat and spoke haltingly, "It's like this, Director.

"I noticed there are many female actors in the crew, far more than what a typical palace intrigue drama requires. Besides that, the number of young female actors and middle-aged to elderly female actors is roughly equal. This situation is also relatively uncommon in palace intrigue drama productions..."

"....."

At first, Shang Yechu seemed somewhat nervous, but gradually, she spoke more and more fluently, more and more smoothly.

"From this, I inferred that these middle-aged and elderly actors might be portraying the later lives of these young palace consorts." Shang Yechu said seriously. "There is no traditional winner in the palace struggles in Tale of Cloud Incline. Instead, it's a gathering of losers, crazily telling stories of their pasts... as if in the clouds, as if in a dream..."

Chapter 28: High-end compliments often only require...

"You made this inference just by looking at the numbers of middle-aged and young actors?" Zheng Bohan snorted, his face showing suspicion. "Do you think I would believe that?"

"Of course not." Shang Yechu smiled slightly and spoke with sincere earnestness:

"Palace intrigue dramas between the millennium and 2010 often featured young, handsome, romantic emperors paired with clever, beautiful maidservants, palace consorts, or daughters of officials and generals. Of course, there were also stunning commoners who rose from humble origins to become phoenixes. The female lead would stand out among all the seductive palace consorts, gaining the emperor's exclusive favor, ending with 'one love for one lifetime.' Though called palace intrigue, they were essentially just idol dramas with different packaging.

"Times are developing, and audience tastes are evolving with them. Soap operas disguised as palace intrigue quickly became outdated. Nowadays, palace intrigue dramas have begun promoting female ensemble casts and the shared tragedy of all beauties. But the main formula of most palace intrigue dramas still involves selecting one female character to fight and struggle, eliminating all others. The only difference is that the emperor changed from deeply affectionate to fickle, and 'one love for one lifetime' became the protagonist reaching the end alone, melancholy and sorrowful, finding the highest position unbearably lonely.

"Such scripts certainly have their advantages—for example, the female lead gets a complete personal arc and story line. From the female lead's perspective, this is undoubtedly an epic growth story of a powerful female protagonist. Therefore, we see this interesting phenomenon: certain palace intrigue dramas promote both 'shared tragedy of all beauties' and 'powerful female protagonist' simultaneously.

"This self-contradictory situation actually reflects the essence of such dramas: the so-called 'shared tragedy of all beauties' is nothing but nonsense. At best, these dramas are just a group of flower attendants and flower ministers surrounding one flower queen.

"What is true shared tragedy of all beauties? It's the destruction of both the good and the bad together. Tragedy tears beautiful things apart for people to see—but that's not enough. We should tear apart both beautiful and ugly things together, letting victors and losers alike return to dust, letting the wise and the foolish share the same eternal doom—making people understand that your destruction has nothing to do with you!"

Zheng Bohan's thin, serious face gradually showed astonishment.

Of course he would be surprised, because these words were what Zheng Bohan himself had said in a past interview. And Shang Yechu had actually memorized them word for word!

"You—" Zheng Bohan coughed lightly, "You watched my interview?"

Shang Yechu nodded, showing an embarrassed smile: "Though you might not believe it, acting in one of your productions has always been my dream."

"Dream?" Zheng Bohan snorted, clearly half-believing, "I've heard of artists dreaming of becoming some famous director's leading lady or young star, but your dream is quite unique."

Shang Yechu's face flushed slightly: "Director Zheng—no, Teacher Zheng! I grew up watching your dramas. Yes, the director is important, but you're the one who truly created those characters! Yu Qiaosheng, Feng Budu, and Yan Gonghuai, Yin Shisanniang, Emperor Kun, Lu Xunxiang—they were all my favorite characters when I was young!"

Zheng Bohan was slightly stunned. These names Shang Yechu mentioned were all characters from works he had written. Some of these roles were quite obscure, not even broadcast on online platforms anymore. Besides himself, few people remembered them now.

What satisfied Zheng Bohan even more was that these characters came from five different television dramas. Among these five dramas, two were co-created with Xu Hanwen, while the other three were collaborations with other directors.

What did this prove? It proved that even without Xu Hanwen, he could create unforgettable characters!

Hearing Shang Yechu say this, Zheng Bohan now believed about thirty percent of her words. His tone softened slightly: "Just for this, you went and watched my interviews?"

"Yes." Shang Yechu lowered her head sheepishly, "I know my qualifications are average, and I might never be good enough for scripts written by Teacher Zheng in this lifetime. But I still couldn't give up. So from the day I decided to pursue acting, I've been watching your past works, interviews, and I've also read your published book 'Thirty Questions on Character Portrayal'."

'Thirty Questions on Character Portrayal' was a book Zheng Bohan published during the celebrity publishing trend a few years ago, just joining the hype. It contained very little substantial content, since no one would casually give away their trade secrets. The book's sales weren't high either, with only about two thousand copies printed. He never expected this young person to have even read this watered-down book.

Now it was Zheng Bohan who felt embarrassed. Facing the earnest gaze of this young extra, Zheng Bohan rarely felt a twinge of awkwardness, as if his embarrassing past had been completely exposed.

Shang Yechu seemed somewhat ashamed of being so frank but continued: "I thought that if I could understand your preferences and interpretation of characters, just in case, just in case there might be an opportunity in the future..."

Shang Yechu stammered a couple of times, unable to continue.

She's still just a child, thin-skinned. Zheng Bohan thought with amusement.

If this were any other industry, knowing someone had painstakingly studied your past statements and analyzed your preferences to gain your appreciation would probably only feel terrifying. But this is the entertainment industry.

The entertainment industry has no privacy to speak of. In this place, being observed, studied, and analyzed can only prove that you are powerful, important, significant—proving you haven't fallen out of favor. This isn't malicious peeping, but the highest form of flattery!

In the entertainment industry, you shouldn't fear others having designs on you—you should fear being useless to others.

No one dislikes being flattered. There are no ineffective compliments, only misplaced ones.

Shang Yechu's compliment was perfectly placed. Domestic screenwriters have low status, practically semi-transparent figures. Although Zheng Bohan and Xu Hanwen were fellow apprentices, their treatment in the industry wasn't comparable. Plus, Zheng Bohan came from serious dramas with an older audience demographic. So although widely praised, he rarely experienced such worship.

Moreover, Zheng Bohan was currently at a low point in his life!

Betrayed by his senior fellow apprentice, abandoned by capital, questioned by old friends, kneeling to beg only to have capitalists force a privileged young lady into his crew who took whatever she wanted. He had broken with his senior fellow apprentice for the sake of his script, only to have to mutilate his script beyond recognition to beg for work... It was impossible for Zheng Bohan not to doubt himself.

Shang Yechu's flattery was like timely rain after long drought, like delivering charcoal in snowy weather—it instantly melted through Zheng Bohan's emotional defenses.

Zheng Bohan's face still looked fierce, but his tone had softened considerably: "Alright, alright, let's talk about the script. So, after watching that interview, you figured out what kind of thing I'm trying to shoot with this drama?"

"Mm!" Shang Yechu nodded heavily, her face showing yearning expression, "The screenwriter's character portrayal and the actor's character understanding rarely achieve complete alignment—sometimes they can even be completely opposite. But this doesn't mean the screenwriter needs to confine the actor within a framework. Sometimes, letting actors improvise freely can often yield unexpected results..."

This passage was exactly from 'Thirty Questions on Character Portrayal.' Zheng Bohan immediately felt so embarrassed his scalp tingled, quickly waving his hand to stop her.

Now Zheng Bohan completely believed Shang Yechu was his genuine admirer. Otherwise, it would be hard to explain why Shang Yechu could memorize such boring, watered-down book material so fluently!

"Alright, alright, Little Ye, just speak normally, why recite my book?" Zheng Bohan said, not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

Shang Yechu clenched her fists, saying seriously: "That's because I discovered that you practice what you preach!"

"..." Zheng Bohan: "Ah."

Shang Yechu said excitedly: "You're not giving us the complete script precisely because you want us to deepen our own understanding of our characters!"

Zheng Bohan: "...Oh, is that so?"

"I carefully read my portion of the script. Yuzhu's perspective is different from Zhao Meiren's. Wan Chen, who plays Zhao Meiren, told me she doesn't know her character's ending, which makes her very anxious. But my script mentions Zhao Meiren's outcome—because she speculated about the emperor's preferences, she was confined to the cold palace. That cold palace is called Dusk Cloud Palace."

"Zhao Meiren is my 'master' in the drama—but she's not my only 'master.' After Zhao Meiren was confined to Dusk Cloud Palace, I went to serve a new palace consort, Consort Liang."

"Coincidentally, Consort Liang also made a mistake and was confined by the emperor to Dusk Cloud Palace."

"These two plot sections are very short, yet each tells a complete story. Starting with some turmoil, ending with confinement to the cold palace."

"—And most importantly, there's no connection between these two plot sections!" Shang Yechu's eyes sparkled, speaking enthusiastically, "There's neither a strategizing female lead nor secretly scheming spy maidservants. I'm just an observer."

"Zhao Meiren and Consort Liang are portrayed completely differently, yet they meet the same end. I immediately thought of what Teacher Zheng mentioned—'your destruction has nothing to do with you'."

"So, who destroyed these women?"

Shang Yechu took a deep breath, enunciating each word clearly: "That's right, it's the emperor played by Teacher Qin Tianye!"

Unconsciously, Zheng Bohan had leaned forward slightly, assuming an involuntary attentive listening posture.

"Yes! The biggest villain in this drama is precisely the emperor!" Shang Yechu said excitedly, "A palace intrigue drama that doesn't compete for the emperor's favor, but instead directs criticism at the instigator. What is this? This is an epoch-making innovation!"

"Whether you're a clever, understanding flower, or an innocent young girl newly entered the palace; whether you're the formidable daughter of a military family, or a low-ranking palace consort who rose from maidservant origins; whether you're an imperial consort favored throughout the harem, or the lowest-ranking court lady who's never even seen the emperor's face—"

"Under imperial power, everyone is a slave! Even the empress is just a higher-ranking slave!"

Earth-shattering!

In that instant, Zheng Bohan felt his spirits lift, as if a strong wind had swept across the lake of his heart, blowing away all the dust covering it!

"Good. Good!" Zheng Bohan slapped the table, making a sharp sound, "Good!"

Only then did Shang Yechu recover from her fervor, quickly apologizing: "Ah! Sorry, Director Zheng, I got too excited just now."

"It's nothing." Zheng Bohan clapped his hands, "I think what you said is even better than what I wrote. Please continue."

Of course it was good—Shang Yechu had spent two days and nights working tirelessly to write this script.

"After forming this speculation, I remembered that the cold palace is called Dusk Cloud Palace, and our drama is called 'Tale of Cloud Incline.' I thought this story might be a very long one. It tells the stories of palace consorts from various dynasties oppressed by imperial power in the cold palace. The reason it's called 'Tale of Cloud Incline' is because when the dynasty is overthrown, this cold palace called Dusk Cloud Palace will also collapse. Teacher Zheng, am I right?"

Shang Yechu's eyes were filled with longing. Like a child eager for the teacher's approval.

Zheng Bohan's heart stirred slightly. He didn't answer immediately. Fortunately, Shang Yechu wasn't foolish enough to wait for his response, instead continuing:

"Palace intrigue dramas are women's stories. But aside from the protagonist, most women ultimately die. All current palace intrigue dramas tell the stories of victors." Shang Yechu exhaled, "Actually, where are the victors? The so-called victors are merely appendages of imperial power."

Having said all that needed to be said, now it was time for emotional appeal.

Shang Yechu paused, then said: "I'm very happy to participate in such a drama, truly very happy. Even if only as a little palace maid, an observer, I still feel honored."

"Ten years ago, you wrote 'Western Garden.' There's one line I still remember to this day. 'Tyrant! People's enemy! The one who steals the world—the emperor!' It completely cleared the trend in the film and television industry of glorifying feudal emperors;"

"Ten years later, you still haven't forgotten your original intentions. Whether depicting conflicts in officialdom or struggles in the harem, these works always direct their criticism at the one who most deserves it. Teacher Zheng, you haven't changed at all."

Shang Yechu raised her eyes, gazing intently at Zheng Bohan: "Teacher Zheng, I grew up watching your dramas. This drama will definitely succeed. It will be like your past dramas—popular throughout the country, drawing huge audiences, and ushering in a new era!"

As the last word fell, a tear slid from the corner of Shang Yechu's eye. She flusteredly wiped her eye corner, saying shamefully: "Oh my, why am I crying? Sorry, Teacher Zheng, I'm too emotional."

Zheng Bohan's eyes also moistened.

He suddenly felt ridiculous. Not because of Shang Yechu, but because of himself.

Look! See what precious things he nearly lost because of his rivalry with Xu Hanwen!

When his scripts were first performed, when he first received audience applause—what was he thinking then?

When did he start forgetting his original intentions?

Yes. Xu Hanwen is a traitor, capitalists are thieves, 'Legend of Qingyun' is a monstrous hybrid, and Meta Pictures is an arrogant amateur.

And for these things, he was willing to destroy his own defenses, damage his own wings, mutilate his own creations beyond recognition, abandon his true core, and give up the audience that had accompanied him for twenty years!

Zheng Bohan took two tissues from the table, handing one to Shang Yechu and using the other to wipe his glasses.

Zheng Bohan's face was expressionless, his tone calm: "So... Little Ye. I think... you shouldn't play Yuzhu anymore."

Shang Yechu showed astonishment: "Director Zheng?"

"Don't panic. Don't panic." Zheng Bohan smiled. He didn't smile often, so this expression looked somewhat strange.

"Yuzhu—you shouldn't play her anymore. I have a more important role for you." Zheng Bohan put on his glasses, the lenses reflecting Shang Yechu's stunned expression. "Given your understanding of this drama, this role suits you well. Wait here for a bit—I need to go talk with Old Qin."

With that, Zheng Bohan didn't wait for Shang Yechu's response before standing up and leaving.

He had decided—even if Meta Pictures withdrew all funding, leaving the crew so poor they had to share ten costumes among the entire production, he wouldn't let Su Ge turn the script into some melodramatic romance drama.

He would shoot what he truly wanted to shoot.

The audience sees nothing.

The audience doesn't see the power struggles of capital, doesn't see the oppression, belittlement, and contempt suffered by screenwriters, doesn't see his helplessness and compromises.

The audience sees everything.

The audience will use their own eyes, their own hands, their own mouths and hearts to choose what they truly want to watch, to choose the creators and works they truly want to follow!

Just watch, Xu Hanwen—let's see which of us will be chosen by the audience!

Chapter 29: Three Years

After Zheng Bohan left, Shang Yechu leaned against the sofa and let out a long breath.

To cater to his tastes, Shang Yechu had spent the past few days watching every interview and reading every article about Zheng Bohan. Since he had so many TV works she couldn't possibly finish them all, she searched for written episode summaries online and forced herself to memorize them by rote.

To add credibility, she even visited Green Petal Net—the country's largest site for book, film, and TV reviews—found Zheng Bohan's works group, picked out the most popular reviews and character analyses, and crammed them into her memory.

She had no choice. Her current circumstances were too ordinary. She had to cling to Zheng Bohan like a lifeline. Opportunities in the entertainment industry vanished in an instant; needless pride would only bury everything.

This approach, of course, placed a tremendous burden on her brain. In fact, Shang Yechu's mind was both exhausted and overexcited, as if her left and right hemispheres had split into two halves. The right half screamed, "Opportunity! Opportunity! Opportunity!" while the left half howled, "I want to sleep! I want to sleep! I need sugar! I need sugar!"

Shang Yechu pulled out a chocolate bar from her pocket, peeled back the foil, and popped it into her mouth—not cheap compound chocolate, but the expensive kind she had bought at the supermarket after spending her last money. After days of mental overwork, she deserved to treat her poor brain.

The sweet taste melted on her tongue; the silky texture made her close her eyes in bliss and smooth the tension from her brow.

Sugar is addictive like that. Sugar... sugar... play... play... Shang Yechu lazily rolled those syllables on her tongue, finally letting her mind go blank.

"I say—"

A voice interrupted her reverie. Shang Yechu didn't open her eyes and replied lazily, "Hmm?"

103 said, "It's rare that you're free. I have a question for you."

"You still have questions for me?" Shang Yechu answered slowly. "Aren't you almost omniscient?"

"You may choose not to answer; that's your freedom. After all, our relationship is equal." 103 answered evasively.

"Ask, then." Shang Yechu was in a relatively good mood.

103 asked, "Why are you in such a hurry? Or rather, what exactly are you rushing toward?"

"Rushing toward what?" Shang Yechu still didn't open her eyes.

103 was blunt: "That's a rhetorical question."

Shang Yechu fell silent. She really was tired.

"You're forcing yourself to improve in a hurried, almost counterproductive way—becoming smarter, prettier, taller; studying, taking roles, being an extra," 103 said. "But none of these things are actually that urgent. You're twenty now; by human standards, you're still young."

103 genuinely couldn't understand.

Shang Yechu balled the chocolate wrapper and tucked it back into her pocket. "You're worried I'll overdraw my health? But can't my weight be exchanged for health value? If my body really can't take it, I can just eat two more kilos of meat and 'replenish' it."

"You're not wrong. Theoretically, even if you worked yourself into cancer, as long as you exchange sixty kilograms of weight for sixty health points, all ailments would vanish immediately." 103's voice was hollow, not conveyed through sound waves but pressed directly into Shang Yechu's mind, carrying an oppressive weight.

"But there's an easier way. For example, don't exchange intelligence—exchange beauty instead, turning yourself into a pretty vase," 103 continued, calm, objective, and cold. "Then use that appearance to attach yourself to a wealthy man—what you earthlings call a 'coal boss'—and have him invest in a major production. You could instantly land a lead and avoid hardship."

Shang Yechu said nothing, and 103 went on: "According to my calculations, this method's success rate exceeds eighty percent. Because men like beautiful and foolish women."

Shang Yechu snapped her eyes open.

103 stopped its monologue, fell silent for a moment, then said, "You're angry."

Shang Yechu gave a short, bitter laugh. "Thanks. You actually noticed."

103 corrected, "I can't determine anger from your expression; I detected it through hormone levels."

Shang Yechu pinched her cervical spine; it made a tiny crisp sound.

"Do you think I'm humiliating you?" 103 asked unconcerned. "I don't mean to. I only care about task efficiency and success rate; I won't waste time degrading you."

Shang Yechu inhaled deeply. "I know."

"You should understand that everything you're doing looks like a high-investment, low-return losing business to me. If I could swap hosts, I would have left on day one," 103 said. "So why are you so impatient? If you're in such a hurry, why not choose the method I proposed?"

Shang Yechu asked warily, "What, if I chose the method you suggested, you'd take back my intelligence and swap it for beauty points?"

"That's impossible." 103 replied coldly. "Don't you have common sense? Your body has already been modified. Values you exchange are like water poured out—irretrievable. To put it in terms you'll understand—

"On the day you turned on the device you ate a piece of roast suckling pig. The chef can turn a live pig into roast suckling pig, but can the farmer turn that roast suckling pig back into a live pig?"

Shang Yechu didn't mind being compared to a pig; she actually felt relieved. Thank heavens. She had been afraid everything she'd gained would vanish, that she'd wake to find herself back to how she was before. Knowing exchanges were irreversible was tremendous good news.

Even if the system left her one day, she wouldn't revert to the foolish girl from her previous life.

"All right, Ms. Shang Yechu. Question session concluded. I have answered your questions; in exchange, you should answer mine." 103 said impatiently. "Tell me, what exactly are you rushing for? Don't give me platitudes like 'get famous early.'"

103 had had enough of Shang Yechu's reckless schedule. If she died from neglect, the system would record a failed mission—a grave shame for it.

Shang Yechu stared at the ceiling with distant eyes and slowly said, "Here's a deal. Tell me one more thing. After you clear that up, I'll answer your question."

"What question?"

Shang Yechu focused on a single point.

"Why me?"

"What?" 103 didn't understand. "What do you mean by that?"

Shang Yechu sat up and walked to the window, speaking as she paced, "There's no such thing as a free lunch. Why me? Is there something special about me?"

If she were human, she might have skirted around it coyly. But 103 was a system.

Without hesitation and without mercy, 103 answered, "No. You're not special."

"You're blunt." Shang Yechu laughed. "I half expected to be the chosen one or the world's child."

103 replied coolly, "Binding is entirely random. Any age, any gender—even a newborn could be bound. Binding you has nothing to do with you personally. Frankly, if I could choose, I'd rather not be bound to you."

"Then why is the exchange based on weight?" Shang Yechu had grown used to 103's sarcasm, treating it like a robot that made spiteful remarks.

"What is exchanged depends on the bound person's situation. The exchange anchor is set as 'the thing the bound person lacks least,'" 103's tone was objectively solemn like a science documentary. "If I bound an old man, I might become a 'white hair exchange system'; if I bound someone who constantly chases others and fails, I'd be a 'simp value exchange system'; if I bound a billionaire, I'd be a 'money exchange system.'"

"I see." Shang Yechu laughed. "Looks like besides weight, I really have nothing."

"Correct." 103 said. "Due to drug effects, your weight increases far more easily than others. You gain weight more readily."

"Wait." Shang Yechu picked up on that keyword. "What drug effects?"

103's tone was calm: "You don't know? Your mother took large amounts of drugs while pregnant with you, causing fetal abnormalities. Your previous appearance, weight, and intelligence were affected by this."

Shang Yechu gripped the windowsill. "What drug?"

"Transgénero," 103 said. "Its Chinese name is 'Baojingen.'"

Shang Yechu's hands trembled as she pulled out her phone. A simple action, but she had to try three times before succeeding.

She shakily typed a few characters into the browser search box: What is Baojingen?

Seconds later the search results loaded.

Ads were at the top, which she skimmed past, and scrolled down.

[Make the fetus change from female to male? The folk "fetal transfer miracle medicine" exposed!

"On the seventieth day, it can be yin or yang, heaven or earth." This was the slogan for the folk miracle medicine "Baojingen" that circulated more than twenty years ago. Behind that lofty wording, it promoted nakedly feudal nonsense. What did the phrase mean? Right—this scam targeted families favoring sons: within forty-nine days of pregnancy, taking "Baojingen" could supposedly change the fetus's gender from female to male.

From a scientific perspective, such claims are nonsense. A fetus's gender is determined at fertilization. Yet some unscientific families still believed a "fetal changing drug" could reverse nature and turn a female fetus into a male one.

According to investigative reporters of the time, a genuine course of "Baojingen" cost more than two thousand yuan and was hard to obtain. Pregnant women were told they needed to take over twenty courses during gestation to complete this mysterious "ritual"...

Bang.

The heavy Renxing Phone hit the floor with a dull thud.

Shang Yechu snapped back to herself and hurriedly bent to pick up the phone. Good—just as Boss Lu had said, the Renxing Phone was solid. It landed without a scratch.

"What happened?" 103 asked, puzzled.

"Nothing." Shang Yechu wiped her eyes and offered a small smile. "I felt my performance earlier in front of Zheng Bohan wasn't natural enough, so I was rehearsing it again."

103 said, "Don't belittle yourself. Your acting is so vivid and delicate it makes systems nauseous."

"By the way." Shang Yechu changed the subject. "What is that 'task' you always keep mentioning? As part of the mission, I should at least know what it is, right?"

She should indeed be told. In truth, 103 had been too busy to go into detail with her.

"Simply put, you have to become someone remembered through the ages."

"Huh?" Shang Yechu paused, then laughed. "An actor becoming immortalized isn't easy."

"Yes." 103 agreed. "If you chose to be a writer, painter, or scientist, the task would be much easier. Those people leave works or achievements that can survive generations; fame can endure centuries. But actors—how many actors from a hundred years ago can people still name? How many opera masters from two hundred years ago are remembered? Performers from over a thousand years ago only survive in poets' verses."

"That's true." Shang Yechu nodded in agreement.

Just when 103 expected her to change her goals and dreams, Shang Yechu went on: "Then it seems I have to become an extraordinarily great actress."

103 fell silent.

After a long moment, 103 said, "Do you want to know what happens if the task fails?"

"I don't care." Shang Yechu smiled, baring her teeth. "Either greatness or death. There is no third way."

"All right." 103 gave up trying to dissuade the madwoman. "I've answered your questions. Now tell me why you're working so hard."

Though it no longer cared, 103 didn't say that aloud.

"The reason is simple." Shang Yechu said, "The reason I'm pushing myself to act so hard is because—"

"I'm listening." 103 prompted.

"In three years, a groundbreaking, epoch-making masterpiece will begin filming. And I will be the lead in that film." Shang Yechu said calmly. "I must accumulate enough fame and leverage within three years to stand before that project's director and screenwriter."

That statement was undeniably arrogant. She was now only a minor extra with cameos across various TV shows. There was a vast chasm between TV bit parts and film stars—especially when you were an extra.

Moreover, if the film was an "epoch-making masterpiece," typical film stars might not even access the resources involved. Shang Yechu's claim was tantamount to holding the bowl in her hand while eyeing the Himalayas.

Fortunately no one else was present. As a harsh and humorless system, 103 wouldn't bother mocking her dreams. It only said, "I see. Understood."

With that motive in mind, her frantic actions made sense. Three years is neither short nor long—just a few projects could pass in that time.

Shang Yechu sat back down on the sofa and gazed toward the door with anticipation.

What news would Zheng Bohan bring back? Good or bad?

Honestly, before capital, Shang Yechu still had limited influence. But even if Zheng Bohan failed in negotiations, he could still arrange the role he promised her.

She had never underestimated Zheng Bohan. In her previous life, the lead pair in Tale of Cloud Incline were two wooden talents whose combined acting couldn't add up to a denominator. Under such poor conditions, Zheng Bohan still turned Tale of Cloud Incline into a very pleasant romantic light comedy that enjoyed good reception before plagiarism allegations surfaced.

Zheng Bohan was truly an unparalleled genius in screenwriting. Shang Yechu's flattery to him was part sincere, part feigned, but at least her praise of his skill was genuine.

A likable little role should be easy for Zheng Bohan to manage...

Just as Shang Yechu thought this, Zheng Bohan pushed the door open!

An unusually dreamy look crossed Zheng Bohan's gaunt, stern face, as if he had just seen the world's tenth wonder.

"Little Ye, come here... the script matter is settled."

Chapter 30: Aura

Zheng Bohan felt he had just experienced the most surreal half hour of his life.

Given Meta Pictures' usual track record, Zheng Bohan had actually prepared himself for a complete fallout with Su Ge and Meta Pictures withdrawing all their investment.

But when he found Su Ge and Qin Tianye, he witnessed a scene he never could have imagined even in his wildest dreams.

Su Ge looked utterly miserable, resembling a little cabbage that had been abused by harsh winds and frost. Zheng Bohan's heart immediately sank, thinking Qin Tianye had scolded Su Ge.

That shouldn't be right? Although Qin Tianye appeared as cold and hard as steel, he was actually very cultivated and rarely clashed with fellow actors.

When Zheng Bohan looked at Qin Tianye again—good heavens!

When facing those mediocre male actors in the entertainment industry, Su Ge could be perfunctory to her heart's content. But facing Qin Tianye, Su Ge didn't dare do that.

Teacher Qin was a very dedicated performer. He never used stand-ins or dubbing, and even in the most poorly received terrible productions, he acted with extreme seriousness. Su Ge remembered every single scar on his body clearly—those scars were all left from Qin Tianye personally performing his own action scenes.

Such a dedicated professional like Teacher Qin would absolutely not have a good impression of unprofessional actors.

Su Ge didn't want Teacher Qin to look down on her, so even though she had rehearsed over thirty times with Qin Tianye without a single successful run-through, Su Ge gritted her teeth and persevered, neither reciting numbers nor calling her teleprompter assistant.

Now Zheng Bohan understood why Qin Tianye had that expression.

Over thirty times—over thirty times!

Not to mention Qin Tianye had never encountered such a situation before, even Zheng Bohan had never seen anything like it!

Su Ge pulled out a pack of delicate, scented tissues from her pocket, wiping her tears as she said, "Director Zheng, what should I do? After the thirty-third failed rehearsal attempt, Teacher Qin told me he wanted to take a break, and then he stopped talking to me."

The veins at Zheng Bohan's temples were twitching. Qin Tianye really had a good temper. Even after all that, he hadn't thrown the script or stormed out!

Su Ge obviously felt the same way. While sniffing, she took out her phone, moved a bit further away from Zheng Bohan, and began editing a Weibo post:

■AmanoSong: Sisters! Today while filming with Teacher Qin, I happened to encounter him rehearsing with a certain female actor. The female actor forgot her lines over thirty times! Teacher Qin didn't get angry at all, he kept comforting that female actor with a pleasant expression! And every time they restarted the scene, Teacher Qin could immediately get into character, summoning up full emotional intensity!

Ahhh Teacher Qin is just so wonderful, I love him so much, love him even more than yesterday wuwuwu~ [sobbing loudly][sobbing loudly][Cupid's arrow][Cupid's arrow]

PS: Teacher Qin is still so handsome in person, I was fortunate to see him up close, he completely doesn't look like a forty-five-year-old man, his nose bridge is particularly straight, his eyelashes are particularly long!■

Qin Tianye had very few active fans on Weibo, so after Su Ge posted this, there were no comments for the time being.

Su Ge temporarily put away her phone, looked up, and saw Zheng Bohan looking at her with a complicated expression.

Zheng Bohan was practically ready to prostrate himself in admiration before this young mistress. One moment he thought she was going to reform herself; the next moment, she was playing on her phone!

Zheng Bohan said amiably: "So, Miss Su, what do you plan to do? Do you still intend to film this production?"

Zheng Bohan was ready to lay his cards on the table with Su Ge.

He really didn't want to serve her anymore. Working with Su Ge even once felt like it could take ten years off his life from stress. Money gone was just money gone, but if his life was gone, everything was gone.

"Of course!" Su Ge said bewilderedly, "I'm definitely going to film it. Since Teacher Qin isn't leaving, I'm even less likely to leave."

Zheng Bohan said pleasantly: "Then you probably need to properly memorize your lines. The female lead has so many scenes, it's impossible not to speak lines."

"That's exactly why I came to you!" Su Ge said as if it were obvious, "My father said you're a top-tier screenwriter in the television industry. Then you must be really good at revising scripts, right? Think of a way to reduce the female lead's lines, preferably to the point where she doesn't need to speak at all."

Su Ge had already thought it through. Reciting numbers or reading from a teleprompter in front of Qin Tianye was obviously impossible—that would ruin her perfect image in Teacher Qin's eyes. But making her memorize lines was also absolutely out of the question.

Su Ge knew her own memory capabilities well—even her educational qualifications were obtained from sketchy high schools and universities abroad that her father had donated several buildings to, with teachers giving her A's because of the donations. Su Ge didn't think her brain was up to the formidable task of memorizing lines.

This being the case, the only solution was to make screenwriter Zheng Bohan suffer a bit. At most, she could offer more money. Problems that could be solved with money weren't really problems.

Su Ge extended an olive branch to Zheng Bohan: "I'll add another five million, how about that?"

Zheng Bohan opened his mouth.

Then Zheng Bohan closed his mouth again.

He didn't want to deal with this spoiled heiress either, but she, she was offering too much.

Where in the world was there a female lead who didn't need to speak? But when someone throws five million at you, then there can be one.

Zheng Bohan gritted his teeth and said: "Let me think about it some more."

But to make a long story short, after experiencing Qin Tianye's departure and return, the rehearsal drama, and a series of other events, Su Ge finally settled down and stopped mentioning script changes altogether. Zheng Bohan thus inexplicably regained control over his own script.

Zheng Bohan felt like he was walking on air, not knowing what incredible luck had come his way—the money was secured, and his screenwriting authority had returned home in glory!

Zheng Bohan pondered distractedly for a moment before coming back to reality and looking at Shang Yechu in front of him.

Shang Yechu sat awkwardly opposite Zheng Bohan and said: "Teacher Zheng."

Zheng Bohan carefully examined her face and said: "Indeed, after some tidying up, you look much better. In the entertainment industry, girls still need to pay some attention to their appearance."

Shang Yechu's beauty points had reached 70, and she could now be considered quite pretty. With makeup, she could become even more attractive.

Having seen countless handsome men and beautiful women, Zheng Bohan didn't find Shang Yechu particularly special. He just felt that compared to the audition day, she now seemed more delicate and pleasant to look at.

When facing those mediocre male actors in the entertainment industry, Su Ge could deal with them perfunctorily to her heart's content. But facing Qin Tianye, Su Ge didn't dare do that.

No one would dislike such a smile. Yet Zheng Bohan slowly furrowed his brows.

Zheng Bohan examined Shang Yechu for a moment, then shook his head and said: "Your temperament doesn't seem to match the character I envisioned."

Shang Yechu was taken aback, "Director Zheng, what kind of temperament do you want for the character?"

Zheng Bohan slowly gestured: "It needs to be sharper—your temperament is too gentle, lacking that kind of aura."

Shang Yechu had a unique quiet temperament about her, with a faint scholarly air. While this kind of temperament was certainly distinctive in the domestic entertainment industry, it wasn't what Zheng Bohan wanted.

After his brief moment of impulsive enthusiasm, Zheng Bohan had cooled down.

"Aura..." Shang Yechu thought for a moment, "Is it like an emperor's aura?"

"Hmm, you're thinking quite ambitiously." Zheng Bohan laughed and shook his head, "Let's assume that for now. What, do you have confidence?"

"For such roles, I really don't have much experience." Shang Yechu said slowly, "Teacher Zheng, how about this—give me two days to properly study and understand it."

Zheng Bohan nodded: "That works. You can go for now." Coincidentally, he also needed time to organize the script and figure out how to write the "female lead who doesn't need to speak" that Su Ge had requested.

Just thinking about this made Zheng Bohan's head start hurting again.

Shang Yechu stood up and was about to leave. Zheng Bohan watched her slender figure and, for some reason, suddenly found himself inexplicably saying: "Little Ye, do you know of any way to make the main character of a production not need to speak?"

After asking this, Zheng Bohan laughed at himself. He was really like a drowning man clutching at straws. Shang Yechu wasn't a professional screenwriter, how could she possibly know this?

Shang Yechu was momentarily surprised, then smiled: "Teacher Zheng, aren't there many works like that? For example, the mute father played by Teacher Xue Lijian in 'The Wine Pot,' or American movies like 'Alien Story,' and similar ones."

Zheng Bohan certainly knew these two films. But considering movie runtimes—one or two hours—having a main character who doesn't speak doesn't have much impact.

For a TV drama with thirty to forty episodes, if the main character dared to just stare blankly for dozens of episodes, they'd be waiting to get torn to shreds by viewers.

Besides, with Su Ge's acting skills, could she play a mute, or a non-speaking alien?

Zheng Bohan weakly waved his hand: "Forget it, I won't make things difficult for you. Go ahead, focus on figuring out how to develop that aura."

What exactly is aura?

The entertainment industry has many similar concepts—things like "star quality," "red hot aura," "superstar presence." But when you really discuss it, no one can clearly explain what it actually means.

Shang Yechu had never been a superstar for even a single day, so she truly didn't know what aura was.

Shang Yechu simply sat down on the set and began searching for some runway show videos. Those models were often praised by the media for "having aura," and Shang Yechu wanted to see.

Lights flickered, stars glittered. Shang Yechu only watched for a short while before having to admit that these people did indeed possess some kind of aura.

But it wasn't right. It wasn't right.

Shang Yechu closed the page.

An emperor—let's assume it's an emperor. What should an emperor's aura be like?

Shang Yechu remembered watching a movie before. In the movie, the killer described humans using the sentence "You wouldn't remember how many slices of bread you've eaten."

Should an emperor be the same?

All the people under heaven are the emperor's private property. Would a miser remember how many gold coins are in his treasury?

In any case, an emperor's temperament absolutely couldn't be like those models on the runway. The purpose of runway shows is to increase brand exposure—essentially to sell clothes, using these highly charismatic models to exaggerate the design sense of the clothing and showcase the brand style.

What does an emperor have to sell? The entire world is his!

Shang Yechu casually jotted down her thoughts on a sticky note.

What an emperor needs most might precisely be—

"Miss Shang, could I ask for your help?"

Shang Yechu's train of thought was abruptly interrupted. She looked up to see an unfamiliar young woman standing before her.

The other woman was dressed simply, had a efficient demeanor, and wore a smile so standard it seemed measured with a protractor.

The woman extended her hand and said politely to Shang Yechu: "I'm Su Ge's agent, my name is Lin Hui."

Chapter 31: Thoughts

Shang Yechu was politely "invited" by Lin Hui to Su Ge's dressing room.

As soon as she entered, Shang Yechu saw Su Ge lying back on the sofa, holding her phone and shaking with laughter.

Lin Hui said, "Tangtang, Miss Shang is here."

Su Ge continued shaking with laughter, seemingly not hearing.

Lin Hui said, "Tangtang, Miss Shang Yechu is here."

Su Ge hummed a happy tune, occasionally letting out "hehe" and "hehe" laughs.

Lin Hui finally lost her patience and said, "Su Ge! Do you still want to ask about the plot or not?"

Su Ge finally heard Lin Hui's call this time and reluctantly sat up, glancing at Shang Yechu.

Su Ge lifted her chin, pointing with her chin tip at the makeup chair opposite her: "You're here? Sit."

Shang Yechu wasn't very familiar with Su Ge, her only impression being the other's abysmal acting skills. Now that this young mistress had suddenly sought her out, Shang Yechu really didn't know why.

Shang Yechu sat down opposite Su Ge. Su Ge waved her hand, dismissing Lin Hui: "Huihui, you can go out first."

Lin Hui looked worriedly at Shang Yechu. She knew Su Ge's sharp tongue well - without her around, what if they ended up fighting?

Shang Yechu smiled slightly, pursing her lips, and nodded to Lin Hui. She looked quite gentle and harmless.

This little actress seems quite mild-tempered... should be fine, right?

Lin Hui hesitated but walked out the door.

As soon as Lin Hui left, Su Ge casually threw her phone aside and scrutinized Shang Yechu critically: "Teacher Qin said you've really digested the script?"

Shang Yechu said cautiously, "I've just added some of my own understanding."

Su Ge waved her hand dismissively: "Forget it, forget it, let's add each other on WeChat first. — You do have WeChat, right?"

Su Ge thought Shang Yechu looked rather rustic and even doubted whether she used a smartphone.

Shang Yechu felt puzzled but smiled, "Yes." As she spoke, she took out her phone and opened her QR code.

Su Ge scanned the code, and Shang Yechu's WeChat account popped up on her phone screen. Shang Yechu's WeChat name was simply "Shang Yechu," and her profile picture was also very proper - a fresh green leaf.

She looks like a pretty boring person. Su Ge muttered to herself.

"Added." Su Ge said.

Shang Yechu looked and indeed, she now had a new friend named "Eating Candy Every Day." The profile picture showed a bright blue sky and emerald green fields, with a strawberry-flavored fruit candy in the foreground.

Su Ge's WeChat name was quite girly. Shang Yechu thought to herself.

The next second, the chat interface jumped, suddenly showing a transfer!

["Eating Candy Every Day" transferred 50,000 yuan to "Shang Yechu."]

Shang Yechu was startled, not understanding what kind of show Su Ge was putting on.

"Miss Su?" Shang Yechu raised her eyes, expressing her confusion with her gaze.

Su Ge snapped her fingers, "This is the deposit."

Shang Yechu raised an eyebrow, seeming to sense something, "Deposit for what?"

Su Ge picked up her phone again to glance at it, then said while typing, "Organize your understanding of the plot and send it to me. I'll give you another 50,000 after you send it."

Shang Yechu now understood. Su Ge probably wanted to market something - like "Su Ge's Finale Thoughts," "Su Ge's Farewell Ceremony with XX Character," "Su Ge Posts to Commemorate the Completion of Tale of Cloud Incline," "Su Ge Writes a Ten-Thousand-Word Biography for Tale of Cloud Incline," etc. There were dozens if not hundreds of such hot searches on major websites every day.

Some artists, though their acting was terrible and their only role in the drama was to make the audience lose immersion, could all write ten-thousand-word essays after the drama ended, expressing what influence this character and this work had on their lives. The artists dared to post, and the fans dared to believe, which could be called a touching mutual pursuit.

Su Ge was treating her as a ghostwriter.

In the entertainment industry, such things are very common. It's all work, nothing to be pretentious about. Besides, 100,000 yuan was a huge sum for Shang Yechu nowadays.

But Shang Yechu didn't accept the transfer, instead politely declining: "Sorry, Miss Su, I can't take this money."

"Huh?" Su Ge thought Shang Yechu was being hypocritical and rolled her eyes, "Why the politeness with me? There's no one else here."

Those who don't take money when it's offered are either crazy or stupid - that was Su Ge's simple view of money.

Shang Yechu said sincerely, "My understanding of the script is based on my own portion of the script. As for the complete script, I haven't seen it yet."

This was the truth. To be honest, even Zheng Bohan himself probably didn't know what the complete script looked like.

"If I write nonsense, it might have a negative impact on you, Miss Su." Shang Yechu lowered her eyes, her tone gentle but firm, "So, I'm sorry, Miss Su."

"So that's how it is." Su Ge made a "tsk" sound, "Teacher Qin praised you to the skies, I thought you were really something."

For a moment, Shang Yechu actually felt a bit envious of Su Ge. Such emotional intelligence was hard to develop unless you were a child spoiled rotten since childhood.

Su Ge was extremely disappointed. She had originally planned to buy the plot understanding from this little extra to perform well in front of Teacher Qin and improve her image.

Su Ge persisted, "Then if I get a complete script from Zheng Bohan for you, how many days would it take you to finish writing? I can add another 50,000."

Shang Yechu hesitated, "As far as I know, Director Zheng seems to be revising the script..."

The implication being that he hadn't finished revising it yet, so even if she asked, she wouldn't get it.

Only then did Su Ge remember that she had asked Zheng Bohan to revise the script. She immediately wilted like frostbitten eggplant and instantly lost interest in Shang Yechu: "Alright, then you can go out now."

Just then, Su Ge's phone made a "ding dong" sound. Shang Yechu knew this was the notification sound for when someone you specially follow on Weibo posts.

Su Ge's eyes lit up, she grabbed her phone and started playing with it, not giving Shang Yechu another glance.

Shang Yechu's heart stirred, and she quietly checked the current time.

1:36 PM.

Shang Yechu walked out of the dressing room, found a quiet corner, took out her phone, went to Su Ge's Weibo, and clicked into her following list.

Su Ge followed very few people, only about forty. Shang Yechu clicked into each user profile that Su Ge followed one by one - no one had posted on Weibo just now.

For some reason, Shang Yechu was somewhat concerned about this mysterious special follow.

Could it be Su Ge's boyfriend?

Shang Yechu typed the beginning of Su Ge's topic in the search box - wow, a whole string of results immediately popped up!

#Su Ge Qi Sheng#

#Su Ge Qi Sheng Sweet Date on Set#

#Su Ge Smiled#

#Su Ge Chosen Ancient Costume Young Miss#

#Su Ge Yingjie#

#Su Ge You Jinghua#

...

Su Ge's rumored love interests were too numerous to count. With rigorous investigative spirit, Shang Yechu checked each of these rumored love interests one by one - no one had posted on Weibo just now.

Shang Yechu let out a breath, thinking she really had too much time on her hands. Although Su Ge was the Privileged Princess of the crew, figuring out her preferences wasn't that easy.

Just as Shang Yechu was about to close Weibo, she suddenly remembered something.

Tale of Cloud Incline would definitely need promotion on Weibo when the time came, so she might as well follow the main creators of the crew now.

Shang Yechu moved her fingers, following Zheng Bohan and Su Ge. After thinking about it, she typed Qin Tianye's name in the search box.

The moment the search results popped up, Shang Yechu's gaze slightly froze, almost jumping up from the bench!

Qin Tianye, posted on Weibo:

[Fortunate to have encountered a good script, happy!]

Accompanied by a photo of a script taken from a straight male perspective with mosaics.

Time, twenty-one minutes ago. It was now 13:57, twenty-one minutes ago would be... 13:36.

Shang Yechu was very certain that in Su Ge's following list she had just seen, there was no one named Qin Tianye.

A secret account?

Shang Yechu followed Qin Tianye, then clicked into the comments section of this Weibo post.

Qin Tianye didn't have many fans, only over 900,000. The comments section was even sparser, with only over 100 comments received more than twenty minutes after the post.

As soon as Shang Yechu entered the comments section, the first thing she noticed was the top hot comment.

AmanoSong: Uncle Qin, good afternoon~ What did you have for lunch? With a new script, are you joining a new project? [love][love]

The reason Shang Yechu noticed this comment wasn't just because it was in the top hot comment position, but also because of the commenter "AmanoSong"'s profile picture—

It was a strawberry candy.

Shang Yechu's eyelids twitched.

It couldn't be this coincidental, could it?

Shang Yechu changed the comments section to "sort by comment time," then was surprised to discover that this "AmanoSong" was actually the first user to comment!

Recalling Su Ge's hurried way of grabbing her phone, Shang Yechu's heartbeat gradually quickened.

She clicked into AmanoSong's profile, and the first thing she saw was the other's latest Weibo post - several high-quality edited paparazzi photos posted in Qin Tianye's super topic.

[#Qin Tianye Super Topic# #Promoting Qin Tianye to the Whole World# ■ #The Best Qin Tianye in the World#

■■Unknown TV Drama■Paparazzi Photos

2016.09.15

■To be edited]

Looking at the clothes Qin Tianye was wearing in the photos, these were indeed fresh paparazzi photos from today. The editing quality of these pictures was very high, with bright color grading, though not very clear, looking like they were sneakily taken.

The dozen or so comments in the comments section all offered their praises:

[Qin die is still so handsome...]

[Those long legs, awsl!]

[Miss Su's color grading is really nice, please share the tutorial www]

Under the comment asking for the color grading tutorial, AmanoSong replied: [Just average, didn't bring my computer today, just quickly adjusted with my phone. Will re-edit when I get back!]

Shang Yechu's heart was about to fly out of her chest. Covering her chest with one hand, she used her other hand to search in her browser for "what does Amano mean."

The search results showed that "Amano" in Japanese means "Tianye."

As for "Song," anyone who's been to school knows it means song...

"!!!"

Shang Yechu nearly threw her phone away!

Suppressing the urge to scream, Shang Yechu scrolled down further. This time she saw that [Sisters! Today while following Teacher Qin for photos, I ran into him rehearsing with a certain female artist. The female artist forgot her lines over thirty times!...] Weibo post.

Other than someone who was on site, who could describe the details so specifically?

Shang Yechu immediately remembered Su Ge's WeChat nickname again, "Eating Candy Every Day."

Su Ge's English name was Sugar, which means candy.

Just now, Lin Hui called Su Ge Tangtang.

Before knowing certain things, this nickname seemed completely normal. But now that Shang Yechu knew certain things, looking at Su Ge's WeChat nickname again was simply unbearable to witness...

Why Su Ge took on this drama that looked like it would flop, why this drama had turned into a romantic comedy, why the script kept being revised - these things, with just a little thought, would make people suddenly understand!

Shang Yechu now felt very tormented.

People are all like this. When discovering some huge but completely useless secret that can't be revealed to anyone, everyone would feel the same torment as Shang Yechu.

Shang Yechu had a suffocating feeling like she had drunk a bellyful of water but couldn't go to the bathroom. To regulate this emotion, she turned off her phone and prepared to go to the bathroom to wash her face and calm down.

Just as she stood up, something suddenly flashed through Shang Yechu's mind.

Almost without any hesitation, she immediately rushed toward the break room where Zheng Bohan was!

Zheng Bohan was deep in thought about how to create a female lead who didn't need to speak when he suddenly heard knocking.

Zheng Bohan irritably pinched his nose, thinking it was Assistant Yu, "Come in."

To his surprise, the person who pushed the door open wasn't Assistant Yu, but that guy who had just left his office, Shang Yechu.

"Little Ye?" Zheng Bohan put down his hand from pinching the bridge of his nose, rarely joking, "You finished practicing that quickly?"

"No, that's not it. Director Zheng." Shang Yechu walked up to Zheng Bohan, lowering her head seriously, "It's like this. Regarding the 'non-speaking' female lead you asked me about earlier, I've had some immature ideas..."

Chapter 32: A Trivial Task

"You mean," Zheng Bohan put down his pen and looked at Shang Yechu seriously, "arrange a 'white moonlight' for the emperor?"

"Yes." Shang Yechu sat opposite Zheng Bohan, nervously turning the teacup in front of her.

Zheng Bohan neither agreed nor disagreed at once. He leaned back in his chair and studied Shang Yechu with a probing look.

"Tell me your reasons."

Shang Yechu chose her words carefully. "Suppose there's a woman who met the emperor when he was still obscure, who was his wife for many years, sharing hardships and triumphs. The emperor promised that after he seized the realm, she would be his only empress. But on the eve of his ascension, she dies for some reason."

Zheng Bohan didn't interrupt, so she continued: "She could appear in the emperor's memories. Whenever the emperor struggles to make a decision, he could confide in the imagined wife. The imagined wife wouldn't need to speak, not even make any extra moves—she would just listen silently."

Zheng Bohan straightened slightly—an indication of growing interest in the conversation.

Shang Yechu went on: "This wife could stay forever young—because she's dead. In the emperor's memories, she never ages. That way, visually, it's also fitting."

Shang Yechu didn't explicitly say whose appearance this wife should resemble, but Zheng Bohan understood naturally.

Not only smart, but tactful—this was one of the things Zheng Bohan admired most about Shang Yechu.

But Zheng Bohan didn't rush to endorse her idea. He tapped lightly on the script draft in front of him.

"Little Ye, you know what the central theme of our drama is."

"Mm." Shang Yechu could only nod.

Zheng Bohan slowly twirled his pen and said, "Then you should know that a sequence like this, placed in this kind of work, is inappropriate."

Before Shang Yechu could answer, Zheng Bohan continued, "A devoted emperor and a tragic love—it's beautiful, sure. If this were an idol drama, I'd say your idea is good. But since our piece is billed as 'a palace struggle like never before,' we can't include scenes that glorify an emperor's love like this."

Honestly, Zheng Bohan felt a little disappointed. But he also knew Shang Yechu wasn't at fault. She wasn't a professional screenwriter; she only meant to help him solve a problem. Ultimately, the blame lay with Su Ge's demanding requirements.

If Legend of Qingyun hadn't been taken away...

Shang Yechu noticed Zheng Bohan's expression had grown complicated. It seemed the veteran writer was nostalgic for the project that never aired.

She smiled slightly, a trace of youthful innocence in her look. "Teacher Zheng, you're absolutely right. So, the sequence I mentioned actually has a second half."

Lowering her voice, Shang Yechu told Zheng Bohan a few more lines.

Zheng Bohan's expression shifted from casual to stunned.

Before Shang Yechu finished that last sentence, Zheng Bohan slammed his hand on the table and shouted!

"Brilliant!"

Shang Yechu jumped, startled. "Director Zheng?"

"Ahem. It's nothing. Little Ye, I'm just too excited." Zheng Bohan sat back down.

This time his posture was impeccably proper, but his tone was far from solemn—almost exhilarated. "Little Ye, this scene is great—no, to be frank, it's bloody brilliant!"

Zheng Bohan actually swore, which surprised Shang Yechu. After all, he was an intellectual type; such coarse language seemed out of character.

What Shang Yechu didn't know was that Zheng Bohan was mentally spinning countless schemes at that moment.

With this scene, why not stomp on Xu Hanwen and that whole pack of reputation-hungry writers who stole his script?

As the true author behind Legend of Qingyun, Zheng Bohan knew the script—both the original and the revised versions—quite well. He could even guesstimate the number of episodes.

While talking with Shang Yechu, he had already laid out how Tale of Cloud Incline and Legend of Qingyun would line up, even calculating which dates each episode could air!

He wanted to give Xu Hanwen a hefty slap! Not just one—he wanted to slap one side of his face, then force the other cheek forward for more!

Shang Yechu couldn't fathom Zheng Bohan's eagerness to crush Xu Hanwen, but she knew how to ride the momentum. "Teacher Zheng," she said, "please don't praise me so much. If you keep complimenting me, I'll get arrogant."

"Hahaha..." Zheng Bohan roared with laughter. "A perceptive young person like you shouldn't be overly modest."

"Teacher Zheng!" Shang Yechu sounded a little embarrassed.

"Alright, enough teasing. Let's get down to business." Zheng Bohan's smile faded and he spoke earnestly. "This idea came from you, and I won't steal your creativity. I plan to put your name in the screenwriter credits. How does that sound?"

Shang Yechu looked tempted, but replied delicately, "Teacher Zheng, I want to focus on doing my own job well first."

Zheng Bohan read her subtle meaning like a practiced musician. He wouldn't force her. Still, he made a mark in the air as if to record it, "I understand. But—I'm not cursing you—I'm saying, if one day you want to try screenwriting, you're welcome to collaborate with me."

Shang Yechu smiled brightly, like a child receiving approval from a teacher. "Of course, teacher!"

"You," Zheng Bohan chuckled, tapping her forehead from across the table, "little flatterer."

That sealed the "teacher" as accepted.

Shang Yechu felt a surge of excitement. Whatever the weight of those two words, she could use them to shine.

The flattery session ended, and it was time to get serious.

Shang Yechu was naturally thrilled by the prospect of the emperor role Zheng Bohan mentioned. She couldn't wait to know what kind of role it would be—now was the perfect time.

She cleared her throat. "I just wonder if Miss Su would be willing to play such a role?"

Zheng Bohan's smile stiffened.

Happiness is always fleeting; Zheng Bohan felt as if a lump of sticky glutinous rice had clogged his chest.

Would Su Ge agree? He wasn't sure.

A deceased character can never have too much screen time in any series. If Su Ge played the deceased beloved wife, her actual scenes would be drastically reduced. She'd be a female lead in name only, not in substance.

Given Su Ge's fame, what were the chances she'd accept such a deal?

Even if she agreed—what about her fans?

The fanaticism of pop-star fans had begun to surface by 2016. Su Ge was one of those actresses who thrived on controversy, and her fans were ferocious. Zheng Bohan couldn't imagine the uproar when viewers tuned into Tale of Cloud Incline expecting Su Ge, only to find her appearing briefly...

He shivered.

Nothing in this world comes with only benefits and no drawbacks. Zheng Bohan hesitated for two seconds, then tossed the risk of being yelled at out of his mind. In showbiz, you need a thick skin.

He gritted his teeth. "Don't worry about that. I'll talk to her agent."

Before Shang Yechu had called him "teacher," she had been an outsider in Zheng Bohan's eyes. After that word, she was half one of his own. So he didn't hold back any real information: "I have some rapport with her agent."

"How convenient," Shang Yechu's eyes curved. "I just became friends with Miss Su, and we've even added each other on WeChat."

She took out her phone and showed Zheng Bohan the contact labeled "Eating Candy Every Day."

Zheng Bohan recognized Su Ge's WeChat at once; he was surprised Shang Yechu had really connected with the heiress.

Surprise vanished quickly, and Zheng Bohan's eyes gleamed with an idea.

"Isn't that even better?" he said without hesitation, selling his freshly acquired 'student.' "I'll talk to Lin Hui; you feel out Su Ge and see what she thinks."

Before Shang Yechu could answer, Zheng Bohan offered a proposal she couldn't refuse: "If she agrees, there will be more room to maneuver for other roles."

That was blatantly straightforward. Translated into modern terms: if Shang Yechu could secure Su Ge, then Zheng Bohan's proposed role would be Shang Yechu's to have—and with extra scenes as a reward.

Undeniably, he was dangling a big incentive. And Shang Yechu had to bite.

Private dealings required fewer niceties. The entertainment industry was a small world that couldn't accommodate excessive virtue or formality. If you wanted to play the noble, someone across the table would play zero-sum with you. Hesitate, and the opponent would have already taken the chessboard and smashed you with it.

Both Zheng Bohan and Shang Yechu were familiar with this reality. Shang Yechu didn't take offense; on the contrary, she knew Zheng Bohan wasn't treating her as an outsider.

She wasn't ungrateful. Smiling, she shook her phone. "Speaking of which—teacher, I have Su Ge's WeChat, but I don't have yours yet. That's not appropriate, is it?"

When Shang Yechu arrived at Su Ge's dressing room, Su Ge was eating dinner.

Her meal was pitiful: a single cabbage leaf and half a carrot. Shang Yechu glanced at the delicate mauve plate and silently thanked the System for letting her avoid the daily grazing other actresses endured.

Su Ge had a leaf in her mouth and a laptop in front of her, a mouse in hand, intently working on something.

Shang Yechu guessed Su Ge was retouching photos of Qin Tianye.

Today's shooting had been disrupted again. By dusk most of the crew had left the set. Qin Tianye hadn't gone—he was waiting to leave with Zheng Bohan, so Su Ge stayed too.

Shang Yechu knocked on the door to announce her arrival.

Su Ge looked up, spat out the cabbage leaf, and gestured for her to sit.

"You're here so late. What's up?" Su Ge asked casually.

Shang Yechu wasted no time. "Director Zheng said he has an idea about the female lead's screen time."

"Oh." Su Ge's interest piqued. "Tell me. I'm listening."

After a moment of thought, Shang Yechu said, "Miss Su would play the woman Qin Tianye's character loved most in his life."

"Bang!"

Su Ge's hand slipped and the salad plate crashed to the floor!

She stared at Shang Yechu like she'd seen a ghost, forgetting even to pick up the dish.

Shang Yechu looked innocently concerned. "Miss Su, your plate fell. Shall I help you pick it up?"

"Don't come over!" Su Ge yelled, glaring at her while bending to retrieve the plate from the floor.

On Su Ge's laptop screen was a Photoshop window; Qin Tianye's headshot stared back at her. Because she'd just misadjusted the color curve, his face now looked smurf-blue.

"Are you busy?" Shang Yechu asked, puzzled. "If you are, I can come back tomorrow."

"No! I'm not." Su Ge grabbed a tissue to wipe her hands and slammed the laptop shut with a snap. "Tell me more—about the man Qin... Qin Tianye would love, and so on."

Shang Yechu nodded calmly and continued, "Qin Tianye's role is an emperor. You would play his wife, the empress."

Su Ge coughed, as if her throat suddenly felt odd.

Shang Yechu didn't seem to notice and went on gently: "Director Zheng set it up this way because this drama is an anthology. Each installment uses a different cast, but the male and female leads act as running threads—'fixed guests'—throughout the series.

"What fixed pairings exist in a palace drama? There aren't many: emperor and empress dowager, emperor and empress, emperor and eunuch, emperor and wet nurse. Miss Su obviously can't play the empress dowager, a eunuch, or a wet nurse. That leaves only the empress."

Su Ge nodded almost involuntarily.

"But there's a small problem—Qin Tianye is forty-five this year..." Shang Yechu held up two hands and showed four with one and five with the other.

Su Ge interrupted, "But he looks young, doesn't he? I think he looks at most thirty."

Shang Yechu retracted her hands and agreed. "His face is indeed youthful, but his aura—mature, refined—is something ordinary young people don't have."

Su Ge brightened slightly. "His temperament is... well, quite good."

She shut her mouth sheepishly, nearly getting carried away with pride.

"As everyone knows, empresses are usually the original wife. So the empress should be roughly Qin Tianye's age." Shang Yechu observed Su Ge's expression without revealing her thoughts. "Your age doesn't exactly match his, Miss Su."

Su Ge protested. "Age is not the problem!"

"Of course it's not the problem," Shang Yechu smiled. "It's just that Miss Su probably won't want to be made up as a middle-aged woman. And if Qin Tianye is forced to act as a young emperor, netizens will talk."

Su Ge's face darkened.

As a top rising star, she knew how vicious online comments could be. She couldn't bear being made old and ugly and having trolls screenshot and ridicule her. She also couldn't have Qin Tianye play younger just to accommodate her—netizens would mock him mercilessly.

The thought of people calling Qin Tianye an "old cucumber painted green" almost made Su Ge faint.

"Then design an original wife who dies early, and I can be the second wife," Su Ge muttered.

A smile flickered across Shang Yechu's eyes. "Then you'd have to pick another actress roughly Qin Tianye's age to play the original wife. Even if you become the second wife, the title isn't flattering."

Die-hard fans never like seeing a rival 'sister-in-law' appear for their idol, even hypothetically. Su Ge, pampered her whole life, couldn't play a replacement wife.

Her face tightened and she looked ready to blow up.

Sensing the right moment, Shang Yechu tossed out her sugared cannon: "Luckily Director Zheng is experienced. He designed a new plot so that Miss Su doesn't have to play an older woman yet can still be the emperor's original wife."

"Huh?" Su Ge widened her eyes.

Shang Yechu continued deliberately: "And Qin Tianye won't get criticized either."

"!!!" Su Ge almost exploded. "Tell me now!"

Shang Yechu told her the whole white-moonlight concept.

"The original wife dies young; all her appearances are in Qin Tianye's fantasies and memories. Since these are frozen at her most beautiful moment, Miss Su wouldn't have to look middle-aged." Shang Yechu spoke with a dreamy tone. "The young deceased wife and the middle-aged emperor separated by the barrier of time, meet in illusions—oh my God, just picturing that shot makes me want to cry!"

Su Ge was stunned.

"Incredible. The tragedy, the poignancy, the weight—it's brilliant," Shang Yechu sighed. "Director Zheng really is a master. This design solves every problem and deepens Qin Tianye's character."

Su Ge breathed faster. She sprang from her chair, cupped her face, and spun, "Is he a genius?"

Shang Yechu suppressed a laugh and wore a regretful expression. "But Director Zheng hasn't decided yet. Sigh, such a perfect solution—what could he be agonizing over?"

"Why hasn't he decided?" Su Ge couldn't believe it. "What more could he want?"

"Maybe he's worried about screen time," Shang Yechu said casually. "Qin Tianye might have more scenes than you. And since the empress appears only in fantasy and memory, she may have few lines. Miss Su, Director Zheng is doing this for your own good—"

Before Shang Yechu finished, Su Ge grabbed her phone and dialed.

"Lin Hui! Lin Hui!" Su Ge shouted into the phone. "Contact Zheng Bohan for me!"

Zheng Bohan sneezed while bickering with Lin Hui.

After the sneeze, Lin Hui finished the call and returned, looking at Zheng Bohan with a strange glare—as if she wanted to devour him whole.

Zheng Bohan frowned. "Lin Hui, what's wrong?"

She sized him up again to make sure he really didn't know instead of pretending, then clicked her tongue and sat down.

"Sometimes I honestly wonder if your luck makes you stubbornly foolish," Lin Hui said, sarcastic.

Zheng Bohan's brow twitched. "What do you mean?"

She sipped her coffee and replied, "You don't need to bother with the thing you just asked me about."

"Lin Hui, what do you mean?" Zheng Bohan panicked.

"I mean you don't have to ask me to help anymore," Lin Hui put down her cup and stared at him. "Miss Su already agreed."

Zheng Bohan froze in mid-motion.

"Not just agreed—she practically insisted I contact you immediately. She's extremely, extremely willing to play that damned 'white moonlight.' I suspect you sent someone to put herbs in her tea." Lin Hui continued, "So, Old Zheng, besides coming to me, did you deploy some strategist to persuade Su Ge?"

"No, no, of course not." Zheng Bohan came to his senses and took a sip of tea.

He set his cup down and beamed at Lin Hui, "It was just a small favor from one of my students—a trivial task. Come, have some tea."

Chapter 33: Screenwriter

Shang Yechu had known from the beginning that only by resolving Su Ge's problem could she truly obtain the role and screen time she desired.

Zheng Bohan indeed kept his promise. That very night, he sent Shang Yechu the script for the agreed-upon role.

Though called a script, it was actually just some drafts and outlines. Most of the content still required Shang Yechu to interpret and develop on her own.

This wasn't Zheng Bohan intentionally making things difficult. In the film and television industry, this situation wasn't uncommon. There was even a specialized term for it—flying pages—where scripts were written while filming was ongoing, with actors improvising along the way.

Shang Yechu curled up in her warm, thick cotton quilt, using an electric blanket to stay cozy while reading the script outline Zheng Bohan had sent. As she read, she gradually sat up from within the blankets.

Heaven have mercy! Zheng Bohan had been incredibly generous this time!

Shang Yechu could hardly control her excitement because the role Zheng Bohan had given her was actually that of a female emperor!

Shang Yechu could barely believe her eyes. She read the mere three pages of script back and forth six or seven times, until by the end she had even memorized every punctuation mark clearly!

The story framework was simple, maintaining the structure of an episodic series. Shang Yechu's character started as an elder princess, the emperor's first child, born from the emperor's most beloved original wife, naturally showered with endless affection since childhood and enjoying unparalleled prominence.

But this elder princess was an undeniable ambitious schemer. She hated that her father claimed to deeply love her mother yet kept producing litter after litter of younger brothers and sisters with other women in the harem. She was even more jealous that her brothers had the qualification to compete for the throne simply by virtue of being male, while she was excluded from this contest from the very beginning.

By the story's conclusion, the elder princess exploited her father's feelings for her mother, used poison to murder her father, personally killed several of her brothers, and ascended the imperial throne stepping over piles of blood and bones.

The elder princess's storyline revealed how feudal systems and imperial power completely dehumanized people. Fathers ceased to be fathers, sons ceased to be sons. Even without complete story details, only a rough outline, Shang Yechu could imagine what a magnificent role this would be!

No wonder Zheng Bohan wanted her to learn how to play an emperor...

Shang Yechu rubbed her phone screen, warming her fingers slightly with the friction.

The elder princess's screen time probably wouldn't be extensive since this was ultimately an ensemble drama. But like the emperor and empress, she served as a hidden thread running through the entire series. Regardless of screen time, in terms of importance alone, she was absolutely comparable to the emperor and empress.

From this perspective, this elder princess could be considered the female lead number two.

Rising from an extra to female lead number two...

No, it was still too early to say such things.

If Shang Yechu performed brilliantly enough, she could naturally secure the position of female lead number two; but if she performed like an oversized Su Ge, then, say goodbye—Zheng Bohan would definitely cut all her scenes entirely. Forget female lead number two, she wouldn't even make it to female lead eighteen

while it was still relevant, and might even get criticized by audiences as someone who got the role through connections.

Shang Yechu simply climbed out of her quilt, went to the shop to find several books related to emperors and history, and carried them all back to her pillow.

In her previous life, ninety percent of the roles Shang Yechu had played were either comedic film roles or comedic characters. While these roles had accumulated rich experience for her, they had also severely limited her acting range. Shang Yechu had very little experience with serious dramatic roles. She could handle minor roles like pharmacy shopkeepers or maidservants with ease, but for roles like princesses or empresses, she really didn't have much confidence.

What should an emperor be like?

Viewing the world as personal property, treating all people as worthless grass? But that was the behavior of a foolish ruler. What about a wise ruler?

And what should a princess who wanted to seize the throne be like?

Wanting something intensely, yet being unable to show the slightest interest in it—even needing to appear as if she genuinely believed it had nothing to do with her.

Shang Yechu first flipped to the biographies of female emperors in "The General History of Hua Country." There had been three female emperors in Hua Country's history, each ascending to power through different methods. Shang Yechu planned to find some inspiration from their life experiences. Although "Tale of Cloud Incline" was set in a fictional background, emperors were all fundamentally the same.

Shang Yechu wasn't the only one staying up late. On the other side, Zheng Bohan was also burning the midnight oil. Having decided on the path he wanted to take, Zheng Bohan no longer hesitated and began writing with exhilarating intensity.

"Tale of Cloud Incline" was initially set for forty episodes. Exactly half the length of "Legend of Qingyun." There was no helping it—the budget was limited, and additionally, forty episodes per season had reached some invisible upper limit for episodic series; any more would fatigue the audience.

As a screenwriter from the golden age of the film and television industry, Zheng Bohan's writing speed and efficiency were no joke. He managed to write detailed outlines for three episodes and one complete script for another episode in just one day.

But this still wasn't enough. Once the production team started filming, every single day meant burning money. What Zheng Bohan had written wasn't even enough to fill the cracks between teeth.

Zheng Bohan was already very tired. He wanted to sleep, so he quickly went to wash up, planning to watch some television afterward.

The hotel television allowed video-on-demand for TV series. Zheng Bohan watched one or two episodes every night before bed to keep up with trends and avoid falling behind the times.

Today was no exception. While soaking his feet, Zheng Bohan wearily narrowed his eyes, searching through rows of TV series for something that interested him.

Whether this hotel was stingy or what, all the TV series displayed in the video-on-demand section were poorly-rated disastrous shows. Zheng Bohan nearly wore out the remote control buttons but couldn't find a single watchable series.

Just as Zheng Bohan was preparing to randomly select any series to watch, a flash of inspiration suddenly crossed his mind!

Zheng Bohan threw down the remote control and jumped up in an instant!

Not even bothering to dry his feet or put on shoes, Zheng Bohan hurriedly rushed to the desk and grabbed his phone!

Zheng Bohan opened WeChat, initially intending to send a message, but finding that too inefficient, he simply made a direct phone call instead!

The phone rang a few times before being answered. Zheng Bohan couldn't wait to speak: "Old Liu, it's me, Old Zheng..."

A tea room.

Wispy, delicate smoke rose from a small red-clay stove. The room's temperature was warm and comfortable, not stuffy at all.

A middle-aged man sitting by the wooden table took a sip of tea, unhurriedly put down the cup, and said, "Old Zheng, what exactly is this about today, calling us all here? I heard from Old Liu that you want to use our scripts?"

"Not to criticize you," a man wearing glasses with a rather long face spoke up, "Old Zheng, you're at the peak of your career now, with no worries about food or clothing. Why would you still need to seek us out?"

The chubby man sitting next to him also chimed in, "Old Zheng, among us old-timers, you're the youngest and the most famous. What, have you run out of talent too?"

As soon as the chubby man's words came out, everyone burst into laughter. Though within the laughter, there was less mockery and more bitter amusement.

Every screenwriter present was a veteran with decades of experience in the industry. Each had at least one representative work they could proudly present.

For example, the chubby man who just spoke—his surname was Jing, with the given name Jing Fengnian. Despite his portly appearance and seemingly well-fed look, he was actually a master at writing deeply tragic love stories. His "Lonely Palace Depths" from ten years ago had drawn tears from countless young women.

For example, the long-faced bespectacled man—his surname was Fu, with the straightforward name Fu Yu. Although he looked perpetually worried, he actually excelled at writing sweet, simple-minded romance in historical idol dramas. His representative works "Marrying Double High Gates" and "Chronicles of Childhood Sweethearts" were overwhelmingly sweet early-period historical idol dramas that swept the nation over a decade ago and traveled overseas.

And the screenwriter who spoke first—his surname was Jiao, named Jiao Xiachun. He specialized in adaptation—turning classical literary masterpieces into TV series. Some called it innovative retelling, others called it reckless fabrication—in any case, opinions about him were divided.

The other screenwriters who hadn't spoken also had their own works to some extent, and some had even experienced moments of glory. But those were all stories of the past.

Not everyone was like Zheng Bohan, possessing seemingly inexhaustible creative inspiration, able to constantly keep up with contemporary trends and continuously write bestselling new scripts. Most people were hardworking types, or even what could be called mediocrities.

These old-timers present had gradually declined in recent years. Mentioning their names now probably wouldn't ring any bells for many viewers. The entertainment industry was just that kind of realistic place, requiring constant exposure to build your reputation. Being forgotten once often meant being forgotten forever.

Screenwriters already held relatively low status. After losing their influence, these old-timers had quickly fallen out of their original social circles. Some could only make money by writing fiction for third-rate magazines.

This didn't mean they hadn't produced new works. Quite the opposite—most of them had indeed created TV series in recent years. But the storylines were cliché, the pacing didn't suit contemporary tastes, the values clashed with the new era, commercial appeal was insufficient... and so on. For various such reasons, their stories suffered both in reputation and ratings, plummeting sharply, abandoned by the market and forgotten by audiences. Struggling to catch the train of the new era, they only managed to tarnish their late-career reputations.

Sitting here was a group of relics from a bygone era, abandoned by both the market and audiences.

No wonder Jing Fengnian and the others spoke to Zheng Bohan with a somewhat sour tone. After all, Zheng Bohan was the only one here who hadn't yet been forgotten by audiences.

"Old Jing," Zheng Bohan spoke up, "don't jinx me. None of us are even sixty yet, why call ourselves old-timers?"

Every profession had its "circles," essentially small cliques. The literary and arts circles were especially prone to this. Screenwriters like Zheng Bohan naturally had their own small screenwriting groups.

Veteran screenwriters had their own pride; new, cutting-edge screenwriters found it difficult to break into their circles. Zheng Bohan was considered one of the more prominent figures in this small group.

However, scholars tend to disparage one another—this had been true since ancient times. Screenwriters were no exception. Although Zheng Bohan had some status, it wasn't enough to completely command everyone's respect. For instance, this time he had actually invited twenty screenwriters, but only fifteen showed up.

Zheng Bohan was already quite satisfied with this turnout. He clapped his hands, drawing everyone's attention to himself. Only then did he speak: "Everyone, do you know what these things in front of me are?"

In front of Zheng Bohan stood a stack of A4 paper, which everyone had noticed when they arrived.

"What is that?" Liu Hong asked. He was the first screenwriter Zheng Bohan had called to bother last night.

Zheng Bohan smiled without answering.

"Old Zheng, stop keeping us in suspense," Fu Yu said. "I'm busy rushing home to work on my manuscript. I haven't finished this month's short story for 'Every Family Story Club' yet!"

"Alright, I'll reveal the answer now," Zheng Bohan said, both amused and exasperated. "Old Fu, you're still the same as ever, not even letting go of the meat in a fly's eye."

Zheng Bohan stood up, picked up the stack of papers, and slowly walked out from his seat.

"Let me see... these pages are Old Jing's..."

Zheng Bohan walked to Jing Fengnian's side and placed several pages on the table in front of him.

"This is Old Ke's."

Zheng Bohan walked to a screenwriter named Ke Fu and placed several pages in front of him.

"Old Liu's..."

"Old Du's..."

"This is Old Li's..."

The screenwriters took those pages into their hands. After just a few glances, their expressions changed dramatically.

"Zheng Bohan, what is the meaning of this?"

Chapter 34: Gourd Play

The pages distributed to everyone actually printed the television drama titles they had written over the past few years!

Flipping through, they could see the papers contained copied-and-pasted episode summaries from search encyclopedias. They hadn't even bothered to delete the small ads between web pages.

The screenwriters present all wore unpleasant expressions. For no other reason than this—the television dramas Zheng Bohan had selected weren't their glorious masterpieces, but rather those with abysmal ratings and discussion numbers, or widely criticized disastrous productions. These were essentially everyone's shameful histories.

This move was practically equivalent to humiliation, and someone immediately couldn't sit still anymore.

"Zheng Bohan, what do you mean by this?" Jing Fengnian stood up, furious. "Yes, you're noble, you're proud, you're amazing! We lowly minions don't deserve to sit at the same table as you! What do you intend to do?"

Fu Yu also said coldly, "Old Zheng, this matter of yours has gone somewhat too far."

The scene descended into chaos, buzzing with noise like they'd entered a vegetable market. Scholars didn't mean they had no temper—on the contrary, scholars had bigger tempers than anyone.

Zheng Bohan leisurely waited for the commotion to subside before speaking: "Everyone, I, Old Zheng, am not deliberately making things difficult for you. On the contrary, I came today to ask for your help."

"Help?"

Jiao Xiachun snorted coldly, "You still need our help? And even use the word 'ask'? We dare not accept such honor."

Liu Hong also wiped sweat from his brow, "Ah yaya~ Old Zheng, just stop beating around the bush! At our age, don't you know how precious time is?"

"At least give me a chance to explain." Zheng Bohan said with a bitter smile, "Alright, alright, everyone, please quiet down for a moment."

The room fell silent.

"You've all probably heard that Xu Hanwen and I have had some recent conflicts?" Zheng Bohan first asked.

Everyone fell silent—the entertainment industry had no secrets, especially since this matter had already caused quite a stir. They just hadn't expected Zheng Bohan to bring it up so brazenly.

Zheng Bohan continued: "The production 'Legend of Qingyun' that Xu Hanwen is currently filming—you all know about it, right?"

This time, a few more people responded. A major production like 'Legend of Qingyun' was basically slated for drama of the year—few in the industry weren't paying attention.

In fact, when 'Legend of Qingyun' was recruiting various screenwriters and consultants, many present had tried their luck. Unfortunately, they'd all been eliminated.

"Old Xia, Old Li, Old Liu, Old Jiao..." Zheng Bohan called out several names like a khan conducting roll call, "You gentlemen went to 'apply' for positions as screenwriters, historical consultants, cultural consultants, etc., and all failed, correct?"

Those named looked rather uncomfortable, with Jiao Xiachun snorting coldly: "What, which imperial law states I can't be a cultural consultant?"

"Of course you can." Zheng Bohan smiled, "But weren't you shown the door? Do you know what Xu Hanwen said at the time?—'If we let Jiao Xiachun be the cultural consultant, he might make the Jade Emperor and Chang'e engage in an affair!'"

This was an artistic circle joke. When Jiao Xiachun was young, he adapted a mythological TV drama that actually wrote Hou Yi as the Jade Emperor's illegitimate son—Hou Yi shooting down the suns was actually him killing his nine Golden Crow brothers to compete for the throne!

Chang'e was Hou Yi's wife, making the Jade Emperor naturally Chang'e's father-in-law.

This drama was one of Jiao Xiachun's sore spots. It was officially criticized and became a typical example of reckless adaptation. Jiao Xiachun couldn't hold his head high in the industry for several years.

Sure enough, upon hearing this, Jiao Xiachun immediately jumped up, veins bulging on his forehead: "Zheng Bohan! You and Xu Hanwen—you turtle bastards!"

Shouting wasn't enough—Jiao Xiachun raised his teacup and charged forward, displaying the undying determination of an aging Lian Po.

Peacemakers Liu Hong and another screenwriter stepped forward to form a human wall blocking him. Liu Hong wiped sweat while saying, "Aiya! Aiya ya! Old Zheng, what exactly are you trying to say?"

Seeing the timing was about right, Zheng Bohan scanned everyone present and spoke astonishing words, enunciating each syllable deliberately:

"I want to invite all of you to collaboratively write a work that surpasses 'Legend of Qingyun!'"

The scene instantly fell silent.

Jiao Xiachun's raised teacup froze mid-air. Two seconds later, with a crash, it fell to the ground and shattered.

"Little Leaf, there are suddenly so many more people on set recently." Li Kui gossiped. "And they're all old men and uncles. What can they play? Old eunuchs?"

Shang Yechu, sporting two enormous dark circles under her eyes, yawned and said, "They're not actors—they're screenwriters."

"Ah?" Li Kui covered her mouth. "Really? How do you know?"

Shang Yechu was practically dying from exhaustion, forcing herself to stay alert as she tapped her phone a few times. "Here."

Li Kui took the phone and saw Zheng Bohan's Douban entry page displayed prominently. In the "Friends" column, there were clearly two faces that had appeared on set today. The small text below read "Screenwriter Liu Hong" and "Screenwriter Fu Yu."

"This person is actually named Fu Yu." Li Kui stuck out her tongue. "Quite a fortunate name. I'd like to be wealthy too."

Shang Yechu's head kept nodding, unclear whether she heard Li Kui's words or not.

"Our crew actually has this many screenwriters?" Li Kui continued. "I thought our crew was pretty poor."

"..." Shang Yechu's head drooped down.

"Hey hey hey, Little Leaf!" Li Kui called. "What's wrong with you today? Why are you so exhausted? Did you stay up late last night? If I'd known, I wouldn't have asked you to come accompany me for my scene..."

103, hearing this, truly wanted to sneer on the spot. If it were just staying up late, he would be thanking heaven and earth.

Shang Yechu—this constantly self-destructive host, hopeless madwoman, arrogant and self-important ambitious schemer, fool who valued money over life—please forgive him for portraying her this way, but 103 genuinely couldn't think of more appropriate words to describe her.

Shang Yechu half-opened her eyes, slowly typing on her phone's memo app. She said to Li Kui, "It's fine, Kui Kui, I'll go sleep after watching your scene."

This wasn't Li Kui's fault. Shang Yechu had stayed up all night—the small storage room she lived in had no windows, only artificial light, making it impossible to tell day from night. Shang Yechu only noticed time's passage when she checked her phone at 7 AM. She originally intended to sleep a bit, but then Li Kui sent a message.

Li Kui was filming her first scene today and was extremely nervous, hoping Shang Yechu could accompany her.

Towards this naturally friendly young girl, Shang Yechu had no reason to refuse. Besides, she also wanted to see what new developments the crew had with several new screenwriters joining, so she came despite her exhaustion.

Li Kui nervously rubbed her hands. "Little Leaf, can I really do this? I still don't know what the plot is about—I'm just responsible for giggling foolishly."

"Oh, and also laughing at this thing." Li Kui pulled out a green jade gourd. "What is this? Feels like something wholesale for two yuan from a small commodity market."

Li Kui glanced around and nodded: "I'm more nervous now than during major exams!"

"Then I'll teach you a method." Shang Yechu leaned close to Li Kui's ear and whispered, "When filming later, imagine this gourd is your salary."

Li Kui paused: "Will that work?"

"Of course it will." Shang Yechu smiled. "However happy you are to see your salary, be that happy when you see this gourd. This take will definitely pass."

Chapter 35: A Smile Makes You Ten Years Younger

"Cut!"

"Cut cut cut! Cut!"

Zheng Bohan took a deep breath and said to Su Ge, barely containing his frustration, "I think it's best if you don't film today, Miss Su. Go back to the hotel and find your groove first, alright?"

The sun was already high in the sky, yet the crew hadn't managed to complete a single scene!

The scene's plot was incredibly simple—no lines or complex movements required. All Su Ge needed to do was stand beneath the pear blossom tree and cast a tender glance toward Qin Tianye.

Zheng Bohan knew exactly what Su Ge's acting capabilities were and had minimized her part to the absolute basics. All the more demanding emotional moments—like shedding tears, reminiscing about the past, or contemplating fallen blossoms—had been assigned to Qin Tianye.

Yet even with such a straightforward role, Su Ge couldn't deliver. Whether due to nerves or genuine lack of skill, she stood there completely motionless, like a clay or wooden statue. Forget conveying deep emotion—her eyes stared fixedly at the camera as if she'd accidentally wandered onto a horror movie set!

So far, Qin Tianye had already tearfully performed alongside Su Ge a full ten times. His eyes were so strained they'd developed red veins, forcing him to take a break for hydration.

The more meticulously and conscientiously Qin Tianye performed, the more nervous and guilty Su Ge became, and the worse her performance got.

Zheng Bohan clearly wanted to lose his temper, but constrained by the fact that Su Ge had been placed there by the Investors, he couldn't vent properly. He could only stand there with a grim expression, arms crossed under the blazing sun, one foot tapping the ground repeatedly. Anyone could see his mood had hit rock bottom.

Su Ge took a large gulp of ice water and stole a glance at Qin Tianye across the set. Qin Tianye was applying eye drops—not because he needed artificial tears like some actors, but simply because his eyes had dried out from all the crying.

Su Ge felt her heart was about to break. She wanted to rush over and comfort Qin Tianye immediately, but didn't have the courage. Though spoiled, she wasn't completely shameless.

"I understand... Director." Su Ge lowered her head and shuffled off the set.

The moment Su Ge left, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. After working all morning with zero progress, everyone's nerves were stretched to the limit. An atmosphere of anxiety and irritation permeated the crew.

Scenes with similar settings were typically filmed together. Therefore, as soon as Su Ge exited, it was Li Kui's turn for the next scene.

Li Kui walked onto the set with awkward, uncoordinated steps. Before she could even get properly positioned, Zheng Bohan reminded her, "You're not in the frame."

"Oh. Oh oh!" Li Kui was so frightened by Zheng Bohan's dark expression she nearly cried. She moved with unusual swiftness, darting into the camera frame so quickly she knocked over a chair the props department had just positioned.

The camera and lighting teams simultaneously let out low groans. It seemed another novice had taken the stage. The entire morning was essentially wasted.

Li Kui sat on the chair. Zheng Bohan pinched the bridge of his nose and reminded her, "Remember your actions. You have no lines, you just need to smile. Surely you can manage that?"

After witnessing Su Ge's earth-shatteringly terrible acting, Zheng Bohan had lost all confidence in the half-baked talents he'd recruited. If some performers couldn't even manage to "look" at someone properly, then being unable to smile probably wasn't that surprising either.

Li Kui nodded woodenly, then shook her head.

Zheng Bohan's face darkened like the bottom of a pot. "Can you do it or not?!"

"Yes!" Li Kui shouted loudly, startling the crew member scattering artificial petals nearby.

"Action!"

Li Kui sat on the chair beneath the tree and stiffly retrieved the Jade Gourd from her bosom.

The movement was clumsy. Zheng Bohan frowned but didn't call cut. When they edited in a hand close-up later, Li Kui's stiffness wouldn't be visible.

The crucial element was her expression.

Li Kui stared at the plastic gourd, remembered Shang Yechu's coaching, and decided to treat a dead horse as if it were alive—giving it her all in one desperate attempt.

Li Kui hypnotized herself: "This is one hundred thousand yuan... This is one hundred thousand yuan..."

Li Kui thought of many things.

She thought of her second classroom credits.

The second classroom program included a social work component requiring students to complete at least one internship before graduation. Ever since the dreaded second classroom system was implemented, these two credits had become every student's nightmare. Students had to beg and plead everywhere, either leveraging connections or searching high and low for any possible job opportunity. Even positions like bubble tea shop servers near campus were highly sought-after roles.

But Li Kui had already signed a formal employment contract with Zheng Bohan, meaning she had legitimate work experience and wouldn't have to worry about internships like her unfortunate classmates.

Li Kui thought of her one hundred thousand yuan acting fee.

One hundred thousand yuan was enough for Li Kui to comfortably prepare for graduate school entrance exams without financial pressure. Even if she stayed home studying, her parents wouldn't criticize her.

Gradually, an indescribable sweetness filled Li Kui's eyes. Though she still stared at the gourd, her thoughts had drifted far away.

"Hehe... hehe..."

Joyful laughter spilled from Li Kui's lips, brimming with her hopes for a bright future.

Zheng Bohan watching from off-set couldn't remain seated.

The palace-dressed woman sat beneath the shower of falling blossoms. Though her face no longer looked youthful (thanks to makeup effects), her eyes overflowed with childlike innocence.

She gazed tenderly at the green gourd, occasionally letting out one or two peculiar giggles. Her smile was innocent and pure, completely untainted, yet the entire scene carried an inexplicably eerie quality.

After running through all the happiest moments of her life, Li Kui finally heard the heavenly sound: "Cut!"

Zheng Bohan stared at Li Kui's face with a complicated expression. For a moment, he even began to wonder if Li Kui actually possessed some acting talent beyond just being a smiling airhead.

"Take approved."

"Yay!" Li Kui shot up from the chair like a rocket!

Zheng Bohan didn't scold her for being unprofessional, and even added, "Good performance."

Crew members exchanged looks of utter astonishment.

Since the first day of filming, Director Zheng had constantly worn a furrowed brow, as if everyone owed him two million. Today he'd actually broken precedent and praised someone?

Shang Yechu was seizing every opportunity to catch up on sleep when she suddenly felt someone shaking her vigorously.

Shang Yechu opened her eyes to see Li Kui standing before her, exclaiming excitedly, "Little Leaf, I passed!"

"Mhmm, I saw." Shang Yechu widened her eyes and gave Li Kui an encouraging pat on the shoulder. "You did great."

Before the two could exchange more words, a familiar voice suddenly interrupted.

"Hey!"

Shang Yechu looked up to see it was actually Su Ge!

Su Ge looked down at Shang Yechu from her superior position, chin lifted arrogantly. "Hey. I heard from Li Kui that her good performance was entirely thanks to your coaching?"

That big-mouthed Li Kui!

Shang Yechu shot a glare at Li Kui, who responded with a clear-eyed, clueless expression typical of college students.

Su Ge had been cut ten times by Zheng Bohan this morning, while Li Kui passed in one take and even earned Zheng Bohan's praise. Thinking more cynically, Su Ge might well be here to pick a fight.

Shang Yechu couldn't be blamed for thinking this way—other celebrities might protect their reputation and avoid conflicts with extras and minor actors. But Su Ge clearly couldn't be judged by normal standards.

Shang Yechu felt somewhat helpless, trying to figure out how to brush this off, when she saw Su Ge suddenly extend a hand toward her.

Su Ge was holding a cup of ice cream, her face wearing an awkward expression as if she'd never done anything like this before.

"Could you... teach me too?"

Chapter 36: Acting

The nine heavens opened their palace gates, and officials from myriad nations paid homage to the imperial crown.

Within the magnificent towers and towering palace halls, the dark-robed emperor sat upright on the dragon throne, his vermilion brush flying as he reviewed memorials.

After finishing a stack of memorials, a palace attendant respectfully approached and presented an ornate brocade box to the emperor. His waist was bent so low that his head seemed about to touch the ground.

The attendant placed the brocade box on the dragon desk, then made an almost imperceptible gesture.

As his hand fell, all the attendants and maids in the palace orderly withdrew from the hall, leaving the vast palace empty except for the emperor in the blink of an eye.

The emperor used a dagger to slice off the specially made sealing wax on the brocade box and slowly opened it.

From the brocade box, the emperor took out a stack of secret memorials as thin as cicada wings, spreading them out one by one on the desk. The characters on the secret memorials were strangely shaped, as if written in some kind of code.

The emperor picked up a finer vermilion brush, drew a red circle on the first secret memorial, and casually tossed that memorial aside.

When the emperor unfolded the second paper, his handsome brows twitched slightly, then he lifted his brush and drew a cross on the paper.

As he made these two marks, no expression showed on the emperor's face, but a cold, murderous intent flashed briefly in his eyes.

Without any words needed, everyone knew that the person mentioned on the second secret memorial was already dead in the emperor's mind.

Just as the emperor began unfolding the third memorial, he suddenly heard an attendant outside the palace gate exclaim: "Princess, you cannot enter!"

The emperor's hand paused, and he casually pulled over several memorials to cover the secret ones.

At the same time, a slender figure stumbled into the main hall. Before the emperor could clearly see her face, the newcomer threw herself to the ground, wailing: "Father Emperor, you must uphold justice for your daughter!"

The newcomer was none other than the emperor's eldest daughter, the empire's eldest princess. But at this moment, she showed none of a princess's dignity or grace, kneeling on the ground weeping uncontrollably: "Father Emperor!"

The emperor pinched the bridge of his nose—this was his sign of impatience: "Pingzhao, what is it this time?"

Princess Pingzhao raised her head, revealing a face streaked with tears. "Father Emperor, the imperial consort has been disrespectful and shows contempt for the imperial majesty!"

The emperor's gaze suddenly sharpened: "What has the imperial consort done?"

"Pingzhao dare not conceal anything." Princess Pingzhao sobbed intermittently: "The imperial consort, because he resents that I cannot bear children, has been keeping dozens of singing girls in his residence, living in utter debauchery. I originally didn't want to bother Father Emperor with such filthy matters, but last night when the imperial consort was drunk, he actually said while intoxicated... said..."

The emperor stood up, his voice betraying neither joy nor anger: "Said what?"

Princess Pingzhao wept: "Insects respond while dogs leave the fence, jackdaws perch on phoenix branches!"

"Outrageous!"

The emperor swept his large hand across the dragon desk, sending everything on it crashing to the ground!

The emperor's wrath carried the force of thunder. Princess Pingzhao could no longer suppress the fear in her heart, only kneeling on the ground trembling. Her body shook uncontrollably, as if she wished she could burrow into the ground. She looked utterly pathetic.

The emperor raised a hand, and several shadowy figures emerged from the darkness.

"Clean up outside the palace gate," the emperor said calmly.

Princess Pingzhao still lay prostrate on the ground. The emperor descended from the dragon throne, walked to her side, and slowly helped her up.

Princess Pingzhao shrank back, not daring to look directly at her father.

The emperor reached out a hand, gently wiping the tears from her face, speaking softly: "Si'er."

Princess Pingzhao trembled even more violently.

"Si'er." The emperor paid no attention to the fear she displayed, continuing: "Don't be afraid, I am your father. What is there to fear before your father?"

At the feet of this father and daughter pair, a dark red shadow slowly approached their toes. Princess Pingzhao looked closely and realized it was blood flowing into the main hall from outside the palace gate. The river of blood spread through the hall, about to stain Princess Pingzhao's shoes.

Princess Pingzhao trembled violently and couldn't help but try to dodge to the side.

The emperor firmly held her in place. Those clearly defined hands contained terrifying strength, trapping Princess Pingzhao where she stood, unable to move.

The emperor said gently: "Si'er, this is the first lesson your father teaches you. If the person who came wasn't you, but any of your siblings, then they would be at your feet right now."

Princess Pingzhao's lips trembled, her knees went weak, and she instinctively wanted to kneel.

"Now, now." The emperor comfortingly patted her head. "Don't be afraid, child. You are different from them."

The emperor's tone was full of warmth, but his eyes held no temperature whatsoever.

The indifferent hawk-like eyes met the tear-blurred ones, and the latter's outline contracted almost imperceptibly.

Princess Pingzhao trembled: "How are my imperial brothers and sisters... different from me?"

The emperor's voice was as gentle as spring rain: "You are your mother's child."

"Cut!"

"OK, that's a wrap."

As Zheng Bohan's voice sounded, the tense atmosphere on set immediately relaxed, and all the crew members breathed sighs of relief.

This was the smoothest scene the crew had shot in days.

Done in one take—no forgotten lines, no breaking character with laughter, no positioning errors, no damned (as the crew privately said) certain young ladies suddenly standing frozen in place like blocks of wood. Even the picky Zheng Bohan couldn't find any faults. On the contrary, during filming, this screenwriter-director frequently nodded, seeming extremely satisfied with this scene.

Since the smooth filming saved considerable time, Zheng Bohan was generous for once, giving the crew members a half-hour break.

During the intermission, many crew members discussed this animatedly.

"Thank heavens! After filming today's scene, I finally feel like I'm working in a real film crew!"

"Didn't you see Director Zheng being unusually generous? Everyone was—well, scared. Hahahahahahahahaha..."

"Teacher Qin Tianye's acting is really amazing. I was standing diagonally across from him earlier, and when he got angry, his gaze swept right over me—scared the piss out of me."

"That woman acting opposite Teacher Qin was pretty good too. What's her name again?"

"I think her surname is Shang? I heard Director Zheng call her Little Leaf."

"Who cares? She acted really well, just too pathetic—kind of annoying to watch."

"And you're complaining? Thanks to her acting sufficiently pathetic, we get to eat ice cream here. If she'd acted like 'a certain young lady,' we'd be in trouble!"

This double-edged remark provoked a burst of laughter from everyone, filling the set with a cheerful atmosphere.

Qin Tianye went straight to remove his makeup after leaving the set. The emperor's costume was simply too thick and hot—if he took it off even a moment too late, he might develop heat rash.

Shang Yechu didn't immediately go to remove her makeup. Instead, she walked up to Zheng Bohan, her face showing apprehension: "Director Zheng?"

"Good performance," Zheng Bohan praised sparingly.

Shang Yechu's eyes lit up with pleasant surprise: "Thank you, Teacher Zheng!"

Zheng Bohan looked Shang Yechu up and down, saying: "I read the character biography you submitted. Very thoughtful. You performed Princess Pingzhao's 'hidden' aspect quite well. Are you confident about the 'revealed' aspect?—You should know, the two are very different."

"Come on, Old Zheng." The good-natured screenwriter Liu Hong interrupted: "Let the young lady go remove her makeup first! You're cool and comfortable, but haven't you noticed she's sweating?"

Shang Yechu smiled, her eyes crinkling. "Thank you, Screenwriter Liu, for speaking up for me. Director Zheng always likes to push me hard."

"Look at this, look at this." Zheng Bohan pointed at Shang Yechu, complaining to Liu Hong: "She's the one who came to me, yet it becomes me pushing her hard."

Shang Yechu went to remove her makeup while laughing. Liu Hong watched her retreating back and sighed: "The younger generation is formidable."

"Why the sudden sigh?" Zheng Bohan glanced sideways at him.

"Don't tell me you can't see it." Liu Hong lit a cigarette. "In the entertainment industry now, young people who can hold their own against Qin Tianye's acting can be counted on one hand."

The decline in quality of domestic entertainment actors was a fact. Whenever veteran screenwriters like them watched recent TV dramas, those puppet shows with crooked mouths and twisted eyes always gave them artistic constipation.

Zheng Bohan snorted through his nose, "She's just alright."

"Old fox, stop pretending." Liu Hong laughed and scolded: "Do you know what I was thinking while watching this scene earlier?"

"What?"

"I was thinking, how could such a brilliant, ambitious, cold-blooded, and ruthless emperor have such a weepy, disgraceful daughter?" Liu Hong said between puffs of smoke. "Hmm, even now I'm still thinking, why was she so useless? The more I think about it, the angrier I get—the angrier I get. Guess why I urged her to go remove her makeup earlier? Because seeing her face just makes me angry."

To outsiders, this sounded like criticism, but to insiders, it was unequivocal praise.

Shang Yechu's "cowardice" matched Qin Tianye's "imperial authority" perfectly, and because it was so detestable, it left an even deeper impression on the audience.

This was like that childhood trauma scene from a TV drama where an old matron gives acupuncture to a princess. Although the princess was pitiful and much more pleasant to look at than the old matron, what audiences remembered most vividly was definitely the old matron's menacing face during the acupuncture. Though not a positive impression, it proved the old matron actress's acting skills.

Zheng Bohan coughed lightly: "Give me one—do you really think so?"

"Of course. Although I like smoothing things over, I don't like flattery." Liu Hong handed Zheng Bohan a cigarette. "Where did you dig up this student?"

Zheng Bohan sniffed Liu Hong's cigarette, frowning critically, "Picked her up on the street. Be jealous."

"Old sly fox." Liu Hong took back his cigarette. "Young, has acting skills, looks... passable too. Minor fame is guaranteed. Major fame uncertain. Pity."

Pity. The current entertainment industry wasn't an era ruled by acting skills anymore.

"You think she's good-looking?" Zheng Bohan was somewhat surprised. "I think she's just delicate-looking. Not unattractive."

"You've always had high standards." Liu Hong said with a hint of envy. "But I'm quite curious—such a cowardly princess, how would she have the courage to barge into the emperor's palace? The character setting is too contradictory. Who wrote this terrible script?"

Zheng Bohan smiled slightly: "I did."

Just as Shang Yechu finished removing her makeup, Su Ge burst into the dressing room like a whirlwind.

"Hey! You, surnamed Shang!"

Everyone present sensed trouble and immediately employed the art of swift departure, clearing out completely in less than half a minute. On-set catfights were commonplace, and everyone had long learned not to see what shouldn't be seen, not to hear what shouldn't be heard.

Shang Yechu had no choice but to undo her hair bundle herself. As she worked on it, she said: "My surname isn't Shang... Never mind. Miss Su, what can I do for you?"

"You promised to teach me how to act yesterday!" Su Ge plopped down next to Shang Yechu, grabbed Shang Yechu's swivel chair, and spun it halfway around, forcing Shang Yechu to face her directly.

Shang Yechu blinked: "Yes, I did."

Su Ge said indignantly: "Then why haven't you taught me yet? Instead, you went and acted to your heart's content yourself!"

Shang Yechu was almost amused by Su Ge's unreasonable behavior: "Because I had scenes today. Besides, didn't I invite you to watch from the sidelines while I was filming?"

"What's the use of just watching? Are you not planning to teach me seriously because I didn't pay you?" Su Ge asked suspiciously. "I clearly transferred 100,000 to you—you're the one who didn't accept it, only taking the ice cream."

"..." Talking with Su Ge was always like speaking different languages, and Shang Yechu was used to it. "After watching the scene I filmed, what are your thoughts?"

Su Ge paused suspiciously: "Uh... you acted very... very pathetically?"

"..." Shang Yechu said: "How about Teacher Qin's performance?"

"Teacher Qin was amazing!" Su Ge said excitedly: "Natural imperial aura! He's never played an emperor before, and he performed so well on his first try! That walking posture, that angry gaze... oh my god, sexy..."

Su Ge had studied abroad for several years. Although her academic qualifications were questionable, her spoken English had improved quite well. When excited, she couldn't help but slip in a few English phrases.

Shang Yechu had to wave her hand to stop the ecstatic Su Ge. "See, Teacher Qin's imperial aura, and my... uh, pathetic aura—this is the acting you need to learn."

"Ah?" Su Ge clearly hadn't grasped it. "I'm the empress, I don't need to weep and wail like you, right?"

"No, no, no." Shang Yechu said patiently, "Teacher Qin is the emperor, so he has imperial aura; I'm a princess who lost her birth mother, so I live cautiously. What about you? Have you thought about what your character is really like?"

"Of course my character is the person Teacher Qin loves most," Su Ge said matter-of-factly.

"That's falling into a misconception," Shang Yechu said bluntly. "Don't think about 'how this character appears in others' eyes,' OK? Instead, think about 'what this character is like!'"

Su Ge looked utterly confused: "Ah."

"If you always think 'how does this character appear in Teacher Qin's eyes,' 'how does this character appear in the audience's eyes,' then you're completely mistaken," Shang Yechu said bluntly. "There are many handsome guys in the entertainment industry, right? But once they know they're considered handsome in others' eyes, they become oily and frivolous on camera, going out of their way to show off their handsomeness!"

Su Ge was already completely baffled: "Aha?"

"It's good for actors to have performance desire. But when interpreting a character, what you need to interpret is 'I am this character,' not 'I am an actor,' 'I am a handsome guy in the audience's eyes,' 'I am the person so-and-so loves most!' So Su Ge, don't act as the person Teacher Qin loves most—instead, act as the empress herself." Shang Yechu gripped Su Ge's shoulders, enunciating each word clearly.

Su Ge hadn't completely understood, but she was somewhat frightened by Shang Yechu. "But what kind of person is this empress? How would I know?"

Shang Yechu said through gritted teeth: "Go analyze! Go think! Use your brain—what kind of person is this emperor? Selfish, cold-hearted, views human life as worthless grass, born in the wilds, rose from humble origins. What kind of person would someone like that fall in love with?"

"Ah..." Su Ge was almost scared to tears by Shang Yechu. She had grown up with a silver spoon in her mouth, and no one had ever spoken to her like this before. "I... I..."

Shang Yechu said: "Regardless of one's own will, proceed entirely from the character itself.' Go, Su Ge, think about it yourself. You can do it."

Chapter 37: Rehearsing the Scene

Another new scene.

After the emperor used his staff to execute two treacherous ministers, he poured out his heart to his imagined deceased wife—because those two ministers had been loyal old officials who had helped the emperor build his kingdom.

The core of this scene rested on Qin Tianye. He had to portray the emperor's frenzy, hypocrisy, and cold-heartedness through long stretches of monologue. That style leaned toward stage drama; if handled poorly, it would make the audience feel bored and listless.

Zheng Bohan had completely given up hope for Su Ge; he planned to use a crafty trick to "help" her through the difficulty.

Specifically, he instructed post-production to add ten layers of deathly soft light and filters to Su Ge, blurring her face entirely. That way, viewers could barely make out a human silhouette and wouldn't be able to scrutinize Su Ge's acting.

After the set was cleared, departments took their places, and Su Ge sat in her designated spot.

Waves of dizziness washed over Su Ge. The lighting panels and the cameras made her jittery, and Qin Tianye's face made her heart pound like a drum. She turned her head instinctively and saw Shang Yechu standing at the edge of the set, her dark eyes quietly fixed on her.

In that moment, Su Ge's heart suddenly calmed.

What kind of person was the empress?

No script could possibly capture an entire life. An actor had to use microexpressions, small gestures, even bearing and temperament to let the audience sketch the person's outline through imagination.

The role Su Ge played worked that way. She had no lines; she could only use her gaze and expressions to embody an apparition in a dream.

She had shared hardship with the emperor from the earliest days.

She died before he ascended the throne.

To her, the emperor was not an emperor—he was simply her husband.

How would she look at her husband with her eyes?

This emperor was stingy and unloving by nature and selfish. Whoever occupied his thoughts forever must have given him the truest, deepest, and most selfless love of their life.

In a sense, the white moonlight figure that Shang Yechu and Zheng Bohan jointly designed was made for Su Ge.

Su Ge didn't know how to act, couldn't memorize lines well, and was naive about social ways. But there was one thing she did best.

Ever since she was four and first saw Qin Tianye on television, she had chased after him. It had been twenty years now.

A fan's unconditional, unrewarded devotion to their idol was no lighter in weight than any sincere, selfless love.

It could be put this way: because the emperor was Qin Tianye, Su Ge could naturally become the empress.

Action!

The emperor paced slowly into the bedchamber; the window was open, and a figure sat on the bed's edge, fanning herself to cool off.

Tree shadows swayed outside the window.

The emperor walked two circuits inside the bedchamber, then suddenly spoke: "Lianggong and Dun's treason—I killed them."

The figure by the window turned her head and looked at the emperor with pity.

Those eyes carried endless warmth and tolerance, almost enough to drown the emperor in them.

"Don't look at me like that!" The emperor's breathing quickened. "What did I do wrong? Lianggong's mansion hid five hundred sets of black armor! Don't forget, when I rose up with you, I only had three hundred men—twenty suits of armor!"

The woman by the bed knit her brows slightly.

The emperor and those sorrowful eyes stared at each other for a moment; then he abruptly turned his head and strode about the chamber!

As he walked, an endless stream of curses spilled from his mouth, filled with coarse rural slang. He complained about shirking civil officials, about generals who harbored evil intentions, about useless sons. In the end, he even blamed himself—blamed himself for not being ruthless enough to pluck the poison from his scepter sooner!

The woman sat quietly at the window; her expression showed no impatience, only a trace of concern.

She felt pity for her husband.

Finally, the emperor emptied his chest of grievances and looked toward the woman by the window. "What are you doing?"

The empress pointed to the pear blossoms and a jar on the table, propping her chin, wearing the coquettish air of a young girl.

"You're making pear blossom wine?" The emperor could not help laughing. "Who are you brewing it for?"

The empress didn't answer. She stood and reached for the pear blossom branch hanging by the window.

The emperor suddenly realized something.

"Don't." His face was in shadow, and the words came out muffled.

The empress ignored him, rising on her toes to reach the pear blossom closest to her.

"I told you not to!" The emperor shouted sharply. He rushed to the window in three strides, trying to grab her.

But it was too late. The woman's form vanished in an instant amid the swirling pear blossoms, as if she had never been there.

The emperor lifted his head; the whole garden's pear blossoms drifted white, falling like snow.

He lowered his head; the jar still sat on the table. It contained not pear blossom wine but a jar of sour, bitter medicinal broth.

The emperor summoned a palace attendant and asked, "Who delivered this medicine?"

The attendant bowed and answered respectfully, "The eldest princess heard that His Majesty has been worried day and night over state affairs; she specially brewed a bowl of calming tonic and sent it."

"I understand." The emperor waved weakly. "You may go."

Cut.

Zheng Bohan's cut sounded as if he were sleepwalking; several crew members didn't hear him clearly and only stopped after someone nearby reminded them.

Everyone held their breath and watched Zheng Bohan.

He peered at the set in indecision, and after a long moment said, "That's a take."

The crew felt as if released from condemnation. These days Su Ge had driven them to the brink; they were nearly PTSD.

Su Ge almost jumped up!

This was her first clean take—meaning the director didn't soften it for her and she didn't rely on editing numbers. And it happened in front of Teacher Qin!

Su Ge excitedly rushed to Qin Tianye, opening her mouth to say something but suddenly shy and at a loss for words.

Qin Tianye, however, casually patted Su Ge on the shoulder. "Xiao Su, you've improved a lot. You've been working hard these days, haven't you?"

"Not really, not really." Su Ge hurried to say, "Teacher Qin, actually I—"

"Su Ge."

Zheng Bohan's voice came from behind. Qin Tianye raised his eyes and asked, "Old Zheng? Anything else to reshoot?"

Zheng Bohan hesitated for a moment, didn't answer Qin Tianye, and instead asked Su Ge first, "How do you feel... about your state?"

"Huh?" Su Ge asked, bewildered. "I feel great, right?"

Zheng Bohan gestured. "Can you reproduce that state you just had?"

Earlier, Su Ge had seemed almost divinely aided; the way she looked at the emperor was tender as water, each emotional layer rich and complex. Without any lighting or filters, anyone looking at her would know how deeply she loved the emperor.

Was that something Su Ge could perform?

Such effortless, natural acting exceeded what Su Ge was capable of. Zheng Bohan suspected someone might have put a curse on her.

He wanted to reshoot some close-ups but feared Su Ge's acting was a time-limited phenomenon. He was afraid that once the camera started rolling, her performance would revert like Cinderella's pumpkin carriage at midnight.

Su Ge glanced at Qin Tianye and lowered her head. "If Teacher Qin is here... maybe, possibly?"

Qin Tianye chuckled, "Of course I'll be here. I'm not going to have you act opposite a blank green screen."

Zheng Bohan still couldn't believe it and probed, "Did you hire an acting coach?"

Su Ge looked toward the periphery of the set; Shang Yechu was no longer there.

"Actually, I asked some friends who are good at acting—uh, girlfriends." Su Ge stammered. "The one whose name has 'Ye' in it."

Zheng Bohan raised his eyebrows in surprise.

Shang Yechu could not only act but also teach acting?

Chapter 38: Signing Company

After finishing her scene, Su Ge unusually didn't immediately open her phone to follow celebrities. Instead, with a serious expression, she sought out her agent Lin Hui.

"Hui Hui," Su Ge said gravely, "If someone helped you with a major favor, how would you repay them?"

Lin Hui was currently swamped with work, not even looking up as she replied, "Give them money."

"What if they refuse to accept money?" Su Ge persisted.

"Then ask them what they truly want." Lin Hui said impatiently, "What's wrong with you now? Who do you owe a favor to?"

"Alright, alright, go back to your work!" Su Ge rolled her eyes and left Lin Hui's office, clicking away in her high heels.

What did Shang Yechu want?

Su Ge's paramecium-level barren brain rarely engaged in serious thought. The other party didn't seem particularly interested in money. Su Ge herself owned many luxury bags, watches, and shoes, but she didn't think a small-time actress like Shang Yechu needed these things.

After much deliberation, Su Ge felt that what Shang Yechu needed most right now was acting opportunities.

Teacher Qin had said that Shang Yechu's acting skills were excellent, among the best of the new generation actors. Su Ge didn't understand what constituted good acting, but she trusted Qin Tianye's judgment.

However, despite having such good acting skills, Shang Yechu had no notable works to her name. Su Ge was quite certain she had never seen Shang Yechu in any television drama or movie. The other party's only role with substantial screen time was this random princess in Tale of Cloud Incline.

Tale of Cloud Incline was destined to be a flop, and Su Ge had long prepared herself mentally for it.

She wasn't short on resources - after Tale of Cloud Incline flopped, endless opportunities would still come her way. But what about Shang Yechu?

After Tale of Cloud Incline failed, would that be the end for her?

Teacher Qin had said that all actors want to act.

Since Shang Yechu was also an actor, what she probably wanted most... was acting opportunities too?

Thinking this, Su Ge made a video call.

Mai Zhenye, the CEO of Meta Pictures, was reviewing documents when his WeChat video call ringtone suddenly sounded.

Only one person would dare disturb Mai Zhenye at this time. After glancing at the caller's nickname, he reluctantly set down his pen.

"Tangtang, what's wrong?" Mai Zhenye answered the video, looking at the girl on screen with a headache.

"Dad, does our company have any upcoming productions recently?" Su Ge asked rapid-fire, "Something with female roles around my age, preferably lead roles, but if not, supporting female roles in major productions would work too."

"Wait, Tangtang." Mai Zhenye said suspiciously, "What are you planning? You're not being scammed, are you?"

"Just tell me if there are any?"

Mai Zhenye held up two fingers, making an X shape, "There are a few. But you need to tell me first - who is this role for? And why?"

Su Ge propped her phone on the desk, filing her nails as she said, "There's a sister in the crew who's been teaching me how to act, and it's been very effective. My acting has improved by leaps and bounds recently. I want to thank her properly."

Mai Zhenye barely managed to suppress his laughter.

Su Ge? Acting skills?

He'd seen his daughter act before, and to put it bluntly, even he as her biological father couldn't bring himself to praise her performances with a clear conscience.

What did "improved by leaps and bounds" mean coming from Su Ge? Had she progressed from negative scores to zero?

His silly daughter had probably been fooled by the director's flattery.

Mai Zhenye said dismissively, "Well, we do have a few productions; and there are some roles remaining. But—"

He drew out the word, emphasizing this "but," "These roles can only go to our internal people. It's the rule, and we can't break it."

"Rules, rules, rules!" Su Ge lost her temper, "It's always rules with you! I don't care! You have to free up a role for me!"

Mai Zhenye didn't know whether to laugh or cry, "How about this - discuss it with your friend and see if she'd be willing to sign with our group? As long as she becomes a contracted employee of Meta Pictures, I guarantee she can pick from our internal scripts as she likes, okay?"

"That's more like it." Su Ge snorted. Having achieved her goal, she immediately abandoned her father and happily went to find Shang Yechu.

Su Ge wasn't accustomed to owing favors - she wanted to repay it immediately.

Shang Yechu was sitting on a small folding stool on set, bowing her head reading a thick, heavy book. Spotting her from afar, Su Ge called out loudly, "Yechu! Yechu!"

By the time Shang Yechu looked up in surprise, Su Ge had already run up to her.

Su Ge got straight to the point, "Yechu, would you like to sign with our company?"

"Meta Pictures?" Shang Yechu helped Su Ge sit on the small stool, looking somewhat surprised.

"Yes, Meta Pictures." Su Ge picked up an unopened bottle of mineral water and gulped down a few mouthfuls. "What do you think?"

"Why would Meta Pictures suddenly want to sign me?" Shang Yechu immediately identified the questionable point.

Su Ge twirled her hair, "Well, I told my agent about you. We both think your acting is excellent, so I introduced you to the company. The company also sees potential in you. Probably to discover new talent, I guess."

Meta Pictures wasn't short on people, making Su Ge's statement questionable. But Shang Yechu believed she meant no harm, since this kind of lie would be easily exposed.

"What do you think?" Su Ge urged.

She was quite confident. How could a wandering extra like Shang Yechu possibly refuse an olive branch from Meta Pictures?

Su Ge guessed correctly this time - Shang Yechu was indeed somewhat tempted.

The saying "it's easier to enjoy shade under a big tree" was a universal truth. In the entertainment industry with its numerous factions, life was truly difficult without backing from a major player.

Meta Pictures, Guanjun Century, and Tianding Entertainment were known as the three major carriages of the entertainment industry, forming a tripartite balance of power. The domestic entertainment industry generally operated on a small workshop model, making these three entertainment companies stand out like cranes among chickens amidst all the husband-and-wife operations.

Signing with such a major company would definitely provide access to more resources. Matters like compensation, employment, and screen time would all be handled by professionals. It would save a lot of trouble.

Being a lone wolf didn't work in the entertainment industry. Unless you were an extra who never rose to prominence, or a big star confident enough to open your own studio. Shang Yechu didn't want to be the former, and she wasn't the latter yet. That only left aligning with a major faction.

Shang Yechu had originally planned to wait until she gained some fame before joining an entertainment company. She hadn't expected Meta Pictures to approach her now because of Su Ge.

Out of caution, although quite tempted, Shang Yechu didn't immediately agree, instead saying, "Could I have some time to consider?"

Su Ge was somewhat surprised. She had thought Shang Yechu would be ecstatically grateful. Wasn't this reaction a bit too calm?

Su Ge wasn't angry though - she was confident no one could refuse Meta Pictures.

"Of course." Su Ge made a phone gesture, "Call me when you've decided."

After Su Ge's acting skills "mastered perfection," the crew finally crossed their most difficult hurdle, and filming progress accelerated rapidly.

Tale of Cloud Incline was an anthology series, with each episode having its own title. The veteran screenwriters worked quickly - in less than half a month, Zheng Bohan already had scripts for six or seven episodes including "The Golden Lock Chronicle," "The Gourd Chronicle," and "The Dusk Cloud Chronicle." Enough to keep the crew busy for a while.

Today they were filming "The Dusk Cloud Chronicle," which told the story of a princess from a small country being presented to the emperor.

To demonstrate the friendly relations between the two nations, this princess received preferential treatment. Not only could she wear her native ethnic clothing in the palace, but she could also host grand grassland banquets in her own palace.

The princess was a visitor from the grasslands, fond of horse riding and hunting. Homesick after leaving her homeland, the emperor specifically moved up the autumn hunt to accompany her to the Bashang Hunting Grounds for autumn hunting.

Period dramas often featured grassland scenes, but not every crew had the time or budget to film on the vast northern grasslands. Therefore, there was a large specially designated grassland east of Heng City Film City called the East City Grassland.

Compared to the endless thousand-mile grasslands of the north, East City Grassland naturally wasn't as magnificent. But it was sufficient.

Zheng Bohan painfully spent a large sum, paying the East City Grassland owner substantial rent to book the grassland for three days. The crew needed to film all grassland scenes within these three days.

The expensive rent made Zheng Bohan's heart ache with every breath. He repeatedly emphasized to the crew that the actors in this episode must perform well and try not to delay filming progress. After all, every additional rental day meant Zheng Bohan would have to cut another piece of flesh.

The actors and crew members for this episode marched in a grand procession toward East City Grassland. Qin Tianye was naturally among them, along with the actors playing the princess and others. Additionally, Shang Yechu as the eldest princess would naturally accompany her Father Emperor hunting.

This episode had no scenes for Su Ge, since the emperor wouldn't be missing his deceased wife while horseback riding or barbecuing. Su Ge herself was also concerned about the harsh grassland sun tanning her skin, so she didn't come along.

Zheng Bohan didn't believe in special treatment arrangements, simply chartering a bus for everyone to travel together to East City Grassland.

Zheng Bohan and Fu Yu, the screenwriter for "The Dusk Cloud Chronicle" episode, sat in one row, while behind them, Qin Tianye and Shang Yechu sat together.

After all, they played father and daughter in the series, so they needed to spend more time together.

Qin Tianye had a very favorable impression of Shang Yechu. Hardworking, motivated, willing to endure hardship, and most importantly, quite talented.

As the bus crawled leisurely through the city, Qin Tianye initiated conversation with Shang Yechu, "Little Ye, want to run lines together?"

Shang Yechu was sitting on a small folding stool on set, lowering her head to read a thick, heavy book. Spotting her from afar, Su Ge called out loudly, "Yechu! Yechu!"

With that, Shang Yechu slightly blinked, and in an instant, her expression completely changed: "Does Father Emperor wish to spare Consort Yue?"

She didn't look at the script, directly reciting the line from memory.

Qin Tianye raised an eyebrow slightly, also not consulting the script. He lowered his eyes, his voice calm and measured: "What are you trying to say?"

Shang Yechu said timidly, "But Consort Yue did betray Father Emperor after all... If handled this way, I fear it might damage the imperial family's dignity."

"The imperial family's dignity cannot be shaken by some barbarian woman." Qin Tianye glanced at Shang Yechu, "You want me to execute her?"

Shang Yechu said respectfully, "Sparing her life demonstrates Father Emperor's magnanimity. This daughter wouldn't dare presume to speculate."

"You think I'm being too soft-hearted?" Qin Tianye said indifferently.

"This daughter wouldn't dare!" Shang Yechu's tone turned panicked, "This daughter merely, merely..."

Fu Yu, sitting in the front seat, suddenly spoke in a falsetto voice: "Your Majesty, Amodun, chieftain of the Northern Desert, presents birthday gifts to Your Majesty."

Shang Yechu naturally continued: "Father Emperor's birthday is still two or three months away. Why is the Northern Desert presenting gifts so early?"

Qin Tianye's tone paused slightly, as if looking at something. Then he spoke, his voice calm: "Open the box, let Princess Pingzhao see."

Fu Yu made a sound effect: "Click."

Shang Yechu's breath hitched, and the next moment, she let out a soft, suppressed scream!

Although Shang Yechu had done her utmost to keep her voice down, everyone on the bus turned to look at her.

Shang Yechu gave everyone an apologetic smile: "Sorry, I was practicing lines."

Everyone then looked away.

Fu Yu, sitting in front, nodded with satisfaction: "Now this is how lines should be practiced. Each generation falls short of the last. Back in my day, ah..."

"Back in my day" was Fu Yu's catchphrase, and Zheng Bohan was accustomed to it. He laughed and scolded, "Not saying my lines are watery anymore?"

"They don't sound watery when someone recites them." Fu Yu shook his head.

Different screenwriters handled different episodes, inevitably making the scripts feel disjointed. Therefore, Zheng Bohan needed to oversee the entire series, uniformly polishing and refining the scripts.

The lines Shang Yechu and Qin Tianye had just spoken were additions by Zheng Bohan.

"Old Zheng, Old Zheng," Fu Yu sighed, "You do have some talent. I can see it now - you're better than that old fool Xu Hanwen."

The bus finally left the city limits, gradually picking up speed. The soft, warm autumn sunlight streamed through the windows, making everyone drowsy.

In this lazy atmosphere, someone suggested, "How about we sing some songs?"

"Sing what?" someone nearby asked with interest.

"Something everyone knows." The first person thought for a moment, "How about 'West Mountain Rain'?"

"Great!"

"Good idea!"

Everyone chimed in agreement.

"Who will start?"

"I will." Shang Yechu smiled.

Shang Yechu clapped her hands, cleared her throat:

"Flowers of the northern frontier, snow of the southern rivers;"

Everyone sang in unison:

"Rain over Luo River, moon over Luzhou;"

This song was the theme song of Western Garden, having swept across the nation along with the drama's popularity. Zheng Bohan had personally written the lyrics for this song.

Zheng Bohan frowned - this song reminded him of Xu Hanwen, which didn't feel good.

Just as Zheng Bohan was about to stop them, he heard Qin Tianye behind him joining in:

"The great river flows endlessly, scattering romance, the eternal sky never ages, love never ends..."

Everyone's enthusiasm grew even higher, singing together:

"Squalid fleeting life like lightning, rise and fall of generations repeating through days and nights;

"The river wind cannot blow away eternal sorrow, on which page of history's records do you and I remain..."

It was a heroic, majestic song. Because when Zheng Bohan wrote this song, he was in the most confident and ambitious period of his life.

Zheng Bohan's lips trembled slightly, but in the end, he didn't stop these happy young people, letting them continue.

The bus, filled with laughter and song, sped toward the Bashang Hunting Grounds.

Chapter 39: Grassland

"What's going on? Boss, we clearly booked this first!"

Zheng Bohan's usually expressionless face was now flushed bright red, "I even paid you the deposit! What do you mean by this?"

The grassland owner looked embarrassed, "This... Teacher Zheng, perhaps you could come another day?"

"Filming schedules are fixed!" Zheng Bohan was about to explode with anger, "Delaying for a month would throw everything into chaos!"

Tale of Cloud Incline was already a makeshift production team to begin with. To compete head-to-head with Legend of Qingyun, their shooting schedule was extremely tight. They had to squeeze every single day out from between their teeth.

Now this grassland owner was speaking so lightly with just a flap of his lips, but the crew members would suffer tremendously!

Fu Yu tried to mediate from the side, "Old Zheng, ah, Old Zheng! Each generation is worse than the last, back in our day..."

Qin Tianye held Zheng Bohan back and stepped forward politely, "Boss Dai, could you give us a reason? The city is quite far from here. We've already come all this way—it's not really appropriate to send us away completely confused, is it?"

The crew had been jostling on the bus for over two hours, and some of the weaker staff and actors had turned pale. Moreover, a three-day shooting schedule wasn't short—everyone had brought their personal items and change of clothes, not to mention how troublesome this all was.

Boss Dai's expression grew even more awkward, his eyes shifting uneasily, "It's just... not very convenient. Not very convenient..."

Even Qin Tianye's good temper was choked by this hesitant manner. What did he mean by "not very convenient"? There's no such thing as inconvenience under the sun!

Just then, a young man carrying a large bag hurried toward the grassland entrance. Zheng Bohan spotted him immediately and called out loudly, "Luo Da!"

The young man named Luo Da instinctively stopped in his tracks. Turning and seeing Zheng Bohan, his face immediately lit up with pleasant surprise, "Teacher Zheng!"

Luo Da ran over to Zheng Bohan with the large bag, "Teacher Zheng, what are you doing here?"

"That's what I should be asking you." Zheng Bohan glanced at Luo Da, "Why are you here? What's that on your back?"

Luo Da panted, "This is Wang Miyun's tent, it was left on the vehicle just now. The production assistant sent me to get it."

"Wang Miyun?" Zheng Bohan suddenly realized something, "Is the Legend of Qingyun crew here?"

"Yes." Luo Da nodded, then suddenly noticed the group of crew members behind Zheng Bohan, his expression immediately stiffening, "Teacher Zheng, you're also—?"

Zheng Bohan didn't answer his question, instead countering, "Wasn't Legend of Qingyun supposed to film at Qingjiang Grassland? Why did you come to East City Grassland?"

Luo Da looked around and lowered his voice, "September and October are the hottest times at Qingjiang Grassland, plus there are lots of mosquitoes and poisonous insects. Some people in the crew couldn't handle it."

Fu Yu interjected, "Who couldn't handle it? Was it those young ones? I knew it—each generation is worse than the last. Back in our day..."

Luo Da said awkwardly, "Well, it was Wang Miyun's agent who brought it up first."

Fu Yu's words cut off abruptly.

Luo Da whispered, "Then Qi Yan and Lu Yuxuan's agents also followed up with complaints to the crew. After that, the Qingjiang Grassland schedule was canceled, and we came to East City Grassland instead."

Zheng Bohan said sharply, "Is Xu Hanwen dead? He just stood by and watched? How many field surveys did we do together back then, how much grassland sand did we swallow, before we settled on Qingjiang as the location!"

Luo Da quickly interrupted Zheng Bohan in alarm, "Teacher Zheng! The thing is, Director Xu isn't the only one who calls the shots in the crew."

"He doesn't call the shots?" Zheng Bohan sneered coldly, "He managed to kick me out, and you're telling me he doesn't call the shots?"

Luo Da was almost crying with anxiety, "Teacher Zheng, Teacher Zheng, Teacher Zheng—please say less. Director Xu is having a hard time too... Since you're not here—ah, never mind."

Chapter 40: Let's go eat ice cream

"Director Xu initially didn't agree to give up Qingjiang Grassland and settle for this small, shabby, crowded pasture either.

"But Wang Miyun's agent said, 'Our Yunyun's face is insured for ten million dollars! What if she gets bitten by some poisonous insect in that godforsaken place?

"I heard the poisonous bugs in Qingjiang Grassland are as big as fists, and their bites leave marks that don't fade for a month! If our Yunyun's face gets injured and delays the filming schedule, you Xu Hanwen will bear full responsibility!"

"With things being said to this extent, what else could we do? We just had to let it go."

Zheng Bohan listened silently. Apart from the throbbing veins at his temples, there was almost no visible emotional fluctuation.

Luo Da said awkwardly, "Um, Teacher Zheng, I still need to deliver the tent to Sister Miyun, so I'll be going now."

Zheng Bohan didn't speak.

Qin Tianye sighed, took a red banknote from his pocket, and quietly slipped it into Luo Da's pocket. "Go ahead, I'm really sorry, this might get you scolded."

Luo Da was stunned, "Teacher Qin..."

"It's so hot, buy some cold drinks." Qin Tianye smiled, "Go quickly."

Luo Da didn't refuse either, bustling away busily.

"Old Zheng." Qin Tianye said quietly.

Zheng Bohan lowered his head without making a sound.

"It's always been like this all these years." Qin Tianye said helplessly, "This kind of thing... what are you planning to do?"

Zheng Bohan turned around and looked at the young people standing behind him.

They were carrying photography equipment, large and small bags, baking under the scorching sun, everyone covered in sweat.

Ten minutes ago, they were still happily singing on the bus. Ten minutes later now, they stood behind him, watching their director with confused, anxious eyes.

Zheng Bohan's lips trembled slightly, then he turned back to the pasture owner and said, "Really no room for negotiation?"

Boss Dai scratched his head. Dragging things out pointlessly was the most meaningless thing. Everyone should know what's appropriate. He didn't want to keep muddling through anymore.

"To be honest with you," Boss Dai gestured with his chin toward the inside of the pasture, "The crew inside paid double the money. Not just a deposit, but the full amount."

Making money isn't something to be ashamed of.

Zheng Bohan gritted his teeth and said humbly, "We can add a bit more too... Your pasture is so big, it can easily accommodate two crews, earn two incomes, wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"How is that possible?" Boss Dai laughed evasively, "My pasture isn't that big."

Zheng Bohan clenched his fists and lowered his voice, "My, my crew is just a small crew too. You might not know, our show is just a, a second-rate small web series, only a few dozen people total, just filming some small scenes, we don't need much space."

Boss Dai said impatiently, "Please don't make things difficult for me. Do you think I don't want to earn two incomes?"

Fu Yu asked curiously, "What do you mean by that?"

"When the crew inside came to negotiate with me, I already told them." Boss Dai said, "I said the Tale of Cloud Incline crew had already reserved the pasture in advance, and asked if they could accept two crews filming here together."

Boss Dai spread his hands, "Then they said no. They said two similar crews filming together clashes, it would ruin the feng shui, causing the show to lose its popularity energy after broadcasting. Then they gave me double the money and booked the entire venue."

"Teacher Zheng, you can't blame me." Boss Dai said, "My venue only makes this kind of big money once a year. We're not like you entertainment industry people who can scoop up gold just by reaching out. We need to eat..."

While Boss Dai was still chattering on, Zheng Bohan waved his hand, no longer listening to his complaints, and turned around.

"Is everyone tired?" Zheng Bohan asked with a smile.

"Tired—" everyone replied in a long, drawn-out tone.

"Then I'll tell you some good news," Zheng Bohan made a gesture like an eagle spreading its wings, "We're taking the day off today!"

"Ah?" Instead of cheering, everyone looked somewhat confused.

"Director Zheng," Xiao Yan, the lead actress for this arc of Tale of Cloud Incline, spoke up timidly, "What about today's scenes?"

"It's fine." Zheng Bohan withdrew his hand and casually wiped the corner of his eye, "Everyone has worked very hard, taking one day off is nothing."

Pigs would fly before this happened!

Everyone looked at each other, neither daring to leave nor asking Zheng Bohan what was really going on.

Fu Yu stepped forward to smooth things over, "Everyone, here's the situation. I just looked at the Tale of Cloud Incline script and found there are still some omissions. We can't film for now, everyone will have to wait for me to make some revisions."

The actors suddenly understood, immediately sighing with disappointment.

Fu Yu squeezed a kind smile onto his long face: "I'm getting old and confused, my screenwriting skills aren't what they used to be. Your Director Zheng is just covering for my embarrassment, hahaha!"

Only then did the actors feel relieved.

"Alright, alright, let me make it up to everyone, I'll treat everyone to ice pops, how about that?" Fu Yu pushed his glasses up his long nose, revealing a bitter melon-like smile.

One actor boldly said, "Teacher Fu, you're treating for ice pops, but what about ice cream?"

"Sure, sure, I'll treat for everything!" Fu Yu laughed heartily as he squeezed into the group of young people, and everyone left laughing and chatting.

Shang Yechu got up from bed and poured herself a glass of water.

She was currently staying in a hotel contracted by the crew, with much better conditions than the bookstore warehouse.

The deep sleep felt very comfortable, and Shang Yechu's brain felt pleasantly relaxed.

The earlier scenes for Princess Pingzhao were basically finished, with only the final major scene left to film.

That was the scene where Princess Pingzhao ascends the throne as emperor.

Shang Yechu had been imagining what an emperor should be like. For this, over the past few days, she had watched many movie and TV clips about emperors from both ancient and modern times, Chinese and foreign.

There were many excellent actors who performed very well. Even through the screen, when they made eye contact with Shang Yechu, she could feel that sharp, unmatched dominance.

But when Shang Yechu tried to imitate it herself, it always felt off.

She had good memory and strong imitation abilities, and could mimic about ninety percent of those actors' movements and expressions.

This ninety percent was enough for Tale of Cloud Incline—it was about approximation rather than authenticity, and Shang Yechu could guarantee that her performance would fool eighty percent of the audience.

But the remaining ten percent was the essence. If she couldn't perform the essence, she might fool others, but she couldn't fool herself.

Shang Yechu fell into a state of anxiety.

Since she was already awake, Shang Yechu simply connected to the hotel WiFi and began pondering what an emperor should be like.

She carefully recalled the script.

Princess Pingzhao didn't inherit the throne through achievements—her succession wasn't even legally justified. It was purely because her several brothers were all deeply implicated in suspicions of plotting against the emperor, losing their qualifications to compete for the throne.

The emperor was a founding ruler with no brothers. The only blood relatives he had were his sons and daughters. After several princes became suspected of patricide, the court became turbulent, with many remnants scheming restlessly.

Tale of Cloud Incline is set in a fictional dynasty, where the restrictions on female succession weren't as severe as in real history. After multiple power struggles, the court ministers pushed the seemingly timid eldest daughter Princess Pingzhao onto the throne.

How should such an emperor—legitimate in name only, possessing nothing but "name" and "legitimacy"—be portrayed?

Chapter 41: Ascension to the Throne

"Everyone to your positions!"

Zheng Bohan raised his megaphone and shouted loudly: "Everyone pay attention to camera positions! Watch your movements! Adjust your official robes! Script supervisor! Get someone to clean up the garbage over there, don't let water bottles appear in the shot!"

Zheng Bohan's voice was hoarse from shouting.

Today they were filming Shang Yechu's coronation ceremony. This was also her final scene.

This was a major scene, grand in scale and magnificent in atmosphere, with the largest number of extras in the entire series. Just the positioning of the ministers had taken a full day of rehearsal.

And the lead of this scene, Shang Yechu herself, still hadn't arrived on set.

Shang Yechu was still in makeup.

The emperor's ceremonial robes hadn't been put on yet, and the crew's makeup artists were busy working on Shang Yechu's face.

Shang Yechu felt layer after layer being applied to her face until her skin felt stiff. She was genuinely worried whether she'd be able to make expressions later.

The heavy makeup wasn't because the makeup artist had poor taste or liked thick makeup. It was because cameras absorb makeup severely. Moreover, today's coronation ceremony would be held under bright sunlight - if the makeup wasn't heavy enough, Shang Yechu's facial features might become indistinct.

A good makeup artist was almost like a second parent to an actor. Shang Yechu had seen countless unfortunate artists with fly-leg eyelashes and caked powder faces - from certain angles, any screenshot could become an unflattering photo.

The makeup artist for "Tale of Cloud Incline" was Zheng Bohan's old friend - highly skilled with natural techniques, able to maximize an actor's facial advantages to the fullest.

As the makeup artist applied highlighter to Shang Yechu, she chattered: "Am I seeing things? Why does your face seem to be getting more beautiful?"

Shang Yechu barely moved her lips: "Probably because power is the best cosmetic." She didn't dare move her mouth too much.

The makeup artist took a while to decipher what she said and couldn't help but laugh heartily. "You really are... such a character. Alright, I can laugh but you can't. Don't move, let me add some blush."

This time, Shang Yechu was enjoying the treatment of a female lead: having a makeup artist all to herself.

Assistant Yu rushed in hurriedly, firing questions like a machine gun: "Sister Ye, Director Zheng wants to know if you're ready? How many takes will it take? Are you confident?"

Shang Yechu only said two words: "Don't worry."

Assistant Yu froze for a moment, then dashed out like a whirlwind.

The makeup artist gossiped: "That confident?"

Shang Yechu mumbled: "Why not?"

Forty-nine bells chimed, marking the auspicious noon hour.

Shang Yechu, dressed in black and red wide-sleeved ceremonial robes and wearing the emperor's crown with hanging beads, ascended the steps surrounded by palace attendants.

Although it might look majestic and imposing on television, the actual filming scene looked quite comical. Camera operators followed Shang Yechu step by step, shooting close-ups of her face. They were so close they were practically in her face.

In a while, Shang Yechu would have to walk the path again to shoot long shots.

Shang Yechu wore heavy makeup for battle, but it wasn't the traditional eyebrow-painting and lip-rouge style. Her full makeup leaned toward neutral, three-dimensional, and resolute, highlighting her facial features to the maximum while blurring all gender characteristics.

The dragon robe also featured wide sleeves and five layers of clothing, solemn and elegant.

The emperor was a symbol of imperial power, requiring no gender-specific gaze. If a male emperor didn't need red lips and green eyebrows, then a female emperor didn't either.

This was the makeup approach Shang Yechu had suggested to the makeup artist, and after discussing with Zheng Bohan, the crew had ultimately adopted this makeup plan.

Shang Yechu walked up the steps step by step, her expression neither sad nor happy. Only her eyes burned intensely toward a certain direction.

That was the direction of the dragon throne.

This cautious princess who had lain dormant for over a decade could finally reveal a hint of ambition at this moment.

With the sun hanging in the sky, Shang Yechu reached the open space before the second level of steps and stopped.

An old eunuch stood just inches in front of her, expressionlessly swinging down the long whip in his hand!

"Crack!"

A whip crack echoed through heaven and earth!

The whip tip barely grazed past Shang Yechu's shoe surface, landing three inches from her feet.

This was a national custom in the script, with the three most experienced old eunuchs in the palace personally wielding the whip. If the whip grazed the emperor's body without injury, it was an auspicious omen. If the whip left injuries on the emperor, it was an inauspicious omen.

If the emperor remained uninjured but panicked and lost composure before the people, while not considered inauspicious, it still showed the emperor lacked potential.

Shang Yechu stepped over the whip lying on the ground without changing expression, continuing upward.

The first old eunuch shrieked: "First whip, dispel old ignorance—"

A great bell resonated solemnly.

Shang Yechu reached the open space before the first level of steps and stopped again.

The second old eunuch's whip moved like a swimming dragon!

"Crack—!"

The whip brushed past Shang Yechu's black robes, landing on the open ground before her.

Shang Yechu didn't even blink an eyelash before stepping over the whip.

The second old eunuch shrieked: "Second whip, peace across the four seas—"

"Clang—"

The bronze bell rang twice more.

Shang Yechu continued forward. This time her walking posture differed slightly from the previous two - she quickened her pace!

The female emperor walked toward her dream throne, her expression still solemn, her hair perfectly in place, with only her breathing becoming slightly heavier.

"Hey hey hey, camera two, get closer to her," Zheng Bohan stared intently at the monitor, directing, "Capture her breathing state!"

The camera operator's equipment was practically shoved in Shang Yechu's face!

Closer, closer.

The imperial seat, dragon throne, emperor's position... power.

Twenty years like a dream.

In the final few steps, Shang Yechu's eyes contained nothing else, only staring fixedly at that chair. It was a gaze of nearly pious fervor.

The last whip-wielding old eunuch stood before the dragon throne. Seeing Shang Yechu approach, the old eunuch swung with force according to tradition!

The whip crack didn't sound.

Zheng Bohan stood up before the monitor!

Shang Yechu had actually made a move that wasn't in the script at all!

Under the astonished gaze of the old eunuch, Shang Yechu's eyes fixed intently on the dragon throne while one hand casually caught the swinging whip!

The female emperor's gaze locked on the imperial position, her hand gripping the whip symbolizing the test of imperial power.

The white-haired but youthful-looking old eunuch stood facing her.

That weather-beaten whip, one end held in the aged hands of the fading old man, the other end tightly grasped in the young female emperor's hand, stretched into a perfectly straight line.

The female emperor didn't let go.

The new ruler and the witness of past emperors stood in silent confrontation before the eternal symbol of imperial power - the dragon throne.

Dynasties rise and fall like morning and evening.

The old eunuch looked into the female emperor's eyes.

What kind of eyes were these! Dark like boundless abysses, with the reflection of the dragon throne adorned within them like two will-o'-the-wisps.

Besides power, those eyes contained nothing else.

The old eunuch felt burned by that scorching gaze and, almost instinctively, he released his hand!

"Thud!"

This wasn't the sound of the whip tip sweeping through air and ground, but the sound of the whip handle hitting the ground.

The female emperor smiled.

The female emperor stood firmly before the old eunuch, waved her hand and threw the whip away, her wide sleeves flowing like clouds, tracing a beautiful arc in the sultry air.

The old eunuch suddenly shivered.

He immediately straightened his body and called out in the loudest, most resonant, most perfectly enunciated voice of his life:

"Third whip—"

"Ten thousand generations of peace!"

Hearing this, everyone bowed in unison, their voices like mountain cries and sea roars.

"Long live the Emperor, ten thousand years, ten thousand ten thousand years—"

Chapter 42: Wrap

All the officials knelt once and kowtowed three times, crying out long live!

The emperor stood on the high platform, looking down at everyone with cold eyes.

She did not tell them to rise, so the officials could only remain kneeling. They knelt until mountains would shatter, until rivers and lands would split—no, until the world seemed to tear apart.

The late emperor honored talent over bloodline and permitted officials not to bow before imperial relatives. The court developed a culture of valuing ability and looking down on noble birth.

Ten children of a former emperor combined could not match the status of one capable minister or competent official.

No, even now, they still did not render formal bows to Princess Pingzhao.

They knelt to the new emperor, they knelt to the dragon throne behind the new emperor, they knelt to the eight great characters stamped on the imperial seal before the new emperor: "Mandated by Heaven, long may you reign."

Power, power, immortal power!

The world was silent.

Amid that frozen silence, the director of the Palace Household stepped forward and presented a blank imperial edict to the emperor.

This was a custom carried through dynasties: when a new emperor ascends, before taking the dragon throne, he must draft an imperial edict as his first decree.

The edict's contents were entirely up to the emperor himself.

Generally, as long as the emperor was not completely absurd, he would write some official platitudes on the edict — things like a general amnesty, tax reductions, urging cultivation of agriculture, and so on.

Some ridiculous, foolish rulers would use their first edict to call for an open selection of palace ladies to fill the harem.

On the whole, those edicts were not wildly outrageous. After all, having just ascended, one had to go through the motions.

Two Palace Household servants knelt respectfully, holding the edict aloft above their heads and stretching it flat in the air. Another mute eunuch held a sandalwood tray bearing the imperial seal and red sealing paste.

Everyone held their breath, awaiting the emperor's first edict.

The emperor's phoenix-like eyes narrowed. She reached for the brush with a broad stroke of thick ink.

With her left hand she gathered up the wide sleeve of her robe, with her right hand the brush moved like a dragon and a snake, splashing ink in a flowing stroke!

Her handwriting was graceful—pressing, lifting, hooking, stopping—each motion composed, her body like a green pine, her hand like a wandering dragon, a true aristocratic bearing.

The Palace Household director bowed his head; the servants likewise knelt with bowed faces, daring not to peek at the imperial decree.

Only the old eunuch who had been holding the whip quietly glanced to see what the emperor had written.

When he saw the emperor's characters, the old eunuch's aged eyes suddenly widened!

On that otherwise blank edict, the emperor had written only one character!

"Zhen!"

The single character was written with iron strokes and silver hooks, dragons flying and phoenixes dancing—the force of it pierced the yellow silk. Through that character, the old eunuch seemed to see the new emperor's eyes burning with ambition.

After writing that character, the emperor flung the brush aside and casually reached for the imperial seal.

The motion looked practiced, as if performed a thousand times. Yet when her hand touched the cool jade of the seal, she slightly retracted her fingers, and for a second a startled expression flickered across her face.

In an instant, that cloud of confusion on her face vanished.

The emperor showed a very small smile.

That smile carried arrogance, pride, satisfaction. It brimmed with a domineering disdain for the world!

Regrettably, everyone around her was kneeling, not one person dared meet her gaze.

The emperor looked down at everyone.

The realm lay beneath her feet. She had waited twenty years for this day.

Without hesitation she pressed the imperial seal onto the edict!

The eight vermilion seal characters, "Mandated by Heaven, long may you reign," were stamped atop the single character "Zhen."

The emperor laughed loudly, carelessly tossed the seal back onto the tray, producing a clink.

Gold scales are not meant for a pond; once encountering wind and cloud, they become a dragon!

The emperor raised both arms slightly, making a mock lifting gesture.

"You officials, rise."

"Cut!"

At Zheng Bohan's voice, everyone woke as if from a dream.

The cameraman closest to Shang Yechu, Xiao Li, wiped his forehead without thinking, discovering it was already beaded with cold sweat.

After a moment, another cameraman muttered his complaint, "Damn! My jaw hurts so much."

His assistant murmured, "Why?"

The cameraman said quietly, "I don't know. I suddenly found myself clenching my teeth just now."

The assistant snapped back, "I wasn't asking you, I was asking Director Zheng. Why hasn't he come over?"

Speak of the devil — no sooner had he finished than Zheng Bohan walked toward Shang Yechu's side.

The makeup team were touching up Shang Yechu's makeup because they still had a wide shot to film.

Shang Yechu was exhausted; shooting a major scene drained all one's energy. Besides, the blistering sun was torture.

Zheng Bohan approached, his expression a little conflicted.

Shang Yechu noticed immediately. "Director Zheng, do you want a retake?"

Zheng Bohan stared at her face for a long time, then shook his head. "No need."

Shang Yechu rested only ten minutes, then returned for the wide shot.

Zheng Bohan was surprised to find her second take no worse than the first. Normally, wide shots are much more forgiving of facial expression since the face is not seen clearly. Yet Shang Yechu remained meticulous, solemn in expression, hair undisturbed, posture impeccable.

Zheng Bohan watched her walking posture. She had no unnecessary little movements—no swaying of the waist, no hip flicks, her arms did not swing wildly.

Her steps were composed, as if strolling through a courtyard.

Moreover, Zheng Bohan noticed that when Shang Yechu moved, with each step the twelve hanging beads of her coronet swayed only minutely, and every step was nearly identical!

In historical dramas, bearing is a crucial element.

These days many artists in costume dramas like to flutter sleeves and hems dramatically, letting the tassels on headpieces swing like fairy wands. It looks wild and free, but it is actually wrong.

True aristocrats—especially someone like Emperor Pingzhao with noble blood—should have dignified bearing: don't expose the feet when walking, be still as a pine when standing, sit like a bell when seated. These are habits cultivated by generations of noble living.

A person's walk reveals much. There was once an emperor whose stride was described as "dragon-like, tiger-like"; people saw that he was no ordinary person, and indeed he became emperor.

An actor whose robes, sleeves, and tassels flutter wildly, even in a dragon robe, makes it hard for the audience to believe he is a crown prince; they'd mock that he looks nothing like a ruler.

It was not that Zheng Bohan promoted the stifling baggage of rituals. Of course it's good that many of those old customs fade. Zheng Bohan himself fully supported equality and freedom —

But actors who take home hundreds of thousands or millions in pay should at least put in effort commensurate with that income, right?

Earning a lifetime's normal income from a single drama and yet performing a tassel-swinging circus act seems a bit much.

As Zheng Bohan pondered, Shang Yechu repeated the sequence with dedication, maintaining emotional intensity and committing no errors.

This wide shot was a one-take success as well!

If the first take's success could be attributed to good condition, this second take revealed Shang Yechu's real strength.

Any actor with some experience knows how hard it is to find the right state while acting. Harder still is to maintain that state.

In this scene—the bearing, expressions, blocking, dramatic tension—every element was near flawless.

Not everyone present was an experienced veteran actor or crew member. Yet even so, after watching Shang Yechu's entire scene, they could vaguely predict that this would be one of the most classic moments in the entire series.

Before this, the crew had already filmed several excellent scenes. For example, Qin Tianye's imperial rage, the across-time tender clasping of hands between Su Ge and Qin Tianye, and a few intense exchanges between the old eunuchs and Qin Tianye.

But who is Qin Tianye? And who are those aged eunuchs?

They were veteran actors who had scraped and clawed through the entertainment industry for decades!

Shang Yechu, a newcomer whose surname many might even get wrong, could display skill comparable to those seniors?

Some refused to believe it; some couldn't figure it out. But more people felt a fresh goodwill toward this extraordinarily talented young actor.

"Little Ye, that was great!"

"Yeah, Little Ye, you really surprised us!"

"You're wearing such a tall crown and walking so far. Must be exhausting. Boxed meal with a drumstick at lunch!"

Even Qin Tianye, watching, couldn't help stepping a few paces forward.

He looked at Shang Yechu with complicated eyes—both pleased and touched.

"Every generation has its talents," Qin Tianye said with feeling. "Young people are formidable, indeed."

Shang Yechu blinked in surprise and waved her hands. "Teacher Qin, you flatter me..."

"Nonsense," Qin Tianye chuckled, "excessive modesty isn't good."

Someone teased, "The princess is secretly hiding her talent, Your Majesty, don't make things hard for her!"

Qin Tianye laughed heartily, "I'm nothing but a plaque now, don't call me Your Majesty. Yechu plays an emperor quite well! Better than me!"

Qin Tianye's open, humorous nature meant people often joked with him. Hearing this, the crew immediately ribbed him:

"Unbelievable! The late emperor came back to support the new ruler!"

"Look, Your Majesty, the late emperor really approves of you!"

"Those old ministers who buttered up the princess? Drag them out and execute them all!"

The cast and crew of Tale of Cloud Incline were mostly journeymen; they treated one another fairly equally and got along well. They often joked boisterously like this.

"I mean it," Qin Tianye said appreciatively, patting Shang Yechu's shoulder, looking at her the way a senior looks at a promising junior. "You're a rare kind of actor. You have both natural spark and you're willing to work hard."

Some actors aren't devoid of skill; in fact their acting is quite mature, but they lack that tiny bit of spark—like fried rice missing the scallion that gives it soul.

Some have the spark but don't steady themselves to refine their craft. In the fame-and-fortune market of show business, their light gets burned out, a tragic wasted talent.

Shang Yechu was fortunate: she had both, and she was enviably young.

Qin Tianye regarded Shang Yechu's face with feeling.

How far could such a young person go?

He was eager to find out.

Chapter 43: Mistakes

After the long shots were completed, this scene was officially wrapped up.

And Shang Yechu's role in the "Tale of Cloud Incline" production team had officially wrapped as well.

Unlike the lively wrap-up behind-the-scenes footage circulating online, Shang Yechu's wrap-up was actually silent and unnoticed.

She was a minor actress, so she couldn't possibly receive the treatment of the entire crew sending her flowers to celebrate. In fact, most of the crew didn't even know Shang Yechu had wrapped her role.

Li Kui had already left—her role was even smaller than Shang Yechu's, and she had finished all her scenes long ago, going home to count her money.

In front of the camera, Shang Yechu was the glorious, unparalleled female emperor. But after the cameras and flashlights were turned off, what remained was just a minor actress being constantly urged by the crew to change out of her costume.

Shang Yechu silently took off the black imperial robe, lingeringly stroking the smooth texture of the silk fabric.

The female emperor... was truly wonderful.

No one knew that when Shang Yechu wore this black dragon-patterned robe and stood on the high platform, for a period of time, she had genuinely immersed herself in the role.

She seemed to see a woman enduring hardships and concealing her ambitions for twenty years, all for that throne.

When the officials knelt at her feet, Shang Yechu almost felt an uncontrollable intoxication. The smile Princess Pingzhao revealed was fifty percent her genuine emotion.

This outfit was rented by the crew at great expense, and the crew would get anxious if Shang Yechu wore it for even one extra second. Therefore, after gently stroking it once, Shang Yechu obediently returned the clothes to the crew.

After taking off the costume, Shang Yechu sat in the corner, waiting for someone to remove her makeup.

From time to time, people came up to greet Shang Yechu. Her performance today had been too stunning—the entertainment industry values connections, and people are always friendly toward promising newcomers.

Shang Yechu smiled and acknowledged each of these people one by one.

Shang Yechu's scene was the last one scheduled for the morning. After filming wrapped, all crew members were going to have lunch.

Shang Yechu's makeup was very heavy, and the makeup artist worked for a long time before finally cleaning her face. By the time the makeup artist packed up and left, everyone in the makeup room had already gone.

Shang Yechu also planned to go have lunch. If you miss the free boxed meals, they're gone.

Just then, the makeup room door was pushed open, and a tall, slender figure walked in.

"Teacher Zheng?" Shang Yechu's heart stirred slightly as she quickly stood up and walked over to him. "Have you finished lunch already?"

"No." Zheng Bohan didn't look at Shang Yechu, finding a chair and sitting down by himself.

Shang Yechu keenly sensed that Zheng Bohan's attitude seemed somewhat off, so she carefully chose a safe distance and also sat down.

Shang Yechu didn't speak, proactively waiting for Zheng Bohan to broach the topic.

Zheng Bohan looked around, observing the messily piled costumes and makeup in the room, before finally fixing his gaze on Shang Yechu's face.

Zheng Bohan's gaze was extremely sharp, as if trying to penetrate through Shang Yechu's face and stare straight into her heart.

"You need to give me an explanation about this morning's matter," Zheng Bohan said.

Of course, Shang Yechu wasn't foolish enough to directly ask what explanation, instead uneasily lowering her head and twisting her fingers together.

Sure enough, seeing Shang Yechu like this, Zheng Bohan softened a bit and added, "I'm not here to interrogate you. But your performance was very different from the script, and I need to know why."

In the original script, the description of Shang Yechu's coronation was quite brief.

The ceremony procedures were directly rehearsed under the guidance of the etiquette teacher; as for Shang Yechu's movements and demeanor, the script only gave eight words:

Dignified composure, unsettled state of mind.

Many scripts are like this—long segments of performance in film and television might only amount to a few words on paper.

Plus, the "Tale of Cloud Incline" script was already rushed, so Zheng Bohan certainly wouldn't have time to describe a supporting character's personal scenes in detail. Moreover, Shang Yechu's acting skills were quite good to begin with, and Zheng Bohan, trusting her abilities, had been even more hands-off.

Of course, Zheng Bohan was after all a renowned screenwriter. Even with just eight words, they were carefully considered based on Princess Pingzhao's character setting.

Dignified composure, because Princess Pingzhao was the legitimate eldest princess, raised in luxury and privilege since childhood, necessarily possessing a natural nobility.

Unsettled state of mind, because Princess Pingzhao had obtained the throne improperly and her imperial position was unstable.

This didn't mean Princess Pingzhao was incompetent—quite the opposite, such an expression reflected her political cunning.

Princess Pingzhao had lain low for over a decade, using weakness and frailty as her protective coloring. The officials had pushed her onto the throne precisely because she seemed indecisive and easy to control.

During the early unstable period of her reign, Princess Pingzhao should have maintained her usual timid image before the officials, letting the powerful ministers lower their guard and relax their vigilance. This would give Princess Pingzhao enough time to develop her influence, waiting until her wings were fully grown before revealing her great talent and bold vision.

But Shang Yechu's performance...

The "dignified composure" was achieved, and done quite well. That walking sequence could be called textbook-level ancient walking posture. Although this dignified composure contained too much solemnity and cold severity, Zheng Bohan was still satisfied.

As for unsettled state of mind? Where was the unsettled part?

He thought Shang Yechu had been quite arrogant! Instead, she made the veteran actor playing the eunuch unsettled!

Zheng Bohan admitted that Shang Yechu's performance was very captivating. He was an industry veteran, with decades of ups and downs, having seen countless outstanding actors. But while watching this scene, he still couldn't take his eyes off Shang Yechu.

Especially that moment when Shang Yechu grabbed the ceremonial whip. At that moment, Shang Yechu seemed to possess a magnet-like magic, dominating the entire scene. The officials, the set, and the rented Dragon Throne behind her all became the most insignificant decorations on her crown.

That shot, whether in composition or tension, could be considered top-tier work in Zheng Bohan's career.

And that segment where Shang Yechu wrote on the blank imperial edict!

Most young people today don't have much skill in brush calligraphy, so in Zheng Bohan's design, Shang Yechu only needed to casually write a few characters on the edict, and Post-Production would later replace the shot with a normal edict.

However, Shang Yechu didn't choose to be perfunctory, but seriously assumed the posture and wrote the character "Zhen" on the imperial edict!

At that moment, Zheng Bohan's heart pounded like a drum, and he felt dizzy.

He didn't even have time to be surprised, just stared blankly at Shang Yechu's writing movements and the large character she wrote.

Zheng Bohan was extremely grateful that the photography team he chose was very professional, meticulously filming Shang Yechu's entire writing process from 360-degree angles.

Just moments ago, Zheng Bohan sat in front of the monitor, replaying the various angles of Shang Yechu writing over and over again.

Watching it repeatedly, there were only two words.

Perfect.

Zhen!

A single character that fully expressed the arrogance, wildness, and boldness of an autocrat—looking down on everything, considering oneself supreme.

What do the common people matter to me? What do ancestral laws matter to me? When I sit on this throne, between heaven and earth, there is only "Zhen"!

That self-satisfied intoxication, that undisguised ambition, that charming self-complacency. If Zheng Bohan were filming a major female-led emperor drama, he would have applauded Shang Yechu for a full minute the moment he called cut!

But this is a palace intrigue drama, and Shang Yechu is playing the timid Princess Pingzhao. The imperial throne beneath her hasn't even warmed up yet—isn't it inappropriate to be so sharp and prominent?

Chapter 44: The Bet Was Won

Admittedly, Shang Yechu's performance approach was absolutely more brilliant and audience-winning than the original script setting. It could be described as radiant.

Without exaggeration, in this scene, Shang Yechu had practically "outshone" all the female characters in the entire series. This "outshining" naturally didn't refer to appearance, but rather compared from the perspective of character design and the deep impression left on the audience.

But did this kind of outshining truly align with the script and logic?

Zheng Bohan certainly knew that Shang Yechu wanted to become famous. Who in the entertainment industry didn't want fame? But Shang Yechu shouldn't take risks for a character's highlight moment by drastically changing the script's setting!

When Shang Yechu was diligently interpreting the script, her desire for fame showed she had ambition and courage as a young person.

But when Shang Yechu's ambition affected Zheng Bohan's script, that became arrogance, ulterior motives, and an inability to see the bigger picture.

Therefore, even though Shang Yechu's performance in this scene was excellent, and everyone from Qin Tianye to the cinematographer was praising her, Zheng Bohan felt displeased in his heart.

When he called "cut," Zheng Bohan struggled internally for quite a while, hesitating whether to completely scrap this take and reshoot a timid version of the ascension.

Ultimately, Zheng Bohan couldn't bring himself to do it. Not because he pitied Shang Yechu's hard work, but mainly because he cherished that near-perfect performance.

Zheng Bohan had a brain, but he also had eyes. And his eyes came before his brain. Regardless of script logic or not, you had to admit Shang Yechu's performance was captivating and satisfying!

Plus, Shang Yechu was usually humble and hardworking, very polite to everyone, and quite approachable. Zheng Bohan actually didn't want to believe she was the type of person who would willingly ruin her own character just for fame.

Therefore, Zheng Bohan didn't immediately give Shang Yechu a death sentence, but instead took advantage of this quiet moment to personally question Shang Yechu.

Zheng Bohan's tone suggested there was still room for negotiation.

Shang Yechu breathed a sigh of relief.

This time she had indeed taken quite a risk. If Zheng Bohan had been an extremely arrogant, rigid person who couldn't tolerate others randomly changing his script, then Shang Yechu's first scene would have been filmed for nothing.

Not only that, but it would have left a bad impression, potentially ruining future collaborations.

But this was the entertainment industry. The entertainment industry always rewarded the bold and punished the timid. An artist who didn't dare to break through and innovate would only ever be mediocre material.

Anyway, Shang Yechu currently had nothing to lose. Even if she offended Zheng Bohan, at worst she'd be back to square one, so there was nothing to fear.

Shang Yechu had gambled correctly this time. Zheng Bohan wasn't that kind of dictatorial director and screenwriter, and was willing to give Shang Yechu a chance to explain.

As long as Shang Yechu could speak, then this matter would be manageable.

Shang Yechu raised her head, looking directly at Zheng Bohan, and said slowly, "This is actually my own speculation about the character..."

"Speculation?" Zheng Bohan's tone revealed neither joy nor anger. "Explain."

Shang Yechu cleared her throat lightly, "Please don't laugh at me. This is my first time playing an emperor. This emperor has two important traits, one is 'concealment' and the other is 'revelation.'"

This was from the character analysis Shang Yechu had submitted. Zheng Bohan neither nodded nor shook his head, just gestured with his eyes for her to continue.

"The 'concealment' part refers to concealing one's abilities and biding one's time, lying low for over a decade," Shang Yechu said seriously. "While the 'revelation' part focuses on her performance after ascending the throne.

"How did she ascend? The script only says she was pushed up by the ministers, legitimate in name but not in reality.

"So, I went to Zhihu to ask..."

Zheng Bohan immediately snorted from his nose: "Zhihu?"

Zheng Bohan looked down on such mixed-quality Q&A platforms.

Shang Yechu's face flushed slightly, "It's faster this way."

"Alright," Zheng Bohan waved his hand. "Continue."

Shang Yechu continued, "I asked two questions on Zhihu.

"First, which emperors in history concealed their abilities and bided their time?

"Second, which emperors in history were pushed to the throne by ministers?"

"And then?" Zheng Bohan's tone improved slightly. After all, no one disliked dedicated actors.

"There were many answers, and I picked the ones that appeared most frequently. They were Emperor Tianjing, Emperor Weixuan, and Emperor Wu of Southern Chen."

Zheng Bohan nodded, "Good, Emperor Tianjing was installed by ministers, while Emperor Weixuan acted like a fool for over twenty years, and Emperor Wu of Southern Chen bided his time under a great general for ten years."

"Teacher, you're so knowledgeable, saying exactly what the books say," Shang Yechu flattered him.

"Enough with the smooth talk," Zheng Bohan snorted. "Then what?"

Shang Yechu took out her phone and showed Zheng Bohan the notes in her reading app.

"Then I went to read the biographies of these people," Shang Yechu scrolled through her phone, picking out a few notes to show Zheng Bohan.

"First, Emperor Weixuan. He acted like a fool for twenty years, and after outliving all his brothers, he was installed as emperor by eunuchs," Shang Yechu made a pushing-up motion.

"The eunuchs' original intention in supporting him was because he was a fool and very easy to control," Shang Yechu pointed at her temple from a distance. "This is quite similar to Princess Pingzhao. Foolishness and cowardice—sometimes cowardice is even worse than foolishness."

Zheng Bohan's eyes narrowed slightly. As a knowledgeable screenwriter, he certainly knew what happened next—

"Then, a miracle occurred," Shang Yechu smiled. "On the day Emperor Weixuan ascended the throne, he suddenly swept away his previous foolishness and stupidity, displaying extraordinary wisdom and decisiveness. You know all these things, teacher, so I won't show off in front of an expert."

Zheng Bohan not only knew, but could recite it backwards. Emperor Weixuan not only created a prosperous era, but shortly after ascending the throne, he killed all the eunuchs who had supported him. In terms of endurance and patience while enduring hardships, he was among the top among emperors.

"Next is Emperor Tianjing. The emperor had no sons or brothers, so the officials had to pull this distant relative to sit on the throne, even forcing him to acknowledge the previous emperor, who was only ten years older than him, as his father."

Zheng Bohan certainly knew all this.

Shang Yechu scrolled through her phone and read, "In July of the same year, the emperor caned twenty-three civil officials to death at Vermilion Bird Gate." She was of course reading the vernacular version.

Zheng Bohan's brow twitched, "What are you trying to say?"

Shang Yechu extended a hand and wrote a "6" in the air, "From the emperor's ascension to caning these civil officials who installed him, it only took six months—half a year! After that, no matter what absurd things Emperor Tianjing did, the officials dared to be angry but not speak out."

Zheng Bohan had already sat up straight, "Continue."

Shang Yechu put down her phone and said seriously, "Princess Pingzhao's situation is actually quite similar to Emperor Tianjing and Emperor Weixuan.

"A new emperor succeeds to the throne, with an unstable position. According to normal thinking, people would assume the new emperor should be cautious and careful with the ministers who pushed him up. Actually, that's not the case.

"The emperor's power is supreme in the world. As long as one legally sits on that throne, it's very difficult to be removed legally. That is to say, from the moment of ascension, officials have already lost the qualification to compete fairly with the emperor.

"Power struggles aren't about give and take, but about not yielding an inch! Retreat one step, and you'll retreat step by step. Therefore, a new emperor won't show weakness to the enemy at this critical moment—in fact, the new emperor must display hundredfold majesty to intimidate these ministers who helped him ascend!"

A slight smile tugged at the corner of Zheng Bohan's mouth, then quickly disappeared.

He snorted from his nose, "Easier said than sung! Then tell me, why didn't Emperor Wu of Southern Chen, as you said, show his edge immediately upon ascension, but instead bided his time under the great general for ten years before taking action?"

Shang Yechu said unhurriedly, "As you said, he was biding his time under a great general."

The smile on Zheng Bohan's lips was almost impossible to hide, "Oh?"

"Our Tale of Cloud Incline script clearly states that the previous emperor was inherently suspicious and thoughtful, gradually sending away all the old generals who fought with him to establish the empire over the years. Before his death, he took the last batch with him," Shang Yechu cleared her throat lightly. "The gun and the pen are two different things. When pointed at by a gun, of course one can only obediently lower their head. When pointed at by a pen, just break it, right?"

The more Shang Yechu spoke, the brighter her eyes became, "Princess Pingzhao was installed by civil officials. As the saying goes, scholars' rebellions take three years to succeed. If Princess Pingzhao had been pushed to the throne by a group of generals, then of course she would have to endure first; but those old generals had already been finished off by the previous emperor, the new generation of generals restrained each other, and were terrified by their predecessors' fates, each quiet as chickens, obediently agreeing, no matter who sat on the throne, they could only shout 'long live the emperor.'

"Tale of Cloud Incline sets Teacher Qin as the founding emperor who fought his way out of chaotic times. As a new dynasty of only twenty years, this dynasty's civil official group and scholar clan forces haven't fully formed yet, even if they unite to strike, they're far from capable of paralyzing the entire state machinery.

"The officials installing the cowardly Princess Pingzhao as emperor was actually the civil official group extending a tentacle toward imperial power while taking advantage of the previous emperor's death and the unstable throne.

"In such a situation, what the new emperor needs to do is absolutely not show weakness to the enemy and retreat step by step, feeding the officials' ambitions; on the contrary, the new emperor needs to display an even tougher stance to intimidate these restless insects!"

Zheng Bohan remained silent, while Shang Yechu at this moment was practically beaming with delight.

"Only emperors overthrown by violence and productivity, no emperors brought down by civil officials' criticisms!"

"Clap, clap, clap."

Scattered applause sounded in the dressing room, but it didn't come from Zheng Bohan.

Shang Yechu looked up in surprise to see Qin Tianye standing at the door at some point!

Qin Tianye walked into the room while applauding, praising, "Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant!"

"Teacher Qin? When did you arrive?" Shang Yechu quickly stood up, her face showing some embarrassment.

"For a while now," Qin Tianye smiled in response to Shang Yechu, then heavily patted Zheng Bohan's shoulder a few times, saying meaningfully, "So, Old Zheng? You lost."

Zheng Bohan reached out and covered his face, "So what? Go ahead and gloat."

"What lost?" Shang Yechu showed a confused expression.

Qin Tianye laughed heartily, "I made a bet with your Director Zheng. I bet your performance this morning was the most reasonable approach, while he bet that the 'distracted and uneasy' written in his script was the most reasonable design."

Shang Yechu held her breath, "So what Teacher Zheng just said..."

Qin Tianye patted Shang Yechu's shoulder and laughed loudly, "Congratulations, you convinced Old Zheng the stubborn mule! Comrade Little Ye, now, you've successfully wrapped filming!"

Chapter 45: Farewell to the Film Crew

Shang Yechu immediately understood what Qin Tianye meant—Zheng Bohan had approved of her character interpretation, and therefore, Shang Yechu wouldn't need to reshoot. Of course, this also meant she had successfully wrapped up her role.

Shang Yechu said with pleasant surprise, "Thank you, Teacher Zheng and Teacher Qin!"

"You don't need to thank me." Qin Tianye leaned casually against a makeup table. "Actually, I don't really understand all that civil official, imperial power, centralization stuff. I just thought your scene felt comfortable to watch, so I placed my bet on you. Fortunately, you didn't disappoint me."

Qin Tianye stretched out an arm and lightly tapped Zheng Bohan's back. "Now this guy owes me a meal."

Qin Tianye's forearm was quite muscular, with prominent veins and smooth lines. A watch of antique style was meticulously fastened around his wrist. When he tapped Zheng Bohan's back, the watch face shimmered with understated, elegant silver light.

Looking at Qin Tianye in that moment, Shang Yechu could finally understand Su Ge's fanatical star-chasing intensity. This was indeed an extremely attractive man, and what made it even more precious was that he was also an intelligent, good person.

Good people in the entertainment industry were rarer than pearls in the ocean.

Zheng Bohan put down his hand, stood up, and patted Shang Yechu's shoulder. "Well done."

After saying this, the face-conscious old screenwriter walked off with a stern expression.

Qin Tianye raised his eyebrows. "Don't take it to heart—that's just how he is. This means he actually listened to what you said."

Of course Shang Yechu wouldn't take it to heart. She thanked Qin Tianye again, then said, "I still need to go say goodbye to Teacher Zheng. Teacher Qin, shall I go ahead then?"

"Go on." Qin Tianye pulled over a chair and sat down. "I'll rest here for a bit."

As Shang Yechu turned to leave, Qin Tianye suddenly remembered something and added, "Oh, right."

"Hmm?" Shang Yechu turned back, waiting curiously for Qin Tianye's follow-up.

Qin Tianye offered a compliment: "Your calligraphy today was quite good. Did you study it specifically?"

Shang Yechu bid farewell to the Tale of Cloud Incline production crew and returned once again to Grandma Hu's bookstore.

Grandma Hu was wearing reading glasses while perusing a thick book. Hearing footsteps, she lifted her eyes and looked at Shang Yechu over the top of her glasses. "Back?"

"I'm back." Shang Yechu stretched lazily. "Ah, Grandma, I'm so tired."

Grandma Hu set down her book, removed her reading glasses, and looked at Shang Yechu expectantly.

Shang Yechu deliberately teased, "Grandma, why are you staring at me?"

Grandma Hu didn't speak, just stared intently at Shang Yechu's face.

Shang Yechu raised her hands in a surrendering gesture. "Alright, alright. Today on set—"

The bookstore fell silent for two seconds.

"From the director to the main cast to the cinematography director—everyone! They all said your calligraphy was absolutely amazing!" Shang Yechu raised her hands and cheered!

The corners of Grandma Hu's mouth instantly stretched to her ears. But before three seconds of smiling had passed, she retracted her smile, pulled out her back scratcher, and gave Shang Yechu's waist a light but firm tap.

"Brat, how dare you keep me in suspense!" Grandma Hu huffed.

That's right—the stunning "Zhen" character that had amazed everyone on set was actually Grandma Hu's handiwork!

Shang Yechu's pen handwriting was fairly decent now, ranking above average among ordinary people. But brush calligraphy... to put it bluntly, putting it on screen would only invite ridicule.

Brush calligraphy couldn't be mastered quickly—it wasn't determined by intelligence. Shang Yechu had bought a cheap set of calligraphy tools and spent three days scratching her head in frustration at the bookstore, practicing horizontal strokes, vertical strokes, left-falling strokes, right-falling strokes, and the eight basic strokes of the "Yong" character, producing a floor full of scribbled messes.

One day, Grandma Hu picked up one of Shang Yechu's brush calligraphy attempts from a corner, initially thinking a competitor had drawn a curse talisman against her!

After questioning Shang Yechu, Grandma Hu learned about her predicament.

Grandma Hu was a retired teacher, so of course her handwriting was quite good, and she could handle brush calligraphy too. At least to untrained eyes, it was quite pleasing.

Grandma Hu appeared like a divine savior, mercifully writing a fiercely imposing "Zhen" character for Shang Yechu. Shang Yechu treated it like a priceless treasure, copying that single character over and over for a full half month, using up all her draft paper.

Though last-minute preparation might not achieve perfection, it could still shine. In the end, Shang Yechu carried this imitation of Grandma Hu's authentic work to complete her coronation scene.

The effect was good—Zheng Bohan had already decided to directly use that calligraphy shot. Qin Tianye and others even believed Shang Yechu possessed miraculously skilled brush calligraphy, with several friendly actors begging Shang Yechu to write their Spring Festival couplets for them.

Shang Yechu had pulled off an impressive act on her wrap day!

Shang Yechu pleaded for mercy: "I was wrong, alright? How about I mop the entire bookstore floor today?"

Only then did Grandma Hu reluctantly let her off. "The bookshelves need wiping too. Some have ink stains, making them look like leopard-print pants."

"Understood, Your Imperial Highness~" Shang Yechu pinched her voice and made a gesture of flicking a handkerchief, then went off laughing to clean.

Chapter 46: New Film Contract

Although she had already played the second female lead written by a famous screenwriter, Shang Yechu still had to work as an extra in the days that followed.

Tale of Cloud Incline hadn't aired yet, so Shang Yechu couldn't even be considered an upcoming star. In the entertainment industry, she was still treated like a background actor.

However, her savings had multiplied several times over. When Shang Yechu was initially selected for the maidservant Yuzhu role, Tale of Cloud Incline had set her compensation at a package price of 6,000 yuan. Later, through various efforts, Shang Yechu's role transformed from a maidservant to a princess, and naturally, her pay increased accordingly.

Shang Yechu's per-episode fee was 5,000 yuan per episode. She appeared in 12 episodes of Tale of Cloud Incline, earning a total of 60,000 yuan!

Li Kui's compensation was 100,000 yuan, nearly double Shang Yechu's amount. However, her screen time was much less than Shang Yechu's. Through indirect inquiries, Shang Yechu learned that Li Kui's initial offer was actually 50,000 yuan. Because she was worried about affecting her studies, Li Kui initially didn't want to film this drama. Zheng Bohan then proposed doubling Li Kui's pay, and only under the temptation of this financial power did Li Kui agree to participate.

Whether for Shang Yechu or Li Kui, such per-episode rates were absolutely at the bottom tier in the entertainment industry. They weren't even considered fifth-tier artists, just slightly better than eighteenth-tier. These 60,000 yuan wouldn't even get a second glance from third or fourth-tier celebrities. But for Shang Yechu at this moment, it was nothing less than a fortune.

Unfortunately, this fortune would only be paid after the entire Tale of Cloud Incline crew wrapped filming, so currently it was just theoretical income. Therefore, the impoverished Shang Yechu still had to live in Grandma Hu's bookstore.

Grandma Hu rubbed her hot water bottle and sighed, "Does acting really nourish people? You're getting more and more beautiful. But you're also getting thinner—should change your name to Little Stalk."

When Shang Yechu first arrived, her complexion was yellowish, and her hair was somewhat yellow too. Because of this, Grandma Hu had given her the nickname Brat.

Now that Shang Yechu had blossomed into an elegant beauty, Grandma Hu felt embarrassed to call her by that nickname anymore.

Shang Yechu's current beauty points had increased to 85, rising another level. Her skin was now fair and smooth, her face fresh and pretty. Her previously sparse, yellowish hair had become thick, jet-black, and smooth, falling softly to her shoulders. Standing about 168cm tall, aside from being overly slender, it was hard to find any major flaws in her appearance.

Shang Yechu had run away from home in June, and now it was approaching November. In just five short months, earth-shaking changes had occurred in her.

Shang Yechu was leaning against a bookshelf reading when she heard this and didn't know whether to laugh or cry, "Grandma, aren't stalks still yellow?"

Grandma Hu warmed her hands for a while, put on her glasses, and began sewing something. "Alright then, alright then. How about 'Ivory Chopsticks,' satisfied?"

Unable to outtalk this sharp-tongued old lady, Shang Yechu could only surrender: "Then should I increase my food intake starting today?"

Grandma Hu worked her needle swiftly while saying, "Your appetite is already quite substantial—that day you ate four mushroom chicken buns! But you just don't gain weight. Strange, strange."

As the old lady continued chattering, Shang Yechu glanced at the time on her phone and returned the book to the shelf.

"Grandma, I need to go film," Shang Yechu walked over to Grandma Hu. "I might not come back tonight, you can close up directly, no need to wait for me."

Grandma Hu had given Shang Yechu a key to the bookstore. Even if closed, Shang Yechu could still enter by herself.

"In a hurry? If not, wait a bit longer," Grandma Hu made a "chi" sound as she pulled a thread.

"I can stay another ten minutes," Shang Yechu said honestly. She had originally planned to use these ten minutes to buy some street food to fill her stomach. But since the old lady asked her to stay, she could skip that snack.

"Plenty of time. Wait before leaving." Grandma Hu gestured with her chin toward the side. "Go practice one large character, and by the time you finish, it'll be about time."

The "large characters" Grandma Hu referred to were calligraphy written with a brush. Unable to afford expensive rice paper, Shang Yechu made do with materials from the pedestrian street, buying rough draft paper from stationery stores there.

This draft paper was poor quality, yellowish in color, leftover stock from various stores. In a way, Shang Yechu was helping clear inventory for the local community.

Shang Yechu sat on a small wooden stool beside Grandma Hu and began practicing her clumsy characters. One sheet of this draft paper could fit about ten characters. As she was writing the ninth scribble, Grandma Hu spoke up: "Done."

"What's done?" Shang Yechu looked up blankly, a bit of ink still on the tip of her nose.

Grandma Hu handed what she'd been working on to Shang Yechu. "Try it."

Shang Yechu took it immediately, but fell silent when she saw what Grandma Hu had given her.

It was a lemon yellow knitted hand muff.

The hand muff had a strap that could be worn around the neck. Additionally, a small pocket was sewn inside the hand muff.

Worried Shang Yechu might miss her clever design, Grandma Hu pointed out, "See that pocket? You can use it for loose change and your phone."

The hand muff was exquisitely knitted with fine, tight stitches. Shang Yechu touched it—the inside was lined with thick plush lining, warm and soft, completely windproof. The small pocket was made from printed fabric with a fresh white background and green leaves pattern.

Shang Yechu touched the green leaves for a long moment before looking up with a delighted smile: "This is way too beautiful! Grandma, your hands are so skilled!"

Grandma Hu said proudly, "Pretty, right? I learned from short videos. Made one for everyone in the family. Yours is definitely the prettiest!"

Short video platforms had just become popular in recent years, and as a fashionable elderly person, Grandma Hu naturally had to ride this trend.

Grandma Hu chattered on, "The weather will keep getting colder from now on, this will keep you warmer. The gloves sold on the street are like onion skins—not warm at all."

Shang Yechu stroked the hand muff's fur, marveling, "This came just in time—I was almost about to buy those cashmere gloves from Uncle Fan's new stock!"

"Don't be such a sucker, those cashmere gloves have everything except cashmere." Grandma Hu took off her reading glasses, about to advise Shang Yechu further, then remembered she still had to film and changed her tone: "Hurry along. Aren't you going to be an extra?"

Shang Yechu hung the hand muff around her neck, nodded emphatically, and jogged out the door.

Only when she reached a place where no one could see her did Shang Yechu slow her pace.

103 suddenly spoke up: "You're in a bad mood?"

"..." Shang Yechu tucked her hands into the hand muff. "No, I'm not."

103 had always been indifferent to Shang Yechu's mental state, asking only as routine procedure. Seeing Shang Yechu stubbornly deny it, he didn't press further.

Shang Yechu looked down at the lemon yellow hand muff, but her thoughts drifted to a faraway place.

In her previous life, around this same time, Grandma Hu had also knitted a hand muff for her. Even the color and pattern were the same.

The only difference was that in her previous life, Shang Yechu had been chubby, so Grandma Hu had knitted an extra-large hand muff for her.

The convergence of these two timelines gave Shang Yechu a momentary illusion, making her think she was still that pitiful ugly duckling from her previous life, that nothing had changed.

Looking at the much smaller lemon yellow hand muff, if the extra-large one from her previous life was like a proud fat general, then this small one was at most a poor scholar who hadn't eaten for three days.

No. Everything was changing.

Shang Yechu lifted her head and ran with determined steps toward the film studio location.

Although she was still working as an extra, there were some differences between Shang Yechu's current extra work and before.

The biggest difference was that she could now work as a foreground actor and special appearance actor.

This was the privilege of being good-looking. The entertainment industry was the most appearance-focused place in the world. With her beauty points risen to 85, Shang Yechu now looked no worse than some young starlets in the industry, and might even be better in terms of height and posture.

The entertainment industry was all business, except the products were people themselves. An actor's various qualities were the added value of the product. Shang Yechu had high added value but low pay, making her cost-effective. Therefore, the number of role offers she received had multiplied compared to before.

With this density of offers, if Shang Yechu was willing to work as frantically as before, she could definitely achieve moderate prosperity within a month. But instead of her previous desperate acceptance of any role, Shang Yechu had started being selective.

Shang Yechu picked through offers on her phone, first eliminating several mid-level special and small special appearance invitations from web dramas and historical idol dramas.

Then came offers from two urban dramas—the casting coordinator said Shang Yechu could play the female lead's colleague, even with a few lines. Shang Yechu didn't blink before directly refusing.

She continued deleting and rejecting offers one after another. After Shang Yechu turned down the third female lead role in a low-budget web drama, 103 finally couldn't hold back.

"What kind of role do you actually want to take?"

Accustomed to Shang Yechu's workaholic schedule, 103 had prepared for her to work ten days and nights nonstop. Who would have thought she'd become picky!

At the same time, Shang Yechu's scrolling finally stopped.

"This one."

Displayed on Shang Yechu's phone screen was clearly a role offer for a work titled Heavenly Secrets Pavilion!

An account noted as ■Hengdian Extras Group Leader-Casting Coordinator Pi Ge■ had sent Shang Yechu a message:

■Little Ye, the movie Heavenly Secrets Pavilion is recruiting for major special appearances, female, with dance foundation, decent appearance. Want to go?■

Shang Yechu: ■Going. Thanks Pi Ge■

Chapter 47: Dance Crash Course

A major special appearance is just a large-scale special-appearance role, basically a bigger extra. Compared to the tiny roles Shang Yechu used to run through rain and wind, a major special appearance gets better treatment, higher pay, and more lines. Although there might only be one scene in a drama, the pay could reach four to five digits.

Majors have certain requirements for an actor's image and acting; they're the coveted roles extras envy. The timing of Shang Yechu's rebirth was pretty decent — at this moment Heng City's film city didn't have rigid requirements for majors yet. If a director or production staff liked you, you could give it a shot. A few years later, an artist without connections would have to go through a cumbersome certification process to become a major.

Shang Yechu asked Pi Ge, "What exactly is this role like?"

Pi Ge is a casting coordinator, well connected, and already knew Shang Yechu was cast in Tale of Cloud Incline and had landed a fairly sizable role. He wanted to befriend this promising young actress, so he unloaded everything he knew.

"It's a period film. From what I see the production is modest. The role is a brothel courtesan. I don't know more specifics," he said.

"Okay, thanks, Pi Ge," Shang Yechu replied.

This was the extra she would be auditioning for this afternoon. Calling it an extra was really just a formality — it was an audition. The role hadn't been officially offered to her yet.

When Shang Yechu arrived at the audition venue, a dozen people were already waiting ahead of her. All were unknown new faces who, to be blunt, might be of even lower standing than Shang Yechu.

Pi Ge had already sent Shang Yechu the audition requirements. Most extras are not given scripts; they only receive a vague "character description."

The character brief Pi Ge sent was short, only four lines.

Courtesan: Mianmian

Perform a classical dance;

Expression alluring and seductive;

Has a worldly, worn look.

Those four short lines were all the information Shang Yechu could get. Even though a dozen people were queued ahead, each audition would not exceed five minutes. In other words, Shang Yechu had less than an hour to fully absorb those four lines and then interpret them.

The worst part was, for such minor roles the production would absolutely not provide props or costumes. In other words, Shang Yechu had to perform without any physical aids.

103 spoke mechanically, "Can't tell you can dance."

"..." Shang Yechu checked her phone and answered honestly, "I've never learned to dance."

That was true. Shang Yechu had never studied dance and had no interest in it. Besides, even if she had interest, Ji Ya and Shang Hongxuan might not have been willing to spend money on it.

In her previous life she had danced a duet in some comedies, but those jumps and spins were purely for laughs — crowd-pleasing antics, not real dance.

Since her rebirth, Shang Yechu's brow had been furrowed in constant worry and she hadn't had time to enroll in a dance class. Moreover, dance typically requires childhood training; it's not something you can learn in a few days.

103 was silent for a moment. "If that's the case, why are you taking a role that clearly doesn't fit you?"

Shang Yechu swiped quickly on her phone. "I'm learning."

"..." 103 suspected it misheard. "Learning? Now?"

While they spoke, Shang Yechu had already pulled up a classical dance video. The dance was called Butterfly Loves Flower and was ubiquitous on short-video platforms. She picked the version with the highest views.

Almost every classical dance beginner starts with this dance. Still, to make it look halfway decent takes at least a week!

Did Shang Yechu plan to learn this dance in an hour and then bluff her way through for the casting director?

That was wildly fanciful.

Fortunately, Shang Yechu was impulsive, but not completely insane.

She sped through the video at four times speed, skipping the intro, middle, and climax, and went straight to the ending segment.

She used screen-recording software to clip a thirty-second ending, saving it to her phone.

After doing this, Shang Yechu put on a polite smile and told the person behind her in line, "I'm going to the restroom. If it's my turn and I'm not back, you can go in first."

The young woman behind Shang Yechu had just arrived too; she nodded politely. "Okay."

Restroom?

A bad premonition flashed through 103.

No way, could Shang Yechu be...

As if on cue. Shang Yechu went into the restroom but didn't use the toilet. Instead she went straight into the janitor's closet with mops and trash bins.

The closet was relatively spacious and, at that moment, empty. Shang Yechu closed the door, propped her phone on the windowsill, and looped the thirty-second classical dance clip she had trimmed.

She raised a hand and mimicked the dancer's movements, "dancing."

Shang Yechu was prone to astonishing antics; 103 had become used to being constantly shocked. It was about to tune out this painful scene when Shang Yechu shouted in a commanding tone, "System."

103 had to return. "What is it?"

While awkwardly dancing, Shang Yechu said, "Help me watch."

103 wanted to refuse but hesitated and asked, "Watch what?"

"Watch," Shang Yechu panted as she turned, "how my dancing looks."

103 protested, "The System has no aesthetic sense and cannot appreciate art." That was true.

Shang Yechu stared intently at the dancer on the screen and said, "You don't need to appreciate it, you just need to compare my similarity to the person in the video."

Data comparison was 103's specialty. That relieved it; it truly did not want to be forced to admire Shang Yechu's clumsy moves.

"Fine," 103 said. "At what similarity percentage should I notify you to stop? Seventy percent? Eighty?"

"Huh?" Shang Yechu stopped, breathless. "You overestimate me. Forty percent is fine. If that's impossible, thirty-five will do."

Thirty-five percent... can that even be called dancing?

103 wanted to ask that aloud. But Shang Yechu clearly didn't want to waste time. After a three-second rest she resumed imitating the video dancer.

103 had to start observing.

The more it watched, the more 103 noticed Shang Yechu's cleverness.

The ending of a dance is often the slowest-paced section. Slow tempo means fewer moves, slower motions, smaller ranges. At least for Butterfly Loves Flower, that was the case.

These three characteristics are actually more beginner-friendly for someone like Shang Yechu, who had good memory.

Shang Yechu broke the thirty-second sequence into ten moves and forced herself to memorize them like doing a set of calisthenics.

That meant she didn't need to learn to truly dance; she only needed to perform those ten moves in sequence convincingly in front of the casting director!

At twenty years old, Shang Yechu naturally couldn't be as limber as dancers who trained from childhood. So she removed three of the more difficult moves and used a lazy substitution to link the remaining moves together.

The final scene of Butterfly Loves Flower is the butterfly's death; the flower collapses to the ground and weeps for the butterfly. The dancer is supposed to squat low, burying the head very close to the ground.

With the janitor's closet floor, Shang Yechu certainly wouldn't lie on that filthy floor. After hesitating, she chose a wide horse-stance squat and, in a rather ridiculous posture, completed the final beat.

Through 103's perspective, this "dance" was sacrilegious to art. But Shang Yechu mimicked it extremely earnestly, unaffected by the surroundings and without any hint of discouragement.

103 silently watched the awkward dancer turn and twirl, twist her waist, and squat in horse stance again and again. Her expression remained resolute; her posture was hilariously ridiculous... yet she never stopped.

"Good memory is no match for constant repetition," the saying applied to dance too. Thirty seconds of choreography can be repeated three times every two minutes. In forty minutes that's sixty repetitions.

By the sixtieth repetition, Shang Yechu's moves, whether graceful or not, at least formed a coherent sequence.

"Similarity thirty-nine percent," 103 finally declared. "You should go out. It's almost your turn."

Chapter 48: Asian Dance King

Shang Yechu washed her face with cold water, rinsing away the sweat from her head and face. Fortunately, she hadn't worn any makeup today.

Sure enough, after stepping outside, they were just calling her number. Shang Yechu jogged to the audition room door and flashed a bright smile at the secretary calling the numbers.

Entering the room, Shang Yechu confidently bowed to the interviewers. "Good morning, teachers."

Only three people sat in the room, all women. A stern, capable-looking woman sat in the center. Shang Yechu recognized her—she was Yi Tianzhao, the chief director of Heavenly Secrets Pavilion. To her left sat a smiling elderly woman wearing glasses, whose role Shang Yechu couldn't determine—perhaps screenwriter or producer. To her right sat a quite elegant and poised middle-aged woman, whose identity Shang Yechu similarly couldn't pinpoint.

From this arrangement, it seemed the director of Heavenly Secrets Pavilion cared quite a bit about this film. After all, selecting minor roles like this could usually be delegated to assistant directors or casting coordinators. The chief director didn't need to handle it personally.

Shang Yechu didn't waste time, getting straight to the point: "My name is Shang Yechu. I'm auditioning for the role of courtesan Mianmian."

As soon as she finished speaking, the elegant woman on the right lifted her head and began examining Shang Yechu.

Her gaze held no warmth, carrying only pure assessment.

Shang Yechu understood immediately—this woman was likely the dance teacher hired by the production team.

Shang Yechu had guessed correctly. The woman sitting to Yi Tianzhao's right was indeed the dance consultant hired by the production team. Her name was Du Xiaotang.

Yi Tianzhao's eyes, however, lit up. Shang Yechu had delicate features, a well-proportioned figure (in an experienced director's eyes, "well-proportioned" meant how it would appear on camera), dark pupils, and clear, bright eyes. Among the dozen or so people who had auditioned today, she had the best overall appearance conditions.

Courtesans traded on their looks, so Director Yi Tianzhao naturally wanted the courtesan in her film to be beautiful.

"Begin. Let's not waste time," urged the bespectacled elderly woman.

Performing classical dance in modern clothing inevitably created a somewhat comical feeling. Therefore, the dancer's fundamental skill was crucial.

In fact, before Shang Yechu entered, another performer had already auditioned for the courtesan Mianmian role. Though that person wasn't as attractive as Shang Yechu, her dance foundation was quite solid—she performed Hundred Days Feast with flowing grace that earned Du Xiaotang's sincere admiration.

Yi Tianzhao and the other two had already decided to cast that skilled dancer. Seeing Shang Yechu also wanting to audition for Mianmian, they actually felt rather unenthusiastic.

Shang Yechu gently closed her eyes for a moment.

When she opened them again, her expression had completely transformed!

Good acting skills. Able to get into character just by opening and closing her eyes. Yi Tianzhao mentally added a few more points for her.

She didn't start dancing immediately. Instead, she walked to the window, leaned against it diagonally, and slightly curled her fingers as if holding something.

Shang Yechu half-closed her eyes, her expression lazy, her gaze seeming to contain indistinct emotions, yet also appearing completely empty.

She gently swayed her hand twice, and everyone immediately understood—she was holding a fan.

This was an objectless performance. Shang Yechu leaned diagonally against the window, her body below the shoulders completely suspended in an uncomfortable slanted standing position.

Yet her expression remained weary, her posture relaxed, her movements leisurely—she somehow forcefully created the impression that "she was reclining on a chaise lounge"!

The bespectacled elderly woman's initially indifferent expression gradually grew serious.

Suddenly, the "fan" in Shang Yechu's hand stopped moving.

Shang Yechu slightly turned her head, as if listening carefully to something.

A moment later, a touch of mild anger appeared on Shang Yechu's face. "They're here again?"

No one was acting opposite Shang Yechu. But everyone could tell this was a maid reporting something to Shang Yechu.

Yi Tianzhao nodded.

After two seconds—precisely as Yi Tianzhao finished nodding—Shang Yechu abruptly straightened up and threw the nonexistent fan to the ground with a sharp motion!

"Day after day like this—when will it ever end!"

Shang Yechu's face flushed with anger, her delicate eyebrows knitted together, displaying completely undisguised disgust.

The invisible maid said a few more words.

Shang Yechu closed her eyes and exhaled. When she opened them again, a warm smile like the spring breeze of March had appeared on her face.

"Never mind. Help me with my makeup."

The scene shifted, and in the blink of an eye, Shang Yechu was now "sitting" among the guests.

Shang Yechu raised an imaginary wine cup, lightly touched it to her lips, then poured the imaginary wine from the cup into her sleeve.

Shang Yechu wore a charming, coquettish smile on her face as she subtly pushed away the invisible young master approaching her.

Covering her mouth with an imaginary handkerchief, Shang Yechu giggled, "Fine, I'll dance. For every step I dance, you drink one cup of wine—how about that?"

After a few seconds, Shang Yechu stood up and began performing her crash-course version of Butterfly Loves Flower.

To be fair, Shang Yechu's dancing was terrible—absolutely terrible, exceptionally terrible. So bad it could make dancers worldwide die of shame for her.

The dance teacher Du Xiaotang sitting beside Yi Tianzhao had already furrowed her brows when Shang Yechu made her first movement.

But—

Shang Yechu lightly touched her temple, making a "holding the pipa half-hiding the face" gesture, then threw a subtly suggestive glance toward Director Yi Tianzhao.

That single glance could make men's bones melt. Though Yi Tianzhao was a woman, she still felt somewhat overwhelmed, unconsciously rubbing away the goosebumps on her arms.

Shang Yechu swayed her waist and gracefully leaped to where the invisible young master had been, adopting an extremely provocative posture as she lifted the invisible young master's chin while pouring imaginary wine from the invisible cup into his mouth.

After completing this action, Shang Yechu casually tossed away the invisible cup and continued her clumsy dance.

Shang Yechu knelt diagonally on the ground, replicating movements she had just learned from the video.

The butterfly's death, the flower's weeping tears...

The flower prostrated on the ground, gazing at the dead butterfly, a clear tear sliding from the corner of her eye...

Shang Yechu strained to lift her head, a teardrop perfectly timed to slide into her hairline. Simultaneously, an unrestrained, seductive smile bloomed once more on her face.

That ethereally beautiful face still had tear tracks not yet dried at the corners, yet displayed such a bewitching smile... This scene inexplicably exuded an indescribable sorrow.

After completing her final movement, Shang Yechu stood up, all traces of smile and tears wiped clean from her face, revealing an embarrassed expression.

"Thank you, teachers. I've finished my performance."

The room fell into temporary silence.

After a long while, the elderly woman removed her glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"You said your name was... what again?"

Shang Yechu replied politely, "My name is Shang Yechu. Shang as in merchant, Ye as in leaf, Chu as in the first day of the lunar month."

103, having watched the entire performance, simply didn't know what to say.

Cunning!

So cunning!

Shang Yechu knew her dancing skills were appallingly bad—one could even say she had no skills whatsoever.

Therefore, she had minimized the dance portion to the extreme!

Shang Yechu spent five minutes completely portraying a haughty, aloof courtesan who looked down on worldly matters, yet was forced by circumstances to entertain and trade smiles with vulgar, mediocre men!

From the initial weariness and loneliness, to the anger and resentment at being forced to receive guests, to the despair and endurance while dancing. Shang Yechu's emotions progressed layer by layer, using the shortest time to vividly portray the image of a woman of the night.

She successfully shifted the interviewers' focus from the dancing to the courtesan's emotions and feelings. Dance technique became the least important element here.

And once it involved emotions and feelings, that was Shang Yechu's domain of mastery—because she was an actress!

Even those thirty seconds of clumsy "dancing" could be interpreted as the courtesan looking down on these infatuated, vulgar men, thus perfunctorily performing a random piece, rather than the courtesan herself lacking dance skills!

How utterly cunning was that?

Yet, those interviewers actually fell for this cunning approach!

103 saw that Director Yi Tianzhao and the elderly woman beside her had already straightened in their seats, their necks practically stretching toward Shang Yechu's face!

Chapter 49: Actors and Audience

The only person in the room who wasn't amazed by Shang Yechu's performance was the dance teacher Du Xiaotang sitting to the right of Yi Tianzhao.

The other woman frowned deeply, her expression displeased. It looked like she was about to give Shang Yechu a hard time.

Sure enough, Du Xiaotang couldn't wait for the bespectacled old lady to finish speaking before immediately speaking up: "Have you actually studied dance before?"

Amateurs watch for excitement, while experts watch for technique. Shang Yechu's amateurish moves were completely inadequate in the eyes of a true expert.

Shang Yechu certainly couldn't lie, but she also couldn't say she had no experience at all. The former would immediately be exposed by Du Xiaotang, while the latter would leave a bad impression on Director Yi Tianzhao and the others.

Shang Yechu replied tactfully and cleverly: "Due to financial constraints, I haven't systematically studied dance. I could only teach myself by following videos online."

103: "..."

Calling one-hour crash courses self-study wasn't technically wrong.

Sure enough, Du Xiaotang's expression darkened further. As an officially certified dance teacher, she naturally looked down upon those unorthodox online dance methods.

Du Xiaotang said sharply: "Didn't you read the recruitment requirements clearly? It explicitly states 'must have some dance foundation'! Or do you think your amateurish flailing around qualifies as foundation?!"

Shang Yechu's lips trembled slightly, her face instantly turning pale, but her attitude remained graceful and poised.

"I'm sorry, teacher. I'll practice harder..."

Just as Du Xiaotang was about to say more, the bespectacled old lady couldn't stand it anymore and mediated: "Oh, alright, alright. Little Du, why so angry! This old woman thinks she performed quite well... You should calm down. Take it easy."

Both Yi Tianzhao and Du Xiaotang seemed to respect this old lady greatly. Du Xiaotang still appeared somewhat unconvinced, but ultimately stopped speaking.

Shang Yechu began to form some speculation about the bespectacled old lady's identity.

Yi Tianzhao cleared her throat lightly, "You have WeChat, right? Scan these two codes on the table, we'll contact you before the day after tomorrow."

Shang Yechu showed a pleasantly surprised expression: "Thank you, Teacher Yi!"

Yi Tianzhao seemed somewhat surprised, "You actually recognize me."

"Of course," Shang Yechu said while scanning the codes, "I've watched many of your films on China Central Television. Just a few days ago I saw your interview on the movie channel."

Yi Tianzhao nodded, her face still expressionless.

After adding the contact information, Shang Yechu bowed to the bespectacled old lady: "Thank you!"

The bespectacled old lady smiled from ear to ear: "My surname is Jiang."

"Thank you, Teacher Jiang!" Shang Yechu's voice was clear and her tone cheerful.

Of course, Shang Yechu didn't neglect Du Xiaotang either. She nodded to Du Xiaotang again and said sincerely: "Teacher Du, I'll take your advice and go back to practice properly!"

Du Xiaotang's expression still looked as if she had swallowed a fly, but at least she didn't embarrass Shang Yechu further, giving a cold nod.

Vibrant, sincere, and cheerful young people are hard to dislike. Especially when they regard you as an authority and show you great respect.

The entertainment industry has this conservation law: although everyone may not be completely pure, everyone likes innocent flowers. Actors, producers, directors, screenwriters - they're all the same.

Shang Yechu left the audition venue, humming an out-of-tune song, leaned against a bench by the street, and began searching for dance class advertisements.

Seeing this, 103 spoke coldly: "Do you think you've already gotten that role?"

"It's not that 'I think'," Shang Yechu corrected, "It's already mine."

103 said: "Objectively speaking, I think you're sometimes overconfident."

"Small-scale auditions like this don't waste much time. If they didn't want you, they'd tell you on the spot." Shang Yechu said without looking up, "Directors at this level don't need to save face for minor roles anymore. What, do you think Director Yi Tianzhao didn't reject me face-to-face just now because rejecting me on WeChat would be more tender and affectionate?"

103 didn't argue with Shang Yechu, just mechanically pointed out: "But the lady on the far right, Ms. Du, doesn't seem very satisfied with you."

"Of course she's not satisfied." Shang Yechu bookmarked several dance class advertisements, "For me, dance is just a means to get the role. For her, it's half a lifetime's work, possibly even an artistic pursuit."

"In that case, I believe her opinion might influence the director's casting decision." 103 said.

While conversing with 103, Shang Yechu continued walking. As evening approached, small stalls had appeared along the street. An old man stood guard in front of a sweet potato oven, hawking roasted sweet potatoes.

The sweet aroma of roasted sweet potatoes temporarily interrupted Shang Yechu and 103's conversation. Shang Yechu immediately took out money and picked the largest roasted sweet potato from the old man's oven.

Now that she had become wealthy, she could buy such a large sweet potato without blinking!

The sweet potato was wrapped in kraft paper, emitting steaming heat and fragrance. Taking a bite, the golden, flowing potato flesh shone brightly, melting in the mouth like sweet cream.

Shang Yechu sighed contentedly, "Where were we just now?"

"In that case, I believe her opinion might influence the director's casting decision." 103 repeated.

Shang Yechu took a bite of sweet potato, speaking vaguely: "Her opinion is the least important one."

103 clearly didn't understand human logic, "Why?"

"The reasoning is simple." Shang Yechu's tongue felt swollen from the hot sweet potato, "The movie needs a courtesan, not a dancer."

"Professional matters should be left to professionals." Having secured the role, Shang Yechu was in a good mood and patiently explained: "There's a saying - amateurs watch for excitement, while experts watch for technique—"

"But has anyone ever told you that there are always far more people watching for excitement than those watching for technique?"

103: "Oh."

Perhaps the sweet taste of the sweet potato stimulated Shang Yechu's desire to express herself. Not minding 103's indifference, she continued enthusiastically:

"Having been in the entertainment industry for over ten years, one of the most valuable lessons I've learned is to identify your audience correctly.

"You don't need to please everyone, just please your audience.

"Movies aren't song and dance dramas, audiences don't come to watch graceful water sleeve dances. They want to see stories, human interactions, tension-filled plots—they want satisfaction! Excellent dance skills are just the icing on the cake, while actors who can interpret the plot well are the timely help."

"For a movie, dance skills aren't essential, acting skills are."

The sweet potato had already caramelized, its sweet, sticky, and delicious texture refreshingly delightful. Shang Yechu somewhat regretted buying only one.

"Actors don't need to specialize in any skill other than acting, they just need to perform well enough to make the audience believe you're 'professional'." Shang Yechu concluded.

Chapter 50: Phoenix Plays with Dragon

Shang Yechu's theory could truly be called earth-shattering. If she had said this during her future peak popularity, she would likely have been immediately labeled as unprofessional.

Fortunately, the only one who heard these words was 103. 103 showed no extra emotional fluctuations, merely expressing agreement in its typically detached manner: "That sounds reasonable."

"Of course it's reasonable." Shang Yechu walked into the milk tea shop, ordered a full-sugar milk tea, and added one of the shop's desserts.

"You just said the dance teacher's opinion might influence the director's view? That's wrong." Shang Yechu sat on the milk tea shop's chair, using the store's WiFi to continue searching for dance classes.

"I never considered the dance teacher's opinion. My target has always been only the director from start to finish."

"There were three people sitting at the audition, yet you only consider the director's opinion." 103's tone remained calm.

"NONONO." Shang Yechu wagged her finger. "This isn't simple addition and subtraction. If energy magnitude were determined by headcount, we background actors would have dominated the entertainment industry long ago."

As she spoke, Shang Yechu's milk tea was ready. She walked to the counter to collect her milk tea and dessert, returned to her seat, and took a large sip of the full-sugar milk tea.

The lethal amount of sugar warmed her heart comfortingly. Shang Yechu continued: "Find your target audience.' For these minor roles, the decision basically comes down to the director's unilateral verdict. Win over the director, and you win the role."

"The dance teacher's presence is like the etiquette consultant in period dramas." Shang Yechu's throat felt slightly uncomfortable from the sugar overload, but fortunately she didn't need to move her mouth when talking to 103. "They're the delicate carving knife that enhances movie quality, not the judge's brush that decides actors' fates."

"—Dear Teacher Du can throw her tantrum all she wants, but she might still need to guide my dancing later." Shang Yechu bit her straw, completely composed and confident.

When Shang Yechu spoke about her professional domain, both her attitude and tone carried an air of relaxed self-assurance. 103 listened quietly, then suddenly asked: "Who is that elderly woman wearing glasses?"

"Well..." Shang Yechu paused her milk tea drinking and searched through the encyclopedia. "I have some impression. 'Heavenly Secrets Pavilion' seems to have an original novel..."

Grandma Hu's bookstore had piles of unsold old books, and Shang Yechu vaguely remembered scanning the original novel of 'Heavenly Secrets Pavilion' there.

Sure enough, after a short while, Shang Yechu found this original work.

The original novel of 'Heavenly Secrets Pavilion' was called 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon'. It wasn't a single volume but rather a series. There were 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: Journey to Jiangnan', 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: Expedition to Mobei', 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: Imperial Court Mystery', 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: Seven Gates Division', and others.

'Heavenly Secrets Pavilion' was the first book in this series, 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: Heavenly Secrets Pavilion'.

'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: Heavenly Secrets Pavilion' was older than Shang Yechu's two lifetimes combined, having been published over fifty years ago.

'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon' was a series of martial arts novels. From the 1950s-60s to the 1980s-90s, the martial arts novel literary genre entered its flourishing period. The martial arts literary scene could be described as brilliantly star-studded, giving birth to countless widely popular works.

However, most martial arts novels featured male protagonists. The audience for martial arts novels wasn't exclusively male—a considerable number of female readers also longed to see stories of dashing female heroes roaming the martial world from female perspectives.

Against this backdrop, 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon' emerged at the right time.

The protagonist of 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon' was an orphan girl bearing deep blood feud. To investigate her family's massacre, the female protagonist Xiao Fengque disguised herself as a man and infiltrated the martial world's most mysterious organization, "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion", embarking on a thrilling journey.

Once published, this book caused quite a stir among martial arts enthusiasts. The female protagonist Xiao Fengque possessed both courage and wisdom, carried blood vengeance, yet still firmly believed in worldly justice and human principles. Her character was richly developed, portrayed with vivid authenticity. It brought a refreshing breeze to the then overly masculine martial arts literary scene.

After 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon' gained popularity, it quickly amassed a large following. In the pirated novel bookstores of that era, aside from works by masters like Jin, Gu, and Liang, the most frequently borrowed works included 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon'.

Following the great success of 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: Heavenly Secrets Pavilion', the author felt greatly encouraged and successively created sequels including 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: Journey to Jiangnan', 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: Expedition to Mobei', 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: Imperial Court Mystery', and 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: Seven Gates Division'. The creative timeframe spanned over thirty years, totaling twenty volumes.

To this day, Xiao Fengque remains one of the most classic character images in martial arts novel history.

The original author of 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon' was credited as "Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng".

This certainly wasn't their real name. But Shang Yechu immediately recalled the elderly woman with glasses introducing herself—"My surname is Jiang."

The milk tea shop's internet was somewhat slow, but the search results page finally loaded.

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng, female, original name Jiang Aihua.

The accompanying picture on the encyclopedia showed a middle-aged woman's photo, but Shang Yechu recognized her instantly—it was exactly that elderly woman with glasses from the audition venue!

No wonder. No wonder.

No wonder Yi Tianzhao and that dance teacher both treated her with such respect.

An indescribable excitement surged in Shang Yechu's heart. She had actually met the original author of 'Heavenly Secrets Pavilion'!

The milk tea had cooled to room temperature, but Shang Yechu didn't care at all, taking another fierce sip to suppress the fire burning in her heart.

As a generation's martial arts legend, 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon' had rather unfortunate adaptation luck.

The first adaptation combined the contents of the first three books into one martial arts film. However, because the director's radical changes went too far, it was met with widespread criticism after release.

The second adaptation was a long series produced by Bao Dao Film Entertainment, using a filming-while-broadcasting format. After three episodes aired, both reputation and response were positive. But just then, the legendary drama 'Justice Bao' exploded onto the scene, dominating over eighty percent of viewership share. 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon' met defeat, ending hastily after only five episodes.

The third adaptation was a twenty-episode television series produced by Hong Kong TV. They filmed the entire series, one book per episode. As one might expect, such compact episodes inevitably sacrificed numerous original plot details.

Sure enough, after airing, this television series faced another wave of criticism. Numerous precious traits and shining qualities of the female protagonist Xiao Fengque were completely erased. This provoked anger among the "Feathers" (Xiao Fengque's loyal fans). The Xiao Fengque Fan Club and Xiao Fengque Book Forum united to boycott the series, mockingly calling this version's Xiao Fengque "Little Lame Phoenix".

The fourth adaptation caused the biggest uproar. After the millennium, a co-production across mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan created 'Xiao Fengque' with massive investment and an exceptionally luxurious cast, drawing widespread attention.

However, just as filming was nearing completion, the series' female lead, male lead, female supporting role, male supporting role, third male role, and fourth male role—six people total—experienced career collapses through six different methods!

Drug abuse, soliciting prostitutes, infidelity, domestic violence, political issues, and so on—covering all types of scandals!

This series earned the title "Most Comprehensive Cast Collapse in Television History", simultaneously ending the careers of six of the most popular actors across both sides. When the news broke, it created massive waves throughout mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, with aftershocks still felt two to three years later.

Needless to say, this series was permanently shelved. Since these scandals emerged before filming completion, the series didn't even have a final edited version.

The three major film companies that invested in this series suffered devastating losses, the director was severely impacted and produced no new works for five consecutive years. That year's blockbuster series king completely became the annual laughingstock.

Since then, 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon' also became known as "Xiao Fengque's Curse".

The entertainment industry is actually quite superstitious, even burning incense and worshipping Buddha during production commencement ceremonies. Moreover, 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon's misfortune was truly unbelievable, repeatedly suffering terrible luck.

Since then, no investor dared to adapt 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon' again.

Who would have thought that over a decade later, the film adaptation plan for this book would actually restart again!

Chapter 51: Sunset Glow

"That Teacher Jiang turns out to be the original author of 'Heavenly Secrets Pavilion,' Teacher Jiang Aihua," Shang Yechu said to 103.

"I can see that," 103 paused. "After finishing 'Tale of Cloud Incline,' you've been searching for period drama crews in the film city—you wanted to be in this production all along?"

103 was with Shang Yechu constantly, naturally aware of her every move. After completing "Tale of Cloud Incline," Shang Yechu had abandoned her previous haphazard approach to extra work, deliberately lingering around period drama sets for odd jobs.

In 2016, the Dragon State approved a total of 1,300 television series for production, with one-sixth being period dramas; films exceeded 1,000, including over two hundred period films.

Heng City Film City, as the largest film base with the best ancient settings, operated at full capacity year-round shooting period productions.

103 had assumed Shang Yechu developed an addiction to period dramas after "Tale of Cloud Incline" and wanted to relive her glory from that series. It never occurred to him she was specifically targeting "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion."

"Yes," Shang Yechu admitted readily. "I knew early on that 'Heavenly Secrets Pavilion' was going into production, and I decided long ago to get a role in it."

"How did you know this production would start filming recently?" 103 didn't recall Shang Yechu inquiring about "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" from anyone. "Do you have some connections?"

"..." Shang Yechu took another sip of milk tea and smiled. "My connections are called the Dragon State Television Administration and Dragon State Film Bureau official websites."

103: "..."

Every half month, the Dragon State Radio and Television Administration and Dragon State Film Bureau publicly listed newly approved and registered television series and film scripts. Displayed for all citizens to see, available to everyone. With just minimal effort moving their esteemed fingers, one could clearly understand the approximate filming schedules for the entire year's audiovisual projects.

■September 2016. "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" Project - Approved for Production■, these bold characters were plainly displayed on the webpage. If 103 had just glanced at Shang Yechu's browsing history from recent days, he wouldn't have needed to ask this question.

Shang Yechu set down her milk tea cup, considering carefully. "Do you really see me as just some brute who only knows how to study obsessively and work as an extra?"

103: "..."

"Unbelievable, you actually defaulted to agreeing with that," Shang Yechu scooped a spoonful of cream cheese, creating a dent in the deep yellow cheese.

103 remained silent for a moment. "I admit I haven't paid enough attention to you and hold some rather excessive biases. My apologies."

"Unnecessary," Shang Yechu slid the cheese into her mouth, the rich sweet aroma relaxing her slightly. She didn't care about 103's opinion of her—others looking down on her was just annoying, familiar garbage to Shang Yechu.

103 tactfully changed the subject. "Will 'Heavenly Secrets Pavilion' be a huge hit? What's its box office?"

"Of course I remember," Shang Yechu stirred the cheese into the hot milk she'd just ordered, white milk floating with a layer of yellow oil.

"Its box office is... zero," Shang Yechu said with a slight smile.

"Zero," 103 repeated. "Are you trying to joke with me?"

"Of course not," Shang Yechu took a sip of milk. "Because 'Heavenly Secrets Pavilion' was never intended for theatrical release—it's a television film."

103 immediately looked up the definition of television film: movies specifically produced for television broadcast.

Shang Yechu sipped her milk gradually while explaining to 103 what a television film was. She quite enjoyed these kinds of conversations with 103 because these "her imparting knowledge to 103" dialogues somewhat restored some balance in her heart.

Alright, Shang Yechu admitted—she did feel somewhat bothered by this cold, sharp-tongued system's consistent underestimation of her.

"Television films... hmm, where to begin?" Shang Yechu thought for a moment. "Anyway, they've existed for a long time. They first appeared in the United States. Around the millennium, our Dragon State also started producing these films."

"These films only air on television. No theatrical release, no ticket purchases. You might ask, why produce films that don't go to theaters? What are the benefits?" Shang Yechu bit her straw.

103 listened silently. Actually, everything Shang Yechu was saying, he could search and absorb in fractions of a second, without having to listen to this madwoman's rambling here.

But for some reason 103 couldn't articulate himself, he chose not to interrupt her, instead cooperatively asking, "Why?"

"Asked the right person," Shang Yechu scooped another spoonful of cheese, mixing it into sweet potato. "This question—the fundamental reason is that theatrical films cost too much money and take too much time."

Shang Yechu continued, "Although every region has local stations, with television programming flourishing diversely, everyone knows the true dominator in television is the state-backed Dragon Central Television, the C-H-T-V series."

"Dragon Central Television has twenty-six channels, covering music, sports, films, television series, news... every aspect, nothing lacking. Among them, CHTV6 is the movie channel, nicknamed 'Six Empress Dowager.'"

"As the official mouthpiece, CHTV6 must support domestic films. According to some unspoken soft regulations in the industry, over eighty percent of the films it broadcasts must be domestic productions."

Here, Shang Yechu paused. "Do you know how many films CHTV6 broadcasts daily?"

103 hesitated. "No."

"Ten to eleven," Shang Yechu stated an exact number. "Meaning CHTV6's annual film throughput reaches at least over 3,600 films! Among these, over 3,000 are domestic films."

"From the founding era to the millennium, these decades saw a total domestic film production of over 3,600 films. After eliminating some completely unbroadcastable films on television, only over 2,000 remained. Meaning, if broadcast without repetition, these films wouldn't even suffice for the movie channel's one-year schedule."

"What's a drop in the bucket? This is a drop in the bucket," Shang Yechu swallowed a spoonful of cheese sweet potato. "The pace of theatrical film production couldn't keep up with the movie channel's massive demand—the hungry Six Empress Dowager needed more films to fill her belly."

"Ordinary people have a demand for watching movies. Not everyone has the money and leisure to stroll to cinemas, buy tickets costing dozens, sit through two-hour theatrical films—with quality not necessarily worth the ticket price."

"But film merchants need profits—theaters remain their primary battlefield. Production, release, to ending theatrical runs, often taking months. The television domain has always been neglected."

"Six Empress Dowager, as the movie channel, takes satisfying the people's cultural needs as its mission," Shang Yechu recited CHTV6's founding purpose. "Therefore, investing in television films to meet movie channel audiences' demands is only natural."

Recalling Six Empress Dowager's self-produced film history she researched online, Shang Yechu remarked with some emotion, "I grew up watching Six Empress Dowager's television films too. I had no allowance for cinema tickets—those films Six Empress Dowager produced were among my earliest impressions of movies in life."

After reminiscing about the past, Shang Yechu concluded, "There, now you know. 'Heavenly Secrets Pavilion' is such a television film. It's also Six Empress Dowager's investment."

103 finally spoke, "I don't consider this a good idea. Television films generally have very low investments, small-scale productions. What's the significance of your painstaking efforts to join such a low-budget production?"

It wasn't that 103 enjoyed pouring cold water, but low-budget films usually meant flops. This was almost an ironclad rule.

Shang Yechu lightly tapped the table. "Do you know how many viewers the movie channel has?"

Without waiting for 103's answer, Shang Yechu said, "According to statistics, eighty-eight percent of television viewers have watched the movie channel. Five percent of viewers watch the movie channel daily!"

"How many television viewers does the Dragon State have? What do these eighty-eight percent and five percent of viewers translate to in actual numbers?"

103 fell silent. Shang Yechu appeared to have conducted quite detailed investigations—the data she cited matched some professional analysis data precisely.

Based on these figures, Six Empress Dowager's audience numbers were indeed quite terrifying.

The milk tea and milk reached bottom, sweet potato and cheese finished. Shang Yechu felt somewhat full, exiting the milk tea shop to stroll.

Approaching November, temperatures had already dropped.

Shang Yechu walked onto a tree-lined path, tucking her hands into the hand warmer Grandma Hu made, strolling through the bleak autumn atmosphere.

"What qualities do you think megastars have?"

103 had no interest in human celebrities, nor could he distinguish human differences clearly. "They're all very beautiful?"

"That's really flattering for certain stars," Shang Yechu laughed hoarsely. "You're overcomplicating it. The biggest characteristic of megastars is that almost everyone recognizes them."

From eighty-year-old men and women to eight-year-old boys and girls, household names, universally known.

This statement wasn't far from being nonsense. What kind of megastar goes unrecognized? That's more like self-indulgence.

"Tell me, are megastars megastars because everyone recognizes them, or are they megastars because everyone recognizes them?" Shang Yechu asked a seemingly nonsensical question.

When this madwoman posed such peculiar questions, she generally didn't require 103 to actually answer. All 103 could do was listen.

Shang Yechu stepped on dense, soft fallen leaves, continuing, "What kind of star path do you think I should take? Be an extra, be a television supporting actress, be a television female lead—be a film supporting actress, be a film marginal female lead, be a true female lead?"

"I don't know," 103 said frankly. "I thought you could die anytime, never imagined you'd reach this point."

"Listening to you talk is like drinking arsenic," Shang Yechu couldn't help complaining.

"If you want to hear useless flattery, I can offer you a copy of 'The Complete World Guide to Flattery,'" 103 said coldly.

"Forget it," Shang Yechu couldn't be bothered arguing with artificial intelligence. "The path I just described is the promotion route for most female stars. Steady and solid. Struggling like this for ten years, fifteen years, even twenty years, perhaps waiting for that first major female-led work in life."

103 seemed to grasp something: "But for you, that's too slow. Right?"

"Correct," Shang Yechu tugged the corner of her mouth.

"The work I most want to act in won't give me ten or fifteen years to grow," Shang Yechu said. "Besides, I've already been steady and solid for over ten years. Haven't I?"

Shang Yechu referred to her previous life. If considering only performance years, Shang Yechu could already be called a veteran actor now.

"I want to try making everyone recognize me first."

Hearing this, 103 finally understood Shang Yechu's scheme.

Although television films had low budgets and small productions, their audiences weren't small.

103 had just reviewed all relevant data. Up to last year, 2015, CHTV6's average audience share was 3.01%.

Don't underestimate this 3.01%—last year's drama king "Joy of the World" only had 6.05% audience share!

The movie channel naturally had a substantial base audience. If Shang Yechu appeared in CHTV6's productions, that meant this massive audience would "recognize" her.

An autumn breeze blew past, a golden fallen leaf landing on Shang Yechu's shoulder. Shang Yechu reached to pick it up, squinting at its veins.

"You're right. 'Heavenly Secrets Pavilion' has low investment, small production. Television films are generally like this," Shang Yechu twirled the leaf.

"But similarly, television films have short production cycles yet quick releases. Mature television film teams can complete quality works in twenty days; after production finishes, they can broadcast during the movie channel's prime time within a week!"

"I don't have much time left," Shang Yechu rubbed the autumn leaf. "It's 2016 now—online video platforms are about to enter their prosperous phase, short video platforms are rising."

"2016 to 2019 is television and television films' final afterglow. Missing this window, I'll never have another chance to grasp this massive base audience again."

"Will I catch the tail end of the golden era?" Shang Yechu gazed at the golden fallen leaf, murmuring.

"Forgive my reminder," 103 said. "I don't intend to pour cold water. But I believe for a film role to make audiences 'recognize' someone, it seemingly needs considerable prominence. Your role is just a major special appearance—a courtesan appearing in few scenes."

Shang Yechu's rhetoric was certainly glorious, quite aspirational. But 103 wasn't those easily excited humans who'd get carried away by her grand promises.

Wanting audiences to recognize, remember you—even if not the protagonist, at least it should be a distinctive villain, right? What's with a flower queen appearing for mere minutes?

Shang Yechu flicked the leaf from her fingertips, a sly smile suddenly appearing at her mouth corners.

"Who told you the role I want is that flower queen?"

Chapter 52: Devil Training

"Legend of Qingyun" was the major drama of the new year, scheduled to premiere between late January and early February. "Tale of Cloud Incline," aiming to compete directly with it, had a similar broadcast timeframe.

Now approaching November, there were just over three months left until "Tale of Cloud Incline" would air.

Shang Yechu couldn't possibly leave herself with a three-month gap. Three months of inactivity would turn even a top star into a has-been.

"Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" was the perfect opportunity to fill that gap.

Just as Shang Yechu had anticipated, the very next day she received notification from the production team, instructing her to report to the "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" set for filming in three days.

Along with the notification came part of the script for the flower queen Mianmian, an electronic contract, and the contact information for dance teacher Du Xiaotang.

The script was brief, only four pages long. Shang Yechu read through it once. Aside from one dance scene, Mianmian only had two other scenes. One was being interrogated by Xiao Fengque and her companions under suspicion of murder, and the other was deciding to leave the brothel and bidding farewell to Xiao Fengque.

The interrogation scene was the flower queen's highlight moment, taking up significant space. The other two scenes were relatively brief.

Shang Yechu naturally couldn't ask the production team to adjust their shooting schedule for her sake. This meant she had to salvage her bizarrely terrible dancing skills within just three days.

Even if Shang Yechu were the reincarnation of Asia's dance king, she couldn't possibly make any dance look presentable with just three days of practice!

Shang Yechu looked at the script. Regarding the flower queen Mianmian's dance movements, the script only contained one brief line: slow singing and graceful dancing, tears falling when the dance ends.

It seemed Director Yi Tianzhao had already reached some understanding with Teacher Du Xiaotang. Since the production team had given her the dance teacher's contact information, they clearly expected her to seek guidance.

Even though Shang Yechu feared nothing in heaven or earth, she now felt a headache coming on.

Did Du Xiaotang like Shang Yechu? This question was like asking Dragon State citizens if they liked strawberry mapo tofu, or Italians if they liked pineapple pizza.

What were the chances that if Shang Yechu proactively sought out Du Xiaotang for dance lessons, she'd receive a harsh lesson instead?

...

Shang Yechu could only comfort herself—Du Xiaotang had been hired by the production team as dance director, so her skills were undoubtedly solid, far superior to those questionable wild dance classes out there.

Most dance classes were group sessions anyway, and private tutors cost a fortune. Now she had such a skilled dance teacher offering one-on-one guidance—what, was she not satisfied?

After this mental preparation, Shang Yechu swallowed her pride and added Du Xiaotang on WeChat.

The request was approved quickly. Shang Yechu immediately sent a very student-like message:

[Hello Teacher Du! I'm very sorry to bother you. I'd like to consult you about some dance-related matters for "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion," if it's convenient for you?]

Du Xiaotang wasted no time on pleasantries, immediately sending Shang Yechu an address.

Shang Yechu preferred dealing with straightforward people like this. Whether Du Xiaotang liked her or not didn't matter, as long as she could learn something useful.

While replying to Du Xiaotang, Shang Yechu left the bookstore, hailed a taxi, and headed toward the agreed-upon address.

A full day later.

Both parties had engaged in a cordial and friendly exchange, thoroughly sharing their perspectives. In the end, Du Xiaotang used her professional expertise to convince Shang Yechu.

By the time Shang Yechu finished training, not a single muscle in her body felt like her own anymore.

From her neck to her shoulder blades, then to her arms and thighs, every component of Shang Yechu's body ached miserably, with even the spaces between her bones crying out in agony.

Now even 103's hormone adjustments were useless. Hormonal deception was temporary, but physical pain was persistent.

Shang Yechu felt particularly ravenous today, buying a full-weight entire roast duck at the pedestrian street. The duck had been roasted to a glossy brown, so fatty that oil dripped from it.

When Shang Yechu entered the roast duck shop, she looked like a starving ghost, startling the familiar shop owner.

The roast duck shop was nearly closed for the evening. The owners were a married couple who valued their shop's reputation—any unsold leftovers would be discarded, never to be reshelfed the next day.

Everyone on the entire pedestrian street knew about Shang Yechu's large appetite. As fellow neighborhood residents, taking care of Grandma Hu's young assistant was only natural. Owner Uncle Ke fried a large paper bag of duck skeletons and necks that were originally destined for disposal, along with some stir-fried duck gizzards, while Auntie Meng wrapped up a large stack of leftover small pancakes and cucumber strips for Shang Yechu.

"Little Leaf," Auntie Meng advised, "if you can't finish it today, don't eat it tomorrow. Overnight duck oil congeals and isn't good for your stomach!"

Shang Yechu nodded gratefully, saying weakly, "Thank you so much, Auntie Meng."

"Little Ye," Uncle Ke said loudly, "remember to advertise our shop to your colleagues after you've eaten well!"

Shang Yechu managed a difficult smile: "Of course, Uncle Ke." Her voice was as faint as a lonely ghost that had starved for ten years.

Shang Yechu staggered out of the roast duck shop, her retreating figure resembling a pitiful little old lady.

Uncle Ke sighed with emotion, "Being an actor is so strenuous. Why does Little Ye push herself so hard? She'd be better off setting up a stall on the pedestrian street selling hand-grabbed pancakes."

Auntie Meng nudged him, "Look at your limited aspirations! I think Little Leaf will definitely become famous someday."

Shang Yechu crawled back to the bookstore, placed the large bag of roast duck on her secondhand dining desk, then went to the bathroom to wash her hands and face.

While wiping her face, Shang Yechu looked at her exhausted reflection in the mirror, still feeling lingering fear.

Du Xiaotang's professional level was unquestionable, and she completely excluded any personal emotions while working.—This "exclusion of personal emotions" meant she didn't treat Shang Yechu as a living person at all, but rather as a piece of clay to manipulate.

Coupled with Shang Yechu's fearlessness of hardship and fatigue—no matter how painful or difficult, she gritted her teeth and endured without complaint—Du Xiaotang became even more unrestrained.

As Du Xiaotang put it, "The clumsy bird must fly early, and birds without wings must work twice as hard to fly!"

The devil training indeed showed results. At the very least, after one day, Shang Yechu could now smoothly perform those thirty seconds of "Butterfly Loves Flower."

Based on Shang Yechu's experience, in movies, for viewing pleasure, single musical performances typically don't exceed one and a half minutes. This minute and a half also includes close-ups of the actor's face, hands, and feet, empty shots, skirt hems, ribbons, and more. Close and distant shots overlap, plus some reactions from onlookers. Therefore, pure dancing shots usually last around thirty to forty seconds.

Yi Tianzhao had apparently given similar instructions to Du Xiaotang. During today's training, although Du Xiaotang maintained a stern expression throughout, she never asked Shang Yechu to practice other dances, focusing solely on these thirty seconds.

Du Xiaotang's requirements were extremely strict. Expression, posture, gaze, movements—if there was even the slightest error, she would mercilessly mock Shang Yechu relentlessly, then make her practice five or six more times. Even the simplest arm raise, Shang Yechu had practiced over fifty times.

Shang Yechu had a large appetite, with three fixed meals daily—she only ate more, never less. Suddenly skipping a meal, combined with significantly increased physical activity, created an indescribably miserable experience.

After washing her face, Shang Yechu returned to her humble dining table, viciously tore off a duck leg, and stuffed it into her mouth!

"Ah~"

The meaty fragrance and rich oiliness enveloped her taste buds—the happiness in that moment nearly moved Shang Yechu to tears.

The first duck leg slipped down into her stomach, finally providing some relief to her burning stomach.

After finishing one duck leg, Shang Yechu opened her phone, propped it against a large bottle of mineral water, and opened the electronic version of "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" in her reading app.

To portray a character from a book, reading the original work was essential. Otherwise, there would be major problems in character understanding and interpretation.

Shang Yechu rolled duck meat and cucumber strips into pancakes, eating duck rolls while intently reading "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon."

Before she knew it, Shang Yechu had actually finished the entire roast duck and the large pile of duck parts.

Shang Yechu rolled the last bits of meat and cucumber into the final pancake, and after eating it, meticulously wiped the oil from the corners of her mouth.

Her stomach was completely full and round, and the pain throughout her body seemed to ease somewhat after the satisfying meal, leaving her with a lazy, drowsy feeling all over.

"System, I want to check my current stats," Shang Yechu said to 103.

In an instant, the familiar panel appeared before Shang Yechu again.

[Name: Shang Yechu

Age: 20 years

Weight: 55kg

Height: 168cm

IQ: 140

Beauty Points: 87

Health Value: 55

Combat Power: 0

.....

.....]

Shang Yechu had been eating and drinking well these past few months, so her weight had increased relatively quickly. Plus, working as an extra counted as daily exercise, gradually improving her physical condition slightly.

"I remember 55 health value corresponds to 'basically healthy,' right?" Shang Yechu inquired.

103 said dryly, "Yes. Basically healthy, various physiological indicators normal, capable of light to moderate physical labor."

As he spoke these words, 103's internal alarm bells started ringing. He knew how little Shang Yechu valued her own body, and how much trouble she could cause—he understood that all too clearly.

The phrase "basically healthy" was almost equivalent to "can be recklessly abused" as far as Shang Yechu was concerned.

103 warned, "If you're thinking about staying up all night reading, I don't recommend it. The physical exertion from dance practice is several times greater than your previous activity levels. If you pull all-nighters under these circumstances, Shopkeeper Hu will have to prepare a coffin for you."

103 knew his words meant nothing to Shang Yechu, so after considering her psychology, he tried bringing Grandma Hu into the equation.

"If you want to die, please don't drag me down with you," 103 issued an ultimatum, unable to bear it any longer. "If the host dies from staying up all night, I'll be nailed to the system's pillar of shame and laughed at for a hundred years."

Shang Yechu remained silent for a few seconds, then suddenly burst out laughing.

"Look at that, I've actually scared you this much."

Shang Yechu wrapped up the trash on the dining table, tied it securely, and tossed it into the trash bin outside the bookstore.

Shang Yechu opened the bookstore door to air out the smell.

"Actually, what I wanted to say was... I want to exchange six kilograms of weight for six health points."

"..."

"!!!"

103 was shocked.

Pigs were flying! Shang Yechu actually knew to exchange for health points herself!

Afraid Shang Yechu might change her mind, 103 immediately made the exchange for her. His actions were faster than any previous exchange.

Shang Yechu amusedly sensed the changes in her body. It seemed she had left quite a psychological shadow on 103.

After completing the exchange, 103 finally remembered to ask Shang Yechu why.

"'Moderately healthy' is the next level after 'basically healthy,' with various physiological indicators good, capable of moderate physical labor," Shang Yechu read the system's definition. "Reaching this level requires 61 health points."

Fifty-five plus six equaled exactly sixty-one.

Exchanging six points at once was a significant expense for Shang Yechu too. She felt the pain in her flesh.

But money that needed to be spent still had to be spent.

The role Shang Yechu had her eye on couldn't be portrayed without a good physique. Someone as frail as a willow swaying in the wind would be mocked by audiences.

And also...

After cleaning the table, Shang Yechu took advantage of the night to visit the bathhouse in the pedestrian street for a hot bath.

Soaking in the hot water, the gentle currents meticulously massaged Shang Yechu's entire body, every pore, patch of skin, and piece of bone and flesh relaxing completely.

Shang Yechu finally felt like she had come back to life.

And also, Teacher Du's training was really hard to endure without a good body.

Shang Yechu closed her eyes comfortably, "System, wake me in half an hour. I need to return to the bookstore and sleep early... Zzz, zzz..."

"I understand."

103 watched Shang Yechu soaking comfortably in the bath and finally breathed a sigh of relief.

He had constantly worried before that Shang Yechu might die and his mission would be ruined. But at this moment, seeing her so content, he suddenly had a vague feeling:

This person didn't seem to have such strong self-destructive tendencies anymore.

After three days of devilish crash training, Shang Yechu finally arrived at the "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" set.

Surprisingly, her first scene wasn't the dance performance. Instead, it was the interrogation scene where, under suspicion, she was questioned by Xiao Fengque.

Chapter 53: Each With Their Own Hidden Agenda

On the set of Heavenly Secrets Pavilion.

Generally speaking, before a movie begins filming, the main creative team needs to gather together to discuss their insights and understanding of the script and characters. They need to coordinate with each other to avoid the embarrassing situation where everyone does their own thing without cohesion.

However, such discussion gatherings were clearly beyond Shang Yechu's current level of access. What Shang Yechu needed to do was come to work diligently and be a supporting character who didn't cause trouble.

When Shang Yechu arrived on set, filming had already begun.

It wasn't Shang Yechu's turn to appear on camera yet, and she hadn't even been called for makeup. She had no choice but to find a corner and wait patiently for the Assistant Director's summons.

Most background actors spent years upon years waiting like this, and Shang Yechu was already quite accustomed to it.

Shang Yechu's gaze swept across the film set, and the more she looked, the more astonished she became.

The cast of Heavenly Secrets Pavilion was unexpectedly star-studded.

This "star-studded" wasn't referring to the actors' fame, but rather the quality of both actors and crew members.

Not far from Shang Yechu stood a lean man gesturing and explaining, his features sharp and hawk-like, his stature short and seemingly unremarkable. Based on appearance alone, few would recognize this small man. But mention his famous name, and many martial arts drama enthusiasts would immediately recognize it!

He Yuan—the number one martial arts choreographer in mainland China, one of the rare mainland talents who could rival Hong Kong martial arts directors.

The person chatting with the martial arts director was an elegant middle-aged man who still retained his charm. Time had weathered his facial features, but the lingering charm at the corners of his eyes and his distinct facial contours still hinted at his former handsomeness.

Shang Yechu certainly recognized him—he was a veteran actor who had remained popular in the entertainment industry for over thirty years, once nicknamed "The Number One Handsome Man in Period Dramas." The officially designated top actor for historical dramas by Dragon Central Television, Jiang Erjing.

An elderly gentleman wearing dark official robes, with a prosperous-looking face, was adjusting the safety harness on his body in the middle of the set. The old gentleman had a pale, beardless face—not naturally, of course, but freshly shaved. His role was likely that of a eunuch.

This prosperous-looking old gentleman's face was familiar to several generations of Dragon State audiences. He was precisely the golden supporting actor in domestic dramas, the eunuch specialist—Mr. Ge Dafu.

Shang Yechu looked toward the other end of the set, where Director Yi Tianzhao was speaking with an actress about her own age. That actress wore a water-red traditional jacket and skirt, with striking features and heavy makeup. Shang Yechu looked twice before recognizing her as the famous TVB actress, Shi Qing. She had won the Hong Kong TV Best Supporting Actress award several times.

Without a doubt, this was a set filled with highly skilled performers.

These actors present might not command particularly high salaries, their fan followings might not be massive, and their combined buzz might not even match a single trending topic about Su Ge holding hands with some young idol.

But when it came to acting skills, they could easily outperform most of the entertainment industry!

Shang Yechu spontaneously felt a wave of pressure. She had confidence in her own acting skills, having struggled in the entertainment industry for over a decade. But every single person on this set had acting careers longer than her entire previous lifetime!

Shang Yechu had already read most of the original novel of Heavenly Secrets Pavilion, Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: Heavenly Secrets Pavilion. Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: Heavenly Secrets Pavilion wasn't very long, only about one hundred fifty thousand words. Every book in this series hovered around this word count. To put it in trendier terms, this word count was Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng's comfort zone.

Shang Yechu matched the actors' makeup and costumes with their roles in the movie. Indeed, these supporting roles were all cast very faithfully to the original work. Now, only the female lead Xiao Fengque hadn't appeared yet.

In her previous life, Shang Yechu had watched this movie. She still remembered that the female lead Xiao Fengque was...

Speak of the devil, just as Shang Yechu was recalling that female lead, a voice sounded behind her.

"Director Yi! Director Yi! Sister Huanyi said she'll be here right away!" A chubby, bespectacled girl ran panting to Yi Tianzhao's side, saying breathlessly, "Could you please wait just a little longer?"

Yi Tianzhao's expression didn't change, but Shang Yechu knew her mood must be quite unpleasant.

On the first day of filming, the female lead was late. No matter which director it was, this was an unfortunate situation.

"Understood," Yi Tianzhao said calmly. "Tell her not to rush, we can film other scenes first anyway."

The bespectacled girl, unaware of the underlying tension, happily thanked Yi Tianzhao, "Thank you for your understanding, Director Yi! Sister Huanyi has been having a hard time recently too..."

"Alright, you can go now." Yi Tianzhao waved her hand, dismissing the profusely thankful girl, then turned around and wiped her glasses.

Shang Yechu watched Yi Tianzhao's expression with great interest. Just then, she suddenly felt someone sit down beside her.

Shang Yechu turned her head and saw a tall young man had somehow approached her.

The newcomer wore a narrow-sleeved purple robe. Purple robes were originally military attire with a relatively narrow cut. The robust physique of a grown man stuffed into sharp, form-fitting military clothing created a distinctly oppressive presence.

However, such a tall and sturdy frame was topped with an exquisitely delicate face that seemed completely harmless. His skin was fair and smooth, his facial features delicate and three-dimensional, and when his long eyelashes lowered, he strongly resembled a doll.

He sat very close, and Shang Yechu instinctively felt uncomfortable with this invasion of her personal space, subtly shifting away.

Four words involuntarily surfaced in Shang Yechu's mind: muscular doll.

"Hello. You are?" Shang Yechu asked hesitantly.

The newcomer revealed a smile brimming with innocent goodwill, "I'm Li Yi. And you?"

Shang Yechu glanced at him, "Shang Yechu. Are you the actor playing Xiao Fengque's partner?"

Li Yi was taken aback, "How did you know?"

"By your costume," Shang Yechu said with a forced smile. "Your costume quality is better than others'."

In Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon, besides the absolute protagonist Xiao Fengque, there were several male supporting characters with significant screen time. For example, Xiao Fengque's partner Xie An. Shang Yechu hadn't read the later parts of Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon, but in this Heavenly Secrets Pavilion installment, Xie An was the male character with the most screen time.

Li Yi's makeup and costume were identical to Xie An's description in the original work, and even his appearance closely matched the original description. Shang Yechu would have had to be blind not to notice.

"Do you always observe others this carefully?" Li Yi asked curiously.

"No. I just read some of the original work recently." Not wanting to continue this topic, Shang Yechu said bluntly, "Did you come to rehearse with me?"

Li Yi touched the tip of his nose, "Rehearse? With you? Who are you playing?"

"Flower Queen Mianmian," Shang Yechu said succinctly.

"Oh, oh." Li Yi remembered, "Then I do have a scene with you. Wait a moment, I'll go get the script."

Shang Yechu watched his retreating figure, slightly frowning.

She didn't have a good impression of this artist.

It wasn't that Shang Yechu disliked his seemingly not-very-intelligent appearance—she had met many innocent and clear-minded people, like Su Ge, like Li Kui. This Li Yi seemed to have a similar personality to the previous two, which wasn't unbearable.

Mainly, as someone who had watched Heavenly Secrets Pavilion in her previous life, Shang Yechu clearly remembered his absolutely terrible acting...

Only two types of characters occupy lasting impressions in audiences' minds: either extremely good or extremely bad. Unfortunately, Li Yi's portrayal of Xie An belonged to the latter category.

Heavenly Secrets Pavilion was filmed in three parts, with Xie An appearing throughout as an important character. Martial arts films inevitably include romantic elements, and Xie An naturally developed feelings for Xiao Fengque—this was part of the original plot.

However, in the movie, Li Yi's performance as Xie An was truly difficult to describe. When facing the female lead Xiao Fengque, Xie An looked like a blind man; when facing innocent victims, Xie An looked like a villain; and when confronting the ultimate antagonists, Xie An looked like their accomplice!

Amidst the contrast with all the veteran actors, Li Yi appeared like a savage who had mistakenly entered civilized society, tormenting poor audiences with his disgraceful acting and substantial screen time. Even casual viewers like Shang Yechu, who typically forgot movies after one viewing, detested his face to the core and wanted to change the channel whenever his scenes appeared.

Shang Yechu remembered that online, the biggest flaw of this version of Heavenly Secrets Pavilion was the male lead Xie An. Many netizens complained and called Li Yi a scene-stealer, saying Heavenly Secrets Pavilion should be renamed The Legend of Xie An.

What great female protagonist works fear most is adding scenes for male characters, especially when those male characters are poorly acted!

As for whether Li Yi was actually a scene-stealer, Shang Yechu reserved judgment. After all, she knew some inside information others didn't. But regarding Li Yi being an acting-challenged monkey, Shang Yechu felt this was beyond doubt.

Now, after seeing the cast of Heavenly Secrets Pavilion, Shang Yechu was even more puzzled about why Yi Tianzhao had hired Li Yi.

Heavenly Secrets Pavilion was funded by CHTV6, with all money coming from government sources, completely untouched by private capital. Li Yi couldn't be some privileged young master who bought his way into the production. Nor had she heard of any entertainment industry family having such a handsome star kid or director's child who could use connections to get into a Dragon Central Television production.

Just as Shang Yechu was turning these thoughts over in her mind, Li Yi finally returned with his script.

Li Yi sat on the small folding stool beside Shang Yechu, opened a page of the script, and suddenly said, "By the way, do you know why Teacher Yang hasn't arrived yet? I originally planned to rehearse with her."

Shang Yechu paused, then shook her head, "If you don't know, I'm even less clear."

Li Yi said "Oh," then, "Alright. Wait a moment, I need to 'preview' this first..."

Shang Yechu looked at the script in Li Yi's hand—it was three to four times thicker than hers. This was the treatment of a main character. If it were Xiao Fengque's script, it would probably be even thicker.

Shang Yechu's thoughts drifted far away. She had lied to Li Yi. Of course she knew where the female lead playing Xiao Fengque, Yang Huanyi, had gone. Not only that, but she also knew that not only would she be late today, but she would be late or even miss filming even more frequently in the future.

Yang Huanyi was the biggest star in Heavenly Secrets Pavilion. In a certain sense, her status was even higher than Director Yi Tianzhao's.

Because she was one of the rare female action stars in the country.

Yang Huanyi had studied martial arts since childhood, coming from a family tradition. Since her debut, she had played female warriors in numerous martial arts dramas, female agents in spy action series, female assassins, and similar roles. The special forces drama Wolf Poison Flower she starred in was the ratings champion of its year. Although due to audience demographics, she wasn't considered a massively popular superstar, she was still quite famous and not to be underestimated.

Action stars are always scarce, and female action stars even more so. Although body doubles can be used for filming, actors who perform their own stunts undoubtedly have more "prestige" than those who use doubles. Not using body doubles and performing stunts personally is even considered something worth bragging about among some new-generation celebrity fans.

At a time when many actresses were gradually adopting softer, more glamorous, red-carpet styles, the heroic Yang Huanyi was undoubtedly the best choice to play Xiao Fengque.

Artists with bigger star power than her wouldn't come to act in television films, and those with more buzz than her didn't have her acting skills and martial arts ability. Plus, with appropriate pay—good quality at reasonable prices (particularly important for budget-conscious television film teams)—Yang Huanyi was practically Yi Tianzhao's dream casting.

Unfortunately, while the king was willing, the goddess was not. Shang Yechu knew that Yang Huanyi didn't share Yi Tianzhao's enthusiasm for Heavenly Secrets Pavilion.

At that moment, she was probably filming wire work on the set of Dangerous City Envoy.

That's right, when she agreed to star in Heavenly Secrets Pavilion, Yang Huanyi had actually also accepted another film—the suspense action movie Dangerous City Envoy.

This was information Shang Yechu gathered from scouring the Dragon State Film Bureau website. Of course, Shang Yechu didn't just look at film lists approved in September and October; she needed to look further back. When she saw the Dangerous City Envoy film project approved by the Film Bureau in August, Shang Yechu's distant memories were awakened.

As an actor, watching numerous films is essential training. Shang Yechu naturally had to watch many movies in her previous life too. While she couldn't remember the names of foreign film actors, she could mostly remember those in domestic productions.

Shang Yechu recalled the female lead of Dangerous City Envoy—it was precisely Yang Huanyi.

This made things interesting.

Dangerous City Envoy was a project approved in August. Whether for films or television series, once approved, they definitely need to start filming quickly. This way, they can be efficient and start making money sooner.

Since Dangerous City Envoy wasn't released during the National Day period, it was clearly targeting the Spring Festival season. Excluding the one to two months needed for promotion, September to December would be Dangerous City Envoy's filming period.

And quite coincidentally, Heavenly Secrets Pavilion's filming time happened to be October to December.

In industry terms, Yang Huanyi was double-booked. And completely, perfectly double-booked.

Throughout the entire filming cycle of Heavenly Secrets Pavilion, Yang Huanyi was destined to shuttle between both productions, even interfering with the entire crew's filming schedule, forcing the crew to accommodate her personal schedule.

This also explained why Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon had a full twenty books, but the film only adapted three parts.

Clearly, Director Yi's collaboration with Ms. Yang Huanyi ended after three installments.

Shang Yechu narrowed her eyes, pondering—how could she accelerate this process of collaboration breakdown?

Chapter 54: The First Round of “Heaven’s Secrets Pavilion”

"On the evening of August fifth, what were you doing?"

"What was I doing?" Shang Yechu covered her mouth with a light laugh, throwing a flirtatious glance at the empty air before her. "I'm a prostitute, what do you think I do at night?"

"Uh, uh..."

As expected, Li Yi stumbled over his lines again.

"I'm sorry!"

Before Shang Yechu could even get angry, Li Yi had already stood up on his own, repeatedly apologizing: "Sorry sorry sorry!"

Shang Yechu took a deep breath.

Then took another deep breath.

Suppressing the urge to grab Li Yi's head and shake it back and forth, Shang Yechu forced a smile and said, "Maybe you should memorize your lines first—okay?"

Shang Yechu had been batting her eyelashes so much they were about to flip inside out, and she was so sick of repeating those same two lines she could vomit. Yet Li Yi's brain seemed to be made of solid wood!

She really wanted to take a rolling pin and flatten his face, or grab his head and dunk it in water or something.

It was only at this moment that Shang Yechu began to feel some genuine admiration for actors like Qin Tianye. The torture of acting opposite an idiot was no less painful than any form of prolonged suffering.

Li Yi looked at Shang Yechu's slightly flushed face from anger and said pitifully, "Are you angry?"

What else would I be?

Did you actually think acting with you was some kind of pleasure?

Controlling her temper, Shang Yechu gave him a mild jab: "Nothing to be angry about, let's just hurry up. We haven't even finished one complete run-through yet."

Li Yi studied Shang Yechu for a moment, pursed his lips, and was about to say something when he suddenly heard what sounded like tearful joy from beside him: "Sister Huanyi is here!"

After endless anticipation, the female lead of Heavenly Secrets Pavilion had finally arrived fashionably late.

Shang Yechu glanced sideways and saw a tall, straight-backed figure striding briskly into the studio. The newcomer had wheat-colored skin and handsome features, with long limbs and an outstanding figure.

This was Yang Huanyi, the female lead of Heavenly Secrets Pavilion.

Yang Huanyi was around thirty-five years old, right at the most charming age for a woman. The moment she entered the studio, it was as if she brought in a refreshing breeze that captured everyone's attention.

Seeing Yang Huanyi in person, Shang Yechu could understand why Yi Tianzhao was willing to risk her being double-booked to cast her as the lead. If Shang Yechu were casting for Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon, she'd probably choose someone like this to play Xiao Fengque too.

Shang Yechu's eyes swept over Yang Huanyi without missing a detail, comparing her qualities point by point with her own.

After the comparison, as expected—Yang Huanyi completely dominated, Shang Yechu completely lost.

From appearance to figure to presence, Yang Huanyi surpassed Shang Yechu in every aspect. In terms of acting skills, Shang Yechu estimated they were about equal, but the other woman's action scenes were unparalleled among female stars, instantly turning their equal acting into completely unequal overall value.

There was only one area where Shang Yechu could surpass her—professional dedication... but then again, the entertainment industry was never a place where dedication alone could make you successful. Otherwise, the first superstars should have been those martial arts directors and stunt doubles from Baogang.

This result was undoubtedly discouraging. Trying to snatch a role from such a strong competitor was truly a fantastical challenge.

Yang Huanyi moved with hurried steps, not even giving small fries like Shang Yechu and Li Yi a single glance as she headed straight for Yi Tianzhao.

Yang Huanyi first apologized to Yi Tianzhao, then glanced at her watch and said urgently, "Let's start quickly."

With that, Yang Huanyi hurried into the makeup room. The waiting makeup team immediately began grooming and preparing her.

The studio instantly became busy. Soon after, Shang Yechu was also pulled into the makeup room—she had already changed into her costume, but her makeup had to wait until Yang Huanyi arrived to be applied. Because no one knew when Yang Huanyi would show up, and if they waited too long, the makeup would smudge.

This was the power of a big star.

As the female lead, Yang Huanyi actually had her own private dressing room. But she was simply too busy—so busy that she didn't even have time to go to that single room at the end of the hallway, instead walking directly into the large shared dressing room used by other actors.

By coincidence, Shang Yechu, who entered right after her, ended up sitting next to Yang Huanyi.

While getting her makeup done, Shang Yechu heard Yang Huanyi say decisively to the makeup artist, "Xiao Fengque is a female knight-errant, she doesn't need heavy makeup! Keep it as simple as possible."

The makeup artist paused briefly, giving a soft "mm" in acknowledgment.

While applying blush, Shang Yechu heard the rustling sound of pages being turned nearby. Sneaking a sideways glance, she saw Yang Huanyi flipping through the script.

Yang Huanyi's assistant said quietly beside her, "We'll be shooting Scene One of Act Three in a moment."

Yang Huanyi flipped through a couple pages, then stopped. She seemed to be scanning the script.

This kind of last-minute preparation wasn't uncommon in the domestic entertainment industry, and Yang Huanyi made no effort to hide it. If an actor didn't even know when to keep quiet, they wouldn't last long in showbiz.

Once makeup was finished, this scene was ready to officially begin shooting.

Chapter 55: Flower Queen

Heavenly Secrets Pavilion, underground interrogation room.

The flower queen wore a moon-white silk nightgown with a magnolia-colored outer robe, sitting quietly on the cold iron chair.

Even at night, the interrogation room remained brightly lit. The flower queen's delicate face showed little expression, only her moist eyes darting around restlessly.

Suddenly, the candle flame before her flickered.

Two handsome young men walked in. Both wore narrow-sleeved purple robes—the one on the left was taller, while the one on the right was shorter and more slender.

The flower queen's gaze wandered between the two men before finally settling on the thin youth's face, a smile of interest curling at the corners of her lips.

The flower queen's smile differed from that of a respectable woman—it was extremely soft, extremely beautiful, every curve carrying a seductive meaning. If this were one of her regular customers, they would likely have turned to jelly the moment they stepped through the door.

Unfortunately, this charming glance was destined to be wasted on the blind.

The two young men showed no reaction to the flower queen's smile. The slender youth pulled out a chair and sat directly before the flower queen, while the taller one simply stood behind him.

The tall youth's figure was exceptionally robust, enveloping both of them with a formidable oppressive presence.

"Mianmian." The slender youth lightly tapped the table. "Is that your name?"

"Before asking a lady's name, shouldn't you first introduce yourselves properly?" The flower queen extended a jade-like hand, gently resting it on the slender youth's hand, softly stopping his movement.

The slender youth calmly withdrew his hand: "I'm Di Five, he's Di Three."

"Fifth? Third?" The flower queen covered the corner of her mouth with a light laugh. "I actually think you could easily rank first in my book."

Di Three impatiently interrupted: "What were you doing on the evening of August fifth?"

"Doing what?" The flower queen's eyes shimmered as she cast a meaningful glance at Di Three. "I'm a prostitute, sir—what do you think I do at night?"

"Enough of your tricks!" Di Three's wrist moved, his Kunwu blade at his waist sliding two inches out of its sheath with a metallic ring, a flash of cold steel reflecting in the flower queen's eyes!

"Di Three." Di Five said coldly.

Di Three looked displeased but snorted and sheathed his blade.

Silence fell momentarily.

The flower queen, Di Three, and Di Five remained locked in stalemate under the bright candlelight.

Five, four, three, two, one.

Shang Yechu counted down five numbers in her heart, yet the expected line didn't come.

Shang Yechu slowly furrowed her brow internally. Next, Di Five—that is, Xiao Fengque—should have spoken up to extract information from the flower queen using indirect tactics.

Di Three and Di Five were Xie An and Xiao Fengque's respective rankings within the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion, determined by their entry time into the organization.

Why wasn't Yang Huanyi speaking? If she didn't deliver her line within ten seconds, the director would call cut.

Shang Yechu's heart stirred slightly—"Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" was quite faithful to the original martial arts adaptation, and this scene's adaptation was basically identical to the source material. In this plot segment, Xiao Fengque had the most dialogue-heavy scenes. Yang Huanyi had only looked at the script for about ten minutes—could she really memorize all her lines in such a short time?

Could she have forgotten her lines!

Shang Yechu looked at Yang Huanyi's face—the other woman appeared calm and composed, still wearing that icy expression, even with a hint of slight impatience.

Shang Yechu confirmed it: Yang Huanyi had genuinely forgotten her lines—and wasn't planning to call cut herself, but intended to just muddle through like this!

The flower queen glanced lightly at the blade at Xie An's waist, then suddenly, softly and slowly stood up.

Her figure was ethereal, her rising motion less like standing and more like floating.

The flower queen floated over to Xie An's side, a delicate hand gently stroking the Kunwu blade at his waist.

She stood too close—Xie An could even feel her cool body temperature.

Xie An openly stepped back while instinctively drawing his blade, saying sharply: "Do you have a death wish?"

The flower queen placed a hand on her slender neck, smiling enchantingly: "You want to cut this neck? If it's your blade, I'd willingly lie beneath its edge."

With that, she leaned toward Xie An as if boneless, soft and pliant.

Seeing that cold body drifting toward him, Xie An instinctively blocked with his sword hilt, keeping her three feet away!

"Ouch!" The flower queen cried out delicately in pain. "You really don't know how to cherish beauty, do you?"

Xie An sheathed his blade with a metallic ring, saying coldly: "So, tonight, where else have you been? What have you done?"

Shang Yechu's eyes narrowed abruptly.

That was Yang Huanyi's line!

Clearly, Li Yi had also noticed Yang Huanyi had forgotten her lines. Therefore, he spoke the line asking Mianmian on Yang Huanyi's behalf.

But—Li Yi couldn't even remember his own lines, so how could he recall Yang Huanyi's lines?

Shock and confusion lasted only a moment—Shang Yechu's eye-narrowing lasted less than half a second before naturally transforming into a coquettish smile.

"Tonight?" The flower queen slightly raised her hand, extending a lotus-root-like arm. "Are you blind, with those useless eyes of yours? I was sleeping peacefully, of course, when your people dragged me here."

"Enough, Di Three, put your blade away." Xiao Fengque said coldly. "Mianmian, return to your seat."

The flower queen's beautiful rose-petal lips twisted quite noticeably, seemingly regretting she couldn't tease the man before her further. But she obediently floated back to her seat.

Xiao Fengque stood up.

Xiao Fengque bent down, picking up a strand of the flower queen's hair that had fallen over her shoulder, and gently sniffed it.

The flower queen instinctively flinched backward, noticing her unnatural reaction, then forcibly stopped the movement, smiling seductively: "Number One, this isn't the place for that sort of business."

Xiao Fengque gazed deeply into the flower queen's shimmering, liquid eyes.

Pale irises met dark pupils.

Xiao Fengque's face came extremely close, "his" nose almost touching her cheek. Xiao Fengque remained completely still, gaze shifting toward the flower queen's temple, warm breath brushing against the other's jade-like face.

A flicker of panic suddenly appeared in the flower queen's beautiful eyes.

Xiao Fengque suddenly smiled.

Xiao Fengque leaned close to the flower queen's ear, lips brushing against her earlobe, whispering softly: "Miss Mianmian, could you tell me why you used cosmetic paste to cover your ear holes when going to bed?"

Ear holes meant ear piercings.

As she spoke, Xiao Fengque reached out, gently twisting the flower queen's earlobe. The gesture was extremely intimate, but their gazes in that instant turned as cold as winter sand.

The flower queen's body trembled.

"Cut!"

Thank goodness—although Yang Huanyi had forgotten her lines twice during the scene, both times Shang Yechu and Xie An had covered for her and muddled through.

Yi Tianzhao seemed relatively satisfied, not requesting a retake, only telling Shang Yechu to go for touch-ups. Close-ups still needed to be filmed later.

Yang Huanyi was busier than Shang Yechu—she not only needed touch-ups but also had to review the script again. There was still a long dialogue-heavy scene ahead, and she couldn't afford to forget lines like she just had.

Only Li Yi stood foolishly in place. Yi Tianzhao approached and patted him, smiling: "Your acting has improved? Those blade movements just now were quite dashing."

Li Yi uncomfortably touched his blade: "Actually, I'm still not quite used to it—this blade is too light..."

"It's a prop blade. I thought you performed well." Yi Tianzhao didn't pay much attention to this comment, praised Li Yi a couple more times, then left.

Li Yi slightly furrowed his brow. Actually, he really wanted to tell Yi Tianzhao that during those scenes just now, he wasn't acting... or rather, he wasn't controlling his own performance.

Li Yi had never acted before and didn't know how to describe this feeling. It seemed that as long as Shang Yechu stood before him performing, he could easily be drawn into that situation, involuntarily doing things that fit his character's setting.

Even those lines had flowed smoothly from his mouth, as if his lips had a mind of their own.

Li Yi was a newcomer to acting and didn't know that skilled actors could draw their scene partners "into character." After thinking it over, he decided to go ask Shang Yechu.

Meanwhile, Yang Huanyi, who was reviewing her script, suddenly asked her assistant: "What's the name of that actress playing the flower queen?"

The assistant paused, struggling to recall, then shook her head: "Not sure, haven't seen her before."

Yang Huanyi made a "tsk" sound: "Good acting. A hundred times better than that one."

The "that one" Yang Huanyi referred to was the popular traffic star Wei Yize. "Dangerous City Envoy" was the film Yang Huanyi had collaborated with him on. Wei Yize had first billing, Yang Huanyi second.

Wei Yize's popularity in the entertainment industry was at its peak, with commercial endorsements coming easily, his fans never hesitating when comparing sales charts. But when it came to acting... Yang Huanyi didn't even want to talk about it.

How could someone not even manage basic facial control? Too much plastic surgery? Botox gone stiff? Or just plain incompetent?

Never mind thirty years ago—even ten years back, acting like this would have been straight trash in the domestic entertainment industry.

In the film, Yang Huanyi and Wei Yize played a couple in a romance with an older woman. But when acting opposite Wei Yize, Yang Huanyi felt like an unfortunate homeroom teacher, earnestly trying to persuade a struggling student to study hard, only to find the other party had already fallen asleep!

Not exaggerating, Yang Huanyi felt only four words could describe Wei Yize's acting:

Leave it to fate.

You act your part, I'll act mine. As for how it turns out—leave it to heaven!

When Yang Huanyi arrived at the "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" set, physically and mentally exhausted, she hadn't held much hope. After all, "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" had a much smaller production scale than "Dangerous City Envoy," so the acting quality might be even worse.

But surprisingly, a newcomer had given her a pleasant little surprise!

When acting opposite that flower queen, Yang Huanyi immediately felt she was no longer a pitiful solo performer. Quite the opposite—the tension, the chemistry when acting with that actress, along with her reaction speed and positioning, were in no way inferior to any veteran actor Yang Huanyi had collaborated with before!

Yet the other was clearly an unfamiliar newcomer. With such looks and such acting skills, she should have made some waves in the industry.

Yang Huanyi couldn't help but start wondering—had working with Wei Yize for so long made her so starved that she now thought everyone was a good actor?

Maybe that newcomer's acting was actually just average?

Chapter 56: A Crash Course Starting from Zero...

Soon, the second scene proved to Yang Huanyi that it wasn't her imagination.

The second scene was a confrontation between Yang Huanyi and Li Yi, filmed in the dimly lit corridor outside the interrogation room.

After exchanging just two lines with Li Yi, Yang Huanyi immediately experienced the same feeling of hitting a brick wall that she'd had when acting opposite Wei Yize.

Li Yi had his lines memorized perfectly—this was his only merit, slightly better than Wei Yize. Beyond that, he was utterly worthless.

Yang Huanyi once again found herself channeling her inner homeroom teacher. Unlike when she lectured Wei Yize, Li Yi seemed to be reciting a textbook passage directly at Yang Huanyi, with the textbook content being "Regarding the Suspicious Aspects of Flower Queen Mianmian."

Yang Huanyi didn't know how she managed to finish filming this scene. All she knew was that after completing it, her body felt completely drained.

Behind the monitor, Yi Tianzhao also frowned deeply.

The chemistry in this scene seemed to have exited stage left along with Shang Yechu. At least between the male and female leads Xie An and Xiao Fengque, Yi Tianzhao saw no chemistry whatsoever—only Xie An seemingly reciting from a script, and Xiao Fengque looking thoroughly exhausted.

Yang Huanyi's performance today was very poor—even bordering on perfunctory. Yi Tianzhao had been dissatisfied about this for a while.

During the first scene, Yang Huanyi had forgotten her lines and had to be bailed out by that actress surnamed Shang and Li Yi. Although the performance was just passable, Yi Tianzhao figured that since she had just arrived from another production crew and hadn't adjusted her state yet, it was normal, so she kept quiet.

In this current scene, the weariness on Yang Huanyi's face and the exhaustion in her eyes were almost completely unconcealed. Due to her light makeup, traces of age were clearly exposed under the high-precision digital lens. Moreover, the impatience in Yang Huanyi's eyes and her overly relaxed body language made her less resemble a young girl bearing deep-seated hatred and more like an office worker who had given up on life.

This was the cruelty of the camera—three points of flaw would be magnified to ten, five points to thirty. Movies demanded texture and couldn't be smothered with ten layers of soft-focus filters like idol dramas. Yi Tianzhao was already getting a headache.

As for Li Yi, he didn't even need mentioning—in Yi Tianzhao's eyes, what he was doing couldn't even be called acting. Yi Tianzhao planned to have post-production cut this entire segment to wide shots, keeping only their dialogue audio.

Li Yi really couldn't handle praise. Yi Tianzhao thought to herself, that actress surnamed Shang was so much more comfortable to work with. Such acting skills and improvisational ability were practically every director's dream mother.

Yi Tianzhao wanted to reshoot the take, but after she called "cut," Yang Huanyi immediately went to her assistant to get an ice pack for her eyes and lay down on the crew's lounge chair.

Having been in this industry for so many years, if Yi Tianzhao couldn't understand such obvious body language, she might as well quit.

Yang Huanyi's meaning was crystal clear: she didn't want to film anymore, needed a break, and this take would have to do.

Although Yi Tianzhao had a big-name director title, Yang Huanyi was the real boss on set, while she was the subordinate. Therefore, she could only grit her teeth and keep this take.

After the break, Yang Huanyi, Shang Yechu, and Li Yi quickly filmed the final take of this scene—the one where Mianmian's psychological defenses collapse and she reveals the truth to Xiao Fengque.

This time, Yang Huanyi was absolutely certain—this flower queen's acting skills were genuinely good.

Yang Huanyi took a moment of her precious time to observe Shang Yechu. When not filming, Shang Yechu was very quiet and reserved. Sitting there on her folding stool, she looked like just an unremarkable, delicate girl.

Even the thin silk dress and magnolia-colored brocade robe lost their cinematic sparkle off-camera, looking like nothing more than two pieces of burlap.

Shang Yechu's walking posture was very proper—yes, Yang Huanyi looked several times before settling on this rarely used description for someone's walk. The other party walked with an almost rigorous uprightness, neither swaying her hips nor swinging her pelvis, with no unnecessary small movements and rarely looking around aimlessly.

In fact, Yang Huanyi noticed that Shang Yechu sometimes unconsciously hunched her shoulders, appearing to have developed a habitual restraint—even showing signs of inferiority.

Just looking at her off-camera demeanor, Shang Yechu seemed more suited to play the long-bullied female lead in a low-budget campus movie than an experienced flower queen.

However, the moment she faced the camera, Shang Yechu's serious, proper, and cautious demeanor completely vanished.

Through the lens, her waist became as sinuous as a water snake's. Though she only swayed slightly, she somehow managed to exude an air of coquettishness. Her hands were never properly positioned—either preening, playing with her hair, or intentionally or unintentionally displaying her round, pearly white nails.

Even her lip-pursing mannerisms were completely different from when she was silent—the flower queen always slightly pouted her lips, looking as if she was ready to sell her smiles at any moment.

This flower queen was constantly flaunting her delicate, moving charm. Even in the interrogation room she couldn't stay still, her eyes constantly darting around.

The plain-colored robe she wore, when donned by her, took on the meaning of "extreme plainness reveals the flower's true beauty."

Some might think Shang Yechu's interpretation was too coquettish, seductive, and vulgar, but after their first scene together, Yang Huanyi had watched all the scenes related to this flower queen. The flower queen played by Shang Yechu, having done wrong, needed to pester Xiao Fengque and Xie An at this moment to cover up the things she had done.

Precisely because of this, she would continuously flirt with them. To be accurate, Shang Yechu's performance was a play within a play—Shang Yechu was using her acting skills to portray the flower queen, while the flower queen was also using her acting skills to portray a "courtesan as perceived by the general public."

Recalling Shang Yechu's improvisation when she herself had forgotten her lines during the first scene, Yang Huanyi sighed softly in her heart.

Each generation has its talents emerging.

Yang Huanyi even considered whether she should reach out and mentor the other party, but she was too busy recently.

Forget it, she could do it another time if the opportunity arose.

What Yang Huanyi didn't know was that while she was thinking about Shang Yechu, Shang Yechu was also thinking about her.

Shang Yechu was talking with Li Yi.

"Teacher Yang seems very busy," Shang Yechu said casually while drinking the cheap soda provided by the crew.

Seeing Shang Yechu drinking so happily, Li Yi curiously opened a soda bottle too. After sniffing it, Li Yi frowned critically.

"Smells awful," Li Yi said frankly. "Like artificial sweetener."

Shang Yechu guessed Li Yi was probably a young master slumming it to experience filming life. Combined with Yi Tianzhao's concerned attitude toward him, he was likely some industry scion.

Shang Yechu had no intention of debating artificial sweetener soda with Li Yi and continued, "Teacher Yang looks really tired. I'm genuinely worried about her health."

"Are you close with her?" Li Yi asked doubtfully.

"..." Shang Yechu took another sip of soda. "I really enjoy watching her TV dramas."

"Oh." Li Yi nodded. "I think she's filming another project."

"Hmm?" Shang Yechu raised her eyebrows in surprise. She had thought it would take some effort to steer the conversation in this direction. "How do you know? You said you didn't know during our scene earlier."

"Yi... someone told me," Li Yi said, showing curiosity. "Is it really that good? You keep drinking it."

"It's alright," Shang Yechu put down the soda bottle, lightly tapping the glass bottle with her fingers. "Since Teacher Yang is filming another project, why not just consolidate her Heavenly Secrets Pavilion scenes and film them all at once? With some scheduling adjustments, she could free up more time."

Li Yi, unsuspecting, said offhandedly, "Because the script hasn't been finalized yet. The parts we're filming are already set, but there are many later parts that haven't been decided. I—the original author Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng is still holed up at home revising it."

Shang Yechu's finger-tapping on the bottle stopped, but Li Yi didn't notice.

"What if we film ahead and Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng wants to make changes? That would be double the effort," Li Yi ultimately couldn't resist the cheap soda's temptation and took a small sip. "Wow—this is even worse than I imagined. How can you drink this?"

Shang Yechu downed her soda in one gulp, then smiled slightly, revealing two dimples. "Really? I'll get you a bottle of my flavor." With that, she stood up and left.

Li Yi stared at Shang Yechu's retreating back for a moment, something seeming to flicker in his beautiful eyes.

Shang Yechu got herself a new phone number.

Fortunately, the 2013 model Renxing Phone also supported dual SIM cards. Shang Yechu inserted the new card and painfully topped it up with two hundred yuan worth of credit.

Using the WiFi from the shop next to Grandma Hu's bookstore, Shang Yechu registered a WeChat account with her new phone number and bought a secondary Weibo account.

After thinking for a few seconds, Shang Yechu changed both her WeChat nickname and Weibo nickname to "KuiKui Who Loves Three-Five ■ Fengbao Is My Destiny."

Then, Shang Yechu opened Weibo, searched around, found a beautifully drawn fan art of Xiao Fengque, cropped it for an avatar, and set it for both accounts.

In her Weibo bio, Shang Yechu wrote this line:

■Xiao Fengque forever my ultimate white moonlight|Three-Five eternal! On Weibo only for Fengbao ■■■ Politely declining any fans of the Eighty-Five movie, Little Lame Phoenix fans, and fans of disgraced celebrities! No one can portray my Fengbao!■

"Three-Five" was the CP name for Xie An and Xiao Fengque, taken from their code names "Di Three" and "Di Five" in Heavenly Secrets Pavilion.

Grandma Hu's bookstore had a comprehensive collection. Shang Yechu dug through old book piles, secondhand bookshelves, and the warehouse, respectively finding the complete set of Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon published in the 1980s, the complete set published around the millennium, the 2010 revised commemorative edition complete set, and the 2015 collector's deluxe commemorative edition complete set.

Shang Yechu took her quilt from the storage room, spread it flat on the floor, and then laid these books on the quilt.

The four sets of books, from oldest to newest, totaled eighty volumes, neatly arranged on the clean quilt, creating an impressive sight.

Shang Yechu used her Renxing Phone to take many 360-degree photos of these books. After photographing them, she opened Meitu XiuXiu and began cropping and meticulously editing.

■Newbie introduction! Though new to Weibo, not new to being a Feather!

Loved Fengbao since age five, now entering my twentieth year loving Fengbao!■

The accompanying images showed eighty different versions of Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon.

Chapter 57: The Beginning of a Storm

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng was already over seventy years old this year. At this age, she hadn't become rigid, stiff, and inflexible like some elderly people of the same generation. Quite the opposite, she still kept up with current trends and paid close attention to changes in popular culture.

Every month, Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng would purchase a batch of books published in recent years, either reading them intensively, skimming through them, or giving them a general read.

Writers from her era had either stopped writing, passed away, or lived in seclusion within the city, appearing and disappearing mysteriously. Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng wouldn't play these mysterious games. She had her own official website, official forum, and book club. Besides these, Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng also personally managed a WeChat public account and a Weibo account.

As Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng put it, she wanted to talk with young people.

Martial arts had grown old.

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng often sighed like this.

Fewer young people loved reading martial arts stories, and martial arts TV dramas and movies had been declining for many years. That era of light furs and galloping horses, wild songs and hearty drinking, that era of flashing blades and swift vengeance, was getting further and further away from people.

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng's public account and Weibo were both quite deserted. The same few familiar faces came and went, and Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng had long grown accustomed to them.

Unlike other martial arts works, Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon never had repeated adaptations that fed back into the original work—although every novel adaptation received mixed reviews, film and television adaptations were indeed the best method to maintain discussion about a novel. Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon missed the golden age of martial arts film and television again and again, so its current decline was quite normal.

Despite this, Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng still opened her public account and Weibo every day with anticipation, sharing some daily interesting stories with her book fans. She loved talking with them.

In recent days, Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng's enthusiasm for checking her public account and Weibo had grown even stronger. Because, among her book fan community, a very interesting new friend had suddenly appeared.

We need to go back a few days in time. That day, Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng opened her public account backend, wanting to see if there were any reader messages, but was astonished to discover that over a hundred messages had popped up in the backend!

What was going on?

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng looked closely and couldn't help but chuckle. It turned out that seventy or eighty of these hundred-plus messages were all sent by the same person.

That person's profile picture was a meticulously drawn girl. Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng squinted and looked for a long time before realizing it was actually fan art of Xiao Fengque. She had even reposted it on Weibo.

The WeChat nickname was interesting too—a long string called "KuiKui Who Loves Three-Five■Fengbao Forever."

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng had seen several similar IDs before. From her impression, people who used this kind of ID were generally young people.

It seemed like this was a little reader who had newly sought her out?

Quite curious, Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng clicked into the chat box, then was practically blinded by the wall of text. Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng scrolled up a bit more and nearly fainted from the endless stream of messages.

—Without a doubt, this was an extremely self-confident reader.

In the messages this reader sent, they extensively discussed the shortcomings of Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: Heavenly Secrets Pavilion and proposed countless revision suggestions. The tone was quite confident and arrogant, completely embodying an "I'm second only to heaven" attitude.

[Like in Chapter 11 of the main text, where Ah Feng falls from the tower and Xie An catches her by the waist—completely vulgar! That delicate feminine and masculine demeanor is exactly like the talented scholars and beautiful ladies from old mandarin duck and butterfly stories! Delete it!]

[Chapter 3 of the main text isn't good either! Too redundant, delete it all!]

[Xie An is too stupid—if I were Xie An, I would have noticed clues two chapters earlier. The deceased had a deformity fetish for foot-binding, usually holding his concubine's small feet to warm his hands while writing. Mianmian has big feet that can sing and dance, what did the deceased like about her? It's a suspicion that could be eliminated just by looking down at her feet, why did Xie An drag it out for three chapters?]

[Ah Feng's reaction here is inappropriate! It's good that Ah Feng has compassion in her heart, but her reaction here is too bland...]

Blah blah, blah blah.

This little reader talked non-stop for tens of thousands of characters worth of "insights and experiences" and "revision suggestions," interspersed with countless emotional particles and phrases like "if you don't change it this way this book is finished" and "I've loved Fengbao for twenty years." Given that Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: Heavenly Secrets Pavilion was only 150,000 characters long, this volume of book review was truly astonishing.

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng found it very interesting.

Her readers respected her experience, status, and age, when speaking with her they'd say "you've worked hard" every three sentences, "take care of your health" every five sentences, and "teacher, I've long admired you" every ten sentences, making her often wonder if she was about to be buried. This was the first time she encountered a reader who was so emotionally charged and spoke so bluntly, and she found it quite interesting.

Naturally, Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon had received plenty of criticism over the years, and when she was young, Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng had frequently engaged in verbal battles over this. Now that she was older, looking at these lovely criticisms, she actually felt they were worth reading.

Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon was a work from fifty years ago. Some of the thoughts and plots in the text seemed quite advanced and innovative at the time, but in today's era of widespread entertainment, they weren't that fresh anymore. This was also why Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng had been continuously revising the script.

Now that there was a ready-made young audience member offering valuable opinions, although the tone was slightly impolite, the intention was good.

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng scrolled down through the string of messages sent by KuiKui Who Loves Three-Five█Fengbao Forever, and as she looked, she started feeling a bit dizzy. Why did she sense noise from this sea of text?

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng decided to take a break for now, so she closed the public account backend and opened Weibo.

Looking at Weibo—wow! Amazing! The usually deserted message bar actually showed unread message count as "...", which meant there were more new messages than 99+.

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng rubbed her temples with her wrinkled hand.

No way? Did KuiKui Who Loves Three-Five█Fengbao Forever also send those messages on Weibo?

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng was both amazed and amused by the young reader's abundant energy, and clicked into the message bar with mixed feelings.

Good news, KuiKui Who Loves Three-Five█Fengbao Forever didn't copy over the dozens of messages sent to the public account backend;

Bad news (not sure if it counted as bad news), dozens to hundreds of readers, for some reason, had unprecedentedly sent private messages to Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng on the same day!

Besides this, today's Weibo @ notifications (forwarding or mentioning Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng in some tweet) were especially numerous. Usually there were at most three to five, but today there were hundreds.

Feeling puzzled, Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng intuitively felt that the sudden surge in private messages might be related to the sudden surge in @ notifications, so she first clicked into the @ notification message bar.

After seeing the source of these hundreds of @s, Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng: "..."

KuiKui Who Loves Three-Five█Fengbao Forever, posted on Weibo ten hours ago:

[#Xiao Fengque Super Topic# █ #Phoenix Towers Reach Azure Skies, Rustling Wutong Leaves Send Your Voice#

Feathers, Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: Heavenly Secrets Pavilion is getting another adaptation recently.

As everyone knows, Ah Feng's adaptation luck and casting luck have never been great. Whether it's the 1985 version's demonically altered movie, the 1995 version with overly masculine actors, or the 2002 version with problematic celebrities, they've all been pains in Feathers' hearts. Even the slightly better-reviewed 1990 version TV drama, in my opinion, didn't capture even one ten-thousandth of Ah Feng's charm.

I'm always paying attention to news about Ah Feng. Recently, I learned that Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon is going to be adapted into a movie again, with casting undetermined and plot faithfulness unknown.

Xiao Fengque, one of the most captivating characters in martial arts novel history—or even in Feathers' hearts, this "one of" can be removed—is about to receive another film adaptation.

We don't know what awaits us ahead. It might be a pleasant surprise, or it might be another bout of pain.

Whether in terms of discussion popularity, content output quantity, super topic member count, topic popularity, or national recognition, the character Xiao Fengque ranks first by a large margin among female characters in martial arts novels; whether in appearance, talent, martial skills, or intelligence, Xiao Fengque is among the top tier of characters in martial arts novels.

However, due to the burden of film adaptations, the character Xiao Fengque has long carried various stigmas and brainwashing packages like "curse," "adaptation black hole," "not beautiful/strong/tragic enough," and "one-dimensional character." Feathers might laugh it off on the surface, but how can our hearts not ache?

I know Feathers are quite laid-back. Like me, although I've loved Ah Feng for twenty years, I rarely spoke up for Ah Feng on various platforms before, just loving her silently in my heart. However, this kind of silent love has only brought disappointment after disappointment. Demonically altered adaptations, cuts, grafting, problematic celebrities... the harm Xiao Fengque has suffered is arguably the worst among fictional characters.

Silence is useless. Silence harms the characters we love.

Therefore, I'm here to sincerely request Feathers, at least this time, let's not remain silent anymore.

The casting and plot for Heavenly Secrets Pavilion haven't been finalized yet, there's still room for maneuver. The only thing we can do is let the creators of this production know our love for Ah Feng.

As Teacher @Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng's first work, Heavenly Secrets Pavilion actually has many areas where the plot could be improved. These are all old topics, so I won't elaborate further. @Director Yi Tianzhao is the chief director of this production. Director Yi has a good reputation and rarely engages in demonic alterations when filming.

While filming hasn't started yet, Feathers can communicate our requests to Teacher Jiang and Director Yi. Feathers' demands really aren't many—we just want casting that matches Ah Feng's image, no demonic alterations or cutting of Ah Feng's highlight moments, and no hiring problematic celebrities to play Ah Feng. That would satisfy us.

These humble wishes are the final request of a twenty-year Feather. Thank you everyone.]

The accompanying images for this Weibo post were quite abundant.

There was a screenshot of Heavenly Secrets Pavilion's project approval from the Dragon State Film Bureau;

There were stacked copies of various versions of Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon;

There were screenshots of Xiao Fengque from various film and television adaptations;

There were Douban ratings for various versions of Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon, along with various joking comments and sarcastic comments underneath;

There were screenshots of Xiao Fengque's fan activities across various platforms, like Tieba follower counts, Weibo super topic member numbers, Douyin topic participation, food storage APP fan content output, Weibo #Xiao Fengque# topic total read count, Pilipli video website tag follower counts; not just Xiao Fengque's own, but also similar screenshots for other martial arts characters from different authors and works—it could be seen that the latter's fan activity was far lower than the former's.

There was also a worn-out copy of Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon, with a yellowed piece of paper tucked between the pages, on which was written in childish handwriting "I'll always like Xiao Fengque." It looked like it had been quite some years...

Sincere, almost obsessive emotion practically overflowed from the screen. The comments section was filled with crying, old and new Xiao Fengque fans huddling together for warmth in the comments, shedding bitter tears for miles around.

The repost section was equally lively. As a classic martial arts character, Xiao Fengque also had her own fan homepage on Weibo—

Xiao Fengque Homepage reposted this Weibo, with the repost caption:

[Over twenty years like a single dream, alone listening to the sound of tides on the river. A veteran Feather's monologue, hope everyone takes a look.
[Crying]][Heart]]

As the gathering place for Xiao Fengque fans and book lovers, Xiao Fengque Homepage had considerable influence. Many Feathers enthusiastically reposted this sincere and emotional Weibo post, and even some passersby who enjoyed martial arts novels came to join the excitement.

[So well written... I can feel the overwhelming love.]

[Oh my god, twenty years! Longer than my life!]

[Putting myself in their shoes is really heartbreaking, having your favorite character adapted again and again but getting hurt each time...]

[Xiao Fengque! My childhood goddess. I read pirated comic books in bookstores.]

[Wow, Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon—my grandparents loved it, my parents loved it too, and it's getting another adaptation?]

[Holy... the entertainment industry god of war back in the day, one drama sent off six top stars, I couldn't harvest six crops that fast ahhh]

The paper character Xiao Fengque had good public appeal and high national recognition. She was the kind of character that even if you hadn't read Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon, you'd probably heard her name.

Female character fans were generally quite loyal, and paper character fans were even more so. Therefore, most of the feedback this Weibo received was positive.

Of course, there were also some reposts and comments with less harmonious styles.

[Wait, is no one paying attention to the other martial arts characters being brought out? If you want to praise Xiao Fengque then praise Xiao Fengque, why bring other characters into it?]

[I looked at the original poster's Weibo, they've never used Weibo before, they came specifically for Xiao Fengque, they probably don't understand anything about bringing others into it. Don't be too sensitive.]

[I'm sensitive? So the character being put down isn't your favorite, right? Easy to talk when it doesn't affect you.]

[Uh uh uh with such hot temper, take some Huoxiang Zhengqi dripping pills to regulate yourself. Listing data is called putting down? What, would you only be satisfied if we put mosaics on your favorite's face?]

[Don't know, anyway it's not my favorite who flopped four times out of four adaptations. Wishing the fifth adaptation a disastrous failure~]

[Right side is a dead person, original poster is a good baby, no need to pay attention to them. //Don't know, anyway it's not my favorite who flopped four times out of four adaptations. Wishing the fifth adaptation a disastrous failure~]

[Getting defensive already? Isn't it fact that Xiao Fengque killed four projects? Little Lame Phoenix is your name, flop is your destiny.]

[You're the one who's defensive, right? Xiao Fengque killed four projects but stayed popular for fifty years, your favorite got ten adaptations but still can't be found anywhere~]

This Weibo post received several hundred reposts, and Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng and Yi Tianzhao were also @ed several hundred times. Aside from some strange arguments and fights, most reactions from fans and onlookers were surprise, emotion, and heartfelt sentiment.

Even Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng was moved.

Regardless, learning that a character she created was so deeply loved felt quite wonderful.

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng's private messages were exploding, mostly containing opinions about the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion movie, with some expressing comfort and affection. Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng didn't choose to ignore them, but instead opened and read each one.

On the other side, 103 watched Shang Yechu tapping rapidly on her phone screen and fell silent.

The system rarely felt surprise—but at this moment, witnessing with her own eyes Shang Yechu become a "big fan" and "twenty-year veteran fan" in the Xiao Fengque book fan circle in just three days, stirring up trouble within the circle, even manipulating fan community trends, guiding fans to collectively approach the original author with opinions...

103, even 103 who usually had zero presence and seemed almost dead, couldn't help but feel astonished.

Perhaps Shang Yechu's usual image of desperately filming was too deeply ingrained, 103 had always thought Shang Yechu was an acting-obsessed drama fanatic. Now seeing the other party stirring up storms on the internet, 103 actually felt a strange sense of unfamiliarity.

While switching between alternate accounts to stir up trouble, Shang Yechu sighed: "As expected, Weibo is still so easy to start fights on."

"What are you doing?" 103 couldn't help saying, "You're using alternate accounts to argue with yourself?"

"To be precise, this is called fan manipulation," Shang Yechu corrected. "Let me tell you a truth—the most valuable fans are all manipulated out."

"..."

103 said: "You—didn't you want to take the skilled actor route?"

"Yes. What about it?" Shang Yechu didn't even look up.

"What is the relationship between these things and being a skilled actor—?" 103's mechanical tone carried a rare hint of confusion.

"Skilled actors also need opportunities to showcase their skills, right? If you run as an extra your whole life, who would know you have skill?" Shang Yechu clicked send. "Right now I'm creating opportunities to showcase my skills for myself."

"Manipulating fan communities, scheming for others' roles, scheming against the original author and director, even scheming against others' 'love'?" 103's tone was indifferent. "Aren't your methods for seeking opportunities slightly unscrupulous?"

"..." Shang Yechu looked surprised at the void for a moment, then suddenly burst into loud laughter.

"Hahahahahahahahahahaha..." Shang Yechu laughed until tears came out. She hadn't laughed so heartily in a long time, even forgetting to switch accounts to fight with people.

"What are you laughing at." After Shang Yechu stopped laughing, 103 said.

"Nothing, just thought the word love... pfft, sounds too ridiculous coming from your mouth." Shang Yechu wiped the corner of her eye. "Do you understand what love is? Hearing this from you is even more ridiculous than Li Yi claiming he can act!"

103 paused: "I truly don't know what that is. But that doesn't prevent me from thinking your actions are despicable."

Xiao Fengque was a string of characters, and 103 was a string of data. The two were quite similar in essence. Therefore, regarding Shang Yechu using Xiao Fengque fans' emotions to pressure the director and original author, 103 felt slightly empathetic.

"I like this about you." Shang Yechu completely disregarded 103's belittling words. "You only speak the truth—you're like a mirror."

Truthfully reflecting my despicableness. Shang Yechu didn't say this part out loud.

"Let me tell you a second truth." Shang Yechu said while continuing to type.

"Here, love is a commodity, directors are commodities, screenwriters are commodities... I'm also a commodity. Everyone needs to be calculated, then placed on the shelves." Shang Yechu's gaze was clear as a mirror, her smile graceful.

"Of course, on the shelves, love is more noble. Much more expensive than people like us."

Chapter 58: The Storm Is Brewing

Yi Tianzhao was going crazy lately.

As a director on the government payroll, Yi Tianzhao took her work extremely seriously. Being a celebrated Dragon Central Television director with multiple achievements under her belt, she carried the pride of a true filmmaker in her heart.

The Heavenly Secrets Pavilion project was something Yi Tianzhao had personally guaranteed to her superiors when fighting for it. Because Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon was also part of her youthful memories. Yi Tianzhao hoped she could personally bring this story to life.

For this purpose, Yi Tianzhao had been running around everywhere, assembling a cast of top-tier actors within budget constraints. She had even swallowed her pride and used personal connections to persuade action star Yang Huanyi to join.

Yi Tianzhao was determined to personally break "Xiao Fengque's Curse."

Who could have predicted that whether it was Yi Tianzhao hitting a streak of bad luck or Xiao Fengque's curse being too powerful, misfortunes had been piling up one after another since she took on this project.

First came Yang Huanyi being double-booked. The other party hadn't mentioned this initially, only bringing it up during contract signing. Since this was a big name she had personally invited, Yi Tianzhao had no choice but to grit her teeth and bear it.

Then Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng, also known as Teacher Jiang Aihua, somehow pulled some strings to get a connected individual into the production, insisting on slotting him in as the male lead.

According to Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng, this connected person was the grandson of her closest friend, essentially like her own grandson. She had promised this old friend decades ago that she would let this grandson play Xie An.

Teacher Jiang Aihua's grandson only had good looks going for him, while his acting skills were quite mediocre. Fortunately, he possessed impressive martial arts abilities. The grandson's fight scenes were crisp and fluid like flowing water; he could split bricks and stones barehanded, and during his audition, he even kicked and broke Yi Tianzhao's rosewood office desk with a single whip kick.

This was martial arts fiction after all—what kind of martial arts story would it be without actual martial arts? Taking his genuine skills into account, Yi Tianzhao reluctantly overlooked the grandson's painfully bad acting and accepted him.

The subsequent casting went smoothly, even discovering one or two exceptionally talented newcomers among the extras. Yi Tianzhao had thought "Xiao Fengque's Curse" would end there—

Then, her mentality completely collapsed.

First was Li Yi—that connected grandson of Teacher Jiang Aihua. His acting was so abysmal it offended both gods and men, with one cameraman actually bursting into laughter while watching him perform!

Then came the double-booked Yang Huanyi. Her condition was terribly poor, acting every day as if she were clocking in for work—while acting was indeed work for performers, you couldn't bring that bureaucratic feeling into the actual performance!

Watching the exhausted, slick, and lazy woman on the monitor, Yi Tianzhao hardly recognized her as Xiao Fengque. She felt immensely grateful that Teacher Jiang Aihua was busy revising the script and didn't have time to visit the set during live filming, otherwise the seventy-year-old lady might have literally been angered into a heart attack.

Even in her specialized action scenes, Yang Huanyi started cutting corners!

Dangerous City Envoy—just reading these four words gave away what kind of movie this was.

As a suspense investigative action film, "action" naturally comprised a significant portion. Given Wei Yize's capabilities, he certainly wouldn't be handling those two characters. The person carrying the action scenes was precisely Yang Huanyi.

Dangerous City Envoy was a theatrical film, which in Yang Huanyi's eyes was countless levels superior to the television film Heavenly Secrets Pavilion. If not for wanting to connect with Dragon Central Television's network, Yang Huanyi wouldn't have touched this outdated script adapted into an old-fashioned martial arts film.

Therefore, Yang Huanyi poured the vast majority of her energy into Dangerous City Envoy. Whether dramatic scenes or action sequences, she gave them her absolute all. No matter how many times the director called for retakes, Yang Huanyi never complained, diligently performing again; no matter how dangerous the fight scenes or how difficult the stunts, Yang Huanyi performed them personally, absolutely refusing to use stunt doubles.

Such performances earned Yang Huanyi widespread praise, with her team even preparing to purchase promotional articles ready for release during Dangerous City Envoy's marketing period.

But human energy ultimately has limits. Investing ninety percent of her energy into Dangerous City Envoy naturally left only ten percent for Heavenly Secrets Pavilion; filming three action sequences for Dangerous City Envoy then coming to Heavenly Secrets Pavilion's set to film fight scenes naturally left her drained; even getting more retakes in the Dangerous City Envoy crew inevitably added weariness and irritability that accidentally carried over into Heavenly Secrets Pavilion...

Yi Tianzhao hadn't personally witnessed Yang Huanyi filming Dangerous City Envoy, but from the other's performance, she could clearly see where her priorities lay.

Yi Tianzhao's heart gradually grew cold.

Heavenly Secrets Pavilion had now become a chicken rib—tasteless when eaten yet regrettable to discard. Yi Tianzhao's once boundless passion was drowned in exhaustion, leaving her only wanting to safely complete the remaining portions and hand over the finished product.

Then, at this very moment, Weibo exploded again.

Could someone please tell her why hundreds of people suddenly flooded her Weibo comments begging her to faithfully adapt the original Xiao Fengque?

[Director Yi! Please take good care of our Ah Feng! [bow][bow][bow]]

The comment included an exquisitely drawn fan art illustration of Xiao Fengque.

[Does Director Yi also like Ah Feng? [heart peeking]]

[Please treat Ah Feng well!]

[#PhoenixTowersReachAzureSkies,AutumnLeavesWhisperYourName# Director Yi should check out this hashtag!]

Some even used KuiKui Who Loves Three-Five█Fengbao Devotee's Weibo images to create memes.

[Forever loving Xiao Fengque.jpg]

To be honest, these comments all seemed quite friendly and adorable. But could someone tell her why looking at them made her scalp tingle?

Her private messages were equally bustling. Numerous book fans enthusiastically flooded Yi Tianzhao's inbox, attempting to engage in warm, friendly exchanges with the director.

Yi Tianzhao didn't read them one by one like Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng did, because she was already sweating bullets.

In 2016, fan circles had developed basic procedures for protecting their interests, but the large-scale fan campaigns, review control, voting manipulation, and "squeaky wheel gets the grease" tactics that would emerge years later were still quite novel at this time. Top-tier celebrity fans might have been somewhat familiar with these methods, but fictional character fans absolutely didn't play by these rules.

Moreover, neither Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng nor Yi Tianzhao had ever been targets of fan circle activism before!

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng went without saying—she was a respected veteran martial arts master, and few book or character fans would ever attack the original author.

Yi Tianzhao was a government employee. She held Dragon Central Television's iron rice bowl, shielded by the government's iron protection. No matter how blind various celebrity fans might be, none would dare charge at Dragon Central Television's gates.

When had either of them ever witnessed such tactics?

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng found it quite interesting, but Yi Tianzhao felt differently.

She had already detected the scent of impending storm winds from the screens full of warm words and polite language.

Chapter 59: Custard Lava Bursting Milk Shortbread

Compared to fan rights protection, what troubled Yi Tianzhao even more was Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng's attitude.

As Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng's first work, "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" indeed had many slightly immature aspects in its plot, despite its elegant and unrestrained writing style. There were even some clichéd plot points and logical flaws that hadn't completely broken away from convention.

These issues had been thoroughly discussed over the decades, and quite a few people hoped Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng would undertake a major revision. Now with "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" being adapted for screen, these problems were being rehashed.

Three cobblers with their wits combined surpass Zhuge Liang—with hundreds of fans offering suggestions, there were bound to be some constructive ones among them.

Unfortunately, Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng took these suggestions and implemented them into her script.

Yi Tianzhao: "..."

On one side was Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng constantly revising the script and striving for perfection, while on the other was Yang Huanyi with her tight schedule, carelessly completing filming tasks. Caught between the two, Yi Tianzhao felt like a poor paperhanger, patching here and mending there, yet still letting drafts through everywhere.

Yi Tianzhao really wanted to persuade Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng that there was no need to keep revising the script—Yang Huanyi wouldn't follow it anyway. She had already passed most of the lines with many words to Li Yi.

Yi Tianzhao really wanted to persuade Yang Huanyi to put in more effort—didn't she know that what she was refusing to perform were scenes Teacher Jiang had carefully considered, weighing each word for days before finalizing?

Yi Tianzhao really wanted to slap herself—why had she invited Yang Huanyi to play the female lead in the first place? Didn't she know that high status doesn't match low status, and a small temple can't accommodate a great Buddha?

Adding to the watchful eyes of the original work's fans, Yi Tianzhao could be said to be besieged on all sides. In just one week, she had lost ten pounds.

—

Compared to Yi Tianzhao's overwhelming troubles, Shang Yechu's recent days could be described as quite leisurely.

Shang Yechu only had one scene left in "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion"—the dance from her first appearance. Since that scene required set construction, it was tentatively scheduled to film in a week.

Shang Yechu went to Du Xiaotang's place every morning to practice dancing on time, then spent afternoons curled up in the bookstore, reading "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" volume by volume.

Today was slightly different though. Instead of staying in the bookstore, Shang Yechu was killing time sitting in a dessert shop.

Out of cautious consideration, Shang Yechu had bought all the copies of "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" that she used for photos.

During the golden age of martial arts novels, pocket books were popular—books about the size of clothing pockets, with slightly smaller fonts, and relatively rough paper quality and printing. These books were inexpensive, portable, and convenient for people to read anytime, anywhere.

The "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" that Shang Yechu was currently reading was the pocket book version. Compact and exquisite, the cover featured Xiao Fengque dressed in men's green clothing.

When Li Yi arrived at the dessert shop as promised, he saw Shang Yechu using a knife to cut into a molten lava custard bun, with a copy of "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" lying face down on the table.

Seeing Li Yi had arrived, Shang Yechu stopped cutting the bun and raised her eyebrows, "You're very punctual."

Li Yi wore a black baseball cap, a white T-shirt under a black hooded printed sweatshirt, and brown jeans. He carried a semi-new canvas backpack. The whole look gave off youthful energy, fresh and handsome, like a college boy just out of campus.

Shang Yechu immediately complimented his fashion sense: "After getting used to seeing you in period costumes, modern clothes are quite pleasing to the eye too."

Li Yi unabashedly showed a very sunny smile: "Really? You look quite... quite..."

Li Yi looked at Shang Yechu's cheap street stall clothes and "quite"-ed for a long time without saying anything substantial.

The environment Li Yi grew up in made it impossible for him to praise Shang Yechu's outfit against his conscience, so he simply said, "You're absolutely radiant today."

Shang Yechu accepted this praise without blushing or heartbeat, "What do you want to eat? Scan the code and order yourself."

After saying this, Shang Yechu picked up her knife again and continued cutting her bun.

The golden crispy bun skin burst open under the knife, the soft white bread interior neatly sliced through to reveal creamy yellow custard lava.

The fluffy, soft bread was still warm, emitting tempting aromas.

Li Yi watched with envious eyes and couldn't help saying, "What's that you're having? I want one too."

"Custard Lava Molten Milk Crispy Bun," Shang Yechu recited this embarrassing name without changing expression, "There are packaged ones and freshly baked ones. Mine is freshly baked, but you have to wait quite a while."

"Then I'll have the freshly baked one too." Li Yi took out his phone and started scanning to order, "Do you come to this shop often? What's good to drink here?"

"This is my first time here too." Shang Yechu speared a piece of bread with her fork, "But if you're asking about drinks..."

"Shang Yechu!"

A voice sounded behind Li Yi. He turned around in surprise and saw a tall figure walking toward the table where he and Shang Yechu were sitting.

Li Yi didn't know the newcomer. He slightly furrowed his brows and looked at Shang Yechu, "Your friend?"

Shang Yechu nodded, put down her knife and fork, stood up and said, "Let me introduce you, this is my friend from school, her name is Sheng Wenzhi. Sheng Wenzhi, this is Li Yi, my friend from the film crew."

Sheng Wenzhi's face stiffened slightly, then she revealed a standard social smile and extended her hand to Li Yi, "Pleased to meet you."

Li Yi also stood up, symbolically touched her hand, then quickly withdrew his.

"Have a seat." Seeing the two had completed their greetings, Shang Yechu said.

Before sitting down, Shang Yechu looked at Sheng Wenzhi's outfit today with some appreciation.

Sheng Wenzhi was dressed very fashionably today, wearing a soft black turtleneck sweater with pleated wide-leg pants underneath, covered by a long camel-colored men's trench coat. The whole look was indescribably intellectual and capable—clearly androgynous in style, yet with a restrained feminine charm.

Both Sheng Wenzhi and Li Yi were dressed quite well today. The unfashionable Shang Yechu sat between them and for the first time began to doubt her own taste.

Maybe I should learn from Sheng Wenzhi later to improve my fashion sense or something. Shang Yechu thought silently. She didn't have money now, so clothing and appearance naturally had to take a back seat. When she had money later, she couldn't let people mock her unfashionable taste anymore.

After the three sat down, Sheng Wenzhi critically sized up Li Yi a couple of times, then turned to Shang Yechu and said, "You asked me which dessert shop was good, and said you wanted me to meet your new friend—is it him?"

The disdain in this statement wasn't even hidden. The fork in Shang Yechu's hand slipped, making a harsh sound as it scraped across the plate.

Sheng Wenzhi's emotional intelligence, whether back then or now, remained consistently suffocating. Opening her mouth meant offending people.

Shang Yechu paused, then naturally changed the subject: "Yes. What good drinks does this shop have? I'm thirsty."

Saying this, Shang Yechu pushed her phone's ordering page to Sheng Wenzhi: "Help me choose."

Sheng Wenzhi choked slightly, stopped talking, and lowered her head to select drinks.

Li Yi coldly observed their interaction, but when Shang Yechu looked over, he immediately revealed a brilliant smile: "You two have such a good relationship."

"..." She and Sheng Wenzhi had a good relationship? Shang Yechu almost felt sick hearing that.

She had called Sheng Wenzhi out mainly to prevent awkwardness. Li Yi was about her age and they were collaborating on the same film—Shang Yechu was afraid of creating any ambiguous misunderstandings.

Actors working on the same project should maintain pure friendship—that was Shang Yechu's view.

Therefore, calling a "sister" along was quite necessary. Although she and Sheng Wenzhi weren't exactly sisters, having the formalities complete was enough.

Sheng Wenzhi snorted coldly, clearly also disapproving of Li Yi's words.

Shang Yechu said shamelessly, "It's alright, after all she's my best fri—"

"Chosen." Sheng Wenzhi stiffly interrupted Shang Yechu, "See which one you like?"

Shang Yechu glanced at what Sheng Wenzhi had selected—all high-sugar, high-calorie drinks—and couldn't help feeling strange: "Is this shop good at making sweet things? Why did you choose all 'extra sweet' flavors?"

Shang Yechu naturally liked this, but could Li Yi drink this kind of flavor?

"Based on your preferences." Sheng Wenzhi naturally pulled over Shang Yechu's plate and started cutting the bread for her, "You've liked sweet things since middle school."

"Alright." Since Li Yi was Shang Yechu's guest, she naturally couldn't just neglect him, so Shang Yechu had to push her phone to Li Yi, "Look at these, is there anything you like?"

Sheng Wenzhi frowned slightly.

Chapter 60: Action Scene

"I'll have this one." Li Yi actually ordered the weird drink that Sheng Wenzhi had chosen.

Shang Yechu could tell Sheng Wenzhi didn't like Li Yi, so she contemplated using food to shut Sheng Wenzhi's mouth. "What would you like to eat? It's faster to order everything together now."

Sheng Wenzhi only ordered an unsweetened lemon water.

The lemon water arrived quickly. Sheng Wenzhi poked at the glass straw and took a small sip.

Shang Yechu had important matters to discuss with Li Yi, so she started with an opening question: "Don't you have any scenes to film today?"

"Nope." Li Yi propped his chin on his hand. "Most of my scenes are with Teacher Yang. Since she's busy today, I ended up with free time."

"Oh..." Shang Yechu drew out the sound slightly, showing a concerned expression. "By the way, is your arm still hurting?"

"Huh?" Li Yi looked confused. "What arm?"

Sheng Wenzhi stopped drinking her lemon water and looked at Shang Yechu. "What arm?"

Shang Yechu gently patted her own elbow. "I saw you bump into a tree trunk here during your fight scene the day before yesterday. The skin around the elbow is quite thin—did you get injured?"

"Oh, that." Li Yi flashed a bright smile. "Just a little scratch, doesn't hurt at all."

Sheng Wenzhi interjected, "What does he play in the movie? A thug? Bodyguard?"

"Neither, he's an assassin." Li Yi's smile was brilliantly untroubled. "The kind who can kill four skinny, weak men with one punch—"

Sheng Wenzhi's straw slipped, and she lifted her eyes to glance at Li Yi.

Shang Yechu didn't want to waste time on pointless matters, so she took advantage of their bickering to tap her phone twice.

Sheng Wenzhi's phone screen lit up. Unlocking it, she saw only five words in the message bar: ■Got business, don't interrupt.■

Sender: Little Leaf.

"..."

Sheng Wenzhi glanced at Li Yi, then lowered her head and stayed silent.

Shang Yechu continued expressing concern for Li Yi's health: "During yesterday's fight scene, your leg seemed uncomfortable? I thought your gait looked a bit strange."

"Ah?" Li Yi paused for a moment before understanding. "No—that was a leg technique, um, how to put it, a precursor to a certain footwork."

"Leg technique? Footwork?" Shang Yechu asked with interest. "Did you practice martial arts as a child?"

Li Yi didn't know how to explain this to Shang Yechu, so he answered vaguely, "Yeah, practiced for many years."

"No wonder your fight scenes are so crisp," Shang Yechu praised. "They're very pleasing to watch. Don't laugh, but I even tried imitating a couple moves."

"What did you imitate?" Li Yi showed a curious expression.

"This one." As she spoke, Shang Yechu extended one hand and used her fingers to mimic a kicking motion. "Whoosh—just like that, flying out."

Surprisingly, Li Yi actually recognized which move Shang Yechu's finger dance represented. Seeing this, he shook his head. "I'd advise you not to imitate that move."

"Oh? Why?" Shang Yechu teased. "Secret technique?"

"Not exactly." Li Yi's expression and tone were completely sincere. "It took me five years to master that move."

Shang Yechu, who had just taken a bite of bread, choked and nearly suffocated.

Sheng Wenzhi snorted with laughter.

"You find that funny?" Li Yi raised an eyebrow.

Sheng Wenzhi was about to speak when Shang Yechu shot her a warning look, making her close her mouth again.

Li Yi said nonchalantly, "I noticed a while ago that your health isn't great. This move, if you haven't trained since childhood, can really damage your body. You really shouldn't do it anymore."

Shang Yechu struggled to swallow the bread in her mouth. Just then, the toast and tea Li Yi had ordered finally arrived.

Li Yi picked up a knife and began cutting the bread, his expression completely focused.

Shang Yechu suddenly noticed a detail.

Li Yi's hands as he cut the bread were remarkably rough, completely mismatched with his refined face. Each finger had calluses of varying sizes, shapes, and thicknesses. When he speared the bread with his fork, his upturned palm also revealed a layer of thin calluses.

Li Yi was undoubtedly from a wealthy family—his daily behavior and speech proved that. But these hands...

Shang Yechu's eyelid twitched.

Shang Yechu had invited Li Yi out today originally intending to subtly ask him for tips about fight scenes.

Li Yi's fight scenes were completely different from any that Shang Yechu had studied or watched—clean, crisp, powerful, without any unnecessary movements. Every punch, palm strike, and technique carried a palpable killing intent.

You could say that when acting in dramatic scenes, Li Yi seemed like a savage who had stumbled into civilized society; but when filming fight scenes, he was more Xie An than Xie An himself.

Since Shang Yechu wanted to play Xiao Fengque, she naturally coveted Li Yi's martial skills.

Li Yi looked like a pretty boy, with a temperament that was too gentle and harmless. Shang Yechu had never considered the possibility that he might have "trained martial arts since childhood."

Given his apparent wealthy playboy and connections-based approach, Shang Yechu had naturally assumed he had hired some professional martial arts instructor before filming and crammed to learn these skills.

One-on-one professional martial arts instruction in the entertainment industry could cost anywhere from one hundred thousand to several million. Even if Shang Yechu sold herself for parts, she couldn't afford it. Shang Yechu wanted to glean some tips from Li Yi—even a word or half-sentence of advice would be immensely valuable to someone starting from zero like her.

Before Yang Huanyi stepped down from the role, Shang Yechu absolutely couldn't show even the slightest covetousness toward the female lead position—if anyone discovered any hint of her ambitions, she would face severe backlash.

That's why Shang Yechu hadn't discussed fight scenes with Li Yi on set, but instead invited him out and broached the topic through casual conversation as friends.

But now, looking at Li Yi's hands and combining that with his earlier statement about "practicing for five years," Shang Yechu suddenly realized what a serious mistake she had made!

Who said pretty boys couldn't practice martial arts since childhood?

Who said people with connections were necessarily uneducated and untalented?

Who said wealthy playboys' main occupation had to be eating, drinking, and having fun?

Shang Yechu deeply regretted not observing Li Yi more carefully before. But then again, who normally stares at people's hands during conversations...

Shang Yechu refused to give up: "System, I remember there's a combat power stat in the system panel, right? Can you see other people's combat power?"

"Yes."

"What's Li Yi's combat power?"

103 paused before saying, "Normal people's combat power generally fluctuates between 10 and 40."

"Eh?" Shang Yechu was somewhat confused. "Am I not normal? Why am I at 0?"

"Your health is poor," 103 said. "When your physical condition is slightly better—not staying up late, eating normally, exercising regularly—your combat power has reached 8 or 9 points before. As for why you always see 0, it's because those times are too rare."

"Fine." Shang Yechu stopped dwelling on that issue. "What's Li Yi's?"

103 continued, "Sheng Wenzhi sitting next to you has a combat power of fifty, which is already quite good."

"Eh?" Shang Yechu was surprised. "When did she practice martial arts?" She had thought Sheng Wenzhi was as weak as her.

"Female action star Yang Huanyi has a combat power around sixty-five. Don't think this number is low, because action stars' fight scenes prioritize visual appeal over practical effectiveness. This sixty-five is already enough for Yang Huanyi to dominate among action stars."

Shang Yechu wasn't surprised—fight scenes on screen and real combat were two different things. On screen, you had flashy moves and extended clashes, punches that looked powerful and crisp; while real-life "fight scenes" involved pots, pans, and groups of thugs fighting like angry chickens. Nobody would want to watch the latter in films.

"Alright." Shang Yechu took a sip of her sweet, rich cheese foam milk tea. "After all that buildup, how far is my fight scene ability from reaching Li Yi's level? What exactly is Li Yi's combat power?"

103 fell silent.

"Speak." Shang Yechu said. "I'm not afraid of being discouraged."

103 briefly uttered a number: "130."

Shang Yechu: "..."

"Cough cough cough cough cough! Cough cough! Cough cough!"

Shang Yechu suddenly started coughing violently, as if she were about to cough up her lungs!

"What's wrong? Choked?" Li Yi quickly stood up from his seat, wanting to pat Shang Yechu's back.

While coughing, Shang Yechu fearfully dodged Li Yi's iron palm. She was afraid Li Yi might accidentally kill her with one pat.

Sheng Wenzhi glanced at Li Yi and began soothing Shang Yechu's breathing: "Why drink so hastily? If you like it, take another one home."

While coughing and gasping violently, Shang Yechu waved at Li Yi, struggling to say, "Sorry, Li Yi—cough! I'm not feeling well, I need to—"

"I'll go with you." Li Yi immediately said.

"No, I need to—go to the restroom to wash my face first." Shang Yechu pulled out a tissue to wipe her tears.

Li Yi paused awkwardly and withdrew his hand.

Shang Yechu had lost interest in Li Yi and didn't want to waste any more time with this superhuman man. His path to fight scenes was completely different from Shang Yechu's—if she tried learning his methods, she was afraid she might kill herself in the process.

Shang Yechu wanted to call Sheng Wenzhi to the restroom to discuss how to get rid of Li Yi. She gave Sheng Wenzhi a meaningful look: "Come with me?"

Li Yi showed a strange expression: "You two? Together?"

Sheng Wenzhi's face stiffened. Biting her lemon water straw, she squeezed out a few words through her teeth: "I'm not going."

No sense of timing, that one.

Shang Yechu had to go to the restroom alone. After hastily washing her face, she stared at the mirror, beginning to worry.

After a long while, 103 suddenly heard Shang Yechu say: "System, can I take out a loan?"

Chapter 61: The Substitute

"Loan?" 103 guessed immediately what Shang Yechu meant. "Loan combat power?"

"Right." Shang Yechu said painfully, "Even high-interest loans are fine, like borrow one repay three or something..."

"No." 103 said coldly, "There are no such rules."

Shang Yechu's eyes rolled around, "Then what if I encounter danger? Like suddenly meeting some thug who I must defeat to stay safe or something? Combat power below 10 points can't save my life."

103 paused, very reluctantly saying, "According to regulations, the system can forcibly boost your combat power in such situations. But the scenario you described is extremely rare, with minimal probability of occurring."

Shang Yechu's eyes lit up, selectively ignoring the latter part: "Forcibly boost? For free?"

"How could that be." 103 said coldly, "Of course there would be serious consequences. Your body would be weak for a long time, bedridden and unable to eat or drink. But simultaneously, you must replenish the boosted combat power with 1.5 times the weight within one month, otherwise—"

"Otherwise what?"

"You'll die, or lose half your life if you don't." 103 said word by word, "On the 31st day, the system will forcibly drain your weight to make up the difference."

103's tone was chilling, carrying an unquestionable quality: "Assuming you exchange 70 points of combat power, 1.5 times means 105 kilograms of weight. Even if you eat day and night without stopping, you couldn't consume that much. That means on the 31st day, you'll have dozens of kilograms drained from you all at once, physically turning into a dried corpse."

Shang Yechu mentally moved her finger, placing this method into the backup options area.

After long-term adaptation, Shang Yechu had developed a deep understanding of the system. She had even explored certain tricks.

For example, the system was named "Weight Exchange System," yet when determining what counted as "weight," the criteria were quite mechanical.

According to common sense, food only becomes part of someone's "weight" after turning into fat and flesh, otherwise it's just some food paste stored in the stomach.

But in the system's view, as long as something enters Shang Yechu's stomach, it counts as Shang Yechu's "weight." During exchanges, stomach contents would be the first to be exchanged as excess weight.

Shang Yechu had once conducted an experiment. She precisely measured her weight value on the system panel down to grams, then held a mouthful of water in her mouth.

In the system's judgment, while holding this water, Shang Yechu's weight showed no significant change. But the moment Shang Yechu swallowed the water, her weight immediately increased by forty grams.

This meant that anything "entering" Shang Yechu's body interior could be considered part of her weight.

This was undoubtedly a huge loophole, which Shang Yechu had discovered early with this artificial intelligence judgment. She had even tried to exploit system loopholes, quickly exchanging stomach contents after finishing a meal, then immediately starting the next meal when her stomach emptied.

Theoretically, using this method, Shang Yechu could eat continuously day and night like a perpetual motion machine, rapidly exchanging values endlessly. But theory remained theory, with numerous difficulties in practical operation.

First physiologically, Shang Yechu's teeth and stomach couldn't support this eating method. Chewing things for too long would strain her teeth and cheeks; food disappearing with a poof just as it entered her stomach, with gastric acid just secreted, violated human body principles.

Second psychologically, Shang Yechu quickly discovered that with this eating method, she would rapidly develop aversion towards all foods, even physiological rejection. Making herself develop anorexia was undoubtedly killing the goose that lays the golden eggs, so Shang Yechu soon stopped trying.

Finally, there were cautious considerations. Shang Yechu didn't know whether this judgment method was a bug or a reasonable judgment conforming to system rules. If the latter was fine, but if the former, if she became greedy, eating and exchanging endlessly, and eventually the system or something else discovered the abnormality and fixed this bug, that would be more loss than gain.

There was a difference between one full meal and every meal being full. Therefore, Shang Yechu intentionally defined her daily "weight" exchange range between one kilogram and two kilograms. Actually this was already a lot—you should know, normal people gaining half a kilogram of weight per day was considered fast already.

Actually, what Shang Yechu lacked most right now wasn't necessarily combat power, but the ability to make fight scenes look good.

"Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" filming was nearing its end, with the second part's production start and casting at least a month away.

Assuming Shang Yechu started exchanging two combat power points daily from today, she could reach over 60 points in a month—this was already sufficient.

But if she only had combat power without visual appeal, merely throwing old-fashioned punches before the camera, even if she smashed the crane and lens, neither Yi Tianzhao nor the audience would approve of her, at most thinking she had lost her mind.

Shang Yechu sighed.

Shang Yechu washed her face, went out to finish the remaining food, then hastily ended this gathering. Li Yi was already useless, Sheng Wenzhi was useless from the start. Being with these two was completely wasting time.

The ungrateful Shang Yechu had already set her sights on the next target.

"Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" filming set.

When Shang Yechu arrived at the set, the crew was filming the scene where the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion master and Xiao Fengque fight.

This plot was a flashback, telling about when Xiao Fengque first arrived at Heavenly Secrets Pavilion, and the Pavilion master tested her skills.

The Heavenly Secrets Pavilion master was played by former period drama handsome man Jiang Erjing. He was no longer young, but fortunately had outstanding acting skills, with a spirited demeanor when looking around.

Shang Yechu certainly wasn't here to appreciate Jiang Erjing's acting, but to admire his fight scenes.

Jiang Erjing's fight scene style was completely different from Li Yi's—graceful as startled swan, vigorous as swimming dragon, with a unique elegant and handsome beauty.

Actually from a visual perspective, Jiang Erjing's fight scenes were more beautiful. But this set of skills had accumulated decades of experience, making Shang Yechu worry she couldn't learn it, which was why she prioritized extending the olive branch to Li Yi.

Martial arts choreographer He Yuan was explaining movements to Jiang Erjing and Yang Huanyi. For this scene, the two needed to first fly down from the roof, fly into the bamboo forest, then fight within the bamboo forest.

With tight filming schedule, after explanations finished, crew members quickly came forward to attach wires to Jiang Erjing and Yang Huanyi.

Yang Huanyi glanced at the crew member busy around her waist, then signaled to her assistant with her eyes.

The assistant immediately understood, walking to Yi Tianzhao's side and whispering: "Director Yi, Sister Yang wants to use a body double for this scene."

"Body double?" Yi Tianzhao frowned, "This scene was supposed to be filmed yesterday according to the original plan. Moreover, Teacher Yang said at the time she would personally perform, no body double needed."

The assistant said with difficulty: "Sister Yang has been on wires all morning, rolled on cement ground over ten times, her body really hurts..."

Yi Tianzhao almost wanted to laugh—willing to go through fire and water in "Dangerous City Envoy," but unwilling to even hang from wires in "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion"?

"Xiao Li, bring the body double actor." Yi Tianzhao didn't say much, just glanced faintly at Yang Huanyi. The latter uncomfortably avoided her gaze.

The crew's female martial arts double was a robust woman around Yang Huanyi's age, with slightly taller and larger build than Yang Huanyi. After arriving on set, she silently took the wires and attached them herself, appearing very experienced.

Yang Huanyi examined the female martial arts double twice, her expression somewhat displeased. The assistant noticed this and quickly approached: "Sister Yang, what's wrong?"

Yang Huanyi whispered something. After a while, the assistant ran back to Yi Tianzhao with a distressed face: "Director Yi, is there a slimmer body double?"

"What?" Yi Tianzhao showed an unbelievable expression.

"A slimmer body double." The assistant said carefully, "This body double's figure differs too much from Sister Yang's, viewers can tell it's a double at a glance."

Yi Tianzhao could no longer suppress her anger, sneering coldly: "She's not ashamed of acting like this, but afraid viewers will know she uses a body double? Tell her, this is the only one, take it or leave it!"

The assistant almost cried: "Director Yi... I, you, ah!"

"Director Yi, I can give it a try."

A clear female voice came through. The assistant felt like hearing heavenly music, turning to look, then froze again.

The newcomer was actually that flower queen actor whom Sister Yang had praised for good acting!

"You?" Yi Tianzhao was still indignant, her tone not very good either, "What do you want to try?"

Shang Yechu slightly curved her eyes, her smile gentle and harmless: "I've worked as a martial arts double in other crews before."

"You've been a martial arts double?" Yi Tianzhao suddenly raised her voice, then became aware of the surrounding gazes, calming her voice, "Show me a couple moves."

Shang Yechu made a kicking motion, nearly kicking Yang Huanyi's assistant.

"Hey!" The assistant dodged in fright, "Be careful!"

Shang Yechu quickly stopped her movement, "Sorry sorry, are you okay? Apologies apologies..."

"No no no." The assistant patted her arm, "Just got startled."

Shang Yechu turned back to Yi Tianzhao, apologetically saying: "Director Yi, I can't really demonstrate here... How about this, I'll fly on wires for you to see, then you'll know if I'm suitable."

Chapter 62: Martial Arts

"Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" is a film intended to fill prime time slots on Dragon Central Television's sixth channel, and not a single moment can be delayed.

Yi Tianzhao glanced at Yang Huanyi, seeing that the other had already returned to her recliner to rest with closed eyes, and couldn't help feeling angry inside. She's so carefree!

Treating a dead horse as if it were still alive, Yi Tianzhao nodded to Shang Yechu: "Alright, go up and give it a try. But if you perform poorly and waste everyone's time, I won't let you off easily."

Anyway, there were wires supporting her, and the crew's safety measures were beyond reproach. The worst outcome would be Shang Yechu flailing around while suspended mid-air—embarrassing, yes, but not fatal.

Shang Yechu hadn't rehearsed this scene. Yi Tianzhao brought martial arts choreographer He Yuan before Shang Yechu to briefly explain the key action points.

He Yuan didn't believe for a second that Shang Yechu had any martial arts foundation. Although he explained in considerable detail, deep down he was waiting to see this young woman make a fool of herself.

This youngster probably thought that swinging around a couple of times while suspended on wires meant a fight scene was done—what an amateur!

Human genes inherently fear danger, and heights are one such danger. Hanging on steel wires, neither reaching heaven nor touching earth, genetic fears are amplified to the extreme!

Without professional training, whether it's a seven-foot-tall man or a three-year-old girl, anyone hoisted up would wet their pants. Unless they're death-defying lunatics or mentally ill patients—but in this world, who isn't afraid of death?

Furthermore, even if this slender young girl were recklessly bold, what about after flying down from the wires? Would she know how to fight?

Jiang Erjing is a seasoned professional. If this young Shang girl treated the esteemed veteran to some monkey-scratching or octopus-dancing antics, how ridiculous would that be? Would "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" become a comedy?

Despite his endless internal criticisms, He Yuan showed none of it on his face. Instead, he explained every key movement, positioning, and fighting rhythm to Shang Yechu with utmost detail, appearing like a truly dedicated teacher.

Let her make a scene. From the lead actors to the director, everyone in this film is just going through the motions. If he explained everything thoroughly and clearly, and this young Shang actress made a fool of herself later, it wouldn't be his fault.

After explaining meticulously, He Yuan added one final reminder: "Can you remember all that? If not, have the script supervisor give you positioning cues."

After all, he only said it once—no one has a perfect auditory memory.

Shang Yechu smiled slightly with pursed lips: "Thank you, Teacher He. Your explanation was very detailed."

He Yuan was momentarily taken aback, then sighed softly, "Detailed is good—go on. Be careful."

Yang Huanyi learned from her assistant that Shang Yechu would be her body double and frowned: "Her? Is she really capable?"

"You said her acting was good," the assistant wiped sweat, "Sister Yang, her figure is similar to yours. Although there's a three-to-four centimeter height difference, fight scenes move quickly on camera—it won't show."

"I'm not worried about her figure or acting skills," Yang Huanyi said tiredly. "How she fights is how I'll appear to be fighting in the audience's eyes. Don't ruin my reputation."

The assistant didn't know how to respond to this, so she vaguely said: "Let's watch first. Actually, Director Yi doesn't trust her much either. Right after she left, Director Yi sent the assistant director to find martial arts doubles from other crews."

Yang Huanyi's expression finally improved: "We'll make do with shooting for now. At worst, we can use two martial arts double shots together, editing her figure with another double's fight scenes."

Take the essence and discard the dross—everyone in the entertainment industry knows how to do this.

It takes three people to make one Xiao Fengque—we're playing Pinduoduo here... The assistant thought to herself but remained silent.

Meanwhile, Shang Yechu had already reached the rooftop via the lift platform, with the wires properly secured. Once the camera positions were adjusted, they would begin the suspension.

Ever since Shang Yechu volunteered to the director, the System had a bad feeling. And now, at this five-meter height, the System's unease had reached its peak.

How could it not know whether Shang Yechu could handle fight scenes? She'd be lucky if she didn't splat into paste upon landing.

"What are you trying to do?"

"I must warn you, no amount of combat power can save you from seeking your own death."

"Why aren't you answering me?"

"You should at least give me a heads-up, right?"

"These steel wires are very sturdy—they could hold ten more of you without issue. You can't exploit this method to find loopholes."

No matter what 103 said, Shang Yechu turned a deaf ear, merely standing at the edge of the roof, looking eager to try.

"Ready—" Yi Tianzhao had already called out from below, "Final check, all camera positions confirm your locations!"

Shang Yechu slowly reached her hand to her waist.

"Clear the set! Everyone in position!"

"Click."

An extremely faint sound, so quiet, yet 103 heard it perfectly clearly.

"What did you do?" 103 urgently asked.

Shang Yechu laughed softly: "I undid the wires."

"!!!"

Madwoman!

"Action!"

Instantly, Shang Yechu leaped into the air!

Crazy woman!

103 had no time to think, quickly activating the emergency temporary rescue protocol, forcibly raising Shang Yechu's combat power to 70 points—the minimum value that could preserve her life in this situation. Enough to let Shang Yechu spin 360 degrees mid-air and curl into a ball, preventing her from landing headfirst with brains splattering everywhere.

Suddenly, wind seemed to gather beneath wings.

In that instant, Shang Yechu seemed to grow wings under her ribs, leaping through the air with effortless grace!

Her figure in the air was light and nimble, rising gracefully like a soaring dragon dancing, a phoenix soaring across the nine heavens!

103 froze, instantly realizing that Shang Yechu had never actually undone the wires!

He had been tricked by this deceiver!

For the first time, 103's system core understood what "mixed feelings" meant—on one hand shocked and angered by Shang Yechu's manipulation and deception, on the other relieved that she hadn't actually gone mad enough to undo the wires and fall to a bruised and battered state.

Shang Yechu closed her eyes, slightly feeling the unprecedented power filling her limbs, and smiled: "I was kidding. Thanks."

103 didn't want to say another word.

As if by muscle memory, Shang Yechu stepped lightly in the air, her slender sleeves fluttering, light as willow catkins, gracefully descending.

Falling catkins fly without shadow.

Shang Yechu's feet lightly touched the ground, stabilizing her posture in the blink of an eye. Simultaneously, the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion master had already chased to her back!

Without even looking, Shang Yechu turned and pushed out a palm strike. The Heavenly Secrets Pavilion master extended his bone flute to block, the palm wind meeting the bone flute with a "clang" sound.

Of course, whether it was the palm wind, the energy flow, or this "clang" sound—all would be added in post-production.

Shang Yechu seemed to be shaken by the master's true energy, instantly retreating three steps in succession!

At the same time, the bone flute in the master's hand shattered into pieces.

Jiang Erjing threw away the prop flute, closing in to begin hand-to-hand combat with Shang Yechu.

Fists, palms, legs—within moments, the two had exchanged over a dozen moves!

Shang Yechu's movements were crisp and clean, agile as a startled dragon, containing hidden killing intent. She wasted no movements—every technique and form targeted vital points on her opponent's body. When flesh met flesh, they produced gut-wrenching dull thuds.

In comparison, Jiang Erjing's movements were more elegant, his postures graceful, maintaining a distance that suggested effortless probing.

Xiao Fengque fought while retreating, and soon the two had moved into a bamboo grove. Despite such intense fighting, not a single bamboo leaf was disturbed.

The two fought with exhilarating intensity, their sleeves fluttering wildly. Xiao Fengque's martial style was resolute and fierce, bold as an unsheathed treasured sword; the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion master's techniques were magnificent, flowing like butterflies circling Zhuang Zhou.

The trembling bamboo shadows writhed like dragons and snakes—wind sounds, killing sounds, the sound of fists meeting flesh.

After several exchanges, the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion master seemed tired of this back-and-forth game, suddenly shaking his sleeves and retreating like a falling flower in the wind, floating several feet away!

Xiao Fengque touched the ground with her toes, about to leap and pursue, when the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion master swept his long sleeve and pointed with two fingers through the air!

Xiao Fengque froze.

Xiao Fengque's body stiffened in place, one hand still tightly clenched in a punching posture. But this posture completely locked here, unable to continue further.

Because the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion master had struck her pressure points.

Rustle. Rustle.

Xiao Fengque and the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion master gazed at each other through the shimmering bamboo shadows. At this moment, only the sound of wind moving through bamboo leaves remained between heaven and earth.

Xiao Fengque's eyeballs moved with difficulty, flashing with unwillingness. The Heavenly Secrets Pavilion master could already use true energy to strike pressure points from a distance during combat—this level of cultivation was beyond what she could challenge at her current stage.

The Heavenly Secrets Pavilion master smiled casually, suddenly raising his hand.

Tap.

A bamboo leaf moved without wind, flying into the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion master's hand. The master turned around, casually waving his hand.

A jade-green bamboo leaf lightly touched a certain spot on Xiao Fengque's body, then fell to the ground.

The next moment, Xiao Fengque's hands dropped dejectedly, her entire body relaxing.

The pressure points had been released.

Carried on the wind, the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion master's laughter-tinged voice came from afar:

"Young one, your killing intent is too heavy."

Chapter 63: A New Look

"Cut!"

As soon as Yi Tianzhao finished calling cut, Shang Yechu hurried over to Jiang Erjing's side and said anxiously, "Sorry, Teacher Jiang, I think I hit a bit too hard just now—are you hurting anywhere?"

Jiang Erjing was taken aback for a moment, then laughed heartily, "Oh dear! If you put it that way, I'm going to have to extort you now. This old body of mine hurts everywhere!"

Since Jiang Erjing said that, it meant he was fine. Shang Yechu breathed a sigh of relief.

On the other side, Yi Tianzhao was staring intently at the monitor, her eyes completely fixed on the screen.

Yi Tianzhao repeatedly dragged the progress bar back and forth, like oiling a zipper.

Martial arts choreographer He Yuan stood dumbfounded behind Yi Tianzhao, watching the footage on the monitor with her.

After a long while, Yi Tianzhao let out a breath, stood up, and said very politely to He Yuan, "Teacher He, your guidance was excellent."

He Yuan said, "Ah, my guidance?"

He Yuan said, "Oh. My guidance."

Just as the two of them were staring at each other in bewilderment, the assistant director came running over, panting heavily, "Director Yi, Brother Yuan, I found a martial arts double. But it's not a woman, it's a very thin man, about the same build as Sister Yang. Do you think that will work?"

Yi Tianzhao waved her hand, "Fine, fine. That's perfect. Quickly send him back where he came from."

"Oh. Huh?—" The assistant director was stunned, "Does that mean Sister Yang is willing to perform the scenes herself again?"

Martial arts director He Yuan said, "You're no longer needed here, and you've worked hard. I'll treat you to drinks after work. Hurry along now."

The assistant director left completely confused, mentally cursing Yi Tianzhao and Yang Huanyi for their constantly changing decisions.

Shang Yechu was drenched in sweat. After confirming she hadn't injured Jiang Erjing, she began looking around for a towel to wipe off.

A production assistant eagerly approached, holding a stack of warm towels, "Sister Ye, Sister Ye, over here."

Shang Yechu gave the production assistant a surprised look, picked up a towel, and said, "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," the production assistant said with a beaming smile, "Just let me know if you need anything."

As Shang Yechu was wiping her sweat, Yi Tianzhao and Yang Huanyi came over to her together.

Yi Tianzhao spoke first, "Little Ye, you performed well."

"Performed well" was an understatement. From Yi Tianzhao's perspective as a director with many years of experience, with skills like that, Shang Yechu could already land a female lead role in a low-budget martial arts film.

Yang Huanyi's attitude was more direct, "You worked hard. I prepared a small red envelope for you, remember to collect it after filming."

Shang Yechu understood immediately—this red envelope was hush money.

"Thank you, Director Yi and Teacher Yang." Shang Yechu smiled reservedly, looking somewhat shy, "It's been too long since I last practiced, so I'm actually a bit rusty."

Yi Tianzhao patted Shang Yechu's shoulder, "Too modest. Aside from that initial jump, everything else was excellent."

Shang Yechu took the hint tactfully, "Then, should I reshoot that scene?"

Yi Tianzhao was pleased with Shang Yechu's understanding, "Since you don't mind the trouble, let's do it one more time. How are you feeling, tired now?"

Shang Yechu said modestly, "A bit, but if it's just one jump, I can manage."

Since Yang Huanyi was right there, if Shang Yechu said she wasn't tired at all, Yang Huanyi—who had used a double because she was too tired—might feel uncomfortable.

"Alright." Yi Tianzhao nodded, "As soon as possible."

Shang Yechu jumped once more in her long-sleeved robe along with the camera. This time the jump was perfect, even He Yuan couldn't find any fault with it.

Jiang Erjing was standing next to He Yuan. They were old friends and often chatted on set.

Jiang Erjing said, "What do you think of that kid?"

"What about her?"

Jiang Erjing shot He Yuan a sidelong glance, "Don't play dumb with me. Can't you see it?"

He Yuan snorted and said slowly, "That initial jump was a bit amateurish, but she found her footing in an instant. As for the fight with you..."

He Yuan paused to consider his words, "You can tell it seems like a very systematic martial art, very structured, very practiced, but—"

"But what?"

"But it's too practical." He Yuan said mysteriously, "Which makes it completely impractical."

This statement seemed contradictory, but Jiang Erjing understood immediately. "Too practical" meant it was very effective in actual combat, while "completely impractical" meant it lacked visual appeal and wasn't suitable for display on screen.

After all, martial arts in film and television primarily consisted of flashy but impractical moves.

Jiang Erjing brushed off his shoulder and glanced at Yi Tianzhao, who was directing another scene, "But Director Yi seems quite satisfied. Look, she's finally stopped pulling that long face."

Actors were very sensitive to directors' moods, and Yi Tianzhao clearly no longer had that "I've had enough" attitude from earlier.

"That's because it's suitable." He Yuan cracked his neck vertebrae, "Don't underestimate that kid, she's got something special."

"Suitable?" Jiang Erjing's interest was piqued, "What's suitable?"

"Suitable for you, of course." When it came to his area of expertise, He Yuan couldn't help but become animated and talk at length:

"Your fighting style is too ornate. I've been pointing out this flaw of yours for decades, and you still haven't fixed it.

"In the entertainment industry, no one's fight scenes are more flowery than yours. Have you forgotten how those drama critics criticized you when you were young? 'At life-and-death moments, sleeves billow gracefully; before the enemy falls, the pose is struck first.'"

Jiang Erjing chuckled happily, "What, are you here to expose my shortcomings today?"

"Bullshit." He Yuan cursed crudely, "But that Ye kid is different from you—her fighting style is too 'plain.'"

"Taken alone, what she does isn't particularly impressive to watch. But when paired with your style, the effect is dramatically different!

"She can balance out your flamboyant style!"

Jiang Erjing gave He Yuan a surprised look. For this slippery old eel, this statement was quite blunt. "Really?"

"One firm, one soft; one ornate, one plain; one practical, one flamboyant; one clean, one splendid." He Yuan said something quite professional, "I'm a rough guy, not good with words. Let me give you an analogy—it's like, like a precious sword fresh from the forge, without any decorations yet, shining bright like snow, but

with a red petal balanced on its tip..."

"What's all this about swords and petals," Jiang Erjing laughed, "I just thought the fight was quite satisfying. Is it really as good as you say?"

"The best isn't necessarily suitable, but what's suitable is the best." He Yuan sighed, "If you don't believe me, go watch the monitor yourself. The visual tension is incredible. In my eyes, it can almost compare to that fight you had with Jing Shangfei when you were young."

"Wow! That's high praise!" Jiang Erjing widened his eyes, "Old Jing had real skills!"

"Believe it or not, up to you." He Yuan tossed out the remark.

On the other side, Yi Tianzhao was asking Shang Yechu if she'd be interested in playing a supporting female role in the upcoming series.

Talented artists with special skills and potential were always in high demand everywhere. Yi Tianzhao certainly wouldn't be so blind as to let this golden goose slip away.

"The villainous sorceress in the second installment—you've read 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon,' right?"

Shang Yechu nodded, "I've read it, but only the first few books. I haven't finished the later ones yet."

"There's a villainous sorceress in the second installment, how about that? This time it's not just a major special appearance, but a genuine female supporting role." Yi Tianzhao flipped through her phone, "But your image isn't quite suitable for a villain. The female constable in the third installment could also work..."

Yi Tianzhao was painting an ambitious picture for Shang Yechu, who excitedly responded, "Goddess Constable Tian Rushui? That's my favorite character in 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon!'"

"You like Tian Rushui?" Yi Tianzhao smiled, "She is a good character. Go back and review the scenes for these two roles, and I'll notify you later."

In Yi Tianzhao's view, Shang Yechu had the looks, the skills, and the acting ability—her rise to success was only a matter of time. Making a good connection now was a wise choice.

This was an unspoken understanding—a form of investment.

"Alright, thank you, Director Yi." Shang Yechu stood up, "Should I head back now?"

"Wait." Yi Tianzhao said, "Don't forget to collect your payment. You're not part of the martial arts team, so you'll be paid immediately."

"I won't forget." Shang Yechu said playfully, "This is payday from the authorities."

Chapter 64: Desire

Shang Yechu walked toward the finance office while humming a little tune.

Outwardly, Shang Yechu appeared no different than usual, except her cheeks were slightly more flushed. However, physiological changes couldn't escape 103's detection.

"Blood pressure slightly elevated, heart rate and breathing accelerated, partial muscle contraction..." 103 recited, "Are you feeling proud?"

Shang Yechu didn't speak, clenching her hands into fists, then slowly releasing them. After repeating this several times, she finally spoke: "No. Just a bit... excited."

Both sex and violence connect to humanity's primal desires. The worship of strength complex, that is the craving for power, is engraved in everyone's nature. When such craving suddenly gains an opportunity for realization, the pleasure, excitement, and satisfaction are indescribable.

The moment she obtained combat power, Shang Yechu's heart immediately began racing wildly, experiencing immense excitement, even exhilaration!

She genuinely felt that power—that most primitive strength she had always craved but couldn't obtain. Something that transcends all reason, rules, and laws!

The dual agitation of physiology and psychology descended upon her in an instant.

Most people's combat power accumulates gradually over time, and the pleasure of growing stronger is also progressive. But Shang Yechu was different—her combat power surged dramatically in a single moment!

When a miser suddenly receives ten thousand taels of gold falling from the sky, their first action would definitely be to pick up a gold ingot and bite it to verify its authenticity; and when a weak person suddenly gains tremendous power, what would they do first?

Even someone completely devoid of violent tendencies would probably be unable to resist immediately punching a rock or tree to test their current physical strength.

But Shang Yechu couldn't do this.

Shang Yechu could only perform some flashy moves, flick her sleeves, and leap lightly a couple of times. After doing all this, she had to wear her gentle, composed mask and smile welcomingly at the senior actors, martial arts choreographer, and director.

Shang Yechu exerted almost all her effort to restrain herself from actually fighting Jiang Erjing.

If not for her rich acting experience and strict professional discipline binding her, then the punches and kicks that landed on Jiang Erjing might have been real blows rather than mere showy techniques.

Suppressing primal instincts is painful. Shang Yechu's violent urges found no release, a stifling depression swirling in her chest, her heart pounding like a drum, head feeling congested with blood, her hands trembling constantly. It felt as if a fire were burning in her core, scorching hot enough to make her heart want to escape her chest.

Even so, Shang Yechu still wore her most appropriate smile on her face, appearing as if she were in good spirits as she arrived at the finance office to collect her "overtime pay" for the day.

Body doubles' wages are completely disproportionate to their work difficulty and risk factors. Although this scene earned unanimous praise from the director and martial arts choreographer, the payment Shang Yechu received was only three thousand yuan.

Although body doubles earn money by risking their lives, their lives in this industry circle seem not as valuable as Shang Yechu had imagined.

When she received her payment, Shang Yechu couldn't pretend she wasn't surprised. In her previous life, she mostly filmed comedy movies with few martial arts scenes, and due to her status and physique, Shang Yechu rarely had opportunities to hire body doubles either.

In Shang Yechu's imagination, martial arts doubles scaling walls and running across rooftops—whether in terms of work difficulty or risk factors—were much higher than other performers. A single scene should start at five figures at least. But after asking the finance staff distributing payments, Shang Yechu learned that ordinary martial arts doubles' salaries are settled monthly, and most people only earn four figures per month.

The three thousand yuan Shang Yechu received was already Yi Tianzhao's special consideration for her.

Shang Yechu silently weighed the three thousand in her hand, her brain that had become excited and feverish from violence and opportunity finally cooling down.

She didn't know how to describe her current feelings, only that something felt very wrong inside. Quietly stuffing the three thousand yuan into her pocket, Shang Yechu turned around, about to leave the finance office, when she encountered an unexpected person.

Xiao Xue, Yang Huanyi's assistant.

Xiao Xue walked up to Shang Yechu, showing an pleasantly surprised expression: "Fortunately I caught up! Sister Yang asked me to give this to you!"

Speaking, under everyone's watchful eyes, Xiao Xue pulled out a thick red envelope and unceremoniously stuffed it into Shang Yechu's hand.

"Take it," Xiao Xue smiled so broadly her teeth disappeared, "Sister Yang said you worked hard today and asked me to thank you on her behalf."

This was both a lucky gift and hush money. After accepting this red envelope, regardless of whether Shang Yechu was willing or not, that fight scene completely belonged to Yang Huanyi.

Later, whether during interviews or fan questions, if anyone asked about that scene, Yang Huanyi could openly claim she performed that fight scene herself. Meanwhile, Shang Yechu could only remain silent, even cooperating with the lie.

Shang Yechu felt the thickness of the red envelope, pursed her lips into a smile: "Sister Yang is truly generous. Then thank Sister Yang for me."

Xiao Xue, worried that Shang Yechu being new might not understand Yang Huanyi's meaning, reminded her again: "Your fighting looked impressive, which brings honor to Sister Yang's face. This is what you deserve."

Xiao Xue lowered her voice: "It's even higher than a professional martial arts double's monthly salary!"

Shang Yechu twitched the corner of her mouth, originally planning to offer a few more perfunctory words, but upon hearing this, suddenly felt her interest wane.

"Tell Sister Yang not to worry, I've been in this industry for a long time, I won't speak carelessly." Shang Yechu lowered her eyes, the smile on her face as bland and fake as plain water, "Thank you."

Xiao Xue couldn't help but pause briefly. But since the task Yang Huanyi assigned her was completed, she didn't overthink it and jogged away.

Tree shadows danced, yellow leaves withered and fell.

The weather had grown quite cold. Shang Yechu sat alone on an iron bench along the willow-shaded path, counting money.

Logically speaking, just finding any bank and depositing this money through the deposit slot would take less than three minutes to count. But somehow, Shang Yechu found herself sitting on the cold iron bench, counting bill by bill.

The crisp new bills slipped through her fingers as Shang Yechu roughly counted the total.

The martial arts double's compensation was three thousand yuan, while Yang Huanyi's hush money was ten thousand yuan.

Shang Yechu stuffed both her acting payment and Yang Huanyi's hush money together into the red envelope, then placed the red envelope on the bench.

The iron bench coated with white paint now bore a brightly colored red envelope, creating a coldly conspicuous sight. Shang Yechu turned sideways, gazing at her hard-earned payment.

A withered yellow leaf landed on Shang Yechu's shoulder.

Suddenly, Shang Yechu raised one fist and heavily struck the red envelope!

One punch down, the thick stack of paper remained completely unmoved, while the thin skin over Shang Yechu's knuckles turned red from the impact.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

Shang Yechu delivered several consecutive punches, each landing precisely on that expensive stack of paper, the skin around her finger joints getting scraped and broken.

The action was ridiculous—hysterically ridiculous. 103 watched for a long time before barely understanding Shang Yechu's behavior.

She was venting.

But venting what? Frustration from unfulfilled ambitions or anger, or simply pure violent urges? 103 didn't know.

This person was so insignificant, laughable, contemptible, only capable of using this pitiful method to vent her ugly desires and irrational emotions in an unoccupied corner.

After punching several times, Shang Yechu let out a long exhale, carefully returning the red envelope to her pocket.

"Let's go." Shang Yechu stood up, not knowing who she was speaking to.

Low-level, out-of-control, even laughable. 103 silently thought.

Somehow, 103 recalled how Shang Yechu had leaped through the air.

—Laughable, lamentable, infuriating, but also somewhat... pitiful.

Chapter 65: Preparation

The moment the clock struck midnight, Shang Yechu collapsed in the bookstore like a puppet with its strings cut.

Fortunately, the bookstore was empty at this hour, otherwise someone would have immediately called emergency services.

Her body felt weak and sore, limbs exhausted, head dizzy and vision blurry—even her teeth seemed to be aching with sourness.

Every gift from fate comes with a hidden price tag. Shang Yechu had forced the System to "gift" her seventy combat power points, and now it was time to repay the debt.

"Due to significant fluctuations in your combat power, obtaining precise values is difficult," 103 announced coldly. "Therefore, your initial combat power will be calculated based on the human average. The midpoint between 10-40 points, which is 25 points."

Shang Yechu, wrapped tightly in her electric blanket and thick quilt, struggled to open her mouth, wanting to say thank you. But only a faint breathy sound emerged.

"Therefore, within 31 days, you need to repay 1.5 times the body weight equivalent to 45 combat power points, which is 67.5 kilograms, or 135 jin."

"Averaged out, you need to contribute 4.5 jin of body weight daily," 103 said. "Counting starts now."

Shang Yechu shook her head, then nodded randomly, communicating with 103 mentally: "How long will this condition last?"

"Three days. The first day is the most severe, symptoms will gradually lessen."

"That's good... that's good." Shang Yechu murmured. "I'll... sleep for a bit first. Hoo... hoo."

The following month became the darkest period since Shang Yechu's rebirth.

Eating, drinking, endless eating and drinking.

Shang Yechu's body operated like a high-powered engine, constantly grinding down food, mixing it with water, then converting and disappearing—resting for a few minutes before eating and drinking again.

Shang Yechu felt her stomach had become like a burlap sack, endlessly filling with things then rapidly emptying. She no longer cared whether what she stuffed into her mouth was food or garbage—their ultimate destination was always disappearance.

This was a torturous punishment. But Shang Yechu had no regrets whatsoever.

Compared to what she had gained, this price was utterly insignificant. One couldn't obtain what they wanted without paying any cost. If it were only one month, even if she had to eat like this for the rest of her life, Shang Yechu would do it without hesitation.

As a famous line from some TV drama went, time is like a wild donkey—once it starts running, it never stops.

One week later, Shang Yechu finished filming her dance scenes. With her combat power as foundation now, her dance movements gained a beauty of strength, becoming more fluid and expressive.

Not long after completing the dance scenes, "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" wrapped up filming.

A few more days passed, and Shang Yechu's debt was also settled.

"Congratulations, host," 103 said icily. "Thanks to your life-threatening eating habits, you've repaid the weight owed to the System five days ahead of schedule."

Only after hearing 103's announcement did Shang Yechu collapse back into her bedding with relief.

To avoid being drained into a desiccated corpse, Shang Yechu had lived through a month of utter darkness. She had nearly eaten herself into stomach bleeding, but finally managed to fill the debt quota.

This eating method left Shang Yechu feeling nauseated at the sight of food now, unsure when this symptom would fade. But having eliminated the hidden danger, Shang Yechu still felt it was worth it.

Curling back into her bedding, Shang Yechu calculated the approximate broadcast time for "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" based on her previous life's experience.

"Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" filmed for about one and a half months total. Martial arts films require more complex post-production work, which would probably take another month.

Given Dragon Central Television's efficiency, once production was complete, it would likely be sent to fill prime time slots soon.

In her previous life, Shang Yechu had filmed many comedy films for Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel to fill their prime time slots, so she was quite familiar with Six Empress Dowager's operations. According to her calculations, "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" would probably broadcast in early January.

Every year at the beginning of the Gregorian calendar, Six Empress Dowager faced its leanest period. During this time, the New Year film season was just heating up—theatrical films were either newly released or still in pre-release promotion, naturally unavailable for television broadcast. Meanwhile, summer season new films had already been aired during the latter half of the previous year.

With the new year bringing fresh atmosphere, Six Empress Dowager couldn't air outdated old films during prime time at the Gregorian year's start. Therefore, newly produced television films became the perfect choice for this period.

Self-produced films enjoyed green lights all the way from approval to broadcast. Efficiency was the main focus.

Drowsily curled in her bedding, Shang Yechu also calculated the broadcast time for "Tale of Cloud Incline."

Well... not long after "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" premiered, "Tale of Cloud Incline" would have its debut broadcast too...

Shang Yechu took two sips of water, opened the radio app on her phone, and started listening to the storyteller narrate "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon."

Even during the most difficult times, Shang Yechu never gave up reading "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon." When her eyes and brain were too exhausted, she would open the audiobook app and listen to someone read "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" to her.

The "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" series, spanning over three million characters, had been read and listened to by Shang Yechu about three or four times already.

It was now December, and the bookstore had no heating. Sleeping on the cold warehouse floor, even wrapped in thick quilts and electric blankets, Shang Yechu felt waves of chill.

It was time to rent a proper place. Shang Yechu thought.

The final payment for "Tale of Cloud Incline" still hadn't arrived. Her previous savings and the deposit from "Tale of Cloud Incline" had all been spent on eating and drinking to replenish her weight.

But she had recently taken several extra roles, especially two major special appearances and three mid-level specials, plus the flower queen compensation and martial arts double salary—Shang Yechu had already saved over twenty thousand yuan.

The ten thousand yuan hush money from Yang Huanyi was reserved for other purposes and couldn't be touched for now. With these twenty thousand yuan, what kind of place could she rent?

Shang Yechu was completely in the dark about this.

Just as Shang Yechu was lost in random thoughts, her phone suddenly chimed. Opening it, she saw it was a message from her bank.

[Dragon State Bank] Hanhai Fund Management Co., Ltd. completed a UnionPay deposit transaction of RMB 38,000.00 to your account ending **** at 20:43 on December 17. Balance: 38,888.99.

!!!

The final payment for "Tale of Cloud Incline" had arrived!

Shang Yechu almost leaped out of her bedding!

She waved her arm, letting a blast of cold air rush into her quilt, making her shiver and quickly wrap herself tighter in her little blanket.

"Tale of Cloud Incline" had wrapped up filming back at the end of November. Half a month after wrapping, this payment had finally arrived.

Shang Yechu counted her savings again. She now had over seventy thousand yuan total.

Over seventy thousand yuan—it was enough. Enough for Shang Yechu to do what she had been wanting to do.

Now, she only needed to wait quietly for "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" to premiere, then give Six Empress Dowager a surprise.

Chapter 66: "The Heavenly Secrets Pavilion," premiered

The year 2016 passed uneventfully, and 2017 quietly arrived.

January was already approaching the New Year, with primary and secondary school students mostly on winter break, and working adults facing the hectic year-end rush.

The New Year movie season was being promoted with great fanfare, with countless big-budget productions, small-scale films, domestic movies, and imported films filling the theaters. Various platforms and offline locations were saturated with trailers and advertisements for all kinds of movies - this was the most prosperous time of year for cinema.

Sun Xiaoxiao was a second-year middle school student.

After the tense and exciting final exams, Sun Xiaoxiao finally welcomed her winter break. At the beginning of the vacation, her exam results hadn't been released yet. It felt both relaxing and not quite relaxing.

After playing for a day, she returned home around seven in the evening, just as her family was starting dinner.

Sun Xiaoxiao sat at the dining table, excitedly eyeing the golden lobster her mother had just served. Her father was still in the kitchen making vegetable soup, which would take a while longer.

"Go ahead and eat," her mother said with a smile. "It'll get cold soon."

Family meals weren't particularly formal, so Sun Xiaoxiao put on disposable gloves and eagerly grabbed a large shrimp, devouring it with gusto.

Her mother turned on the LCD TV, which was broadcasting the news.

Since the Sun family didn't particularly care for news, her mother immediately started channel surfing.

"Let's see what's on the movie channel?" Sun Xiaoxiao mumbled through a mouthful of shrimp.

The movie channel showed films every day, and the movies during prime time were usually quite good. They had a high quality baseline, making them reliable entertainment when bored.

Sun Xiaoxiao hoped the movie channel was showing a romance film. At her flower-like age, she was very interested in idol dramas and love stories.

Her mother had the same idea and pressed "6" on the remote control.

The TV screen switched to the movie channel. Sun Xiaoxiao dropped her shrimp shell and saw three characters on the side of the screen - the title of this movie.

"Heavenly Secrets Pavilion."

Sun Xiaoxiao pouted disinterestedly. Just from the title, she could tell what kind of boring film this would be.

"Mom, change the channel," Sun Xiaoxiao said casually.

Unexpectedly, her mother - who normally never cared what was on the movie channel and just used the TV as background noise - slowly put down the remote.

"Let's watch this," her mother said.

"Huh?" Sun Xiaoxiao pouted, but it wasn't worth arguing with her mother over such a small matter. She lowered her head and continued eating her shrimp.

"Soup's here!" Her father placed the soup on the table, rubbing his fingers.

Her father glanced casually at the TV, then his gaze suddenly fixed on the screen.

"Heavenly Secrets Pavilion?" Her father scratched his eyebrow. "Isn't this that - what's it called? The one written by Jianghu Xiaoxiao Sheng?"

"Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon," her mother said, her expression actually looking excited. "This one's good!"

Her father also sat at the table, putting on gloves as he said, "Back when you were in school, I went to the library to borrow this book for you."

Sun Xiaoxiao looked up curiously, her gossipy eyes shifting back and forth between her parents.

Perhaps children always have some curiosity about their parents' romance history. Along with that, Sun Xiaoxiao also felt a spark of curiosity about this movie with the unremarkable name.

Usually, the TV at home only served as background noise during meals. But today, Sun Xiaoxiao discovered that her parents were actually watching television very attentively!

The movie opened with a sea of flames. Men's agonized screams, women's weeping, and children's sharp cries intertwined, making it easy to understand the current plot - a massacre of an entire family was happening here.

Half a feathered arrow was stuck in the soil across the sea of fire.

A small, bloodstained hand struggled to pull out the arrow. Looking closer, three small characters were carved on the arrow shaft: Heavenly Secrets Pavilion.

The three characters "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" gradually floated up, covering half the screen to form the movie's title. Then the scene shifted, and the three characters slowly faded, finally transforming into a richly colored plaque hanging on a magnificent tall building.

The camera moved downward, showing a young man in blue robes standing before the building's entrance, looking up at this plaque.

The young man had handsome features, a solemn expression, and eyes that held a worldly weariness.

Sun Xiaoxiao heard her mother exclaim, "Isn't that Yang Huanyi? She's playing Xiao Fengque?"

"Mom, who's Xiao Fengque? The main character of this movie?" Sun Xiaoxiao asked curiously.

Her mother nodded, intently watching the screen: "Yes, her martial arts are incredible! You'll understand when you watch more!"

A martial arts film? That sounded even more boring. Sun Xiaoxiao wasn't interested in fighting and killing.

Her father teased: "She's your mother's heartthrob, and my dream lo—ow!"

Her mother tapped her father's head with her chopsticks. Though not hard, her father exaggeratedly cried out: "Your mother's abusing me again—ow!"

"Stop shouting, watch TV!" her mother warned. "I can't hear what they're saying."

Since this was a movie adapted from a book her parents' generation liked, the plot was probably clichéd and outdated—Sun Xiaoxiao thought this as she glanced disinterestedly at the screen.

Who would have thought that this movie's plot would actually be quite gripping!

At first, Sun Xiaoxiao just casually glanced at it a few times.

Ten minutes later, Sun Xiaoxiao was chewing her shrimp while staring intently at the TV screen.

Twenty minutes later, Sun Xiaoxiao sat with her mouth open, watching the intense, realistic fight scene between the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion master and Xiao Fengque on screen, her bowl of vegetable soup already gone cold.

"Young one, your killing intent is too strong."

A lazy, ethereal voice sounded from the screen as the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion master's mysterious figure disappeared into the bamboo grove.

Sun Xiaoxiao finally snapped out of it, rubbing her sore neck from holding the same position for so long. "That old guy was pretty cool just now..."

"He's your father's heartthrob, and my dream lover~" her mother imitated her father's earlier teasing tone. "Jiang Erjing has gotten this old? He was so handsome when he was young."

"Is he the mastermind behind everything?" Sun Xiaoxiao quickly asked. If the handsome old man was the main villain, that would be so exciting!

"He's not," her father said while eating his rice. "The killer is that... they haven't appeared yet! Later, a madam in red clothes will appear, she's the killer."

Sun Xiaoxiao: "..."

Being middle-aged, her father had an insurmountable generation gap with young people and completely didn't realize how heinous spoilers were, continuing to chatter:

"Who's playing the madam? In the previous version, it was Wang Sheng - big and burly, you could tell at a glance it was a man dressed as a woman..."

Her mother also joined the spoiler camp: "Jiang Erjing is a good guy, he's really nice to Xiao Fengque..."

Sun Xiaoxiao listened in dismay as her parents spoiled every detail of this movie down to its ancestors. When she looked back at the scenes of characters running across rooftops on screen, it suddenly didn't feel appealing anymore.

"Stop, stop, stop!" she protested. "You've seen it but I haven't!"

Just as the family was happily bickering, the TV screen suddenly darkened.

Sun Xiaoxiao's attention was naturally drawn to it.

The next second, a dim, ambiguous light slowly condensed into a dot on the screen. The light spot gradually enlarged, and Sun Xiaoxiao finally saw that the light source was actually someone's fingertip.

A slender, elegant beauty leaned languidly against the window, holding a long jade pipe. The setting sun cast oblique rays, the orange evening light making the scene resemble an oil painting.

The camera moved closer, slowly panning from the beauty's fingertips, over her silky clothes, along her slender neck, and finally resting on half of her face.

She was beautiful.

Her features couldn't be called exquisitely perfect and flawless. But her aura was like the spring moon in a pear blossom courtyard, making people unconsciously hold their breath, afraid to disturb her.

When her half-open, half-closed eyes shifted, it was like clear moonlight scattering over a ground covered with pear blossoms.

The camera gazed at her, from her forehead and cheeks, to her brows and eyes, to her crimson lips. The dark red lipstick had worn off halfway, making those lips look like incomplete flower petals.

Half of her face was hidden in dim shadows, making it impossible to discern her emotions. The snowflake silver pipe bowl gently tapped against the windowsill, reflecting cold, dazzling light from the setting sun.

She was like a jade carving.

Sun Xiaoxiao's family TV was 55 inches. The camera gave the woman several consecutive close-up shots, the massive screen displaying the woman's charm from all angles. Instantly, the entire living room seemed to brighten up!

"Ah," Sun Xiaoxiao couldn't help but exclaim.

"What's wrong?" her mother quickly turned to ask.

"Nothing. It's nothing." Sun Xiaoxiao held her breath, staring intently at the TV screen.

A maid's voice came at just the right moment: "Madam, Young Master Zhu and the others have arrived."

The flower queen courtesan closed her eyes and casually tossed the jade pipe onto the couch.

The scene shifted to an exquisitely beautiful hall. The previously ice-cold flower queen, now barefoot, danced gracefully upon clouds of brocade.

She had changed into watery red clothes, her neck as white and smooth as snow, her cheeks as bright as peach blossoms, her gaze shimmering like spring water.

Between her bamboo shoot-like fingers, she held a small silk fan. The sheen of the silk and the pearl ring on her finger complemented each other, making them appear even more lustrous and captivating.

Her face wore a bright, moving smile as she spun on the brocade platform, her skirt flowing like water waves, her gauze ribbons dancing like drifting clouds.

Peach blossom eyes, lotus-like face, pomegranate-red skirt. Intoxicating to the heart.

All the guests in the hall stared dumbfounded at her dance, already completely enchanted.

The entire hall of flowers intoxicated three thousand guests.

The dance was reaching its conclusion, like a brilliant, glorious dawn suddenly transforming into a poignant sunset.

As the dance ended, the flower queen casually threw the silk fan in her hand. The guests in the hall, as if possessed, crowded and scrambled, fighting over this fan, creating chaos.

"Mine!"

"Lady Mianmian! Lady Mianmian!"

"I bid three thousand—three thousand!"

Countless red silks, pearls, jewels, and small gold coins rained down toward Mianmian like raindrops. The flower queen knelt silently on the ground. Gems and gold coins weighed down her skirt, pearls brushed past her forehead, leaving a shallow red mark.

The madam smiled from ear to ear but still came out to maintain order: "Gentlemen! Gentlemen! Mianmian is only dancing today, not receiving guests!"

The maids hurried forward, supporting Mianmian as she went upstairs.

Although she'd been spoiled that the madam was the mastermind, Sun Xiaoxiao completely failed to notice the character at this moment. She didn't even realize the madam had already appeared, her gaze following the flower queen, unwilling to miss even her graceful back as she ascended the stairs.

For some reason, Sun Xiaoxiao felt a wave of sadness and loneliness when looking at that slender back.

Sun Xiaoxiao didn't understand dance, but watching it made her feel sorrowful. For the flower queen beautiful as the morning glow, and for all the guests in the hall.

The flower queen's scene had ended, and Sun Xiaoxiao reluctantly pulled her gaze away from the TV.

"Mom, who is she?"

"Who who?" Her mother put down her chopsticks. "The one dancing? Don't know."

Her father also murmured: "Is she Yu Feixian?"

"No!" Her mother glared at her father. "Didn't you see? Her name is Mianmian!"

"Who's Yu Feixian?" Sun Xiaoxiao asked curiously.

"The number one beauty in the martial world from the book. She doesn't appear until the Journey to the Northern Desert arc, your father remembered wrong." Her mother said casually. "Oh! Your soup has gone cold, don't drink it, I'll get you a hot bowl."

Her mother went to get more soup, while her father and Sun Xiaoxiao continued watching the movie. But for some reason, Sun Xiaoxiao couldn't concentrate like before.

After Mianmian left the scene, Sun Xiaoxiao inexplicably found the movie starting to become dull.

To be fair, the movie was good. The plot, pacing, and storytelling were all well-designed. Definitely a qualified work to watch while eating. But after seeing Mianmian's breathtaking dance, when looking back at these stingy sets, barely passable acting, and plain costumes, everything seemed bland and tasteless, even hard to swallow.

A good actor could elevate the visual quality of the scene directly. The scenes where the flower queen Mianmian appeared, whether in lighting or texture, had already approached the standard of theatrical films.

It's easy to go from frugality to luxury, but hard to go from luxury back to frugality.

How stunning it was to jump from television film quality to theatrical film standard, that's how impactful it was to fall back from theatrical film texture to television film cheapness.

It was like someone who had just eaten a fragrant, spicy beef hotpot - when seeing plain porridge and side dishes, while they might want a few bites to cleanse their palate and stomach, they definitely wouldn't be drooling over it.

Sun Xiaoxiao couldn't help asking: "Dad, will Mianmian appear again?"

"I don't know, ask your mom." Her father said honestly. After thinking, he speculated: "Probably not? She looks like a big star making a cameo, probably only has this one scene."

Sun Xiaoxiao made a disappointed "oh" sound, suddenly feeling uninterested, even losing her appetite to continue eating.

Just then, her mother returned to the table with soup. "Don't listen to your father's nonsense. This flower queen is a suspect, she'll appear again later."

"Really?" Sun Xiaoxiao said excitedly. "Then I'll keep watching."

The flower queen was clearly not a main character. Although her mother said she had more scenes later, it seemed she wouldn't be appearing again for a while.

Sun Xiaoxiao didn't want to leave the TV, but was too lazy to keep watching those plain scenes either, so she took out her phone and started playing on it half-heartedly.

After tapping around for a bit, Sun Xiaoxiao suddenly had an impulse and typed this line into her browser:

[Who plays the flower queen in "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion"?]

Chapter 67: Aftermath

Soon, the encyclopedia entry for the movie "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" popped up. But to Sun Xiaoxiao's disappointment, after clicking into the entry, there were only a few sparse lines. It was a brief plot summary about "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion."

The cast list only had a few names: director Yi Tianzhao, screenwriter Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng, lead actress Yang Huanyi, supporting actors Li Yi, Ge Dafu, Jiang Erjing, and others. Even the martial arts choreographer He Yuan was listed. Only the name of the flower queen that Sun Xiaoxiao was desperately searching for was missing.

At this point, Sun Xiaoxiao's curiosity was completely piqued.

Didn't Dad say that was a cameo by a big star? Why was there no name?

If she had found it immediately, Sun Xiaoxiao might have forgotten about it after looking. But these empty search results instead completely ignited Sun Xiaoxiao's competitive spirit.

Young people easily develop inexplicable obsessions over trivial matters. Some would scour half the internet just to find a picture book they read as children; some would post reward questions across various platforms, just to learn the name of some amazing snack they tasted once in childhood; some would search through various forums and message boards, seeking a very old, long-forgotten television drama.

Perhaps in some people's eyes, such behavior is an incomprehensible waste of time. But for themselves, these fragmented little things are meaningful.

For Sun Xiaoxiao, her current obsession was uncovering that mysterious flower queen.

After finding nothing in the encyclopedia entry search, Sun Xiaoxiao, refusing to accept defeat, searched for "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion cameo," "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion big star," "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon flower queen," and various other keyword combinations, but still found nothing!

There were many search results, but unfortunately they were either about that millennial TV drama that took down six major stars in the most catastrophic collapse in history, or advertisements from reading websites, and even some cosplayer photos. Only the "Mianmian" from this movie was missing.

Sun Xiaoxiao glanced at the television, saw the current scene was Xiao Fengque facing off against a handsome male character, then uninterestedly lowered her head to continue playing with her phone, "Mom, call me when Mianmian appears."

"Okay," Mom readily agreed, then muttered, "Why does this Xie An always have such a long, sour face..."

"Long sour face" refers to a zucchini, a long-shaped gourd that's thin at the top and thick at the bottom. Mom doesn't surf the internet often and can't offer professional critiques like "wooden face" or "no acting skills," but her casual metaphors are equally sharp.

Sun Xiaoxiao looked at the handsome Xie An twice, frowned and said, "He's the villain, right? His performance is way too obvious."

"Xie An isn't a bad guy!" Mom retorted, but after looking at Xie An on screen, she felt somewhat uncertain too: "Anyway, he's not in the book, they probably wouldn't change that randomly in the movie, right?"

"Xie An is quite handsome," Dad interjected, "All the men and women in this movie are good-looking."

Sun Xiaoxiao lowered her head to continue searching for information about the flower queen. What use is being handsome when his eye-searing acting drastically reduces his good looks, practically writing "villain" all over his face.

Refusing to give up, Sun Xiaoxiao continued searching in her browser with the keywords "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" "Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel." She hadn't held much hope, but unexpectedly this time, the search results actually showed one from just five minutes ago!

[Is everyone watching "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" airing on CHTV6 right now? (Adapted from Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng's "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" series first installment)]

Sun Xiaoxiao's spirits lifted, eagerly clicking into this search result!

After clicking in, Sun Xiaoxiao saw the full context of this result.

[After Tea Discussion]Is everyone watching "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" airing on CHTV6 right now? (Adapted from Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng's "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" series first installment)]

Source: Wuxia Forum.

So it was a forum post.

Sun Xiaoxiao doesn't usually browse forums much, but she does have a forum account and app. Following the principle of not letting any possible clue slip away, she clicked into this post.

Forums in 2017 hadn't completely declined yet, with monthly active users still over forty million. Although not as bustling as during their peak, they were still quite lively in January.

This post already had dozens of comments.

[Watching right now.]

Attachment: A living room television photo.

["Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon"? My grandparents love watching that.]

[How old are you, upstairs?]

[Watched it, is the production team this poor? The scene where they burn down the Ten Miles Cloud Smoke Pavilion only shows one small shabby building burning?]

Attachment: Photo from the opening scene of "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion."

[Xiao Fengque is my wife [hehe][hehe]-5th floor]

[Upstairs, take a piss and look at your reflection]

[My urine is yellow, I'll go first! 5th floor, get ready!]

["Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon"? Read it in college, loved Sister Feng to death, then the author suddenly paired her with that Xie guy, dropped it.]

[Agree with upstairs... What man wants to see his wife belong to another man! Whoever wants to be the cuckold can be it, okay? [speechless]]

[Xiao Fengque was better played by Xi Caichun in the 90s version.]

[You guys be cuckolds, I'll just become Xie An directly! [yummy][yummy]]

[If you're Xie An, then who am I?]-Source ID: Di Three

[Cuckold cuckold cuckold cuckold cuckold cuckold cuckold~ oh~]

[[Heavenly Secrets White Jade Pavilion, viewing the nine provinces from the clouds.

If you ask travelers in Chang'an, "Which family is the wealthiest in Chang'an?" The guests might give different answers; but if you ask, "Which building is the most magnificent in Chang'an?" They would unanimously answer: "It's the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion."

Vast beyond the clouds, expansive nine provinces. There are immortals above the clouds, and the immortals' dwelling is the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion!]

Look how the original work describes it, then look at this thing! You're telling me this three-story Western-style building is the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion?]

Attachment: The Heavenly Secrets Pavilion from the movie.

[If "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" was filmed exactly according to the original, who could afford it? The Heavenly Secrets Pavilion master's residence is even carved from white jade, go carve it yourself, go on. [speechless]]

Sun Xiaoxiao impatiently scrolled down. She hadn't read the original "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion," so she couldn't understand what these wuxia enthusiasts in the wuxia forum were arguing about. She just wanted to see if anyone had noticed that flower queen.

[The women in this movie are all quite good-looking. [screenshot][screenshot][screenshot]]

[Yang Huanyi? Shi Qing? Quite a few stars. Who's the last one?]

[Isn't Yang Huanyi a bit old to play Xiao Fengque? Sister Feng is only sixteen...]

[It is a bit jarring, looks okay when the lighting is particularly bright or dark, but the fatigue shows quite obviously under normal lighting.]

[Yang Huanyi is alright, Xie An is the real heavyweight, made me laugh.]

[Might as well let forum friends act, at least forum friends wouldn't look at Sister Feng like they're blind.]

[I want to know too, quite pretty.-Reply to: Yang Huanyi? Shi Qing? Quite a few stars. Who's the last one?]

[Flower queen Mianmian, was she this good-looking in the original?]

[Looks great [yummy], but don't recognize her.]

[Looking at this picture, she's just average looking, similar to Yang Huanyi?]

[What do you know? She's gorgeous when moving, her aura is amazing, absolutely amazing!]

[Give me a break, those who praise aura are just average-looking girls [embarrassed]]

[Have you even watched the movie?]

[Haven't watched, I don't like Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon.]

[Go watch it, guarantee your eyeballs will shoot into the TV.]

Sun Xiaoxiao's eyes lit up—finally someone mentioned Mianmian!

[Could she be a dance performer? Looks like it to me, haven't seen her act before.]

[Seems like she studied dance, dances quite professionally.]

[So who is she exactly? I couldn't find her online.]

[Just check the names when the ending credits come out?]

[It hasn't finished airing yet. Oh, she seems to have appeared again!]

Sun Xiaoxiao jolted, and at the same time, Mom spoke up: "Sweetie, the flower queen lady has appeared again."

"Ah!" Sun Xiaoxiao looked up to see the television screen had switched to a dim interrogation room, "Mianmian got arrested?"

"That's right." Mom thoughtfully explained to Sun Xiaoxiao, "Young Master Zhu and the others all died, Mianmian is the prime suspect. Because her jade pipe contained poison."

The current Mianmian had washed off all her makeup, plain and simple like a moonlit night-blooming cereus. Compared to her heavily made-up, splendidly dressed appearance while dancing, she had a uniquely elegant charm.

Sun Xiaoxiao watched the entire scene with drool practically flowing. Strangely enough, despite wearing no makeup and having very plain clothing, Sun Xiaoxiao felt that Mianmian in this dark room was even more alluring than when she was dancing during the day.

Especially during the two scenes where Mianmian leaned softly and bonelessly against Di Three, and when Xiao Fengque pinched and rubbed Mianmian's earlobe, Sun Xiaoxiao suddenly shuddered, feeling an indescribable thrill that shot from the crown of her head straight to her heart!

Sun Xiaoxiao found it hard to describe what that feeling was, only that her scalp tingled and the corners of her mouth involuntarily turned upward.

After watching these two segments, the plot returned to normal, and Sun Xiaoxiao eagerly opened that post again to continue reading everyone's discussions.

[Holy crap! Xie An gets to enjoy this? @Di Three Bro, sell me your ID, name your price!]

[So who exactly plays Mianmian? So anxious!]

[You're anxious, I'm anxious too, are the bros in the wuxia forum this useless? Show the same energy you have when arguing about versions and power levels and doxxing people!]

[Save it, this movie is premiering now, there's very little information online. We'll know when we check the actor list during the ending credits after it finishes airing.]

[No one asked on Weibo? I don't have a Weibo account.]

[A few people are asking under Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel's official Weibo account, but Dragon Central Television hasn't replied. [crying][crying]]

[What a coincidence? I just came from Old Wine Shop, people there are also asking who plays this flower queen.]

[Bro, you actually have an Old Wine Shop account? That place is all female readers, I don't mix well with them, haven't been on in ages.]

[I'm a female reader too, I'm a sis.]

[Hello sis, what are they saying at Old Wine Shop? Any news?]

[No, that's why I came to the forum to see if anyone knows.]

Old Wine Shop? Weibo?

Sun Xiaoxiao keenly caught these two keywords. She knew about Weibo, but what was Old Wine Shop? A website?

Filled with curiosity, Sun Xiaoxiao boldly replied under the female reader sis's comment: [Sis, may I ask what Old Wine Shop is? I'm new to the wuxia forum, not really clear. Thank you!]

The reader sis replied quickly:

[It's a wuxia enthusiasts forum. [link.Old Wine Shop]]

Chapter 68: Screening Ended

Di Xue was a martial arts novel enthusiast.

Beyond that, she had another special identity—she was one of the administrators of "Old Wine Shop," the largest martial arts enthusiasts forum in the country.

Old Wine Shop was established in 2003, and now it had been over ten years. This forum had over one hundred thousand registered users, where martial arts enthusiasts gathered to chat about everything under the sun, forming their own little martial world.

Di Xue had become an administrator a few years ago, responsible for managing the section called "Teahouse and Tavern."

Teahouse and Tavern was essentially the casual chat and random posts section, where the most newcomers gathered and the crowd was most mixed. Because if newcomers wanted to post in the forum, they needed to reply to three posts in Teahouse and Tavern to accumulate enough experience and level up.

Di Xue had to log in every day to silence a batch of people posting small advertisements or selling pirated book resources. These tasks were tedious and boring, and there was no salary—it was purely driven by passion. But Di Xue found it very worthwhile.

After work, Di Xue leaned tiredly on her apartment sofa and opened the forum interface again, preparing to continue her second shift on the internet.

Today's Teahouse and Tavern seemed particularly lively, with many new Level 0 and Level 1 faces appearing. These new accounts were chattering noisily, clumsily posting random content in Teahouse and Tavern.

With a quick glance, she saw today had a full five pages of new posts—double the usual amount!

Was it because of a holiday, so there were more new users?

Di Xue was somewhat puzzled. The martial arts enthusiast demographic tended to be older, so generally, primary and secondary school holiday periods didn't significantly impact the forum.

Or had some new martial arts drama recently aired? That situation could usually attract some newcomers too.

Di Xue thought back repeatedly, but she couldn't recall any recently aired martial arts dramas. In fact, recent television dramas had been quite terrible, and Di Xue didn't remember any of them.

After cleaning up Teahouse and Tavern, Di Xue couldn't wait to exit the newcomer spam zone. Right then, she noticed a red post prominently floating at the top of the forum homepage.

[Did everyone watch "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" that Six Empress Dowager aired tonight? What did you think?]

In front of this post was a small [Hot] symbol, indicating it was currently the most discussed thread on the forum.

This post came from "Screen Traces and Heroic Shadows," the forum section specifically dedicated to discussing martial arts films and television.

Was CHTV6 airing "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion"?

As a martial arts novel enthusiast, Di Xue had of course read "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon." Had this novel been adapted into a film?

Di Xue didn't bother with the forum anymore and immediately turned on her apartment television, switching to the movie channel.

On the television screen, a young woman dressed in men's clothing, holding a silver-inlaid jade opium pipe, was saying something to the person in front of her.

"Brother Que, this is for you."

Di Xue also recognized the person facing the cross-dressing woman—it was female action star Yang Huanyi. Familiar with the "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" plot, Di Xue immediately realized this was the scene at the end of "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" where the flower queen Mianmian, having washed away her makeup, bids farewell to Xiao Fengque.

Every night, flower queen Mianmian would disguise herself as a man to go out and buy poison, which she would put in her jade opium pipe—she wanted to poison the madam, then steal her money and escape into the martial world. Unexpectedly, the madam was killed by the mastermind behind the scenes, a man who disguised himself as a woman pretending to be the madam and stayed in the brothel.

When the madam's corpse was dug up, Mianmian who had hidden poison became the prime suspect. Coincidentally, around the same time, those young masters who frequently harassed and humiliated Mianmian also died. The authorities were eager to close the case, so they handed over Mianmian as the real culprit.

In the end, Xiao Fengque uncovered the truth and rescued Mianmian from the death row prison on execution day, letting her go free.

Xiao Fengque used the alias Que Feng in Heavenly Secrets Pavilion, so Mianmian called her Brother Que.

Xiao Fengque's indifferent eyes swept over the opium pipe, and she shook her head, "I don't smoke hookah."

Mianmian didn't mind "his" refusal, giggling as she said, "This isn't hookah, and it's not for smoking either."

"I don't poison people either," Xiao Fengque said calmly.

"Such a boring man," Mianmian rolled her eyes at Xiao Fengque. Suddenly, she brought the white jade mouthpiece to her lips and lightly held it between them.

She wasn't wearing heavy makeup, and after being imprisoned for several days, her lips were pale, even somewhat dry and chapped.

Yet when these lips held the mouthpiece, they exuded an indescribable temptation and decadent beauty. Xiao Fengque could even clearly hear the rustling sound of the dry lips rubbing against the cold jade material.

"Hey!" Xiao Fengque panicked, pressing down on the pipe, "What are you doing? This is poisonous!"

In that instant, a flash of cunning appeared in Mianmian's eyes. Using Xiao Fengque's position, she took advantage of the situation to stand on tiptoe and lightly kissed the corner of Xiao Fengque's mouth.

"Mwah."

!!!

Xiao Fengque was so startled she retreated two steps back as if she'd seen a ghost, staring at Mianmian in astonishment.

Mianmian casually tossed away the white jade opium pipe, laughing heartily, "My home is in the Ninth Lane of Jiangnan's Thirteen Lanes, come find me!"

With that, this flower queen turned around without hesitation and walked toward the misty river waves—where fishing boats returning to Jiangnan were docked.

Xiao Fengque stood by the riverbank, watching the receding boat shadow, unconsciously touching the corner of her own lips.

After a long while, when the boat shadow on the river had completely disappeared, Xiao Fengque silently bent down, picked up the jade opium pipe from the ground, and gently touched the cold white jade mouthpiece.

Suddenly, Xiao Fengque put the white jade mouthpiece between her own lips.

A few seconds later, those hands put it down again.

She shook her head self-mockingly, tucked the opium pipe into her robe, took one last look at the river surface, and walked resolutely toward the direction of Heavenly Secrets Pavilion.

The camera pulled back, farther and farther, eventually becoming a bird's-eye panoramic view. In the frame, the person on the river and the person on the shore moved in opposite directions, growing farther and farther apart...

Gradually, both figures in the scene disappeared.

Nothing remained.

The screen abruptly went black. Immediately after, the ending theme song began playing!

Only when the screen went dark that instant, briefly reflecting Di Xue's face on the television, did Di Xue realize the movie had ended.

Di Xue rubbed the goosebumps that had appeared on her arms at some point, grimacing at the screen.

This... this... this was just too...

Di Xue couldn't think of any adjectives. She only felt extremely excited right now, wishing she could immediately go downstairs and run a few laps, even more wishing she could immediately find some fellow enthusiasts to passionately discuss this with—ah!

She suddenly realized that tonight's new forum members might, perhaps, possibly have some connection with this movie...

Wait!

Di Xue suddenly remembered something and quickly stared at the ending credits rolling during the theme song.

After the names of Yang Huanyi, Li Yi, Jiang Erjing, Ge Dafu and others scrolled past, the name Di Xue most wanted to know finally came into view.

Mianmian—Played by Shang Yechu.

Chapter 69: Blossoms in Full Bloom

From the very first day she started filming, Shang Yechu had already begun using the stage name Shang Yechu.

She did not like her family name. She hated her father and mother, hated her full-blooded younger siblings, and hated everything tied to that surname.

Entertainers normally cannot pick a stage name on a whim; usually the company makes the call. In places where superstition runs deep, like the Baogang entertainment circle, choosing a stage name often involves hiring a master to check feng shui and pick an auspicious time.

Shang Yechu was still working solo at the moment, so she felt freer choosing a name. She simply removed the family name and used her given name directly. Dropping the surname was to sever ties with those people, keeping the given name was to remember who she was.

When the cast of Tale of Cloud Incline was filming, Zheng Bohan's old writer friend Liu Hong even cast a divination for her stage name.

Screenwriters read widely and know a lot. For their craft they often study a variety of odd, niche knowledge.

Liu Hong had once written a script about a diviner, so he knew more than most about fortune-telling and name divination. One day, with some idle time after Shang Yechu finished her scenes, Liu Hong gave her name a quick reading.

Shang Yechu still remembered the scene.

"Yechu..." Liu Hong, acting mysterious, muttered and did his calculations, "Shandi Bo hexagram, middle-low."

Shang Yechu did not believe in such things, but not wanting to offend, she played along and asked, "What does that mean?"

"This hexagram shows a person who repeatedly receives unexpected blessings, often experiencing miracles at the brink of disaster that reverse the situation.

"The person indicated by this hexagram prefers tranquility, fears noisy places, and is drawn to the contemplative worlds of religion and philosophy. Rational, good at planning, suspicious by nature, and fond of wealth.

"In family matters, blood relatives are weak, self-reliant in setting up a household; personally, hard-working but stubborn, prone to gastrointestinal illness. All signs are inauspicious.

"As for romance, there may be secret admiration for an unmatched person, or memories that last a lifetime. Ominous.

"Quick-thinking, exceptionally intelligent, sometimes hard to get others to resonate with you, yet through trials you will eventually accomplish great things and gain widespread acclaim."

Liu Hong spoke in a pedantic way. Shang Yechu blinked and smiled, "Very scholarly, the student doesn't quite understand."

"Playing dumb." Liu Hong waved an invisible finger at her with an air of amusement, "Is that your real name? I heard Old Zheng say your surname is Shang?"

"Yes." Shang Yechu made up a casual reply, "Some say that surname doesn't match the name well, so I changed it."

Liu Hong perked up, "Let me calculate it for you."

Before she could stop him, Liu Hong began fiddling with his tools again.

After a while, Liu Hong frowned and said, "Not great, honestly. Chen Fei weak, many illnesses and misfortunes, destined to die alone. It clearly shows artistic talent—excellent aesthetic sense and performance ability—but it also shows destiny suppressed, impossible to succeed..."

Shang Yechu listened quietly without a word.

Liu Hong mumbled a couple more sentences, then said, "Still, use Yechu. Yechu is pretty good, much better than your original name. There's still some hope of fame and fortune."

Shang Yechu smiled, "Then I'll take your auspicious words."

Putting her stage name aside for the moment, over on the other side, after the movie ended, Di Xue couldn't wait to get on the forum.

On the Screen and Shadow section, the post titled "Did anyone watch Heavenly Secrets Pavilion on Six Empress Dowager tonight? Thoughts?" had the [hot] badge replaced by [explosive], showing just how heated the discussion was.

Di Xue clicked into the Screen and Shadow section and was immediately startled by the scene of fervor!

"Did anyone watch Heavenly Secrets Pavilion on Six Empress Dowager tonight? Thoughts?"

"Newbie help|Can anyone tell me how to download a movie from the movie channel to my phone?"

"Newbie help|Does anyone know who the actor playing that flower queen in Heavenly Secrets Pavilion is?"

"Newbie worship post|Where can I read the original novel of Heavenly Secrets Pavilion?"

"New to the scene|Will Mianmian appear later?"

"Old-timers complaint treehole|The casting for Heavenly Secrets Pavilion is a major failure, the male and female leads are the biggest blunders."

"Is Mianmian and Xiao Fengque a pair?"

"Does Xie An like Mianmian?"

"Newbie worship post|New movie on the movie channel, please guide me!"

"Casual chatter|Congrats, Xiao Fengque's Curse strikes again!"

"Is the movie channel not state-run? How do so many connected people get in? What is Xie An even playing?"

"Contains salt mud, enter with caution|Xiao Fengque sixteen! sixteen! sixteen! Old cucumbers back off!"

"The movie channel aired Heavenly Secrets Pavilion tonight, I think it should be renamed Auntie Xiao and Xie the Root"

"The worst version of Xiao Fengque hasn't been decided yet, but the worst Xie An has already appeared..."

"Jiang Erjing's sword's still sharp, he has a little Li Tanhua vibe."

"Who is the dancer in Heavenly Secrets Pavilion? Feels like the mastermind."

"Why not just delete Xie An..."

The whole board was a battlefield of posts about Heavenly Secrets Pavilion. Old Wine Shop hadn't been this lively in a long time.

Di Xue fully understood why. Given Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon's status and the public affection for Xiao Fengque, it would be shocking if people weren't discussing it.

Di Xue first opened the thread with the highest activity, the first post.

Old Wine Shop had more female fans; the tone there differed slightly from other forums.

"Did anyone watch Heavenly Secrets Pavilion on Six Empress Dowager tonight? Thoughts?"

"Watching now, the production is pretty good, looks nice."

"What? Heavenly Secrets Pavilion? I'm going fast!"

"Watching now, Yang Huanyi's action scenes are still pretty good, but her state is off, several scenes are jarringly out of place. She acts like she's drugged."

"The poster above hasn't seen Xie An yet. Once you see his performance, you'll think Yang Huanyi is an award-winning actress."

"No... another failed remake... Xiao Fengque's curse strikes yet again..."

"Honestly, the plot is fairly faithful to the original, maybe about seventy percent. The supporting cast is good too: Jiang Erjing, Ge Dafu, Shi Qing, and that dancer flower queen, they all look like they stepped out of the book."

"What use is supporting cast fidelity if you don't make the main character faithful?"

"The edition with the least CP chemistry—three and five—standing there like an earnest homeroom teacher and a rebellious student."

"Ah Feng, my Ah Feng, what a tragic life..."

"My god, I saw on Weibo a fan who's defended Xiao Fengque for twenty years, hoping the movie channel would do a good job. I can't imagine how heartbroken she must be..."

"The one named Kui Kui? I saw her too. She really loves Xiao Fengque. Twenty years ago I was still a meatball in my mother's belly."

.....

After dozens of pages of old-timer chatter, the thread suddenly changed tone.

"Hello everyone, I'm a newbie. Does anyone know which actress played the dancing flower queen?"

That message was like a fuse. Immediately, ten new primary accounts popped up asking about the dancer.

"Newbie seeking attention! I checked so many places, I don't know who she is! Please please [hands folded]."

"Can this board post fanfiction? I just wrote a little Xiao Fengque and Mianmian fanfic, not sure where to post it."

"I'm so fast! Let me see~ (screams)"

The newbies' posts scrambled the thread by dozens of pages. Fortunately the forum veterans were friendly and willing to answer, so the exchange remained pleasant.

Those posts were made while the movie was still airing. Di Xue scrolled to the last page.

The last page contained a just-posted reply.

"Report! I've found the dancer's actress name! It's Yechu! Such a beautiful name! [screenshot]"

"Yechu? Never heard of her. Pure newbie?"

"Maybe she studies dance. The production brought in a dance specialist who just guest-starred for the dance scenes and a couple other bits?"

"Hey, hey, this is a movie discussion thread, how did it become a character discussion thread..."

"Because the most dazzling role in this movie is her. If you aren't discussing her, who else? Xie the Root?"

"Help, does the new Xie An already have a nickname?"

"I'll be honest, Xie Guangkun would've played Xie An better than this guy."

The thread's mood was cheerful. Di Xue marveled that an outstanding role naturally draws conversation, while also wondering how bad Xie An could be to stir such universal anger on the forum.

Her phone vibrated; a new reply appeared in an instant.

"Report! Latest update, Kui Kui is broken, I saw on Weibo she posted over ten crazy messages!"

—

When Heavenly Secrets Pavilion premiered, Shang Yechu of course watched.

There was no television in the bookstore, so she watched on her phone. CHTV6 has an official partner site called 6TH Movie Network, which streams new movies roughly in sync with CHTV6, about five minutes later.

Because of this, Shang Yechu reluctantly spent twenty yuan to get a 6TH Movie Network membership.

She watched intently, curled up under the covers, eyes fixed on the screen.

After more than an hour, the film ended. Shang Yechu exhaled deeply.

"Yang Huanyi is done," Shang Yechu declared firmly.

"Done how?" 103 was watching too. It couldn't judge the movie or acting quality; it was just passing time with her.

"Look at this." Shang Yechu dragged the progress bar back to the opening credits, "See it?"

"'171-21 Blossoms in Full Bloom Project (Part I)'," 103 read aloud the line Shang Yechu pointed to, "what does that mean?"

"'171-21 Blossoms in Full Bloom Project is a cultural initiative led by the government's Ministry of Culture, officially hosted by Dragon Central Television," Shang Yechu said, "lasting five years, from 2017 to 2021, supporting a group of outstanding Chinese popular literature works that have never been adapted or have been adapted few times, turning them into theatrical films, digital films, TV series, and so on, enriching the public's spiritual products."

103 naturally understood the weight of the words "government" and "official": "So Heavenly Secrets Pavilion is part of this series?"

"That's right!" Shang Yechu said excitedly, "I should have guessed! Jiang Aihua is a highly respected teacher, the foremost inland wuxia author; Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon has long-standing influence but has never had a successful screen adaptation; and the cast of Heavenly Secrets Pavilion..."

"Heavenly Secrets Pavilion isn't just part of the series, it's the very first installment!"

Shang Yechu became more animated and sat up from under the covers. "First is always the hardest. Judging by Dragon Central Television's style, they probably wanted Yi Tianzhao to give this series a strong start. Who could have expected Yang Huanyi would shoot it like this!"

Shang Yechu sighed, "It's settled."

"Settled how?" 103 asked.

Shang Yechu smiled slightly, "You'll find out soon enough."

Chapter 70: Viewer Ratings

Shang Yechu set an alarm for 4:00 AM, worried she wouldn't wake up, and reminded the System: "You absolutely must wake me up at four o'clock."

"You've completely lost it," the System said incredulously. "Isn't your sleep schedule chaotic enough already?"

"It's not for extra work," Shang Yechu had already closed her eyes. "It's to check... the network data. It updates precisely at four, I need to see it the moment it's available."

Shang Yechu fell asleep.

At 4:00 AM sharp, 103 woke Shang Yechu. On the cold bookstore floor in the predawn hours, Shang Yechu turned the electric blanket to its highest setting, used a power bank to charge her phone, and logged into the CTVB official website.

CTVB (Dragon State Television Big Data) is Dragon State's only official television ratings survey website approved for execution by the National Bureau of Statistics. In the era before television's decline, CTVB data was basically the sole standard for measuring television program performance. Everything else could be inflated with fake numbers, but official data couldn't be faked.

CTVB promptly updates television ratings for the previous day every morning at 4:00 AM. With bleary, sleep-filled eyes, Shang Yechu clicked open yesterday's ratings chart.

CTVB's ratings charts are relatively complex - movies, TV series, and variety shows all use different measurement methods. Taking movies and TV series as examples, TV series need to calculate average ratings per episode, but movies that are only one or two hours long obviously don't use this calculation method.

Shang Yechu quickly scrolled through the interface and saw last night's ratings for "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion."

Ratings: 1.84%, ranked third in its time slot, market share: five percent.

This ratings performance looked quite good.

Shang Yechu adjusted the page, pulled up the 2016 full-year movie channel ratings chart, scrolled to the fiftieth position, and glanced at the rating.

In 2016, the movie ranked fiftieth in movie channel ratings had a rating of 1.88%, ranked third in its time slot, with a market share of 5.9%.

"Heavenly Secrets Pavilion"'s ratings performance was fairly decent, just barely hitting a share that was sufficient to justify the production. However, the stunning opening shot, prosperous start, and new year new atmosphere that the 171-21 Blossoms in Full Bloom Project wanted were clearly far from achievable. The stunning opening shot had become a dud, the prosperous start had become a disastrous start, and the new year new atmosphere couldn't even reach the heels of last year's fiftieth-ranked movie!

After comparing the ratings, Shang Yechu had a clear understanding in her heart, then opened Weibo again.

This time, Shang Yechu switched to another alternate account, changed the ID to "Every Day Loving Mie Mie," then followed the Yang Huanyi super topic.

Weibo super topics only opened in June 2016. The Yang Huanyi super topic had also just been established not long ago, with not many people yet, but the studio had already joined, and some relatively die-hard fans were also here.

Shang Yechu navigated to the highlighted posts section and began saving the retouched photos and promotional materials posted by Yang Huanyi's studio and fans in the highlighted posts area.

After Shang Yechu had saved at least hundreds of retouched photos and GIFs, 103 finally couldn't resist speaking up: "What? Are you planning to become Yang Huanyi's twenty-year veteran fan?"

"Yang Huanyi hasn't even been debuted for twenty years," Shang Yechu rubbed her stiff, frozen fingers. "By the way, System, shouldn't you be playing some other role now?"

"What role." Although 103 clearly knew Shang Yechu had ulterior motives, it still spoke up. "Depending on the situation."

Shang Yechu blew warm air onto her fingers and said: "Can you hide my IP and create virtual accounts for me? Simply put, prevent others from tracking me down through the internet."

Such matters were of course child's play for 103 - it didn't even need to expend any energy, relying on computational power alone could achieve this. Shang Yechu's request, to 103, was like asking a mathematics PhD to calculate addition and subtraction within one hundred.

"Possible. However, if you want to engage in telecom fraud, no."

"Telecom fraud will only become 'popular' several years later," Shang Yechu laughed. "That's really great, saving more money."

Although Shang Yechu could pay someone to do this herself, the cost would be beyond what she could afford. Shang Yechu didn't want to borrow money from Su Ge or Zheng Bohan, consuming those personal favors. 103 handling it was both secure and saved money, so Shang Yechu felt reassured.

"How long will it take?" Shang Yechu said. "I need it within three days."

103 said: "One..."

"One day?" Shang Yechu said excitedly. "Such high efficiency!"

"One millisecond."

"..."

103 said: "How many do you want? I just created one thousand virtual IPs and electronic accounts. However, I can only do this much - you must operate these accounts yourself. And they're all shell accounts, without a single cent inside."

"Enough, enough," Shang Yechu said sincerely. "Thank you, truly. Are you tired? Do you need to rest for a while?"

"Compared to the mental exhaustion of watching you cause trouble every day, the exhaustion from doing these things doesn't even amount to nine oxen and one hair."

Shang Yechu wisely stopped speaking.

Early the next morning, Shang Yechu went to the mobile phone shop on Pedestrian Street, used some smooth talking, and rented a second-hand no-name laptop from Shopkeeper Lu.

Buying was unaffordable - every cent in Shang Yechu's hands had important uses, so she could only rent like this. Shopkeeper Lu's mobile phone shop didn't have computer rental services; if not for Grandma Hu's sake, he absolutely wouldn't have made this exception for Shang Yechu.

Shang Yechu brought the laptop and computer charger, found a relatively nice internet cafe, spent a large amount of money to reserve a VIP private room for an entire day.

Shang Yechu's posture clearly indicated she was preparing to demonstrate her skills extensively, making 103 instantly grow somewhat curious. It closely watched Shang Yechu's every move, wanting to figure out what the other intended to do.

Shang Yechu first glanced at the surveillance camera positions in the private room, confirmed the cameras couldn't capture the computer screens, then turned on the internet cafe's computer, the tablet she rented, and her own phone.

Then, on the internet cafe's computer... Shang Yechu downloaded a computer version of Meitu XiuXiu.

103: ...

"Are you going to take selfies with the computer?"

Without looking up, Shang Yechu said: "I don't know how to use PS, and it's also relatively troublesome. Meitu XiuXiu's functions are sufficient."

After opening Meitu XiuXiu, Shang Yechu opened the laptop she rented, connected to the internet cafe's WiFi, started watching "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion," then took screenshots frame by frame.

Finally, Shang Yechu opened her own phone, opened a reading app, and while watching the movie, read the original "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" novel, occasionally pausing to compare something.

Shang Yechu worked continuously for four hours before finishing. When she looked up, it was already noon, and her stomach was growling with hunger.

Shang Yechu rubbed her slightly aching temples from prolonged computer use, put two drops of eye drops in her eyes, then went downstairs to buy a large amount of bread and milk.

Given the previous black eating month, Shang Yechu now felt nauseous seeing greasy, heavy, dense foods. Currently, she could only barely manage to eat soft bread and refreshing milk like these.

Shang Yechu dipped the bread into the milk, and while eating, began contemplating how to write the detailed analysis post.

Chapter 71: Insignificant Preparations

Stunning Years Beauty Time Machine was a major Weibo influencer with 100,000 followers, usually posting celebrity beauty photos on Weibo. Regardless of whether they were new or established stars, or whether they had high traffic, as long as fans submitted content or she was personally interested in the celebrity, Beauty Time Machine would post them.

The beautiful photos she posted included both her own screenshots and edits, as well as fan submissions. For the latter, Beauty Time Machine would credit the image creator and include a disclaimer about removal upon request.

Influencers like Beauty Time Machine had considerable influence. Generally speaking, celebrity fans were happy to see her post positive promotions about their stars. While editors might be displeased with Beauty Time Machine's reposting, out of love for their idols and seeing that she credited the source, they usually wouldn't complain.

Beauty Time Machine received another submission today, or more accurately, a business collaboration.

The collaborator was an account using female star Yang Huanyi's profile picture, with completely blank homepage content, but they were quite generous—willing to pay two thousand yuan for Beauty Time Machine to post a positive promotion about Yang Huanyi.

The promotion content: beautifully edited photos of Yang Huanyi from last night's broadcast of the movie "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion." If they were GIFs, they hoped for no less than 9 frames; if they were screenshot edits, each must be a three-photo collage.

The collaborator required that Beauty Time Machine keep the collaboration confidential and present it as organic fan content, posting this promotion naturally.

Beauty Time Machine's usual engagement metrics weren't particularly high, so this offer was quite sincere. The other party paid thirty percent deposit upfront, with the balance to be paid after Beauty Time Machine made the post.

Beauty Time Machine naturally agreed to this collaboration. After all, Yang Huanyi wasn't any problematic artist—she had decent public appeal—so posting a few photos wasn't any loss.

The collaborator even provided the caption:

■35-year-old Yang Huanyi, time never defeats true beauty.■

This simple caption seemed perfectly fine—nine out of ten fans of celebrities over thirty-five had used similar captions. It appeared to be just a devoted little fan of Yang Huanyi.

Beauty Time Machine asked: ■When does this Weibo post need to be published?■

The other party quickly replied: ■The day after tomorrow at noon, is that okay?■

Two days was enough time for Beauty Time Machine to edit the photos, so she readily responded: ■Of course that's fine.■

What Beauty Time Machine didn't know was that during the same period, about ten other major influencers similar to her had also received similar collaborations.

These influencers' collaboration fees ranged from one thousand to five thousand yuan, with some requiring their own photo editing while others received images directly from the collaborator. The captions were all provided by the collaborator.

The most expensive influencer was a marketing account with five hundred thousand followers—the collaborator provided several pieces of paparazzi footage and asked him to praise Yang Huanyi. Every little bit helps, so the major influencer happily accepted.

On the other end of the internet connection, Shang Yechu was clattering away on computer keyboards, using two computers, ten browsers, and over a dozen alternate accounts to enthusiastically negotiate with these major influencers.

103 watched as Shang Yechu spent twenty thousand yuan in just two hours and couldn't help but comment with his characteristic cold humor: "You look like a wealth-scattering child right now."

"Not bad," Shang Yechu said, her fingers flying across the keyboard. These days she had been practicing typing at internet cafes occasionally, and her typing speed had evolved from two-finger typing to basic touch typing.

"Marketing posts on weekdays are cheaper than weekend posts, and positive articles are cheaper than negative ones," Shang Yechu explained to 103 while typing. "Posts with provided captions are cheaper than those requiring the marketing accounts to write their own."

"Fluff praise posts like these are the cheapest because they don't offend anyone and generate engagement easily. Post two pieces of negative gossip, and fans will chase you down and attack you, with major fans organizing reports—a full combo that'll beat your brains out, and the money earned isn't enough to compensate for the damage to your account's authority."

"Positive articles are great—praise a couple of lines, fans see the compliments and casually repost them, everyone's happy, beautiful harmony all around. It generates heat without worrying about being cursed at for eighteen generations of ancestors or having your views crushed to pitiful levels from reports. You earn money standing up."

"You'll eventually realize that the twenty thousand I spent is actually quite minimal..."

"Are you bored?" 103 finally snapped. "My interest in these meaningless topics isn't that great."

"Mhm." Shang Yechu extended an olive branch to another major influencer. "This is just the beginning—the real battle hasn't even started yet."

After contacting several major influencers, Shang Yechu finally quieted down somewhat. Just when 103 thought she had successfully clocked out, Shang Yechu entered another website address in the browser search bar.

The URL brought up an interface that, at first glance, looked very similar to the website where Shang Yechu had previously bought Weibo accounts, but upon closer inspection, this site was more clearly designed and had more comprehensive features.

This website had more detailed categorization, dividing Weibo accounts into infinite subdivisions based on interest areas, follower counts, registration years, and fan demographics. Categories included emotions, beauty, film and television, food, celebrities, and more; follower counts from under ten thousand to ten to thirty thousand, even hundreds of thousands; it even distinguished between accounts with more male fans versus female fans.

A newly registered blank account cost only five yuan each, level 10-17 accounts ranged from 20 to 30 yuan, accounts from 2011-2014 cost 50 yuan each, and verified accounts were the most expensive, starting at 200 yuan each.

The website also prominently displayed: Bulk discounts available, please contact customer service for details.

Shang Yechu didn't even glance at the displayed accounts and directly contacted customer service.

Half an hour later, after some friendly business communication, Shang Yechu packaged several hundred accounts for eight thousand yuan.

As she bundled and received the accounts, Shang Yechu said, "This price is still quite reasonable now. In a couple of years when Weibo cracks down and with fan inflation, Weibo account prices will become even more expensive."

"Can you handle operating so many after packaging them all?" 103 asked coolly.

"Just a drop in the bucket," Shang Yechu said modestly. "If I can't endure this little hardship, how dare I set my sights on Dragon Central Television."

After finishing all this work, the city lights were already bright outside the window. The bread and milk on Shang Yechu's desk were completely gone.

Shang Yechu said lazily, "I really don't want to go downstairs to buy food... but the stuff sold in internet cafes is much more expensive than outside..."

Despite saying this, Shang Yechu still dragged her tired body downstairs and visited the store next to the internet cafe again, buying a large bag of soft milk-flavored bread.

Carrying the bread, Shang Yechu continued typing on her phone.

This time, Shang Yechu's message was sent to an organization called Blue Whale Creative Co., Ltd., with the contact person's ID being Killer Whale.

Shang Yechu activated the virtual account created by 103 and created an account called "Yibao."

Yibao: ■Available?■

Killer Whale replied instantly: ■Available.■

Yibao: ■How much for one natural trending search? Positive article, the day after tomorrow afternoon, just need to make the top fifty on the overall chart, no need for high placement.■

Killer Whale said: ■Experienced? Let's be straightforward—100,000 packaged price, no payment if it doesn't trend.■

Yibao: ■Do you think I'm stupid? I think even twenty thousand is too much.■

Killer Whale: ■This conversation can't continue, you should find someone else.■

Yibao: ■It's the dry season for entertainment recently, how much cost savings compared to the peak season goes without saying.■

Killer Whale: ■Still dry season? Can't you see how many movies are being released?■

Yibao: ■Am I a three-year-old child? Theatrical films have flopped ten times in a row this year; Dragon Central Television channels one and eight, plus the four major platform TV dramas have all flopped—if this cold market isn't the dry season, then it can only be the ice age.■

Killer Whale: ■Those unreleased films are constantly looking for topics to trend on searches, the market has been quite active recently, we don't lack your twenty thousand!■

Yibao: ■Those unreleased films are all big productions, trending searches are aiming for number one spot, costs start at seven figures—does your agency even get that business?■

Killer Whale showed "typing" for a while, then said: ■You know your stuff. But your twenty thousand is just ridiculous! How about this—fifty thousand, I'll do it for fifty thousand.■

Yibao: ■I already said it's a positive article, is it appropriate to charge the same as for negative articles? Plus I said we don't need high trending placement, just top fifty is fine. If it can't make top fifty, even making the entertainment chart would work.■

Killer Whale: ■Requirements this low? Whose article is this anyway?■

Yibao: ■Yang Huanyi's, promoting the movie "Dangerous City Envoy."■

Killer Whale: ■Dangerous City Envoy is a big production, why so stingy with promotion funds?■

Yibao: ■The main promotion budget goes to the male lead Wei Yize, Yang Huanyi is just an add-on, her expenses don't even reach one-twentieth of the male lead's. The company actually doesn't care at all, they've pushed everything onto subordinates.■

Yibao: ■If it weren't for work, I wouldn't bother coming to you either. Let me know if you can do it or not, otherwise forget it.■

Killer Whale immediately became flustered. In business, you don't fear arguments with the other party—you fear when the other party simply lacks interest and doesn't care whether the deal happens or not.

As someone working in the entertainment field, Killer Whale naturally kept up with industry trends. He knew quite a bit about "Dangerous City Envoy." For example, although Yang Huanyi had seniority, she was being overshadowed by male lead Wei Yize; how Wei Yize's fans were very skilled at data manipulation; how Wei Yize's fans had recently been boasting everywhere that Wei Yize was the number one male lead...

Remembering this, Killer Whale believed about half of what Yibao said.

He tried to negotiate: ■Regardless, twenty thousand is just too outrageous. That's not how bargaining works. How about forty-five thousand—can't go any lower!■

Yibao said: ■Forty thousand, and I'll come to you again in the future.■

Killer Whale gritted his teeth: ■Fine, forty thousand it is! Consider it making friends with you.■

Yibao happily typed: ■Deal, looking forward to good news. The day after tomorrow.■

By the time the communication ended, Shang Yechu had already returned to the VIP private room in the internet cafe. The milk-flavored bread was also almost finished, with only a few slices left.

Shang Yechu put away her computer, plugged in her phone to charge, and then locked the private room door from inside.

She had booked this room for 24 hours, meaning she could stay here until 8 AM tomorrow morning.

There was a sofa in the private room. Shang Yechu set an alarm for 7 AM, then lay down on the private room sofa.

Shang Yechu covered herself with the thick cotton coat she had bought at a friendly price from Pedestrian Street, curled up into a ball on the sofa, and fell asleep.

Chapter 72: Carrots

Sun Xiaoxiao opened the PiliPili short video platform and skillfully entered Shang Yechu's name into the search bar.

Only three or four days after "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" began airing, there were already many fan-made edits of Shang Yechu circulating on short video sites.

As the current highest-quality platform for fan-made edits online, period beauty compilations had always been an enduringly popular genre on PiliPili.

Shang Yechu had clearly become the new favorite among video editors these past two days, with just over ten minutes of source material being creatively transformed in countless ways.

■Period Beauties■Stunning Beauty That Takes Your Breath Away

■Flower Queen Mianmian Personal Tribute■A Peerless Beauty from the Northern Lands

■Xiao Fengque x Mianmian■My Home is in the Ninth Lane of Jiangnan's Thirteen Lanes...

■Misinterpretation■What if Mianmian Was the Mastermind Behind It All...

■Xie An x Mianmian■"You really don't know how to be gentle with delicate flowers."

Whose Every Smile and Frown Sways the Stars? | "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" Mianmian Personal Tribute

I Have a Love Story Set in Jiangnan's Past | Mianmian Personal Tribute | "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion"

These videos were exquisitely edited and had decent view counts. The most popular one had already surpassed two hundred thousand views!

As Shang Yechu's newly converted appearance fan, Sun Xiaoxiao had been indulging in PiliPili these past two days, watching various fan-made edits and thoroughly enjoying herself.

The only problem was that Shang Yechu's screen time was simply too limited. After repeatedly watching the same ten-plus minutes of footage, she felt like she had memorized every frame.

Sun Xiaoxiao desperately wanted to see new works from Shang Yechu, but unfortunately this actress seemed quite mysterious. Sun Xiaoxiao couldn't find any trace of her across various platforms.

She hadn't even opened a Weibo account!

After admiring some exquisite edits of Shang Yechu on PiliPili for a while, Sun Xiaoxiao opened Weibo.

Although Shang Yechu hadn't created a Weibo account, a small group of her initial appearance fans had already established a super topic for her—the numbers were small, with Shang Yechu's super topic currently having only around forty people, looking quite pitiful.

Sun Xiaoxiao originally intended to go directly to Shang Yechu's super topic, but upon opening Weibo, she suddenly noticed a familiar-looking hot search at the bottom of the entertainment chart.

■Yang Huanyi Professionalism■

Of course Sun Xiaoxiao knew the name Yang Huanyi. These past two days while browsing the Old Wine Shop wuxia forum, the sisters on the forum had been criticizing her and Li Yi (the actor playing Xie An) to no end.

Sun Xiaoxiao carefully recalled Yang Huanyi's performance in "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" and really couldn't connect her with the word "professionalism." She distinctly remembered one scene where Yang Huanyi was speaking her lines while sucking on a mint candy?

Feeling baffled, Sun Xiaoxiao clicked on this hot search with a mindset ready to find faults.

The top post in this hot search was from a Weibo major influencer called "Entertainment Insider":

■Yang Huanyi "Dangerous City Envoy" on-set photos, Douyin behind-the-scenes! Effortlessly maneuvering thirty-meter wires, rolling in mud seventeen times! Personally crossing explosion points! This is truly professional! #Yang Huanyi Professionalism#■

The accompanying images were various behind-the-scenes gifs of Yang Huanyi in a modern drama set. Some gifs showed only a small white dot in the frame, with red text labeling "This is Yang Huanyi."

So this wasn't about the "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" crew. Sun Xiaoxiao felt somewhat disappointed. Since it was professionalism in another production, it had nothing to do with "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion."

Sun Xiaoxiao put this matter out of her mind.

After her noon nap, it was already 2:00 PM when Sun Xiaoxiao opened Weibo again, only to discover that the ■Yang Huanyi Professionalism■ hot search had skyrocketed from positions 30-40 on the entertainment chart to number 33 on the overall hot search chart.

Why was this hot search still climbing? Sun Xiaoxiao felt slightly displeased. She hadn't watched "Dangerous City Envoy," but she had seen "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion." Yang Huanyi's professionalism in the former didn't affect Sun Xiaoxiao's negative impression of her from the latter.

Pouting, Sun Xiaoxiao clicked into the hot search for another look.

This time the hot search was much livelier than before. Besides Entertainment Insider, there were many popular posts from other major influencers. There were various beautiful photos of Yang Huanyi in different roles, action shots of Yang Huanyi, and old interviews with Yang Huanyi, among others.

One particularly popular post was from a blogger called "Stunning Years Beauty Time Machine" sharing retouched beautiful photos—nine gifs in total, with the caption: **■35-year-old Yang Huanyi, time never defeats true beauty. #Yang Huanyi Professionalism#■**.

To be fair, the images shared by Beauty Time Machine were quite attractive. Yang Huanyi's fans and many casual browsers enthusiastically reposted, significantly boosting this post's popularity.

Sun Xiaoxiao watched this very unhappily, feeling the irritation of seeing someone she disliked being universally admired. She couldn't resist posting in the hot search: **■Professional? I thought her performance in "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" was quite average.■**

After sending this, Sun Xiaoxiao no longer felt like browsing Weibo and turned off her phone.

Meanwhile, Shang Yechu was rapidly switching between accounts like an octopus, boosting the hot search's popularity.

During the entertainment industry's dry season, Weibo hot searches were easier to push compared to other times. Five hundred original discussions could generate considerable heat. During the summer battle royale and New Year competition periods, it would be much more difficult!

Shang Yechu had already prepared over thirty thousand words of fluff praise stored on her phone. She could simply change the name and reuse the content.

Using the virtual IPs created by 103, Shang Yechu tirelessly switched accounts, pasted fluff praise, and sent Weibo posts, continuously warming up the stage for Yang Huanyi.

103 monitored the popularity of the **■Yang Huanyi Professionalism■** topic in real time: "Currently at number 30 on the overall hot search chart, with a significant gap from number 29. It will probably be difficult to climb higher."

From 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM, it had taken a full four hours to reach this position. The result wasn't ideal, but Shang Yechu had done her best.

"Don't worry." Shang Yechu said while typing, "We'll have helpers soon."

"Helpers?" 103 couldn't figure out how, given Shang Yechu's status and connections, there would be helpers willing to assist with this.

At 2:15 PM, just as the hot search that Shang Yechu had painstakingly pushed up dropped from number 30 to number 32 on the overall chart, a mysterious group of visitors suddenly arrived.

Weibo, Wei Yize Fan Data Group One.

Love Tastes Best (Group Owner): **■@everyone Attention, hot search overall chart number 32 "Yang Huanyi Professionalism" topic, everyone contribute ten heating posts!■**

■Use alternate accounts! Adopt casual browser tone! Also praise Xiao Ze's "Dangerous City Envoy" more!■

■Seasoning (Wei Yize fan name) babies, go push the hot search more!!! Promote "Dangerous City Envoy" extensively!

Include **#Dangerous City Envoy#** topic!

Heat up popular content!

Like, comment, and repost influencer posts + interact with other people's posts on the public feed!

Everyone post ten original posts with **#Yang Huanyi Professionalism#** topic, plus **#Dangerous City Envoy#** topic!

+ New line + 15+ word caption + image! Must be "Dangerous City Envoy" stills! Must be "Dangerous City Envoy" stills! Must be "Dangerous City Envoy" stills!

Everyone at least ten posts, use both main and alternate accounts to post, must remember to include "Dangerous City Envoy" posters! If you don't have Yang Huanyi images, save from **@Stunning Years Beauty Time Machine @Entertainment Insider @AreWeAdmiringLooksToday's** Weibo posts!**■**

■Don't think it's not Xiao Ze's hot search and slack off! Yang Huanyi's popularity means "Dangerous City Envoy's" popularity, Xiao Ze is "Dangerous City Envoy's" number one male lead, box office will be counted under his achievements, every casual viewer we attract now will become Xiao Ze's future accomplishments!■

■Start doing this immediately! Strive to push the topic into top five before evening rush hour!■

As the top traffic star who outranked Yang Huanyi, Wei Yize's fans naturally carried weight incomparable to forty-thousand-yuan hot search boosting agencies. Soon, hundreds of Seasonings flooded the hot search public feed, and the **■Yang Huanyi Professionalism■** topic suddenly jumped from the thirties to number ten.

103 watched helplessly as that topic shot up like it was on drugs: ...

Looking at the topic ranking, Shang Yechu stretched lazily and applied two more eye drops. "When it comes to technology and hard work, I'm not as good as you; but when it comes to understanding the domestic entertainment industry, you're not as good as me~"

The entire public feed was filled with praise for Yang Huanyi's professionalism. After scrolling through a couple posts, Shang Yechu murmured, "Next, the real heavyweights should make their entrance..."

There were still heavyweights?

After the topic stabilized at number nine on the hot search chart, a new batch of accounts entered the scene.

These accounts had diverse content on their hompages—each one appearing completely like casual browsers; the account weights were also quite high, with basically every post appearing in real-time feeds.

Although the content was monotonous and even copied many of the captions Shang Yechu had written—but for hot searches, who cared about that?

■Yang Huanyi is truly so professional, my childhood goddess! Heard there's a new film called "Dangerous City Envoy" recently, gonna support it!■

■These behind-the-scenes are from "Dangerous City Envoy," right? Ahhh I really want to watch it■

■Domestic films haven't had such realistic fight scenes in a long time! Worth watching for this alone! #Dangerous City Envoy#■

■Has "Dangerous City Envoy" been released? Attracted by the beautiful photos in the hot search, can't wait to go watch it-■

Although these Weibo posts reeked of automated content, the popularity was genuine. Soon, the hot search topic climbed from number nine to number five.

"'Dangerous City Envoy' production team has joined the fray." Shang Yechu scrolled through the Weibo interface and sneered, "Right now is exactly "Dangerous City Envoy's" promotional warm-up period. When movie promoters see free organic hot searches, it's like elderly folks seeing free eggs—they can't resist heating them up."

Pushing a hot search is easy, pushing a high-position hot search is difficult, and maintaining a hot search is even more challenging. The difficulty of these tasks basically increases progressively.

The first stage is most important because it's the foundation from zero to one; the second stage is most prone to failure, often collapsing midway due to insufficient manpower; the third stage is most expensive because Weibo time is precious, with hot search ad slots costing millions to tens of millions.

Shang Yechu had completed the first stage herself, while Wei Yize's fans and the "Dangerous City Envoy" production team obediently completed the second and third stages for her.

A bunch of traffic influencers and capitalist production teams were led around in circles by Shang Yechu like donkeys chasing carrots.

"Alright." Shang Yechu looked contentedly at the increasingly popular hot search. "Next, it's my turn to make an entrance."

Chapter 73: Purification

During dinner, Sun Xiaoxiao opened the Old Wine Shop forum again.

The atmosphere on the Old Wine Shop forum was very good, with lots of fan-created content. There was even one talented creator who wrote a long fanfiction about Xiao Fengque and Mianmian, which had already reached three chapters.

Although that fanfiction portrayed Xie An as a sinister villain and cannon fodder clown, causing dissatisfaction among many of Xie An's fans in the forum, most readers had gotten into the story through the movie and hadn't read the original work, so they naturally didn't care.

Sun Xiaoxiao didn't like the version of Xiao Fengque played by Yang Huanyi, so she didn't read the fanfiction. Instead, she clicked into the Teahouse and Tavern casual chat section, wanting to see if there was any fresh gossip today.

["Breaking! A twenty-year veteran fan of Xiao Fengque has been purified through fan abuse!"]

The title of this post was clearly provocative, and Sun Xiaoxiao immediately clicked in with curiosity.

["As the title says, does everyone remember that 'KuiKui Who Loves Three-Five · Fengbao Devotee' account? Today I saw her change her Weibo nickname and bio!"]

["Changed to what? Show me, show me."]

["[Screenshot]"]

In the screenshot, KuiKui Who Loves Three-Five · Fengbao Devotee had already changed her ID to "Kui Kui · Return My Xiao Fengque," with the bio stating: ["Xiao Fengque's eternal ultimate beloved white moonlight | Only love Xiao Fengque! Came to Weibo just for Fengbao ■■■■ Politely declining any Eighty-Five movie fans, Little Lame Phoenix fans, and disgraced celebrity fans! Also politely declining scene-stealers! Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel's 'Heavenly Secrets Pavilion' - begone, begone, begone!"]]

["Oh my god, was this a CP fan being purified?"]

["With Xie An being portrayed so terribly, it's hard not to get purified."]

["I find it really strange though, Li Yi's bad acting isn't Xie An's fault, Xie An is quite unlucky too, being played by such a guy..."]

["Yeah, what does Li Yi have to do with Xie An? Why would Kui Kui get purified?"]

["Latest news! Kui Kui has done something big! Everyone go check Weibo!"]

What had Kui Kui done? Sun Xiaoxiao's curiosity immediately burned so intensely that she couldn't sit still. She quickly opened Weibo and searched for "Kui Kui · Return My Xiao Fengque" using the ID from the screenshot.

When she clicked into the other person's profile—wow!

["#ReturnMyXiaoFengque

[Xiao Fengque Book Fans Unlimited Circle Giveaway]

Unlimited circle giveaway, prize pool of ten thousand!

Open to all fans, just repost with the #ReturnMyXiaoFengque hashtag and tag either @CHTV-6 Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel Official or @Director Yi Tianzhao!

Repost to enter drawing for thirty prizes of one hundred yuan, ten prizes of two hundred yuan, and five prizes of one thousand yuan!

We demand @CHTV-6 Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel Official step forward and provide an explanation!

We demand @Director Yi Tianzhao apologize to the Feathers!

We demand the unconditional return of Xiao Fengque's screen time and highlight moments!

Since learning about the 'Heavenly Secrets Pavilion' project's approval, book fans who love Xiao Fengque have countless times pleaded with @Director Yi Tianzhao, hoping Xiao Fengque would receive fair treatment.

'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon' has been published for over fifty years, but in the hearts of Feathers, the character Xiao Fengque remains forever young. Our love for her is no less than any other love in this world.

When we learned the 'Heavenly Secrets Pavilion' project would be handed to @Director Yi Tianzhao, we were filled with hope. Because @CHTV-6 Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel is the official movie channel, and Director Yi Tianzhao is a renowned excellent director.

We thought this character Xiao Fengque, who has suffered unfortunate adaptation luck, would finally receive proper treatment in fair and wise hands; we thought the stigmatizing 'curse' hanging over Xiao Fengque could be cleansed this time.

On January 14th, I waited before the movie channel with full of anticipation, almost reverently, looking forward to seeing my beloved character shine brilliantly, anticipating Dragon Central Television's quality production.

But what did we get instead?

A butchered adaptation! Deleted scenes! Countless instances of perfunctory treatment and appropriation!

Please look at the content in the images. Weibo only allows grid layouts, so I've consolidated all images into several long composite images; in reality, the number of butchered adaptations to Xiao Fengque's related scenes in 'Heavenly Secrets Pavilion' amounts to over fifty instances!

Xiao Fengque's highlight moments were appropriated for irrelevant male and female supporting characters; Xiao Fengque's lines were spoken by other characters; Xiao Fengque's 'Whispering Wind Blade' was outright deleted!

We feel immense pain.

We want to know, is this work 'Heavenly Secrets Pavilion' starring Xiao Fengque as the female lead, or is it 'Xie An Biography,' 'Brothel Flower Queen Biography,' or 'Xiao Fengque Cameo Biography'?

We want to know, why butcher and delete Xiao Fengque's highlight moments and screen time, erasing this character's most precious qualities?

We want to know, is Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel's mission 'creating cultural products the people love' or 'haphazardly altering cultural products the people love'!

Xiao Fengque book fans are launching this unlimited circle giveaway rights defense campaign, our demands:

1. We demand @CHTV-6 Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel Official @Director Yi Tianzhao properly address the Feathers' demands and give us a reasonable explanation;
2. According to documents on the Dragon State Film Bureau's official website, two more 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon' series films are about to start filming—we refuse to allow further deletion and appropriation of Xiao Fengque's highlight scenes in upcoming movies! Please respect book fans, respect Xiao Fengque!

We don't know what the outcome of this rights defense campaign will be. The Feathers' strength is too small, too insignificant to contend with some behemoths. But we will not give up.

For her, for Xiao Fengque's sixteen years, for my twenty years, for the fifty years of countless book fans since 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon' was first published.

Finally, I'll borrow one of Ah Feng's lines to conclude this desperate rights defense campaign.

'If I cannot win every battle, then I shall have no regrets even if I die a hundred deaths.']

Chapter 74: Turmoil

After reading that long post, Sun Xiaoxiao admitted she was moved.

Under the giveaway long post were nine very detailed long images. The images were made with great care, screenshots from the film on top and passages from the original novel underneath, meticulously comparing differences between the movie and the source, with specific discrepancies marked in red so even people who hadn't read Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon could understand.

The last image was a notarized screenshot showing a ten-thousand-yuan giveaway pool.

This giveaway Weibo clearly took a lot of effort. Even Sun Xiaoxiao, who had never read the original novel and didn't like Xiao Fengque in the movie, felt deep indignation and helplessness after finishing the whole post.

Sun Xiaoxiao didn't realize there was such a thing as being incited; she had thought her sense of justice had simply been lit.

That giveaway Weibo had already been reposted more than five hundred times. Many reposts were casual bystanders tempted by the money, but many were people moved by sympathy and shared outrage.

The Xiao Fengque Homepage also reposted it, and many loyal book fans of Xiao Fengque kept increasing the stakes in the comments, some adding physical prizes, others adding cash.

One person's anger fades easily, but a group's fury endures, like a poisonous fog lingering overhead.

Sun Xiaoxiao reposted it too, adding a comment: "Although I don't like the Xiao Fengque in the film, I support Feathers' rights defense. It's been a rough journey."

On the other end of the internet line, Shang Yechu watched the repost count climb and lightly rubbed her temples.

103 let out a mechanical laugh: "A ten-thousand-yuan prize pool? Using the ten-thousand-yuan hush money paid to Yang Huanyi as the giveaway?"

"Mhm—" Shang Yechu hummed softly, "The wool comes from the sheep."

Shang Yechu could be that vicious; 103 stopped arguing and asked, "Are you short on funds? Hiring big influencers, buying hot search spots, purchasing accounts, plus the giveaway, you're already running a deficit."

"Sigh, sigh, sigh, still have to work as an extra." Shang Yechu lamented, "A shortfall of over ten thousand. A few big special appearances would make that back..."

"Luckily the draw date is set a month from now." Shang Yechu leaned on the table, "There's still a month. Work it, while life lasts, extras don't stop."

Near the New Year there were still lots of jobs in film city. Shang Yechu looked good and had acting experience, so she didn't worry too much about not getting scripts.

103 was about to speak when it noticed more fans with Yang Huanyi avatars appearing in the reposts of Shang Yechu's giveaway Weibo, feeling inexplicably puzzled.

"Aren't you trying to target Yang Huanyi with this post? Why are her fans reposting you?" 103 asked, confused.

Since meeting Shang Yechu, 103 no longer dared to claim it understood humans. What a species they were.

"Hey, hey, hey, don't let your System instincts slip into omniscient mode." Shang Yechu weakly flipped through notifications in the extras group, "My post is clearly defending Yang Huanyi."

"....." 103 instinctively read Shang Yechu's giveaway Weibo again, feeling more alarmed with each pass. After reading it three times, 103 couldn't keep its usual cold tone: "You— you really are—"

Really... really...

103 had no words!

How could someone be like Shang Yechu?

She was scheming at Yang Huanyi, yet Yang Huanyi's fans were counting her money for her!

From start to finish, Shang Yechu's giveaway Weibo did not attack Yang Huanyi personally or say anything bad about her. On the contrary, she repeatedly claimed to defend Xiao Fengque's screen time.

Who played Xiao Fengque? Wasn't it Yang Huanyi!

In Yang Huanyi's fans' eyes, the book fans were fighting for Yang Huanyi's scenes! If they didn't support her, who would they support?

That venomous woman Shang Yechu—hoarding screenshots from others was one thing, but now she was squeezing the last bit of usefulness out of people's value down to the bone!

After seeing several of Yang Huanyi's major fans repost the Weibo, 103 no longer wanted to look at these humans being toyed with by Shang Yechu and withdrew its gaze.

"What do you plan to do next?" 103 asked calmly.

"Next..." Shang Yechu put down her phone and smiled lightly, "Next is the internet's favorite plot twist~"

Yi Tianzhao was frantically fielding calls from superiors.

The 171-21 Blossoms in Full Bloom Project was Dragon Central Television's face and political achievement. Heavenly Secrets Pavilion, as the vanguard in that series, had mediocre ratings and the bosses were already a bit dissatisfied. Now Xiao Fengque's book fans had taken their protest to the doorstep of Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel, making the network's dignity look ruined and landing the leaders in a heap of trouble.

At the start of the Gregorian year and the end of the lunar year, new momentum hadn't arrived; only bad luck had shown up in spades!

The Sixth Channel's comments and reposts had already been overrun. Angry and heartbroken Xiao Fengque book fans, bystander fans lured by the giveaway, and even some fans whom the Sixth Channel had offended before, all exploded in the comments.

Yet the Sixth Channel didn't even know whom the fury should be aimed at.

At Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng? The old lady was over seventy; not even the leadership combined could match her prestige and fame. Were they worthy?

At those book fans? How would they punish them? Were they going to banish or bury a fictional character like Xiao Fengque? Ridiculous!

At the rights defender Kui Kui? What, would dignified Dragon Central Television personally go open a box on her?

The hot potato kept being tossed, and Yi Tianzhao ended up the final punching bag, taking a severe dressing-down from the bosses.

Yi Tianzhao had already endured three different rounds of scolding that afternoon and felt shredded to the core.

She was so dizzy from the abuse that she even asked a foolish question: could she just quit and stop filming the Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon series? Her superiors blasted back over the phone like a torrent:

"This is a national project, you can't just stop because you feel like it! I'd like to see you become the Minister of Culture if you can do that!"

"The Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon series sells in more than twenty countries. If you can't film it properly, that's your incompetence, not an excuse to drag this huge IP down with you!"

"Who promised me this project and took it by force? What, did your mind also get butchered?!"

"Use any method necessary, resolve this public opinion storm as soon as possible! The faster the better!"

"Calm those book fans down, stop them from making a scene in the official account's comment section!"

"See if you can contact Teacher Jiang Aihua and ask her to step forward to placate the fans!"

Yi Tianzhao cursed her leader a thousand times in her head. Who would calm them? How could anyone calm them? The book fans would devour her alive at this point!

Yi Tianzhao opened Weibo intending to check the Sixth Channel's comments, but suddenly noticed a trending search on the hot list.

[Yang Huanyi double-booked]

Chapter 75: Clash

Wei Yize's fans pushed [#Yang Huanyi Professionalism#] to ninth place on the overall trending list, and the production team of Dangerous City Envoy then boosted it into the top five of the hot search rankings.

Such a perfect opportunity would be a waste without promotional efforts. The official Dangerous City Envoy Weibo account immediately released a series of Yang Huanyi promotional materials, creatively praising her professional dedication in various ways.

Yang Huanyi's fan nickname is Little Grass. After the official account posted Yang Huanyi's materials, the Little Grass sisters contributed their limited influence, joining Wei Yize's fans in reposting and amplifying the content.

The rights defense action by Xiao Fengque's book fans came unexpectedly. Yang Huanyi isn't a traffic star, so her fans lack extensive experience with fandom rights defense campaigns. This was their first encounter with such a situation.

As long as their idol still wants to remain in the entertainment industry, offending Dragon Central Television isn't a wise move. Therefore, Yang Huanyi's fans only quietly reposted a bit, offering small, unorganized support for the rights defense without making any major moves.

Even so, it's impossible to control everyone. While [#Yang Huanyi Professionalism#] remained on the hot search list, Xiao Fengque's book fans' rights defense campaign erupted fiercely. A ten-thousand-yuan giveaway wasn't a small amount even several years later, and in early 2017, it was particularly generous. Within just two hours, the giveaway Weibo post surpassed ten thousand reposts!

On one side was Yang Huanyi's spirit of going through hell and high water for filming, while on the other was Dragon Central Television's massive deletion and alteration of Xiao Fengque's scenes—which were essentially Yang Huanyi's scenes. The contrast was so stark that many casual observers immediately developed sympathy and affection for Yang Huanyi.

The Little Grass sisters could control their own members from speaking recklessly, but they couldn't restrain the mouths of outraged justice-seeking bystanders. Two hours after the giveaway Weibo appeared, comments under Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel's latest official Weibo post had already exceeded two thousand.

@CHTV-6 Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel Official Weibo: [Little child, little child, don't be greedy, after Laba comes the New Year. Little Six has already started cooking Laba porridge, has everyone made porridge today~[happy][happy][happy]]

The comment section was equally spectacular:

Little Xia Will Get Rich This Year Too: [Drink it while it's hot, this is your executioner's porridge.]

Dudu Grand Governor: [Little child, little child, don't be greedy, after Laba comes the New Year. Little Six, Little Six, don't you cry, messing with scenes makes you a swine.]

Kui Kui · Return My Xiao Fengque: [Please return Xiao Fengque's highlights and scenes without compensation! Please stop deleting and altering Xiao Fengque's original scenes! Please give an explanation to the book fans who have loved Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon for over fifty years! Please demonstrate the impartial conduct expected from an official institution!]

Phoenix Tower Dragon Mansion: [I don't know what to say, I'm really disappointed... I've loved Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon since I was fifteen, and that's fifteen years now. I never imagined Ah Feng would be treated like this.]

Eat Three Bowls of Pizza Every Day: [Pure bystander here, I've followed you for over two years. Although I don't particularly like Xiao Fengque, what you've done this time, Old Six, is really disheartening.]

Phoenix Soaring to Phoenix Tower: [Do you remember your promise to the audience? "The movie channel won't add scenes, won't double-book actors, won't grant special privileges, will respect the original author, will respect the audience friends, making movies the audience loves is our primary mission." Have you lived up to our expectations?]

Three Five Equals Milligram: [Please change the actor playing Xie An, I'm begging you, what kind of addiction makes you keep someone who acts poorly and gets extra scenes?]

My Little Phoenix, Fly Slower: [Cried for a long, long time after watching the movie... You made me so angry [smile]]

Noble Bystander Sister: [Old Six, you need to get your act together—either fire Yi Tianzhao or come out and explain yourself. My parents are longtime book fans of Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon, they cursed for three days after watching the movie.]

Nothing New Under the Sun: [Yang Huanyi almost worked herself to death filming action scenes on set, and you just edited them all out, right?]

This last comment from the fan called "Nothing New Under the Sun" quickly rose to the top, with likes surpassing twenty thousand!

Shang Yechu pressed the final number, transferring eight hundred yuan to the purchased likes agency.

Weibo's popular comments have a particular characteristic—the popular ones become increasingly popular, making it difficult for new comments to rise.

This relates to audience herd mentality. If a comment gets pushed to the top spot, viewers will subconsciously assume it might be more brilliant or incisive than other comments. They develop preconceived agreement with that comment, making them much more willing to like it.

After posting the "Nothing New Under the Sun" comment, Shang Yechu spent another eight hundred yuan to buy likes for her comment, pushing it to the front page while constantly stirring trouble with replies in the comment threads. Sure enough, the comment quickly rose to the top spot through bystanders' likes, directly confronting the Dragon Central Television official Weibo.

"What's next?" 103 said, "Expose Yang Huanyi's double-booking?"

Shang Yechu rubbed her neck and uttered just one word: "Wait."

"Wait for who?"

Shang Yechu said, "Wait half an hour. If the person I have in mind doesn't make a move within thirty minutes, I'll do it myself."

103 remained silent for a moment, then said, "The mutual oppression, persecution, and scheming among humans is truly fascinating."

"This doesn't qualify as persecution." Shang Yechu laughed coldly, her tone more system-like than 103's, "The martial arts team under He Yuan—Martial Arts Master Cheng, that female martial arts double exclusively used by Yang Huanyi—jumped from tall buildings over ten times during the filming of Heavenly Secrets Pavilion, and soaked repeatedly in cold water ponds in December a full ten times. Do you know why? Because Yang Huanyi forgot her lines and performed poorly, causing multiple NGs!"

"Martial Arts Master Cheng's salary is six thousand yuan per month, one-fiftieth of Yang Huanyi's daily pay." Shang Yechu's speech accelerated, "If what I'm doing counts as persecution, then what is making someone soak in ponds ten times while earning fifty times their salary? What is showing body doubles to audiences with over 1.8% ratings while earning half a lifetime's salary of ordinary people?"

"—I admit I'm scheming against her. But accusing me of persecuting her? I won't accept that."

103 paused: "Are you justifying yourself? Actually, you don't need to do this. I'm not accusing you, I just find it interesting."

Shang Yechu said irritably: "Only guilt requires justification, and I feel no guilt. In my previous life while filming a comedy, for comedic effect, I had to dance a waltz with a pig—the kind of locally bred, fat rural pig—with my eyes closed."

Shang Yechu fell silent.

103 said: "Then what? Why did you stop?"

"That pig was filthy. After filming, I vomited, crying and vomiting simultaneously." Shang Yechu said coldly, "That pig had its limbs suspended by wires, using its long snout to nudge me, and I kicked it hard."

"Right then, the pig owner rushed forward to stop me. She was a robust woman who told me they still needed to sell this pig at year-end, and if it got injured, their family would have no fatty dishes for New Year."

"I asked her, 'How much can this pig sell for?'"

"She laughed cheerfully and told me: 'The film crew pays five hundred yuan per day in rent. Her children wake at four every morning to cut grass and feed this pig they've raised for two years. It can sell for four thousand yuan at year-end.'"

Memories flooded back, and Shang Yechu remained contemplative for a long moment. Finally, she said: "I danced the waltz with that pig for a full day, earning two hundred thousand yuan for it. I was crying, while she was laughing."

Perhaps because life was too busy, Shang Yechu rarely had time for sentimental reflection or recalling her miserable, boring previous life. This time, her silence lasted much longer.

"So," Shang Yechu's voice turned slightly hoarse, "if you think I'll feel guilt, remorse, or compassion for what I've done, you're mistaken. I won't today, and I won't ten thousand years from now."

Chapter 76: Public Opinion

Shang Yechu's conversation with 103 lasted too long. By the time they finished speaking, fifteen minutes had passed since Shang Yechu had said "wait."

Shang Yechu glanced at the Weibo interface and curled her lips slightly. "The people I've been waiting for have arrived."

The period from 8 PM to 11 PM is when Weibo sees the most activity. At 8:15 PM, a large number of accounts suddenly emerged, beginning to voice grievances on Yang Huanyi's behalf.

["#YangHuanyi Professionalism# Yang Huanyi risks her life to perform, yet you delete her scenes with reckless abandon! @CHTV-6 Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel official blog APOLOGIZE!"]

["@CHTV-6 Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel official blog Treat Yang Huanyi fairly! Deleting her standout moments, randomly adding scenes for others - a dedicated actress shouldn't be suppressed like this! #YangHuanyi Professionalism#"]

["@CHTV-6 Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel official blog You've really gone to great lengths to prevent Yang Huanyi's rise! Do you deserve all the mud she rolled in and wire work she endured for you?! #YangHuanyi Professionalism#"]

["#YangHuanyi Professionalism# Stealing scenes! Cutting standout moments! Distorting the core! Heaven sees what you do - the curses you receive match the sins you've committed! @CHTV-6 Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel official blog"]

Massive waves of similar Weibo posts flooded the public square, pushing the #YangHuanyiProfessionalism hashtag straight to the top of trending searches!

Dragon Central Television executives nearly blew up Yi Tianzhao's phone with calls.

The Dangerous City Envoy official blog was stunned.

Yang Huanyi's fans were equally bewildered.

While they genuinely wanted to ride the trending wave for some exposure, they never actually intended to clash head-on with Dragon Central Television!

What was this? Tired of living? Itching for trouble? Thinking their wings had grown strong enough? Believing their movie was progressing too smoothly? Feeling their artist's career prospects were too bright?

Yang Huanyi's fans were the most terrified. Xiao Fengque was just a fictional character who didn't fear being blacklisted, but Yang Huanyi was a real, three-dimensional living person!

These suddenly appearing accounts posting such content were practically ensuring Yang Huanyi would offend Dragon Central Television to the point of no return!

The Little Grass sisters rushed to clean up the public square, trying to suppress those ungrateful accounts of unknown origin. Even Wei Yize's fans joined in to help suppress them - they feared offending Dragon Central Television would harm the movie.

Even so, those accounts emerged like cockroaches from every crack - suppress one post, and ten more would pop up!

Under the guise of seeking justice for Yang Huanyi, they relentlessly tagged and insulted Dragon Central Television, even cyberbullying bystanders who expressed indifference toward Yang Huanyi in the trending topics!

Arguments, provocation of conflicts, posting controversial statements, fermenting public opinion...

The originally smooth situation now felt like riding in a car with failed brakes, taking off at a terrifying, heart-stopping speed!

This was strategic praise.

Someone was targeting Yang Huanyi.

Anyone with even slight entertainment industry awareness realized this problem. The Dangerous City Envoy production team immediately contacted Yang Huanyi's team.

To be a good blacksmith, you need strong tools yourself. Don't fear people targeting you - fear having actual vulnerabilities they can exploit!

Did Yang Huanyi have any scandals? Any recent relationships or rumors? Any recent diva behavior? Any inappropriate statements? - These were all points requiring attention.

Yang Huanyi's team's response provided some reassurance: No. None of the above.

The production team felt relieved. Since Yang Huanyi herself had no major issues, there was no need to fear people targeting her. Even if they offended Dragon Central Television, they could blame everything on anti-fans.

They could issue a statement claiming those attacking Dragon Central Television were Yang Huanyi's anti-fans, then send legal notices to a couple of zombie accounts, followed by apologizing to Dragon Central Television on behalf of the anti-fans - problem solved. Saving face!

With their minds at ease, the production team even had the leisure to help fuel the flames - after all, the longer they stayed on the trending charts and the more intense the arguments became, the higher Dangerous City Envoy's topic popularity would rise.

Don't fear controversy - fear obscurity.

Just as the trending heat and public opinion reached their peak, one Weibo post emerged dramatically.

["#YangHuanyi Professionalism#

Exclusive! According to insider sources, Yang Huanyi was double-booked filming Heavenly Secrets Pavilion while shooting Dangerous City Envoy! #YangHuanyi DoubleBooked#"]

Fewer words often meant bigger events. This rule applied equally in the entertainment industry.

The blogger posting this Weibo was called "Entertainment Insider," an entertainment influencer with five million followers, whose influence was absolutely incomparable to those wild marketing accounts. The moment this Weibo appeared, it caused tremors across multiple fronts.

The evidence in this Weibo post was practically ironclad, as it featured an interview with a Heavenly Secrets Pavilion crew member whose face was blurred and voice distorted.

"Teacher Yang was late on her first day of filming, making the entire crew wait for her..."

"Most of the martial arts scenes in the movie were shot by body doubles because Teacher Yang was tired from filming fight scenes in another production (the subtitles maliciously displayed Dangerous City Envoy) and didn't want to film more..."

"Brother Yi is actually a very good person, not arrogant at all, and treats us well. The reason he spoke Xiao Fengque's lines was because Teacher Yang had limited time, only read the script once, and couldn't memorize longer lines."

"Including that final deduction scene - the lengthy reasoning dialogue was too long. Teacher Yang was originally reading from the teleprompter, but it was too obvious. So they had Li Yi deliver those lines instead."

"The reason Whispering Wind Blade was cut was also because Teacher Yang injured her arm filming fight scenes in another production and couldn't wield such a large, heavy blade, so they simply deleted it..."

Each incident was recounted in detail. This crew member's interview was remarkably thorough, accompanied by detailed screenshots and clips from the movie.

This alone could be considered a thunderous revelation, but whoever was targeting Yang Huanyi behind the scenes clearly wasn't satisfied, providing even more direct evidence:

Screenshots of Dangerous City Envoy and Heavenly Secrets Pavilion's project filings from the Dragon State Film Bureau official website, along with the crew's shooting schedules.

Looking at these two images, unless human timekeeping had leaped to another dimension, Yang Huanyi's double-booking was an indisputable truth!

Yang Huanyi's fans were stunned.

The Dangerous City Envoy production team was stunned.

Xiao Fengque's book fans were utterly enraged!

As for the bystanders who felt deceived, misled, forced to go with the flow, then hit hard with this reversal... their humiliated fury was simply incomparable.

Reverse psychology is one of the most important psychological traits of "bystanders." And Yang Huanyi was undoubtedly suffering the backlash.

The #YangHuanyiDoubleBooked hashtag shot up like a rocket, climbing to the top of trending searches within just over ten minutes. Sitting right beside the second-ranked #YangHuanyiProfessionalism created an indescribable dark humor.

Both trending topics were completely overrun. Yang Huanyi's personal Weibo, Yang Huanyi's super topic, and the Dangerous City Envoy official blog were flooded with criticism. Everything on Weibo related to Yang Huanyi and Dangerous City Envoy was submerged in an ocean of online arguments.

Was double-booking important?

To say what audiences don't want to hear - no, it's not.

With capital operation, marketing, and cover-ups, something minor like double-booking isn't even worth a fart. With skillful handling and proper operation, it could even help market an "ambitious," "workaholic," or "acting-obsessed" persona.

Therefore, neither Yang Huanyi nor her team considered this double-booking incident as scandalous material worth attacking. They didn't even mention it when the production team inquired.

However, while double-booking wasn't important, something else was.

At exactly 9 PM, Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng, silent for so long, came online and posted a Weibo.

["My dear little book friends, good evening everyone.

I am Jiang Aihua, also known as Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng.

I don't know how many people from this era still remember me, but every one of my readers, I cherish you deeply in my heart.

I've been following Weibo readers' movements. Although I don't post often, in fact, I see everything you do.

Since Heavenly Secrets Pavilion aired, I've received many private messages from readers. I share your emotions deeply.

The film version of Heavenly Secrets Pavilion has its biggest controversies surrounding two people. Today I'll only discuss one. That is my grandson, Li Yi.

I've also watched Heavenly Secrets Pavilion. In all fairness, this rascal performed very, very poorly in it. He nearly sent these old bones of mine to the hospital with anger!

But I once promised an old friend of mine that when Heavenly Secrets Pavilion was adapted for screen, I would definitely have my incompetent grandson play Xie An.

That person has ridden the yellow crane away - my old friend has been gone for ten years now. This matter was her dying wish, therefore, the casting for Xie An was decided before Heavenly Secrets Pavilion began filming.

For this promise, Li Yi has studied martial arts since childhood, visited many renowned masters, and endured much hardship. Even in the coldest winter months, he had to practice horse stance in the courtyard. However many years he's lived, that's how many years he's studied.

Blame us two inflexible old folks for thinking that learning martial arts well meant he could play a hero. Who would have thought when it came time for actual screen adaptation, we'd learn that knowing how to fight wasn't enough. He also needed to know how to act.

I only learned then that this boy was merely a brute who only knew how to fight, not a qualified actor!

With no alternative, I could only compress Xie An's scenes to the absolute minimum, making his lines as few as possible, fearing my grandson would embarrass himself.

Li Yi performed poorly - we all knew it, and he was aware of it too.

For this production, he acted completely without payment. All fight scenes were performed personally, without using a single frame of body double.

Just to fulfill the dream of two old women's long-ago promise, this child performed these unsatisfactory things. This old woman here apologizes to everyone on his behalf.

I'm sorry for disappointing book friends' expectations of Xie An.

I'm sorry that for the sake of a promise, I've damaged Dragon Central Television's reputation.

Dragon Central Television is a once-in-a-century excellent platform, treating this old woman with utmost respect and going above and beyond. There were absolutely none of those online rumors about "disrespecting the original author" or "reckless changes and adaptations." Every single word in the script passed my personal review before being finalized.

As for adding scenes for Li Yi, that's completely baseless fabrication. This child knows his own limitations and never proactively sought or stole scenes. Li Yi performed poorly - if you want to criticize him, then criticize away openly! I absolutely won't plead his case. But if you claim he added or stole scenes, this old woman must speak up for justice.

Li Yi is my grandson, but Fengque is my fifty-year friend. I would never harm my old friend for the sake of my grandson.

I hereby release the original script for readers to examine, which can be considered giving everyone an explanation.

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng on 2017.1.18"]

Accompanying the Weibo post were several script screenshots.

At this moment, public opinion completely exploded!

Chapter 77: Dust Settled

Although Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng's Weibo post looked like an apology, between the lines she was defending Li Yi.

The old lady's choice was understandable. On one hand, the actor was unfamiliar to her; on the other, he was the grandson of a close friend. Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng was not Mother Mary, she would not let Li Yi take the fall for Yang Huanyi.

But at this critical moment, that move undoubtedly shoved Yang Huanyi into the mud.

The public opinion arena right now was like a dry hot pot that had been burning for a long time: a drop of water would instantly fizzle to nothing, while a drop of oil would immediately ignite a raging fire!

The louder the praise when flowers bloom, the tenfold harsher the backlash when the oil cooks the flame!

The evidence was simply too ample, and Yang Huanyi's team had nothing substantial to argue. At times like this, the best approach is cold treatment. Wait until public opinion calms down, then post an apology on Weibo later.

Yang Huanyi and her team intended to do exactly that, but it was too late.

9:30. CHTV6's official Weibo account reposted Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng's post.

@CHTV-6 CHTV6 Official (reposted from @Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng):

[Thank you Teacher Jiang for speaking up with integrity! Right and wrong lie in people's hearts. CHTV6's movie channel accepts reasonable suggestions and criticism from viewers, but please do not dismiss the efforts of all CHTV staff because of the unprofessional behavior of a few artists!]

PS: Li Yi has already worked very hard, Xiao Liu looks forward to your growth in the second installment-]

9:40.

@CHTV-6 CHTV6 Official:

[Dear viewers, sorry to bother you.

We have noticed that our in-house film Heavenly Secrets Pavilion has sparked a great deal of discussion since its release, and we would like to make a brief statement.

Due to scheduling conflicts among artists, the quality of Heavenly Secrets Pavilion has been affected, hurting new and long-time book fans and viewers' feelings. We sincerely apologize.

The cooperating artists and their agencies have yet to issue effective statements, allowing the public opinion to continue fermenting. The movie channel is always committed to bringing a better viewing experience to our audience. Therefore, we regret to announce that, effective immediately, we will cease all cooperation with the related artists. Future collaborations will exercise greater caution in evaluating artists' professional ethics and schedules.

Please rest assured, Xiao Fengque's story continues, and a new series will set sail soon. Our channel will strive to bring a better viewing experience and a more suitable choice for Xiao Fengque!

Apologies again!]

With that, the dust settled.

Yang Huanyi was finished.

To be precise, her acting career would still continue, but any future cooperation with CHTV — even some special-themed projects — would be forever out of her reach.

CHTV's move was too fast, like a hawk striking as a rabbit bolts, catching everyone off guard.

Yang Huanyi's team hadn't even started drafting their apology statement, and the funds to push *Dangerous City Envoy* on trending searches hadn't even been approved!

"The reason CHTV6 is nicknamed Six Empress Dowager," Shang Yechu turned over and rubbed her aching waist, "is precisely because they act decisively, never dragging things out — oh, and they never let themselves be wronged."

"Yang Huanyi made two mistakes."

Shang Yechu gulped down another bag of hot milk before her stomach felt better.

"First, she treated the audience with contempt."

"Anyone who treats the audience with contempt will inevitably suffer backlash, it's only a matter of time," Shang Yechu said lazily, with milk foam still at the corner of her mouth, "She thought the old, die-hard fans of Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon didn't count as people, so they taught her a lesson."

"The second is that she didn't take CHTV seriously~

"That effect was immediate. Some dignities cannot be provoked."

Shang Yechu walked to the bookshelf and began selecting a book to read tonight, "Yang Huanyi wanted to ride the traffic route, to transition into film, and gradually stopped caring about CHTV — laughable. Back in the day when Six Empress Dowager filmed tribute movies, a bunch of bigshots earning eight-figure paychecks competed to cameo for no pay, even paying to get screen time. What, did they have money to burn?"

"I'm actually more interested in something else." 103 said, "Who exposed Yang Huanyi's double-booking in the end? You don't have that much money to hire a five-million-marketing account."

Shang Yechu casually took out a bilingual copy of *Wuthering Heights* from the shelf and said without much interest, "If you want to take down an opponent, you must study not only your opponent but your opponent's opponent."

She sat back down and said, "*Dangerous City Envoy* is a New Year movie, go see what other New Year films are releasing at the same time."

103 answered flatly, "Hundreds of them."

"....." Shang Yechu gave up hinting, "There's also 11th District Detective, which is the same genre as *Dangerous City Envoy*. Crime, suspense, martial arts."

103 immediately understood the implication behind Shang Yechu's words: "Did the production side of that film make a move?"

"What else?" Shang Yechu opened her book, "The entertainment industry's competition is brutal, and box office battles make people act like idiots~"

"Drop your accent and maybe we could communicate more efficiently."

"Fine. 11th District Detective is starring Shen Yunfan, a rising young actor who's a contemporary of Wei Yize. The two have similar career trajectories: delicate, frail image, creamy young men, both top-tier traffic with twenty million followers, both acting-poor and propped up by veteran co-stars."

Shang Yechu shrugged, "Colleagues are enemies. Two of the same model colliding constantly become mortal foes. Now they both shot films of the same type, coinciding in the New Year season."

"What a bloody, skin-and-bone hatred this is!" Shang Yechu read dramatically, "Wei Yize's fans and Shen Yunfan's fans have already fought openly and covertly many times. Those were truly bloody little skirmishes."

At that point, Shang Yechu paused, "Weren't you there when I read all this entertainment news? Why do you act like you don't know any of it?"

103 could hardly say he found these petty, chaotic disputes boring, so he sensibly remained silent.

Shang Yechu lowered her head and said slowly, "Now I hand Yang Huanyi — the female lead, such a big lever — into the hands of 11th District Detective and Shen Yunfan's team. If they can't use this, then that useless team should just line up and jump into the river."

Although Yang Huanyi wasn't top-tier, she was unquestionably a solid second-tier actress with real appeal.

Now she had been officially stamped as an unprofessional artist, and she was only a step away from being labeled tainted. Unless the *Dangerous City Envoy* production's mind was broken, they would never use that tainted label to prop up the film for CHTV.

In other words, the Dangerous City Envoy's promotion could now only rely on Wei Yize — that acting-poor soft boy — alone. How much box office pull he had outside the fandom, outsiders didn't know, but insiders did.

Dangerous City Envoy had effectively lost half its life. The audience numbers that half represented were happily accepted by 11th District Detective.

Shang Yechu summed up, "Opportunities go to those who are prepared. The people behind 11th District Detective and Shen Yunfan's team are probably keeping a close eye on Wei Yize and Yang Huanyi's teams. See, isn't this useful now?"

Shang Yechu sighed, "They are the real winners."

Chapter 78: Clear Autumn Moonlight

The grand drama had concluded, yet Yi Tianzhao's ordeal was only just beginning.

Yang Huanyi had already been replaced by Dragon Central Television personally intervening, leaving Yi Tianzhao without even a chance to speak up.

For movies in the same series, changing actors mid-production is a major taboo. And to replace the female lead at that!

After this wave of rights defense activism that strengthened fan loyalty, the already sizable force of Xiao Fengque's book fans had grown substantially larger. Xiao Fengque's super topic surged from its original four thousand followers to twenty thousand. Feathers (Xiao Fengque's new generation fans) and Phoenix Fans (Xiao Fengque's veteran fans) camped out daily under Yi Tianzhao's Weibo posts, watching like hawks, forcing Yi Tianzhao to temporarily enable one-click protection mode.

The leadership's pressure intensified even more. "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" had ignited public discourse, attracting attention from all sectors of society. For the 171-21 Blossoms in Full Bloom Project, this was both a blessing and pressure. Both an opportunity and a challenge.

If done well, everyone would feast; if done poorly, with Dragon Central Television's reputation trampled like a shoe mat, then everyone would be left drinking the northwest wind together.

With time tight and tasks heavy, "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" Part Two had to begin filming within a month.

Yi Tianzhao mobilized all her connections, contacting several actresses. The results were unanimously the same—polite refusals.

Television films aren't theatrical films—there's no box office performance to showcase as achievements. Artists with any status would never consider this their first choice; the timeline was also too tight, with few artists having suitable availability.

Moreover, not just anyone could play Xiao Fengque. Finding some delicate, willow-swaying artist to dance with the Affectionate Sword would produce worse results than Yang Huanyi. Yi Tianzhao didn't want to suffer a second round of criticism!

Simply put, the artists that Yi Tianzhao and Dragon Central Television found worthy didn't want this movie; the artists who wanted this movie weren't considered worthy by Yi Tianzhao and Dragon Central Television.

Another important reason was that Yang Huanyi had already starred in the first "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion." While not exactly setting a brilliant precedent, she had established a benchmark of failure. If a successor couldn't even surpass Yang Huanyi, wouldn't that be flushing both their own and Dragon Central Television's reputation down the drain?

Yet Yang Huanyi was already one of China's rare second-tier female action stars. If even she couldn't satisfy those ravenous original book fans, what confidence could others have in surpassing her?

If the performance was poor, it might even end up elevating Yang Huanyi by comparison!

Taking this movie—was it because they found their lives too comfortable? Didn't get enough harsh criticism? Or felt their Weibo comments section was too cold and needed hundreds or thousands of bloodthirsty original fans to warm things up?

Under the influence of these multiple factors, the "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" IP had transformed from a hot commodity into a mess, falling from a cultural project to an abandoned construction project.

Yi Tianzhao was so anxious that several strands of her hair turned white.

She was anxious, but her supervisor was even more anxious.

The 171-21 Blossoms in Full Bloom Project naturally couldn't be assigned to just one person. Dozens of people were competing on the same platform as Yi Tianzhao's supervisor, with about one-third specializing in television film projects like her supervisor.

The adapted works were mostly based on excellent popular literature, so their quality was generally decent. After "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" aired, the movie channel continued broadcasting one new Blossoms in Full Bloom Project television film each night, most achieving respectable results.

Currently, "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion's" viewership ranked third from bottom among the project's aired productions, while its reputation ranked dead last. The only silver lining was that online discussion broke the movie channel's three-year record, though unfortunately it was all negative discourse.

Yi Tianzhao's supervisor had been feeling embarrassed and ashamed while working at the main station these past couple days.

Under such multiple pressures, the entire "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" project team radiated a sense of anxious despair.

Clear Autumn Moonlight was a major content creator on the PiliPili website, usually creating video compilations of film and television scenes, and mixes of handsome ancient-style men and beautiful women.

After two years on PiliPili, Clear Autumn Moonlight had accumulated over twenty thousand followers.

One day, she received a special private message.

["Ma'am, do you accept commercial editing work?"]

Clear Autumn Moonlight glanced at the sender's ID—this was a level two minor account, with an ID that was just the default "User20241181229."

Clear Autumn Moonlight thought the other person seemed a bit like a scammer and replied without much enthusiasm, ["No advertisements."]

The other person instantly replied: ["It's not an advertisement, just a personal compilation of an artist I like."]

Clear Autumn Moonlight grew somewhat interested—she hadn't done this kind of promotion before: ["Tell me more details."]

["It's a fight scene featuring artist Yang Huanyi."] the other person replied, ["I know this topic is quite sensitive recently, but I want everyone to know that she's not entirely an unprofessional artist without merit—she performed many scenes in 'Heavenly Secrets Pavilion' herself."]

The other person typed quite quickly: ["This fight scene was filmed by Yang Huanyi personally. No body double was used."]

Clear Autumn Moonlight still felt somewhat hesitant: ["Forget it, sorry, not really interested in this kind of thing."]

User20241181229: ["This fight scene is three minutes total. Ma'am charges by the minute for editing, right? Under thirty seconds counts as half a minute, over thirty seconds counts as one minute—how about five hundred yuan per minute?"]

Clear Autumn Moonlight: !!!

At this time, PiliPili's commercialization wasn't as severe yet—most content creators were creating out of passion without seeing any financial return. The only way to monetize was by accepting sponsorships.

Clear Autumn Moonlight had thought the other person would only offer two or three hundred yuan like throwing coins to a beggar, never expecting such sincerity!

Clear Autumn Moonlight wavered.

Of course, three minutes of fight scenes couldn't all be included, but by adding some scenic shots, some close-ups, plus some ambiguous opening and closing sequences, wouldn't that mean over a thousand yuan earned?

Money that seemed like it could be picked up just by tripping on the street—should she really give it up?

["Really?"] Clear Autumn Moonlight's tone softened, ["Let's add QQ to discuss details."]

["Okay!"] User20241181229 sounded delighted, ["I've also liked Yang Huanyi for many years and hope audiences can recognize the real her~"]

Clear Autumn Moonlight added the other person's QQ. After detailed discussions, the other party paid the deposit and expressed great anticipation for the final product.

For such straightforward clients, Clear Autumn Moonlight was quite willing to communicate: ["Any requirements for the title, cover image, etc.?"]

User20241181229: ["For the cover, capture a long shot from the fight scene where the face isn't clearly visible, with the eye-catching words 'Fight Scene' prominently displayed on top. That'll do.

For the title, please use 'Holy Shit! Haven't Seen Such Clean Fight Scenes in Domestic Entertainment for Ages!'""]

Clear Autumn Moonlight: ...

Back in 2016-2017 Pi Station, this kind of clickbait title style hadn't become popular yet. People still preferred artsy, fresh titles like ["Yang Huanyi | Heavenly Secrets Pavilion · Graceful as Startled Swan, Elegant as Swimming Dragon"] paired with a major special appearance close-up as the cover.

Clear Autumn Moonlight said with difficulty: ["Are you really sure about using such a title?"]

User20241181229 replied: ["I heard this is the latest trending style~"]

The client is heaven, the client is earth. Though filled with internal complaints, Clear Autumn Moonlight still typed: ["Okay."]

Chapter 79: Tea Room

Shang Yechu had just finished running as an extra in one crew when she transferred the money.

Today was February 7th, with only three days left until the New Year. Yet Heng City's film city showed no signs of shutting down soon, with major productions still operating at full capacity. This situation would continue until New Year's Eve itself.

In fact, with many Heng drifters having returned home for the holiday season, the rates for extras had become increasingly expensive.

Good-looking extras with decent acting skills still had no trouble finding work in Heng City.

Over three weeks, Shang Yechu had taken two major special appearances, two mid-level specials, and several minor special roles. The variety was quite rich too - she hadn't just acted in movies, television films, and TV dramas, but had even played background characters in several micro-films and New Year promotional short videos.

Times had changed since before. After playing the flower queen in Heavenly Secrets Pavilion, Shang Yechu had gained some small fame. Not much - as light as duckweed, as tiny as mustard seeds - but it was enough to earn some decent money.

Taking advantage of the year-end rush, Shang Yechu had aggressively pursued work opportunities, not only making up for the ten-thousand-plus deficit but also hiring several video editors for commercial edits.

After all the back and forth, by today, Shang Yechu still had two thousand yuan left over.

In two more days, the film city would completely shut down. And Shang Yechu needed to consider where she would spend the New Year period.

The neighbors on Pedestrian Street had all returned to their hometowns for the holidays. No matter how well Grandma Hu treated Shang Yechu, she wouldn't have the nerve to intrude on someone else's family celebration.

Spending New Year's Eve lying in the bookstore warehouse wasn't very practical, so Shang Yechu planned to find a cheap hotel to rough it for a few days.

Just as Shang Yechu was calculating her options, an unfamiliar call suddenly came through.

Shang Yechu answered the phone politely, "Hello, who is this?"

"Little Ye." The voice on the other end sounded somewhat tired. "Do you have time right now?"

Shang Yechu paused, her tone surprised, "Director Yi?"

Yi Tianzhao had asked to meet Shang Yechu.

The meeting place wasn't too formal - it was a tea room.

The entry requirements for the tea room were quite strict. If Yi Tianzhao hadn't made arrangements in advance, Shang Yechu wouldn't have been able to get in at all.

Shang Yechu changed her shoes, pushed open the sliding bamboo door of the private room, then paused mid-step.

There were actually quite a few people in the room.

There were four people total in the private room, three of whom Shang Yechu recognized: Yi Tianzhao, Teacher Jiang Aihua, and Li Yi. The only unfamiliar person was a bald, thin man whose few remaining strands of hair were stubbornly combed toward the center, making it look like he was wearing a light reflector.

Shang Yechu first greeted Jiang Aihua and the others, "Teacher Jiang, Director Yi, how should I address this senior?"

The bald thin man said, "My surname is Zeng."

"Hello, Teacher Zeng." Shang Yechu then nodded toward Li Yi, "Li Yi, you're here too."

Li Yi looked thinner than he had two months ago. Hearing this, he stood up and motioned to Shang Yechu, "Have a seat."

Shang Yechu swept her gaze over Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng, then looked at Yi Tianzhao and the bald man named Zeng.

"Sit down, it's almost New Year, no need for so much formality." Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng said with a laugh.

Baldy Zeng spoke rapidly. Though he wore a smile on his face, his eyes were urgent, "We have important business, let's skip the pleasantries."

The table was round, and Shang Yechu chose the seat closest to the door to sit down.

"Director Yi, you asked me here today to..." Shang Yechu began hesitantly.

Yi Tianzhao looked considerably more weathered, his eyes completely bloodshot, "Little Ye, what have you been busy with recently?"

"Acting, of course." Shang Yechu said with a laugh. "The film city doesn't close for New Year."

"All supporting roles, right?"

"Of course." Shang Yechu's face reddened slightly. "I don't really have any—"

Yi Tianzhao waved his hand decisively, "Cancel all of them. The production team will cover your penalty fees."

"Ah?" Shang Yechu looked astonished. "Director Yi?"

Baldy Zeng interrupted, "Old Yi! We agreed to test her capabilities first."

"I know her better than you do," Yi Tianzhao said impatiently. "Forget it, since you're not confident, we'll test her."

Baldy Zeng's status was clearly much lower than Yi Tianzhao's, and his tone was quite deferential, "Old Yi! I don't really care how she acts - the higher-ups are very anxious about this! I need to vet this properly too!"

Shang Yechu caught the key phrase and understood immediately. This was probably someone sent by Yi Tianzhao's superiors to supervise.

Yi Tianzhao rubbed his temples and said to Shang Yechu, "What are your feelings about Xiao Fengque?"

"Um..." Shang Yechu seemed somewhat caught off guard. "I quite admire her..."

"None of that useless talk," Yi Tianzhao interrupted Shang Yechu again. "What insights do you have about this character? Tell us your understanding of the role!"

This was practically unreasonable - Xiao Fengque wasn't even Shang Yechu's character, what was there for her to understand?

After being pressured from both online critics and his superiors these past days, Yi Tianzhao's temper had grown considerably worse.

Shang Yechu paused, straightened her posture formally, and said, "Xiao Fengque has many labels. Some say she's a strong person, some say she's a pioneer, some say she's a hero. These labels are all reasonable, but in my view, she is first and foremost an idealist."

"Idealist?" This time it was Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng who spoke. The elderly woman had been drinking tea and speaking very little.

Shang Yechu pressed her lips together. Of course she understood Xiao Fengque, but she couldn't reveal all her character understanding at this moment - that would expose how much she had studied and coveted this role.

"Yes." Shang Yechu nodded. Seeing that Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng's teacup was empty, she stood up and poured tea for the elderly woman.

"The biggest characteristic of idealists is naivete. In my view, Xiao Fengque is an extremely naive person. Her fundamental nature is constant struggle and constant failure. For such a person to be born in that era depicted in the book is truly tragic..."

"The goddess constable Tian Rushui who appears later is her complete opposite - she's a realist. Her fundamental nature is being torn and compromised between the gap of ideals and reality..."

Shang Yechu couldn't appear to have studied Xiao Fengque too deeply - that would be too suspicious; but she also couldn't appear completely ignorant - that would be too deliberate.

So Shang Yechu simply redirected the trouble elsewhere, steering the topic directly to another character in the book and beginning to chatter enthusiastically.

To make Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng, Yi Tianzhao, and the others believe that the character she truly yearned for was indeed Tian Rushui rather than Xiao Fengque, Shang Yechu worked hard to play the part of an enthusiastic Tian Rushui book fan - such a small matter was effortless for her.

Shang Yechu continued enthusiastically, "Compared to Xiao Fengque, Tian Rushui seems more like someone 'engaged with the world.' Such a person might not be liked by most people, but she has her own unique charm. She's more like a mirror to Xiao Fengque—"

Yi Tianzhao slapped his forehead. "I mentioned to her before about having her play Tian Rushui! This child probably thinks that's what this is about!"

"Stop talking for now, Little Ye." Yi Tianzhao motioned for Shang Yechu to settle down, his expression weary. "We didn't call you here today to discuss Tian Rushui. Rather, we wanted to..."

Yi Tianzhao gritted his teeth, then slid several sheets of paper across the table to Shang Yechu. "You have ten minutes to familiarize yourself with this script segment, and then—"

Yi Tianzhao glanced at Li Yi, who was maintaining a composed demeanor, "Perform this segment on the spot with Li Yi."

Chapter 80: Performance

"Acting as Xiao Fengque?" Shang Yechu appropriately revealed a hint of astonishment, "Director, what do you mean by this?"

"First take a look at the script, pick any random section yourself." Yi Tianzhao rubbed her temples, "I've only slept four hours in the past three days, hurry up."

Pressed by Yi Tianzhao's urgency, Shang Yechu had no choice but to turn her gaze to Li Yi first: "Which part of the plot are you more familiar with?"

Jiang Aihua spun her teacup, smiling cheerfully: "Little Ye, don't worry about this kid. He's already memorized all the lines for both Xie An and Xiao Fengque, he can match any scene you perform!"

This genuinely surprised Shang Yechu. Li Yi's acting was so terrible, yet he put so much effort into memorizing lines... it gave her a sense of absurd irony, like working hard for nothing.

Shang Yechu opened the script and saw it was "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon: The Dynasty Mystery," which was the content from the second installment. She felt slightly more confident.

Shang Yechu quickly filtered through the scenes she could perform in her mind.

Fight scenes were immediately ruled out - this was a tearoom, not a martial arts studio. In such a small space, accidentally kicking Granny Jiang or Yi Tianzhao would be ridiculous.

Scenes that were too "flat" also couldn't be chosen. She wasn't wearing ancient costume, making it already difficult to immerse people in the setting. Bland scenes would only make people break out of the story.

Scenes with deep interactions with Li Yi were also problematic. His acting skills were evident to all, and Shang Yechu didn't want to drag this dead weight during such precious time.

Shang Yechu quickly filtered out the parts she could perform.

After flipping to a certain page, Shang Yechu carefully read the content several times, then handed the script to Baldy Zeng: "Teacher Zeng, here."

Yi Tianzhao was quite satisfied with Shang Yechu's perceptiveness. Baldy Zeng was the only person present unfamiliar with the script, so giving it to him was perfect.

Shang Yechu turned to Li Yi: "The scene we're about to perform now is when Xiao Fengque exposes Gongye Jing's true nature."

Li Yi seemed somewhat surprised, but immediately nodded.

Shang Yechu closed her eyes briefly, and when she opened them again, her eyes were filled with anger.

"Xie An!" Shang Yechu casually grabbed a tea tong, pointing it at Li Yi's neck from a distance, "That night, you were the only one who went to Feishuang Tower!"

"What do you mean by that?" Li Yi widened his eyes in disbelief, "Do you really think I'm the one who killed Chancellor Chen Xiangbo?"

"Who else could it be?" Shang Yechu let out a cold laugh, "The death location has been moved from Luoxia Pavilion to Feishuang Tower. The butler has a lame leg and can't climb up. The Right Chancellor was drinking tea with the Marquis at the time. If the killer isn't you, did Chancellor Chen Xiangbo kill himself?"

Li Yi urgently responded: "I had no grudge against him, why would I kill him?"

Shang Yechu pressed further: "Since you killed him, how dare you say you had no grudge against him?"

"You're slandering me!" The anger on Li Yi's face could no longer be concealed.

"Slandering with the blood from your sword!"

"You're twisting right and wrong!" Li Yi stepped forward, his face contorted with anger.

"Right path, wrong path - today is your path to the underworld!" Shang Yechu spoke extremely fast, pressing close to Li Yi, the tea tong held horizontally against his neck.

Li Yi stepped closer again, his neck already marked by the tea tong, staring at Shang Yechu with eyes burning bright with anger: "Have you been wanting to remove this thorn in your side all along?"

"Whose thorn? Whose side?" Shang Yechu fearlessly lifted her head to meet Li Yi's gaze, extending one hand to press against the back of his neck, forcing him to lean closer to her.

Li Yi's breath hitched, about to break free when suddenly, Shang Yechu narrowed her eyes, flicked her fingers, and something flew straight toward Baldy Zeng's face!

Baldy Zeng had been watching engrossed, not expecting something to fly directly at his face. He instinctively leaned backward.

Unexpectedly, the object didn't hit his face but landed precisely on the table in front of him.

Baldy Zeng was stunned, instinctively wanting to see what it was. The next second, a shadow flashed before his eyes!

Baldy Zeng looked up to see Shang Yechu stepping lightly on a chair, light as a swallow, suddenly leaping onto the tea table!

Sitting on the tea table, Shang Yechu reached across the tea stove, teapot, and teacups with fluid grace, her sleeve flying as she placed the wooden steel-tipped tea tong against his neck!

"Chen Xiangbo, where are you trying to go?" Shang Yechu smiled sharply, her hand pressing down, forcibly pinning Baldy Zeng to his seat, unable to move.

The tea table wasn't large, limiting movement. Even so, Shang Yechu's movements remained extremely elegant and highly entertaining.

With one hand pressing down Baldy Zeng, Shang Yechu still had the leisure to pick up the teapot with her other hand and pour him a full cup of tea.

The tea poured in a continuous stream, falling into the teacup, the hot and steaming tea fragrance misting between them.

With a "thump," Shang Yechu heavily placed the teapot on the table: "The master of this place, I wonder if guests drink farewell tea before leaving?"

Baldy Zeng was shaken by the sharp killing intent emanating from Shang Yechu, actually stammering out the lines he'd just read in the script: "You... what are you saying? I'm the butler! Not Chancellor Chen..."

Li Yi rubbed his neck, the anger on his face completely gone, pursing his lips: "Alright, stop scaring him now, give me back my belt hook."

Shang Yechu curved her lips slightly without looking at Li Yi, picking up the object that had landed before Baldy Zeng with two fingers, and with a flick of her hand, the "belt hook" accurately flew toward Li Yi.

Li Yi precisely caught the "belt hook" and reattached it to his waist.

Baldy Zeng only felt the tea tong pressed against his neck was ice-cold, while the tea before him steamed with heat. Through the curling mist of hot vapor, Shang Yechu's eyes were colder than the tea tong.

Sweat seeped from Baldy Zeng's balding head.

The next second, Shang Yechu suddenly withdrew the tea tong from her hand, obediently got off the table, and stood properly back on the floor.

"Teacher Zeng, sorry, sorry," Shang Yechu said apologetically, seeming slightly uneasy, "Did I poke you too hard?"

Baldy Zeng: "..."

Baldy Zeng let out a breath, instinctively looking around.

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng was examining Shang Yechu, not giving him a glance;

Yi Tianzhao's expression had relaxed considerably, even wearing a slight mocking smile;

Li Yi stood in place, having returned to his original state of observing his nose and heart.

That young girl was looking at him with concern, seeming somewhat apprehensive.

He wasn't a murderer, and there was no dagger at his neck.

"Ah, ah." Baldy Zeng forced an ugly smile, "It did hurt a bit. But Little Ye, it's Little Ye, right? Well acted. Really well done."

Even so, he still felt lingering fear. The chilly sensation when Shang Yechu pressed the tea tong against his neck hadn't dissipated even now.

"Xiao Li also acted quite well—hahaha." Baldy Zeng stood up, walked to Li Yi, patted his shoulder, conveniently moving further away from Shang Yechu, "I see great improvement!"

Chapter 81: Rage

"How about it, Old Zeng? Now do you believe in my judgment?" Yi Tianzhao took a sip of tea and said calmly.

"Oh my! Senior Sister! What kind of talk is that? When have I ever doubted your judgment?" Baldy Zeng wiped his sweat after praising Li Yi.

The address changing from "Old Yi" to "Senior Sister" meant he acknowledged Yi Tianzhao's casting choice.

Yi Tianzhao snorted with a laugh: "Getting a definitive word from you is truly difficult."

Baldy Zeng smiled apologetically: "Of course I fully approve! Look, my sweat hasn't even dried yet! It's mainly because the higher-ups have requirements - she absolutely cannot be worse than Yang Huanyi."

Shang Yechu glanced at Yi Tianzhao, then at Baldy Zeng, feeling quite shocked.

Time really is cruel. Baldy Zeng looked old enough to be Yi Tianzhao's father, yet he turned out to be her junior brother!

"So, how do you think she compares to Yang Huanyi?" Yi Tianzhao set down her teacup.

Baldy Zeng answered without hesitation: "One is in heaven, the other in the underworld!"

Baldy Zeng paced over to Shang Yechu, vaguely pointing at her, then pointing upward: "This one is in heaven."

He then pressed his hand downward: "That one is in the underworld."

"Not going to say the things I saw on that unofficial website are unreliable anymore?" Yi Tianzhao said in an affected tone.

Baldy Zeng quickly corrected: "I said that website was 'unofficial,' not as blunt as you put it. Senior Sister, please don't spread rumors about me."

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng finally spoke, smiling at Shang Yechu: "Little Ye, come over here."

Shang Yechu moved several steps to stand before Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng, first bowing: "Teacher Jiang."

"Look at you, why so formal? Sit quickly." Old Lady Jiang also called to Li Yi, "Little Yi, you sit too."

Li Yi glanced at Shang Yechu, then obediently sat down beside her.

"Don't be nervous," Old Lady Jiang took Shang Yechu's hand, "This boy calls me Grandma, you can think of me as your grandmother too."

Shang Yechu absolutely dared not treat this esteemed figure as her grandmother. She was a million times more wary of this old lady than of Yi Tianzhao and Baldy Zeng combined.

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng appeared kind and amiable, but she was an elderly person who had been writing for decades and weathered countless storms - who among such people wasn't exceptionally shrewd?

Shang Yechu had carefully studied the short essay Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng posted, and after analyzing it, discovered that piece was quite masterfully written!

First, she revealed her identity as the author, then mentioned that Li Yi was her grandson who worked very hard, that her old friend had passed away, and that filming this was to fulfill two old ladies' wishes, and so on. After this appeal to sympathy, the readers' and audience's resentment had already diminished considerably.

Then she flattered the authorities, giving Dragon Central Television a way to save face and preserving the officials' dignity.

Then she straightforwardly called Li Yi useless, saying his acting was terrible, and everyone could feel free to criticize him!

This attitude of lying flat and accepting criticism happened to be the most correct response strategy. The audience's energy is limited - they can't focus on criticizing one actor forever. At such times, as long as you adopt the attitude that the audience members are supreme and can criticize however they want, without triggering reverse psychology, most people will move on after venting.

What made Shang Yechu particularly wary was that Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng's Weibo post was published before Yang Huanyi issued her statement!

The old lady seized the initiative, perfectly contrasting Li Yi's attitude of lying flat and accepting criticism with Yang Huanyi's double-booking while promoting a dedicated professional image through hot searches!

This public relations approach appeared passive but was actually simple, crude, and effective.

Between a second-tier obscure actor who acted poorly but honestly accepted all criticism, and a nationally famous actress with considerable topic popularity who had been popular for over a decade, yet double-booked while heavily promoting a dedicated professional image through hot searches - which side was easier to target? You could figure it out without even thinking.

Finally, the old lady used minimal effort to maximum effect, casually mentioning the point book fans and audiences cared about most: although Li Yi was useless, he had self-awareness and never added scenes or stole spotlight.

More importantly, while superficially the short essay seemed somewhat unfair to Yi Tianzhao, it actually genuinely rescued Yi Tianzhao.

The original author had clearly stated "impossible to add scenes for Li Yi" and "Dragon Central Television staff respect the original author very much," meaning that Li Yi's additional scenes weren't added by Yi Tianzhao, but resulted from Yang Huanyi forgetting her lines forcing extra takes.

Yi Tianzhao shed the label of being a director who added scenes, could account to both audiences and leadership, and successfully became an innocent victim.

This short essay only offended two parties: Yang Huanyi and a small portion of Xie An's fans. However, after this Weibo post, Yang Huanyi was basically finished anyway, so offending her made little difference. And as for Xie An being a marginal male lead in a female-dominated novel, he didn't have many fans to begin with. Moreover, although Li Yi acted poorly, his fight scenes were good, he was handsome, and occasionally could get into character - he wasn't completely worthless. Although fans were dissatisfied, with the original author backing him, they wouldn't become too rebellious.

A series of moves successfully redirected the trouble eastward, completely sending Yang Huanyi off the stage.

From around 8 PM to 9:30 PM - less than an hour - she quickly produced this short essay to protect Li Yi. The wording, timing, and attitude were all perfectly measured, and the essay wasn't even a thousand words long - this was the skill level of a martial arts master who had been writing for decades!

Although the old lady might not understand internet-era marketing rules like Shang Yechu did, her methods remained sharp and her insight keen.

Before such a person, Shang Yechu absolutely dared not try any clever tricks.

The old lady still smiled, kindly like an ancient Buddha: "Little Ye, tell Grandma, why did you choose this particular scene to perform?"

Shang Yechu glanced at Li Yi, then said seriously: "Based on my observation, Li Yi is very skilled at performing 'anger.'"

Yi Tianzhao: "..."

Baldy Zeng: "..."

What? Who? Skilled at what?

Even Li Yi couldn't help laughing: "How come I didn't know this?"

Shang Yechu answered without hesitation: "It's true, if you don't believe me, ask Director Yi."

Yi Tianzhao coughed: "That segment just now was indeed quite good."

The corner of Shang Yechu's mouth twitched slightly. Of course it was good, because among the five basic emotions - joy, anger, sorrow, happiness, and resentment - the easiest to portray is "anger."

Emotions like joy, sorrow, and resentment, if not handled precisely, can turn into fake smiles, constipation-like expressions, and affectation. Anger is different - puffing cheeks, glaring eyes, furrowed brows, and pursed lips all gathered on one face, anyone with eyes can tell this person is displeased. Whether it looks good is another matter, but at least the anger comes through.

If you want to get something, of course you can't just study your opponents - you have to study your teammates too. Li Yi was precisely that future pig teammate.

Shang Yechu had observed Li Yi's performances. This connected actor couldn't be called unprofessional - on the contrary, he was too professional. You could tell he really wanted to portray Xie An's character well, so he always acted with excessive force.

Exaggerated laughter, exaggerated anger, exaggerated displays of his arrogance, exaggerated displays of his dislike for Xiao Fengque.

Since in the first installment, Xie An and Xiao Fengque were still in an adversarial, competitive relationship, Li Yi spent the entire time forcefully disliking Xiao Fengque. This resulted in him constantly pulling a long face and pursing his lips. The nickname "Xie An" also originated from this.

This was why Shang Yechu chose this particular scene.

In the plot, Xiao Fengque and Xie An were originally acting to catch a thief, with Xie An pretending to be angry. Therefore, being "forceful" in anger - meaning slightly overacting - would be understandable. It wouldn't appear too incongruous.

Chapter 82: Final Decision

"Oh?" Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng became interested. "When performing, you don't first think about what you're good at, but instead think about what Li Yi is good at? Why?"

Shang Yechu nodded. "Because... Teacher Jiang seems to place great importance on Li Yi."

"..." Jiang Aihua was slightly taken aback by Shang Yechu's bluntness. "You want to consider my feelings."

"Yes." Shang Yechu's expression was calm and open. She turned her head and gave a slight nod to Yi Tianzhao. "After all... the prerequisite for playing Xiao Fengque is being able to perform opposite Li Yi, right?"

There's a time to play dumb, and a time not to. Playing dumb when you shouldn't is just annoying.

Yi Tianzhao wasn't surprised that Shang Yechu understood her intentions. After all, she had thrown the script at her. Anyone who wasn't a fool could see what Yi Tianzhao wanted. What she found strange was how Shang Yechu had discerned that Li Yi was the "secretly protected one."

"How did you know?" Jiang Aihua was astonished by this young woman's honesty and perceptiveness.

Shang Yechu lowered her head. "If the goal was simply to select an actress for Xiao Fengque, there was obviously no need to call for Xie An as well. Also, I've been occasionally browsing Weibo these past couple of days."

Some things don't need to be spelled out too clearly.

Jiang Aihua nodded, swirling her teacup. "That's right. I absolutely will not allow what happened with Yang Huanyi to happen to Li Yi a second time."

As she said this, a fierce glint flashed in the old lady's eyes, a hint of ruthlessness that didn't match her kindly appearance.

Shang Yechu glanced at Li Yi and said softly, "I've also performed opposite Li Yi before. I know he's very skilled at portraying 'anger.' In scenes involving anger, the two of us would coordinate even better."

Shang Yechu's face flushed slightly as she murmured, "I was thinking... if the two of us could coordinate better, my chances might be a bit greater..."

Lying depends on the person. In front of Yi Tianzhao, a lie could be seventy percent truth and thirty percent falsehood. In front of Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng, a lie needed to be at least ninety percent truth.

"You just wanted to play Tian Rushui, and you've changed your mind so quickly?" Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng smiled amiably, her expression benevolent. "You've studied Tian Rushui, I can see that. Is it so easy to give up on a role you originally liked? Can you bear to?"

Shang Yechu knew the critical moment had arrived!

Shang Yechu raised her head, her palms already slightly sweaty. She didn't explain why she had changed her mind, nor did she emphasize that she could play Xiao Fengque well. She simply said—

"Phoenix unrecognized by the world, common fowl mistaken for its kin. The phoenix has long departed, yet returns this very day."

Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon, Volume Two, opening epigraph!

Everyone present was momentarily stunned.

Suddenly, Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng burst into laughter, patting Shang Yechu's hand in admiration. "Good! Good! Good! Such ambition! Such daring! The younger generation is truly formidable!"

Yi Tianzhao let out a long sigh of relief, stepped forward, and gave Shang Yechu a light, playful tap. "You!"

Having ambition isn't a bad thing. The people present were a director, an author, and a supervisor—they weren't in the same competitive arena as Shang Yechu. Therefore, they could particularly appreciate this kind of harmless (to them) ambition.

Yi Tianzhao pulled a contract from her bag and slapped it down in front of Shang Yechu. "This is a copy. Take a look."

Shang Yechu skimmed through it rapidly. When her eyes landed on the figure in the salary column, her pupils contracted slightly.

"Only one-third of Yang Huanyi's." Yi Tianzhao stated frankly. "You are, after all, a newcomer. The higher-ups' opinion is that if the reception is good, adjustments can be made."

That was just talk. Believing it would be naive.

Shang Yechu, however, didn't care much about the salary. Being able to board the massive ship that was Dragon Central Television, getting Six Empress Dowager to owe her a favor—these things couldn't be measured in money.

Baldy Zeng chimed in from the side, "Little Ye, don't think it's too little. You have to understand, Director Yi went against all opposition to come find you. The pressure was immense!"

"You are, after all, a newbie among newbies. In reality, many actresses of the right age wanted this role. But Director Yi insisted on you alone, saying your acting skills are good, your fight scenes are crisp, your attitude is professional... That's why we're here."

Shang Yechu immediately put on a grateful expression. "So that's how it is. Thank you, Director Yi!"

Baldy Zeng spoke without blushing, and Yi Tianzhao replied without blushing either. "You need to understand what you're about to face."

Audience skepticism, backlash from Yang Huanyi's fans, and the scrutiny and criticism from original novel fans. While Shang Yechu's professional skills were impeccable, she had never played a lead female role before. Mockery and rejection from various groups were probably unavoidable.

Shang Yechu paused, seeming hesitant. She didn't answer immediately.

Yi Tianzhao's heart instantly leapt into her throat—had she been cursed into stupidity these past two days?! Why did she bring this up now?

She should have at least waited until Shang Yechu signed the contract and was firmly on board before spelling it out!

Baldy Zeng was even more anxious, breaking into a sweat. "Ah, Little Ye, Little Ye! Director Yi here is just worrying for nothing! What could you possibly face? It's almost the New Year!"

It seemed the pressure from all sides was indeed intense. Baldy Zeng and Yi Tianzhao were rushing to complete their task. They'd even dragged out the ultimate conflict-smoothing treasure: "It's almost the New Year!"

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng patted Shang Yechu's hand kindly, her eyes behind her glasses sparkling sharply. "I believe Little Ye won't shrink back from such a small matter. Hardship and difficulty polish jade into perfection!"

Shang Yechu very noticeably gritted her teeth, then gave a firm, heavy nod. "Thank you for your trust, Teacher Jiang, Director Yi, Teacher Zeng!"

"And thank you, Brother Yi," Shang Yechu turned towards Li Yi, offering a shy smile. "Looking forward to working with you."

Li Yi's pitch-black pupils fixed on Shang Yechu's smile. After a long moment, he nodded. "Looking forward to it."

Old Lady Jiang chided playfully, "Still calling me 'Teacher'?"

Shang Yechu covered her mouth with a light laugh, then said clearly, "Grandma, I won't let you down!"

"Good. In that case, I'll send you the script in a bit." Yi Tianzhao finally let half her heart settle. "We start work on the eighth day of the Lunar New Year. Little Ye, you have about ten days. Study the script well."

Shang Yechu nodded, but her heart stirred.

Tale of Cloud Incline would premiere on the sixth day of the Lunar New Year. Two days later, the second *Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon* film would begin shooting.

Just then, Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng spoke up again. "A new year's work brings a new atmosphere. Shouldn't our film also have a new atmosphere?"

Yi Tianzhao held immense respect for this elder who had helped her pass the buck. She quickly asked, "A new atmosphere? What do you mean?"

"I've been thinking lately, the name *Heavenly Secrets Pavilion* isn't good." Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng stood up, and Shang Yechu hurriedly supported her.

The old lady smiled, patting Shang Yechu's hand. "The Heavenly Secrets Pavilion was destroyed in the final installment. It's too inauspicious. No wonder our movie with that name ended up in such a mess."

Shang Yechu's heart skipped a beat. Could it be?

If her guess was correct, then—the benefits for her would be multiplied tenfold!

Shang Yechu involuntarily held her breath. Li Yi immediately glanced at her.

"I think it should be like this." Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng declared. "Since we're changing the female lead, let's change the movie's name too! A fresh start. Everything is new. Let's treat it as a brand new series."

"You mean not calling it *Heavenly Secrets Pavilion*?" Yi Tianzhao had no objections. It was just a name. If they wanted to change it, they just needed to file a report. "What new name did you have in mind?"

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng pondered for a moment, then made the decision. "I think my old friend is the most auspicious. So, let's do this. The new series will be called *Xiao Fengque*!"

Xiao Fengque!

Chapter 83: Old Street

The group emerged from the tea room. Yi Tianzhao and Baldy Zeng hurried off first to report back to headquarters. Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng needed to go lend Yi Tianzhao support, so she went with them.

Yi Tianzhao's decision was far too bold; she absolutely needed the original author to back her up.

Li Yi helped Old Lady Jiang into the car and watched it drive away into the distance before finally turning to look at Shang Yechu.

In the blink of an eye, only he and Shang Yechu remained on the street.

"Here, returning this to you." Li Yi extended his hand toward Shang Yechu. Lying on his palm was a small object.

It was the prop Shang Yechu had just used as a belt hook, actually just a very common two-cent piece of chocolate coin made from cocoa butter substitute.

Having spent too much money recently, Shang Yechu's consumption level had been forced back to what it was right after her rebirth.

Shang Yechu glanced at it and saw the chocolate had already been deformed, pinched between Li Yi's two fingers!

"Keep it." Shang Yechu felt a twinge of envy for his arm strength. She had also been diligently trading weight for combat power lately, but after reaching 76, no matter how much she ate, her combat power wouldn't increase any further.

According to 103's explanation, this was because her physical constitution was simply too weak.

Combat power wasn't some castle in the sky; it required an extremely robust physique as its foundation. A sickly martial arts master who could barely take three steps without panting only existed in wuxia novels. In reality, such a person would be lucky not to be flicked away by a true master with a single finger.

With Shang Yechu's current physical condition, just maintaining these seventy-some points of combat power was precarious enough. Wanting to reach the next level was nothing but wishful thinking.

Li Yi gave an acknowledging hum and withdrew his hand.

Compared to when they acted together two months ago, Li Yi seemed much calmer now. Shang Yechu somewhat suspected he had been traumatized by the online abuse.

"Do you have anything else?" Shang Yechu tried her best to make her tone sound appropriately familiar.

Li Yi tilted his head slightly and suddenly asked an unexpected question: "Where is your home?"

"..." Shang Yechu laughed, "What, planning to pay me a New Year's visit?"

"Yes, and no." Li Yi's expression was gentle. "Grandma said I should communicate more with you about acting, learn how to act from you."

Shang Yechu froze for a moment, unsure how to respond.

Should she answer "I don't have a home" or "I don't want to teach you"? Both were true, but neither seemed appropriate for the moment.

Shang Yechu shook her brick-like phone. "My lease is up at the end of the year. I've been looking for a place recently too. I'll let you know on WeChat once I find one."

Li Yi nodded: "Okay. Then I'll come find you after the New Year."

Having said all that needed to be said, Shang Yechu waved at Li Yi: "It's a deal! I'll head back now!"

Li Yi returned an equally polite wave: "Alright, see you."

Shang Yechu's figure quickly disappeared into the bustling street crowd. Li Yi slipped his hand into his pocket, gently and slowly peeling off the gold foil wrapper from that piece of chocolate.

Li Yi placed the twisted, deformed chocolate into his mouth.

Cheap, sweet, the artificial cocoa aroma and waxy texture filled his mouth.

Li Yi swallowed the chocolate. Under the sunlight, his expression was unreadable.

As soon as Shang Yechu entered the bookstore, she saw Grandma Hu dusting the bookshelves with a feather duster.

"Little Leaf, you're back?" Grandma Hu, her back to Shang Yechu, said with a laugh. "You're on New Year's holiday too?"

"Grandma, do you have eyes in the back of your head?" Shang Yechu's tone was light and cheerful as she picked up another feather duster and started helping Grandma Hu clean.

"You're a big star now. I can smell the stardust on you from ten miles away!" Grandma Hu teased.

Even someone as thick-skinned as Shang Yechu flushed bright red: "Grandma! Keep your voice down!"

After learning that Shang Yechu played a role with screen time in *Heavenly Secrets Pavilion* (in the old lady's simple view, the more lavish the costume, the bigger the role), Grandma Hu had bragged about it up and down the Pedestrian Street for quite a while. Not only that, she had mobilized the entire neighborhood to watch *Heavenly Secrets Pavilion* on its premiere night.

Lately, the old and young of Pedestrian Street had been praising Shang Yechu to anyone they met, saying she had the aura of a superstar, glorifying her minor supporting role with less than twenty minutes of screen time to heaven and earth, making Shang Yechu die of social embarrassment.

Now, whenever Shang Yechu heard the uncles, aunties, grandpas, and grandmas of Pedestrian Street praise her as a big star, she wanted to jump out of her skin.

"Alright, alright, are you getting shy now?" Grandma Hu dusted another row of books. "Then I won't call you that."

"Oh, by the way, Little Leaf, I'm closing for the New Year holiday." Grandma Hu said briskly while cleaning. "The bookstore is yours. You can stay here if you want, or go stay at a nicer hotel if you prefer. Just lock the door for me."

Mentioning this topic, Shang Yechu suddenly fell silent.

The feather duster swept across the bookshelf, stroke by stroke, shelf by shelf. Shang Yechu suddenly said in a low voice, "Grandma, in the future I..."

"What?" Grandma Hu didn't catch it. "What's wrong?"

Shang Yechu said loudly, "I won't be living in the bookstore anymore! I've rented a place outside!"

Her voice was loud and full of vigor, as if she was firming up some kind of resolve.

Grandma Hu was stunned. After a long while, she slowly put down the feather duster.

"Oh. Not staying anymore."

The old lady's tone was very slow. "That's a good thing. This place is too small and shabby. Besides, it's way too cold in winter."

"A good thing." The old lady said cheerfully. "Rent in our city is ridiculously expensive. Being able to afford rent means you're making money now."

Shang Yechu gripped the wooden handle of the feather duster tighter. Without turning around, her back still to Grandma Hu, she said, "I'll come back to Pedestrian Street often to see you, to see everyone."

"You'll be a big star in the future. Will you still be able to come back here?" Grandma Hu couldn't help but ask. She didn't really understand what a star was, but in her impression, those people were far removed from ordinary folks.

"Of course I can." Shang Yechu let out an earnest laugh. "I'll just be busier, so I might not be able to come as often."

"You silly child, one moment you say you'll come back often, the next you say you can't come often. You're all mixed up." Grandma Hu chuckled. "You just—do whatever is convenient for you."

Shang Yechu's voice lowered. After a long pause, she finally said, "Mm."

Grandma Hu started chattering again: "Don't be too stubborn when you're out there... If things don't work out, Old Chen said the shopfront across from his is for rent. You can come back and sell hand-pulled pancakes or something. You won't starve."

"Mm. Don't worry, Grandma."

"Read the rental contract carefully when you rent. Everyone on Pedestrian Street has seen decades of rental contracts. Ask around if you don't understand something."

"Mm, I know, Grandma."

"Making big money is good, but don't kill yourself over it. Eat less junk food."

"Okay, Grandma."

"Don't forget to take your books, and your backpack, the hand warmer, the scarf I knitted for you..."

"I won't forget, Grandma."

Having said all she could think of, Shopkeeper Hu remembered one last thing: "Oh, right. Yesterday I found a stack of scrap paper under the table. Something was written on it like 'Forever love something Phoenix Tower' or whatever—your ugly handwriting, it hurts my eyes just looking at it. Don't forget to clean it up before you leave."

Grandma Hu fished out a stack of coarse, yellowed paper from under the table, muttering, "You bought up all of the Wen family's old, unsold scrap paper..."

Shang Yechu turned around, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. "Grandma, please stop exposing my old secrets. I'll throw it away in a bit."

Grandma Hu looked around, feeling she had said all the reminders she could think of. There was nothing left to say.

Looking at Shang Yechu's delicate, pale face, those slightly downturned corners of her mouth, Grandma Hu suddenly felt an indescribable desolation and heartache. The feeling was fleeting, almost making her think her old heart condition was acting up.

Grandma Hu stepped forward and patted Shang Yechu. After a long moment, she said, "I knew you'd leave sooner or later. I even prepared a farewell gift. I have nothing to give but books, so I'm leaving a book for you."

Grandma Hu looked around, feeling she had said all the reminders she could think of. There was nothing left to say.

With that, Grandma Hu tottered away.

Shang Yechu watched her retreating back and, for some reason, suddenly thought of Li Yi—thought of how Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng had defended Li Yi in every possible way.

She really wanted to rush forward and hug Grandma Hu, but a sudden, frantic surge of timidity welled up, tangling her hands and feet.

Perhaps she would never have someone she could embrace without a second thought.

Shang Yechu gathered the scrap paper, walked to the bathroom, tore it into tiny pieces bit by bit, and slowly flushed it down the drain.

After disposing of the evidence, Shang Yechu walked to the old bookcase at the very back of the bookstore, stood on her tiptoes, and reached for the book placed on the top shelf.

It was an emerald green hardcover edition. The textured, hard cover depicted a lush, verdant grassland. A leaf-shaped blank space occupied the center, with the book's title written in both Chinese and English.

Leaves of Grass.

The book was old. The plastic seal was already removed, showing many signs of having been read.

Shang Yechu casually opened it. The pages automatically fell open to a specific spot—a leaf was tucked there as a bookmark.

On the thick paper page, neat lead type imprinted a four-character title: *Song of Myself.*

[I celebrate myself, and sing myself...

I loafe and invite my soul,

I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.]

Shang Yechu seemed to be scalded. With a *thump*, she snapped the book shut and clutched it to her chest!

...

Half an hour later, Shang Yechu dragged a large suitcase, carried an old backpack on her back, and walked out of the bookstore door with the rumbling sound of wheels.

Shang Yechu locked the bookstore door and stepped onto Pedestrian Street.

With the New Year approaching, most of the neighbors had already left. Only a handful of shops were still open.

Seeing Shang Yechu also dragging a suitcase, the neighbors all called out greetings:

"Little Ye, leaving?"

"Little Leaf, going home for New Year?"

"Oh my, Little Leaf, your suitcase is so big. What's in it?"

Shang Yechu walked to the entrance of the phone shop. Boss Lu was just about to close up. Seeing Shang Yechu, she quickly waved her over. "Little Leaf, come here quick!"

Boss Lu fished out a lemon-yellow phone case from the shelf. The case was made of soft silicone, soft, bouncy, and thick. Embedded on the back was a chubby little chick holding a gold coin in its beak.

"Little Leaf, look at this!" Boss Lu said delightedly. "The 'Get Rich Chicken'! The Year of the Rooster is coming soon. This is perfect timing!"

Shang Yechu smiled helplessly. "Auntie Lu, this must cost thirty or fifty, right? This landlord's house has no surplus grain to buy phone cases."

Boss Lu said, "Oh! This case is for your old Renxing brand phone model. Who even buys those anymore? Pure stocking mistake—five yuan, how about five yuan for you?"

Shang Yechu walked to the street corner holding a lemon-yellow, chubby phone. Uncle Ke and Auntie Meng's husband-and-wife shop was also about to close. Ignoring Shang Yechu's protests, the couple stuffed a golden, oily, plump roast duck into her hands.

"This is the last duck of the year!" Auntie Meng cried. "Little Ye, when you become a big star in the future, you have to advertise for our shop!"

Shang Yechu, torn between laughter and tears, agreed.

Shang Yechu, with a chicken in her left hand and a duck in her right, struggled her way out of Pedestrian Street.

Standing at the entrance of Pedestrian Street, Shang Yechu turned around and took one last look at the street sign.

The characters for "Happiness Commercial Street" shone with a soft, golden glow in the winter evening, as if gilded with gold.

Chapter 84: Day Eight

Shang Yechu found a small inn and booked a single room.

The price of sixty yuan per day was genuinely painful. During the Spring Festival period, hotel and inn prices soared. Even this small inn had increased its rates by twenty percent.

Before Shang Yechu could even open her suitcase, she received a WeChat message.

Sheng Wenzhi: [Are you there?]

Shang Yechu put down her suitcase and typed two words: [Yes. What's up?]

Sheng Wenzhi replied quickly: [Are you going home for New Year's this year? Or are you staying here?]

Shang Yechu directly sent her a photo of the inn: [Spending it at an inn.]

Sheng Wenzhi's "The other party is typing..." status lasted for a long time: [How can you spend it at an inn? Send me your location, I'll come pick you up.]

Shang Yechu half-jokingly replied: [Pick me up to go back to my hometown?]

Sheng Wenzhi directly sent a voice message: "Come spend New Year's at my place. I'm the only one at home, no outsiders."

"Don't be shy. My home is your home."

"You know my family situation. Besides, there's a spare room. It's not inconvenient at all."

Sheng Wenzhi seemed very afraid Shang Yechu would refuse, sending five or six voice messages in a row:

"Just send me your location."

"Aren't you always short on money? Inns are expensive this time of year. My place is free."

"We're friends, right? Friends staying at each other's places is no big deal, is it?"

Shang Yechu was also somewhat tempted. Her current savings were just over two thousand yuan. The advance payment for "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion"—oh no, it's "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" now—would only be deposited after signing the contract. She was teetering on the edge of absolute poverty.

Sheng Wenzhi seemed quite well-off. Her clothes and accessories during their few meetings looked expensive. Besides, they were both girls. There wasn't much to be embarrassed about.

You shouldn't fight with money. Shang Yechu didn't hesitate for too long and replied: [Then I'll trouble you.] Then she sent Sheng Wenzhi her location.

Shang Yechu canceled her room for the remaining days and dragged her suitcase out of the inn.

About half an hour later, a black car slowly stopped in front of Shang Yechu. The window rolled down, revealing Sheng Wenzhi's face, which looked as if she hadn't slept enough.

A strange feeling washed over Shang Yechu.

She and Sheng Wenzhi had met too early. They had both witnessed each other's entire two-year student life. In her memory, the image of Sheng Wenzhi the student was so stubborn. Even though she harbored intentions of using her, and their interactions were filled with too much pretense and impatience, Sheng Wenzhi, in her heart, was still a student.

Now, the other party was driving a car to pick her up. This kind of "mature" act seemed to instantly propel the other person across the boundary of being a student and into the realm of adulthood.

Sheng Wenzhi, with two huge dark circles under her eyes, slowly got out of the car and listlessly picked up Shang Yechu's suitcase—

!!!

She didn't lift it. She almost threw her back out.

"Is this full of books?" Sheng Wenzhi exclaimed in shock, "You don't even have a place to stay, and you're still buying books?"

"Let me do it myself." Shang Yechu picked up the suitcase and stuffed it into the trunk. "Driving while fatigued is illegal, you know."

"Don't worry. I slept for twelve hours before messaging you." Sheng Wenzhi sat back in the driver's seat. Shang Yechu took the passenger seat.

"Then why do you still look so listless?"

Sheng Wenzhi started the car: "Before that twelve-hour sleep, I pulled two all-nighters in a row."

"..." Shang Yechu looked at her sideways. "Gaming? Writing?"

"Writing." Sheng Wenzhi yawned. "When inspiration hits, you can't stop it."

Shang Yechu's interest in the "manuscript" Sheng Wenzhi mentioned was ten times greater than her interest in Sheng Wenzhi herself. Hearing this, she turned her head: "Is it a novel? A short story shouldn't take two days and two nights, right?"

"Hmm..." Sheng Wenzhi didn't mind Shang Yechu's probing. "It's a novel. I haven't thought of a name yet. As for the content... you probably wouldn't be interested. It's an adventure story about a group of people in a grocery store."

Shang Yechu felt this setting sounded vaguely familiar: "What's adventurous about a grocery store?"

Sheng Wenzhi drove onto the road and said casually, "Well, basically, very strange things happen in the grocery store. You have to follow various rules to escape... I'll tell you in detail when we get back."

Sheng Wenzhi's home was imposing and spacious. Contrary to Shang Yechu's fantasy of a delicate, sensitive, artsy style filled with world-weariness, the only style of this residence was disarray. Minimalism and brutalism coexisted. It was clean, but not "tidy."

Sheng Wenzhi led Shang Yechu to the second floor and gestured around: "You can pick any room here except that one—that's my room—you can stay as long as you want."

"The third floor is my study. You seem to like reading now? You can go check out my study. Just don't touch my manuscripts."

"The kitchen is on the first floor. I don't usually cook much myself. If you get hungry, you'll have to order takeout."

After saying this, Sheng Wenzhi was utterly exhausted. Yawning, she said nonchalantly, "You settle in yourself. I'm going to sleep a bit more."

Shang Yechu was also tired, but she still had things to do. She couldn't just drop everything and sleep carefreely like Sheng Wenzhi.

Shang Yechu dragged her suitcase into a room on the second floor and flopped onto the bed. Temporarily ignoring things like sheets and mattresses, Shang Yechu opened Weibo and registered a new account for herself.

This was a new account. When choosing an ID, Shang Yechu typed in the two characters "Yechu", but a prompt said it was already taken. Shang Yechu had to change her nickname to "YechuLeaves."

Since she didn't have a management company yet, Shang Yechu couldn't even get verified for the time being. She could only change her profile to [Actress Yechu].

Weibo was already immersed in the New Year atmosphere. Entertainment and trending social topics, big and small, filled the platform. Shang Yechu had no time to browse. She first searched for and followed all the main creators related to *Tale of Cloud Incline*.

Zheng Bohan, Qin Tianye, Su Ge, Fu Yu...

After doing this, Shang Yechu also followed Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng and Yi Tianzhao, among others. She even shamelessly followed the Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel account.

Both *Legend of Qingyun* and *Tale of Cloud Incline* were scheduled to premiere on the sixth day of the Lunar New Year. To win every battle, you must know both yourself and your enemy. Shang Yechu went to inspect the *Legend of Qingyun* official Weibo. Their official account was quite active, posting daily greetings, releasing actor stills and behind-the-scenes footage, and playing along with comment section memes. It felt very lively.

With the critical mindset of a competitor, Shang Yechu wanted to find flaws in the *Legend of Qingyun* official account's operations. However, it was a pity—even judging by entertainment industry standards several years later, this level of fan engagement could be considered exceptionally rare.

Shang Yechu had to give up trying to pick faults with her opponent and went to inspect her own *Tale of Cloud Incline* official account.

The *Tale of Cloud Incline* official account was still easy to find, after all, there was only one verified blue V account.

The moment she clicked into the *Tale of Cloud Incline* official Weibo homepage, Shang Yechu felt suffocated.

Who could tell her why the number of Weibo posts published by the *Tale of Cloud Incline* official account—which was only eight days away from its official premiere—was zero?

Chapter 85: Good Wine Needs No Bush?

In this day and age, the old saying "good wine needs no bush" is already a thing of the past. While it's true that time will eventually distinguish the enduring quality dramas from the worthless fluff, for artists, having the buzz and feedback come in real-time as the show airs is absolutely far better than having the popularity arrive belatedly three or five years later.

What kind of nonsense is Zheng Bohan up to?

Shang Yechu was utterly baffled, her joy from the victory and the bittersweetness of the temporary farewell both diluted by the Tale of Cloud Incline official Weibo account's complete inaction.

Forgetting about packing her things for the moment, Shang Yechu first opened WeChat.

She initially thought of contacting Zheng Bohan directly, but considering he was probably swamped and running around like crazy right now, she changed her mind and sent a message to Qin Tianye instead.

Yechu: [Teacher Qin, there's something I'd like to ask for your help with, if you have a moment?]

Qin Tianye replied quite quickly: [What kind of help?]

Yechu: [I just registered a Weibo account and it hasn't been verified yet. I need to mutually follow a few verified actor accounts. Could you follow me back?]

Qin Tianye readily agreed: [Of course I can. What's your Weibo handle?]

Shang Yechu sent her ID "YechuLeaves" to Qin Tianye. After a short while, a notification indeed popped up on Weibo about a new follower.

Shang Yechu pretended to click into Qin Tianye's homepage and browse for a couple of seconds, then casually sent him another message: [Teacher, how come you aren't following the Tale of Cloud Incline official Weibo account?]

Qin Tianye said: [Oh, I don't really use Weibo much, and Old Zheng didn't tell me to follow it, so I completely forgot. I'll go find it from your following list.]

[Actually, it's not urgent.] Shang Yechu replied, [The official account hasn't started any pre-release promotion yet. It's fine to follow it later after they post something.]

"Haven't started promotion yet?" This time, Qin Tianye sent a voice message. "The premiere is in just a week, what is Old Zheng doing? I'll go ask him!"

Shang Yechu replied in a tone of surprise: [Teacher Zheng might not be in charge of the account operations, right? I see he hasn't logged into Weibo for a long time.]

A voice message from Qin Tianye flew back immediately, spoken very fast: "The Tale of Cloud Incline official account *is* being operated by Old Zheng himself! He said he wanted to handle the promotion personally this time, to make a big splash!"

Shang Yechu: ...

The person behind the Tale of Cloud Incline official Weibo account was Zheng Bohan himself.

Zheng. Bo. Han. Himself.

Had the old gentleman completely lost his mind? Did he plan to dump all the promotional materials and trailers on the premiere day itself?

Was Zheng Bohan's idea akin to starving someone for three days and then making them eat nine meals in one go?

[Then I'll trouble you, Teacher Qin.] Shang Yechu couldn't be bothered to maintain the persona of someone aloof and detached from worldly concerns anymore. [Marketing and pre-release hype are still quite important!]

Shang Yechu typed two cheerful, beaming smiley faces and hit send.

After doing this, Shang Yechu switched to a side account to check on the situation with Su Ge's fans.

This was, after all, a show with Su Ge as the female lead, backed by Meta Pictures' investment. Was Su Ge's fanbase really not doing anything?

Su Ge had huge traffic and her fans were quite vocal. It would be good if they could help with some promotion.

At this time, Weibo hadn't yet rolled out the "followers-only view" function, so core fans would still discuss more things within Weibo fan groups. Fortunately, it wasn't too hard to get into a celebrity's main Weibo fan group; just doing a bit of data support tasks would get you in.

Shang Yechu's side account was in one of Su Ge's main fan groups.

As soon as Shang Yechu entered the group, she saw the new group announcement:

[Don't give that flop show any attention! Reliable intel: not only is Tangtang sharing equal billing with that flop actor, but they're also frantically adding scenes for the flop actor!]

Focus all energy on pulling for "Love's Chocolate Toast"! Little Toast is a major modern romance IP, Tangtang is the sole female lead, and it will premiere exclusively on our daddy Meta's platform on the tenth day of the Lunar New Year!

That flop show already has a similar big-budget production (qyz) airing. Going up against it is suicide. Promoting it everywhere will only invite mass ridicule!

Little Toast's target audience is different from qyz's. Even if qyz sucks up all the viewership, Little Toast will still have its dedicated modern romance audience! That's the audience we need to capture!

The flop show is already buried! Buried! Buried! Important things said three times! Put all effort into promoting Little Toast!]

[Dear Candy Powder babies! The flop show's own official account doesn't even dare to post any materials, it's doomed to flop for sure! What we need to do is let it flop silently, without being associated with Tangtang!]

The flop show's official account knows it's going to be buried. Let's just add a little more dirt on top!

After it airs, marketing accounts will definitely compare the flop show to qyz. Remember: don't engage, don't fight, don't give attention, don't add to the heat! "Love's Chocolate Toast" is the top priority!]

Shang Yechu clicked into the profiles of a few more active fans from the group chat and saw various statements targeting "Tale of Cloud Incline".

[Tale of Cloud Incline is buried, won't do any related data support from now on.]

[Don't give yqj any attention, only looking forward to Liu Qiaoqiao in "Love's Chocolate Toast".]

[What, you also know that @Tale of Cloud Incline Official Weibo is dead? Then come watch "Love's Chocolate Toast" on Meta Pictures!]

So that's how it was. "Tale of Cloud Incline" had already been labeled and buried as a flop show by Su Ge's fans.

Shang Yechu raised a hand to cover her forehead, feeling slightly puzzled.

The equal billing was probably Su Ge's own idea. Given Su Ge's infatuation with Qin Tianye, she definitely wouldn't have the heart to let her idol, who had more screen time, essentially "carry her sedan chair" by boosting her status.

But even if Su Ge's fans weren't promoting it, why weren't Su Ge herself and Meta Pictures doing any promotion either?

Shang Yechu opened Su Ge's WeChat, carefully considering her wording, when a new message actually popped up from the other side!

Eating Candy Every Day: [Little Leaf, are you there?]

Why would Su Ge suddenly seek her out? Could it be that this young lady and she were on the same wavelength?

Yechu: [I'm here. What's up, Su Ge?]

Eating Candy Every Day: [I saw that Teacher Qin Tianye's Weibo has a new follow called Yechu. Is that you?]

Shang Yechu: "..."

Yechu: [It's me. I need to verify my actor status, so I have to mutually follow a few verified actor accounts.]

Eating Candy Every Day: [That's perfect then. Teacher Qin Tianye alone probably isn't enough, right? I'll follow you back too.]

Yechu: [Don't you need to discuss this with your agent first?]

The message had just been sent when a new follower notification popped up on Shang Yechu's Weibo.

[Su Ge Sugar has become your new follower.]

Eating Candy Every Day: [No need! I can make this small decision myself.]

Shang Yechu's eyelid twitched. She opened her follower list. There were only three followers in total. Besides the default Weibo official account follower, the other two were Su Ge and Qin Tianye.

The two accounts sat right next to each other, their verified orange V badges practically flashing before Shang Yechu's eyes.

Is that really why you want to follow me? I'm too embarrassed to call you out on it!

Shang Yechu couldn't help but laugh out loud. She sent a message to Su Ge: [Only you and Teacher Qin know about my account for now. I still need to contact a few more people.]

Eating Candy Every Day: [No rush, no rush. We can talk about it tomorrow, it's getting late anyway.]

Yechu: [By the way, how did you notice Teacher Qin followed me?]

Su Ge showed "typing..." for quite a while: [I was bored and went to look at the Tale of Cloud Incline main creative team's following lists, and happened to see it.]

This was a good opportunity to ask. Shang Yechu typed a sentence.

Yechu: [It's my first time registering a Weibo account, so I'm not too familiar. Shouldn't we be reposting the promotional materials from the Tale of Cloud Incline official account? I see other TV drama main casts doing that.]

Su Ge sent a long voice message over: "That's exactly what I asked Zheng Bohan! But he told me not to make any move, to act as if this show doesn't exist—no promotion, no reposting. If possible, I should even try to manage the fans a bit and tell them not to post about it either."

Su Ge clearly didn't treat Shang Yechu as an outsider, spilling everything like beans from a bamboo tube in a rapid-fire manner: "I originally had it agreed with my—with my company, to have the Meta Pictures app and website homepage use the largest banner, the most prominent spot, to rotate the posters and trailers for 'Tale of Cloud Incline'! But then Zheng Bohan said not to do it for now. I really don't know what that old man is up to."

Shang Yechu was even more confused now. Zheng Bohan actively stopping Su Ge and Meta Pictures from doing these things meant he was fully aware of these marketing tactics. His neglect of the official account wasn't due to ignorance.

This was an intentional abandonment.

And then there was Su Ge. While everyone knew Su Ge enjoyed a "Privileged Princess" level of treatment within Meta, being able to just say the word and have Meta Pictures dedicate its prime promotional real estate to "Tale of Cloud Incline"—that level of treatment was beyond a Privileged Princess, wasn't it? That was more like the Empress Dowager.

Su Ge was still sending voice messages: "So you should hold off on reposting and promoting for now too. Let's see what Zheng Bohan plans to do. My dad said Zheng Bohan is very experienced, so there's no need to worry."

Su Ge's dad?

A slight stir moved in Shang Yechu's heart. She replied to Su Ge with an [Mhm, okay.] and sent over a cute "thank you" sticker.

[Rich Chicken Saying Thanks.jpg]

Chapter 86: New Year's Eve

Entrusting her own fate to someone else's hands was the last thing Shang Yechu ever wanted to do in this life.

But at this very moment, she had no choice but to place her trust in Zheng Bohan. Although she had no idea what earth-shattering, tear-jerking marketing plan Zheng Bohan had, if she rashly disrupted his arrangements (even though she hadn't seen any arrangements being made) and pissed him off, future cooperation might become difficult to discuss.

Shang Yechu still greatly admired Zheng Bohan's screenwriting skills. Among the entertainment industry's crowd of writers who could only churn out formulaic plays or haphazardly butcher novel IPs, Zheng Bohan stood out like a crane among chickens.

Moreover, Shang Yechu also believed that Zheng Bohan wanted to see *Tale of Cloud Incline* flop even less than she did.

For the days that followed, there was nothing to do but wait.

Yi Tianzhao couldn't wait to send the script for *Xiao Fengque* to Shang Yechu, repeatedly urging and instructing her to study the script thoroughly.

This worry was completely unnecessary. After being scolded by viewers for adding and changing scenes, the *Xiao Fengque* script became much more faithful to the original novel; for Shang Yechu, who had read the original novel three or four times, the script was already as familiar as the back of her hand.

There was something more important than familiarizing herself with the script at the moment.

Shang Yechu began adjusting her sleep schedule, eating regularly, trying to keep her health value at a stable level. She couldn't portray a sickly, weak Xiao Fengque.

Surprisingly, Sheng Wenzhi's home actually had a gym, which shocked Shang Yechu. Who would have thought that with her 'bored of living' face, Sheng Wenzhi actually knew the importance of strengthening her body.

Starting on the second day of her stay, Shang Yechu began exercising daily in Sheng Wenzhi's home gym. Running, weightlifting, push-ups, resistance band exercises. These workouts couldn't yield results overnight, so Shang Yechu could only start with the most basic exercises, gradually increasing the intensity bit by bit.

Sheng Wenzhi, however, was the complete opposite of Shang Yechu. After three days of living there, Shang Yechu had hardly run into her at all.

Sheng Wenzhi ate, drank, slept, and did everything else in her study, in seclusion every day, never coming downstairs. She was practically writing that novel of hers with her life on the line. Shang Yechu had originally wanted to visit her study, but after witnessing her writing fervor, she temporarily gave up on the idea.

It's best not to disturb a writer when they are completely absorbed in their work.

Just like that, three days passed in the blink of an eye, and before she knew it, it was New Year's Eve.

On the afternoon of New Year's Eve, Sheng Wenzhi finally crawled out of her study. She looked gaunt and emaciated, like a bamboo pole draped in clothes.

In fact, Sheng Wenzhi had almost forgotten that Shang Yechu was staying at her place. When she saw Shang Yechu cooking instant noodles in the kitchen, Sheng Wenzhi was so startled she nearly smashed a bottle over Shang Yechu's head.

If not for Shang Yechu's high combat power, swiftly twisting Sheng Wenzhi's arm, she might have ended up with a scarred face.

After a chaotic scene of feathers flying and dogs jumping, Sheng Wenzhi finally remembered it was New Year's Eve and asked Shang Yechu what she wanted to eat.

Both she and Shang Yechu were people with little sense of New Year's ritual, and neither was skilled in cooking, their culinary abilities limited to the realm of not starving and not getting food poisoning.

Shang Yechu went to the supermarket and bought a bag of frozen dumplings and a few bottles of juice and soda. Sheng Wenzhi went to a restaurant and got several pre-made dishes to go. They bumped into each other on the way back and walked home together in silence.

They didn't have much in common to talk about. Shang Yechu had no intention of opening her heart to Sheng Wenzhi, and Sheng Wenzhi couldn't be bothered to discuss literature or art with Shang Yechu—in her mind, Shang Yechu simply didn't understand these things.

Even though Shang Yechu had undergone a complete transformation and was a completely different person from before. But just as Shang Yechu still saw Sheng Wenzhi as a student in her heart, in Sheng Wenzhi's heart, Shang Yechu was still that chubby girl from their school days who tried to get close to her.

Ignorant, uneducated, kind-hearted, slow-witted. Someone who evoked both guilt and helplessness.

This was a stereotype difficult to erase. Even though Shang Yechu displayed intelligence and sharpness utterly different from her past self, it couldn't be dispelled overnight.

Shang Yechu boiled the frozen dumplings, and Sheng Wenzhi set the pre-made dishes on the table. Soon, the 2017 Spring Festival Gala began.

Two adults who had known each other since their student days, yet whose relationship was difficult to summarize with any single word, silently ate their New Year's Eve dinner to the sounds of singing and dancing from the gala.

The frozen dumplings tasted bland, and the reheated pre-made dishes weren't great either. This New Year's Eve dinner carried a strange, almost prophetic feeling—as if two friends who had long become strangers were forcibly trying to reheat their long-cold friendship on New Year's Eve, only to end up with a table of unpalatable, lukewarm dishes.

Shang Yechu read her script while eating, and Sheng Wenzhi occasionally glanced up at the gala.

On the TV screen, comedians had the audience roaring with laughter; outside the TV screen, two people sitting opposite each other at the long table remained silent.

It wasn't even nine o'clock after finishing the meal. Shang Yechu was going back to her room to read the script, and Sheng Wenzhi was also returning to her study to continue writing her novel.

Before they each went back to their rooms, Sheng Wenzhi looked back at Shang Yechu.

She opened her mouth, wanting to say 'Happy New Year.' But after glancing at the time, she suddenly remembered it was still only New Year's Eve. The New Year would arrive, fashionably late, only a few hours later. Saying 'Happy New Year' this early was inappropriate.

Sheng Wenzhi suddenly felt a strange, inexplicable sensation. To Shang Yechu, Sheng Wenzhi herself always seemed to be... inappropriate.

"Good night," Sheng Wenzhi finally said.

"Good night," Shang Yechu replied.

This phrase wasn't truly wishing someone sweet dreams; it was merely a period marking the end of a conversation.

Just like that, time flew by, and in the blink of an eye, it was the sixth day of the Lunar New Year.

The day *Legend of Qingyun* and *Tale of Cloud Incline* premiered.

Chapter 87: The Bizarre Move

The sixth day of the first lunar month, an auspicious day for opening business.

Starting from 9 AM, the official Legend of Qingyun Weibo account began posting updates on the hour.

@Legend of Qingyun Official Weibo:

■9:30

10 hours until the premiere of "Legend of Qingyun"!

Bright clouds flourish, intertwining slowly.

The Ming Palace Archives: "The Ten Scents."

The Ten Scents are: Golden Dragon Incense, Mystic Phoenix Incense, Nine Heavens Lotus, Hundred Flowers Dew, Glazed Fire, Celestial Immortal's Intoxication, Azure Jade Dew, Purple Gold Frost, Crane Soaring Among Clouds, Crane Soaring to the Sky.

Do Yun Fans know the functions of these ten scents? Feel free to share your thoughts in the comments and reposts! Yun Fans who answer all correctly will receive an official "Ten Scents" gift box from "Legend of Qingyun"!■

Ten exquisitely crafted, retro-style small spice boxes of varying designs were arranged into five images. The intricately carved, hollow spice boxes were placed on an elegant, understated vintage wooden table, showcasing a unique kind of delicate refinement.

In the center was a still from the drama featuring a palace beauty holding a spice box. Below the still was a large seal script character: "Ten."

The comment section surged:

■Wow! Such a grand gesture!■

■Ahhh I really, really, really want to be with you...■

■Such beautiful boxes, they could be used as jewelry storage boxes.■

■Guanjun Daddy is spending big again■

■Love you, love you~ Looking forward to @Aegis-Qi Yan■

■Incense, aphrodisiac incense, abortifacient incense, poison incense... what other kinds of incense could there be? Isn't that all there is in palace intrigue dramas?■

The comment section was extremely lively. During the New Year period, everyone was relatively free. The enthusiasm for discussion was exceptionally high.

After surveying the situation on the Legend of Qingyun official Weibo, Shang Yechu took a look at the Tale of Cloud Incline official Weibo. Good. So far, the Tale of Cloud Incline Weibo remained completely still, its homepage a blank slate.

Who knew what Zheng Bohan was up to.

It wasn't just Shang Yechu who was anxious; even Su Ge couldn't sit still anymore. She had complained to Shang Yechu several times over the past two days. She had even darkly speculated, suspecting that Zheng Bohan held a grudge against her for her performance during filming and was now deliberately sabotaging the promotion.

Although Su Ge also privately felt that "Tale of Cloud Incline" was doomed to flop, this was her first collaborative television drama with Qin Tianye. In Su Ge's heart, the weight of this drama surpassed all her previous works!

Zheng Bohan's utterly lazy promotional approach infuriated Su Ge, making her jump up and down and scratch her head in frustration. If not for her father, Mai Zhenye, holding her back, Su Ge would have long stormed into Meta Pictures headquarters, held a knife to the staff's necks, and forced them to promote the drama.

Shang Yechu had cleverly encouraged Su Ge and the other actors several times, urging everyone to subtly probe Zheng Bohan to see what he actually intended to do. But Zheng Bohan was like someone who had sworn off drugs—he wouldn't leak a single word!

10:30 AM.

@Legend of Qingyun Official Weibo:

■10:30

9 hours until the premiere of "Legend of Qingyun"!

The sun and moon shine brilliantly, day after day.

The Ming Palace Archives: "The Supreme Ruler."

The "Book of Changes" states: The ninth line, fifth position, a dragon soars in the sky, favorable for meeting a great person. Thus, the supreme one is called "the ninth five."

Has Teacher Wei Tianchi's portrayal of the Supreme Ruler touched your heart? In any case, Yunnian's little heart is pounding wildly with awe!■

The accompanying images were nine stills of veteran actor Wei Tianchi. In the stills, he wore a black dragon robe, his expression stern and imposing, commanding respect without anger.

The comment section under this Weibo post was sparse. Wei Tianchi was a veteran actor and didn't have as many young fans to generate data and flood the comments for him.

But the repost section—that was a dazzling galaxy of stars!

■@Director-Yu Zikun: Congratulations to Brother Tianchi for achieving new glory after Emperor Wei!■

■@Screenwriter-Pan Tianzong: Reign over the world, peerless and supreme!■

■@Screenwriter-Song Yunzhou: Who else but "Wei" could be this generation's emperor?■

■@Vast Literary Sea: Teacher Wei's imperial appearance is overflowing with majesty, and his acting is impeccable, an indispensable part of "Legend of Qingyun."■

■@Actor Jian Ming: Watching "Legend of Qingyun" tonight for Old Wei!■

Well-known directors, screenwriters, and veteran actors who had collaborated with Wei Tianchi in the industry reposted this Weibo one after another, building momentum for "Legend of Qingyun." Although the number of reposts wasn't high due to the age group of his fans, the weight of this support was absolutely not to be underestimated.

At the same time, the Tale of Cloud Incline official Weibo, which had been playing dead, finally... moved.

@Tale of Cloud Incline:

■test■

The moment Shang Yechu saw this Weibo post: "..."

What was Zheng Bohan doing?

Angry Su Ge fans, catching the scent, arrived at the battlefield and charged into the comment section of this Tale of Cloud Incline Weibo post.

■??? What kind of nonsense are you posting?■

■test? What are you testing? Testing if your horse is tough enough?■

■You're awake.jpg■

■You finally crawled out of your turtle shell?■

■You're still alive? Still alive!■

■A dead person.■

■Who are you? Finished burying your dad?■

■Why don't you wait until the drama finishes airing before showing your face?■

■Reject equal billing! Reject equal billing! Reject equal billing! Su Ge is absolutely the top-billed female lead! Su Ge is absolutely the top-billed female lead! Su Ge is absolutely the top-billed female lead!■

■You only know to wipe your nose after the snot runs into your mouth...■

■Testing what, testing the hardness of Zheng Bohan's corpse?■

■Did your account get hacked?■

Although Su Ge's fans claimed that "Tale of Cloud Incline" was already buried and no one cared, if you could fully believe fans' words, you'd be a fool.

Generally speaking, the more someone claims no one cares, the more they actually care intensely; the more a drama is claimed to be destined for burial, the more viciously it gets cursed.

Fandom fans cursing often feels like a thunderous army of ducks quacking incessantly. Su Ge followed a black-and-red popularity path, and her fans' combat effectiveness was especially high. In less than ten minutes, Zheng Bohan's ancestors for eighteen generations had all had intimate contact with the earth.

The "Legend of Qingyun" official Weibo, praised in turn by industry bigwigs, and the "Tale of Cloud Incline" official Weibo, cursed to the point of parents drifting away and ancestors resurrecting from the grave, formed a rather tragic contrast.

Even though Shang Yechu felt Zheng Bohan's antics this time were indeed going too far, witnessing the miserable state of this Weibo's comment section, she couldn't help but silently offer him a tiny bit of stingy sympathy.

11:30 AM.

@Legend of Qingyun Official Weibo:

■11:30

8 hours until the premiere of "Legend of Qingyun"!

The bright heavens above, a dazzling array of stars.

The Ming Palace Archives: "The Eighth Virtuous Prince."

A refined gentleman, like cut and polished jade. The Eighth Virtuous Prince Zhu Zhao, the dream lover in the spring boudoirs of the capital's young ladies. Yet, beneath that warm, jade-like exterior seems to hide secrets unknown to others...

@Aegis-Qi Yan passionately performs, taking you to witness the dual life of the Eighth Virtuous Prince.■

The accompanying images for this Weibo post were naturally stills of Qi Yan. As a rising idol star, Qi Yan naturally had a good-looking face. After professional retouching, he appeared even more handsome and extraordinarily dashing.

The number of comments and reposts for this Weibo post naturally exploded. Qi Yan's fans were determined to make him the biggest traffic draw for "Legend of Qingyun," to use as leverage in future arguments—ahem, discussions. They aggressively pushed the reposts, likes, and comments.

Meanwhile, the Tale of Cloud Incline official Weibo was still being cursed. Its sole, lonely Weibo post was filled entirely with the passionate greetings from Su Ge's fans, looking particularly desolate.

12:30 PM...

1:30 PM...

2:30 PM...

The "Legend of Qingyun" official Weibo continued to release pre-release Weibo posts related to Liao Li, Geng Ziqi, Lu Yuxuan, and others, each also cleverly tied to the corresponding time.

Each pre-release Weibo post generated high heat from the respective star's fans and casual fans. Especially the Weibo posts for Liao Li, Lu Yuxuan, and Qi Yan, each racking up over two hundred thousand reposts!

Weibo had been dominated and flooded all day with news about "Legend of Qingyun" premiering. Six out of ten trending topics were related to "Legend of Qingyun"!

#Liao Li A New Attempt#

#Qi Yan Acting Breakout#

#Lu Yuxuan Hope Everyone Sees a Different Me#

#Legend of Qingyun What Exactly Are the Ten Scents#

#Legend of Qingyun Golden Cast#

#Legend of Qingyun Premiere#

...

The spectacle was unprecedented; saying it blotted out the sky wasn't an exaggeration.

The New Year period was precisely when people most needed entertainment products to pass the time. "Legend of Qingyun" came at the perfect time, with a luxurious cast, plus Guanjun Century's massive marketing investment—it was truly at its peak.

Shang Yechu felt her phone was almost burning up from the heat of "Legend of Qingyun"!

At the same time, the number of curse-filled comments on the Tale of Cloud Incline official Weibo neatly reached exactly ten thousand.

Shang Yechu: "..."

Only two hours remained until the premiere. Even if Zheng Bohan had some trick up his sleeve, using it now would be too little, too late.

Shang Yechu couldn't say she wasn't disappointed.

Although she had secured the role of Xiao Fengque, the female lead, Emperor Pingzhao was also a character she had poured her heart into portraying. Roles might have leads and supports, but her performance didn't distinguish between main and supporting.

Come to think of it, Emperor Pingzhao was her first proper role.

To have a role she invested so much energy and expectation in be deliberately sabotaged and cooled off by Zheng Bohan... that sense of disparity, disappointment, and anger was indescribably painful.

The warm water flowed past her throat and heart. Shang Yechu lowered her eyes, feeling a sour ache in her teeth.

What's done was done. Blaming Zheng Bohan was useless. Better to think about how to boost the popularity later.

■17:30

2 hours until the premiere of "Legend of Qingyun"!

Drums thunderously beat, dancers gracefully leap.

The Ming Palace Archives: "One Life, One World, One Pair."

One life, one generation, one pair of people, how can they be separated, heartbroken in two places?

Yearning and gazing but not close, for whom does spring bloom?

When promises scatter with the wind, when love and hate turn to mud. So close yet worlds apart, beloved? bosom friend? sworn enemy? Who is the one her heart belongs to, who is her final destination in this life?

Within the towering palace walls, the magnificent and turbulent life of one woman.

Renowned actress Wang Miyun @SeekingCloud Cloud passionately performs, narrating for you that story sealed away by history...■

Wang Miyun's hardcore battle fans might not be as numerous as Qi Yan's or Lu Yuxuan's, but Guanjun Century had money to burn.

■Repost this Weibo and follow @Legend of Qingyun Official Weibo for a chance to win one of 200 prizes of [200 yuan], or 6 prizes of [666 yuan]!■

Who doesn't love free money?

Netizens flocked to repost and help, wanting to pocket some spare change from the capitalists. Even netizens who didn't follow the drama joined in.

Wang Miyun was the female lead, so her treatment was undoubtedly the best in the entire drama. Before the netizens' reposts could even warm up the repost section, a large batch of highly influential accounts visited the repost section.

■@Guanjun Century: Wishing "Legend of Qingyun" rides the wind and breaks the waves, marching to victory! Repost this to give away twenty Hainan family travel packages!■

■@Guanjun Century-Xu Guanjun: I'll also join in the fun, wishing "Legend of Qingyun" great success and popularity! Repost this Weibo, and I'll personally draw five red coral bracelets and five sandalwood bracelets.■

■Wang Miyun Fan Club: With a favorable wind to lend strength, it sends me soaring to the clouds! Repost this to draw ten @SeekingCloud Cloud autographed photos!■

■Hongyu Home Furnishings: Honored to have collaborated with "Legend of Qingyun." Repost this to draw twenty sets of Hongyu Home Furnishings custom-made redwood cabinets.■

Over twenty company heads, fan clubs, and sponsors flocked to join the fun in the repost section of this Weibo, throwing money around like heavenly maidens scattering flowers. The repost section glittered with gold, the scent of money wafting through the air.

When had netizens ever seen such a money-throwing spectacle?

The repost section completely turned red with envy. Weibo's trending topics scrolled like promotional ads for "Legend of Qingyun." Marketing accounts promoted with all their might for the premiere in two hours. Everywhere was the extravagant aura of "Legend of Qingyun."

With such a spectacle, "Legend of Qingyun"'s premiere day ratings and online viewership couldn't possibly be poor.

Unwilling to give up, Shang Yechu clicked into the Tale of Cloud Incline official Weibo homepage and was astonished to discover that, just moments ago, the Tale of Cloud Incline official Weibo had actually posted another Weibo!

@Tale of Cloud Incline Official Weibo reposted @Legend of Qingyun Official Weibo:

■Let's grow big and strong together!■

Shang Yechu: ???

Shang Yechu: !!!

Chapter 88: Moon-Level Clout-Chasing

Zheng Bohan's sudden, wild, out-of-left-field punch not only gave Shang Yechu a scare, but also startled the Sugar Fans who were currently cursing up a storm in the comments section.

The Sugar Fans charging headlong through Zheng Bohan's comment section were caught completely off guard, even forgetting to spew insults for a moment.

Not only were the Sugar Fans dumbfounded, but the drama fans of *Legend of Qingyun* and the passersby who came for the prize draw were also left speechless.

[???

[?????

[...]

[#WhatIsThisAbout#]

[Holy shit, thought my eyes were playing tricks on me...]

[Tale of Cloud Incline? What's that? Never heard of it.]

[Seems like it's also a TV drama? Uh...]

[Woke up too fast, did they switch to the wrong account?]

No one had any clue what the official *Tale of Cloud Incline* Weibo account was trying to pull. So, the moment the account posted this Weibo, everyone's reaction was: ???

Shang Yechu's reaction was a bit quicker. After a brief moment of stunned surprise, she swiftly clicked into the original post's repost section to see if Zheng Bohan had made it to the trending reposts list.

Sure enough, Zheng Bohan's "Let's grow big and strong together" repost had already rocketed to third place on the trending reposts list in such a short time, with a whopping five thousand plus reposts, currently only behind Holo Video and Guanjun Century!

Shang Yechu felt the growth in reposts for Zheng Bohan's Weibo was abnormal, a bit too fast.

As an old hand at buying fake likes, fake comments, and fake reposts, Shang Yechu was highly experienced and had a keen nose in this area. After checking the repost section once, Shang Yechu immediately came to a conclusion—more than half of the people currently reposting Zheng Bohan were fake reposts bought by Zheng Bohan himself.

Using fake reposts to push the *Tale of Cloud Incline* official Weibo's repost count into the trending section, attracting more attention from passersby, thus making the reposts even hotter!

In 2017, such a moon-level clout-chasing act was nothing short of earth-shattering. The naive bystanders had never seen such a blatant, bold, and utterly shameless attempt to ride on someone else's hype, and were instantly stunned into silence!

After a brief moment of confusion, Su Ge's Sugar Fans were instantly filled with towering rage, their lungs practically bursting with anger!

[Ahhhhhh! Drop dead, bitch!]

[Get lost! Get lost! Get lost!]

[I'm begging you, just delete it, okay? Don't bring Su Ge any more hate!]

[You're handing the knife right to the anti-fans!!! Delete it! Delete it now!]

[Holy fuck, stop riding the coattails, aren't you embarrassed? Are you trying to ruin Su Ge????!!!]

The Sugar Fans' worries were not unfounded. Anti-fans often have a keener nose than fans. Before long, the anti-fans caught the scent and swarmed to the *Tale of Cloud Incline* official Weibo in droves to condemn it.

[So lame so lame so lame so lame so lame so lame so lame so lame so lame so lame so lame so lame so lame]

[The marketing queen is back at it again, forcing her crap down everyone's throats, and this time she's doing it by piggybacking on someone else's promo...]

[Grow big and strong? Big as in big moon face, strong as in strong-arm, rapey marketing~]

[I'm genuinely feeling a bit nauseous, you know, that kind of physical revulsion?]

[A greasy street stall from the sewers trying to clout-chase a three-star Michelin restaurant be like:]

[I tagged her for you, @SuGeSugar Have some shame, will you? [hehe]]

Anti-fans don't mince words. The highly combative Su Ge fans couldn't possibly tolerate this? They immediately turned around and charged back, tearing into the anti-fans with a vengeance, a continuous stream of insults flying back and forth.

The style of the passersby was completely different from both the fans and the anti-fans.

[Ahahahahaha I'm dying,...]

[Holy shit holy shit holy shit holy shit!]

[My dear sweet lord grandma's fourth uncle's wife...]

[Is this what corporate warfare is?]

[Fake corporate warfare: Strategizing from afar, decisive victories, intricate maneuvering, every move connected; Real corporate warfare: Reposting your Weibo]

[I laughed so hard I collapsed my kang bed.]

[Trying not to laugh at a family gathering, my aunt asked me if I was having a seizure.]

[Didn't you guys notice? *Legend of Qingyun*, *Tale of Cloud Incline*... Even the names are clout-chasing, let me ship this Cloud pairing...]

[What a beautiful state of mind, I'm taking notes...]

[The domestic entertainment industry has officially lost its mind.]

[The domestic entertainment industry has officially lost its mind +10086]

Unlike the fans' anger and the anti-fans' personal attacks, the passersby were all rolling on the floor laughing at the *Tale of Cloud Incline* official Weibo's outrageous move.

This was perfectly normal. There's a common phrase in fandom circles: "No bystanders in the arena." It means that true bystanders wouldn't get so emotionally invested in the hair-pulling catfights of the entertainment industry—here referring to disputes not involving morality or law. Anyone who gets emotionally involved and starts fighting for a celebrity definitely isn't a true bystander underneath that shell.

For most bystanders, whether it's TV dramas or celebrity gossip, it's just a bit of spice in their daily lives. The entertainment industry is full of people earning 2.08 million a day, already far removed from ordinary people's lives. Watching these people's gossip is a form of detached, voyeuristic entertainment.

Two dramas engaging in this unprecedented, primitive form of corporate warfare to please audiences and fight for ratings—people are just here for the laughs. Getting emotionally invested and slinging insults? Completely unnecessary.

Riding the wave of hype, the *Tale of Cloud Incline* official Weibo immediately announced the premiere date for *Tale of Cloud Incline*:

@TaleOfCloudInclineOfficial:

[The pinnacle palace intrigue masterpiece *#Tale of Cloud Incline#* will make its grand debut tonight at 19:30, exclusively on Yunfeng Satellite TV's Eagle Cliff Theater! Premiering across the network on @MetaPictures!

Production: @MetaPictures

Executive Producer: Zheng Bohan @SailingTheVastLiterarySea

Director: Zheng Bohan @SailingTheVastLiterarySea

Fear not the clouds that block the view, for you stand atop the highest peak!]

The moment this Weibo went out, the comments erupted instantly:

The bent-over-laughing type:

[Someone save my funny bone...]

["Fear not the clouds that block the view, for you stand atop the highest peak." That's shade, right? That's definitely shade!]

[Not shade, that's full-on direct sunlight ahahahahahahahahaha]

The trying-to-stay-rational type:

[Why only announce the director and not the actors?]

[Zheng Bohan? A real wolf, no wonder he wrote *Eastern Tower Secret History* and *Western Garden*...]

[Damn, both those masterpieces were written by Zheng Bohan??? Then this drama should be pretty good too, right?]

The drama-loving, chaos-enjoying type:

[If I were the *Legend of Qingyun* production team, I'd probably be fuming right now.]

[Why hasn't there been any reaction yet? I'll tag them for you @LegendOfQingyunOfficial @GuanjunCentury @VastLiterarySea]

[OP, you're brave. If they come for you, I'll be here munching on melon seeds!]

[Fight! Fight! I want to see rivers of blood!]

The sticking-to-their-lane type:

[The billing order! The billing order! Su Ge is absolutely the top-billed female lead! Release the billing order!]

[No equal billing! We won't accept any equal billing!]

[Not releasing the billing order because you have a guilty conscience? You know Su Ge is your cash cow, your golden goose?]

The insider type:

[I get it now, so it's Meta and Guanjun, no wonder they're fighting like this.]

[What's up with Meta and Guanjun? Spill the tea!]

[The person above doesn't follow fandom, right? Anyone who chases stars knows these two are old rivals. Back in the day, to mess with Guanjun Century, Meta would throw money at things without caring about the cost.]

[The moment I realized it was these two old foes, my reaction: Ah, that explains everything.]

The spotting-the-details type:

[The director of *Legend of Qingyun* and the director of *Tale of Cloud Incline* have matching couple usernames?]

[Vast Literary Sea, Sailing the Vast Literary Sea... ummm]

[What couple? Don't you know the twin stars of the screenwriting/directing world? They're master and disciple brothers.]

[How did master and disciple brothers become competitors? Family fighting family!]

[Wait, I used to follow Zheng Bohan. His Weibo name wasn't this before, he changed it to this new one.]

[Oh, so he specifically changed it to a matching couple username, huh?]

[Get better taste. This new ID is clearly a provocation! A boat sailing on water—Zheng Bohan is plainly stating he's going to one-up Xu Hanwen!]

No matter what everyone was discussing, one thing was certain: the hype for *Tale of Cloud Incline* had exploded.

#Tale of Cloud Incline Grow Big and Strong#

#What is Tale of Cloud Incline#

#Tale of Cloud Incline Legend of Qingyun#

#Legend of Qingyun is going to be pissed by Tale of Cloud Incline#

#Vast Literary Sea Sailing the Vast Literary Sea#

#Fear not the clouds that block the view for you stand atop the highest peak#

#Tale of Cloud Incline premieres tonight on Yunfeng TV#

Seven or eight hashtags related to *Tale of Cloud Incline* surged to the top of the trending list all at once, with #Tale of Cloud Incline Grow Big and Strong# directly shooting to number one on the hot search chart!

What was even more remarkable was that these trending topics didn't cost a single cent—they had climbed up entirely by riding on the coattails of *Legend of Qingyun*'s hype!

A favorable wind borrows its strength, sending me soaring above the clouds.

Zheng Bohan successfully rode the east wind of *Legend of Qingyun*, sending *Tale of Cloud Incline* straight to the pinnacle!

As for the other party being used for clout, *Legend of Qingyun*, neither the production team nor the official Weibo account had made any response so far.

Chapter 89: The Premiere of *Legend of Qingyun*

This is the most infuriating part about someone riding your coattails. The party being used can't respond; responding would just be giving the hanger-on undeserved prestige. But if they don't respond, they can only sit back and watch the other party leech off them.

It's like having a giant leech stuck to your neck that you can't just reach out and pluck off!

That feeling of helpless disgust, only those who've been used as a stepping stone truly understand it.

The official Weibo for *Legend of Qingyun* has now fallen into precisely this awkward predicament. If they respond to the *Tale of Cloud Incline* official Weibo, they'll either look petty or like complete fools. If they don't respond to the *Tale of Cloud Incline* official Weibo, they can only watch helplessly as a portion of the audience drifts over to *Tale of Cloud Incline*.

The two dramas share the same positioning and genre. If *Tale of Cloud Incline* didn't exist, a portion of viewers who enjoy this type of show would still tune in to *Legend of Qingyun* even if they weren't super interested. But now, with this shameless, cheap alternative available, it's hard to say whether this segment of the audience will stick around.

Zheng Bohan, the once-in-a-generation genius of the screenwriting world, a rookie director fresh to the industry, the junior fellow apprentice of the *Legend of Qingyun* director.

On the sixth day of the Lunar New Year, he just had to come right up to *Legend of Qingyun*'s face and take a massive dump.

Poor Guanjun Century, getting their door kicked in during the New Year festivities. Their premiere ceremony, which should have been a glorious, dazzling affair, was left in complete disarray by Zheng Bohan.

This move, honed over decades of experience, delivered a thoroughly inauspicious blow to *Legend of Qingyun* right at the start of the year!

The *Legend of Qingyun* official Weibo was clearly also stunned by Zheng Bohan's maneuver. During the crucial golden hour when it should have responded, it just stood there dumbfounded, saying nothing, allowing netizens to meme, repost, compare the two dramas, and discuss everything heatedly.

Then again, even if it wanted to respond, how could it possibly respond?

Zheng Bohan made a killing with just one sentence and a few thousand bot-assisted reposts. Now, the comments and reposts on *Tale of Cloud Incline*'s premiere announcement Weibo have easily broken 30,000 and 20,000 respectively. Among recent data for TV drama premiere announcement Weibo posts, this is second only to *Legend of Qingyun*.

Whether the *Legend of Qingyun* production team likes it or not, now, anyone who knows about *Legend of Qingyun* inevitably also knows about *Tale of Cloud Incline*!

This marketing method, with its incredibly low cost and high return, left everyone inside and outside the industry utterly dumbfounded.

Meta Pictures seized the moment to climb the pole, placing *Tale of Cloud Incline*'s poster and reservation ads on the most prominent, prime promotional spots on their official website and app, and simultaneously making an official announcement on Weibo.

Shang Yechu closed Weibo and let out a long sigh.

Things had reached this point, and there was nothing more to worry about.

Although she hadn't expected the seemingly rigid and serious Zheng Bohan to use this method to forcefully latch onto *Legend of Qingyun*, the effect was, well, pretty darn good.

Shang Yechu vaguely remembered something similar happening a few years later... but now Zheng Bohan had beaten everyone to the punch. There would probably be specific PR measures targeting this kind of over-the-top, shameless leeching phenomenon in the future. Whatever, she'd think about things a few years from now when they actually happened.

Zheng Bohan had truly made a determined, burn-the-boats commitment this time. If the quality of *Tale of Cloud Incline* wasn't up to par, one could easily imagine the wave of collective mockery he would face. That kind of public opinion pressure was absolutely unbearable for the average person.

From the fact that he hadn't officially announced the cast, it was also clear that Zheng Bohan knew this kind of marketing tactic wasn't exactly respectable, and he didn't want to involve the actors for the time being.

Apart from Su Ge, whose excessive number of anti-fans made discussion about her unavoidable, the Weibo accounts of the rest of the main creative team remained mostly calm. Even the comment section under Qin Tianye's repost of *Tale of Cloud Incline*'s announcement Weibo was quite harmonious.

Shang Yechu went to check out Su Ge's comment section with interest. She saw Sugar Fans frantically tagging her studio to demand accountability and disassociation, even urging Su Ge herself to distance herself from this drama. Anti-fans were also stirring the pot in the comments, engaging in a fierce, deadlocked battle with the Sugar Fans. The entire comment section was a complete mess.

Shang Yechu then went to take a look at Qin Tianye's comment section, where she saw:

AmanoSong: [Uncle Qin has a new drama! Gotta watch it! Gotta watch it!]

The accompanying picture showed three mobile phones, two computers, two tablets, and one smart TV, all logged into different accounts with Meta Pictures VIP memberships, and all having reserved *Tale of Cloud Incline*.

Shang Yechu: "..."

Shang Yechu was so taken aback she coughed several times.

The buzz for *Tale of Cloud Incline* had been successfully stirred up. Although public opinion was split between praise and criticism, overall, the benefits absolutely outweighed the drawbacks.

It's better to be controversial, argued over, and hated than to be completely ignored and unknown.

Shang Yechu was actually quite curious about her own billing position in this drama, but she firmly believed that the role itself was more important than the billing. Even if Zheng Bohan gave her an eighteenth-tier billing, she could still establish herself through the character.

The *Legend of Qingyun* official Weibo posted another Weibo at 18:30. This time, it was the most important one-hour countdown post. The accompanying pictures were a full team photo of the creative crew, a group photo of the main cast, several multi-character stills, and the nightly update calendar.

Overall, it was very thoughtfully done. Unfortunately, no one in the comment section cared about the actual content of the post anymore.

Tale of Cloud Incline's leeching behavior made Su Ge's fans angry, but it made the fans of the *Legend of Qingyun* leads and supporting actors even angrier!

Their beloved idols were just walking down the road minding their own business when suddenly a piece of flying, sticky taffy from the heavens latched onto them. The *Legend of Qingyun* pie wasn't big enough to share in the first place, and now here came a leech to suck away the filling!

The fans of the four big names—Wang Miyun, Liao Li, Qi Yan, and Lu Yuxuan—formed a four-nation alliance in the comment section, brazenly launching a charge, demanding that the useless *Legend of Qingyun* official Weibo give them an explanation.

Their rhetoric was nothing more than the usual "report the haters, defend our rights" routine. Unfortunately, everyone understood deep down that these "rights" couldn't really be defended—reposting a Weibo isn't illegal. What, is Weibo owned by your family?

Moreover, casual netizens didn't take their "rights defense" seriously at all. All sorts of meme-filled, teasing comments firmly suppressed the rights-defense comments!

In the repost section of the two-hour announcement Weibo, Zheng Bohan's "grow bigger, get stronger" repost sat firmly at the top of the hot reposts.

In the comment section of the one-hour announcement Weibo, a casual onlooker's comment, "I'm starting to ship you and @Tale of Cloud Incline Official Weibo," reigned supreme as the top hot comment.

Tale of Cloud Incline spent not a single cent, relying purely on leeching, to engage in a back-and-forth battle with *Legend of Qingyun*.

Amidst this atmosphere of fans demanding accountability, anti-fans picking fights, Guanjun Century spitting blood, Meta Pictures winning effortlessly, and casual onlookers enjoying the show, 19:30 quietly arrived.

Ke Na was a working professional. Being busy during normal times was one thing, but during her rare New Year holiday, she was also dragged by her parents to visit relatives and friends all over the place to offer New Year's greetings. It was utterly exhausting.

The day finally ended. After finishing dinner, Ke Na collapsed back into her bedroom, ready to relax.

Ke Na and her parents had very different tastes in TV shows. To prevent family fights over the TV program, Ke Na had installed a 50-inch TV in the living room and a 43-inch TV in her own bedroom.

The soundproofing in Ke Na's house was pretty good. Her parents were intellectuals and generally respected Ke Na's space. Both sides would proactively lower their TV volumes. So, they basically didn't disturb each other.

Ke Na turned on the TV in her bedroom and started changing channels.

Tonight was the premiere night for *Legend of Qingyun*. Ke Na had been looking forward to this drama for a long time.

The two leads, Wang Miyun and Liao Li, possessed both the skill of serious actors and the looks of idols. The director, Xu Hanwen, had several excellent works under his belt; Ke Na's family had watched quite a few of his productions.

A tired person needs some mental nourishment to relax. Ke Na switched to Dragon Gate TV—the exclusive broadcasting station for "Legend of Qingyun". She played on her phone while waiting for the commercials to finish.

At 19:35, the bedroom suddenly fell quiet, all commercial sounds ceasing abruptly.

A melodious and pleasant melody from a guqin drifted out. Ke Na perked up—it's starting!

Chapter 90: Episode One

"Neither mist nor cloud, trailing purple light;

"Suspended splendor, radiant patterns bright;

"In this glorious age, auspicious signs appear;

"Accumulated blessings, spiritual gifts without frontier..."

A weathered, majestic male voice chanted accompanied by melodious zither music, a heavy sense of epic grandeur washing over her. In an instant, Ke Na was transported into that era, resplendent and dreamlike, both heroic and graceful!

Jade palaces, towers of jade, crimson clouds leaning against balustrades.

Majestic imperial palaces appeared on screen from bottom to top, civil and military officials filing in. Wei Tianchi, portraying the Son of Heaven, stood atop the city gate tower, his gaze profound and far-reaching.

Immediately after, the scene shifted. Inside a gate, a bevy of beauties knelt before the emperor—this was a shot of a collective harem investiture ceremony.

With just a few intercut scenes, Ke Na was already getting excited!

Look at this texture, this sense of gravitas, this cinematographic aesthetic!

Truly worthy of being another masterpiece by Teacher Xu Hanwen! Completely incomparable to those knock-offs by some random nobodies!

Seizing the moment before the opening song finished, Ke Na quickly picked up a plate, hurriedly piled it high with melon seeds, dried fruits, chicken feet, chips, and the like, and placed it on the bedside table so she could reach it with just a stretch of her hand.

Watching a great show during the New Year holiday break is truly a pleasure!

The opening song ended, and Ke Na settled in properly, holding a freshly peeled orange in her hand, its fresh, sweet, and refreshing scent lingering around her nose.

The golden characters for "Episode 1" appeared on the screen, and then, the scene actually shifted to a battlefield of clashing steel and armored horses!

What a grand production!

Shouts of slaughter, cries of charge, the clanging of weapons—all sounded in her ears; corpses lay strewn everywhere, defeated horses whinnied mournfully. A large black eagle spread its wings and soared, shrieking as it flew across the gray, vast expanse of the sky.

Truly a grand New Year offering. Such scale and ambition immediately set it apart from those vulgar, run-of-the-mill harem intrigue dramas.

Ke Na chewed the sweet and sour orange with relish, watching with keen interest as the story continued.

The award-winning actor Wei Tianchi, clad in black armor, sat astride a black horse, his gaze cold and sharp as lightning, leading his soldiers forward in a charge.

Old Master Wei Tianchi is already over fifty this year. Who would have thought he's still got it and can still ride a horse. Ke Na thought admiringly.

The scene shifted again. A man in white armor was drenched in blood, wielding a silver spear, fighting fiercely amidst enemy troops—

Thrusting, hooking, lifting, stabbing, the man's spear technique was swift and powerful, his movements agile like a startled dragon. The camera gave several close-ups of his face, revealing eyes brimming with murderous intent, enough to make one's heart tremble with fear.

Ke Na recognized the man in white armor at a glance. He was Liao Li, the male lead of this drama, portraying the most outstanding son of the old emperor, the Fourth Prince Zhu Xi.

"Legend of Qingyun" had trended on Weibo many times before its broadcast. Ke Na remembered one particular hot search topic mentioning that Liao Li had specifically trained in spear techniques for three months to prepare for this role.

She was already tired of saying the phrase "a drama with integrity."

Ke Na ate the orange segment by segment, full of anticipation for the upcoming plot.

Ke Na ate the orange segment by segment.

Ke Na ate segment by segment.

Ke Na ate segment by...

The last segment of the orange was finished, yet Liao Li's fight scene still hadn't ended; he was still clanging and banging away in combat.

Admittedly, Liao Li's fight scenes were very cool, very pleasing to the eye. But no one was here just to watch a full-on martial arts performance. A TV drama isn't a movie that needs the stimulation of fight scenes.

Ke Na couldn't help but pick up her phone. After thinking for a moment, she posted on Weibo: ■Liao Li's fight scenes are so cool! "Legend of Qingyun" has such integrity!■

After praising Liao Li, Ke Na picked up a pack of spicy chicken feet and started opening the packaging.

The rustling sound of the packaging bag harmonized with the clashing of weapons on screen. Just as she got the chicken feet out, Liao Li's fight scene also happened to end.

Ke Na nibbled on a chicken foot, focusing intently on the screen.

The scene changed again. A slender figure clad in red armor rode a horse and leaped onto the battlefield!

The newcomer wore a crimson veil over her face. The thin veil was lifted by the wind at one corner, revealing a breathtakingly beautiful face beneath.

The female lead, Wang Miyun, had also made her entrance.

Sister Miyun is so dashing too... Her horseback riding posture is truly heroic. Worthy of being a general's daughter!

Thinking this, Ke Na couldn't resist posting another Weibo update, sharing her thoughts just then.

Wang Miyun, veiled, fought fiercely with the enemy troops on the battlefield. Even so, two fists are no match for four hands. She was gradually forced back by the enemy, getting closer and closer to Liao Li in his white armor on the other side of the battlefield.

The two of them, back-to-back, kept moving closer together. The setting sun was as red as blood, war banners fluttered. This scene had a profound sense of destiny, moving to watch.

■The texture of this drama is absolutely stunning.■ Ke Na posted another Weibo update. ■The scene where the male and female leads approach each other back-to-back is so grand.■

The scenes on TV switched back and forth between Wei Tianchi's charge, Liao Li's silver spear fight scenes, and Wang Miyun's horseback fight scenes, interspersed with numerous tragic, grand, and sweeping establishing shots.

Unconsciously, Ke Na grew full from nibbling chicken feet. She thought this episode should be almost over, but a glance at her phone showed only about ten minutes had passed.

Ke Na: "..."

TV dramas with high information density do indeed feel more substantial to watch. Ke Na thought.

After fighting for over ten minutes, and after Wang Miyun and Liao Li fought back-to-back for a while longer, the old emperor Wei Tianchi's reinforcements finally arrived, annihilating the enemy forces completely and rescuing the male and female leads.

The old emperor praised his son, and naturally, also praised the veiled female lead profusely.

"What young general is so valiant? Why do you cover your face? Might as well remove your veil for Zhen to see!"

Wang Miyun gave a dashing smile: "This humble one is ashamed of my unsightly appearance, fearing it might sully Your Majesty's eyes."

At that very moment, a general standing beside the emperor suddenly shouted loudly: "Yun'er? What are you doing here!"

The general rushed forward, grabbed Wang Miyun, and scolded: "Nonsense! How can the battlefield be a place for you?"

Wang Miyun narrowed her eyes and smiled mischievously: "Why can't your son come? Your son was also worried about Father."

"Now, now," the old emperor patted the general's shoulder, smiling tolerantly: "General Qing, why be so angry? Truly, a tiger father does not beget a dog son!"

General Qing's face turned green, staring speechless: "But Your Majesty, she—she... Ah! Never mind."

Seeing this point, the corner of Ke Na's mouth twitched involuntarily.

For some reason, she felt as if she was watching "Legend of Qingyun," yet also as if she was watching thousands upon thousands of other TV dramas. An indescribable sense of déjà vu welled up, and countless TV dramas flashed through Ke Na's mind...

Stop that!

Breaking new ground is the right path. Director Xu Hanwen is different from others; he's sure to make clichés feel fresh and new!

Even so, Ke Na's mind couldn't help but conjure up the upcoming plot. Next, perhaps it should be...

The next second, an arrow shot through the air with a cold, whistling sound that almost seemed to scrape against one's eardrums!

Wang Miyun was startled, narrowed her eyes, and lunged forward, trying to catch that arrow!

But quicker than words can tell, almost at the same instant, General Qing also made a flying leap, pushing the old emperor to the ground and shielding him underneath!

Ke Na let out a satisfied burp.

The arrow shot with uncanny accuracy, knocking off Wang Miyun's helmet and also grazing through the ear-loop of her veil. In an instant, both helmet and veil fell to the ground.

Three thousand strands of black hair cascaded down like a waterfall. The fierce north wind blew, tousling the dark tresses, revealing the peerless beauty of the veiled young general.

Liao Li was stunned.

The entire army also held its breath, captivated, utterly mesmerized.

Ke Na: "..."

For some reason, while watching this scene, Ke Na felt as if turtles were crawling all over her body.

Ke Na couldn't help but reach out, take off her glasses, letting the image in her eyes blur a bit to ease the awkwardness. Yet that cringe-inducing, toe-curling sense of embarrassment still transmitted through the 480p pixels, making Ke Na almost want to cover her head and flee.

When nature calls, you can't stop it. Ke Na decided to go to the bathroom first.

Chapter 91: Possessed by Evil?

Ke Na rushed into the bathroom like a thief, sat on the toilet scrolling through Weibo for twenty minutes, then watched a few silly short videos before finally washing away that awkward feeling.

After washing her hands, Ke Na slowly walked out of the bathroom.

Her parents were watching TV in the living room. The show they were watching had a fresh, elegant, and pleasing color palette. The background music was also light and cheerful, making anyone who heard it feel instantly better.

What were Mom and Dad watching?

Curious, Ke Na glanced at the TV screen. It was also a period drama, and the makeup and costumes looked pretty good... Oh, she saw the title now, "Tale of Cloud Incline."

Wasn't that the cheap knockoff riding the coattails of "Legend of Qingyun"?

Her parents were actually watching this!

Ke Na frowned. Although she didn't want to argue with her parents over such a trivial matter, she couldn't help but speak up, "What show is this? Is it any good?"

"Shh shh shh!" Her mother said, completely absorbed, "Keep it down, I'm trying to hear what they're saying!"

Ke Na had no choice but to shut up. The hushed, murmuring voices from the TV also reached her ears.

"Lady Ji is gone, what do you think we should do now?"

"What do you mean, 'what should we do'? Weren't you here sweeping snow just the same when Lady Ji was still around?"

"A few days ago, the Star Observatory said this snow was an auspicious sign, and now we have to sweep it away again..."

"You fool! If the Emperor is happy, this stuff is an auspicious sign; if the Emperor isn't happy now, this stuff is called divine punishment!"

"Divine punishment? Punishing whom?"

"Whoever's gone is who it's punishing."

Red walls, green tiles, heavy snow weighed down the pine trees. An old eunuch with a face full of wrinkles led a young eunuch whose skin was as tender as a peeled hard-boiled egg, sweeping the thick snow to both sides of the path, clearing a vermillion road.

Just then, a small cart came rattling along, pushed by someone. The eunuch pushing the cart was humming a little tune, heading towards the two eunuchs sweeping snow.

"I once saw... the golden orioles singing at dawn in the jade halls of Jinling, the flowers blooming early by the Qinhuai waterside pavilions... who knew they could vanish as easily as melting ice..."

On the dilapidated cart lay a roll of tattered matting. Looking closely, between the gaps of the tattered matting, there seemed to be a glimmer of some luxurious fabric.

The young eunuch whispered, "Pushing a dead person to the mass burial ground, such an unlucky task, why is he singing?"

The old eunuch kept his head down, sweeping, "After all, she was a consort who once enjoyed favor, she had many fine things on her. He's had his fill, that's why."

The young eunuch suddenly understood, his eyes wide with astonishment, "Oh..."

The rattling sound of the small cart faded into the distance. The figure of the cart-pushing eunuch and the cart gradually shrank into a small black dot at the center of the screen, standing out starkly against the white snow, red walls, and cinnabar path.

Only the eunuch's humming tune still drifted lightly between the palace walls:

"Watching him raise vermilion towers, watching him feast guests, watching his towers collapse..."

The TV screen went black, cutting to the ending credits scene.

"Damp silk robes, descend the jade stairs;

"Golden frost brush, falls on silver mud—"

The operatic singing, with its lingering, sighing cadence, like scattered pearls and jade fragments, jolted Ke Na awake.

Looking down, Ke Na was shocked to discover that she had been standing in the living room in her pajama pants, watching this entire episode of the knockoff with her parents!

The smooth, rounded operatic voice suddenly shifted, becoming a hoarse, withered, old voice:

"Who earns a marquisate after a hundred battles in yellow sand? The old tree yearly sees crows bear young.

"Feast and wine within vermilion gates, bones lie in the street; drawing the jade dragon sword, I die for my lord.

"Heaven cold, snow frigid, broken matting snapped, just when new grace is bestowed.

"

"Long live our Emperor, ten thousand years! I've heard even immortals meet their death!"

The old man's voice was raspy, weathered, like the groan of someone dying of thirst in the desert. The off-key, discordant melody carried an indescribable sense of absurdity, yet also possessed a strangely captivating, almost demonic quality.

Ke Na stared blankly at the screen, even forgetting that the TV in her own room was still on.

Only after the ending song finished did Ke Na's mother turn her head and ask, "What did you say just now?"

Ke Na said flatly, "Oh. I asked if this show is any good."

After asking, Ke Na kind of wanted to slap herself.

Wasn't that a stupid question? If it wasn't good, why had she been standing here all this time, even listening to the entire ending song without missing a word?

Ke Na's mother was a middle school teacher and spoke in a rather literary manner, "It's a very sophisticated television drama."

Ke Na's father was much more straightforward, "Yeah, it's pretty good. It just made me laugh so hard."

"Ah? Laugh?" Ke Na was a bit confused, "What's so funny about it?"

Although she had only seen the last few minutes, that "pure, vast white earth, truly clean" atmosphere of the show was practically seeping through the screen. What was so funny?

Ke Na's mother said, "Oh my, the earlier parts were hilarious! You'll know once you watch the second episode. Your dad and I were dying of laughter."

Ke Na pouted, "No, I'm going back to my room to watch 'Legend of Qingyun.'"

"Legend of Qingyun?" Her father, slumped on the sofa, said, "Your mom and I wanted to watch that earlier too. What kind of nonsense is that? Fighting and killing for ages without stopping, like setting off firecrackers, it's annoying as hell."

"Exactly," her mother chimed in, "On the battlefield, everyone else wears iron armor, but he wears a shiny white suit of armor. Does he want to show he's different from ordinary people? No wonder so many enemy soldiers focus their attacks on him alone."

Ke Na: "..."

Ke Na had wanted to defend the director and celebrity she liked, but as soon as her mom said that, it instantly shut her up.

In her mind, Liao Li's graceful, ethereal, almost celestial figure slowly transformed into three big white characters:

Big. Dumb. Ass.

Ahhhhhhhhh!

Ke Na suddenly felt she could no longer look directly at Liao Li—no, she couldn't even look directly at anyone in that show now!

Ke Na covered her mouth, revealing a look of shattered conviction.

It was unimaginable that she had been captivated by "Tale of Cloud Incline," this knockoff!

Even more unimaginable was that after watching "Tale of Cloud Incline," when she looked at "Legend of Qingyun" again, Ke Na's brain seemed to be possessed by some evil spirit, finding the latter low-class and tacky everywhere...

Commercials were still playing on the TV. Ke Na dawdled her way back to her room.

"This kid has always watched TV differently from us since she was little," Ke Na's father clicked his tongue, "Fortunately, she's grown up now, so she won't argue—"

Before he could finish, Ke Na gracefully walked back into the living room, carrying her platter of dried fruits, fresh fruits, candies, and chicken feet.

Her mother said, "Eating so many snacks at night! Walk around a bit later to digest, then go downstairs and take out the trash, you hear?"

"Oh," Ke Na replied without looking up, opening Weibo and starting to search for anything related to "Tale of Cloud Incline."

She actually thought this brazen, over-the-top knockoff was good? This was seriously not normal!

She was going to search on Weibo to see if she was the one possessed by an evil spirit, or if everyone else thought the same!

Chapter 92: Real-Time

Weibo, the real-time public square (search results) for "Tale of Cloud Incline" and its main creative team including Zheng Bohan, Su Ge, Qin Tianye, and others.

["Tale of Cloud Incline"... is one hell of a show.]

["Oh my god, it gave me goosebumps. #Tale of Cloud Incline#"]

["Holy shit, when did Su Ge's acting get so good?"]

["Sweet mother of mercy, no wonder Zheng Bohan dared to ride the coattails. If I shot something this amazing, I'd ride them even harder than he did..."]

["Teacher Qin Tianye is so handsome, watching him made my period come early."]

["'Tale of Cloud Incline' utterly crushes 'Legend of Qingyun', I said what I said, fight me if you disagree!"]

["Where did Su Ge go to study? I almost didn't recognize her when she appeared."]

["Su Ge got more plastic surgery again."]

["Teacher Qin Tianye... hehe... Teacher Qin Tianye..."]

["Zheng Bohan definitely read 'Dream of the Red Chamber' a lot."]

["What's the name of the ending song for 'Tale of Cloud Incline'? I can't find it on Tingyun or Tomato Music! Please, I'm begging you, I'll pay!"]

["Watching 'Tale of Cloud Incline' made me cry... during the New Year holiday, I don't know why."]

["Zheng Bohan is a legend."]

["Damn, I originally went in planning to curse out that old clout-chaser Zheng Bohan, but ended up binge-watching the entire episode in one go [smile]"]

["Huh? Lady Ji just died like that? #Tale of Cloud Incline#"]

["I watched him raise his vermilion tower, I watched him feast his guests, I watched his tower collapse... #Tale of Cloud Incline#"]

["A masterpiece needs no explanation. #Tale of Cloud Incline#"]

["Making the first episode this good, are you trying to kill us? #Tale of Cloud Incline#"]

["People who watch the first episode of 'Tale of Cloud Incline' and don't immediately search for the name of the ending song, have you guys quit drugs or something?"]

Of course, mixed in with these praising comments were countless insults from fans of the leads of "Legend of Qingyun". Even so, Ke Na finally felt relieved.

At least she wasn't the only one who thought "Tale of Cloud Incline" was good. That at least proved her brain wasn't malfunctioning.

Ke Na completely let go of her psychological burden and happily went to watch the second episode with her parents.

She just wanted to judge it a little. Ke Na thought, wouldn't a show that makes people laugh and cry seem very disjointed? Let her be the judge.

Shang Yechu was also watching the second episode of "Tale of Cloud Incline".

Although Princess Pingzhao wouldn't appear until the fourth episode, which was tomorrow, Shang Yechu still seriously watched both episodes of "Tale of Cloud Incline" that aired today.

Perhaps feeling guilty, or perhaps because she had finished writing her novel draft, Sheng Wenzhi, for once, didn't shut herself in her study. Instead, she sat in the living room with Shang Yechu to watch "Tale of Cloud Incline".

After the two episodes finished, Shang Yechu took a sip of water, turned to Sheng Wenzhi, and asked, "What do you think?"

To be honest, Shang Yechu was almost dumbfounded, never expecting Zheng Bohan could film the show this well. But she was afraid it was just her own psychological bias, so she still wanted to ask Sheng Wenzhi, a literary and artistic worker, for her opinion.

Sheng Wenzhi watched as the palace gate slowly closed on the screen. After a long while, she finally said, "This director's filming technique is very unique. It looks like those internationally award-winning directors from the nineties."

Alright, no need to ask further.

Zheng Bohan really made something of himself, rising from a famous screenwriter to a famous director!

Shang Yechu's interest was piqued. "What do you estimate the ratings will be?"

Sheng Wenzhi shook her head. "I don't understand the affairs of your circle, but it probably won't be high. This show deals with things that are too profound. It requires a certain viewing threshold."

Shang Yechu paused slightly, her enthusiasm instantly deflating.

Sheng Wenzhi was still like this, forever so arrogant, viewing herself and her so-called "literary art" as refined and highbrow, treating literature and culture as things far removed from the common masses.

Discussing this with Sheng Wenzhi was a mistake.

The two chatted for a couple more sentences, then Sheng Wenzhi went to wash up. Shang Yechu remained sitting on the sofa and began paying attention to the public sentiment on Weibo.

Shang Yechu scanned the Weibo hot search list and her eyes widened slightly in surprise.

"Tale of Cloud Incline" was actually trending with six hashtags!

#Tale of Cloud Incline is Good#

#Tale of Cloud Incline A Vast Expanse of White Land Truly Clean#

#Tale of Cloud Incline Ending Song#

#Su Ge's Acting#

#Qin Tianye#

#Zheng Bohan Excels in Both Pen and Sword#

Were these bought hot searches, or organic ones?

Shang Yechu knew very well how poor the promotion budget for "Tale of Cloud Incline" was, but she couldn't rule out the possibility that Meta Pictures was boosting the heat for the Privileged Princess. But even if they were buying, was it necessary to buy this many?

Casually clicking into the #Zheng Bohan Excels in Both Pen and Sword# hot search, Shang Yechu saw the hottest post in the topic praising Zheng Bohan for being able to both write and direct scripts. It was posted by a marketing account. The comment section was full of exclamations and praise, making it hard to tell for the moment whether they were real people or paid posters.

Of course, "Legend of Qingyun" also had many hot searches. They were all praising the exquisite production of "Legend of Qingyun", implicitly trampling certain copycat shows into the dirt.

It was rather amusing that Su Ge's acting actually made it to the hot search. Su Ge appeared in both the first and second episodes, though her screen time wasn't much. But that light cloud-like cyan dress, the lingering trace of sorrow in her eyes when she looked at the emperor, and the deep affection that seemed about to overflow the screen, all left a very deep impression.

Especially the part where she vanished gracefully under the pear blossom tree, it carried a sense of destiny reminiscent of "All conditioned phenomena are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow, like dew or a flash of lightning."

With a bit of curiosity, Shang Yechu clicked into Su Ge's Weibo. Su Ge's latest Weibo post was a very official-sounding announcement for the premiere of "Tale of Cloud Incline", which didn't seem to be written by her personally. The fans in the comments were all engaged in rights defense, with no one discussing the plot.

Shang Yechu switched the comment section to "latest comments" and immediately felt both amused and exasperated.

["Ahhhhh baby is amazing! Baby's acting in the new show is really great!"]

["Please, everyone, go watch 'Tale of Cloud Incline' ahhhhh, I almost cried when baby appeared!"]

["Tangtang's acting has improved so much! Mom loves you!"]

["Ahhhh my baby's acting is so good but her screen time is so little, you're dead to me @Sailing the Vast Literary Sea"]

Sure enough, saying one thing but doing another is a characteristic of all fans. Even if they say the show is dead and buried, they still can't help but take a look.

And what was the Sugar Fans' idol herself doing?

AmanoSong:

["#Qin Tianye Super Topic#

Qin Tianye | 'Tale of Cloud Incline'

Dragon's grace, phoenix's bearing, a natural celestial quality.

EP1-2 | Screenshot edits | Feel free to take the pictures, no secondary editing, please credit source if reposting."]

The accompanying images were nine GIFs of Qin Tianye from "Tale of Cloud Incline".

Even Shang Yechu was moved by this persistent idol-chasing spirit and gave Su Ge a like with her alternate account.

While liking it, Shang Yechu suddenly noticed something different. Su Ge's previous screenshot edits of Qin Tianye usually got around two hundred likes and a few dozen comments. But the Qin Tianye screenshot edit posted today, just two or three minutes after being posted, already had six or seven hundred likes, and the comment section had many completely unfamiliar passersby.

Was the popularity of "Tale of Cloud Incline" this high? Even Qin Tianye, an old tree, was sprouting new life and attracting a batch of new fans?

It had only just aired one episode. This effect was too immediate!

There were simply too many paid posters on Weibo, making everything hard to distinguish as real or fake. In the end, for TV shows, ratings were what really mattered.

The ratings wouldn't be released until four o'clock tomorrow morning. During this time, besides waiting, what else could be done?

Wait.

Actually, the largest domestic platform for book, film, and music exchange wasn't Weibo, but Douban!

She should go take a look at Douban!

Chapter 93: Drama Review (Part 1)

Douban, Domestic Drama Subgroup.

Currently the hottest post.

[Review Post | Watched the two dramas that aired tonight... (Fans, do NOT enter)]

[Hello everyone, I, Hu Hansan, have returned. I believe many little chainsaws are familiar with this ID... I was reported and banned for 180 days by some ugly person using their ID card... Finally, I have returned with dignity! Tears in my eyes.

Let's get the unpleasanties out of the way first, fans of anyone should not enter. This post only welcomes those looking for entertainment. If any 208 fans dare to come, their idol will flop straight through the earth's core.

Spoiler Warning | Long and Dragging Warning | Purely Personal Interpretation Warning | Many Images, Mind Your Data | Continuously Updating

OK, warnings are done. If you can accept the above, please →

The well-known "trying to reach the moon on the sixth day of the Lunar New Year" incident of overreaching needs no further explanation from me. In short, it's about two dramas like this and that, the love-hate relationship between two ugly old men, the dirty commercial war between two capitalist groups... Let me first say Zheng Bohan is truly insane, and then say... Zheng Bohan is a once-in-a-generation genius in the domestic entertainment industry.

Personally, I watched *Legend of Qingyun* first. And I finished both episodes. Please don't suspect I have pica, because my ex-husband is Liao Li... dddd, one always has lingering feelings for an ex-husband, so I went to watch it.

First, posting a few GIFs.

GIF of Liao Li in white armor wielding a spear;

GIF of Wang Miyun charging with her veil;

GIF of Wang Miyun's helmet and veil falling off, her black hair flowing in the wind;

...

That's right, it's the year 7102, and we can still see this kind of plot in a domestic drama. The female lead disguises herself as a man to go to the battlefield and helps the male lead fight enemies—yes, before the old emperor played by Wei Tianchi finds the male lead, the female lead finds him first.

After rescuing the male lead, a hidden arrow shoots towards the old emperor, but instead, it knocks off the female lead's helmet and veil...

This segment is also known as *After Her True Gender Was Revealed on the Battlefield, They Were All Stunned*

Screenshots:

Screenshot of Soldier A stunned;

Screenshot of Soldier B stunned;

Screenshot of the old emperor stunned;

Screenshot of the male lead Liao Li stunned;

...

I know, after watching this segment, continuing to watch further makes me look like an i,d,i,o,t, but, relying on my old feelings for my ex-husband, I watched on.

Of course, the old emperor wouldn't die. The female lead's father took the arrow for the old emperor, was seriously wounded, and was about to die.

In the military camp, the female lead's father was on his last breath, about to ascend to heaven. At this moment, the female lead suddenly grabbed his hand and cried out, "Father, don't leave me, don't leave me, at least leave me one last word."

Do you think the father would have a final rally? NONONO. Then you are too naive.

The female lead's father spat out a bloody bubble and closed his eyes.

Right then, a miracle happened.

The old emperor's personal military doctor took out a bottle of medicine, saying this was a miraculous drug invented by the Xianlu Zhi Medicine Hall in the capital. Drinking it could extend one's life for a short while...

Does this plot feel abrupt? Yes, it is. This is a hard advertisement. A sponsor ad inserted by Xianlu Zhi Pharmaceutical.

Anyway, the female lead's father drank this bottle of medicine and opened his eyes again. But he didn't speak to the female lead. Instead, he grasped the Emperor's hand and said to him:

"Your Majesty, please, for the sake of this humble subject's life, take good care of my daughter, Qingyun. She is too naive..."

Then followed a bout of dramatic, heart-wrenching crying. In short, the emperor promised to take good care of the female lead, and then the father breathed his last.

Then the emperor decided to take the female lead into the palace as a consort... As. A. Consort.

Someone risked their old life to save you, and you, you old thing, you cradle-snatcher, take their daughter to be your little wife.

Even more ridiculous plot follows.

The emperor called the female lead aside alone and said to her, nominally you are my consort, but in reality, you are like a daughter to me... like... AAAAAH!

"I will treat you as a sovereign father would, I will raise you to adulthood, and then marry you off gloriously with the status of a princess."

Then why. Didn't you. From the beginning. Just adopt her as your foster daughter? You old fogey?

Then, the female lead, brain-dead, actually found this reasoning very sound and was moved to tears, crying her heart out. She just agreed. And then was carried into the palace on a grand sedan chair by eight bearers.

The first episode ends here.

Logically, with a rotten egg, you don't need to eat the whole thing to know it's bad. But I am such a sentimental person. After watching the first pile of dogshit, I actually gritted my teeth and finished the second episode.

The second episode is about what happens after the female lead enters the palace. The female lead, unfamiliar with palace rules, does many stupid things. Like defying the Empress, trespassing into forbidden areas, casually flipping through memorials in the imperial study, taking the princes who were in class out to skip lessons and play... Too many to list in detail, so here are a few GIFs to get the feel.

Because the old emperor treats the female lead as a daughter, he never punishes her. I'm done...

On the other side, the male lead played by Liao Li also silently develops feelings for the female lead.

Because of the old emperor's tolerance towards the female lead, the consorts in the rear palace become very, very jealous and prepare to devise a scheme to have the female lead killed off.

The second episode ends here.

After watching these two episodes, I felt my intelligence had been assaulted.

It was the feeling of someone serving you spoiled durian on a golden platter... Those who haven't watched these two episodes wouldn't understand.

I was deeply shocked. I even went to Weibo and sent Liao Li a private message, saying, ex-husband, I've already gone above and beyond by watching the first two episodes of *Legend of Qingyun* for you.

After watching these two episodes of weirdness, I felt physically uncomfortable. That's when I remembered *Tale of Cloud Incline*, this copycat dog.

Filled with malice, I prepared to go judge this drama...

This is what I thought. *Legend of Qingyun* had an investment of 400 million, and it still served everyone this plate of crap. *Tale of Cloud Incline* had some connected person bring in tens of millions for investment, how bad must it be?

I watched it on Meta Pictures. Updates on Meta Pictures are about an hour later than on TV, friends who want to follow the drama, please note.

The first episode of *Tale of Cloud Incline* is about how it hasn't snowed for a long time, and the Emperor is troubled (because no snow in winter might mean drought or locust plague next year). To free up disaster relief funds for next year, he simply purges a corrupt official surnamed Chu.

No sooner had the corrupt official Chu been thrown into prison than it started snowing.

With the snow, Official Chu had a chance of survival. Official Chu's daughter is a beauty, her childhood name is Chu Jixiang. In the palace, for auspiciousness, she is called Lady Ji—she starts racking her brains, using all sorts of methods to win the emperor's favor, hoping to plead for her family.

Because Lady Ji has been with the emperor for many years and has long lost her novelty, she must work extremely hard to gain favor. Many hilarious things happened in the middle, AAAAAH I laughed so hard I almost peed while watching, won't spoil it here. Anyway, while watching you'll think, Zheng Bohan... Genius.

Then, perseverance pays off. This Lady Ji actually gains favor! And is even granted the title of Lady Ji by the emperor!

You think the next part is an inspirational story about saving her whole family? Wrong again.

Lady Ji, taking advantage of the emperor's good mood, starts babbling to him, asking if he could spare her family, blah blah blah.

Then—

.

Then, the emperor is greatly shocked and says, "You are also from the Chu family? Well, that's perfect. Your family has already been exterminated to the ninth degree. You should hurry up and join them!"

AAAAAAH I would be very sorry if anyone didn't see the following part with their own eyes:

Lady Ji is dumbfounded, saying she has been with the Emperor for so many years, how could he not know she was from the Chu family? The Emperor says, all these years I've been calling you Lady Ji, Lady Ji, it just rolled off the tongue. Who knew what your real name was?

Qin Tianye's acting is absolutely superb... The way he delivered those lines, scummy yet charming... Absolutely captivating. Getting off track.

Lady Ji asks, you don't even know my real name, why were you so good to me?

The emperor impatiently replies: I really liked the sweet and sour cherry pork from the imperial kitchens, ate it for years. But it was only last year, during a private inspection tour, that I learned it's called "braised pork" among the common people.

Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.

God knows when I saw this line, I almost jumped out of my seat...

What kind of seasoned veteran could write such a cruel yet realistic line?

Anyway, next, Lady Ji is given poisoned wine. Then the emperor asks the eunuch beside him why he didn't remind him that Lady Ji was also surnamed Chu. The eunuch says, the emperor had been favoring Lady Ji recently, he was afraid of offending the emperor's favored consort, so he didn't mention it.

Then the emperor kills the eunuch too.

Oh, my god, the latter part of the post keeps getting flagged for violations, friends, wait for me to fix it and repost!

Welcome everyone to discuss with me in the comments, onegaishimasu... I really like *Tale of Cloud Incline* this drama...]

Chapter 94: Drama Review (Part 2)

Second Poster | Saw-wielders, I'm back...

Last time I talked about the first episode of Tale of Cloud Incline, the scumbag Emperor Qin Tianye's sleazy moves...

But actually, even someone who wears his scuminess plainly on his face was once a person... once had things he longed for but could never reach, once had a past that could be called "love," once had... a lifelong regret...

Saw-sisters might ask, can such an old fogey who treats human life like weeds even understand love? His love is like the cheap vegetables at a 10 a.m. market clearance sale, who would crave that...

Before watching episode two, I thought the same.

First, a disclaimer — I'm not a fan of anyone here; the only ex-husband I favor, Liao Li, has no good feelings toward that Su-family connected person, nor does he like the semi-Old Xu type Qin Tianye. What I say below comes purely from a drama fan's perspective and has nothing to do with those two performers personally. If any saw-sister wants to judge them, I wholeheartedly raise both hands and both feet in agreement...

The first episode of Tale of Cloud Incline ended in a desolate chorus of laughter and sorrow. I immediately chased after it and dove into episode two.

Episode two is another standalone story. Episode one was called "Auspicious Signs," episode two is called "Nuisance Banishing." The title makes it clear: episode two concerns witchcraft and curse rituals.

Scumbag Emperor Qin Tianye frequently has nightmares and hallucinations, so he summons the palace physician, the most dedicated tool in palace fight dramas. The physician diagnoses that someone used witchcraft on the Emperor!

It turned out that this physician had actually been bribed by a consort named Consort Zhen — yes, this physician also had a beloved woman in his heart: Consort Zhen's chief maid. For the sake of that chief maid, the physician and Consort Zhen joined the same side.

Consort Zhen wanted to frame and ruin the precious lady who had offended her. But that icy-smart new favorite, the precious lady, turned the plan around, planting the wooden effigy back on Consort Zhen, burying the little wooden puppet in Consort Zhen's bedchamber...

Image: Cross-eyed little wooden puppet

Then the climax hit. The Emperor ordered a full investigation of the six palaces and had the wooden doll excavated—

But the wooden doll was not found in Consort Zhen's bedchamber, nor in the precious lady's bedchamber. It was dug up from the palace of Consort Xu, who had been watching the drama unfold with an innocent, bewildered look on her face!

Here should be five astonished faces:

Consort Zhen: ...

Precious Lady: ...

Consort Xu: ...

Physician: ...

Chief Maid: ...

Then Consort Xu was convicted; though she kept claiming she was framed, no one cared.

Immediately after, scumbag Qin Tianye's slick maneuvering continued.

Consort Xu's father was Xu Ban, and her second uncle was Xu Hu; both were old ministers who had fought alongside the old scumbag in his rise to power. Xu Ban was even the leader among the military officers. Because Consort Xu used the banishing ritual, her father and uncle became highly suspect, accused of cursing the Emperor.

The scumbag Emperor waved his hand and had the Xuanwu Guard search Xu Ban's and Xu Hu's homes. Of course they didn't find the wooden puppet, but as expected they found five hundred sets of armor. So the entire Xu household was promptly taken care of.

Suddenly, Qin Tianye's headaches and nightmares vanished; he put on a show, shed two counterfeit tears in front of the officials, and issued an edict sending the Xu family away. Since witchcraft has always been taboo through the ages, and privately hoarding armor was suspicious, nobody petitioned for the old Xu family's sake.

After sending the Xu family away, the scumbag returned to his bedchamber.

What follows is the absolute climax of the whole series... attention, attention, what follows may contain idiotic, drugged fangirl rambling, take care!

Triumphant, the scumbag Emperor returned to his bedchamber and suddenly found someone sitting by the window, fanning herself.

At the sight of this person, all the depth and coldness on the Emperor's face, and those two performative cat-eye tears, vanished!

The Emperor began to lose his mind!

Video.

The Emperor went into long, long fits of frenzy!

Video.

Yes, he felt no remorse or hesitation over the deaths of his old comrades; on the contrary, he thought he had acted too late!

Qin Tianye's acting here is insanely good, bringing to life a selfish, egotistical, arrogant, hypocritical, power-obsessed dictator. If you're not careful, he might even brainwash you into thinking the unlucky Xu family truly deserved to die...

But what I want to talk about isn't Qin Tianye's acting, it's... Su Ge's.

No matter how unabashedly scummy the Emperor seemed, Su Ge looked at him with tender affection, sometimes with a pained gaze...

This;

And this.

Not a single line of dialogue, yet it gave me goosebumps all over!

I never imagined in my lifetime I would be fangirling over Su Ge and Qin Tianye, two people who should be utterly incompatible.

But I truly... fangirled.

After the Emperor ascended the throne, he became increasingly unreadable—his emotions hidden so subordinates couldn't guess what his black heart was scheming. Even after eliminating a dangerous associate and feeling ecstatic inside, he would still act wistful and shed tears before the ministers, pretending to be sentimental.

Yet before the Empress he revealed his true self without restraint—there is no difference between that and a male lion flipping onto its back and snoring at you!

And the Empress—despite seeing the Emperor in that state, she still loved him intensely... she didn't care that he killed his old brothers, she only pitied that the Emperor would have to worry himself over such affairs... she loved him fiercely.

1. Somerset Maugham's paragraph describing the Empress's feelings fits perfectly here:

"I know your schemes and your plots, yet I love you. I know you are cruel, vulgar, selfish, yet I love you. I know you are second-rate, yet I love you..."

The private selfishness of a saint and the genuine heart of a rotten man, too perfect... delicious.

After the Emperor finished his heap of nonsense about principles, the Empress vanished. It turned out the Empress was merely the Emperor's hallucinated shadow (episode one already mentioned the Empress had been dead for many years).

At the moment the Empress disappeared, the Emperor actually broke down...

Yes, this man who treats people like dishes, beheads old ministers like slicing melons, who thinks he is the greatest—at the moment his imagined shadow vanished, he lost his guard!

Three reaction GIFs of the Emperor breaking down:

The Emperor chased to the window, but the Empress had already disappeared. Pear blossoms filled the courtyard and drifted down; the Emperor blinked and the pear blossoms vanished... they were never pear blossoms at all, but heavy snow filling the court.

You are buried beneath the spring, bones decayed, I send snow to the human world to heap upon your head.

Nothing remained.

Qin Tianye's acting troupe has already been dissected and praised to death, so I won't repeat it. Su Ge's acting here, wow, as if trained by a peerless master, leapt from foundation level all the way to the transformative stage in an instant!

Honestly, a venomous woman like me, upon seeing Su Ge's gaze, actually let two slow tears fall...

Zheng Bohan really has something. The last big director who failed when working with Su Ge was Zhan Kexiang, who taught her hand by hand for three days and ended up defeated... but Zheng Bohan pulled it off.

The final scene of this episode: the palace physician arrives to take the Emperor's peace pulse, and the old Emperor casually grants the chief maid to the physician as his concubine.

Cut to the laundry bureau where the precious lady and Consort Zhen, like two bumbling henchmen, are washing clothes.

The physician, trembling, asks the old Emperor why he punished the two consorts.

The scumbag Emperor drops another golden line:

"Every three years the Rear Palace holds a selection; each time a hundred or so are picked. The Imperial Medical Bureau summons physicians from across the land yearly; among them, those with real talent number no more than three or five."

The physician is so frightened by the Emperor's words that he sweats like rain, immediately kneels and proclaims long live my Emperor, your grace is boundless. The Emperor gives a thieving smile, waves the physician off, then pulls out that witchcraft wooden doll and toys with it in his hand.

Episode two, over.

—

I stayed up during the New Year to binge-watch and won't waste time on value judgments; here's the conclusion: judging from these two episodes so far, a great work; if the remaining thirty-eight episodes maintain this level, it's a masterpiece...

Not that it's a masterpiece because it's compared to Legend of Qingyun, it is a masterpiece in its own right. Rather than saying it's riding on Legend of Qingyun's coattails, it elevates Legend of Qingyun.

So far two episodes have aired, each a standalone story. They make you eager to keep watching, curious what other audacious moves the scumbag Emperor will pull... Saw-sisters, please, please, go watch it, okay...

—

Third Poster: Oh my god this thread is so red! I didn't expect so many saw-sisters from my group watched it!!! I thought it would be niche! Saw-sisters have taste! The official Weibo just dropped the trailer; tomorrow—oh no it's past midnight already, so today—tonight's two episodes are called "White Crane" and "Cold Crow"!

PS: I might write reviews later, thanks to my lords for tolerating my rambling...

Fourth Poster: Over four thousand characters of drama review... thank you for the effort!

@Zheng Bohan, come accept our kowtows.

Finally found resonance! Su Ge's acting in this drama is really excellent; although her screen time isn't huge, she's stunning...

Never thought a palace intrigue drama could be made into an absurd comedy; though it feels a bit frivolous and mocking, it's so watchable.

The scumbag Emperor keeps spitting out golden lines...

Already looking forward to tonight's "White Crane" and "Cold Crow." Sounds like mythic tales?

The scumbag Emperor must be an atheist; he plays with witchcraft effigies like cracking walnuts.

Legend of Qingyun has finally met a rival; this drama's values seem to be constantly targeting Legend of Qingyun...

Chapter 95: First Day Ratings

Shang Yechu waited nervously, her eyes heavy with sleep.

The moment the clock hand skipped past "12," Shang Yechu immediately started refreshing the page!

The CTVB official website promptly updated the television ratings from the previous day.

Douban hadn't opened its scoring yet, but after browsing around, Shang Yechu felt that the general sentiment towards *Tale of Cloud Incline* was quite positive. However, ratings were the most important standard for measuring a TV drama's commercial value.

The moment she saw *Tale of Cloud Incline*'s rating ranking placed below *Legend of Qingyun*, Shang Yechu's heart suddenly sank.

Although she had long anticipated that the first day of broadcast might not be entirely perfect, actually seeing *Tale of Cloud Incline* fall behind *Legend of Qingyun* still brought an indescribable, hollow sense of loss.

Could it be that Sheng Wenzhi's jinxing mouth was actually right? But Shang Yechu didn't feel that *Tale of Cloud Incline* was overly highbrow or inaccessible. Judging by the online feedback, the audience seemed to really get the jokes?

Suppressing her disappointment, Shang Yechu clicked into the detailed rating records interface for both *Legend of Qingyun* and *Tale of Cloud Incline*.

As she looked, Shang Yechu's breathing gradually quickened. After tremblingly clicking one last time, Shang Yechu suddenly sat up in bed!

The highest-rated part of *Legend of Qingyun* was the first half of the first episode. At the very beginning of its broadcast, *Legend of Qingyun* achieved a staggering rating of 2.49%! Its market share was a full 6.2%!

In recent years, ratings breaking 2% had already become extremely rare. A premiere rating breaking 2% was undoubtedly something only the annual champion drama of the year could achieve.

The lavish cast and long-term marketing warm-up were definitely not without value. The rating for the first episode of *Legend of Qingyun* had already reached a height other dramas could only look at from afar. Following the rule that TV dramas usually see higher ratings as they reach their climax, *Legend of Qingyun*'s best days were probably still ahead.

In comparison, the initial rating for *Tale of Cloud Incline* was pitiful, only 0.9%, with a market share just reaching 2%, ranking fourth on the overall chart. Its heat was even lower than a self-produced movie airing on the movie channel and a rural family-friendly drama on another channel.

Such an opening was indeed disheartening. However, ratings were never a flat, straight line; they were constantly fluctuating!

About ten minutes into both dramas, *Legend of Qingyun*'s rating had already dropped from 2.49% to 2.2%, while *Tale of Cloud Incline*'s rating had risen from 0.9% to 1.1%!

Don't underestimate this change of a few tenths of a percent. It was a weather vane.

After this, the rating curve for the first episode of *Legend of Qingyun* had its ups and downs, but the overall trend kept declining. Even in the final few minutes, which usually see a small peak, the rating only remained at 1.91%.

The rating curve for *Tale of Cloud Incline* also had its ups and downs, but it kept climbing slowly! By the end, it had even reached 1.5%, an increase of a full two-thirds!

By the end of the first episode, although there was still a rating gap between *Tale of Cloud Incline* and *Legend of Qingyun*, it was no longer an insurmountable distance but rather a close pursuit.

By the second episode, this gap shrank even further. The rating for the first part of *Legend of Qingyun*'s second episode had dropped to only 1.75%, while the rating for the first part of *Tale of Cloud Incline*'s second episode had already reached 1.66%!

After this, *Tale of Cloud Incline* surged ahead triumphantly, its ratings climbing step by step, finally reaching its peak at the end of the second episode!

1.96%! Ranked number one on the overall chart!

Meanwhile, the rating for the end of *Legend of Qingyun*'s second episode saw a small climb, but it was only 1.88%.

In other words, in reality, during the final stage of yesterday's broadcast, *Tale of Cloud Incline* had actually surpassed *Legend of Qingyun*!

On the very first day of broadcast!

She hadn't misjudged Zheng Bohan! *Tale of Cloud Incline* had actually achieved the goal of surpassing *Legend of Qingyun* on its first broadcast day. It was just that the CTVB official website's ranking was based on the highest rating point, which was why *Tale of Cloud Incline* was placed behind *Legend of Qingyun*!

Shang Yechu's heart began to pound uncontrollably. This was only the first day. What about tomorrow? What would happen tomorrow?

Would it break 2%? Or would it be a flash in the pan, collapsing after a single setback?

Shang Yechu stared fixedly at her phone screen. She suddenly felt a strong urge to talk to someone, but she didn't know who to turn to. It was 4 a.m. now; everyone was deep in dreamland.

Excitement and loneliness washed over her simultaneously. Suddenly, her phone buzzed with a vibration.

Who was calling her at this hour?

The vibration only rang once before the other end hung up. Shang Yechu saw the caller ID clearly. It was actually a voice call from Zheng Bohan.

A faint stir of emotion moved in Shang Yechu's heart. She called back.

The other party answered in one second, his voice somewhat hoarse. "Hey, Little Ye."

"Teacher, you're not asleep?" Shang Yechu walked to the window, lowering her voice.

"You're not asleep either." This wasn't a question but a statement.

"Mhm." Shang Yechu didn't ask Zheng Bohan why he had called. She got straight to the point. "Teacher, I saw the ratings for *Tale of Cloud Incline*."

There was a long silence on the other end of the line.

Shang Yechu emphasized his tone, continued. "Teacher, during the final stage, the ratings actually overtook them. Plus, considering the comparison in investment, marketing input, and other aspects, we've already won."

His tone was very calm, but the question he asked was anything but calm. Shang Yechu could hear it. He was panicking. Zheng Bohan was panicking.

Even though Zheng Bohan had shamelessly latched on and passionately rallied the screenwriters, he was far from as tough as he presented himself.

"Why wouldn't we?" Shang Yechu retorted.

"You have that much confidence in me?" Zheng Bohan couldn't help but let out a bitter laugh.

"Not just in you," Shang Yechu became the calmer one instead, "It's in 'us'."

Without waiting for Zheng Bohan to speak, Shang Yechu enunciated each word clearly and authoritatively, "Teacher, we will still win tomorrow. Not only that, we will win even more honorably and irreproachably!"

Struck by this bold spirit, Zheng Bohan was silent for a long moment before letting out a long sigh. "You're right. Tomorrow is the day Emperor Pingzhao makes his first appearance. The ratings can't possibly be bad."

"Teacher, please stop teasing me," Shang Yechu laughed. "Isn't disturbing my sleep in the middle of the night enough?"

"You, you!" Zheng Bohan laughed heartily, his laughter sounding exceptionally clear in the night. "Was it really a disturbance? I thought it was an unspoken agreement. The one who instigated Old Qin to come question me the other day, don't think I don't know who it was!"

"He keeps secrets well, but I'm not brainless myself," Zheng Bohan teased. "My disciple cares about this drama no less than I do."

Shang Yechu could only laugh and beg for mercy. "Alright, Teacher, get some rest earlier. There's a tough battle to fight tomorrow."

Zheng Bohan's tone also turned serious. "Mhm, I know."

Shang Yechu hung up the phone, gently parted one side of the curtain, and peered through the gap at the night scene below.

The city lights were as bright as day.

Chapter 96: Passersby and Fans

#Liao Li's Zhu Xi Spear Technique#

#Wang Miyun Looks Too Cool on Horseback#

#Legend of Qingyun Emperor's Acting Skills#

#Qingyun Causes Trouble Again#

#Give Me a Tube of Lu Yuxuan's Lipstick Shade#

#Miracle Qingqing#

Early in the morning, various hashtags related to *Legend of Qingyun* surged onto the trending charts. It wasn't just Weibo; even platforms like Douban were flooded.

Amidst the various praising and fawning hashtags, a baffling little trend popped up.

#Legend of Qingyun Pickled Cabbage Sugar-Coated Haws#

This trending topic looked utterly bizarre, making people instinctively want to click on it.

Clicking into the trend revealed a complaint posted by a very ordinary viewer:

■I'm seriously fed up, who the hell served up this giant bowl of shit called *Legend of Qingyun*? The whole plot is like a middle-aged historical idol drama, with fifty-year-old stale cabbage Wei Tianchi and thirty-five-year-old stale cabbage Liao Li competing for thirty-six-year-old stale cabbage Wang Miyun. Clicking in feels like falling into a pickling vat, except the pickling failed and only left behind a stench of ancient, peerless Mary Sue flavor. It's 7102, and we still have the brain-dead plot of the male lead wearing white armor into battle and the female lead wearing a veil into battle? The old emperor making his savior's daughter his little wife and calling it 'like a father, like a brother' is truly next-level. Why didn't that arrow skewer you three idiots together like sugar-coated haws?■

The blogger who posted this Weibo was called "Eggplant Just Wants to Eat Potatoes," just a very ordinary daily rant account with only a few dozen followers. Usually, their Weibo posts got single-digit likes and comments. But this particular post suddenly exploded, with likes already surpassing fifty thousand, and reposts and comments also breaking ten thousand.

Compared to the lukewarm performance of the other praising hashtags, this Weibo post seemed exceptionally lively, filled with viewers' complaints and support.

■Can I borrow your mouth?■

■Finally, someone put into words the cringe I felt watching the show! Yes! That feeling of smelling industrial pickled cabbage!■

■LMAO... Sir/Madam, could you go roast *Tale of Cloud Incline*? I feel your sense of humor is similar to the scumbag Emperor in *Tale of Cloud Incline*...■

The third comment was originally just an offhand remark, but somehow, it was slowly pushed to the top spot among the comments!

On the very first day of *Legend of Qingyun*'s broadcast, fans naturally wouldn't allow such rebellious talk to muddy the waters. They immediately launched their three-pronged attack of reporting, insulting, and spamming the post. Unfortunately, "Eggplant Just Wants to Eat Potatoes" was clearly a rather feisty passerby who didn't give a damn about anyone's worthless opinions, countering every attack with a killer blow.

■Water army bought by *Tale of Cloud Incline*? Go watch your copycat dog drama!■

@Eggplant Just Wants to Eat Potatoes: ■I hope *Tale of Cloud Incline* buys more, floods the seven armies, and drowns the army of idiots in *Legend of Qingyun*.■

■Uh-huh, the tail is showing, clearly bought marketing by a certain drama, everyone don't give it attention■

@Eggplant Just Wants to Eat Potatoes: ■Can't compare to *Legend of Qingyun*, which originally wanted to show off its face but ended up exposing its peanut-sized brain.■

■Watching this drama has a threshold, it's normal if you don't understand it.■

@Eggplant Just Wants to Eat Potatoes: ■The threshold is indeed high; you can't get into it without having your brain stem knocked out.■

■Now I finally know why domestic dramas are getting worse and worse. It's because of low-taste viewers like this blogger driving out the good with the bad. It's a two-way street between trashy viewers and trashy dramas.■

@Eggplant Just Wants to Eat Potatoes: ■Please let *Legend of Qingyun* suck on its own, don't drag other intellectually normal domestic dramas down with it.■

■Don't know, only looking forward to Liao Li's Zhu Xi.■

@Eggplant Just Wants to Eat Potatoes: ■Transferring to customer service.■

"Eggplant Just Wants to Eat Potatoes" took on the crowd, fighting more fiercely and getting hotter as they went. With the help of other viewers and *Tale of Cloud Incline* viewers, this Weibo post was gradually pushed to the third spot on the trending list!

This now constituted a major public opinion issue. Negative trending topics have a significant impact on a drama. Once words like "sucks," "brain-dead," or "Mary Sue" become associated with a show, its reputation becomes incredibly difficult to salvage!

Guanjun Century was certainly not to be trifled with. Soon, the #Legend of Qingyun Pickled Cabbage Sugar-Coated Haws# hashtag, which had been sitting at third place with soaring popularity, suddenly plummeted at a staggering speed, dropping out of the top ten in the blink of an eye.

Immediately afterward, another hashtag appeared out of thin air, directly occupying the third spot on the trending list!

#Legend of Qingyun Tale of Cloud Incline Ratings#

@Fishbowl's Top Dog:

■Yesterday's ratings for *Legend of Qingyun* and *Tale of Cloud Incline* are out!

Legend of Qingyun tops the overall chart with a rating of 2.49%, while *Tale of Cloud Incline* also performed brightly with a rating of 0.9%, ranking fourth.■

■Ahahahahahaha LMAO, all that aggressive piggybacking, and the ratings just barely made it into the top five■

■The audience's eyes are sharp; they can tell what's a quality, well-made drama and what's a brainless defective product just trying to ride the coattails for a quick buck■

■@Sailing the Vast Literary Sea, still barking?■

■Where are those people who said *Tale of Cloud Incline* is good? Come out and boost your 0.9 rating~■

■Oh, you guys, stop mentioning @Tale of Cloud Incline Official Weibo's 0.9% rating! It's just @Tale of Cloud Incline Official Weibo's 0.9% rating! Why do you always have to emphasize @Tale of Cloud Incline Official Weibo's 0.9% rating? Even if @Tale of Cloud Incline Official Weibo's rating is 0.9%, so what! Our @Tale of Cloud Incline Official Weibo can still shamelessly claim it's awesome by piggybacking on *Legend of Qingyun*'s popularity even with a 0.9% rating!■

■*Legend of Qingyun*'s rating is almost three times that of *Tale of Cloud Incline*, right? The market speaks with quality.■

■What does it matter if you buy off a bunch of loud but inconsequential young primary and middle school students to post brainwashing propaganda online? The ones who truly hold the remote control are the silent majority!■

■Such a massive casual viewer base is something a certain drama could never achieve even by piggybacking for a lifetime. @Sailing the Vast Literary Sea might as well change their name to Sailing the Vast Water Army Sea■

Very few people, like Shang Yechu, would actually click into the CTVB official website to carefully compare data. Most people, after seeing one or two screenshots posted by marketing accounts, would believe it wholeheartedly.

The fans of *Legend of Qingyun* felt their status was now clear. Like serfs standing up and singing, they triumphantly went to the *Tale of Cloud Incline* official Weibo to flaunt their victory.

■The hearse is here! @Su Ge Sugar■@Sailing the Vast Literary Sea■ A harmonious union for a hundred years, forever united in heart; sharing life and death under the same quilt, never betraying each other! ■■

■A copycat dog is just a copycat dog, copycat dogs deserve to die badly, copycat dogs can never touch the heels of the genuine original in this lifetime, so they can only brood sadly in the corner, trying even harder to copy!■

■Good riddance, time to pop the champagne!■

■2.49 is a height you'll never reach in your lifetime, 0.9 is the peak your drama achieved by begging~■

Although *Tale of Cloud Incline* had decent word-of-mouth, objectively speaking, the organic fans and casual viewers of a drama were absolutely no match for organized fan circles when it came to controlling online discourse. Moreover, *Tale of Cloud Incline*'s opponent was a full four fan circles combined.

Coincidentally, the latest Weibo post from the *Tale of Cloud Incline* official account happened to be a freshly updated set of stills.

Tonight's episodes would feature Princess Pingzhao's scenes. Shang Yechu's portrayal of the princess was Zheng Bohan's proud creation. Zheng Bohan, wanting to show off, posted a nine-photo grid of stills for her alone, a treatment second only to Su Ge's twenty-seven stills and Qin Tianye's eighteen stills.

As everyone knows, when fans from different camps argue, they usually pick the most convenient post to attack.

This Weibo post was the latest from the *Tale of Cloud Incline* official account, the first thing you'd see when clicking in. Furthermore, Shang Yechu was a nobody among nobodies, with no fans to defend the comment section. Thus, the venting words of the triumphant *Legend of Qingyun* drama fans and actor fans landed squarely on Shang Yechu, every single one of them.

This was, of course, a coincidence. Most of those fans didn't even know who Shang Yechu was.

Shang Yechu scrolled through the comment section, filled with foul language. She was about to exit when she suddenly noticed an inconspicuous comment.

■Wow! It's Yechu! I super love her portrayal of Mianmian!■

This comment was quickly buried amidst the onslaught of the fan army.

Shang Yechu suddenly pursed her lips and quietly gave this comment a like.

After doing this, Shang Yechu, feeling like a thief, quickly exited the comment section.

Chapter 97: Episode Four

Sun Xiaoxiao's whole family sat in front of the TV, counting the seconds until the commercial ended so they could watch Episode Four of Tale of Cloud Incline the instant it resumed.

Sun Xiaoxiao's parents had originally planned to watch Legend of Qingyun, but Sun Xiaoxiao learned from Shang Yechu's super topic on Weibo that tonight's Tale of Cloud Incline would actually feature Sister Shang Yechu!

When she heard the news, Sun Xiaoxiao was ecstatic and nagged her parents until they switched channels to Tale of Cloud Incline.

Because her final exam results were pretty good, Sun Xiaoxiao barely had the right to negotiate with her parents. In the end, both sides made concessions: Xiaoxiao's parents would first watch Episode Three of Legend of Qingyun on the TV, then Sun Xiaoxiao would get to watch Episode Four of Tale of Cloud Incline.

Her parents really liked Legend of Qingyun, so when they handed the remote to Sun Xiaoxiao they muttered and looked a bit unwilling.

Sun Xiaoxiao hadn't seen the first three episodes of Tale of Cloud Incline, but sisters in the super topic said it was an anthology series, so not watching the earlier episodes wouldn't affect understanding. For Shang Yechu, Sun Xiaoxiao decided to give it a try.

The opening theme of Tale of Cloud Incline was very different from ordinary costume dramas: it was a light, brisk instrumental. The opening intercut not characters but various scenic objects—mirrors, a gourd, pear blossoms, white cranes, and the like.

After the short opening, the main story began. The first thing on screen was a luxurious mansion with a plaque reading “Pingzhao Residence.” The scene shifted inside the estate, where a group of people were drinking and carousing.

Floating goblets on winding water, singing, dancing, and orchestral music. The subtitles helpfully noted that this group was the young aristocratic talent of Pingkang City, led by Imperial Consort He Ji.

A courtesan swayed her waist among the seats, while the wine in a jade bowl gleamed like amber. The camera slowly pulled up into the air and a bird with black tail feathers perched on a newly sprouted willow branch and cawed roughly.

Three antique characters appeared in the center of the screen:

Cold Crow.

This opening had a pretty strong vibe, Sun Xiaoxiao thought. Then she noticed a small line of text at the bottom of the screen:

This episode written by: Jing Fengnian, Zheng Bohan

A TV episode had two screenwriters? Wouldn't that turn into a two-headed monster?

Sun Xiaoxiao complained to herself.

Just then, her mother, who had been distractedly scrolling her phone, suddenly cried out, “Old Sun, this drama is written by Jing Fengnian!”

“Huh?” Xiaoxiao's father, also on his phone, looked up with a face that showed mixed feelings, “Oh! It really is! Xiaoxiao, change the channel!”

Sun Xiaoxiao bristled, “Hey hey hey! You promised me! You can't go back on your word!”

Her father's face screwed into a scowl, “Jing Fengnian only writes that wailing, tearjerking stuff! Your mother used to watch his shows and cry herself half to death—on New Year's Day too, don't watch that mournful garbage...”

“Don't listen to him.” Her mother said excitedly, “We'll watch this. I'll watch it with you.”

Sun Xiaoxiao stuck out her tongue, feeling a bad premonition. Would Shang Yechu be acting in some tragic, tortured love story? She didn't really like that style...

Twenty minutes later.

“Oh, what a good-for-nothing!” her father shouted in anger, “Why didn't she tell the Imperial Consort the truth? I knew watching Jing Fengnian's stuff would drive people mad! Change the channel, change the channel!”

“No,” her mother kept her eyes glued to the screen, “I'm watching the important part.”

Sun Xiaoxiao was also staring fixedly at the screen, because up to now the role of Princess Pingzhao had been heard but not seen. Whenever the princess appeared, the camera deliberately panned down and only filmed her slender hands, gaunt frame, and her noble, leisurely posture—her face was hidden completely, not a sliver revealed.

Sun Xiaoxiao had been tantalized for nearly half an episode without even seeing Shang Yechu's pointed chin.

The first twenty minutes were very clichéd: the Imperial Consort had once been saved by someone who gave him a family heirloom talisman as a token of gratitude. For years he couldn't forget that debt of life and wanted to find the girl who saved him.

He never found the life-saving girl, but He Ji was forced to marry the princess. After marriage, the Imperial Consort led a dissipated life and subjected the princess to cold cruelty.

Meanwhile, the princess often wept in secret, took out a worn talisman, and murmured, “Has he forgotten me?”

Besides that, the first half of the episode was full of the Imperial Consort's favored maidservants framing and humiliating the princess. A princess living like the downtrodden victim in a melodramatic, abusive romance novel!

The plot was both tacky and malicious; there was nothing to say but to ridicule it. Yet somehow it was addictive—no one could take their eyes off the screen.

Take Sun Xiaoxiao's father as an example: though he cursed and fussed, his eyes stayed glued truthfully to the TV!

More than halfway through, Shang Yechu still hadn't shown her proper face in the drama. Sun Xiaoxiao's family was close to being driven mad by this weak, love-obsessed princess.

Each episode was a self-contained story, and this one would surely end this episode. The Imperial Consort would inevitably face a “chase-wife cremation” moment, right? Would he be forgiven halfway through? That would be feeding the audience poison!

Sun Xiaoxiao clutched her aching, angry little heart, so furious she almost wanted to unfollow. Although Shang Yechu was a nobody and taking roles was hard, she couldn't accept such a terrible character!

As the plot moved into its latter half, Sun Xiaoxiao's family hunched forward, peering at the screen with bitter, intense focus.

"If she forgives the Imperial Consort later, that's just too pathetic." Her father said bluntly, "Jing Fengnian loves doing this kind of thing. That lonely palace—"

"Lower your voice!" her mother said, absorbed, "She went to see the Emperor. Let's see what she's going to do."

Sun Xiaoxiao snorted in displeasure, "Ask for a divorce from the Imperial Consort, then he wakes up and faces the chase-wife cremation, right?"

Her mother was enjoying this cheesy plot immensely. While Sun Xiaoxiao criticized inwardly, she couldn't take her eyes off Shang Yechu's skirt on screen.

Towering nine-storied halls.

A snow-blue skirt flowed like a pale cloud across the scene. The camera moved up, showing the misty fabric. Further up was a pale-gray waist sash and a smoke-blue upper garment—everyday attire for a princess.

This time, however, the camera didn't stop. It continued upward, revealing Princess Pingzhao's jade-like neck. On the white neck hung a red cord with a small jade Buddha.

The camera moved higher. Under the dazzling noon light, Princess Pingzhao's face was backlit and at first hard to make out.

Even so, Sun Xiaoxiao's heart skipped a beat.

Shang Yechu had appeared!

The light dimmed gradually and Shang Yechu's face appeared complete on screen for the first time—

Starry eyes, brows like the crescent moon, delicate and graceful. As finely polished as stone, as carefully carved as jade.

Describing a gentleman as jade would be apt, but describing jade as Princess Pingzhao might be more fitting; comparing brows and eyes to stars and moon was appropriate, but to use Princess Pingzhao as a comparison for stars and moon would be insulting to her.

Seeing the princess now, a single phrase suddenly popped into Sun Xiaoxiao's mind.

—A mingling of stars and moon.

"A mingling of stars and moon" was a lie. Either the moon is bright with few stars, or the stars shine without the moon.

Why did she feel Princess Pingzhao was as beautiful as a lie?

Chapter 98: Running Away

For a moment, Sun Xiaoxiao almost thought Princess Pingzhao had a cold sneer on her face. But looking closely, that beautiful, jade-like face only had two clear trails of tears.

Princess Pingzhao wept as she walked, her pace growing faster and faster, until finally, she broke into a small run!

Sun Xiaoxiao opened her mouth, then closed it again.

Ahhhhhhhhh...

Sister Yechu is so beautiful... even running is so beautiful... that back view, it's like the goddess of idol dramas has descended...

Princess Pingzhao rushed into the main hall. The Emperor was reviewing memorials. After a bizarre and inexplicable exchange, the nine familial clans of the Imperial Consort's family quietly set off on their final journey.

The jaws of Sun Xiaoxiao's entire family dropped to the floor!

"They're definitely going to stage a jailbreak at the execution ground next," Xiaoxiao's dad declared with certainty. "Then they'll wail and mourn at the execution ground, the Emperor will pardon them both, they'll fake their deaths, change their names, and live as an ordinary couple!"

Having been immersed in TV dramas for years, Dad was clearly an expert at this, weaving the subsequent plot with convincing flair.

Mom clenched the paper ball in her hand. "Might as well just kill He Ji! What's the point of faking death?!"

Sun Xiaoxiao said nervously, "No way, no way? I also hope He Ji dies quickly..." Then the princess sister will be mine, hehe... a gorgeous widow...

"Jing Fengnian loves playing this trick," Dad said with experience. "When he filmed 'Deep Loneliness in the Palace' before, that princess and her consort faked their deaths and went into seclusion. It was so nauseating."

"Shut your mouth! Are we listening to the TV or to your blabbering?" Mom gave Dad a light kick. "If you don't want to watch, go back to the room and make the bed!"

The plot Dad predicted did not happen. The Imperial Consort's family was convicted of contempt for imperial authority and, with lightning speed, were sent to the western heavens. Collateral branches were exiled or beheaded. All the favored maids who had once bullied the princess were also conscripted into the palace as slaves.

Compared to the earlier plot full of dragging misunderstandings, heart-wrenching angst, and melodramatic bloodshed, the latter half of the episode was simply exhilarating enough to make one's scalp tingle!

Kill! Kill! Kill them all! Leave none alive!

What love, nobility, talented youths, what heartbreak, tragic romance, years of misunderstandings—before absolute imperial power, they were like a grasshopper under a gravel crusher, instantly ground to dust!

At the end of the story, He Ji, with a ferocious expression, cursed Princess Pingzhao as a cold-blooded, heartless person who didn't cherish their past marital affection. Separated from him by just a window, Princess Pingzhao was in her study copying calligraphy, her brush just finishing the line: "Suddenly, catching the wind, wings are born; in an instant, losing the wave, one is abandoned to sand and mud."

After writing the final stroke of the character for "sand," Princess Pingzhao looked out the window. A jackdaw flew across the sky, its wings carrying it far away.

"Caw—caw—"

The jackdaw landed back on a tree, causing a flurry of leaves to fall to the ground.

Withered willow leaves fell onto a head of white hair. The camera pulled back to reveal an old woman with graying hair, dressed in rags, standing under the willow tree, gazing vacantly at the jackdaw on the branch.

Sun Xiaoxiao was startled, thinking Yechu had aged so quickly. Looking closely again, she realized it wasn't Princess Pingzhao, but that favored maid of Imperial Consort He Ji!

Though her appearance had changed somewhat and her wrinkles had multiplied many times over, the mole on her face was exactly the same as in her youth. Combined with the hints in the cinematography, Sun Xiaoxiao recognized her at a glance!

"That was many years ago," the white-haired palace maid said. "His Lordship the Imperial Consort... he was the best person in the world..."

Around the white-haired palace maid, sitting or leaning, was a group of similarly white-haired, ragged elderly palace servants.

Hearing this, the other palace servants mocked, "Chunliu, you're daydreaming again!"

"Believe it or not," Chunliu murmured to herself, "His Lordship promised me, once I was with child, he would kick out that sallow-faced wife and marry me as his concubine..."

The white-haired palace maids tittered with laughter, their voices carrying far, far away.

The jackdaw on the tree cawed twice hoarsely, as if echoing the women's laughter.

The scene shifted, and a pearl-like opera singing voice rang out. Sun Xiaoxiao jolted violently!

She stared blankly at the screen, instinctively reaching for the remote control, only to suddenly realize her palms were damp.

What's going on?

Sun Xiaoxiao rubbed her hands together and only then discovered, for some reason, her palms were sweaty.

"This ending..." Xiaoxiao's mom muttered, "feels so weird."

"Exactly, exactly," Xiaoxiao's dad chimed in, "so baffling. Does this mean this entire episode was that Chunliu's memory?"

Xiaoxiao's mom rubbed the goosebumps on her arm. "It's creepy. On New Year's—let's just continue watching 'Legend of Qingyun' tomorrow."

"What's creepy about it?" Sun Xiaoxiao retorted instinctively. "I saw you guys were pretty engrossed."

Mom opened her mouth but couldn't articulate why, so she just said, "Anyway, I think it's really spooky."

Sun Xiaoxiao felt as if something was lingering in her mind, but she couldn't put it into words. The only thing she was sure of was that the feeling wasn't the so-called "falling out of fandom." On the contrary, she really wanted to go see Shang Yechu right now.

Sun Xiaoxiao scrambled back to her room like a monkey, opened PiliPili, and started browsing clips of the flower queen courtesan Mianmian. But her heart felt like it was on fire, making it impossible to concentrate!

Her mind was filled with Princess Pingzhao—Princess Pingzhao's hands, Princess Pingzhao's neck adorned with a jade Buddha, Princess Pingzhao's face carved like marble... and in the end, even Princess Pingzhao's calligraphy, Princess Pingzhao's tears, the slight squint in Princess Pingzhao's eyes when she exchanged glances with the Emperor.

What on earth is going on?

Sun Xiaoxiao closed PiliPili and opened Weibo. Ignoring the hot search list, she went straight to Weibo's real-time search for "Tale of Cloud Incline princess."

Most posts on the real-time feed were criticizing Princess Pingzhao, calling her weak, incompetent, love-brained. Blaming her for only being able to rely on her dad when bullied. Some even escalated to attacking the actress herself, saying the actress playing Princess Pingzhao also had a stupid look on her face or something.

Though her appearance had changed somewhat and her wrinkles had multiplied many times over, the mole on her face was exactly the same as in her youth. Combined with the hints in the cinematography, Sun Xiaoxiao recognized her at a glance!

No, no, what these people are saying is wrong!

But what exactly is wrong?

Sun Xiaoxiao couldn't help but jump in, replying to one of the most vicious comments in the real-time search results: ■Princess Pingzhao isn't stupid! You're the stupid one! You brain-dead pig!■

After pressing send, Sun Xiaoxiao suddenly panicked—would doing this attract hate for Shang Yechu?

Without time to think further, Sun Xiaoxiao frantically deleted her original comment and replied with: ■It's understandable not to like the character, but there's no need to attack the actress.■

Sun Xiaoxiao didn't realize her mindset was shifting from "casual fan"/"appearance fan" towards "sole fan"/"die-hard fan." She was feeling heartache and anger over Shang Yechu being criticized, and even learned restraint after her outburst!

Though unintentional, Sun Xiaoxiao was indeed embarking on a traditional fan-solidification process through hardship.

The atmosphere on the real-time feed was too negative. Sun Xiaoxiao didn't want to look anymore. She closed Weibo and opened Meta Pictures.

The Meta Pictures homepage featured the promotional banner for 'Tale of Cloud Incline.' Sun Xiaoxiao clicked in, only to find that Episode 4 wouldn't update for another hour; there was no way to watch it yet.

Furious, Sun Xiaoxiao threw her phone onto the bed. Useless Meta Pictures!

The feeling of having a fishbone stuck in her throat made Sun Xiaoxiao lose interest in browsing any other platforms. She just felt a blockage in her heart, as if she had discovered a treasure but forgotten the location's name when trying to tell others about it.

Sun Xiaoxiao buried her head in the pillow, but then a familiar melody suddenly reached her ears.

"...?"

Sun Xiaoxiao crawled out of her bedroom to see her dad and mom sitting on the living room sofa, casting 'Tale of Cloud Incline' Episode 1 from their phone to the TV.

Sun Xiaoxiao: "..."

Sun Xiaoxiao said with a half-smile, "Mom, didn't you say this drama was spooky?"

"Why don't you go check your own real-time evaluations?" 103 said.

Today was the day Shang Yechu made her appearance. 103 had thought Shang Yechu would be monitoring public opinion on various platforms 24/7 without rest. Who would have thought that after watching these two episodes alone in her room on her phone, she would obediently turn off her phone, crawl into bed, and go to sleep?

This was truly pigs flying!

When Shang Yechu is quiet, she's definitely up to no good. 103 couldn't help but ask, "Aren't you curious?"

"Not curious," Shang Yechu said with her eyes closed, her expression serene. "Getting criticized. What's there to be curious about?"

"Why are you so sure you'll be criticized?" 103 asked, puzzled. "You acted very well."

It was rare for 103's dog mouth to produce an ivory tusk. Shang Yechu's eyelashes fluttered, but she still didn't open her eyes.

"Because escalating from character to actress is a fixed process, especially for female actors. The audience lets me earn this money, so the audience has the right to criticize; as a person, I also have the right not to look at these evaluations."

"Exactly, exactly," Xiaoxiao's dad chimed in, "so baffling. Does this mean this entire episode was that Chunliu's memory?"

"..." Shang Yechu turned over, trying to face away from the presence in the void. "Shut up."

"Not only scared, but also very anxious and agitated," 103 said calmly. "Seeing your heart rate and blood pressure so normal, I thought you didn't care."

Shang Yechu didn't want to talk anymore. One more word and she'd die of anger.

"This isn't your first broadcast role either. What exactly are you so nervous and scared about?" 103 said. "Of course, this isn't an interrogation, just my personal curiosity."

"..." Shang Yechu didn't answer the question. Instead, she said, "No need to wake me at four o'clock."

"You're not getting up to check the ratings?" 103 was genuinely surprised this time.

"It's not too late to look after waking up," Shang Yechu said impatiently. "Can't I even sleep in?"

103 said coolly, "Of course you can. However, I must remind you that procrastination is also a sign of fear."

"Get lost." Shang Yechu yanked the quilt over herself, covering her entire body, not leaving a single strand of hair exposed.

"Has it evolved to escaping reality now?" 103's tone was flat and rigid, showing no sign of anger. "But sleeping with your head covered is bad for your health. Your health value is precious."

"..."

True to her word, Shang Yechu actually slept straight through until eight in the morning.

The winter sun shone through the gap in the curtains, landing on Shang Yechu's face.

Shang Yechu's eyelashes fluttered. She threw off the quilt and instinctively glanced at the time on her phone.

This glance was no big deal, but Shang Yechu was nearly scared into a heart attack by the screen full of messages and missed calls!

Chapter 99: Ratings & Trending Topics

Shang Yechu opened WeChat. The message at the very top was from Li Kui. A quick glance caught a few words: "Little Leaf, you're trending!"

Scrolling down further, there was a message from Qin Tianye: "Stay off Weibo these next few days. Focus on filming. The audience will see it."

Right below Qin Tianye's was a message from Su Ge: "Don't pay any mind to those people cursing you. I get cursed at every day, and it doesn't stop my per-episode salary from being more than their annual income."

Then came Yi Tianzhao's: "Outstanding performance in 'Tale of Cloud Incline'. Looking forward to seeing a different side of you in 'Xiao Fengque'."

At the very bottom was Zheng Bohan's. Who knows what he sent—there were a full ten unread messages, more than the combined total from the people above. The latest message was a link; without clicking, it was impossible to tell what it was for now.

Shang Yechu checked her missed calls. The missed calls were also from Zheng Bohan, a total of five. It was clear the old man was really anxious. But calling at 4 AM was just too unearthly, wasn't it? What could be so urgent?

Shang Yechu frowned slightly, walked to the window, and quickly dialed back.

The phone rang for a long time before being answered. Shang Yechu held her breath until a voice came from the other end: "Yechu!"

Shang Yechu didn't speak, and Zheng Bohan didn't need her to. She only heard Zheng Bohan's voice, hoarse and strained, yet exceptionally exhilarated: "We won!"

No further explanation was needed. Just those four words, and Shang Yechu let out a long sigh of relief.

"How much?" Shang Yechu heard herself ask in a calm voice.

"2.1!" Zheng Bohan was almost shouting himself hoarse. "The first episode hit 2.1!"

It broke the 2% barrier.

Shang Yechu involuntarily clenched her fist, her voice barely audible: "Then... what about the second episode?"

How did the episode I appeared in fare?

Zheng Bohan paused.

That brief pause almost stole Shang Yechu's breath away. It was less than three seconds, yet Shang Yechu felt as if an entire century had passed.

"One piece of good news, one piece of bad news. Which do you want to hear first?" Zheng Bohan said.

Shang Yechu wasn't exactly an optimist, so logically, she should hear the bad news first. But perhaps that comment on Weibo, "It's Yechu, I love her Mianmian so much," had given her a bit of encouragement. Shang Yechu suddenly smiled: "Let's hear the good news first. It's the new year, after all."

"The good news is—" Zheng Bohan deliberately drew out the suspense, "2.52! The scene where you go to find Qin Tianye, the ratings shot up to 2.52!"

"Yechu, it was the exact moment you officially appeared on screen that 'Tale of Cloud Incline' righteously surpassed 'Legend of Qingyun!'"

Bang!

Shang Yechu almost thought it was the sound of her own chest bursting from the heat. Looking up, she realized she had unconsciously used too much force, her grip so strong she had yanked a curtain hook clean off!

Uncontrollable, wild joy surged into her heart. Shang Yechu's heart pounded like a drum. Unable to help herself, she pulled the curtains open with a single motion. Daylight was already bright, the dazzling sun shining upon all things, generously casting its rays upon Shang Yechu as well.

"That's wonderful," Shang Yechu said in a light, cheerful tone. "What's the bad news?"

Zheng Bohan hesitated for a moment. "This is also why I called you last night—you haven't checked WeChat yet, have you?"

"True," Shang Yechu tapped her phone a couple of times. "I'll look now."

"Forget it, I'll tell you straight," Zheng Bohan said, the excitement in his tone rising another notch. "Your character... has sparked quite a bit of controversy. Initially, it trended with some rather negative keywords."

Zheng Bohan apologized first: "At the time, the trending topic was overwhelmingly filled with people cursing you. Although there were some speaking up for you, they were too few. But because it helped heat up the show's popularity, I didn't intervene. Sorry about that."

"What's there to be sorry about?" Shang Yechu's tone was placid, even carrying a hint of tolerant laughter. "The more they curse now, the greater the contrast later."

"I knew you wouldn't care about this," Zheng Bohan chuckled happily. "You're different from most young people. You have a sense of composure about you—"

"Please, no more flattery," Shang Yechu said, opening WeChat to read the unread messages. "Was it just for this that you called me five times?"

Zheng Bohan laughed: "Of course not. Originally, the trending topic was overwhelmingly against you. But just now, I browsed the Douban Domestic Drama group and found something good."

Shang Yechu hadn't expected Zheng Bohan's internet speed to be so fast. She quickly clicked on the link he sent. A quick scan revealed a lengthy, detailed piece that would probably take a while to read properly.

Zheng Bohan said, "You've seen it by now, right? This review is written exceptionally well. I'll ask a few marketing accounts to repost it, then buy a trending spot to give you a boost."

Shang Yechu temporarily closed the Douban page: "Alright, thank you then, Director Zheng."

"Better to be cursed than to be forgotten," Zheng Bohan said with earnest sincerity. "The greater the controversy, the better it proves your performance, the more it makes people empathize. Although you seem more mature than most kids, as your teacher, there are still some things I need to say."

"I know. Don't worry," Shang Yechu said only these six words.

Between two people with a shared goal, there was no need for excessive pleasantries. Zheng Bohan quickly hung up. The Lunar New Year period was the golden time to stir up public opinion; miss this window, and the opportunity was gone. He still had plenty to do next.

Shang Yechu was no less busy than Zheng Bohan. Today was the eighth day of the Lunar New Year, the day "Xiao Fengque" began filming. The opening ceremony was scheduled for 12:18 PM.

Film crews usually held opening ceremonies between 9 AM and 11 AM. But there was no helping it; "Xiao Fengque's Curse" was just too ominous. Yi Tianzhao was determined to dispel the bad luck, so she chose the hour with the strongest yang energy—noon—for the ceremony.

Anyway, it was winter now, so it wouldn't be too hot.

Shang Yechu quickly took a shower. After washing up, she applied light makeup for herself. After some dedicated practice, her makeup skills had finally improved by leaps and bounds. At the very least, she wouldn't end up looking like a drowned ghost anymore.

Just as she stepped out of her room, she saw Sheng Wenzhi yawning as she emerged from her own room at the other end of the hallway.

Sheng Wenzhi, still bleary-eyed, was taken aback upon seeing Shang Yechu: "Up so late today?"

"There's an opening ceremony today. I have to go," Shang Yechu said succinctly.

"Leaving now? Then you're not having breakfast?"

"I'll eat on the way," Shang Yechu said. "I'm heading out first."

"Hey—" Sheng Wenzhi quickly added, "Have breakfast at home before you go. I'll drive you."

Afraid Shang Yechu would refuse, Sheng Wenzhi tacked on the second half: "I also want to see what an opening ceremony is like."

Sheng Wenzhi seemed quite eager for her novel to be adapted into film and television, so her curiosity about the opening ceremony was understandable. Shang Yechu nodded: "Alright."

Chapter 100 Pingzhao

After finishing the bread and drinking the holiday-stocked milk, the two of them got into the car and headed to Film City.

Riding in Sheng Wenzhi's car, Shang Yechu finally had time to read the Douban review that Zheng Bohan had pushed to her.

[Review | My Thoughts on the Controversy over Episode Four of Tale of Cloud Incline and the Debate over Princess Pingzhao's Character]

[Long Post Warning | Rational discussion, not involving fan wars | Attempting to evaluate from the audience's objective perspective, contains heavy spoilers, analysis, and predictions for upcoming plot.

First time writing a long review, please excuse any formatting errors.

Episode Four of Tale of Cloud Incline ended, and online discussion about the show has been rampant, full of controversy.

The disputes boil down to two main points: first, "What exactly is the meaning of this episode?" and second, "Princess Pingzhao's characterization."

This review will discuss those two controversies in detail. Note that I will not address them point by point, but rather synthesize them together. As to why, you'll soon understand.

What is the true meaning of this episode? Anyone who watched the first three episodes should have already picked up some clues. On the surface, Tale of Cloud Incline is a light palace drama comedy, but at its core it is quite serious and heavy.

If the first two episodes were just tentative attempts, then by the third episode the screenwriters' sharp blade could no longer be hidden.

"Are Cui'er's and Bainiang's lives not worth a crane cloak?"

"They are already worth much more. Today's Son of Heaven is a wise emperor, three palace maids' lives can be exchanged for a crane cloak and a hand-copied Scripture of Rebirth by the Fifth Prince; under the previous cruel emperor, five palace maids' lives would only earn a bland admonition!"

"Further back in the years, the lives of hundreds of palace maids could only squeeze into a corner in the imperial tomb!"

"I see, Long live our emperor, may he reign forever, I truly hope every future Son of Heaven will be so wise..."

It is openly mocking, yet it cuts like a blade. Tale of Cloud Incline uses the most humorous means to expose the festering sores of that cannibalistic era.

The first three episodes were dense with laughs and memorable lines, each slap leaving blood, each whip leaving a scar. We instinctively labeled it dark humor. But in Episode Four, the tone abruptly changes, shifting to the heartbreaking story of a princess and her imperial consort, turning into a palace melodrama of suffering.

This episode is very different from the first three: it's neither funny nor full of punchlines. The black comedy style seems incompatible.

Many viewers likely could not accept such a contrast, which directly caused the controversy. Many vented this dissonance on the main character, Princess Pingzhao. A quick search across platforms for that keyword yields mostly negative evaluations: lovesick, stupid, cowardly, living off her father.

To be honest, I had the same doubts when I first watched this episode. The pacing is extremely fast, the plot is dense without confusion, and the plotting is very crafty — masterful at stirring emotion and laying hooks. Not something an amateur could pull off. Given that this episode was written by Zheng Bohan and Jing Fengnian, it's not hard to understand.

Stories like this have advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is catharsis — twists and turns, exhilarating and satisfying. It gives viewers an explosive thrill.

The disadvantage? Superficiality — shallow, flat, fast, with no depth. Watching an episode like this is like eating junk food.

But is this episode really devoid of meaning?

I must state firmly — no. Absolutely not.

It's thrilling, but it has depth. Yes, that is what I'm saying.

Look closely and you'll see Princess Pingzhao's characterization is sharply split between the first and second halves. In the first half she is madly in love with Imperial Consort He Ji; in the latter half she shows no concern for his entire family. If they die, so be it. The plot is thrilling, but the characterization does not hold.

I watched to the ending with that doubt, until the white-haired palace maid's appearance under the cold crow tree struck me like a revelation, sending chills through me!

Yes, the Princess in the first half appears lovesick, weak, foolish, and willing to demean herself — but is that truly Princess Pingzhao?

No! That is the Princess as seen through maid Chunliu's eyes!

The camera language hints at this. In the first half, whenever Princess Pingzhao appears, only her lower body is shown; her face is never revealed!

Why is that? Because as a servant, Chunliu cowers and bows every day; she does not have the status or courage to raise her head and look at the noble princess's face!

Fine clothes, delicate hands, exquisite jewelry — these are what the maid sees of the princess. These symbols form the entire concept of "Princess Pingzhao" in the maid's eyes.

Therefore, the Princess's unrevealed face in the first half is entirely written from the maid's perspective!

That brings us to the second topic.

Is Princess Pingzhao truly the weak, love-obsessed figure Chunliu perceives her to be?

Again, the answer is no!

Aside from the split in characterization, the biggest secret lies in the scene between the Princess and the Emperor.

Look at the screenshot: the Princess meets the Emperor and immediately accuses the Imperial Consort of impropriety, listing several charges.

Up until that moment, the Emperor had not yet become angry. That's understandable. The Emperor, nicknamed the scumbag Emperor, shows limited affection toward his children. The Princess's small grievance alone is not enough to enrage him.

Then the Princess says one line, and the Emperor flies into a rage!

What did she say?

"Insects respond while dogs leave the fence, jackdaws perch on phoenix branches!"

On the surface, this line seems to mock the Imperial Consort — calling him an echoing insect, not a loyal dog guarding the house, instead occupying the phoenix's perch.

But do not forget: Princess Pingzhao is the eldest princess, the Emperor's most treasured daughter. The Imperial Consort has multiple parents and likely even multiple lives; who would dare call his household a phoenix's nest and the Emperor's daughter an insect, a dog, or a jackdaw?

Moreover, guarding the home is a dog's duty. But Princess Pingzhao is a princess who eats imperial grain; what duties could she possibly have? The three characters "dogs leave the fence" are clearly not referring to Princess Pingzhao.

So who is this line really describing?

Let's move the timeline back to that opening drinking scene — the Imperial Consort and a group of young talents drinking together.

What did they say while drinking?

Screenshot:

"Now His Majesty has widely opened the imperial examinations, selecting the worthy. We've become idle nobles."

"Even my family's book-copying poor scholar has abandoned his master, got jealous, and gone to take the literary exam!"

"He Ji's the lucky one, he married a princess and holds a second-rank official title, how delightful..."

See it now?

There is no doubt He Ji is the son of an aristocratic clan, a scion of a refined family. Many such privileged second-generation figures exist; at least everyone in the scene is of that sort.

We all know that for a long time, the aristocratic clans controlled official positions and manipulated appointments. The saying "no commoner among the top talent" applies.

The Emperor, as a founding ruler, could not tolerate these clans devouring the realm he conquered. Therefore he broadened the imperial examinations, selecting many talents and cutting off the clans' roots.

He Ji, being a clan scion, was naturally very unhappy about this. Thus, after drinking, he uttered the treasonous line "Insects respond while dogs leave the fence, jackdaws perch on phoenix branches!"

"Insects respond" refers to those clans who dare not oppose the Emperor's decision and only mutter compliant words.

"Dogs leave the fence" mocks lower-level scholars who abandon their humble book-copying duties to rush into the examination system.

"Jackdaws perch on phoenix branches" is even easier to understand — talented commoners enter the officialdom and occupy positions once held by these incompetent privileged second generations.

It is not mocking any princess at all!

This line certainly crossed a major taboo of an ambitious, reforming Emperor, which is why the Emperor erupted in anger!

And it was this line that made the Imperial Consort's family the scapegoat, the ones slain to warn others.

Despising imperial authority is a versatile accusation. If the Emperor wants to spare you, he can laugh it off. If he wants to annihilate you, a household register won't be enough to account for the killings.

Did the Imperial Consort's household know why they were to die? They did, but they could not say; they could only watch the Emperor use the Princess as the raft to send them to the western heavens.

Did the aristocratic clans know why the Imperial Consort's household was executed? They knew but could not say; not only could they not speak, they applauded and rejoiced, glad the He family was punished!

With that single line of verse, Princess Pingzhao sent hundreds of people from the aristocracy to their deaths.

What's more ruthless is that observers inside and outside the drama were completely oblivious to the cleverness of this move, mistaking her for a fragile little white flower...

Chunliu's perception paints the Princess as she appeared in the first half; audiences limited to Chunliu's viewpoint were similarly deceived.

This is a cunning technique.

It also explains why the Princess seems like a different person in the second half. From the moment her face is revealed, she is no longer the "princess" as Chunliu saw her; she becomes — truly — herself!

The Emperor used her to strike down the outlier, but did she not also use the Emperor to recover her own freedom?

I even suspect that, like the Emperor, deep down Princess Pingzhao favored expanding the imperial examinations, undermining the clans and consolidating imperial power. She simply gave a light push — as for why a supposedly apolitical princess would want the imperial exams strengthened, that is a delicate matter we can discuss later.

Finally, let us return to the question of this episode's substance.

Is this episode funny?

It seems not.

Then I will put it this way:

A maid — a powerless, disenfranchised bottom-dweller — cannot comprehend the political maneuvers and cooperation between two political figures, cannot understand the Princess's impatience with the Imperial Consort, her scorn for the clans, or her desire to strengthen imperial authority. She crudely interprets everything as: the Princess is unloved by the Imperial Consort!

With that belief, she distorts every act of those in power, filtered through the resentment of the disenfranchised, producing half an episode of laughable, ridiculous melodramatic heartbreak.

So, funny or not?

Both funny and not funny!

Is it not perhaps the most extreme, absurd, inverted, cruel, satirical, and heartless form of dark humor?

Does it fit the core of Tale of Cloud Incline?

As this review concludes, there is one last thing I want to say.

To pacify the nation is to make it stable, to be upright and clear is to be manifest.

Princess Pingzhao's character is far more complex than she appears on the surface. I hope friends watching Tale of Cloud Incline will feel and think with their own hearts.

This review is only my personal view, and I welcome friends inside and outside the group to discuss with me.

Drama-lover Pingping on the eighth day of the new year, dawn.]

This review was three thousand characters long. By the time Shang Yechu finished reading it, the comment section had already grown by several hundred replies.

"Wow! What a writer..."

"She said what I was thinking! How could a scumbag Emperor produce a mild-mannered, humble daughter?!"

"So the scumbag Emperor and the white-flower princess are actually on the same side... my ship sailed."

"Nini, Nini, Zheng Bohan and Jing Fengnian, those old fogeys, fooled the maid but how did they fool the audience too!"

"Following people with brains to watch the drama is never wrong. Rewatched Episode Four and found many plot holes earlier, like where the Princess looks at a protective talisman but the talisman never appears... it was all the maid's imagination..."

"Exactly! Chunliu claims she's the Imperial Consort's favorite maid and even says he will marry her. But if He Ji truly favored Chunliu and the Princess were so weak, why would Chunliu always kowtow before the Princess, never even seeing her face?"

"Also, the Imperial Consort's household has no secondary concubines or concubines... only princes can take side consorts. For a mere Imperial Consort to have side concubines is outrageous..."

"So the whole episode is the rantings of a madwoman?"

"No, no, no, it's mixed with a heavy filter of a resentful woman's memories. It's reasonable to suspect the maid channeled her frustration about not being chosen into blaming the Princess."

"The disenfranchised filter, that phrase is so interesting."

"Insects respond while dogs leave the fence, jackdaws perch on phoenix branches... goosebumps."

"If that's the case, everything makes sense... why Princess Pingzhao was leisurely practicing calligraphy when the Imperial Consort died, why the supposedly weak princess dared to barge into the imperial hall... why the first and second half characters are so split..."

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa"

"I want to hack into Zheng Bohan's hard drive and take a peek..."

"I want to hack into Zheng Bohan's hard drive and take a peek +1..."

"Who plays Princess Pingzhao? That acting is insane... I frame-by-frame analyzed the lead's expressions and movements..."

"To the sister above, her name is Shang Yechu, I just followed her..."

"I even DM'd her, but she didn't reply!!!"

"I told you! I saw Princess Pingzhao sneer! My parents didn't believe me!"

"That stare with the scumbag Emperor tasted so good, the only moment that wavered in the whole episode..."

"That half-second of Princess Pingzhao was like a plain egg cracking a seam, revealing a dragon scale inside... then quickly covered."

"Everything lines up! I even compared color palettes between halves, they are slightly different! The first half has warm tones with a faint haziness; the second half is iron-clear cold tones! So the first half is the maid's memories, the second half is the real past!"

"Question for the pros: if the scumbag Emperor wanted to eliminate the clans opposing the imperial exams, why not act openly? Why use Princess Pingzhao as a pretext to punish them with despising imperial authority?"

Reply: "There's a kind of non-cooperation called 'passive cooperation'... it means not openly obstructing, but secretly sabotaging, deliberately making a good thing fail. Imagine the Emperor wants to build a library for exam candidates and asks aristocratic families to donate books to be copied. The clans donate nonsense like A Book of German Jokes and Pig Husband Postpartum Care. Can you say they didn't cooperate? They cooperated too well! But is it useful? No, it only takes up space. This tactic is disgusting: you can't convict them, but they sabotage you behind your back. If you punish them, what crime do you pin? They might have only muttered a few words against the low-born scholars — can you slaughter their whole family for that? Even a scumbag Emperor might lack a lawful means to punish those rotten people. Then Princess Pingzhao appears, handing over an excuse of 'despising imperial authority,' and the Emperor uses it gladly! The clans know it's an excuse but cannot resist. The centuries-old noble blood keeps them in line for a while. It achieves killing as a warning while humiliating the clans. A very efficient way to pass the knife..."

"I'm kkkkkk, can I repost this? Weibo is full of people attacking Shang Yechu, it makes me so mad..."

Reply: "Of course! Repost freely, just credit the source. Personally, I admire Princess Pingzhao and wish to vindicate her!"

Chapter 101: Dinner

To be honest, after reading this drama review, Shang Yechu was deeply shaken.

If she hadn't already spoken with Zheng Bohan over the phone, Shang Yechu might have even suspected this review was commissioned by Zheng Bohan himself, just to generate hype for "Tale of Cloud Incline." The subtexts and hints it explicitly pointed out almost perfectly aligned with Zheng Bohan's script and character bios.

Clicking into the reviewer's profile, "Pingping Who Loves to Binge Dramas" was also an old user of Douban. This was the only long-form review she had ever written, though she had hundreds of short comments. From this alone, she was undoubtedly a genuine casual viewer.

Getting on the trending searches would take time, so there was no rush for now. After finishing the review, Shang Yechu turned off her phone, closed her eyes to rest, and began to concentrate on matters related to "Xiao Fengque."

Although "Xiao Fengque" was nominally the first installment, in terms of content, it was already the second part of the "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" franchise.

During the New Year period, besides paying New Year's respects to Grandma Hu, Shang Yechu also visited Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng's residence. The elderly lady was still full of vigor, her passion for creation undiminished. In her second revised script, she condensed the content of the first part into a brief flashback inserted into the middle of the film, to be played by Shang Yechu.

This way, "Xiao Fengque" standing as an independent film series was beyond doubt.

Starting a new venture versus taking over someone else's project, though only a nominal difference, was incredibly important for Shang Yechu, whose list of representative works was still thin.

Thinking about these things all the way, she soon arrived at the film city.

Sheng Wenzhi didn't have a crew work permit. Fortunately, Shang Yechu had already mentioned it to Yi Tianzhao, saying something like "a writer friend of mine wants to visit the set." Since today was just the opening ceremony and not the official start of filming, Yi Tianzhao readily agreed.

Unlike her treatment on "Tale of Cloud Incline" or previous extra roles, as the female lead this time, Shang Yechu received an immense amount of attention and courtesy.

Of course, part of the reason was also Shang Yechu's emergency rescue of the entire project. In any case, everyone greeted her with smiles and polite formalities. Shang Yechu not only had her own separate makeup team but also her own private dressing room.

The opening ceremony followed the usual old routines. Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng had a writers' conference to attend recently, so she wasn't present at the ceremony. The male lead, Li Yi, however, was there. Later, Shang Yechu still had to take official costume photos and duo shots with Li Yi—each one a troublesome affair.

Other television films from the movie channel usually didn't get this kind of treatment, but the "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" IP was too big, and the recent public discourse was too heated. The production side had no choice but to follow suit and put on the whole show to demonstrate their seriousness.

After the rituals of offering to the gods, burning incense, paying respects, and unveiling the red cloth passed, Shang Yechu received a piece of roasted suckling pig. Although Sheng Wenzhi was just tagging along, the staff also gave her a piece.

Due to the public perception that "actresses eat very little," the piece of meat given to Shang Yechu was pitifully small, while the one given to Sheng Wenzhi was incredibly generous—a thick, hefty chunk.

Sheng Wenzhi's brows were tightly knitted, her expression one of deep suffering as she stared at the golden, oily, crispy pork on her plate.

Shang Yechu tilted her head to look at her. "What's wrong?"

"I don't eat such greasy things," Sheng Wenzhi stated bluntly. "But throwing it away seems impolite."

"..." Young Miss Sheng, who had never done a day of hard work in her life, also had extremely picky tastes. Shang Yechu was already used to it. "If you don't want to eat it, just leave it on that table over there."

Shang Yechu finished her own piece of pork in two or three bites.

Watching her wolf it down, Sheng Wenzhi was reminded of some past events. "I remember in middle school you only ate the cafeteria food. No. 3 Middle School's meals were no different from pig slop; I never touched them. But you, every time you got a single portion, it wasn't enough, and you didn't have enough money on your card for a double portion..."

"Why bring this up now?" Shang Yechu cut her off. "Reminiscing about the good old days?"

Sheng Wenzhi put down the pork in her hand. "Watching you eat suddenly reminded me, that's all. I thought I'd long forgotten, but it turns out—"

"Yechu." Li Yi's voice came from behind. Shang Yechu looked up to see him walking over from a distance, a beaming smile on his face, his two neat canine teeth gleaming porcelain-white under the bright sun. "About that acting question from the other day, could you teach me a bit more later?"

Sheng Wenzhi suddenly let out a cold snort, lowering her voice to a volume only she and Shang Yechu could hear. "Must be tough having to babysit a spoiled rich kid while filming."

"He's not a completely useless spoiled rich kid." Shang Yechu frowned at Sheng Wenzhi's sarcastic remark. "He has real skill in action scenes. The problem of overacting is something five out of ten newcomers have."

Recalling Sheng Wenzhi's inexplicable hostility towards him at the dessert shop last time, Shang Yechu added with emphasis, "You'd better not come to the set with me anymore. This is my job. Don't make things awkward between me and my colleagues."

Sheng Wenzhi fell silent.

By the time they finished dealing with the opening ceremony, official photos, and other matters, it was already evening. Yi Tianzhao was busy as a spinning top and didn't have time to treat the main cast to a simple meal. Shang Yechu headed straight to a restaurant in the film city and ordered a whole table of dishes.

After a whole afternoon of running around, having only eaten that birdseed-sized piece of roasted suckling pig, Shang Yechu's body felt so hungry it could squeeze through a door crack.

Li Yi also joined them. It's hard to hit a smiling face, so Shang Yechu ended up sharing a table with Sheng Wenzhi and him, making a party of three.

Sheng Wenzhi ordered a stir-fried pea shoots and a vegetarian "Three Delicacies" soup—one green plate and one green bowl, looking utterly fresh and healthy.

Li Yi's diet was equally inhuman. He only ordered some plain boiled chicken breast and a vegetable salad—the kind of salad without any dressing, the mere sight of which was enough to kill one's appetite.

The two of them sat opposite each other, leisurely eating what Shang Yechu considered utterly unappetizing food. Their behavior even made Shang Yechu, who was devouring her meal with gusto, momentarily wonder, "Am I not disciplined enough?"

In the middle of eating, Shang Yechu suddenly heard what seemed like hushed, gossipy whispers from the table next to them.

Evening was the dinner rush, and the restaurant was crowded and noisy. Shang Yechu couldn't make out what they were saying. The reason she noticed was because the young women at that table kept glancing her way very frequently.

Li Yi was just picking up a bite of pale-yellow chicken shreds with his chopsticks when he suddenly lowered them and looked at Shang Yechu. "They're discussing you."

Wait, do people with high combat power also have better hearing? How could he possibly hear that clearly!

"Really?" Shang Yechu feigned surprise.

"Really." Li Yi's eyes curved into a smile. "They're discussing 'Tale of Cloud Incline'—last night's episode."

As if to confirm Li Yi's words, one of the young women from that table suddenly took a few quick steps over to their table. Standing in front of Shang Yechu, she said excitedly, "Yechu! Is that you?"

Chapter 102: New Fan

Shang Yechu was caught off guard by being recognized and felt somewhat awkward—after all, she wasn't exactly a world-renowned superstar yet. Although she knew this day would come eventually, she hadn't expected it to happen so quickly.

The girl excitedly grabbed Shang Yechu's hand: "I absolutely love the Princess Pingzhao you played!"

Compared to the less successful "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion," the ratings juggernaut "Tale of Cloud Incline" was clearly more widely known. Shang Yechu instantly put on a pleasantly surprised smile: "Really? You're the first fan to tell me that in person!"

The table was set for four, and Sheng Wenzhi had originally been sitting beside Shang Yechu. When the girl approached, Shang Yechu shot Sheng Wenzhi a sidelong glance.

Sheng Wenzhi was still slowly chewing her plate of stir-fried pea shoots. Sensing Shang Yechu's gaze, she thought Shang Yechu wanted her to play along. She quickly addressed the fan: "It's true, I can vouch for that. You are indeed the first fan to recognize her."

"..."

Seeing this, Li Yi flashed a smile, revealing a dimple: "Yechu, why don't I switch seats with you?"

Although Li Yi, like Su Ge, was a Connected Person, his emotional intelligence was leagues above hers. Shang Yechu nodded at him: "Thank you."

The girl sat down next to Shang Yechu, her eyes sparkling as she stared at her: "Yechu, can you tell me, is Princess Pingzhao actually a good person or a bad person?"

Such a classic question!

Shang Yechu was momentarily taken aback, then smiled gently: "Why do you ask?"

"It's trending on Weibo!" the girl hurriedly pulled out her phone, "Look!"

Shang Yechu glanced at the other's phone screen, which showed the Weibo trending topics list. A quick scan revealed five or six trending topics related to "Tale of Cloud Incline."

#PingpingTheDramaAddict#

#PrincessPingzhao#

#TaleOfCloudInclineColorPalette#

#TaleOfCloudInclineForeshadowing#

#BlackHumorOrTragicLoveStory#

#TaleOfCloudInclineRatingsSurpassLegendOfQingyun#

Zheng Bohan really works fast!

The girl's voice was excited: "I even made a bet with my friend! Is what that drama review said true or not?!"

"What drama review?" Shang Yechu tilted her head slightly, "I've been busy with some things today and haven't had time to check my phone."

"Oh! It's—it's," the girl shook her head, "It's too long, let me summarize it for you. Someone said Princess Pingzhao is, is, is..."

The girl got stuck, suddenly unsure how to continue. A bad person? But Princess Pingzhao doesn't seem to have done anything bad. A good person? If the analysis in the review is true, then Princess Pingzhao can hardly be called a good person.

A loser? Would saying that to the actress's face be impolite?

After hesitating for a long moment, the girl could only say vaguely: "Someone analyzed in a review that Princess Pingzhao is the mastermind behind everything. But others say she's just an ordinary person. I wanted to ask you, is the review right, or are the other people right?"

The girl grew more agitated as she spoke: "I've been arguing with people about this on Weibo for ages! I'm in the 'mastermind' camp, and to find evidence, I've already subscribed to Meta Pictures' VIP service, planning to take screenshots frame by frame!"

"You already have an answer in your heart, why ask me?" Shang Yechu teased deliberately.

"Oh!" the girl slapped her thigh, "No matter how much we analyze, it's not as useful as official confirmation. If you personally confirm it, it'll definitely make those blockheads shut up!"

"Alright then." Shang Yechu slightly curved her eyes, lowering her voice: "Don't tell anyone else—I'm only telling you~"

The girl's eyes widened, unable to believe such incredible luck had fallen into her lap. She was about to become the first person in the entire internet to know the truth about Princess Pingzhao!

Shang Yechu pulled out a napkin, elegantly dabbed the corner of her mouth, then met the girl's gaze seriously: "Princess Pingzhao is an ordinary person."

!!!

The girl almost choked on her breath, "Huh?"

Shang Yechu nodded, her expression sincere.

Seeing she didn't seem to be lying, an overwhelming wave of disappointment instantly flooded the girl's heart. The actress herself personally confirming Princess Pingzhao is ordinary meant the conclusion was absolutely undeniable. In other words, Princess Pingzhao really was a pathetic, love-obsessed loser!

So all her persistent, diligent arguing, quarreling, debating, and writing lengthy analytical essays since this morning... had it all just been a joke?

Young people can't hide their feelings well; the girl practically had "disappointed," "bored," "heartbroken," "already unfollowed" written all over her face.

Shang Yechu smiled slightly and clearly, deliberately delivered her next sentence:

"Are kings, marquises, generals, and ministers born of special stock?"

A thunderclap out of the blue!

The girl looked up in shock, meeting Shang Yechu's pitch-black eyes!

In that moment, the girl felt her heart struck, an indescribable thrill surging through her—thump, thump. That was the sound of her heart beating for Yechu at this very moment.

The girl opened her mouth, wanting to say something, but only stammered out a few words:

"Ah. You..."

Shang Yechu smiled tolerantly: "Me?"

"You're really—" the girl took a deep breath. As a semi-seasoned viewer who had been passionately defending "Tale of Cloud Incline" and Princess Pingzhao all day, she could vaguely guess the core theme of "Tale of Cloud Incline." But now, hearing it from Shang Yechu, it felt like a sudden, enlightening revelation!

Yes! Princess Pingzhao is an ordinary person! But the emperor is also an ordinary person, eunuchs are ordinary people, palace maids and imperial consorts, scions of noble families and scholars from humble backgrounds, the prince who loved crane-feather cloaks and the palace servant executed for ruining one—they all started as the most ordinary flesh and blood!

Are kings, marquises, generals, and ministers born of special stock?

Even with an iron threshold standing for a thousand years, in the end, it's just a mound of earth.

"I'm really—?" Shang Yechu prompted playfully.

The girl took several deep breaths, gathering her thoughts for a long moment, then suddenly declared:

"Yechu! I really like you!"

With that, she gave Shang Yechu a fierce hug and announced loudly: "No matter what kind of character Princess Pingzhao is, I like you!"

Shang Yechu smiled and gently returned the hug: "Alright, alright, have you finished your meal? Should we invite your friend over to eat together?"

"No!" the girl reluctantly pulled away from Shang Yechu's embrace, "She doesn't like you; she's in the 'loser' camp."

Shang Yechu couldn't help but chuckle, amused: "So that's the brutally honest title, huh?"

Realizing she'd let it slip, the girl stuck out her tongue: "I should go now. Yechu, you're definitely going to become hugely famous!"

"Thanks for the good wishes." Shang Yechu smiled and straightened the other's wrinkled collar.

As the girl was about to leave, Shang Yechu called her back: "You haven't told me your name yet."

The girl scratched her head: "Almost forgot, my name is Chen Chen. Chen as in 'aged wine,' Chen as in 'enthusiasm.'"

"What a special name." Shang Yechu stood up, politely gesturing as if seeing her off, "I hope you always maintain your enthusiasm for the things you love."

Chen Chen looked at Shang Yechu, her sparkling eyes twinkling: "I definitely will!"

After seeing Chen Chen off, the meal was pretty much over. Sheng Wenzhi asked curiously: "What did you say to that girl? Why did she leave looking so pumped up?"

Shang Yechu didn't answer her question, instead glancing at Sheng Wenzhi's plate and saying incredulously: "You haven't even finished one plate of stir-fried pea shoots?"

Sheng Wenzhi said grumpily: "I have no appetite."

Sitting next to Li Yi for half the meal was nauseating.

Li Yi placed his last bite of chicken into his mouth and said unhurriedly: "Are you dieting? There's no need for that."

Sheng Wenzhi choked, about to retort on the spot, but Shang Yechu cut off their verbal sparring: "Enough, filming starts officially tomorrow, let's rest early today."

On the other side, Chen Chen returned to her seat. Her friend asked eagerly: "Did you find out? Is she a loser or the mastermind?"

Chen Chen pouted: "Guess?"

"The mastermind, right? I saw you were so excited you hugged her."

"Hmph~" Chen Chen turned her head away, "Not telling."

"You can't fully trust what actors say either, maybe she's just saving face?" her friend said stubbornly.

"Forget it, to prevent us from arguing, it's better to say some things now." Chen Chen sighed.

Her friend was puzzled: "What things?"

"From today onward," Chen Chen announced, "I am Yechu's life-long fan! As long as she's alive, I'll be following her!"

"..." Her friend gave Chen Chen a dead-fish stare, "You said the same thing when you got into your Ex-Husband, Ex-Wife, Ex-Ex-Husband, Ex-Ex-Wife, Ex-Son, and Ex-Daughter."

Chen Chen bristled like a cat whose tail had been stepped on: "Don't jinx it! I said life-long fan means life-long fan, just you wait and see!"

Chapter 103: Fight! I Want to See It

To facilitate filming, starting today, Shang Yechu would no longer stay at Sheng Wenzhi's house but would stay in the hotel uniformly booked by the production crew.

Sheng Wenzhi didn't have any feelings of reluctance and went home after a few words of advice.

This was the first time since her rebirth that Shang Yechu was playing a role important enough for the crew to provide accommodation, which felt both novel and nostalgic. However, there was no time to savor these mixed emotions for now. Shang Yechu needed to immediately understand the direction of public opinion.

After thinking for a moment, Shang Yechu decided to log into her main Weibo account first.

As soon as she logged in, messages flooded in like a swarm of locusts during a plague. Shang Yechu's Weibo interface froze for a full minute before the new messages finished loading!

Was this some kind of haunting?

Shang Yechu carefully recalled—she didn't think she had reached the stage of being wildly popular or universally hated yet, right?

Shang Yechu scrolled down. The majority of the messages were private messages. Their content was largely similar, all being the kind inquiries of viewers bursting with curiosity.

■Is Princess Pingzhao a good person or a bad person?■

■Is Princess Pingzhao smart or stupid?■

■Ahhhh, please, sister, tell me! I absolutely won't tell anyone!!!!■

■Sister, you acted brilliantly! May I ask if the princess is really like what's said on the hot search~■

■I will keep watching you... watching you...■

■[Screenshot][Screenshot][Screenshot][Screenshot] May I ask if these scenes were intentional? Or were they simply continuity errors?■

■Baby, my baby, I've been following you since the Mianmian days ahhhh, mommy loves you■

Scrolling further down to earlier times, before that drama review was posted, the private messages were much less harmonious.

■Get lost, trophy wife!■

■Although I know the character has nothing to do with you personally, I still want to curse at you... what to do...■

■Palace intrigue all depends on daddy, nice one.■

■Ahhhh, can't you cherish your reputation a bit? Don't accept just any role! It's disgusting to watch, disgusting!■

■How did you manage to play a princess like she's mentally challenged [crying-laughing emoji]■

Shang Yechu didn't even bat an eyelid, swiftly skimming past this emotional garbage.

Although Shang Yechu had followed and been followed by people like Qin Tianye and Su Ge, she hadn't verified her identity as an actress yet. However, it was absolutely effortless for the audience to dig up information on someone.

The 'New Followers' section also showed a number so large it could only be displayed as "...". Shang Yechu clicked in and was surprised to find she already had over fifty thousand followers.

For the sake of appearances, celebrities generally buy followers and engagement. But Shang Yechu hadn't had time to do that yet. Which meant these fifty thousand-plus people were all real followers.

They might not necessarily be fans of Shang Yechu herself, but they were definitely real, living viewers.

The power of a hit drama is truly unimaginable.

Shang Yechu's account was currently brand new, without a single Weibo post, which was why the restless viewers could only come to her private messages to ask questions. Shang Yechu thought for a moment, clicked into the Tale of Cloud Incline Official Weibo homepage, and reposted the promotional still featuring her appearance.

@YechuLeaves:

■■■■■

After doing this, Shang Yechu clicked into the hot search rankings.

Today's hot searches were still dominated by Legend of Qingyun and Tale of Cloud Incline, competing fiercely, taking turns in the spotlight.

Shang Yechu first clicked into the #Princess Pingzhao# hot search. As expected, the top Weibo post was the drama review reposted from Douban. Checking the hot search's duration on the chart—wow, it had entered the hot search at 3 PM, and now it was 7 PM. It had been hanging on for a full four hours and was still in fifth place.

They had been arguing for four whole hours without stopping!

Shang Yechu immediately ruled out the possibility that this hot search was bought by Zheng Bohan. Maintaining a hot search position costs more money than pushing it onto the chart initially. Zheng Bohan was almost pawning his last penny to film Tale of Cloud Incline; he couldn't afford a four-hour rotating hot search spot.

Although she had already guessed the spectacle on the hot search, the moment she clicked in, Shang Yechu was still slightly stunned.

■A trophy wife is a trophy wife, an idiot is an idiot, what's with trying to add depth? What depth does a moron who gets rubbed into the ground by a maid have? More idiotic than the weak-minded princess are the weak-minded princess's fans. Watching a drama by comparing it to a color chart is the joke of the year. Congrats to Tale of Cloud Incline for delivering the opening act's clown package for the new year~ I'm having a blast watching~■

This was the latest Weibo post refreshed on the public feed. The blogger was called "A Lifetime for Li".

The words were too harsh, immediately provoking the anger of the general public and drama fans. Shang Yechu moved her finger to refresh, and this Weibo post already had over twenty new comments.

■Checking the profile solves the case—turns out she's a fangirl of Brother Liao Li. Get some taste, please.■

■LMAO, flops make people go crazy. Little Li's fans are really putting on airs.■

■What's wrong? Not enough pickled cabbage on the 'Li' altar for you to look at? How many accounts do you have to be pointing fingers at other people's dramas?■

■Legend of Qingyun isn't about trophy wives; it's about a trophy daughter and trophy son giving their trophy daddy a green hat. Satisfied?■

■I get you. Tale of Cloud Incline's 2.52% viewership rating shows its decline, while Legend of Qingyun's 1.57% rating is leading the pack.■

■Uh-huh, haven't chased a star in twenty years and still get labeled as someone's fan. Is it possible that in this world, there aren't just fans and rivals, but also regular viewers who just want to discuss the plot properly?■

The Tale of Cloud Incline drama fans were witty and eloquent, infuriating "A Lifetime for Li" so much that she posted over a dozen rebuttal comments in a row. Unfortunately, two fists are no match for four hands, and her comment section was soon overrun by the public.

@YechuLeaves:

Shang Yechu: "..."

This method of claiming moral victory further incited the anger of the drama fans. The Tale of Cloud Incline fans launched a second assault on her. Shang Yechu had no intention of watching further and exited.

The opinions within the hot search were extremely polarized. Those who believed the drama review analysis made sense and those who believed it was over-interpretation were split roughly fifty-fifty. They were arguing furiously, fighting so hard it felt like the very fabric of reality was about to wear thin.

This situation was easy to understand. No one wants the thing they like to be "lowbrow"; everyone wants to give it some fashionable value. This was true for Tale of Cloud Incline fans, and likewise for Legend of Qingyun fans and celebrity fans.

Legend of Qingyun had only aired for two days, and its viewership rating had already dropped by nearly half, faster than in her previous life. Not only was the plot criticized, but the main actors were also being mocked and turned into memes by sharp-tongued netizens. The drama fans and actor fans were already fuming.

Now that their rival, Tale of Cloud Incline, had aired an episode suspected of being a clichéd, angsty romance, wouldn't they mock it relentlessly? How could they let some so-called drama review salvage its reputation?

Shang Yechu first clicked into the #Princess Pingzhao# hot search. As expected, the top Weibo post was the drama review reposted from Douban. Checking the hot search's duration on the chart—wow, it had entered the hot search at 3 PM, and now it was 7 PM. It had been hanging on for a full four hours and was still in fifth place.

It was only in the mid-to-late stages of the plot, when Legend of Qingyun's storyline became increasingly bizarre, and Tale of Cloud Incline's plot became sweeter and sweeter (yes, even under the tough conditions of her previous life, Zheng Bohan still desperately tried to film the male and female leads as sweetly as possible), that the former's audience gradually dwindled, the latter's reputation improved, and the conflict gradually intensified.

The process of fans from both dramas and their respective celebrity fans engaging in large-scale battles wasn't supposed to happen until the mid-to-late stages.

Unexpectedly, in this life, this scenario had arrived early. And the biggest focal point had actually landed on Shang Yechu!

If this were a newcomer to the entertainment industry, they would probably have been trolled into social withdrawal by now.

But Shang Yechu was not.

"Do you remember?" Shang Yechu murmured to herself.

How did the most valuable fans come about?

Chapter 104: The Protagonist

The two episodes of "Tale of Cloud Incline" airing tonight are titled "Tale of Morning Clouds" and "Tale of Evening Clouds." Just as the uproar on Weibo was reaching its peak, at exactly 7:30 PM, "Tale of Cloud Incline" began its broadcast on time once again.

The arguments on Weibo quieted down a bit, as the two factions of drama fans who were arguing most fiercely had gone off to watch the show.

At this very moment, the long-silent Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel suddenly reposted a Weibo post.

@CHTV-6 Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel Official Blog: Reposted from @Film Xiao Fengque Series Official Blog:

["The peach tree is young and elegant; brilliant are its flowers.

The phoenix flies high; rustling are its wings.

Today, the first film in the #Xiao Fengque# series, #Xiao Fengque: The Dynasty Mystery#, produced by the CHTV-6 Dragon Central Television Sixth Channel Official Blog, with @Director Yi Tianzhao serving as the chief director, held its opening ceremony in Heng City. All key creators attended the ceremony.

Original Work: Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng @Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng

Lead Starring: Shang Yechu @YechuLeaves

Setting sail with all our viewers, returning together to that era of swift justice and riding freely in light furs!"]

Well, well!

Shang Yechu was originally still figuring out how to 'torture' the fans, but she never expected the first one to come knocking and serve themselves up on a platter would be the "Xiao Fengque" series!

This movie announcement post only officially announced one actress for the female lead role, besides the producer, chief director, and original author. This kind of treatment placed on any other female star in the entertainment industry would absolutely make everyone green with envy.

The official designation of a single "Lead Starring" actor essentially stamps this performer as the sole, definitive female lead—no, it's even a step above concepts like "big male lead" or "big female lead." From this moment on, this series no longer has a "female lead"; it only has "the protagonist, Xiao Fengque"!

In future fan wars, just one line—"My idol was announced solo by the production, while yours wasn't even mentioned"—would be enough to shut the opposition down completely!

Of course, the "Xiao Fengque" production team wasn't being charitable, throwing such a prime opportunity to Shang Yechu for nothing. In fact, their intentions could be described as quite disrespectful.

"Xiao Fengque" had now become a stalled project, a ticking time bomb. Whoever it landed on would be unlucky. Although Li Yi had Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng backing him, if he were to still undeservedly occupy the male lead position, even Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng's limited prestige probably wouldn't be enough to shield him from the fallout.

Old Lady Jiang likely couldn't bear to see her precious grandson Li Yi get criticized, so she directly demoted Li Yi from male lead to a supporting role alongside Jiang Erjing, Ge Dafu, and others.

There's an unwritten rule in fan circles: if a work flops, the lead actors bear 80% of the responsibility. Although this is just a tactic used during fan wars to attack others, it also reflects the reality for leads—the scrutiny and judgment they face is greater than that faced by all other roles combined.

Now, "Heavenly Secrets Pavilion" had become "Xiao Fengque," and Shang Yechu had become the sole protagonist. If "Xiao Fengque" performed poorly later, the blame could only fall on Shang Yechu, this nobody who overreached, and couldn't touch those perfectly clean supporting actors.

To put it bluntly, Shang Yechu, who currently had no representative works to her name, had become the scapegoat, needing to face the skepticism of the entire online audience all by herself.

Of course, this also meant that if "Xiao Fengque" achieved success, the credit could be attributed to Shang Yechu without any dispute.

Risk and opportunity always coexist. This was a high-stakes gamble.

This announcement wasn't even communicated to Shang Yechu in advance, which showed just how little regard Yi Tianzhao and the others had for her. But, it didn't matter.

Shang Yechu didn't hesitate. She immediately reposted this announcement Weibo:

@YechuLeaves:

["Looking forward to meeting everyone~"]

The role of Princess Pingzhao was already the focus of public opinion, and Shang Yechu's every move was being watched and magnified infinitely. Now, before the hot search topic had even cooled down, Shang Yechu had actually announced another new project!

Less than three seconds after she hit the repost button, the comments under Shang Yechu's Weibo exploded.

[???

[Am I seeing things??]

[Holy crap...]

[Who?]

[Huh?]

[I was watching TV and just sprayed cola all over the screen...]

It was a complete uproar.

Public opinion takes time to brew. After doing this, Shang Yechu stopped paying attention to the public opinion and closed Weibo, going to review the scenes she had to film the next day.

Early the next morning.

Shang Yechu was one of the earliest people to arrive on set. As soon as she got there, she saw Yi Tianzhao pacing back and forth on the set with her head bowed, in a very strange posture.

Seeing Shang Yechu arrive, Yi Tianzhao was also taken aback.

Having grown accustomed to Yang Huanyi's tardiness and early departures, Shang Yechu's punctuality felt a bit unfamiliar to her.

"Director Yi, what are you doing?" Shang Yechu asked curiously.

"I'm measuring how many steps it takes from here to here," Yi Tianzhao said, wiping sweat from her brow. "You have a scene with Ge Dafu here later, and I'm still considering a few of the movements."

Shang Yechu nodded. "You're really dedicated to your craft."

"It's just part of the job, nothing special," Yi Tianzhao said, looking up at Shang Yechu. "Oh, right, did you see the announcement Weibo? I forgot to tell you about it. Didn't expect you to go ahead and repost it yourself."

Shang Yechu deftly and lightly passed the buck back: "I saw that the leads of other movies all do it that way, so I just followed suit—did I cause any trouble for you?"

"Not at all," Yi Tianzhao said with a bitter smile. "How could anything be more chaotic than it was recently?"

As they spoke, the other main actors also arrived. Li Yi led the way, followed by Jiang Erjing, Ge Dafu, and Shi Qing.

Yi Tianzhao found this odd. "How come you all came together?"

Jiang Erjing laughed heartily. "Ran into Xiao Li rehearsing his lines to thin air on the way here this morning, exchanged a few words. He treated us to breakfast."

Shi Qing also smiled. "Young people these days are surprisingly disciplined! We had milk, soy milk, and fried dough sticks, but he just gulped down two plain boiled eggs!"

Shang Yechu had thought she was the earliest bird in the entire crew, but it turned out the other actors weren't far behind.

Shang Yechu said politely, "Good morning, teachers."

Shi Qing warmly stepped forward and took Shang Yechu's hand. "Oh, Little Ye! I've actually become a fan of your show recently too—that Princess Pingzhao of yours..."

"Alright, Xiao Qing," Yi Tianzhao pleaded, "save your fan experience sharing for after work. Go get your makeup done."

Shi Qing pouted. "You're just exploiting me." With that, she sashayed away.

Shang Yechu also returned to her own dressing room to get made up.

The treatment for the lead was indeed different from that of supporting roles. Today, she had scenes with Ge Dafu, Shi Qing, and Li Yi respectively, scheduled throughout the morning, noon, and evening. Factoring in the time for makeup and costume changes, she would be run off her feet all day.

Shang Yechu liked this feeling of being fully occupied.

Public opinion takes time to brew. After doing this, Shang Yechu stopped paying attention to the public opinion and closed Weibo, going to review the scenes she had to film the next day.

Shang Yechu began to close her eyes and rest her mind. Darkness filled her vision as soft brushes moved across her face. In her mind, Shang Yechu continuously rehearsed and reviewed her scenes for the day.

Chapter 105 Male Disguise

Xiao Fengque is a martial hero disguised as a man, and the male appearance is especially important.

Shang Yechu once tried on male clothing while shooting promotional stills. Dragon Central Television's makeup team were by no means slackers; their techniques were highly professional. Shaping the brows, padding the shoulders, binding the chest, after a full routine, Shang Yechu's appearance was convincingly intimidating.

But once she started moving, the illusion completely fell apart.

Shang Yechu had looked at herself in the mirror; no matter how flawless the makeup, the moment she moved, her femininity spilled out, and anyone could see through it at a glance.

This problem troubled Shang Yechu for a long time. Although she had mastered many postures and gaits, none of them seemed suitable for Xiao Fengque.

Shang Yechu consulted many people about this issue, humbly asking every actor she knew. She even asked around on Zhihu, but sadly, no one could give a clear answer.

In the end, it was Li Yi who provided a theoretical explanation.

During the New Year period, Shang Yechu and Li Yi met twice, both times discussing acting. In casual conversation the topic came up, and Li Yi spoke as if with considerable experience.

"The dynamic differences between men and women are significant. Everything else is easier to change, but gait is the hardest."

Shang Yechu remembered some commercial etiquette and posture books she had read and frowned in disagreement, "Is it because of etiquette? Long-term training forming an ingrained habit?"

"It has something to do with etiquette training, but more of it is caused by physiological factors." Li Yi's expression grew focused, unusually without a hint of a smile.

They were in a restaurant at the time, so Li Yi simply dipped his finger in water and drew stick figures on the table.

"Men's feet are longer and wider, and the pelvis is narrow," Li Yi drew a rectangular little figure, "hip circumference is smaller than shoulder circumference, and when walking the center of gravity is relatively high."

He then drew a pear-shaped little figure, "Women's feet are slightly narrower, pelvis wider, hip circumference larger than shoulder circumference, and when walking they will unconsciously shift their center of gravity toward the inner side of the legs."

Shang Yechu looked at the two little figures on the table and relaxed her brow.

"Rather than being caused by etiquette or personality, it's more of the body's adaptive selection," Li Yi propped up his chin, lost in thought, "even if you forcibly pretend to be someone else for a role, an insider can still tell at a glance."

"You're an insider?" Shang Yechu raised an eyebrow at Li Yi.

Li Yi replied with a brilliant smile, "I am an insider, but don't worry, Xie An is not. So if you're a bit ambiguous, he won't notice."

Shang Yechu lowered her eyelids and stayed silent. Li Yi assumed everyone could be a little "ambiguous." But Shang Yechu knew that wouldn't work at all.

After identifying the crux with Li Yi, Shang Yechu went to ask Jiang Erjing. His period-drama posture was always praised, so it was worth learning from him. After all, Shang Yechu needed not only to "walk like a man" but to "walk like a debonair man."

Jiang Erjing didn't hold back and explained the details to Shang Yechu over WeChat.

"I once had a historical drama role where I played a cripple," Jiang Erjing recalled, "it was a special kind of cripple. One leg was slightly shorter than the other, and out of pride, he worked hard to learn to walk like a normal person."

"So I had to portray a 'cripple pretending to be normal,' neither too lame nor too normal.

"That nearly drove me crazy — both lame and not lame at the same time? What, can a person be pregnant and not pregnant, dead and not dead?"

"But back then competition was fierce—" Jiang Erjing and screenwriter Fu Yu were alike in liking to reminisce, "If I couldn't do it, someone else would take the role. I was anxious, and in the end I came up with a dumb trick..."

Jiang Erjing told Shang Yechu, "I stuffed a screw into the shoe of the lame leg in the script!"

"That way, while walking, that foot would get painfully jabbed, but for the sake of the camera I had to grit my teeth and pretend it didn't bother me."

"The finished footage turned out very well!" Jiang Erjing boasted, "Search 'Jiang Erjing acting compilation' online and you'll definitely see it."

Jiang Erjing's story sparked an idea in Shang Yechu. Before filming began, she discussed details carefully with Yi Tianzhao and the props department.

Shang Yechu opened her eyes; the reflection in the mirror had already changed: sword-like brows slanting into the temples, eyes bright as stars. Her fair skin now had a hint of color. Shadows on the features were more three-dimensional, the contours harder and more masculine.

Her black hair was meticulously bound under a net, styled into an exquisite topknot at the crown, with only a few stubborn wisps left to hang at the forehead. Shang Yechu's sharpened chin and long neck, now exposed, had makeup applied.

Because Yang Huanyi needed to save time, she insisted Xiao Fengque didn't need heavy makeup and essentially sacrificed this male look. Only now did the makeup artist reveal their real skill on Shang Yechu's face.

Shang Yechu looked left and right but still felt something was missing.

The stylist felt it too; she tilted Shang Yechu's face in her hands for a careful inspection and frowned, "That forehead..."

Shang Yechu's forehead was fair and delicate, a perfectly curved, graceful feature that made her distinctly feminine. It created a slight dissonance.

Time was tight. Shang Yechu thought for a moment, patted her bag, and pulled out an eye mask.

She had bought the eye mask at a general store on Pedestrian Street, a simple basic model. It was basically a thin elastic band with a rectangular piece of black cloth attached. The black cloth had been stamped in a cheesy way with the words "Overtly Dominant."

The shop owner had been having a generous sale and sold the mask to Shang Yechu at a discounted price of two yuan.

Shang Yechu folded the mask's two long edges inward to hide the text. Then she tore a piece of tape and stuck the folded edges down.

She stretched the modified mask and set it on her forehead herself, pulling out a few stray hairs, "How about this?"

Stylist: !!!

The broad eye mask had been folded into a suitably wide, narrow black forehead band!

When the black band settled heavy on the brow, it accentuated that youthfully gallant and elegant air to the fullest. Shang Yechu stood and glanced at the stylist with a half-smile; the stylist's inner beautiful-boy soul nearly burst.

The stylist clutched her chest and nodded, "Yes, yes, this is perfect!"

Shang Yechu obediently said, "Shall I go change?"

"Go, go." The stylist stifled the urge to squeal and play with a pretty auntie, and reminded her, "The shoes you asked for are ready."

The pair of shoes Shang Yechu had asked the props department to prepare were specifically for her male disguise.

They were three sizes larger than Shang Yechu's feet, the extra space stuffed full of cotton and the like. The insoles were four centimeters thick, two centimeters fabric insole and two centimeters wooden insole.

Shang Yechu had requested them herself. They would create the heavy-footedness of a male gait and make Xiao Fengque's height more convincing.

Unlike ordinary shoes, these were firmly strapped to Shang Yechu's feet with elastic bands, so even if she jumped and tap-danced in place, they would be hard to shake off.

After changing and putting on the shoes, everyone in the makeup room brightened.

A truly handsome and elegant scion of a turbulent age!

Shang Yechu walked two steps in the makeup room, turned to the group and asked, "How do you all think?"

The stylist stared, speechless for a long moment before saying, "Sudden gender transformation. Director Bai Yi will be pleased..."

"That's good."

Shang Yechu picked up a folding fan from the table, snapped it open with a swish, and fanned herself lightly.

When she stepped out of the makeup room, shooting was nearly ready. As she was about to move closer to check, Yi Tianzhao suddenly pulled her aside.

"Yechu," Yi Tianzhao spoke quickly, "you'll be acting opposite Ge Dafu in a bit. The old man has a rough temper and likes to school young actors..."

Shang Yechu made a perfectly timed "ah" sound, "You mean...?"

Yi Tianzhao, irritated, said, "I've been swamped lately and just forgot. I just saw the old man rubbing his hands and remembered..."

Shang Yechu's acting was good. But to pit her against veteran actor Ge Dafu would still be overestimating herself.

Yi Tianzhao pinched the bridge of her nose and said without much hope, "Handle it as you see fit. Don't put too much pressure on yourself and don't let it affect the next two scenes' condition. If it really doesn't work we can cut to a wide shot." That was something she was good at.

Shang Yechu glanced at Ge Dafu, who was not far off, doing stretches and seemingly not looking this way.

However, the instant Shang Yechu looked over, the old man seemed to have sprouted another pair of eyes and looked straight at her.

When their gazes met, the old man blinked and smiled benevolently.

Chapter 106: Acting Veteran

The order of filming doesn't follow the script, but rather the schedule of locations, props, and personnel availability.

For instance, the scene being filmed now is the movie's finale plot. The Old Eunuch played by Ge Dafu is the mastermind behind the dynasty's mystery case, with countless blood on his hands. He even had a hand in orchestrating the massacre of Xiao Fengque's family. However, due to the imperial court's protection, at the final moment, the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion had no choice but to spare his life, covering up the truth of the matter.

Xiao Fengque, filled with grief and indignation, decides to take revenge with her own power.

This scene is very long and particularly important. Plus, dialogue-heavy scenes rely more on acting skills, so Yi Tianzhao's concern is not unfounded.

"Action!"

The old eunuch with a pale, beardless face gently tapped the lid of his teacup, carefully blowing away the floating foam on the green tea.

With a creak, the door opened.

A bright shaft of light split the room's dim gloom, also dividing the old eunuch sitting in the center of the room into two halves.

Old Eunuch Fu's hand, which had been stroking the teacup, paused. He seemed to sense something and raised his head.

A slender young figure walked in against the light. Old Eunuch Fu couldn't see his expression clearly, but years of experience navigating treacherous waters and bloodshed instinctively put him on guard.

"Who is it?" the old eunuch asked in a sharp, thin voice.

The door swung wide open, flooding the room with sunlight. Tiny dust motes danced in the light beams, revealing a handsome, clear-featured young face before Old Eunuch Fu.

The youth said, "I am Di Five."

Old Eunuch Fu's withered hand instinctively moved toward his sleeve. "Where is the master of the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion?"

Di Five replied politely, "The three-day deadline has passed, and the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion has failed to apprehend the true culprit of the Red Pill case. As the investigator of this case, I have come specifically to apologize to Your Excellency."

"Oh?" Old Eunuch Fu let out a strange, mocking laugh. "Your master slapped his chest and gave me his personal guarantee. Now that things have gone sour, you want to send some wet-behind-the-ears brat to take the fall?"

Di Five remained neither humble nor arrogant. "Although the true culprit has not been captured, we have gained insight into the truth of the case. Please allow me to approach and explain, Your Excellency. After I finish speaking, I will submit entirely to your disposal, without a word of complaint."

"What a fine 'without complaint'," Old Eunuch Fu chuckled merrily, his plump, pale face resembling a benevolent Buddha. "Submit to my disposal? That precious saber at your waist is gleaming brightly. How would I dare to dispose of you?"

At the word "saber," Di Five suddenly raised her eyes, meeting Old Eunuch Fu's gaze!

That glance was as fierce and sinister as a hawk's, the killing intent in her eyes almost tangible!

For the first time, Old Eunuch Fu realized a person's gaze could be condensed as thin as a blade's edge, sharpened into a line, and thrust toward someone.

Old Eunuch Fu's pupils contracted sharply as if pricked by a needle, and even the smile on his face froze.

The next second, this old veteran smiled gently, his voice sweet enough to wring out honey. "Old Bai hasn't handled this properly. You're still just a youngster—forget it, forget it. What harm is there if you just stand there and speak? I can hear you."

"Walls have ears," Di Five lowered her eyes, her demeanor calm, as if the earlier killing intent had just been Old Eunuch Fu's illusion. "The culprit has eyes and ears throughout the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion. I fear alerting the enemy."

Upon hearing "the culprit has eyes and ears throughout the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion," Old Eunuch Fu's posture relaxed ever so slightly.

Di Five seemed completely unaware and continued, "If Your Excellency dislikes this saber of mine, I shall set it aside."

With a clatter, the precious saber fell to the floor, vibrating slightly and emitting a faint hum, as if mourning its master's abandonment.

Old Eunuch Fu smiled benevolently. "I'm not one for wielding swords and waving sticks. What would I know about sabers?"

"Tap." What fell alongside Old Eunuch Fu's words was the folding fan at Di Five's waist.

With a casual flick of her hand, a fluid and graceful motion, a white jade pendant carved with dragons and phoenixes also landed on the floor before Old Eunuch Fu.

Old Eunuch Fu didn't bend over. With a touch of his toe, the pendant slid into his hand like an obedient child.

The old eunuch's aged eyes were now narrowed into slits from smiling. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Your Excellency's 'Soaring Cloud Ten Steps' is peerless under heaven. Beyond ten paces, only hidden weapons can harm you." Di Five's expression remained placid and unruffled. "To demonstrate my sincerity, I am removing all hard objects from my person, one by one, for Your Excellency's inspection."

Old Eunuch Fu laughed heartily. "When have I ever doubted the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion's sincerity?—You martial arts practitioners, you can pluck a flower and turn it into a sword, flick a leaf and make it a needle, even a mouthful of spit can kill a man!"

Di Five nodded. "I have yet to undergo the capping ceremony of adulthood. Honored by Your Excellency's high regard, I shall strive to master that skill of flying flowers and plucking leaves as soon as possible."

Sitting behind the monitor, Yi Tianzhao nodded repeatedly. So far, Shang Yechu and Ge Dafu's performances could be described as equally matched. Neither was overpowering the other.

However, next, the two would appear in the same frame...

On screen, Old Eunuch Fu said amiably, "Since ancient times, heroes emerge from among the young. Though you are youthful, there is no need to unduly humble yourself..."

Di Five suddenly took a step forward.

Old Eunuch Fu's slightly sunken eyes narrowed abruptly. His posture straightened, and the tip of his foot already touched the ground!

Anyone could see that if Di Five advanced another half-step, this cunning, deceitful old eunuch would not hesitate to use his peerless lightness skill to flee.

Old Eunuch Fu watched Di Five.

Di Five calmly returned his gaze.

The young eyes and the aged eyes stared directly at each other, like a sharp, unparalleled cold arrow fearlessly splitting the stagnant air and striking a block of steel!

Just as the atmosphere was about to freeze solid, Di Five suddenly raised a hand and began unbuttoning her robe.

"What are you doing!" Old Eunuch Fu was slightly taken aback, even his smile vanishing.

With a casual tug, Di Five's outer garment fell to the floor. Two more movements, and she undid her middle garment. Letting go, she was left wearing only a thin, close-fitting inner robe and a pair of simple trousers.

In broad daylight, disrobing. The action was indeed improper and unseemly. But Di Five's movements were free, fluid, and her demeanor relaxed and indifferent, somehow managing to exude an air of untrammelled unconventionality.

Old Eunuch Fu's aged face twitched. "What impropriety is this!"

Di Five unhurriedly advanced two more steps, extending both hands, assuming a posture of surrendering herself to be bound. "Your Excellency, please bind these hands of mine and then hand me over to the imperial court."

Old Eunuch Fu's expression now fluctuated between dark and light, and for a moment, he took no action.

The two were gradually entering the same frame. Yi Tianzhao perked up, watching this scene nervously.

Di Five advanced another two steps. Old Eunuch Fu's old, sinister eyes swept over the other's entire body, yet he still gave no answer.

Di Five's eyes didn't blink, appearing extremely calm and composed. However, in a corner of the shot, that black forehead ribbon was already soaked with sweat.

This was the moment that decided fate. If even this state couldn't put Old Eunuch Fu at ease, then...

Everyone on set involuntarily held their breath, even forgetting the script's subsequent setup, nervously awaiting Old Eunuch Fu's response!

Chapter 107: Clash

"Forget it." Old Eunuch Fu suddenly spoke.

"Come closer and tell me the details of this case."

Everyone involuntarily let out a sigh of relief. Di Five—that is, Xiao Fengque—respectfully stepped forward and said, "Does Your Excellency still have those three pills?"

"Naturally," Old Eunuch Fu said in his shrill voice, "They are important evidence in this case. Of course I keep them with me."

"May I trouble Your Excellency to show them?"

Old Eunuch Fu snorted with displeasure, fished out a yellow paper packet from his robe, and spread it on the table. On the yellow paper lay three pills the size of green dates.

The three pills were one red, one black, and one white. They were round like pearls and soft like date paste, emitting an unusual, faint fragrance.

Xiao Fengque reached out to touch them, but Old Eunuch Fu blocked her hand: "This is evidence. Just speak, don't touch recklessly."

Xiao Fengque withdrew her hand and pointed at the three pills from a distance, saying, "Has Your Excellency discovered any toxicity in these three pills?"

"Not yet," Old Eunuch Fu said shrilly, "Those useless quacks from the Imperial Hospital couldn't figure out anything! Truly infuriating."

"Not being able to figure it out is correct," Xiao Fengque said with a smile, "Because these three pills are not medicine."

"Not medicine? Then what are they?" Old Eunuch Fu sneered, "Youngster, don't you dare lie to me!"

Xiao Fengque said, "Does Your Excellency know about drawing lots?"

Old Eunuch Fu looked suspicious: "Naturally I know. What does that have to do with the pills?"

"These three pills are no different from the sticks used in drawing lots," Xiao Fengque stood by the table, her eyes lowered, a flicker of hidden light swirling in their depths, yet her tone grew increasingly gentle and harmless.

"Do you take me for a child like you?" Old Eunuch Fu scoffed.

Xiao Fengque extended two fingers, making a pinching gesture: "In the previous dynasty, there were wandering knights who formed an organization specifically for avenging others. Before assassinating officials, they would put red, black, and white pills into a pouch and draw from it. The one who drew the red pill would kill military officials, the one who drew the black pill would kill civil officials, and the one who drew the white pill would preside over the funerals of the other two."

Following Xiao Fengque's fingertip, Old Eunuch Fu's gaze fell on the pills on the table... one black, one white, one red.

Xiao Fengque picked up a black pill, twirling it before Old Eunuch Fu's eyes: "Think about it, was that official who had the black pill beside him before his death a civil official?"

Old Eunuch Fu's breath hitched, his expression gradually becoming inscrutable.

Xiao Fengque put down the black pill, then casually picked up the red pill, waving it before Old Eunuch Fu's eyes: "Think again, what position did that official who had the red pill beside him before his death hold?"

Old Eunuch Fu's expression shifted several times, turning sinister: "Then this white pill..."

Xiao Fengque leaned in close to Old Eunuch Fu without batting an eye, "The white pill, naturally, is for presiding over the funeral."

Old Eunuch Fu frowned, sensing something amiss: "Whose funeral?"

Xiao Fengque chuckled softly, "Naturally, it's for presiding over Your Excellency's funeral."

Old Eunuch Fu trembled, jolted with sudden shock!

Like an arrow meeting its target, like a bolt leaving the string, in that flash of lightning, Xiao Fengque roared, her two fingers shooting forward!

With a soft *thud*, an extremely tiny red object embedded itself into Old Eunuch Fu's Baihui acupoint at the crown of his head!

The Baihui acupoint is a major vital point of the human body. Old Eunuch Fu was temporarily immobilized by this strike, though only for a fleeting moment, but that was enough.

Thunder has no time to sound, lightning no time to fly—

Xiao Fengque tapped her toes, leaped up, kicked the Whispering Wind Blade from the ground into her hand, turned, and slashed down with a mighty leap!

The Fengque Xiao Clan's Whispering Wind Blade, thirteenth form, Phoenix Returns to Nest!

The blade's edge was like snow, illuminating the clear heavens and earth.

Old Eunuch Fu's eyes widened enormously. A thin line of blood dripped straight down from the red pill on his crown, splitting his plump, pale face in two. One half of his face still wore a kindly smile, while the other half was twisted with terror.

"Clang—"

Xiao Fengque planted the blade upright and leaned down close to his face.

The two were extremely close. Xiao Fengque's breath even sprayed onto Old Eunuch Fu's face, and the bloody froth from Old Eunuch Fu's mouth splattered onto Xiao Fengque's face.

The dying man's pupils had already begun to dilate, while Xiao Fengque's expression remained equally devoid of sorrow or joy. The twisted side face and the calm side profile silently confronted each other, the air between them carving out a river of stars separating life and death.

Old Eunuch Fu stared fixedly at Xiao Fengque, as if stubbornly trying to discern with those dying eyes exactly who this person before him was.

Two pairs of eyes, two faces—one young, one old; one living, one dead. As they gazed at each other, the air seemed to congeal into a cold semi-solid, solid enough to hold a blade.

Blood splattered onto Xiao Fengque's face and lips, lending her whole person an eerie, captivating beauty.

Xiao Fengque slowly parted her lips—

Old Eunuch Fu's eyes widened for the last time, as if wanting to hear Xiao Fengque's answer.

Xiao Fengque suddenly smiled.

"The one who draws the red pill kills military officials."

"Cut! That's a wrap!"

The moment Yi Tianzhao called stop, the entire set fell silent.

Shang Yechu let out a breath, quickly placed the blade aside, stepped off set, and fetched a warm, damp towel for Teacher Ge Dafu.

It was cold in winter. The fake blood was essentially water mixed with pigment, and having it poured all over your face was freezing.

Just as Shang Yechu picked up the towel and was about to leave, suddenly, thunderous applause erupted around her!

What happened?

Shang Yechu was startled and looked around. She saw that all the on-site staff looked quite excited. Especially the Assistant Director, who was wiping his tears, crying like a three-hundred-pound child.

"Director Yi! Director Yi!" the Assistant Director sobbed. These past days, he had endured scolding alongside Yi Tianzhao—she got the big scoldings, he got the small ones. Now, they had finally weathered the storm and seen the moon emerge.

Yi Tianzhao was also quite moved. But she wasn't the type to openly display emotions. She just walked up to Shang Yechu and patted her shoulder.

"Well done," Yi Tianzhao nodded, "Hurry and take the towel to Teacher."

Shang Yechu went to hand the towel to Elder Ge Dafu. Two staff members with name tags watched her retreating back and sighed, "Our half-dead project is finally saved."

Another staff member said, "Don't mention it. I've read 'Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon.' Sister Ye's performance... tsk tsk."

Navigating the entertainment industry, one shouldn't speak too absolutely. So, after clicking her tongue twice, this staff member lowered her voice: "Director Yi probably won't need to drink any more fleecflower root and black sesame concoctions."

Once Ge Dafu was off camera, his whole demeanor became much more amiable. After accepting the towel from Shang Yechu, he beamed even more: "Little Ye performed exceptionally well, much better than that Little Li!"

Shang Yechu thought to herself, *When you were dominating the scene earlier, you certainly didn't mean that!*

The pressure of acting opposite Ge Dafu was unusually immense. His cold, hawk-like gaze paired with a genial smile that made your scalp tingle was the minor issue. The biggest problem was that with such a thousand-year-old fox type of character, fooling him was extremely difficult. If your acting slipped even slightly, the audience would only feel the protagonist was cheating.

Shang Yechu had practically been holding her breath, straining with all her might to avoid showing any timidity.

Currently, it seemed the effect was quite good. At least no one in the production crew could tell Shang Yechu had been struggling. They probably thought she was exceptionally gifted, able to effortlessly match Ge Dafu's performance at just twenty years old.

Shang Yechu smiled and said, "You worked hard too."

Chapter 108: Old Bottle, New Wine

The next scene was scheduled for the afternoon. Shang Yechu went to have her makeup redone and changed into a different costume.

This process was tedious and lengthy. The stylist, while working on Shang Yechu's face, asked curiously, "Sister Ye, what exactly did Xiao Fengque use to kill Old Eunuch Fu? I didn't quite understand."

"You went to watch too?" Shang Yechu asked in surprise. "I thought you were busy doing other people's styling."

"I'm not busy all the time," the stylist chuckled. "But your conviction is really strong. You acted so convincingly that I believed it, even though I couldn't see what you used to kill him."

Shang Yechu explained helplessly, "It was that red pill, hitting Old Eunuch Fu's Baihui acupoint. In martial arts novels, getting hit in the Baihui acupoint is basically a death sentence."

"But I saw that pill. It was all soft and squishy, like playdough," the stylist said with a giggle. "Young Hero Xiao must be exceptionally gifted to be able to shoot that thing in?"

Feeling both amused and exasperated, Shang Yechu explained, "I was using my internal energy to emit heat, evaporating the moisture inside it, while simultaneously using my internal energy to knead it smaller and smaller..."

The explanation was so incredibly chuunibyou that Shang Yechu forced herself to continue, "With equal mass, the smaller the volume, the greater the density. Plus, after losing moisture, it hardened, becoming a lethal hidden weapon."

In martial arts novels, internal energy is basically the equivalent of an all-purpose perpetual motion machine. From major feats like striking an ox through a mountain or healing the dying, to minor ones like helping a hero evaporate alcohol from their body while drinking, allowing them to drink a thousand cups without getting drunk—all are credited to this old friend.

The pill was soft and couldn't be used as a hidden weapon to kill. That's why Old Eunuch Fu let his guard down. Who would have thought Xiao Fengque would ambush him in this way?

This plot point designed by Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng was bizarrely ingenious, making readers slap the table in admiration while reading the novel. But when spoken aloud, why did it feel so... so weird?

"Hahahaha!" The stylist couldn't contain her laughter. "Look at you with that serious little face, you really do look like a young hero."

After finishing her makeup and changing clothes, Shang Yechu immediately moved on to the second scene of the day without a moment's rest.

The second scene was with Shi Qing. Shi Qing was straightforward and had outstanding acting skills. This scene also passed in one take.

The "Xiao Fengque" crew felt like a long drought had finally met sweet rain. They had never encountered a lead actor who was so cooperative and capable. The shadow of being scolded by netizens for so many days also faded considerably.

The scene scheduled for the evening was a night shoot, requiring them to eat dinner before filming. Shang Yechu, who had been busy all day, finally got a chance to catch her breath. Sitting in a reclining chair, she ate her boxed meal while opening the long-unused Weibo.

After ignoring Weibo for a full day and night, she checked her follower count and was startled. In just one short day, her number of followers had broken through the 300,000 mark. The comments under her only two Weibo posts had also surpassed 50,000 each!

Clicking on one casually, she saw that under the Weibo post where she reposted "Xiao Fengque," the top comment was prominently:

[Another connected person?]

The second top comment was even more interesting:

[Hello, the Princess Pingzhao character you portray is suspected in a massacre case involving hundreds of people. Please immediately provide proof of the princess's innocence.]

The third top comment:

[Your lips are truly sealed...]

The entire comment section was divided into two main factions. One faction's attitude was "Where did this connected person come from?" while the other faction's attitude was "I don't care if you're a connected person or not, I just want to know if Princess Pingzhao is actually a wolf in sheep's clothing or not."

Looking at the hot search list again, the Princess Pingzhao topic was actually still trending. Not only that, but on top of the original, there was an additional hot search: #Princess Pingzhao Feudal Moralist#.

Shang Yechu frowned, finding it rather perplexing. In last night's episodes "Tale of Morning Clouds" and "Tale of Cloud Incline," Princess Pingzhao's screen time didn't even total five minutes. Why were people still arguing?

Clicking into the #Princess Pingzhao Feudal Moralism# topic, Shang Yechu immediately felt both amused and exasperated.

The plot of the "Tale of Cloud Incline" episode was roughly like this: A princess from the Northern Desert was presented to the emperor. The princess was extremely beautiful and had a lively, generous nature. The emperor doted on this princess and immediately conferred upon her the title of Consort Yue.

However, this Consort Yue had a childhood sweetheart she loved. She always wanted to leave the emperor and be with her sweetheart. After some effort, while hunting on the Bashang Grassland, Consort Yue successfully eloped with her sweetheart.

Who would have thought that this elopement plan was actually a conspiracy by another one of the emperor's consorts to bring down Consort Yue. As soon as Consort Yue fled with her sweetheart, this consort informed on them, allowing the emperor to catch the pair red-handed.

Everyone initially thought the old emperor would secretly execute this doomed pair. Who would have thought that Consort Yue suddenly threw herself forward and said something to the emperor about love, broad-mindedness, virtue, and love being about letting go and such. And the old emperor actually seemed genuinely moved!

After hearing this, the old emperor expressed his willingness to spare the unfortunate pair. Not only did he pardon them from the death penalty, but he also sent people to escort Consort Yue and her sweetheart back to their hometown in the Northern Desert, telling them to live well.

Fearing that Consort Yue's father would blame his daughter, the old emperor even wrote a letter in front of Consort Yue. The letter stated that he didn't mind and asked the Northern Desert chieftain to allow Consort Yue and her sweetheart to be together, etc., instructing Consort Yue to personally deliver the letter to the Northern Desert chieftain.

Everyone was greatly surprised, thinking the emperor had changed his nature, had truly fallen in love with that little Northern Desert princess, and had even spared her life for the sake of love!

Everyone was moved by the old emperor's great "love is letting go" spirit. Only Princess Pingzhao privately questioned, "After all, Consort Yue betrayed Father Emperor. Handling it this way might damage the imperial family's dignity."

This conversation happened privately between father and daughter. After Princess Pingzhao asked this, the emperor asked the princess if she wanted him to execute Consort Yue.

Princess Pingzhao neither admitted nor denied it, merely saying everything was up to the emperor's arrangement.

Right at that moment, Amodun, the chieftain of the Northern Desert—who was also Consort Yue's father—presented a birthday gift to the emperor.

The emperor's birthday was still two or three months away. For the Northern Desert to present a birthday gift so early was truly strange. Princess Pingzhao seemed very puzzled and naturally asked about it.

The birthday gift was an exquisite box. The emperor glanced at it casually, not even asking what was inside, and ordered an attendant to open the box for Princess Pingzhao to see.

Princess Pingzhao looked at the opened box and immediately screamed in fright—it turned out the box contained the severed heads of both Consort Yue and her childhood sweetheart!

The heads were preserved with lime, looking lifelike. According to the messenger who delivered the gift, they had exhausted three fine horses, delivering them just before they rotted beyond recognition.

Consort Yue and her sweetheart, spared by the emperor, had died at the hands of her own biological father!

Chapter 109: Seamless Connection

When Shang Yechu first read this plot, she had marveled at the skill of those veteran screenwriters. It was old wine in a new bottle, laying bare the cruel face of feudal rulers with perfect clarity.

To curry favor with the Old Emperor, the Northern Desert chieftain did not hesitate to personally kill his own daughter. Even a vicious tiger does not devour its cubs. The chieftain's act was truly worse than a beast.

And the emperor played by Qin Tianye was even more harsh, ungrateful, and utterly vicious!

He was clearly furious at Consort Yue's betrayal, yet he pretended to be magnanimous, even generously allowing Consort Yue to return to her hometown, beautifully phrasing it as letting the two of them live a good life.

In reality, rulers understand rulers best, and people of the same class understand their own kind best. As a cold, astute, and unfeeling emperor, no one understood the Northern Desert chieftain Amodun better than the Old Emperor. After all, the latter was also someone who would even offer up his daughter to curry favor with imperial power.

The Old Emperor saw the situation perfectly clearly. For Consort Yue and her childhood sweetheart, returning to the Northern Desert was a dead end! Whether to maintain relations between the two nations or to preserve the dignity of the Northern Desert!

Therefore, the Old Emperor deliberately gave Consort Yue and her lover hope, letting them believe a beautiful life awaited them tomorrow. Yet, at the moment they were most fulfilled, happiest, and most blissful, he personally crushed all their hopes!

Having escaped from the emperor's grasp, thinking they could live a good life with their lover, filled with longing for the future, only to die at the hands of her own birth father.

This ending was absolutely a hundred times more tragic than being captured by the emperor and executed directly. After all, losing something after having obtained it is far more painful than never having had it at all.

This was the Old Emperor's punishment for Consort Yue's betrayal.

The two heads in the box were the Old Emperor's sweet fruits of victory. Calling them a "birthday gift" was truly fitting.

When Shang Yechu first saw this part of the script, she was amazed by it. Just reading the text, she felt the Old Emperor played by Qin Tianye was utterly despicable, despicable in an innovative way, despicable in a soul-stirring way.

To cause someone's death is one thing; to make someone wish for death but find it unattainable, what is that?

In Shang Yechu's view, this episode's script sang a powerful counter-melody to many ancient palace dramas.

Shang Yechu had watched many TV dramas before where the female lead fell in love with the emperor. The emperors in those shows were all deeply affectionate, restrained, respectful of women, often using their broad-mindedness to *enable* the female lead and another man in a lifetime of devoted love. She used to find it quite moving, but now, looking back, it just felt weird in every way.

This was a beautification of the autocrat.

An emperor does not yield, *tolerate*, let go, or *enable*, because the very concept of an emperor is built upon privilege, autocracy, plunder, and destruction. The entire world belongs to the emperor. The emperor may not want something, but even things the emperor does not want, others cannot take.

This was the logic of "Tale of Cloud Incline." The Old Emperor might not have particularly liked Consort Yue, but he absolutely could not tolerate her betrayal. Therefore, he used this heart-piercing method to deal with a woman.

Feudal society had no place for love and freedom. For the sake of class, people could even betray familial bonds without hesitation.

After reading the script, Shang Yechu thought that after it aired, the ones who would get the most *criticism* would either be the Old Emperor or Amodun, the tiger that devours its cubs. She never expected that, after all the twists and turns, the one getting *criticized* would end up being herself.

Why? On what grounds?

The scene where Princess Pingzhao asks the question was originally designed to *introduce* the box of heads. Even without Princess Pingzhao, there would have been a Princess Tuzhao or a Princess Aozhao to ask. Shang Yechu was purely a tool to *highlight* the cruelty of the feudal dynasty. Furthermore, if Princess Pingzhao truly wanted to execute Consort Yue and her lover, why didn't she speak up when the two were captured, instead waiting until after they had both left to ask?

Even *getting criticized* should have some logic to it!

Look at the things being said in this hot search. Things like "feudal moralist," "why must women make things difficult for women," "more terrifying than the tiger is the ghost of its victim"... Someone who didn't know better might think Princess Pingzhao was the one who married Consort Yue.

Filled with confusion, a touch of *injustice*, and a large dose of *secret delight*, Shang Yechu logged into the Weibo account "KuiKui Who Loves Three-Five · Fengbao Devotee"—now renamed to "Kui Kui · Return My Xiao Fengque"—and began rapidly typing out a little essay to *rally the fans*.

Thanks to that *repost lottery*, Kui Kui's account had already accumulated over ten thousand followers. She was now a genuine major fan of Xiao Fengque. Shang Yechu logged into the account daily, reposting some Weibo posts, sharing some screenshots, maintaining the persona of an old-time fan.

@Kui Kui · Return My Xiao Fengque:

[#Princess Pingzhao feudal moralist# Xiao Fengque is a chivalrous hero who shoulders righteousness on both shoulders and challenges the heavens with her blade. She is a noble person who pities the old, supports the weak, cares for the poor, and aids the distressed. She is a true great *xia*, serving the nation and its people. She is not some fragile brothel woman, nor is she a feudal moralist who disregards life.

I originally thought the Feathers' rights defense would draw official attention. I never imagined it would only earn us official retaliation. We've waited for so long, didn't even have a proper New Year, cried for a long time in my room looking at Ah Feng on the cover of the original edition of "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon," only to be met with this outcome in the end.

Perhaps when disappointment reaches its peak, one truly has nothing left to say. I just want to say, those who betray true hearts should swallow a thousand needles.

@Director Yi Tianzhao @YechuLeaves]

The attached image was a screenshot of Princess Pingzhao's lines from "Tale of Cloud Incline," stolen from the #Princess Pingzhao feudal moralist# hot search topic.

The words of a major fan represent the *prevailing wind* of the entire circle. As soon as Kui Kui spoke, the Xiao Fengque book fan circle sprang into action. Within minutes, the second *charge* had begun.

Through multiple rounds of *fan wars*, fighting, and *fan purification*, the Xiao Fengque book fans had become a group with *considerably fierce combat power*. At the very least, for Shang Yechu, whose fanbase was not yet *large-scale* at this time, *thoroughly defeating* them was still *a sure thing*.

103 watched Shang Yechu's little maneuvers with a cold eye, remarking coolly, "Talking down Yang Huanyi is somewhat understandable, but why are you talking down yourself?"

Shang Yechu was tapping away on her phone screen. Hearing this, she scoffed, "Artificial intelligence really is simple-minded."

"You're *rallying the fans*?" 103 *surmised*.

"*Rallying the fans* is just one aspect," Shang Yechu said, switching to another account and typing out a comment. "Calculate, how much longer until 'Tale of Cloud Incline' finishes airing?"

103 immediately responded, "Excluding the break for the Lantern Festival Gala and the single episodes due to variety shows, there are twenty-three more days of airing."

At this point, 103 reacted. "Yi Tianzhao told you this 'Xiao Fengque' project is quite rushed, needs to be filmed within a month..."

Which meant the day "Tale of Cloud Incline" concluded would roughly coincide with the day "Xiao Fengque" wrapped filming!

"Seamless *transition*, seamless *transition*," Shang Yechu hummed an off-key tune. "While 'Tale of Cloud Incline' is *in full swing*, let me *divert some traffic* to my new movie a bit~"

Chapter 110: Food Obsession and Aunt Xianglin

The ratings for the third day of "Tale of Cloud Incline" reached a staggering 2.64%.

This figure undoubtedly placed it within the top tier of television drama ratings over the past three years.

Yunfeng Satellite TV, which had purchased the exclusive broadcast rights for "Tale of Cloud Incline," was grinning from ear to ear. This station was originally a third-rate broadcaster, with its ratings perennially hovering between tenth and fifteenth place. Zheng Bohan had approached five or six television stations back then, but as soon as they heard this drama was going head-to-head with "Legend of Qingyun," they either politely declined or offered rock-bottom prices. This infuriated Zheng Bohan to no end.

After hitting walls everywhere, Zheng Bohan had planned to try his luck at another major station. Unexpectedly, he ran into Yunfeng Satellite TV's station director, Ou Haijun, along the way.

Director Ou Haijun had originally intended to buy a few dramas that other stations had already aired for several rounds to make do, but he happened to encounter Zheng Bohan, who was a treasure waiting to be discovered. Zheng Bohan's asking price for the rights wasn't low, equivalent to more than half of Yunfeng Satellite TV's annual copyright budget. In Zheng Bohan's view, a good product shouldn't be sold cheaply.

After watching a portion of the sample episodes, Director Ou Haijun resolutely and decisively decided—to buy it!

With immense personal courage, the station director made the call under tremendous pressure, staking his own position as director to purchase this drama, whose price was astronomical for Yunfeng Satellite TV.

Choosing to air "Tale of Cloud Incline" on this station could be described as a disastrous start. Despite this, Yunfeng Satellite TV settled the payments quite promptly, without any of the usual haggling or foot-dragging issues.

Deeply moved, Zheng Bohan's shameless act of riding the coattails of the hype back then was partly motivated by not wanting this decent station to lose money.

The facts proved that Ou Haijun's decision was correct.

On the very first day of the broadcast, advertisers swarmed in like sharks smelling blood. After the ratings for the second day came out, this station, which previously only had ads for elderly bone-strengthening granules and kidney health supplements, actually received olive branches extended by brands like cosmetics, shampoo, and instant food—

And after the ratings for the third day came out, Yunfeng Satellite TV's email and phone lines were nearly paralyzed from being clogged.

Ou Haijun had been in high spirits recently, feeling relaxed and content. Barring any accidents, "Tale of Cloud Incline" should be able to break the 3% ratings barrier.

How many dramas have broken 3% in recent years?

Director Ou Haijun's delight was just a microcosm. In fact, as the series aired longer, a wave of "Tale of Cloud Incline" mania had already swept across major platforms.

As "Tale of Cloud Incline" aired episode by episode, this mania, anchored by discussions about the plot, explorations of anti-feudalist ideas, and debates over controversial characters, spread like a virus across the social networks of the younger generation!

And among them, the most controversial character was not the male lead Qin Tianye, nor the female lead Su Ge. It was a minor character no one could have imagined.

Princess Pingzhao.

In terms of screen time alone, Princess Pingzhao's appearance was even less than that of the old eunuch by the emperor's side. However, if we're talking about presence, perhaps even the white moonlight Empress played by Su Ge was slightly less prominent than her!

From the weak, lovestruck image in Episode 4, the feudalist defender image in Episode 6, to the recently aired Episodes 8, 10, and 12, Princess Pingzhao had successively acquired labels like "more of a hindrance than a help," "the Great Yun fence-sitter," and "a skinflint like Zhou Bapi."

Although after each episode aired, some netizens would post lengthy drama reviews arguing that Princess Pingzhao's actions actually had deeper meanings. But most netizens gradually grew tired of this trick, viewing it as fans trying to save face and amuse themselves. After all, with so many episodes having passed, if Princess Pingzhao were truly as strategically brilliant as her fans claimed, there should have been some hints by now.

Of course, there was also a portion of netizens who firmly believed in the analytical reviews and maintained a "the crowd is drunk, only I am sober" mentality, persistently arguing and fighting with various other netizens.

Before brainwashing others, one must first brainwash oneself. This rule is universally applicable.

Both camps were exceptionally firm in their stances, leading to increasingly larger conflicts. During this process, many people were initially just casual viewers passing the time. However, through daily reinforcement, arguments, and online fights, they gradually developed into steadfast fans of the Princess Pingzhao character.

The character's direction was tangibly linked to their dignity and correctness; Princess Pingzhao's persona and positioning were tied to their right to breathe on the internet!

Without anyone urging them, this initial group of character fans spontaneously formed small teams to control comments, like and repost content, and generate data, doing their utmost to prove Princess Pingzhao's importance to the "Tale of Cloud Incline" production team.

Strangely enough, although everyone cursed Princess Pingzhao, the ratings for episodes featuring her were always slightly higher than those without her. Not by much—around 0.2, 0.3 points. The number was small, but the value it represented was not. The audience in Dragon State was vast; behind these zero-point-something numbers were millions upon millions in revenue!

Even more peculiar was that in the episodes where Princess Pingzhao appeared, the plot's climax often coincided with the moment Princess Pingzhao made an important decision!

Episode 4, the moment Princess Pingzhao showed her face and went to find the emperor; Episode 6, the moment she asked the emperor why he didn't execute Consort Yue; Episode 8, the moment she petitioned the emperor on behalf of an innocent commoner girl accusing a prince, but accidentally brought the wrong case file...

The audience seemed to harbor a bizarre, voyeuristic curiosity. While spitting venom at this foolish and wicked woman, they couldn't wait to see what other stupid or evil things she would do. After getting their wish, they would then heap even harsher curses and mockery upon her.

Princess Pingzhao's loyal fans lived on the vast internet like lonely individuals with pica or widowed Xianglin's Wife. Over and over again, they would prattle to passing viewers, "Princess Pingzhao isn't like that... She's a very, very good, ambitious character... Her depth and schemes need to be savored carefully to be appreciated..."

And the viewers would respond with even more caustic ridicule: "Xianglin's Wife, are you having delusions again!"

Just at this juncture, the actress playing Princess Pingzhao, Shang Yechu, took on the lead female role in another film. Given her thin resume and the "Xiao Fengque" series' previous track record of favoring connected persons, a torrent of people questioned whether she had used backdoor connections. Furthermore, Shang Yechu herself even faced boycotts from a large number of original novel fans due to her role as Princess Pingzhao.

Princess Pingzhao in the drama kept getting cursed at, and Shang Yechu and Princess Pingzhao's fans outside the drama were also getting cursed at for her sake. The character fans, often called "three-month drama fans," felt empathy and pity for the actress Shang Yechu for the first time.

At this moment, Shang Yechu only needed to step forward and express solidarity with Princess Pingzhao's fans to effortlessly harvest a large batch of character fans.

However, Shang Yechu did not.

Shang Yechu continued to film "Xiao Fengque" in the crew with utmost dedication. Since she had the most scenes and basically nailed them in one take, the filming progress was rapid. According to Yi Tianzhao's estimate, they could likely finish filming ahead of the planned schedule.

Chapter 111: The Fast Food Era?

Time flies, and in the blink of an eye, both *Tale of Cloud Incline* and *Legend of Qingyun* have aired up to their thirty-eighth and thirty-ninth episodes.

Tale of Cloud Incline only has forty episodes. That means the finale will air tomorrow.

For *Tale of Cloud Incline*, this is the prelude to its grand finale. For *Legend of Qingyun*, it is the prelude to the moment when a massive shadow looming over it will finally begin to dissipate.

So far, the highest viewership rating for *Legend of Qingyun* remains the 2.49 from its premiere day. Since then, it has been on a continuous downward slide. The ratings kept dropping, and even during the dramatic climax in the middle of the series, the viewership was a pitiful 1.55.

Because they are the same genre, *Legend of Qingyun*'s entire audience base has almost been sucked dry by *Tale of Cloud Incline*.

What's even more devastating for *Legend of Qingyun* is that, despite low TV ratings, it hasn't managed to surpass *Tale of Cloud Incline* on online streaming platforms either!

The total view count for *Legend of Qingyun* on Holo Video currently stands at 3.03 billion.

In 2017, this is already an outstanding achievement. When a show airs simultaneously on TV and online platforms, the former inevitably eats into the latter's share. A view count of 3.03 billion is enough for *Legend of Qingyun* to look down upon its peers and boast about a success story.

That is, provided it hadn't encountered *Tale of Cloud Incline*.

The online view count for *Tale of Cloud Incline* is 4.8 billion!

An astronomical gap of 1.8 billion sits between the two dramas, like an insurmountable Mariana Trench, a cold, mocking chasm.

Meta Pictures is grinning from ear to ear, allocating more marketing resources to *Tale of Cloud Incline*, aiming to push the total view count past 5 billion by the finale. Even the Privileged Princess Su Ge's drama *The Chocolate-Flavored Toast of Love* has quietly changed its broadcast schedule, waiting to see the aftermath.

At this point, *Legend of Qingyun*'s performance can only be considered decent. And if judged by its investment scale, this result can be described as a colossal flop!

Tale of Cloud Incline, with only one-tenth the investment of *Legend of Qingyun*, has achieved several times its success. How could the *Legend of Qingyun* production team not be filled with resentment?

Zheng Bohan, having now exacted his revenge, is in high spirits, buoyed by success. He uses the *Tale of Cloud Incline* Official Weibo account daily to actively interact with fans, living in such bliss that he forgets all else.

Not just him, but his old screenwriter buddies have also experienced a resurgence of their careers. *Tale of Cloud Incline* is an anthology series, and each screenwriter's style is quite different. There's romantic comedy, melodramatic tragic romance, folk horror tales, and more serious historical drama styles.

Each style has its audience, and these old-timers have been floating on clouds lately, praised by their respective fan groups. They get together every few days to "maintain connections," but it's really just to boast and flatter each other.

They've been lonely for too long, forgotten by audiences for too long. Suddenly finding success again makes them even happier than when they first became famous in their youth.

Everything is perfect.

There's only one slight regret: so far, the two dramas still haven't had a direct, head-to-head confrontation.

Since one is a long-form, serious historical drama and the other is an anthology black comedy, although the fans fight fiercely, there's rarely any real side-by-side analysis comparing their plots and themes. For example, although both are classic romance films, few people would take *Titanic* and *It Happened One Night* and compare them frame by frame.

Although it's regrettable, Zheng Bohan isn't anxious.

Based on his understanding of Xu Hanwen and that script that was altered beyond recognition, it's about time for Xu Hanwen to make his move.

Legend of Qingyun has a total of eighty episodes. Around the fortieth episode is a turning point where the female lead, Qingyun, will abandon her old love and embrace a new life.

This turning point is a crucial juncture. They need to figure out how to retain old viewers while also attracting new ones!

Zheng Bohan is waiting. Patiently waiting for Xu Hanwen to deliver his face for a good slapping.

4:30 PM, approaching the end of the workday.

Today is Friday. There are three hours left until the airing of the thirty-eighth and thirty-ninth episodes of *Legend of Qingyun* and *Tale of Cloud Incline*.

This time slot is the pre-heating period for marketing. If you want to buy a trending topic, you should start heating it up around now.

At 4:45 PM, a lengthy, impactful article suddenly appeared out of thin air on the long-dormant Weibo account of a certain retired director!

@Director-Lin Haishan:

[If the Emperor Doesn't Love Me, Is That Anti-Feudalism? – A Debate on *Tale of Cloud Incline* and *Legend of Qingyun*.

The hottest topic recently is undoubtedly the battle of the two 'Yun' dramas. One is *Legend of Qingyun*, the other is *Tale of Cloud Incline*. As a director, one should keep up with the times, so I've watched both works.

First, let's talk about *Legend of Qingyun*, recently labeled by some media as "an idol drama disguised as a palace intrigue," "a cheesy drama," "old-fashioned," etc. The other drama of the same genre, *Tale of Cloud Incline*, is widely praised by netizens as "anti-feudal," "black humor," "every cut draws blood."

I was very puzzled. How could two dramas that look so similar have such a huge gap in reception? However, after watching them both up to now, I realize rumors cannot be fully believed.

Is *Tale of Cloud Incline*, so highly praised as "anti-imperialist and anti-feudal," truly opposing these things?

Let's see! So far, over thirty episodes of *Tale of Cloud Incline* have aired, and what it narrates is nothing but the suffering of women. A white-haired palace woman in the cold palace sits under a withered tree, babbling insanely about stories from ten or twenty years ago; a palace maid with broken legs has dying hallucinations before her lamp burns out; consorts believe they are the emperor's true love, only to find they are mere playthings...

Admittedly tragic, admittedly novel. But behind this lies bloody tears!

Tale of Cloud Incline is using the suffering of these women to sensationalize, to clown around for attention!

Ask yourself, if they truly pity these victims, why tell these stories in such a frivolous, mocking, almost derisive manner? Why package human blood-soaked buns as black humor and sell them to the audience? Why gleefully uncover these wounds and haughtily sprinkle salt on them?

Treating suffering as a gimmick, tears as punchlines, vulgarity as authenticity – this is the truth behind this so-called "anti-feudal" masterpiece!

As for the claim that *Legend of Qingyun* is an idol drama, it only highlights the absurdity of *Tale of Cloud Incline*!

Ask yourself, if the love between Qingyun and the emperor, and Zhu Xi, is idol drama tropes; then what are the tropes of the cold, ruthless Emperor of Yun Dynasty, repeatedly reminiscing about his deceased wife over thirty-plus episodes?

On one hand, they exhaustively portray the emperor's cold-bloodedness; on the other, they create a dreamy fantasy, a utopia of love for him and his so-called "white moonlight." Isn't this contradictory?

On one hand, they satirize the emperor's heartlessness; on the other, they glorify the emperor's love. Isn't this bizarre?

What lies hidden beneath this contradiction is actually the greed of *Tale of Cloud Incline*, wanting to have its cake and eat it too.

It wants the reputation of being anti-feudal and awakening, yet is unwilling to abandon the fundamental appeal of idol dramas. Therefore, *Tale of Cloud Incline* goes so far as to hire a so-called veteran actor and a rising young actress, wrapping the core of an idol drama, a wish-fulfillment drama, in layers of packaging, cloaking it in a sophisticated, high-end sugar coating, and serving it to the audience on a plate called "black humor."

It seems fragrant, but in reality, it stinks to high heaven.

In contrast, *Legend of Qingyun*, consistently criticized as an "idol drama," genuinely portrays women going to the battlefield, breaking free from constraints, supporting each other's growth within the icy palace, and using practical actions to resist the cold indifference of feudal society.

As of yesterday's episode, the female lead Qingyun in *Legend of Qingyun* has already abandoned her old love and embraced a new life. She gave up the love of an emperor, just to rush towards true freedom!

There is only one heroism in this world: having the courage to start anew after recognizing the cruelty of life.

Legend of Qingyun tells us that even if you are a former emperor's consort, you can cast aside the "three obediences and four virtues," the chastity archways, and bravely pursue a new life. Use your own two hands to chase a new life that belongs to you!

This is true anti-feudalism.

As a viewer, I admit I found *Tale of Cloud Incline* very entertaining, very easy to watch. I could laugh heartily without thinking too much.

But whenever I remember that my laughter is built upon stains of blood and tears, that joy turns into guilt.

As a director, a work like *Tale of Cloud Incline* triumphing over *Legend of Qingyun* is actually a sorrow of the fast-food era.]

Chapter 112: A Dream of Zhuang Zhou

It's here!

The production team of Legend of Qingyun finally couldn't sit still any longer.

Lin Haishan is an old friend of both Xu Hanwen and Zheng Bohan, and has directed several decent works. His status in the industry is very high. Now, his sudden opening salvo can be described as an onslaught.

To be honest, the old man's article is quite intimidating. After all, he's an educated man, and he has masterfully employed techniques like stirring emotions, provoking opposition, and substituting concepts. Viewers who haven't seen either series can easily develop a bad impression of Tale of Cloud Incline after reading this little essay; while viewers who have seen both series, even if they feel something is off in their hearts, find themselves tongue-tied, not knowing how to refute it.

When surfing the internet, many people have experienced this feeling—clearly thinking what the other person said is wrong, yet not knowing where to start refuting. They can only retreat in defeat, filled with anger, and then the more they think about it, the angrier they become, holding onto the grudge. It's only many days or even many years later that a flash of inspiration strikes—oh! That's how I should have replied to him back then!

This kind of powerless hindsight is as frustrating as it gets. At the very least, the viewers of Tale of Cloud Incline were thoroughly disgusted. A group of people gathered under Lin Haishan's Weibo, clumsily and inarticulately defending themselves, not understanding how watching a series made them sinners who "consume suffering and bear guilt in their hearts."

In contrast, the fans of Legend of Qingyun naturally felt triumphantly elated for a while. It was as if they had met a rare soulmate:

[Truly a great director with humanistic concern! Nailed it!]

[Wuwuwu thank you, Director Lin, Little Qingyun really suffered a lot of grievances...]

[Truth becomes clearer the more it is debated. Time will prove which work is the audience's true choice.]

[A sudden enlightenment... No wonder I felt so many discomforts while watching Tale of Cloud Incline. Finally, the director made it clear.]

[I only watched two episodes of Tale of Cloud Incline. This series really has a condescending air, everywhere exuding that narcissistic, self-pitying vibe of literati.]

[Qingyun used her own life as collateral to vouch for a palace maid whose background she didn't fully know, ultimately saving the maid's entire family; Princess Pingzhao caused the deaths of hundreds of innocent people, yet practiced calligraphy in her room as if nothing happened. Which series has more human warmth is immediately obvious.]

[Yes, yes, yes, that part with Princess Pingzhao really triggered my aversion to stupidity. She was clearly petitioning the emperor on behalf of a commoner woman to accuse the Eighth Prince of forcibly seizing land, causing her family's ruin, but she ended up taking the wrong case file box—grabbing the brocade box sent by the Eighth Prince's maternal family instead. After submitting it, she got a severe scolding from the emperor...]

[That's what comedy series are like, selling mindless stupidity without even considering character consistency.]

[The civil and military officials in Tale of Cloud Incline even come to blows in the court right in front of the emperor. So tacky and contrived.]

[Can't be helped. It's the fast-food era. This kind of pretentiously profound, brainless comedy has more market.]

The voices of Tale of Cloud Incline fans defending the series were pushed into an unnoticed corner. For every comment posted by a Tale of Cloud Incline fan, dozens or even hundreds of mocking replies would bubble up.

And this was just the beginning.

Half an hour later, directors and screenwriters led by Xu Hanwen began forwarding this critical review in droves. Even some writers and investors unrelated to the entertainment industry caught wind and rushed to lend their support.

[Please allow different voices!]

[Enduring, meaningful works are becoming fewer and fewer. It's the choice of the market and the audience.]

[Every time you press the remote, you are voting for the world you want.]

[Thank you, Director Lin, for speaking out. We collaborated once many years ago, and I deeply admired Director Lin's character. After all these years, his chivalrous heart remains undiminished.]

[Today I bury the flowers, others laugh at my folly; who will bury me when my time comes? The act of seriously creating high-quality series may indeed seem somewhat "foolish" nowadays, but it is precisely this folly that forms the foundation of art's existence.]

[After reading the entire article, I fell silent, speechless, with only tears falling.]

...

This was real business warfare.

In 2017, many people still held a psychological belief in authority. Seeing so many well-known directors, writers, and producers forwarding it inevitably made them identify more with this little essay.

Guanjun Century mobilized a large number of its connections in the literary and artistic circles this time, striving to tarnish the reputation of Tale of Cloud Incline before its finale.—The ratings were already a foregone conclusion, but a series' reputation is linked to its long-tail effect. If they could solidify Tale of Cloud Incline's rotten reputation for consuming suffering, then Guanjun Century's old rival, Meta Pictures, would have one fewer series with long-tail reputation!

Moreover, Legend of Qingyun has a full eighty episodes. At this critical juncture, marketing slogans like "anti-feudalism," "feminism," and "equality and freedom" to pull in viewers experiencing post-Tale of Cloud Incline series withdrawal was the top priority.

It could both annoy the old rival and attract new viewers to make money. Such a win-win situation—how could they not put in the effort?

Such a bloody and fierce scene was truly rare, and the marketing accounts also swarmed out, launching a major discussion about the plots of the two series.

In this discussion, the first to get hurt were not Shang Yechu nor Zheng Bohan, but rather that group of outdated old screenwriters led by Fu Yu, Jing Fengnian, Liu Hong, and others.

Guanjun Century was clearly well-prepared. They dug up all the terrible series and movies these old-timers had written in recent years, found dozens or even hundreds of marketing accounts to post screenshots and collectively mock them.

[Works by Tale of Cloud Incline screenwriter Jiao Xiachun: Legend of the Three Heavenly Gods, Hou Yi is the illegitimate son of the Jade Emperor.]

[Works by Tale of Cloud Incline screenwriter Jing Fengnian: Another Year of Spring, the Imperial Consort gouges out the princess's eyes, stabs her, drugs her, and in the end, the two live happily ever after.]

[Works by Tale of Cloud Incline screenwriter Liu Hong: Three Rivers Water, One River of Love, the male lead takes the female lead flying in the sky, and they give birth to a child on a white cloud.]

...

These skeletons in the closet could nearly get Zheng Bohan beaten up, so the sheer, thunderous absurdity of them goes without saying. Isolated and posted, they immediately triggered a massive wave of collective ridicule!

[Holy shit holy shit holy shit I'd pay a fortune for a pair of eyes that haven't seen this crap]

[Hard to imagine what's going on in their heads...]

[No wonder Tale of Cloud Incline is so lowbrow. Turns out the screenwriters are just a bunch of lowlives...]

[Mom ahhhhhhh how do I deal with not being able to look directly at Tale of Cloud Incline anymore!!!]

[The screenwriters of Tale of Cloud Incline are just this bunch of freaks and monsters, no wonder it reeks of profiting from others' misery]

[Who is the audience for this kind of series?]

[Tale of Cloud Incline viewers love watching this [hehe]]

Mockery of the screenwriters' past works, judgment of Tale of Cloud Incline's themes, attacks on Princess Pingzhao, and praise for Legend of Qingyun. A vigorous, flourishing grand discussion surged across the entire internet!

And the official Weibo account of Tale of Cloud Incline, right at the center of the storm, remained completely silent the whole time. Adopting a posture of lying flat and accepting the ridicule.

Amidst this feverish atmosphere, episodes thirty-eight and thirty-nine of Tale of Cloud Incline aired on time.

The names of these two episodes were also strange. Episode thirty-eight was titled Record of Nanke, and episode thirty-nine was titled—

Record of Zhuang Zhou.

Chapter 113: Record of Nanke

Sun Xiaoxiao and her family huddled nervously in front of the television, awaiting the arrival of the thirty-eighth episode of *Tale of Cloud Incline*.

The cosmetics and shampoo commercials were long and tedious, the clothing and mini hot pot ads equally annoying. As the Sun family anxiously waited for the ads to finish, they speculated about tonight's plot.

"Xiaoxiao," her mom said while cracking sunflower seeds, "what did that preview you saw on—on Weibo say?"

"*Tale of Cloud Incline* doesn't release previews, only behind-the-scenes clips after the episode airs." Sun Xiaoxiao was rushing to finish her homework. The workload at the start of the new semester wasn't heavy yet; she had started writing as soon as she got home from school and was almost done now.

Her mom said disappointedly, "It's ending so soon. I'm feeling quite uneasy."

Her dad, playing on his phone, chimed in, "A dream in Nanke, Zhuangzi dreaming of a butterfly. Are both episodes today related to dreams?"

"People on Weibo said today's two episodes were both written by Zheng Bohan himself," Sun Xiaoxiao said, finishing the last character and stuffing her homework book back into her bag with a sense of relief, as if pardoned. "I wonder what kind of dream they'll do?"

As they spoke, a melodious and cheerful tune began to play, and the family of three fell silent in unison—it was starting!

After the opening song ended, there was, as usual, a short snippet of the plot. This snippet was strange too; the scene was no longer the opulent palace backdrop, but a place of yellow sand everywhere and swirling, heavy snow.

The snow fell like powder, like sand, scattering across the desert ground, soaking the golden-yellow sand into a deep, dark yellow.

The camera gradually pulled back. The soaked, darkened sand formed three large characters:

Record of Nanke.

A line of small text appeared below the image:

Episode Screenwriters: Shang Yechu, Zheng Bohan

!!!

Sun Xiaoxiao scrambled to her feet!

Sun Xiaoxiao rubbed her eyes hard, then stared intently—

It was true! In the screenwriter credit, before Zheng Bohan's name, Shang Yechu's name was indeed written!

What was going on?

Even Sun Xiaoxiao's mom noticed: "Huh? Isn't Shang Yechu that useless princess? She can write scripts too?"

My Little Chu is so amazing!

Sun Xiaoxiao felt her breath catch, itching to immediately open Weibo, rush into Shang Yechu's super topic, and report this to the few thousand sisters fighting a lonely battle there. For the past month, they had been repeating the cycle of "getting scolded — defending — explaining — being mocked by bystanders." They desperately needed a shot in the arm!

Sun Xiaoxiao gazed longingly at the TV screen but ultimately chose to sit back on the sofa and watch the drama first. More than reporting to her fellow fans, she wanted to see what this episode written by Shang Yechu was like.

The scene of snow and yellow sand gradually faded, and the scenery on screen slowly transformed into a spring-like vibrancy. Under a sky full of peach blossoms, a figure in green robes sat beneath a tree, playing a zither.

The camera focused, and the woman's face became clear—it was actually the Empress, played by Su Ge!

In the hotel contracted by the *Xiao Fengque* crew, Shang Yechu was also watching this episode.

Shang Yechu's current feelings were complex. She hadn't expected Zheng Bohan to still add Shang Yechu's name to the screenwriter credits even after she had politely declined. This was undoubtedly an affirmation, a silent show of support.

Shang Yechu didn't hold any particular respect or fondness for Zheng Bohan. She merely saw him as a high-quality, worthwhile connection to maintain, the first stepping stone on her ladder to success. His action had surprised Shang Yechu, but it also warmed her heart.

As Shang Yechu watched Su Ge playing the zither on screen, she recalled the fiasco during Su Ge's filming of this episode.

Since Su Ge herself was completely clueless about playing the zither, her finger movements were comparable to spicy chicken feet; it was less playing the zither and more scratching it. Zheng Bohan had exhausted himself trying to get Su Ge to learn even a little of the proper technique, but the young lady had lazily refused. In the end, it was Shang Yechu who stepped in. Casually mentioning to Su Ge, "Actually, you could use a body double for the zither playing. Wouldn't it be fine to have Teacher Qin act opposite the double?" Only then did the young lady, as if injected with adrenaline, learn the most basic fingering.

The Empress played a few notes on the zither. Suddenly, footsteps sounded from outside the peach grove.

These footsteps were utterly ordinary, yet they disrupted the Empress's heart like a magic spell. Abruptly, she hit a wrong note.

A tall, sturdy figure strode over, stood before the Empress, and looked down at her.

The newcomer's tone was extremely gentle, but the words he uttered left no room for doubt: "The world is in great chaos. I intend to undertake a grand endeavor. Will you follow me?"

The voice was Qin Tianye's voice. Compared to the deep, magnetic tone from the previous thirty-plus episodes, this voice was very clear and bright, carrying a youthful air in its inflection.

Even though only Qin Tianye's back was shown in the scene, the audience instantly realized—this was Qin Tianye from his youth!

The Empress looked up. The myriad tender feelings shimmering in her eyes as she gazed at the man were palpable. She didn't speak, yet that wordless love had seeped into every fiber of her being.

The Empress nodded.

From beginning to end, Qin Tianye never showed his face.

This was normal. Once his face was shown, that mature masculine face would ruin the delicate, hazy atmosphere between the young man and woman, pulling the audience out of the story.

To perform in this episode, Qin Tianye had dieted fiercely, losing eighteen pounds in five days. All to portray the slender frame of a youth.

The scene shifted. It was now Qin Tianye on a warhorse, about to head for the battlefield. The tall, majestic knight wore armor, revealing only a pair of eyes.

Those eyes gazed heavily at his wife standing beside the horse: "I'm leaving."

The wife of the Emperor from his grassroots days nodded without uttering a word. She merely raised her hand, lifted a knife, and cut off a lock of her own hair.

The wife tied the hair onto the Emperor's blade and waved goodbye to him.

The scene shifted again, showing the Emperor galloping across the battlefield. With a single sweep of his great blade, he reaped a harvest of fine heads.

The lock of black hair tied to the blade's ring was also stained with blood.

The scene changed several more times, showing several more fragments of the Emperor and Empress's shared past in their youth. They shared joys and hardships, supported each other in adversity, faced life and death together. Though they were just scattered fragments, they weren't boring. Paired with the drawn-out, sorrowful background music, they became even more tear-jerking.

The final moment finally arrived. The Empress's face grew paler and paler. Finally, on a certain dusk where the setting sun was as red as blood, the Empress held the Emperor's hand, a trickle of blood seeping from her mouth, unable to speak another word.

The Emperor's expression was cold and hard as iron. Not a single tear fell from the corner of his eye, yet that suffocatingly heavy grief was transmitted through every breath, every pause, every blink.

The Empress gave the Emperor one final nod.

The hand held in the Emperor's grasp quietly slipped away.

At the same moment, the Emperor closed his eyes.

Still, not a single tear fell from the corner of his eye, yet the warmth in those eyes cooled inch by inch, never to regain any semblance of life again.

Right then, a seven or eight-year-old girl suddenly rushed forward from a corner, threw herself on the Empress's body, and wailed loudly, "Mother! I want my mother!"

The tragic background music reached its crescendo at this moment.

The blood-red sun sank behind the mountain peaks. A flock of wild geese flew past, their coarse, grating cries carrying far...

The expressionless man and the weeping girl stood before the already cold body, appearing exceptionally desolate.

The scene gradually faded. The cries of the wild geese sounded again. The camera descended from the sky and settled back before a desk.

The Emperor, clad in black dragon robes, trembled and slowly opened his eyes.

Chapter 114: Dream or not?

Only now did Sun Xiaoxiao dare to breathe loudly. "A Southern Bough Dream... So the emperor was dreaming of the past?"

Sun Xiaoxiao's mother, sniffing, had already cried through half a pack of tissues. "Maybe."

Her father was also filled with emotion. "Young married couples... how could one bear to part? It's just like your mom and me."

Sun Xiaoxiao was young, and besides, her mind was completely preoccupied with Shang Yechu, making it hard for her to empathize like her parents. She even found it a bit strange—the tone of this episode was so tragic, wasn't it a bit out of sync with the overall style of the series?

Of course, this episode had Shang Yechu involved in the scriptwriting, so there might indeed be a touch of a maiden's heart. If this was Shang Yechu's intention, she would still indulge her a little...

As she was thinking this, on the screen, Qin Tianye rubbed his neck and asked the Old Eunuch beside him, "What time is it now?"

"Reporting to Your Majesty, it is the hour of Zi. Today is the Ghost Festival."

"The Ghost Festival?" The emperor frowned slightly. "All of you, withdraw. I wish to be alone."

The Old Eunuch led the Palace Attendants away as ordered. In the vast bedchamber, only the emperor remained.

The emperor rubbed his sore neck, stood up, and stretched his limbs.

Just then, the sound of light, floating footsteps approached. A flicker of vigilance passed through the emperor's eyes, but when he looked up, he froze completely on the spot!

In the flickering candlelight, a slender figure in cyan robes approached gracefully.

The bright lamplight gilded her face with a golden edge. Closer, closer... the face the emperor had longed for day and night appeared before his eyes.

The late Empress stood before the now-aged emperor and slowly took a step forward. Her fair, delicate face was now only an arm's length from the emperor's.

The emperor's eyeballs stopped moving. The whole man had become a statue.

The Empress reached out, gently cupping the emperor's cheek. In a tone that was as soft, as dreamlike, as sorrowful, and as bewildered as could be, she slowly said:

"Husband, how did you suddenly become so old?"

Drip.

A very faint sound.

Only then did Sun Xiaoxiao realize that, at some point, she was already crying her eyes out.

Mom and Dad were also crying their hearts out; the tissue paper in the trash bin was almost full.

Was this Little Chu's talent? This was just too... too moving!

My tears are worthless!

Sun Xiaoxiao was both moved and proud, wishing she could proclaim to the world: My baby Shang Yechu is just this awesome!

Having been busy catching up on homework and having no time to check Weibo, Sun Xiaoxiao didn't know yet that Weibo had already begun heavily criticizing the emperor and empress's relationship.

Sun Xiaoxiao wiped her tear-blurred eyes and focused intently on the screen. Who would have thought that the next moment, a sudden change occurred!

The tender, affectionate Empress suddenly drew a small dagger from her sleeve and viciously stabbed it toward the emperor's chest!

Sun Xiaoxiao & Dad & Mom: !!!

Just as the dagger's tip shrieked, tearing through the fabric of the dragon robe, *Clang!* — a metallic sound rang out. It turned out the dagger had struck a soft armor!

Beneath the emperor's dragon robe, he was wearing a layer of soft armor!

Seeing this, a flash of despair crossed the "Empress's" eyes. She pulled the dagger back, aiming to stab her own neck!

But faster than words can tell, the emperor grabbed the "Empress's" arm. A clearly audible *crack* was heard, and the "Empress's" arm went limp, hanging down.

Still unsatisfied, the emperor raised his hand and twisted the "Empress's" other arm, breaking it too. Immediately after, he viciously kicked the "Empress," sending her sprawling to the ground!

The entire combo flowed seamlessly, leaving the Sun Xiaoxiao family in front of the screen utterly dumbfounded.

The emperor roughly hauled the "Empress" up and flung her in front of the desk, simultaneously shouting sharply, "Guards!"

This sudden turn of events had completely stunned the entire Sun family. They saw the emperor looking perfectly alert, his expression icy cold, without a trace of the earlier dazed, trapped-in-memories look.

Eunuchs and Guards filed in, each holding their breath, their expressions solemn. "Your Majesty."

The emperor pinched the bridge of his nose, pointing at the "Empress" on the ground—the assassin who looked exactly like the Empress—and said coldly, "Interrogate."

???

Sun Xiaoxiao felt an indescribable shock pass through her heart, almost making her want to swear.

Give me back my tears! Give me back my feelings!

The scene shifted. The assassin was now covered in whip marks, nail wounds, and burns from branding irons, her whole body looking as if fished out of water. The emperor, meanwhile, sat calmly nearby, sipping tea and reviewing Memorials as if the scene before him didn't exist.

The sky was pitch black. Finally, unable to withstand the severe torture, the assassin weakly spat out a few words:

"I'll confess... I'll confess..."

"Who?" The emperor didn't even look up, drawing a red circle on a memorial with his vermilion brush.

"It's... the Seventh Prince..."

The emperor suddenly lifted his eyes. The chill in his gaze was like ice and snow in the depths of winter.

"Drag her away and keep her under strict guard. Don't let her die."

The Guards responded with a "Yes, sir!" and dragged the assassin, limp as a dead dog, away.

At this point, the parental love story had turned into a suspenseful palace intrigue drama. Sun Xiaoxiao watched with her heart pounding, both shocked and, with a stubborn, lingering hope, anticipating... The emperor didn't kill that assassin. Could it be because of her face? Could it be because of lingering affection?

Although her favorites were Shang Yechu and Princess Pingzhao, Sun Xiaoxiao actually did enjoy shipping the parental couple a little. The emperor's ruthless actions had cooled her shipping heart by half. But then she thought, the assassin wasn't the real Empress. Perhaps the emperor acted this way precisely because he hated her for impersonating the Empress, for tarnishing the purity of that memory in his heart?

Her ship could still sail! And it was even better now!

Just as she was making this mental adjustment, the scene on the screen had already shifted to the Seventh Prince's mansion.

The Seventh Prince stood in his mansion, gazing distantly in the direction of the imperial palace.

"Bong— Bong— Bong—"

Nine bell tolls!

The Seventh Prince's spirits lifted. His trusted aide standing beside him also revealed an excited expression. "My lord, it's done!"

The Seventh Prince clenched his fist, turned, and strode back into the room, giving the order:

"All generals, heed my command! Follow me into the palace to quell the rebels and capture the treacherous traitors!"

The generals in the mansion were all ready and waiting. In an instant, large contingents of troops were already thundering through the streets of the imperial city!

"Kill the traitors! Aid the king! Protect the imperial carriage! Purge the evil around the ruler!"

The Seventh Prince, holding a heavy sword and mounted on his horse, looked majestic and imposing. "Follow me, charge into the imperial city!"

Large squads of black-armored soldiers moved like ghosts, sweeping across the empty, deserted streets.

The camera gradually rose, shifting to a bird's-eye view. From high above, the troops advancing at dawn looked very much like moving black chess pieces.

The scene gradually transformed, becoming an actual chessboard. This board was clearly divided into black and white, though there were more black pieces than white.

Two fair fingers picked up a black piece and, with a *tap*, placed it right in the center of the chess game.

Checkmate.

Chapter 115: Episode 39

The screen went black, and the scene abruptly cut off.

Sun Xiaoxiao and her family were completely stunned.

Not just them—tonight, every viewer of "Tale of Cloud Incline" across the entire internet was stunned!

The ending credits song had already started playing, yet the tune that usually made audiences linger and appreciate it now went completely unnoticed.

Sun Xiaoxiao felt like she couldn't breathe; her eyeballs were practically bulging out of their sockets.

That hand just now—that hand just now!

Sun Xiaoxiao's parents started discussing, "Who was that person playing chess just now?"

"No idea. Looking at the hand, it seemed like a woman's hand..."

"How can you tell if it's a man or a woman from just two fingers..."

Sun Xiaoxiao couldn't spare the attention to listen to what her parents were saying anymore. She practically shot off like an arrow from a bowstring, immediately opening Weibo.

She tapped into the Weibo Hot Search list, and sure enough, the hashtag #Tale of Cloud Incline Chess Player# had already skyrocketed to the second spot on the trending list!

The top spot on the hot search was prominently #Tale of Cloud Incline Emperor and Empress#, but don't forget, the scene of the chess player's hand at the end of episode thirty-eight had only aired a few minutes ago!

To climb to second place on the hot search list in just a few minutes!

Sun Xiaoxiao's heart was pounding like a drum. She clicked into the topic, and sure enough, massive hordes of people were already in there, arguing fiercely—

[Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Whose hand was that at the end?! Whose was it?!]

[It's clearly Princess Pingzhao's hand, right?! Right?! Right?!]

[Need oxygen... Zheng Bohan, stopping here, you're gonna die...]

[Can't confirm it's Pingzhao's hand yet, only two fingers are shown. They're a bit slender and pale... but...]

[66666 I'm getting oxygen deprivation from watching this.]

[Ahhh I can't stand the pig-brains in this topic anymore. Use your atrophied little brains and think! The earlier plot said that before the Empress died, the Emperor only had her as his wife!!!]

After the Empress died, the Emperor then married all these concubines from the three palaces and six courts!!!

That means all these princes and princesses born later, including the Seventh Prince, have never seen the late Empress's true appearance—I beg you, brainless haters, use your pig-brains! Besides the Emperor, who else in this world could remember the late Empress's voice, appearance, and every mannerism? Who else could train an assassin identical to the late Empress???!?!]

[Don't be ridiculous. What, all the old ministers who saw the late Empress are dead? Couldn't it be an old minister supporting the Seventh Prince who found her?]

[Rushed to Shang Yechu's super topic and dug up screenshots. I've compiled every shot where Princess Pingzhao's hands are shown. Please, experts, compare those two fingers. This is really important to me, wuwu.]

[No one cares about the Seventh Prince's fate?]

[The Seventh Prince is already confirmed as a pawn. He's done for. Who cares about a cannon fodder?]

[The scumbag Emperor definitely came prepared. Seventh Prince, out.]

[I'm really about to die. Why can't they just air it all in one go...]

[Certain delusional fans are here again, muddying the waters to gild their own Princess Chunzhu, huh.]

[My girl's anti-fans smelled the scent and came running. Laughing till I faint. Afraid of getting slapped in the face?]

[Slapped in your dreams. Schemed and plotted, trained a knockoff version of your own mother to assassinate your father. Turns out your ally, the Seventh Prince, is so stupid it shows on his face. The dream of imitating the former dynasty's regent princess is shattered again~]

[Someone actually remembers the former dynasty's regent princess from episode twenty-eight! That princess was super cool! A thousand times better than Princess Pingzhao the pig. Too bad times and fate weren't on her side, and she still lost, wuwu.]

[When will Old Aunt Pingzhao and Old Aunt Pingzhao fans realize their only reliance is their Emperor father? Otherwise, she would've been beaten to death by her Imperial Consort in episode four. Wanting to kill your own father is truly stupid.]

The hot search was a chaotic mess. In the past, Sun Xiaoxiao would look at these comments and get so furious her lungs would explode every time. She could only get angry while arguing with people, and especially outrageous comments would even make her cry from anger.

However, today, Sun Xiaoxiao looked at these remarks and felt an oddly profound calm.

She exited this highly toxic hot search and clicked into Shang Yechu's super topic.

When Sun Xiaoxiao first followed this super topic, there were only a few dozen people in it. By tonight, there were already over nine thousand.

Compared to the atmosphere in the hot search, the mood in the super topic was much better. The fans who had endured for a month were even more excited than the casual viewers in the hot search, each of them running around in circles in the super topic, screaming like chickens.

[It must be our baby! It must be, wuwu!]

[Family, we're almost through the dark times. The final darkness before dawn, ahhhhhhh!]

[That's Little Chu's hand! It must be Little Chu's hand. I recognized it at a glance!]

[Everyone, stop arguing with those people in the hot search. They only believe what they want to believe.]

[I'm hanging by a thread, unable to breathe properly, not even daring to blink... I'm really about to have a heart attack.]

[Anonymously, hey, usually Yunfeng Satellite TV's ads are only about ten minutes. Why have they been playing for over twenty minutes today and still aren't done?]

[Sponsors paid up, that's why. These ads are charged by the second...]

[I really can't take it anymore. I want to see Little Chu slap faces left and right and dominate everyone right now, especially smashing the pig-faces of those dead sword tombs Lin Haishan and Xu Hanwen.]

[Sis, calm down, calm down. The ad countdown has five minutes left!]

[I originally wanted to go to Douban to read analysis posts about Little Chu to relax, but I didn't expect Douban exploded too. The whole internet is guessing.]

[In Douban's domestic drama group, a skyscraper thread popped up out of nowhere. All the old analysis posts got bumped to the top too.]

[Tieba exploded as well. In the domestic drama bar, it's a bloody battlefield.]

[Isn't Tieba mostly guys? Do guys even watch palace intrigue dramas?]

[Wei Tianchi, Liao Li, and Wang Miyun have a lot of male fans. Those male fans all hate "Tale of Cloud Incline," and within the show, they hate Zhaozhao the most...]

[I'm speechless. How does my sister manage to be disliked by both men and women... Little Chu only has us left.]

[Qin Tianye has quite a few male fans too. Su Ge's character purely exists in memories, so there's nothing to criticize. The others only appear for an episode or two, so even less to criticize. That leaves only Her Highness getting all the concentrated fire.]

[Just came back from Tieba. Damn impressive. The pro-Pingzhao faction and the anti-Pingzhao faction are doxxing each other. Even house numbers are out...]

[Tieba actually has people supporting Pingzhao? Really?]

It was a restless night.

For some, it was a night of anxiety and unease; for others, a night brimming with hope; for yet others, a night of trying, trying, and achieving nothing.

And tonight, "Tale of Cloud Incline" still had one more episode left to air.

Amidst the sea of arguments, the agonizingly long twenty-five minutes of advertisements finally ended. "Tale of Cloud Incline" Episode Thirty-Nine—"Record of Zhuang Zhou," finally began broadcasting.

Chapter 116: Palace Coup

Episode 39 was titled "Record of Zhuang Zhou."

The opening was quite unique. A butterfly landed on a blank tombstone, becoming the only pattern on that empty stone slab.

As the butterfly's wings fluttered, gradually, several large characters emerged on the tombstone:

Record of Zhuang Zhou.

Episode Writers: Shang Yechu, Zheng Bohan.

Sun Xiaoxiao's eyes darted around, her heart filled with both shock and delight. — Shang Yechu was also involved in episode 39? My Little Chu is just amazing!

Unlike the previous self-contained episodes, episode 39 was tightly connected to the content of episode 38. The scene started with the Seventh Prince leading troops into the palace. Upon reaching the palace gates, the Seventh Prince began calling for them to be opened.

The commander guarding the palace gates was the Seventh Prince's maternal uncle. According to their agreement, he would open the gates for the Seventh Prince, allowing him to enter the palace and seize the throne.

However, to the Seventh Prince's surprise, even after he signaled with torches according to their agreed-upon code, the gates remained motionless. Just as everyone was puzzled, with several "whooshing" sounds, a dense array of crossbows suddenly appeared on the battlements!

The cinematography in this episode was extremely concise and streamlined. With just a few brief shots and no dialogue needed, everyone could see exactly what was happening here.

The Seventh Prince inwardly cursed, shouting loudly, "Retreat!"

The entire army immediately surrounded and protected the Seventh Prince, covering his retreat. But it was already too late. Countless arrows descended like rolling thunder, instantly riddling a large portion of the men and horses like sieves.

The Seventh Prince took an arrow to the arm and fled in disarray. But at that moment, another military force charged head-on, clashing with the Seventh Prince's troops.

Within the drama, the Seventh Prince was already bewildered and could only fight wildly. Meanwhile, the audience, blessed with an omniscient perspective, clearly saw that those shooting arrows from the battlements were forces loyal to the Third Prince; while the other group fighting the Seventh Prince consisted of the Fifth and Sixth Princes' men.

The Emperor's four most capable sons were boiling into a chaotic stew, right under the Emperor's watchful eyes.

Elsewhere, the Emperor was leaning against a small table in his bedchamber, drinking a calming soup, spoonful by spoonful.

This calming soup had excellent sleep-inducing effects, ensuring a very restful sleep afterward. The Emperor, fearing it might contain something harmful, had openly and covertly sought several palace physicians to examine it. Before each consumption, he also tested it for poison using a silver needle and a young eunuch. Only then would he drink it with peace of mind.

No one's nerves could remain taut forever, and the Emperor was no exception. Now that his four foolish sons had obediently taken the bait, and these idiots still needed to fight each other for a good while, he only needed to sit back and wait calmly.

Four sons weren't enough. He needed to delay a while longer, to hook the other big and small fish.

Today's calming soup seemed to have a stronger flavor. The Emperor frowned after just one sip and put down the spoon.

"Why is the taste of this soup so heavy today?"

The old eunuch, the Emperor's most trusted servant, answered unhurriedly, "Your Majesty, this soup was personally simmered by the eldest princess this evening. Fearing it would grow cold, she ordered us to keep it warm over the fire..."

The old eunuch stole a glance at the Emperor, "...It has been kept warm over the fire for two hours. It must have reduced... Your Majesty, please forgive us. We will immediately prepare a new bowl."

"Forget it." Upon hearing it was medicine soup simmered by his foolish daughter, the Emperor's brow smoothed. "Why go to so much extra trouble?"

The Emperor drank a spoonful of the calming soup, tapped the spoon, and a reminiscent expression appeared on his face. "She's just like her mother, always fond of simmering these soups and medicinal brews."

That assassin who looked exactly like the Empress hadn't been without effect on the Emperor; at the very least, it had stirred up many memories.

The old eunuch's eyes and brows smiled like flowers. "The eldest princess has always loved sending these soups and brews. Although Your Majesty sometimes complains they are too strong, too weak, too cold, or too hot, you have never failed to drink them."

"Chatterbox." The Emperor raised an eyebrow and looked at the old eunuch. "Having followed Zhen for decades, you've grown increasingly glib-tongued."

The old eunuch replied respectfully, "Your Majesty treats this humble servant with leniency. It is this servant who has become presumptuous."

"Enough," the Emperor said, hastily drinking a few more spoonfuls of soup. "Wake Zhen in half an hour."

"This servant understands. This servant understands." The old eunuch, his back bent, helped the Emperor onto the dragon bed. His back was so curved, like a drawn bow.

Up to this scene, only ten minutes of the plot had passed, yet the sheer volume of information was making Sun Xiaoxiao's brain spin.

Calming soup... Calming soup...

Sun Xiaoxiao adored Shang Yechu and had rewatched *Tale of Cloud Incline* many times. She remembered... Princess Pingzhao seemed to have sent the Emperor medicinal soup many times...

On screen, the Emperor lay down on the dragon bed and soon fell into a deep, heavy sleep.

The old eunuch walked outside the room and whispered to the guards stationed at the door, "Guard His Majesty well here!"

The guards responded respectfully. The old eunuch walked to the central courtyard, strolling slowly.

Not long after, suddenly, a sharp whistle pierced the night sky!

Among the two rows of standing shadow guards, one person suddenly drew his blade and stabbed it into the chest of the man beside him!

As if it were a signal, immediately afterward, two more guards drew their swords, slashing at the men in front of them.

Those chosen to be imperial guards naturally possessed exceptional skills. The others were not useless fodder waiting to be slaughtered. The two factions quickly clashed into a chaotic melee.

The guards who struck first were clearly aiming for the Emperor inside the room, constantly charging toward the bedchamber. They were incredibly fierce and brave. Who knew who had planted these traitors? There were a full thirty of them!

The guards protecting the Emperor were few in number, hopelessly outmatched, and quite passive.

Seeing this, the old eunuch was frantic and utterly at a loss, shrieking, "Where are the Hongying Guards?! Come quickly to protect His Majesty!"

The old eunuch called out three times. Finally, several ghost-like shadows drifted down from the palace beams and the trees outside the hall.

The Hongying Guards were the Emperor's shadow guards. Usually, they were ghostly and almost never appeared before people.

The old eunuch's eyes quickly swept over the shadow guards, then he urgently said, "You must go and kill all those traitorous rebels immediately!"

The leader of the Hongying Guards said, "His Majesty has not issued an edict. We dare not act rashly."

The old eunuch was almost crying with anxiety. "His Majesty just took the calming soup. How about this: you first kill the traitorous rebels, and this old servant will go wake His Majesty!"

The leader still did not move. The old eunuch pleaded desperately, "This old servant has been with His Majesty since he began his endeavors! I will bear responsibility for anything! If His Majesty wants to behead someone, let it be my head! This old servant kneels before you—please act now!"

Hearing this, the leader of the Hongying Guards finally hesitated no longer and led his subordinates into the fray. Two other shadow guards escorted the old eunuch into the bedchamber.

The Hongying Guards were few in number but elite; in fact, there were only eight. As soon as the old eunuch entered the bedchamber, he hurriedly said, "You two, go outside and assist! Those traitors number forty or fifty, and they are even wearing armor..."

The two shadow guards dared not delay and hurried off.

At this moment, only the old eunuch and the Emperor remained in the bedchamber.

Despite such a major incident occurring, the Emperor still slept deeply, heavily, as if trapped in a dream from which he did not wish to awaken.

The old eunuch gazed at the sleeping Emperor. He did not step forward to wake him. Instead, he walked quickly a few steps, reaching the window of the bedchamber.

Sun Xiaoxiao's eyes widened—No way!

Chapter 117: A Page of History

This window was very familiar to the viewers of "Tale of Cloud Incline." Outside the window stood a tall pear blossom tree. The Emperor often stood here, gazing at the snow-like pear blossoms fluttering down, missing his deceased wife.

But at this moment, the Old Eunuch clearly had no leisurely mood for admiring flowers. Without the slightest hesitation, he pulled open the window. The cicadas buzzed on the summer night; the pear blossoms had long since fallen, leaving only a tree of swaying branches and leaves.

The Old Eunuch gently clapped his hands three times.

Suddenly, a slender hand appeared on the window frame, followed by a second one.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight.

Eight women dressed in maid's attire climbed through the window into the bedchamber!

Sun Xiaoxiao's entire family couldn't help but gasp softly.

These eight people were precisely characters who had appeared in previous episodes. Among them were discarded consorts from the cold palace, others were just ordinary palace maids.

Among them, one had her entire family killed by the Emperor, leaving her alone to survive; another had her sworn sister, as close as siblings, executed by the Emperor's decree; another formed a "paired meal" relationship with a eunuch, and after being reported, the eunuch refused to confess even unto death, and was casually sentenced to death by the Emperor...

These eight women were each emaciated to the bone, some could even be described as having their oil dried up and lamp extinguished. Their only common point was the deep-seated hatred for the Emperor burning in their eyes.

The Old Eunuch glanced at them and whispered, "Hurry." Then he went to the doorway to keep watch.

The eight women gathered around the Emperor's Dragon Bed. One of them bent down and untied a tattered, coarse rope from her foot. This hemp rope was dirty and worn, but looked very sturdy.

The smallest woman climbed onto the Emperor's Dragon Bed with light movements, wrapping the coarse rope around the Emperor's neck.

Several other women took off their socks, rolling them into cloth balls.

The women exchanged glances, nodding at each other. One palace maid gritted her teeth, pinching the Emperor's neck, refusing to let go no matter what; one woman pressed down hard on the Emperor's chest, one held down his left hand, another his right hand, and two women held down the Emperor's legs.

The remaining two women roughly stuffed the cloth balls into the Emperor's mouth, then immediately grabbed both ends of the coarse rope and pulled with all their might!

The Emperor's eyelids began to twitch. His eyes were not yet open, but his body had already begun to instinctively twist and struggle.

The Emperor had spent half his life on horseback, his strength was immense, almost kicking away the two women holding his legs. However, those two thin, withered women used the greatest effort of their lives, clinging desperately to his legs, refusing to relax.

The women pressing down on the Emperor were red-faced, their eyeballs almost bulging out. No one could explain why this group of frail women possessed such immense endurance, determination, and willpower, refusing to loosen their grip even a fraction as the Emperor kicked and struck them until blood flowed from their mouths and noses!

The woman pinching his neck pressed her hand over the Emperor's mouth, preventing him from spitting out the cloth ball. The two women pulling the rope strained with all their might.

In the extreme suffocation, the Emperor finally opened his eyes.

The first thing he saw was the palace maid covering his mouth. A flicker of confusion passed through his eyes—clearly, he did not know who these rebellious, lowly people before him were.

The Emperor struggled violently, trying to make a sound, but discovered something filthy and foul blocking his mouth. Seeing him awake, the women immediately increased their strength together!

Like a dying fish, the Emperor erupted with the greatest potential of his life, forcefully kicking away the two maids on his legs.

The women were not frightened into retreat. On the contrary, the two kicked-away women crawled back onto the Dragon Bed like dogs—however, this was not the seductive, alluring "climbing into bed" of traditional palace intrigue dramas; it carried death with it, like vengeful ghosts from the underworld coming to claim a soul!

The Emperor's imperial face flushed crimson, then turned into a murky purplish-blue. Those majestic dragon eyes were already rolling back, that imperial mouth which casually decided life and death drooled saliva, soaking the dirty, foul sock in his mouth.

The women increased their strength, pulling with all their might, carrying their deep-seated hatred, their resolve to die, their determination to drag this noble Son of Heaven down to hell with them!

They were bruised and swollen, faces covered in blood and grime; one of them even had an eye kicked blind by the Emperor.

They faced death with equanimity, even if thousands stood against them, they would go forward.

The Emperor's dragon body began to convulse. Foul-smelling excrement and urine seeped out from under the dragon robes, soaking the Dragon Bed, defiling the resplendent palace halls, the jade towers and pavilions.

—This was the incontinence symptom of someone about to die from suffocation.

The Emperor's dragon body struggled one last time, finally becoming still.

Even at the moment of death, his eyes remained wide open, not knowing why he died.

So, such a noble, wise and mighty, decisive in killing, heaven-ordained person could also die.

And die in such a filthy, dirty, foul, despicable way. Die so pitifully, contemptibly, tragically, laughably.

A hoarse, withered voice slowly sounded:

"This was an ordinary night in history. On this night, the founding emperor of the Yun Dynasty died at the hands of the most ordinary palace servants."

This was the first time the drama "Tale of Cloud Incline" had a narration. The voice of the narration was exactly the same as the aged, weathered voice in the ending song.

The camera pulled back to the boundless night sky, the stars brilliant and dazzling, not a single one falling because of an emperor's death. The eternal stars roamed freely across the celestial curtain, unmoved by anyone.

The camera moved down. The three characters "Pingzhao Residence" came into view.

The camera flashed into the residence. Princess Pingzhao stood in a small ancestral hall, offering incense before a nameless, unmarked memorial tablet.

Purple smoke curled upwards, the scent of Buddhist incense filling the room.

Princess Pingzhao pressed her palms together, softly reciting a Buddhist invocation.

"Amitabha—"

The screen darkened. Episode thirty-nine, complete.

The moment the screen went dark, the living room in Sun Xiaoxiao's home was so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

The ending song began to play, and only then did Sun Xiaoxiao snap back to reality. She felt her palms were icy cold; touching them, she realized her palms were covered in sweat.

She empathized deeply with those women, tensing with their tension, moved by their perseverance, breaking out in a cold sweat all over.

Sun Xiaoxiao's parents also looked at each other in surprise at the episode's ending. Mom and Dad stared at each other wide-eyed for a moment, then turned off the television.

"Hey—" Dad sounded a bit anxious, "What are you doing?"

"That's it for today," Mom said. "Oh my, the way that Emperor died was really disgusting. No, I feel a bit nauseous."

Dad breathed a sigh of relief: "Almost forgot. But speaking of which, the Emperor's death seems a bit familiar. I feel like I've seen it somewhere before?"

"Seems like an old TV drama I watched before," Mom recalled for a bit. "I'll look for it later."

"Oh right, Xiaoxiao, tomorrow is Saturday, but don't stay up too late playing," Mom remembered Sun Xiaoxiao again and reminded her.

Sun Xiaoxiao gave a perfunctory "mm-hmm," eager to go check the reviews on Weibo, and whooshed back into her bedroom.

After a while, Sun Xiaoxiao heard her mom seem to open a video app, playing some TV drama.

The opening song's prelude sounded a bit familiar. Sun Xiaoxiao listened for a while, only catching a few ambiguous lines:

"Despicable, fleeting life like a flash of lightning; the rise and fall of a hundred generations, dynasty after dynasty, night after night;

"The river wind cannot blow away the sorrow of ten thousand ages; on which page of history's ledger are you and I..."

Chapter 118: The Grand Finale

Sun Xiaoxiao remembered the scene on the day the grand finale of *Tale of Cloud Incline* aired for a very long time.

After a night of fierce confrontation across major platforms, a brief ceasefire was finally reached at 7:35 PM on Saturday evening.

This palace drama that took an unconventional path, was utterly bizarre and unique, and always kept people guessing about its next move, welcomed its finale after nearly a month of broadcast. Everyone, whether its enemies or its audience, was watching this moment.

It was strange. After the 39th episode finished airing, from Weibo, Douyin, and Tieba to PiliPili, Douban, and Toutiao, even the ads tucked away in the corners of browsers, all were discussing *Tale of Cloud Incline* and arguing about it fiercely and irreconcilably. Yet, the *Tale of Cloud Incline* official Weibo account, which was at the center of the storm, remained completely silent.

On this day of the grand finale, the *Tale of Cloud Incline* official account only posted one promotional post: "The shocking finale hits tonight," and then nothing else. Not even the usual promotional stills or the title of tonight's episodes were posted today.

In contrast, the *Legend of Qingyun* official account on the other side was singing and dancing, trying its best to attract the audience's attention.

However, when a drama's ratings reach the level of *Tale of Cloud Incline*, whether they promote or not doesn't really have much impact on the finale anymore.

The ratings for the 39th episode of *Tale of Cloud Incline* were 3.4%!

What does this mean? For a drama, the finale is often the peak of its ratings. This means that by the 40th episode, *Tale of Cloud Incline*'s ratings were bound to break 3.5%—or, dreaming a little bigger, breaking 4% wasn't out of the question either!

If *Tale of Cloud Incline*'s finale ratings broke 4%, then the "Twin Hans" competition wouldn't even need to declare a winner anymore.

The opening of *Tale of Cloud Incline* today was also very different.

The familiar, melodious ancient music of the past did not play. After the commercials ended, the screen flickered with static for a few seconds, and then the camera suddenly showed several washerwomen, kneeling by a stream washing silk while singing an off-key tune:

"Plowing seedlings by day, spinning yarn by night;

"Growing rice, eating beans, reeling silk, wearing hemp;

"A handful of soil for a thousand-year empire, when will the ten-thousand-year reign reach my home?"

Without any accompaniment, the women's clear voices filled the ears. After the six short lines of the song ended, the camera slowly panned upward, revealing the entire village in the frame.

Six large characters slowly appeared in the center of the screen:

The World Belongs to All Its People.

The title of the 40th episode of *Tale of Cloud Incline* was actually not in the same *Tale of XX* format as the previous thirty-nine episodes, but had taken on such a meaningful name. What was even stranger was that, for the first time, the name of the episode's screenwriter was not displayed at the bottom of this episode.

The Sun Xiaoxiao family sat in front of their television, looking at these six words, and couldn't help but hold their breath;

Ke Na, who had recently switched from being a fan of Liao Li to hating him, sat in the living room with her parents, nervously watching the screen;

The *Xiao Fengque* film crew sat in the cafeteria, eating buffet while looking up at the large TV on the wall;

Xu Guanjun, the boss of Guanjun Century, looked at this title and slightly frowned.

The Emperor had died.

As a founding emperor, he died in a wretched, unclear manner. Until the moment he breathed his last, he still didn't know who the people who struck him down were.

Not long after, the Shadow Guards, who had been fighting madly outside the palace, finally finished cleaning up the rebellious guards. Upon entering the bedchamber, they discovered that their brilliant and mighty Majesty had already kicked the bucket.

The culprits were exhausted and collapsed all over the bed and floor. The Old Eunuch stood expressionlessly before the Dragon Bed, gazing at his master.

The Shadow Guard leader stared dumbfounded at the scene before him, almost fainting on the spot.

It took several breaths before the Shadow Guard leader snapped back to reality. Furious, he shouted, "Arrest them! Don't let these traitors escape!"

The Old Eunuch turned around, calmly meeting the gaze of the blood-soaked Shadow Guard leader. His hunched back straightened for the first time, straight as an arrow. The Shadow Guard leader suddenly realized with a start that this old man by the emperor's side was actually quite tall and imposing.

With the emperor dead, the palace was now truly leaderless. The Shadow Guard leader didn't know what to do for the moment. He could only temporarily detain the Old Eunuch and the palace maids.

The Hongying Guards were solitary ministers loyal only to the emperor himself and would not collude with any civil or military officials at such a critical juncture. Just as he was hesitating over which prince to report to, a subordinate suddenly rushed forward and reported, "The eldest princess has arrived!"

The Shadow Guard leader felt as if he had found his backbone—who in the court didn't know the eldest princess was the emperor's most beloved daughter? Although she was a bit foolish and weak, it was still better than having a Shadow Guard try to take charge of the overall situation.

When Princess Pingzhao arrived outside the emperor's bedchamber, she was first startled by the corpses strewn across the ground outside the hall. Upon entering the bedchamber, she was so horrified by her Father Emperor's miserable state that she nearly fainted!

The Shadow Guard leader had to first explain the situation to the eldest princess to steady this foolish and weak princess.

As the Shadow Guard leader, he was not a man without some cunning. The fact that Princess Pingzhao had arrived at the palace at such a sensitive and coincidental time made her highly suspect.

The leader couldn't help but probe, "I wonder why the princess has come at dawn..."

Princess Pingzhao wept, "Today is the death anniversary of the late Empress... My Father Emperor and I pay our respects together every year... Heavens! To lose both my mother and my father on the same day!"

Princess Pingzhao's tears flowed freely; she had already cried herself into a mess. Only then did the Shadow Guard leader remember that the Ghost Festival was the death anniversary of the late Empress.

On this day every year, the emperor would make elaborate arrangements. Not only would he hold a grand memorial ceremony, he even set up a massive soul-summoning altar and invited eighty-one enlightened monks to chant sutras for the late Empress.

The memorial ceremony rituals were complex. As the late Empress's only child, Princess Pingzhao would naturally have to personally oversee everything. Given that, it was reasonable for her to come to the palace at the crack of dawn.

Princess Pingzhao, weeping and sniffing, invited several senior ministers into the palace. In the time it takes to eat a few quick meals, the four princes who had rebelled outside the palace had already been captured. Of course, all of this was largely thanks to the emperor's clever and proper planning, having long ago laid a heaven-and-earth net for his own sons.

The few senior ministers most trusted by the emperor were all civil officials who had followed him for many years. Seeing such a hero of an era meet such an end, they couldn't help but feel both shocked and sighing with regret. However, a nation cannot be without a ruler for even a day. The emperor was in his prime, yet he had suddenly died in such an ugly manner without leaving behind a single word of a will... What should they do?

In principle, the successor should be chosen from among the emperor's remaining sons. The emperor originally had seven or eight sons and over ten daughters, but after so many years of palace intrigue, only five princes had survived to adulthood.

Among these five princes, the maternal family of the Eighth Prince had recently been raided by the emperor. They found night pearls larger than the tribute items in the Forbidden Areas, gold crowns bigger than the emperor's dragon crown; Kaye nanmu wood, said to "revive the dead and regenerate flesh and bone"—something not even found in the imperial treasury; and Duanying brocade tribute from Nansang, of which even the emperor only had two bolts, yet the Eighth Prince's maternal family had half a storeroom full.

The emperor flew into a rage, executed the Eighth Prince's maternal family to the last person, and in his fury declared, "Even if everyone in the world dies, this son shall not become ruler!"

The emperor's word was law; there was no taking back what he said. Therefore, the Eighth Prince was forever barred from the throne.

That is to say, the sons the emperor could choose from were now only four.

—That's right, the very four who, due to rebellion, were now neatly tied up outside the palace.

Even in its grand finale, *Tale of Cloud Incline* did not abandon its dark humor. This short segment of the plot was filled with successive conflicts, each link tightly connected to the next, making viewers laugh heartily.

All four sons were now stained with the crime of patricide and regicide. Forget about inheriting the throne, even being allowed to live on in this world would be considered an act of heaven's mercy!

The senior ministers were suddenly faced with a dilemma—what should they do now?

Chapter 119: There's no limit to how ridiculous things can get

The civil officials racked their brains, and in the end, it was the old minister Wu Zhi, who had followed the Emperor in his rise to power, who recalled a phrase the Emperor had uttered years ago.

Wu Zhi said tremulously, "When Her Late Majesty was with child, His Majesty was overjoyed. Pointing at Her Late Majesty, he said, 'The child in this belly shall one day measure the world!' Do you all remember?"

The Emperor hadn't, after all, killed off all the old ministers. Many of his old comrades from back then were still present. Reminded by Wu Zhi, they immediately recalled this past event.

During the peak of their affection, the Emperor and the Late Empress had exchanged many grand vows and pledges. This phrase, among all those sweet nothings, might not have been particularly significant. But at this very moment, it became these old ministers' only lifeline.

The Emperor's word is golden, his promise weighty as nine tripods!

The realm had only been stable for about twenty years. Everyone present had lived through the chaos of war. In their youth, they could still be filled with lofty ideals and grand ambitions, but now, each was advanced in years, their bones terrified of plunging into turmoil once more.

So, the person who was in the Late Empress's belly at that time was...

The gazes of the old ministers shifted, landing upon Princess Pingzhao, who was still weeping uncontrollably.

Princess Pingzhao looked up in astonishment, her eyes seemingly unintentionally meeting those of the old minister who had just proposed the "child in this belly shall one day measure the world" line. Their glances both flickered with a tacit understanding.

Previous dynasties had precedents of princesses inheriting the throne, and also of princesses acting as regents. After several rounds of maneuvering, the civil officials concocted a somewhat ambiguous "oral decree of the late Emperor," and in a muddled fashion, placed Princess Pingzhao upon the great seat.

Surprisingly, throughout this process, many low-ranking officials from humble backgrounds stood firmly on Princess Pingzhao's side. These impoverished scholars, petty officials, or minor military officers selected through martial examinations argued until their faces were red in the court, and in the common folk's realm, they wrote poems, lyrics, and essays extensively, debating fiercely, desperately paving the way for Princess Pingzhao in the court of public opinion.

The timeline flashed by extremely quickly, almost leaving the audience dizzy. In the blink of an eye, the dust settled.

The day before the coronation ceremony, Princess Pingzhao came to the place where the late Emperor's body lay in state.

Princess Pingzhao stood before her father's coffin, lowering her gaze to look upon the face of her progenitor. The late Emperor had been meticulously attended to by the imperial physicians; his posthumous appearance was quite beautiful, extremely dignified.

The servants had been dismissed, leaving only one living person and a corpse in the room. Princess Pingzhao gazed at her father for a long time, then her two pale, bloodless lips suddenly moved.

"Father."

A dead man naturally could not respond. But Princess Pingzhao didn't seem to care. She continued, "I always knew how Mother died."

The scene flashed back with Princess Pingzhao's memory.

The man who was not yet Emperor was assassinated within his mansion. The Emperor-to-be possessed considerable martial prowess, making it difficult for the assassin to kill him. Fighting while retreating, they reached a side chamber where the assassin took a hostage.

That hostage was precisely the Late Empress, Princess Pingzhao's mother!

The assassin had long heard that the Emperor and Empress met in humble circumstances, shared hardships, supported each other through adversity, and their bond was exceptionally deep. Certain that the Emperor would hesitate for fear of harming the hostage, the assassin shouted for the Emperor to drop his weapon.

The Emperor hesitated for a moment. He did not drop the sword in his hand, but he also took no further action.

The mansion was the Emperor's crucial place for discussing affairs. Just as the Emperor and the assassin were locked in a stalemate, the Emperor's most important strategist happened to pass by. Seeing the situation, he couldn't help but be startled.

The assassin, of course, recognized that strategist. Instantly excited, he dragged the Empress along as he rushed toward the strategist!

In that split second, a flash of silver light came from the Emperor's hand. He leaped forward, and with one sword thrust, skewered both the Empress and the assassin like a candied haw on a stick!

The assassin's look of shock froze in his eyes.

The Empress's wound was relatively off-center. Unlike the assassin, she did not die instantly, but she was gravely injured. Even so, she still looked at the Emperor with that gentle, reluctant gaze, her eyes holding not a trace of resentment.

That strategist who narrowly escaped death was named Wu Zhi. Behind a small door behind Wu Zhi, a seven-year-old girl covered her mouth, watching the scene before her without uttering a sound, as if already petrified with fear.

The scene shifted. Princess Pingzhao emerged from her memory, a trace of a gentle, affectionate smile playing at the corner of her mouth. "Sending you to reunite with her on this day will make her very happy."

"But—"

Princess Pingzhao enunciated each word clearly, "I did all of this not because I wanted to avenge Mother. If I were in your position back then..."

A gust of eerie wind swept through the hall, scattering the latter half of Princess Pingzhao's sentence into the air.

"...it's simply because, your child, wanted to be Emperor."

When the sun rose again, the day of Princess Pingzhao's coronation ceremony had arrived.

The Female Emperor, in solemn attire and deep ceremonial robes, slowly paced up the high platform under the gaze of the court officials.

Three cracks of the Ceremonial Whip. When the Female Emperor reached out and grasped the final whip, Sun Xiaoxiao clearly heard her own father let out an astonished curse!

Xu Guanjun, the CEO of Guanjun Century, who had been drinking tea, accidentally bit the inside of his cheek upon seeing this scene.

On the set of *Xiao Fengque*, Li Yi couldn't help but turn his head, giving a light glance toward Shang Yechu sitting not far away.

Ke Na murmured, "This is way cooler than Liao Li."

When the Female Emperor wrote the character for "Zhen" (the imperial 'I') on the Imperial Edict, households all across the country watching *Tale of Cloud Incline* let out gasps of varying volumes!

In the scene, after the command to rise was given, the old minister Wu Zhi gazed at the new Emperor with a complex look in his eyes. A flicker of something resembling nostalgia passed through his aged, turbid eyes.

He murmured, "Those old fellows... perhaps did a foolish thing..."

The new Emperor sat back upon the Dragon Throne, looking down upon the ministers at her feet from her lofty position. A magnificent, opulent melody rose in response:

"Sweet springs overflow, auspicious clouds grace the sky.

"The Son of Heaven lives ten thousand years, the myriad people rely forever.

"..."

Accompanied by the majestic and heroic tune, the camera pulled further and further back. The new Emperor and the civil and military officials were reduced to a cluster of tiny dots, the splendid palace buildings became mere blurred patches of color. An indescribable sense of desolate grandeur spread out.

The powerful chorus continued to sing as the ending credits began to scroll up slowly from the bottom of the screen:

Screenwriters:

An Ping, Cheng Shao, Chen Xiaoqing... Su Ge, Ye Chu, Zheng Bohan (listed alphabetically by surname)

The list of screenwriters' names alone occupied an entire screen of credits. It was impossible for the viewers in front of their televisions not to notice. Following that were the names of the director and actors. After all the cast and crew were displayed, Sun Xiaoxiao's family still hadn't quite processed it.

That's it? It's over?

Why does it feel like something's missing?

Before Mom could even pick up the remote to change the channel, suddenly, the screen flickered again.

A figure appeared on the screen. It was Princess Pingzhao—now she should be called the new Emperor.

The new Emperor was sitting at her desk reviewing memorials. A vermilion brush touched the paper, lightly drawing a circle.

Before the new Emperor, an official was speaking eloquently:

"According to the law, the former Chief Eunuch Cui, as well as palace servants Zheng Cuier, Chen Xiuxiang, and others, should be sentenced to death by a thousand cuts. The crime of treason committed by these individuals is such that even ten thousand deaths would not be enough... This subject has submitted a memorial for Your Majesty's review."

The new Emperor flipped to the memorial submitted by the official. The camera gave the memorial a close-up, allowing the audience to see its general content: eight palace maids and the old eunuch by the late Emperor's side were guilty of regicide. The memorial inquired whether the Emperor wished to have them executed by a thousand cuts. If so, when should it be carried out? If not, what should the punishment be changed to?

The Emperor raised an eyebrow and glanced at the official, who responded with a deferential, downcast gaze.

The corner of the Emperor's mouth twitched slightly; it was unclear whether it was a cold sneer or a faint smile. She picked up the vermilion brush and lightly wrote a few characters on the memorial.

As she wrote, the camera pulled back again. Sun Xiaoxiao's family craned their necks, trying to see what she had written, but they couldn't make it out.

The Emperor's vermilion brush moved with fluid, powerful strokes. Finally, with a slight hook, it stopped.

Finished?

Sun Xiaoxiao's family craned their necks once more, waiting to see what the Emperor had written.

The next second, the television suddenly went dark. Three large characters appeared in the center of the screen:

THE END

Sun Xiaoxiao's family: ???

The entire internet audience: ???

Chapter 120: Utter Madness

■Zheng Bohan, can you sleep? I certainly can't.■

■Zheng Bohan, where is your conscience???■

■Ahhhhh Zheng Bohan I'm gonna kill you, kill you...■

■Zheng Bohan... I didn't provoke you... I didn't provoke anyone...■

■The most explosive ending of the year has been born■

■Uh, uh, uh, don't talk nonsense upstairs, this ending is actually pretty good, it's just the audience that's exploding■

■This is Zheng Bohan's revenge against this world...■

■My home's soundproofing isn't great, the moment the words "The End" appeared, I clearly heard cursing from the neighbor next door...■

■I'm really about to die, wuwu... really... is there really no other way?■

■@Sailing the Vast Literary Sea Old Fogey, you had a good time filming, didn't you! Had a good time filming, didn't you!■

■@Sailing the Vast Literary Sea Tonight, either you die or I die. . .■

Weibo was exceptionally lively today. To be precise, all major platforms were exceptionally lively tonight.

A three-thousand-story thread sprang up on Douban within an hour. The Weibo hot search list was filled with "Tale of Cloud Incline." The number one spot on the PiliPili hot search list was also #Tale of Cloud Incline" Finale#. Even on Tieba, which has a higher proportion of male users, everyone was now arguing fiercely.

Of course, the liveliest was still Weibo.

Tonight's Weibo hot search list:

#Tale of Cloud Incline Finale#

#Princess Pingzhao#

#What did Princess Pingzhao write#

#Princess Pingzhao Ascends the Throne#

#Tale of Cloud Incline Ending Screenwriter List#

#Zheng Bohan Is Not Human#

#The World Belongs to All the People#

#Why was the Eighth Prince's family purged in Tale of Cloud Incline#

#Zheng Bohan Can You Sleep#

How many years had it been since such a spectacle occurred. The entire Weibo hot search list, fifty spots, and "Tale of Cloud Incline" occupied nine of them—excluding the fixed advertisement slots, that was almost one-fifth of the total share!

And this was just the beginning. About five or six minutes later, the page refreshed, and behind the number one hot search #Tale of Cloud Incline Finale# and the second hottest #Princess Pingzhao#, an "explosive" tag appeared!

In 2017, Weibo's "explosive" tag still carried considerable weight. Moreover, "Tale of Cloud Incline" had two explosive topics at once!

■Can someone tell me, what on earth did Princess Pingzhao write in the end...■

■I thought I was the only one who didn't see it clearly. Seeing that none of you saw it clearly either puts my mind at ease...■

■I was there. I have a friend who said Princess Pingzhao released all those women.■

■Are you kidding??? The old Emperor's heart was dark enough. Princess Pingzhao even killed her own father without hesitation. Would she release a bunch of maidservants she had no connection or feelings for?■

■You know what, Princess Pingzhao might have had deeper feelings for those maidservants than for the Emperor.■

■Wrong. Princess Pingzhao had no feelings for anyone except the Dragon Throne.■

■Hahahahahahahaha, so 'Zhen's' (this emperor's) lover is this world, right?■

■Don't take it seriously, everyone, I was joking [teary eyes]■

■This ending... can't be said to be bad, but it just leaves a lump in your throat... It feels like the first time in your life you eat an immortal peach, and a fairy tells you that taking ten bites will grant you immortality, but when you get to the ninth bite, a dog snatches the peach away...■

■And the dog's name is Zheng Bohan, right?■

■The only thing that can be confirmed is that Princess Pingzhao's last stroke was a hook...■

■So what was it? Death by a thousand cuts? Pardon? Exile? Permission? It couldn't be 'Ah, yes, yes, yes ✓', could it?■

■Blogger, you're my soulmate. I searched for every character with a hook or a vertical turning hook online, and the more I searched, the more panicked I became. Hurry, hurry, hurry! @Sailing the Vast Literary Sea Come out!■

■The last stroke of 'death' isn't a hook, is it?■

■According to modern Chinese stroke order, it is a hook.■

■Princess Pingzhao is an ancient person. No one taught her stroke order.■

■A character's writing habits are definitely decided by the actor themselves. Shang Yechu isn't an ancient person.■

■Is being so pedantic about this fun? Then I can also say she wrote in cursive script.■

■Then I can also say the last stroke was actually a vertical line. Many people have the habit of adding a small hook when writing a vertical stroke. What if Princess Pingzhao wrote 'behead'?■

■666, I've met a real-life nitpicker.■

■Don't get so worked up, everyone. I was there. Actually, Princess Pingzhao wrote 'The End'.■

■Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh■

■Oh my dear ancestors, I'm laughing so hard I'm peeing myself...■

■Seeing this comment, I almost choked to death on my potato chips.■

■My mom asked me why I was rolling on the floor. I said I was doing rolling plank exercises.■

The netizens passionately discussed for a long time. They didn't reach any conclusion from the discussion, but they did get into quite a few fights, battling until the sky darkened and the earth cracked.

Although the atmosphere might not have been great, in terms of heat, "Tale of Cloud Incline" truly could look down on all competitors. "Legend of Qingyun" had been singing and dancing all day, but at this moment, its discussion level wasn't even as high as the old eunuch by the Emperor's side!

Of course, with so many viewers of "Tale of Cloud Incline," there were always a few far-sighted netizens who had recorded the entire finale episode.—The finale update on Meta Pictures would take another hour. The netizens arguing until the great path cracked couldn't wait that long.

Soon, several screen recordings were uploaded. The clip of Princess Pingzhao writing her final words was almost instantly pushed to the top of the trending list. Letting go of the mouse and refreshing would show several new comments.

■Good people live a peaceful life.■

■Thank you, mommy...■

■Watched it three times at 0.25x speed. When Princess Pingzhao wrote the hook, she paused slightly. It's very likely a vertical turning hook. A lifting hook wouldn't pause for this long.■

■That sounds like you said something without saying anything...■

■Shang Yechu really can hold it in too. Not a trace of emotion on her face. Can't tell if it's pity or ruthlessness.■

■Are you saying Shang Yechu has a deadpan face? [doge]■

■A deadpan face is like that guy Qi Yan next door. What she has is called deep cunning, not showing joy or anger on one's face.■

■You dare to say that? Don't you value your life!■

■Fans of Yan, come and curse if you want. My idol is Zheng Bohan. Curse him first if you want to curse me.■

■What a vicious woman, hahaha■

After all, secondary screen recordings lose a lot of detail, and many details were unclear. The netizens weren't satisfied with searching for the truth through these Gaussian-blurred, all-loss-quality fragments and soon proposed a new direction.

■I say, everyone, what's the use of arguing here? Why not go ask Shang Yechu herself?■

■Do you think no one has asked? Shang Yechu and Zheng Bohan's Weibo accounts were stormed twenty minutes ago. Especially Shang Yechu's, the comments under her latest Weibo post have already reached fifty thousand.■

■Wow! Did Shang Yechu reply?■

■No, she hasn't been online for over ten days.■

■No promotion during the show's airing?■

■Promote what? Getting cursed at every day. She's probably almost been cursed into depression by the netizens.■

■Ah, why is she getting cursed at? Any gossip about her personally?■

■Not much gossip. Just some idiots hating the house along with the crowd, disliking Princess Pingzhao and then going to curse her personally. Also, that 'Xiao Fengque' thing she filmed, the original book fans are pretty crazy, calling her a 'Connected Person.' The fights were pretty intense.■

■So tragic... I feel sorry for her.■

Chapter 121: A Triumph

Besides discussions about what Princess Pingzhao wrote, the biggest hot topic fell on that magnificent coronation ceremony.

Within the #Princess Pingzhao# trending topic.

[Princess Pingzhao is so cool,, so domineering,, so, that...]

[Your Majesty is a feeling, Emperor is a gender, Sister is a wife, Pingzhao is a master.]

[The moment the princess grabbed the old eunuch's whip, she also grabbed my heart [crying]]

[The Mandate of Heaven rests upon her, the Mandate of Heaven rests upon her...]

[It's so strange to say, the feeling Princess Pingzhao gives me is 'Emperor', not 'Female Emperor', does anyone understand?]

[I get it, I get it! That moment grabbing the whip, it really felt like a born ruler. She was born to be emperor, her physical form is merely a vessel for power!]

[That character for 'Zhen' (imperial 'I') was written too perfectly, perfect in every aspect, a shot that can be recorded in film history.]

[Already took a screenshot and made it my profile picture. From today, I am the internet emperor.]

[Ah! Ah! Ah!]

[Doesn't anyone find it abrupt? Acting cowardly for over thirty episodes and suddenly a makeover-style coronation?]

[Use your brain... If Princess Pingzhao's acting couldn't even fool the audience, how could she fool the scumbag Emperor and those senior ministers and brothers? Being able to deceive both the people in the drama and those outside it is true acting.]

[Sorry, searched through the entire square, ninety-nine percent of the audience feel they've suddenly seen the light, only one percent of cockroaches are still squeaking about it being abrupt.]

[The intelligence of Pingzhao haters can't even comprehend a comedy, yet they think they're on par with the scumbag Emperor. Give me some of that confidence, I need it urgently for an interview tomorrow.]

[Those saying it's abrupt, click into their homepages and every single one is a Pingzhao hater. I'm saying, can you guys temporarily pick up your brains and put them back in your skulls? So much foreshadowing and setup before, so many analyses on Weibo, Douban, Tieba, PiliPili, you really don't look at any of it!]

Princess Pingzhao's loyal fans finally saw the clouds part and the moon shine bright, triumphantly venting their feelings across the internet. Just one day ago, they were wandering internet gypsies, pica sufferers among Xianglin's Wives, Xianglin's Wives among Kong Yiji. But now, no one dared to speak arrogantly to them—just forty minutes later, Princess Pingzhao's fans had become the only people on the internet with brains!

[This humble consort felt their status was now clear...]

[@MiyunLittlePeachHeart @LiaoLiaoJibiOneGift @YanziYouTakeMeAway Where are you? Huh? Speak! Roll out and keep being stubborn!]

[How do you know my girl ascended the throne? Oh well, actually ascending the throne isn't much to talk about, it's just ascending the throne, ascending the throne is ascending the throne, ascending the throne isn't anything else, ascending the throne is an attitude, it's a way of life—not every princess can ascend the throne.]

[I really cried, all the grievances suffered these days were worth it. The moment I saw her step by step ascend the Dragon Throne, tears just gushed out.]

[What's this 'Princess Pingzhao'? Call her Emperor Pingzhao! The great emperor has arrived!]

[The new emperor has appeared, how can we remain stagnant~]

[@Director-Lin Haishan Can you perform that again? That one about 'abandoning an emperor's love, only to rush towards true freedom' [love you][love you][love you]]

[Holy shit ahhh you should delete that ahhh I'm going to die laughing]

[Ahhh you really want this old thing to die, giving a boost @Director-Lin Haishan]

[@Director-Lin Haishan Come quick, fans are sending you a float.]

[Emperor Pingzhao is already next level, while some people are still striving to be the emperor's little wife.]

[@Director-Lin Haishan @Vast Literary Sea Director Lin, Director Xu, I'm your little fan girl~ Don't be afraid, even if the whole world is against you, I will stand on Emperor Pingzhao's side, because Emperor Pingzhao possesses the whole world [love you]]

[I didn't cry when arguing with people day and night. Just now, seeing her coronation, I went back to flip through the over fifty-thousand-word analysis I wrote for her, and as I flipped, tears just fell.]

[My hands are shaking,, really, right up until the moment she sat on the Dragon Throne, I didn't dare believe she really ascended.]

[Until yesterday there were still pig-brains stubbornly insisting that the shot of the baby offering incense was just for Ghost Festival blessings, couldn't prove she was the little black hand behind the scenes.]

[I saw those dumbasses too, actually saying A'Zhao was mourning the Imperial Consort!!! Shocked me for a hundred years.]

[He Ji's bones could probably play wind and string instruments by now? Still mourning?]

[I'm dying of laughter, only Princess Pingzhao haters on the entire internet still remember the Imperial Consort's name.]

[Don't bother with them, just focus on loving A'Zhao. People only believe what they want to believe.]

[That's because you didn't see the real-time Weibo when the coronation ceremony aired. I just used the web version to flip through over twenty pages and finally found it. When Pingzhao ascended, there were still people shouting that the Eighth Prince would kill his way back to seize the throne. Also some saying this ending was Pingzhao's dream, because the previous two episodes were called 'Record of Nanke' and 'Record of Zhuang Zhou'. All kinds of people.]

[The Eighth Prince's maternal family was already dispatched to Huangquan Co., Ltd. to dig coal, what's he going to rely on to seize the throne? Self-reliance through hard work?]

[The dream theory is even more explosive. Record of Nanke and Record of Zhuang Zhou are clearly talking about the scumbag Emperor Qin. What does the old man dreaming have to do with his daughter?]

[Reposted from Douban, a fresh hot expert drama review! Everyone post it out to slap those people's faces!]

A man named Chunyu Fen sleeps under a pagoda tree, dreaming he experienced decades of life's great ups and downs. Waking up, he finds he was just sleeping and dreaming. This perfectly matches the scumbag Emperor Qin dreaming of the Empress, waking to find twenty long years have passed. This is 'Record of Nanke'.

'Once upon a time, Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, a fluttering butterfly... not knowing he was Zhou. Suddenly he awoke, and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhou. But he did not know if he was Zhou who had dreamed he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhou.' He did not know if it was Zhuang Zhou dreaming he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming it was Zhuang Zhou.

The emperor fought battles for half his life, climbing from an ordinary person to the emperor's position, truly a hero of his generation. Such a person, in the end, died at the hands of a group of weak women. At the moment of death, the hero and emperor were no different from ordinary people.

The relationship between the Son of Heaven and ordinary mortals is exactly like Zhuang Zhou dreaming of the butterfly. Having been a superior Son of Heaven for twenty years, at the moment of waking (dying), he finally discovered he too was actually an ordinary mortal. This is 'Record of Zhuang Zhou'.]

[Thanks sister! Saved it [OK]]

[Everyone don't be angry, Pingzhao and we have already achieved the final victory. Now it's the haters' turn to dream!]

[Don't want to click into Lin Haishan's Weibo and dirty my eyes, any scouts giving a real-time live report? The finale aired, the old fogey has no reaction?]

[Report! Lin Haishan is still playing dead, viewers have cursed him out over twenty thousand times.]

[Only twenty thousand? Chu Jie's latest Weibo comments have already broken eighty thousand.]

[Lin Haishan is a nobody, Chu Jie is the great emperor~]

[The old thing has been controlling comments and liking negative comments, liking comments that speak for him to push them to the top. Comments with a few hundred likes are actually pinned above comments with tens of thousands of likes, hilarious.]

[Investigate and report again!]

[Several of those directors and producers who reposted Lin Haishan have already deleted their Weibos... these old turtles, so cowardly, haha.]

[We don't even need to go curse them, passersby have already blasted those people to pieces, ahhh!]

Chapter 122: Teacher and Student

Generally speaking, when a drama reaches its finale, there can only be one topic with the highest buzz. This is because the audience's energy and enthusiasm for discussion are limited. To maintain the show's popularity, the production side often focuses on reinforcing the single most talked-about topic.

Tale of Cloud Incline broke this rule. For its finale, there were actually two topics with the highest buzz—and they were neck and neck, with neither able to completely overshadow the other!

Even more unusual was that these two topics had little to do with the male or female lead. Instead, they both landed squarely on a single supporting character.

What did Princess Pingzhao write in the end?

— This was the burning question for the plot enthusiasts.

The way Princess Pingzhao ascended the throne was so domineering!

— This was the sentiment of the visual fans whose hearts were struck.

Yesterday, after the emperor played by Qin Tianye died, a wave of fervent discussion had already erupted across various platforms. Trending searches cycled through like they were free, and even history and humanities bloggers who usually rarely spoke up came out to join the excitement. But the heat back then, compared to now, could only be called a minor spectacle.

Right now, the happiest people on the entire internet were probably Zheng Bohan himself and Shang Yechu's fans.

Although he had been scolded bloody by countless viewers, Zheng Bohan was currently overjoyed and riding high. It was hard for the audience to understand this kind of satisfaction a screenwriter felt—much like how many authors, after writing heartbreaking plotlines, would involuntarily reveal a triumphant, scheming smile upon seeing readers cry as intended.

In this drama, Zheng Bohan's most brilliant stroke was the post-credits scene. As for the plot point where the emperor killed the empress, that came from Shang Yechu's suggestion. It also ignited passionate discussion (and the heartbreak and furious cursing of the emperor-empress CP fans).

With both his proudest plot and the plot contributed by his disciple achieving super high buzz, Zheng Bohan at this moment felt like an emperor who had taken an elixir. Though he wasn't physically transforming into a crane, he was almost ready to take flight.

Of course, the toughest battle was still ahead.

Online discussion metrics were intangible; ratings were the real gold. Zheng Bohan needed to see the finale's ratings to determine just how far he had won this battle.

Zheng Bohan was currently having tea with Mai Zhenye, the CEO of Meta Pictures. His current situation was vastly different from that of the beggar-like old man from a few months ago. Mai Zhenye beamed at him, his eyes crinkling shut as if seeing his own father reborn.

"What instructions does CEO Mai have for me today?" Zheng Bohan took a sip of tea and said calmly.

"Instructions? I wouldn't dare, wouldn't dare," Mai Zhenye said with a full-faced smile. "It's just a small matter."

Zheng Bohan set down his teacup. "Please, speak freely."

With achievements under his belt, his back was straight. Zheng Bohan was feeling his oats too.

Mai Zhenye wasn't the least bit annoyed. Instead, he chuckled, "It's like this. I heard from Su Ge, an artist under our company, that the actress called Yechu seems to be Director Zheng's student?"

This question clearly took Zheng Bohan by surprise. He rubbed his teacup, his tone calm and without hesitation. "Yes. She is one of my most accomplished students. What, CEO Mai wants to sign her?"

They were both shrewd people. With this one counter-question seizing the initiative, Zheng Bohan caught Mai Zhenye, who had been preparing to proceed step by step, off guard.

Mai Zhenye gave a light cough. "There's no such plan at the moment. I just feel this newcomer seems to have a lot of potential..."

Zheng Bohan frowned slightly.

Every punctuation mark in these CEOs' words reeked of money. The moment the word "newcomer" left Mai Zhenye's mouth, Zheng Bohan sensed his judgment of Shang Yechu.

Looking solely at seniority, Shang Yechu was indeed a newcomer. But Zheng Bohan felt that if judging by acting skill, if Shang Yechu still counted as a newcomer, then probably over half the people in the entertainment industry only deserved to be called neo-humans.

Mai Zhenye continued, "To be frank with you, Su Ge gets along very well with this Yechu and has tried to persuade her to sign with our company. But for some reason, Yechu didn't seem to agree?"

Mai Zhenye felt some regret. When Su Ge mentioned Yechu to him, he had merely taken her for a small-time celebrity trying to latch onto his daughter and hadn't paid the matter any mind, not even remembering Yechu's name. It wasn't until *Tale of Cloud Incline* was airing like wildfire, with Yechu's individual buzz nearly matching half the show's, that Mai Zhenye remembered this tidbit.

Meta Pictures had many artists under its banner, but the leading male and female stars were no longer young. Su Ge's acting could only rely on being fed resources, and there was a severe gap in the new generation.

The operation model of film and television companies was quite distorted. They usually relied on one or two marquee stars to support the entire family. Now, suddenly realizing he had brushed shoulders with a future star and missed the chance, Mai Zhenye was as frustrated as if he had seen Xu Guanjun make money!

Mai Zhenye mentally slapped himself: Why didn't he urge Su Ge to press the matter more firmly back then! What was he being so wishy-washy for! Once she's hot, she'll be hard to sign!

Zheng Bohan played a round of evasive Tai Chi, his tone neither warm nor cold. "Didn't Su Ge continue trying to persuade her?"

Mai Zhenye answered vaguely, "She's had some schedule these past couple of days, no time."

To be honest, Mai Zhenye didn't know what schedule Su Ge had recently either; he just felt his daughter seemed unusually busy.

When talking to businessmen, discuss interests. When talking to literary types, discuss sentiment. Mai Zhenye was well-versed in this. "Old Zheng, you should also know that in this circle, it's easier to get shade under a big tree... Your student going it alone will probably have to walk many detours."

Zheng Bohan took a sip of tea, silent.

"If you have expectations for her, you should be the one to explain these principles to her," Mai Zhenye advised patiently. "What teacher doesn't hope for their student's good?"

Zheng Bohan raised his eyes and gave a light cough. "There's some truth to that. However, she's filming right now. I'm afraid I can't reach her either."

This was agreement.

Delight surged in Mai Zhenye's heart, and he smiled like a blooming flower. "Come, come, have some tea, have some tea."

Shang Yechu didn't have time to turn on her phone until 5 AM. To ride the wave of *Tale of Cloud Incline*'s popularity, the *Xiao Fengque* crew had been desperately working overtime recently to speed up production. Shang Yechu had filmed night scenes all night, dark circles having been worn under her eyes.

Pulling all-nighters was common for film crews. Shang Yechu planned to grab some breakfast first, then go rest.

The moment she turned on her phone, a flood of new messages poured in again. Shang Yechu was utterly exhausted and truly didn't have the mental energy to look at them.

She had long anticipated that the *Tale of Cloud Incline* finale would be a hit. Most of these messages were polite formalities and congratulations, not something a person who had just filmed fight scenes all night needed to reply to one by one.

Shang Yechu was just about to pack up and go eat when suddenly, a call came in.

Shang Yechu glanced at the number, hesitated for a moment, but still answered.

"Hello, teacher?"

"Yechu!" From the other end of the phone came Zheng Bohan's voice, so excited it changed pitch. "5.2! 5.2!"

Shang Yechu was stunned for a second. Her brain, slightly dulled from the all-night filming, processed for a moment before she realized what Zheng Bohan was talking about.

Could it be—?

Zheng Bohan said with a voice choked with tears, "We won! The highest rating point for the *Tale of Cloud Incline* finale was 5.2%! The highest in nearly five years!"

Shang Yechu tightened her grip on the phone, feeling her throat go tight, her breath almost stopping.

Zheng Bohan cried, "At the moment you ascended the throne!—Yechu, no matter what, we... sob sob..."

The joy of victory, the indignation of having his script stolen, the anger of being betrayed by a close relative, the grievance of being besieged within the industry, the humiliation of bowing and scraping to beg for sponsorship, the clarity of the clouds parting to see the sun, the emotion of finding a kindred spirit...

A myriad of emotions surged in his heart. For the first time in his life, in front of a junior, Zheng Bohan wept uncontrollably, unable to speak through his sobs.

Chapter 123: Choosing a Contracting Company

Zheng Bohan quickly adjusted his emotions and began speaking to Shang Yechu about another matter.

"By the way, Little Chu," Zheng Bohan cleared his throat, feeling slightly awkward about his earlier emotional outburst, "Meta Pictures wants to sign you, did you know that?"

Why would Zheng Bohan suddenly bring this up?

"Yes," Shang Yechu didn't hide it, "it's just that I haven't really considered it properly yet."

Greater fame meant greater bargaining power. Shang Yechu didn't want to sell herself cheaply to some entertainment company while she was still a nobody, which was also the main reason she hadn't immediately agreed when Su Ge first mentioned it.

"Taking more time to consider is a good thing," Zheng Bohan said tactfully.

Understanding his meaning, Shang Yechu walked to a spot farther from the crowd and asked, "What do you want to say?"

Zheng Bohan opened his mouth and began praising Meta Pictures: "I don't need to tell you about Meta Pictures' status. Their achievements in both film and television are excellent, and they have stable collaborations with many major directors. Good scripts, big projects—Meta Pictures isn't lacking in these either.

"The current top male star at Meta Pictures is Du Xuyao. He's in his forties now and is already a triple-golden-award film emperor.

"Besides him, the most promising rising star among the new generation is You Jinghua. Below him, there's also Xing Yuan, Li Wenzhou, Li Jincheng, and others... These guys are all around your age. A-listers, about-to-explode stars, B-listers, quasi-B-listers—a dazzling constellation of stars, too many to count."

Shang Yechu listened patiently to Zheng Bohan's rambling, showing no impatience, just gently stroking her phone case.

"But—" Zheng Bohan had taken a long detour and finally revealed his true intent, "on the female star side, apart from the top actress Zhang Yu, who's forty-five and has already gone international, the only one with any real fame is Su Ge."

Shang Yechu fell silent for a moment, then said with a faint smile, "Thank you, teacher. I understand."

Zheng Bohan made an acknowledging sound. "You're a steady kid. I won't interfere with your decision. Oh, right—"

At the very end, Zheng Bohan's voice finally carried a hint of laughter. "Our crew is having a celebration banquet next weekend evening. The restaurant is booked at Misty Rain Pavilion, my treat. Will the 'New Emperor' grace us with her presence?"

"Since you've put it that way, how could I possibly refuse?" Shang Yechu replied with a smile.

After hanging up Zheng Bohan's call, Shang Yechu let out a soft sigh.

This Zheng Bohan, once he considered you one of his own, he really treated you with genuine sincerity.

Clearly entrusted by Meta Pictures to act as a persuader, he hadn't actually tried to dazzle Shang Yechu with extravagant promises to get her to join. Instead, he had tactfully warned her.

Zheng Bohan's words truly reminded Shang Yechu. Meta Pictures might have resources and background, but they also had Su Ge there.

What would be the consequence of two same-gender artists of similar age and comparable looks signing with the same company?

Meta Pictures couldn't have only recruited Su Ge as a female artist. Yet now, the only female star with any slight fame was Su Ge. There were only two possibilities. Either Meta Pictures favored males over females and didn't plan to invest resources in promoting actresses; or, on the female artist side, Meta Pictures' main focus for promotion was only Su Ge, with the majority of resources poured into her alone.

Whichever it was, it was unfavorable for Shang Yechu. In her heart, Shang Yechu leaned more toward the latter possibility... because the resources Meta Pictures poured into Su Ge were indeed insanely excessive.

Entertainment company contracts typically lasted five to ten years. If after signing with Meta, she could only pick up the leftover crumbs Su Ge didn't want, that wouldn't be much fun.

Shang Yechu made up her mind.

After talking with Zheng Bohan for so long, Shang Yechu felt a bit thirsty, so she walked to the hot water room to get some water. As soon as she entered, she found Li Yi was there too.

"You seem to be in a good mood," Li Yi said, tilting his head slightly upon seeing Shang Yechu arrive.

"Is it that obvious?" Shang Yechu blinked.

Li Yi filled half a cup with hot water, then added half a cup of warm water, handing it to Shang Yechu. "You're rarely this happy. Seeing you like this today is quite uncommon."

Shang Yechu took the paper cup and took a small sip.

After working together for a month, Shang Yechu had gained many new understandings about Li Yi. The most important one was... he was very sensitive to other people's emotions.

Li Yi's acting skills were truly too poor. Shang Yechu had to exert herself to the utmost, mustering all her energy just to barely bring him into the scene. If portraying Xiao Fengque required eighty percent of her energy, then making Li Yi become Xie An required one hundred and twenty percent.

An actor's optimal state was hard to find. No actor could maintain a fully charged state for every single scene, and Shang Yechu was no exception.

Yi Tianzhao, feeling ashamed of past shortcomings, had become more determined, and her shooting requirements were much stricter than before. Shang Yechu wasn't some bodhisattva without temper. After accompanying Li Yi through countless NGs, it was inevitable she'd feel annoyed and irritated.

How could someone be this wooden? Even a three-year-old could fake cry. How could someone not even know how to fake a smile?

This irritation, Shang Yechu never showed on her face. No one else in the crew had ever noticed it. Everyone praised Shang Yechu for her good temper, her gentle personality, and her lack of airs. Only Li Yi—every single time, just as Shang Yechu was beginning to feel a bit impatient—he would immediately become even more cautious, even more "forceful" in his efforts... which is to say, his performance would become even worse.

If she didn't know his actual capability was just like this, Shang Yechu might have almost thought he was deliberately picking a fight!

Shang Yechu felt an indescribable impatience toward Li Yi. It wasn't exactly dislike, just a sense that he was troublesome. He was like that classmate you got paired with for a group project—clearly obedient and diligent, doing exactly what you said without deviation—yet still constantly dragging you down. You couldn't bring yourself to scold him; but not scolding him, you couldn't swallow your frustration.

Shang Yechu gave an evasive answer: "A drama I starred in had its finale. The ratings were good."

"The episode we watched last night?" Li Yi nodded, praising, "You acted really well. I think it was even better than Teacher Zhong Ji's performance as the female emperor in that old drama."

"Thank you." Since you don't hit a smiling face, Shang Yechu returned the same kind of professional compliment: "Your action scenes are also very impressive, on par with Teacher Jiang Erjing."

Li Yi pursed his lips slightly and suddenly changed the topic: "You're tired, aren't you? Do you want to go back to the hotel to rest?"

"Not yet. I need to find Director Yi about something." Shang Yechu wondered if *Xiao Fengque* could wrap up filming before next weekend. She needed to communicate with Yi Tianzhao.

Shang Yechu drank the water in one gulp. "Thank you."

Chapter 124: The Rise of Zheng Bohan

Douban, Domestic Drama Group, currently hottest post:

■Long-form Drama Review | On the Finale of "Tale of Cloud Incline"■

Zhihu, trending list number one question:

■How do you evaluate the finale of "Tale of Cloud Incline"?■

Tieba, Domestic Drama Bar, five-thousand-story hot post:

■Where are the few bastards who said Princess Pingzhao was an idiot? Why are they all silent today?■

Weibo, hot search list number one:

#Zheng Bohan Posts#

@Sailing the Vast Literary Sea:

■If the audience doesn't love me, does that mean they have no taste? — The debate between "Tale of Cloud Incline" and "Legend of Qingyun".

The hottest topic recently is undoubtedly the drama "Tale of Cloud Incline," a work jointly created by me, my old friends, and my students. But as a screenwriter, one should keep up with the times and not only look at one's own work. Therefore, I also went to watch a certain much-debated work lately.

Speaking of "Legend of Qingyun," its reputation truly precedes it, its praise spreading far and wide. "Anti-feudal masterpiece," "praising love and freedom," "breaking the shackles for women," "pursuing the heroism of new life"—the dazzling array of titles is truly eye-catching.

As for my humble work "Tale of Cloud Incline," it has been praised and disparaged by certain directors as "attention-seeking," "feeding off human misery," and "self-contradictory."

I am deeply puzzled: why is there such a huge gap between the views of certain directors and the views of the audience? However, after watching "Legend of Qingyun," I realized that rumors cannot be fully believed.

"Legend of Qingyun," which was highly praised by Mr. @Director-Lin Haishan as... sorry, I can't remember all those words, is it really worthy of these terms?

Let's see! Since its broadcast, "Legend of Qingyun," with its forty full episodes, has told nothing but love stories. The old emperor brings the daughter of his savior into the palace and falls in love; three or four princes see their father's concubine and fall in love; the female lead Qingyun is moved by a "fatherly, brotherly" affection and falls in love...

Love! Love that is soul-stirring! — The May-December romance is indeed shocking; love that leads to dynastic change! — Although it's just a father passing it to his son; behind this love lies even deeper love!

In terms of love, "Tale of Cloud Incline" truly cannot compare to "Legend of Qingyun."

I admit, "Tale of Cloud Incline" is indeed somewhat cold-blooded and extreme. Treating princes, nobles, generals, and ministers as insects in human skin, treating imperial love as a piece of toilet paper, tearing apart the family bonds, love, and friendships of the little people under imperial power like discarded drafts—that is indeed too extreme. After all, there are emperors in this world like the old emperor in "Legend of Qingyun," full of love and humanistic care, who tenderly regard all people at the bottom as equals. I was overgeneralizing.

The cold, ruthless Yun Dynasty emperor personally kills his wife, the ambitious new emperor murders his own father—compared to the secret dreams and pure love utopia between the female lead of "Legend of Qingyun" and the two emperors of the Zhu family, the two emperors in "Tale of Cloud Incline" do indeed seem

greedy, wanting both.

However, compared to "Legend of Qingyun," which wants the reputation of being anti-feudal and awakening while unwilling to abandon the basic framework of an idol drama, this bit of greed is nothing. "Legend of Qingyun" spent a fortune, hiring a group of award-winning actors and actresses, wrapping the core of a youth idol drama layer by layer, coating it with a high-end, grand sugar shell, and serving it to the audience on a plate labeled "serious drama." Such dedication, I admit I am inferior.

The women in "Tale of Cloud Incline," their anti-feudal struggle is a failure. Even if they try their utmost to kill the emperor, it's merely a new emperor taking the stage, who still decides their life and death.

They can never be like the female lead Qingyun in "Legend of Qingyun," who "abandons old love and welcomes new life," because their old love died at the hands of the previous emperor, and their new life is controlled by the next emperor.

This story has nothing to do with heroism; it's just a story of pitiful people, in the wrong era, foolishly dreaming of resisting fate, ultimately powerless.

"Legend of Qingyun" tells us that as long as you have the love of the old emperor, you can cast aside the Three Obediences and Four Virtues, the chastity archways, and bravely become the new emperor's lover. Use love to pursue your own new life!

But "Tale of Cloud Incline" cannot tell the audience, if we were born in feudal times, how could we control our own lives?

"Legend of Qingyun" teaches the audience too much, while "Tale of Cloud Incline" can only show some things of helplessness, unable to educate the audience about anything.

As a screenwriter, I admit that receiving so much support from the audience is joyful, satisfying. Without racking my brains, I can be overjoyed.

Whenever I think that my laughter is built upon the pain of "Legend of Qingyun," this happiness becomes doubled happiness.

As a director and screenwriter, I never think, "If the audience doesn't watch my drama, what's wrong with the audience?"; I only consider, "If the audience doesn't watch my drama, what's wrong with my drama?"

Truth becomes clearer through debate; time will prove which work is the audience's true choice.

The audience chose me, and I thank you all. If anyone criticizes your taste for watching "Tale of Cloud Incline," remember, this criticism is aimed at me, not your burden of guilt.

Please enjoy it to the fullest! If we can bring you a moment of happiness, that is the greatest honor!

Zheng Bohan, on the day after the finale of "Tale of Cloud Incline," 2017■

Zheng Bohan had been in the eye of the storm these past few days, and now that he had finally spoken up, it was like water hitting boiling oil, causing a massive splash!

In just ten minutes, netizens who caught wind of it pushed the comments under Zheng Bohan's post past ten thousand. Within half an hour, #Zheng Bohan Posts# had rushed to number one on the hot search list!

The watching netizens included the shocked type:

■Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh■

■Aaaaaaa■■■■■

■Zheng Bohan is crazy■■■■■

■I rubbed my eyes repeatedly, making sure I wasn't seeing things...■

■■■■■■■■■

■The domestic entertainment industry has gone completely mad■

■Holy shit, awesome■

There was the entertainment-seeker type watching the fun:

■@Director-Lin Haishan Look what you made him do■

■Laughing so hard I want to die■

■@Director-Lin Haishan@Guanjun Century@Vast Literary Sea, come quick, someone here is posting pirated resources of "Legend of Qingyun," support cracking down■

■What is this, an internet free-for-all boxing match?■

■Returning the favor with his own method? Is Zheng Bohan actually called Murong Bohan?■

■Laughing my ass off■

There was the analyzing pros and cons type:

■Is this a complete break? Is Zheng Bohan not afraid of consequences?■

■Wasn't it the "Legend of Qingyun" production side that broke first? Did I forget?■

■■■■Come on, Zheng Bohan already has a drama with ratings breaking 5, do you know what breaking 5 means? Even if Zheng Bohan slapped Xu Guanjun today, if he said he wanted to cooperate with Guanjun Century tomorrow, Xu Guanjun would have to send a grand sedan chair by eight bearers to fetch him■■■■

■Directors with real achievements have a very stiff backbone, especially since the grudge between Guanjun Century and Meta Pictures isn't short of this one.■

There was the audience-is-god type:

■Although a bit harsh, it actually makes sense. What the masses love and enjoy, who the hell are you? Where do you get the face to criticize the audience?■

■Don't even mention that the message of "Tale of Cloud Incline" is infinitely higher than "Legend of Qingyun," even if it really was just a silly comedy, so what? I don't have refined taste either, I don't like highbrow stuff either, I'm vulgar, if you can't stand it then gouge your own eyes out■■■

■This is the right attitude, look for reasons within yourself more, pick on the audience grandpas and grandmas less■

There was the suddenly enlightened type:

■What kind of benevolent believer could a screenwriter who wrote Scumbag Emperor Qin and Pingzhao the Father-Killer be? The "Legend of Qingyun" production side really has bubbles in their brains, daring to provoke this living ancestor.■

■I've wanted to say this for a long time, the stuff Lin Haishan said doesn't hold water at all. Was Qingyun's so-called "freedom" not given by the emperor? The emperor loved her so he forgave all the stupid things she did, just like a cat slave isn't angry when scratched by their house cat. What does that have to do with anti-feudalism?■

■Yep yep, speaks my mind! The so-called anti-feudalism of "Legend of Qingyun" is actually just being the pampered baby of the imperial power daddy while blaming those wild children without a daddy for not "being anti-feudal" like the pampered baby...■

■Real freedom: leaving the old emperor's embrace to throw yourself into the new emperor's embrace [doge]■

■If "Legend of Qingyun" honestly admitted it's a Mary Sue middle-aged idol drama, it actually wouldn't be mocked this much. It's quite good to watch as a Mary Sue wish-fulfillment drama. The problem is insisting on adding value and prestige to the romance core, then don't blame the audience for not buying it.■

■Finally, someone with a mouthpiece helped me say what I think... "Legend of Qingyun" drama fans criticized Princess Pingzhao for coldly watching the hundreds of people in the Imperial Consort's family die without moving, as if all those He family relatives were innocent white lotuses. But aristocratic families have lived for millennia by sucking the blood of commoners, and now they've just been swallowed by a bigger bloodsucker (the emperor), it's just infighting among the meat-eaters. Comparing palace maids, the bottom layer, to the He family, what audacity.■

■"Legend of Qingyun" drama fans criticized "Tale of Cloud Incline" for being aloof, isn't it precisely because in this drama, the ones with human brilliance are the bottom-layer palace maids, eunuchs, and unfavored concubines? The rest of the high-ranking people are all cold-blooded, the scumbag emperor is scum, the tribal leader cuts off his own daughter's head, the princess loves killing fathers and husbands, princes casually kill palace maids over a crane-feather cloak and a few plots of land, ministers are scared by the emperor like timid grandsons!

"Tale of Cloud Incline" strips the human skin off those in power, revealing a formless beast, devoid of emotion and love, alienated by power. Some people's dreams of being "Qingyun" are shattered, that's why they think this drama is aloof!■

The screenwriting team, holding in their anger for several days, finally had their shame washed away and came to assist with beaming faces:

@Screenwriter Fu Yu: ■Allow different voices!■

@Jiao Xiachun Qiu Dong: ■The audience chose me, and I will bring more and more meaningful works to the audience.■

@Jing Fengnian Nian Nian You Yu: ■The audience voted for us with their remote controls, just one word: awesome!

@Screenwriter Liu Hong: ■Thank you, Director Zheng, for speaking up. The first collaboration in many years feels as smooth as flying on white clouds.■

@Not a Screenwriter, a Writer: ■Year after year, the flowers are similar; year after year, the people are different. Seriously making high-quality dramas, looking for reasons within oneself more, is the only way not to be left behind by the audience.■

@An Pinger: ■Finished reading the whole text, laughed heartily, laughed so hard the neighbors knocked on the door.■

The triumphant audience and drama fans formed ranks and swaggered over to Director Lin Haishan's Weibo and the official "Legend of Qingyun" Weibo, starting to queue up and spam comments:

■Truth becomes clearer through debate; time will prove which work is the audience's true choice.■

—Although Shang Yechu had been busy filming this past month and had no time to look at the inexplicable negative reviews online. But it didn't matter, fans would believe she spent this month crying every day, living in the darkness of being cyberbullied. Su Ge's fans could believe Su Ge was being bullied, what's

impossible?

Fans of idol development stars are one of the most long-lasting fan groups. Giving fans a sense of companionship, making fans feel "I accompanied her through obscurity," is the surefire method for making fans suffer to solidify the fandom.

Character fans, also known as three-month drama fans, i.e., transient fans who run away within three months after the drama ends—this most likely-to-leave group was thus easily consumed by Shang Yechu.

Yummy yummy.

Chapter 125: The New Script

Shang Yechu was now a hot commodity.

There was an interesting phenomenon: the first to sense that a certain artist had become popular was often not the artist herself or her fans, but the ever-proliferating capital within the entertainment industry.

The number of followers on YechuLeaves' Weibo had already surpassed two million, and the super topic membership had also broken fifty thousand. She was the cast member of *Tale of Cloud Incline* whose numbers had grown the most.

Being surrounded for autographs and such were minor matters; the olive branches extended by major entertainment companies were no joke. There were also many offers for Shang Yechu to shoot advertisements, endorse small commodities, do magazine shoots... and even star in low-budget movies. It was unclear how they managed to dig up Shang Yechu's phone number.

Shang Yechu knew she needed to hire an assistant and an agent. Her energy was limited; she couldn't possibly respond to all the winks and nods thrown her way by various parties.

Although *Tale of Cloud Incline* had already aired its finale, the ripples were still spreading, its popularity undiminished. The shocking plot twist in the finale drove audiences to re-watch the earlier episodes, scrutinizing the drama with a microscope, striving to find the foreshadowing planted in the previous installments.

The view count for *Tale of Cloud Incline* on Meta Pictures' platform had already exceeded 5.1 billion, leaving a host of new and old dramas far behind. *Legend of Qingyun*, which had hoped to attract new viewers by piggybacking on *Tale of Cloud Incline*'s finale, ended up getting slaughtered by audiences, its ratings not only failing to rise but intermittently dropping quite a bit instead.

A week quickly passed. Yi Tianzhao, true to her efficient nature, had already wrapped filming for *Xiao Fengque: The Dynasty Mystery*. Shang Yechu didn't need to ask for leave; she went straight to the celebration banquet for the *Tale of Cloud Incline* crew.

Shang Yechu was always punctual and arrived very early. When she reached the Misty Rain Pavilion hotel, most of the crew hadn't arrived yet.

Zheng Bohan, returning triumphant, was quite generous, inviting almost all the actors from the crew who had contact information.

The leads, director, and screenwriters naturally had to sit at one table. However, Zheng Bohan didn't like drinking—he believed alcohol affected the brain and, consequently, creativity. His old screenwriter friends weren't so restrained; each had remarkable drinking capacity, and a few had particularly poor drinking manners.

The palace drama crew was predominantly female. Zheng Bohan was worried his old buddies might get drunk and cause a scene, harassing the female colleagues, which could create a negative impact on *Tale of Cloud Incline*, which had just finished airing. Therefore, he booked several private rooms. Apart from the five of them—Zheng Bohan, Qin Tianye, Su Ge, Shang Yechu, and the non-drinking Fu Yu—sitting at one table, the other male and female colleagues were seated separately in different rooms.

This arrangement did dilute the celebratory atmosphere somewhat, but it was also much quieter and safer.

Having just experienced a dramatic rise and fall, Zheng Bohan no longer clung to those fussy formalities as he once did. Regarding his arrangement, the female colleagues naturally gave their wholehearted approval. Those old screenwriters grumbled a couple of times but didn't object.

Before Shang Yechu could even take her seat, a figure pounced on her: "Little Leaf!"

Shang Yechu caught the person, both amused and exasperated: "Kui Kui? You startled me."

Li Kui exclaimed excitedly, "I haven't seen you in so long! You're a big star now!"

"Look who's talking, you've received plenty of praise too, haven't you?" Shang Yechu adjusted Li Kui's collar for her. "The best actor in *Tale of Cloud Incline*?"

"Ah!" Li Kui cried out in flustered embarrassment, hopping in place. "Why didn't Director Zheng tell me my character was mentally ill? On the day my episode premiered, I confidently assured my mom that my character was a cheerful little girl. I ended up making her contact a bunch of relatives to watch it together!"

Shang Yechu laughed unkindly: "What did your aunts and uncles say?"

"You're still laughing!" Li Kui gave Shang Yechu a light, playful punch. "After watching it, my second aunt and the others secretly told my mom to take me to see a psychologist, saying early treatment yields early results! That damn old man Zheng Bohan, why did he keep it such a secret?"

"..." Shang Yechu leaned close to Li Kui's ear. "Let me tell you a secret. Actually, I knew all along."

"!!!" Li Kui's eyes widened. She grabbed Shang Yechu: "You little leaf! You actually didn't tell me? You—you really could keep it in!"

A smirk tugged at Shang Yechu's lips as she mercilessly sold out everyone else: "Actually, the actors in your episode all knew, and the entire crew staff too..."

"Ahhhhhhh—" Li Kui bristled like an angry cat. "You're all bad people—I'm ignoring you. I'm going to eat now. I'm determined to eat that old man Zheng bankrupt today!"

"That might be a bit difficult," Shang Yechu pointed towards Zheng Bohan, who was talking with Jing Fengnian and the others. "Director Zheng has struck it rich."

Li Kui snorted, immediately forgetting the previous matter: "I heard the food at Misty Rain Pavilion is delicious. Normally, I could never afford to come here. After eating, can I pack up the leftovers to take home? I want my mom to try it too."

Shang Yechu blinked: "Of course you can."

"Actually, I feel a bit embarrassed," Li Kui whispered. "This place is so luxurious. Asking a server to pack leftovers seems a bit shameful..."

Although Li Kui was carefree, she wasn't completely without concerns. Seeing this, Shang Yechu paused, then said, "How about this: I'll go pack the leftovers with you later, okay?"

With two people together, the awkwardness would indeed lessen considerably. Li Kui excitedly planted a kiss on Shang Yechu's cheek: "Mwah~ Love you the most, Little Leaf~ hehe..."

"Such a fair-weather friend," Shang Yechu said coolly. "So I'm not a bad person anymore?"

Li Kui stuck out her tongue and darted back to her own private room.

After this brief delay, by the time Shang Yechu entered the private room, Fu Yu, Zheng Bohan, and Qin Tianye had already arrived. Fu Yu unceremoniously occupied the seat of honor, squeezing Zheng Bohan and Qin Tianye to either side.

Shang Yechu unhesitatingly sat next to Zheng Bohan, leaving the empty seat beside Qin Tianye for Su Ge.

After waiting a while, Miss Su finally arrived fashionably late. She was dressed to the nines today, exceptionally radiant.

"Sorry, sorry," Su Ge said, clasping her hands together and directing her apology towards Qin Tianye's direction. "My dress got caught on something when I was leaving, and changing again wasted a lot of time. That's why I'm late."

Qin Tianye didn't make a sound. It was Zheng Bohan who shot Su Ge a surprised glance, smiling, "It's not that late. The food hasn't even been served yet. Have a seat!"

Had Miss Su taken the wrong medicine? She actually learned to apologize to him, a "beggar screenwriter"?

Shang Yechu observed Zheng Bohan's self-delusion, sipped her tea, and tried to suppress the laughter threatening to burst out.

This was Zheng Bohan's first time giving a celebratory speech as both director and producer. He was slightly emotional but overall very proper. Sincere and heartfelt, the length was just right. In his speech, he expressed heartfelt thanks to everyone present.

Everyone else also exchanged polite words, all spoken quite skillfully.

After several rounds of drinks and many dishes, an elaborately decorated large cake was wheeled in. Written on the cake in jam was a bright red "5.21"—the highest rating point for *Tale of Cloud Incline*.

Before digging in, Su Ge took several photos of the cake with a *click-click* sound. Shang Yechu, sharp-eyed, noticed she also secretly took a few photos of Qin Tianye and couldn't help but chuckle silently.

Zheng Bohan used a cake knife to cut a slice for everyone, sharing the fruits of victory together.

The cake tasted good. After scooping a few spoonfuls, Shang Yechu saw Fu Yu cough once and leisurely head out the door.

Zheng Bohan muttered under his breath, "Old nicotine addict."

Slipping out to smoke during a celebration banquet—such impolite behavior was something only Zheng Bohan's old friends would do.

Although he cursed Fu Yu a couple of times, Zheng Bohan's own nicotine cravings were also stirred up.

His stress had been too high lately, and his smoking addiction had grown several times worse than before. Zheng Bohan offered an apologetic smile: "I need to use the restroom."

The second old nicotine addict also left. The private room was suddenly left with just Shang Yechu, Su Ge, and Qin Tianye.

Once Zheng Bohan was gone, Shang Yechu glanced sideways. She saw Qin Tianye intently staring at his plate, occasionally picking up some food to eat a few bites or looking out the window several times—just not looking at Su Ge.

Su Ge, on the other hand, was utterly brazen, almost developing a squint. Even though Shang Yechu didn't want to meddle, she couldn't help but want to remind her to rein in her eyeballs.

Something was up. Something big was definitely up between these two.

Gossip was human nature. For the first time, Shang Yechu felt the thrill of witnessing live drama. Unfortunately, the thrill soon turned into feeling like she was sitting on pins and needles—the silence and weirdness in the air had almost solidified into a semi-solid state. Even the sound of Qin Tianye's chopsticks clinking against his plate was clearly audible. Shang Yechu herself felt embarrassed on behalf of the two people beside her.

Shang Yechu had no choice but to smile and say, "I'll also go to the restroom first," and left this atmosphere-choked private room.

After a perfunctory trip to the restroom, Shang Yechu washed her hands. Strolling slowly, she wondered if Zheng Bohan and Fu Yu had finished their smoke. She really didn't want to return to the private room and face those two alone.

Speak of the devil. Just as Shang Yechu was heading back, she heard Zheng Bohan's voice from behind: "Yechu!"

Shang Yechu turned her head. She saw Zheng Bohan but not Fu Yu, finding it a bit strange: "Teacher, where's Teacher Fu?"

"He complained the hotel's mints don't get rid of the smell enough, went out to buy some," Zheng Bohan walked up and started chatting with Shang Yechu. "What are your plans next?"

Shang Yechu said, "I plan to sign with a company first, then find..."

"Not asking about that," Zheng Bohan said seriously. "What are your plans regarding acting?"

"Several scripts have already come my way," Shang Yechu said cautiously. "But there are still a few more films in the *Xiao Fengque* series, so I haven't decided yet."

Zheng Bohan pondered for a moment, then slowly said, "Actually, if you can wait... I happen to have a good script here that suits you."

Shang Yechu's heart stirred: "Teacher?"

Zheng Bohan chewed the mint in his mouth, swallowed it, then lowered his voice: "Do you know about custom-made productions?"

Shang Yechu naturally knew about this. Custom-made productions were TV dramas where the script was tailor-made according to the requirements of the production company.

"I've heard of them. Did someone commission you to write a script?"

"A major network. Not Dragon Central Television, but a major local network," Zheng Bohan said. "They asked for it two years ago, specifically naming me to write this script. I was busy with another project at the time... Anyway, I have time now."

Given Zheng Bohan's reputation, this wasn't surprising. Shang Yechu's eyes lit up: "What genre is it?"

Zheng Bohan said, "The subject matter is a bit niche—it's a spy drama."

Chapter 126: Serious Drama

Espionage drama?

Shang Yechu's interest did indeed wane a little. Ninety percent of espionage dramas were male-centric shows, with female characters often portrayed as one-dimensional stereotypes. They were either relegated to the background, given romantic or seductive overtones, or entangled in some love-hate relationship with the male lead. A small portion could attract fans, most received lukewarm responses, and some even brought a wave of scathing criticism upon the actors after airing.

Out of respect for Zheng Bohan, Shang Yechu didn't let this disappointment show, maintaining an interested expression. "That's something new. It seems you haven't written this type of script before, have you?"

Zheng Bohan simply stopped walking, leaning against the hotel wall as he spoke. "After writing period dramas for so many years, I am indeed a bit tired of them. I want to try something different."

Shang Yechu pondered for a moment before saying, "Espionage dramas don't seem to be that niche."

"Male-led espionage dramas aren't niche." Zheng Bohan's expression grew even more serious when talking about work, looking somewhat intimidating. "This one is different. This is a female-led espionage drama."

"Ah?" Shang Yechu's hand tightened slightly. "No wonder it's a custom project. I haven't even seen many espionage novels from a female protagonist's perspective."

"That's not the reason." Zheng Bohan said solemnly. "This script is based on a real-life prototype."

Shang Yechu instinctively straightened her posture. "Who is it?"

"I don't know."

Shang Yechu was puzzled. "That local TV station hasn't informed you yet?"

Zheng Bohan shook his head. "She was a legendary spy who used three or four different names throughout her career. As for her real name, because all her comrades sacrificed themselves heroically, and most of the records were destroyed before their deaths to maintain secrecy, no one knows it to this day.

"The fragmented information that remains only records that the local TV station's region was her hometown. Details about her life and deeds are all incomplete."

Many heroes who fought on the hidden front remained anonymous even after death. Their names unknown to the world, their achievements enduring forever.

Shang Yechu felt a pang of sorrow. "That local TV station wants to commemorate this martyr?"

"Yes." Zheng Bohan sighed. "Even if no one knows her name, someone should know her story."

After a moment of silence, Zheng Bohan spoke again. "That local TV station initially hired an author skilled in writing espionage novels for this script. After he finished, they were so angry they threw it away again. The story was thrilling, yes, but it was crammed full of romance! Nonsense! Then they came to me."

Shang Yechu now understood why this project had come to Zheng Bohan. Zheng Bohan had one major weakness: writing romantic scenes. Being too serious himself and lacking romantic sensibilities, the love scenes he wrote were all as stiff as green wood. Most of the time, he simply avoided writing them or asked others to polish them. This weakness was a shortcoming elsewhere, but in a hardcore espionage drama, it became a strength.

Shang Yechu nodded. "Such a script indeed needs careful deliberation."

"Indeed." Zheng Bohan said. "I need to refine it properly. It'll probably take a year or two."

For such a major project, the lead role couldn't be decided by Zheng Bohan alone. Shang Yechu probed, "Teacher Zheng, do you think there's a role in this script suitable for me?"

Zheng Bohan glanced at Shang Yechu and snorted coldly. "You child, you think too much. I haven't even started writing the script yet, but I asked you first. What do you think? Which role do I think suits you?"

Shang Yechu gave a light cough and smiled. "Do you really think I'm suitable?"

Shang Yechu didn't feel she possessed any heroic aura. Such a great existence made her feel a sense of awe, even a desire to respectfully keep her distance.

Zheng Bohan didn't answer immediately, instead pondering for a while.

"That martyr began her undercover work in her teens, so the actor can't be too old. But among the younger artists in the entertainment industry, their acting is either superficial, slick, or shallow. You are just right.

"Besides, she was a spy. She definitely couldn't be a delicate, willow-like figure." Zheng Bohan adjusted his glasses. "I asked Yi Tianzhao, and she said your action scenes are quite good, so your physical condition shouldn't be too poor."

103 inexplicably let out a cold sneer.

Ignoring 103's sarcastic remark, Shang Yechu curved her eyes into a smile. "You really flatter me—"

"No." Zheng Bohan shook his head without hesitation. "You played Princess Pingzhao very well. But I always feel you haven't yet unleashed your true potential."

Zheng Bohan scrutinized Shang Yechu critically, his gaze like a carving knife. "You've gained some fame now, I can sense it. But I've seen too many actors who were flashes in the pan."

Zheng Bohan's gaze made Shang Yechu feel pressure. It wasn't the look of a teacher observing a student, but that of a craftsman examining a piece of work. This feeling made Shang Yechu both intrigued and uncomfortable.

"With your current acting skills, the path you can walk is long." Zheng Bohan made a gesture. "But I hope the path you walk can be wider.

"I'll say this upfront. If, by the time the script is finished, your acting skills remain only at your current level, then consider today's conversation as if it never happened."

Zheng Bohan's words were quite blunt, yet Shang Yechu felt as if an electric current shot through her spine, making her shiver slightly.

It was the feeling of being expected.

Grandma Hu was tolerant of her. No matter what choices Shang Yechu made, Grandma never made any demands or criticisms.

Yi Tianzhao and Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng scrutinized her. If Shang Yechu didn't meet their expectations, they would abandon her without hesitation—no blame, but also no attachment.

But Zheng Bohan, this rigid, serious, dull, and stubborn old man, knowing full well that Shang Yechu's current level wasn't sufficient to reach where he wanted her to be, was still willing to wait, willing to place his expectations on her—expecting Shang Yechu to reach a higher level.

Even though that expectation was mixed with self-interest, scrutiny, criticism, as heavy as certain parents' desperate hopes for their children to succeed, even carrying a hint of forcing growth, Shang Yechu couldn't help but be moved.

In this world, aside from the entire Shang family placing money-making expectations on her, no one had ever expected so much from Shang Yechu.

Zheng Bohan slowly walked to the floor-to-ceiling window in the hotel lobby, looking at the neon lights outside, suddenly seeming thoughtful. "What do you think of 'Legend of Qingyun'?"

"..." Shang Yechu deliberated for a moment, then still spoke her honest thoughts. "A third-rate work pieced together from various parts."

Zheng Bohan glanced back at Shang Yechu, seeming slightly surprised that his usually evasive and roundabout student had answered so bluntly this time.

Shang Yechu said frankly, "I watched a few episodes. Some parts were quite good, some parts were very boring. It felt disjointed. I guess it might be because there were too many screenwriters, and the lead actors and directors each did their own thing."

Zheng Bohan suddenly laughed. His smile wasn't pleasant; instead, it looked like he was about to eat a child. "Actually, my son is also one of the screenwriters for 'Legend of Qingyun'."

In an instant, Shang Yechu felt as if she had been enlightened!

The reason why Zheng Bohan, in her previous life, after having his script stolen and butchered, and being slandered for plagiarism, still remained silent and never stepped forward to clarify—it was because of this!

Perhaps because 'Tale of Cloud Incline' was settled, and Zheng Bohan had put down the heavy burden in his heart, he spoke much more candidly.

"Both his mother and I were busy. His mother is a teacher, devoting more heart to her students than to him. As for me, I devoted more heart to scripts than to him.

"This child resents both of us, especially me, because he wanted to be a screenwriter, and I told him what he wrote lacked soul and would flop if released on the market.

"He wasn't convinced. He chose a pen name himself and got a few scripts filmed. They were a mess. Later on..."

Zheng Bohan didn't continue. But Shang Yechu had already guessed what happened next.

Zheng Bohan brought his son into the 'Legend of Qingyun' project. Maybe to gild his son's resume, maybe to let him gain experience. In any case, his son got in.

After the script was butchered, Zheng Bohan left angrily, but his son—this young man who had always been at odds with his father—didn't leave.

In her previous life, after the plagiarism scandal broke out, Zheng Bohan might have been prepared for a mutually destructive fight. But then, Xu Hanwen or the 'Legend of Qingyun' project team pushed Zheng Bohan's son out to take the fall.

They were father and son. Once the matter blew up, if netizens wanted to dig deeper, they could still uncover it. If Zheng Bohan sued 'Legend of Qingyun' for butchering his script, the other side could conveniently counter-accuse, claiming it was Zheng Bohan's son who stole his father's script and messed with it, and the production team knew nothing about it. But if Zheng Bohan lay down and took the criticism, after the angry netizens vented, they wouldn't dig into any father-son relationship.

Either Zheng Bohan would be the thief, or his son would be the thief.

Just thinking about it made Shang Yechu feel utterly stifled. She truly didn't know how Zheng Bohan, who valued face and was stubborn as a mule, managed to swallow that anger.

This also explained why Shang Yechu had no impression of this "espionage drama" Zheng Bohan mentioned. Probably, in her previous life, after suffering this humiliating anger, Zheng Bohan became disheartened. How could he still have the energy and drive to refine any new scripts or works?

Shang Yechu suddenly had a thought, looking at Zheng Bohan's back with a strange expression. This old man, could it be that because his own son was disappointing and their relationship was strained, with his paternal desires having nowhere to be channeled, he had twistedly transferred his hopes for his son's success onto her!

Fu Yu, who went to buy candy, finally returned. The smell of cigarettes on him hadn't dissipated at all; he probably smoked a couple more outside—a true chain-smoker.

The group returned to the private room, exchanged a few more pleasantries, and finally went their separate ways.

Before leaving, Zheng Bohan stopped Shang Yechu again and urged, "Think carefully about what I said. Espionage dramas are true prestige dramas. They're different."

Shang Yechu nodded seriously. "I understand."

Chapter 127: Method Acting vs. Technical Acting

Douban, the "Domestic Fishbowl is Doomed" group, currently trending hottest post:

[Decisive Battle at the Peak of Acting in "Tale of Cloud Incline" | Finals Group]

[After several days of intense and fierce competition, our group's "Peak of Acting in Tale of Cloud Incline" has finally reached the finals... There are too many actors in this drama, having fought their way through dozens of roles to this point, only six remain.

The Peak of Acting in "Tale of Cloud Incline" will be selected from these six finalists... Disclaimer upfront: The OP is not a fan of anyone. This current top six was voted in by over twenty thousand people in the preliminary rounds. If anyone wants to accuse me of being a fan, I suggest you go check the preliminary round thread yourself.

Preliminary round link: [Link] rt, getting flooded by "Tale of Cloud Incline" lately, starting a poll. Brothers, who do you think has the best acting in "Tale of Cloud Incline"??]

[Current voting has ended.]

[Finals | The person with the best acting in "Tale of Cloud Incline" is (single choice):]

(Current votes: 10,274 participants)

[Old Emperor | Qin Tianye — 2053 votes (20%)]

[New Emperor | Shang Yechu — 1878 votes (18.3%)]

[Princess Pingzhao | Princess Pingzhao — 2166 votes (21.1%)]

[Empress | Su Ge — 1129 votes (11%)]

[Old Eunuch | Liu Changqing — 1303 votes (12.7%)]

[Crazy Woman from the Cold Palace | Li Kui — 1745 votes (17%)]

[Let us announce the final results of the competition:

Third Place: Shang Yechu

Second Place: Qin Tianye

Champion: Princess Pingzhao...

Does this result match your personal choice?]

[This result... I'm laughing my head off...]

[Dying of laughter, the champion truly deserves it.]

[Princess Pingzhao counts as an actor, no problem... I support it.]

[The big Yun Dynasty's Best Actress, is that it?]

[Wrong, it's Best Actor, a real Emperor.]

[Ahhhhhh, what a vicious poll!]

[Shang Yechu is crying herself to death in the bathroom. You all fell in love with my face and another person's character design...]

[Old Ye worked hard for nothing, actually got beaten by Old Ping by three hundred votes [facepalm]]

[The most fair vote in your group's history (?)]

[How did Su Ge get in here, and still has eleven percent? Has your group been invaded by sugar fans?]

[Su Ge acted pretty well in this drama. The ten-thousand-floor sugar-shipping skyscraper in the neighboring hate group is still there. Although it's now turned into a digital criminal record.]

[Tangtang is very suited to playing this kind of mute white moonlight. As long as she doesn't speak, my Tang is a good actress.]

[Old Tang was coached pretty well by Zheng Bohan this time, her acting had a qualitative leap...]

[Isn't Li Kui the amazing one? When she was holding that gourd made of ashes and giggling creepily, I got so scared I fell off my bed.]

[About Li Kui, I checked. This drama was her first time acting. Her main job seems to be finance... A natural-born actor, unbeatable.]

[Li Kui also had no lines like Su Ge, only knows how to laugh. Why are her votes higher than Su Ge's?]

[Su Ge played the Empress better than the assassin. When playing the assassin, she seemed reluctant, like she didn't want to stab the scumbag Emperor. She was still stuck in the Empress state, so her votes were low. As for Li Kui, need I say more? She hit the number one spot on the hot search list the day the episode

aired. Something like "Girls who smile often have good luck."]

[Shang Yechu performed this well? Two out of the top three??? Even higher than Qin Tianye? Old Qin's twenty years in the business were for nothing.]

[Shang Yechu's acting is still a tiny bit less mature than Qin Tianye's, but Princess Pingzhao's acting is definitely better than Shang Yechu and Qin Tianye combined—]

[Hahahahahahahahahahaha, has your group also been conquered by Emperor Zhao?]

[After watching "Tale of Cloud Incline," whether you like Princess Pingzhao or not, you absolutely will not forget Princess Pingzhao. She is that kind of character. Being conquered by Emperor Zhao is as easy as breathing.]

[Who doesn't love Emperor Zhao? She's been flooding PiliPili for days now, right?]

[Old Pi's homepage keeps recommending Emperor Zhao to me every day, even using similar thumbnails. I've practically memorized every frame of that coronation scene, can even recite the lines.]

[Isn't this vote count off? Shang Yechu herself is a bit lower than Qin Tianye, but combined with Princess Pingzhao, it's double Qin Tianye's votes. Although I also think she acted well, it shouldn't be higher than Qin Tianye...]

[Qin Tianye is indeed amazing. During his death scene, I thought he really died. I was thinking, is that madman Zheng Bohan causing a fatality for the sake of filming? Feels like your group is being overly lenient towards young actors.]

[Shang Yechu and Qin Tianye are still different. The goodness of Qin Tianye's acting lies in its naturalness. When he plays the Emperor, he *is* the Emperor. When he plays dead, he *is* dead. You watch him, and without any thought—yeah, that's exactly it.

Shang Yechu's acting lies in her meticulousness. She designed many details and small gestures, picking them apart extremely finely. You watch her, and you have an epiphany—damn, as expected of her! Yes, yes, yes! That's exactly how it should be played!

If you have to argue about who's better between these two, it's probably the difference between method acting and technical acting. Different schools. In my book, Qin Tianye is about ten points higher than Shang Yechu.

In summary, Qin Tianye doesn't seem like he's acting, while Shang Yechu acts like she's not acting.]

[Got dizzy reading the above, who exactly is acting...]

[Oh crap, the decades-long debate between method acting and technical acting has ignited again, let's battle!]

[Ugh, no need to praise one by putting down the other? I also think Qin Tianye's acting is very good, but Shang Yechu is not bad either, a ten-point gap is absolutely not warranted. Listing a few details:

① Princess Pingzhao invites guests to dine twice in the entire series. Once when a commoner woman accusing the Eighth Prince asks for her help, and once when a poor scholar asks for her protection. Both times, there is a fish dish on the table. Using fish to entertain guests was normal in ancient times.

When inviting the accusing commoner woman to dine, it was winter, the tree branches outside the window were bare. When inviting the poor scholar to dine, it was summer—pay attention to this GIF. When the scholar Xu Jinsheng enters, see what the princess is doing next to Xu Jinsheng's table. Zoom in two times and play at 0.5x speed, and you can see clearly: the princess nudges the fish plate as Xu Jinsheng enters, turning the plate around!

[Screenshot] Regarding these two tables of food, the camera gave very brief close-ups during the meals. In the commoner woman's shot, the fish on the table has its belly facing her. In Xu Jinsheng's shot, the fish on the table has its back facing him.

Some might ask, what does it matter which way the fish belly or back faces? — There's a line in the "Book of Rites": "In winter, the right side is the plump belly; in summer, the right side is the fin." It means when entertaining guests with fish on the table, in winter, the fish belly should face the guest, and in summer, the fish back should face the guest. Because winter fish have plump bellies, and summer fish have thick back meat.

Xu Jinsheng is a scholar; he must know the "Book of Rites" inside out. This small gesture seems insignificant, but it actually reflects Princess Pingzhao's attentiveness and courtesy as the hostess towards him. If Princess Pingzhao can be this meticulous just inviting him to eat fish, imagine how she would treat him in other matters. In the finale when Princess Pingzhao ascends the throne, Xu Jinsheng, a minor seventh-rank official, desperately cheers for her. You can see the hint here.

② The scene of bonding with the scumbag Emperor. The scumbag Emperor invites the princess to a family banquet. The two sit at the same table to eat. The Emperor even says, "Today it's just you and me, father and daughter, no need to stand on ceremony." This is considered supreme favor, right? But, watch in slow motion, which dishes did Princess Pingzhao eat—see? That's right! Only *after* the Emperor has eaten from a certain dish does she move her chopsticks. Dishes the Emperor hasn't touched, she doesn't touch at all.

In this family banquet scene, Princess Pingzhao's true nature is already revealed. She is an extremely cautious person. Even in front of her "doting" Father Emperor, she never lets down her guard or etiquette for a single moment.

Look at this GIF—Princess Pingzhao is moved to tears by the scumbag Emperor's words, looking at him with filial admiration. But the next second, she still bypasses the dish in front of her, only extending her chopsticks towards the dish the Emperor had eaten from!

③ One more point to prevent nitpicking. The posture Princess Pingzhao uses when handling the imperial seal during her coronation is particularly practiced. Many viewers have discussed this, saying she must have practiced this moment countless times in her heart, evidence of her ambition. But many have overlooked

another detail. Look carefully at her action of picking up the jade seal: [GIF]

First, she extends her thumb and index finger, only pinching the protrusion on top of the imperial seal. Then she pauses before opening her hand to grasp the entire seal.

[Screenshot]

Look back at episode four when Princess Pingzhao is practicing calligraphy. See this small seal on the table?

Let's proportionally move this small seal from the table onto the image of her holding the imperial seal—it fits perfectly!

Princess Pingzhao's initial action of only extending her thumb and index finger is exactly how you would pinch this small personal seal!!!

Isn't it obvious enough? This action is the action of someone accustomed to using a personal seal, using the imperial seal for the first time! In just thirty seconds, it shows both the familiarity of a long-cherished dream and the hard-to-break habit of first contact!!

[Holy crap, amazing.]

[Ahhhhhhh... First time seeing this analysis, oh my god ahhhhh!!!]

[My goodness, brother, why didn't you post this analysis earlier?]

[+1, if posted earlier, Shang Yechu might have defeated Emperor Zhao and taken the number one spot.]

[I told you you can learn new things online...]

[Oh my god, I originally thought Shang Yechu's acting was good but not enough to challenge Qin Tianye... After seeing this, I'm convinced.]

[Stunned speechless. Many veteran actors aren't this detailed.]

[!!! That scene of nudging the fish was so small and brief, yet she acted with such consideration.]

[The expert spoke my mind. I never dared to say it, but Shang Yechu acts as if a real ancient person has come to life. Although Su Ge is deep, some parts still feel a bit modernized. Qin Tianye's features are too sharp, sometimes his personal aura slightly overwhelms the Emperor's aura. Only Shang Yechu stays completely within the situation, never letting the person overpower the role.]

[Yep, walking that long path during the coronation, the Emperor's Crown with Hanging Beads barely moved!!! Shading that flying crown technique from the neighboring drama.]

[Old Qin lost fairly... "Legend of Qingyun" lost even more fairly.]

[Has the Domestic Entertainment Industry had a flower with acting this amazing in a long time? Will she become a star of tomorrow?]

[Already a star of today. Her fans increased by over two million, and it's still growing.]

[No wonder Su Ge had no scenes with her. Afraid of being completely outclassed...]

[The biggest advantage of this actor Shang Yechu is... she has a strong presence. Many dare to say that even those who curse Princess Pingzhao the most, when watching her scenes, have their full attention focused on Shang Yechu. Having presence without being obtrusive is too rare.]

[Ahhh, true. Princess Pingzhao antis watch Princess Pingzhao more carefully than we do. In one episode, the hairpin on her head had an 'L' size label showing, I didn't even see it, but the Princess Pingzhao anti-fans saw it...]

[Haven't been back in a while, so many replies. Oh dear, I really wasn't praising one by putting down another. Nor did I mean to disparage Shang Yechu's acting. Is it possible that what I'm talking about isn't a difference in performance, but a difference in emotion?]

[...]

[... Princess Pingzhao has emotions? Since when?]

[... Princess Pingzhao has emotions? For whom?]

[Everyone still doesn't get it... I mean, the emotions of the actor Shang Yechu herself.]

Everyone in the entire series shows emotional expression, even the scumbag Emperor displays real emotions like anger, wariness, nostalgia, shock. Only Princess Pingzhao wears a mask her entire life. All her emotional expressions are fake, "simulated."

Venturing a guess: this actor Shang Yechu might very well have some kind of emotional disorder, or perhaps is very insensitive towards human emotions and feelings. Therefore, she can only take the technical acting route, expressing the character through control of body, expression, and micro-actions, rather than the method acting route like Qin Tianye or Su Ge, drawing the character completely from inner emotional experience.

This time it just happened to align perfectly. Princess Pingzhao, like Shang Yechu, is someone who doesn't show emotions outwardly and has very faint feelings, so Shang Yechu could play her with ease. If Shang Yechu plays an emotionally rich role in the future, she might very well crash and burn. I'm putting it out there.

[This paragraph sounds so weird. I believe Qin Tianye is method acting, but what has Su Ge experienced?]

[I get what the OP means now. So... they admit Shang Yechu's acting is very good, admit Shang Yechu's control over expressions and body language is masterful, but Shang Yechu is an emotionless bad woman, so she'll crash in hypothetical future emotional scenes...]

I get what the OP means now. So... they admit Shang Yechu's acting is very good, admit Shang Yechu's control over expressions and body language is masterful, but Shang Yechu is an emotionless bad woman, so she'll crash in hypothetical future emotional scenes...

[Shang Yechu hasn't acted in any other dramas, right? How can you tell she has no emotions? Just from this one role?]

[There's also a flower queen role. You really can't say, I went to watch it, and like the OP said, that flower queen also... didn't have much emotional scenes.]

[Extras naturally wouldn't have emotional scenes, right? Find one with substantial screen time if you can.]

[Report! Six Empress Dowager just released this week's broadcast schedule. "Xiao Fengque" starring Shang Yechu will air the day after tomorrow!]

Chapter 128: MV

For artist fans, what is the happiest thing?

That's right, it's seeing their own idol constantly active.

Shang Yechu's fans are such fortunate ones. Not long after "Tale of Cloud Incline" just had its grand finale, with the whole internet still in a period of fervent discussion, another series starring Shang Yechu, "Xiao Fengque: The Dynasty Mystery," is about to air.

Although this adaptation was blasted to pieces by original work fans even before its release, with them cursing Shang Yechu as a "connected person" or something. But for the newly recruited Ye Ya (Shang Yechu's fan name), being able to see their idol's new work so quickly is undoubtedly a delightful thing.

Shang Yechu, who is so anticipated by her fans, is having a hard time. After finishing the first part of "Xiao Fengque," the crew only rested for one day before starting work again, beginning the filming of the second part, "Xiao Fengque: The Heaven-Sent Journey."

Shang Yechu sat on a chair outside the set, waiting for Li Yi to finish filming this literary scene.

Watching Li Yi's literary scenes is a kind of torture. Besides Yi Tianzhao, who has no choice but to watch, no one in the crew is willing to appreciate Li Yi reciting lines like a textbook. Shang Yechu is no exception.

Shang Yechu was watching clips of spy dramas on PiliPili, wanting to see what the classic spy drama female characters in the public's mind were like. To Shang Yechu's disappointment, the female character compilations for spy dramas on PiliPili were mainly focused on looks, CP pairings, and critique. Videos analyzing character personas and acting skills were few and far between.

Shang Yechu scrolled through several rounds but didn't find anything worth watching. She decided to go read a few spy novels to study and contemplate instead. Just as she was about to exit PiliPili, she saw a video recommended on the homepage.

The video thumbnail was a hand holding a jade imperial seal. Shang Yechu recognized it at a glance—it was her own hand.

The video title was also very interesting, called ["Know me, condemn me, only the Spring and Autumn Annals will tell."]

The video already had over five hundred thousand views. Shang Yechu clicked in and found that this video had actually reached number one on PiliPili's trending list.

The PiliPili trending list still holds some weight. The video wasn't long either, only five minutes, so Shang Yechu simply clicked to watch it.

"Dang—— Dang—— Dang——"

It began with nine bell tolls, precisely the nine false funeral bells used by the Emperor to lure the Seventh Prince. Shang Yechu thought with amusement, it's a pity those false funeral bells later became real ones.

"Wet silk robes, descending the jade stairs——"

A melodious opera-style singing voice rose. The screen showed the hem of a skirt, a pair of hands, then gradually ornate yet cold hairpins and jewels, a posture reclining on a daybed—everything except the face. It was precisely the scene of Princess Pingzhao from her first appearance episode.

The color grading of this video was beautiful, a kind of elegant and dignified warm tone. The editor must have put effort into the color correction.

"Golden frost brush, falls on silver mud——"

Princess Pingzhao's lowered hand faded, gradually transforming into another hand. That hand was writing. As the brush touched the paper, it happened to write the character for "life."

The singing abruptly stopped.

The scene changed drastically. Princess Pingzhao's figure writing suddenly transformed into the Old Emperor writing. The Old Emperor also lowered his vermilion brush, but beneath it was a bloody "x"!

"Kill!" Qin Tianye's stern, murderous voice sounded within the background music.

With this "kill," the rhythm of the background music immediately became faster. The clashing sounds of weapons clattered, like a thousand troops and ten thousand horses, the sound like raindrops, the momentum like rolling thunder!

The scene transitions also became faster. Scenes flashed and interwove, yet didn't appear chaotic at all. Lines from "Tale of Cloud Incline" flashed interspersed within the background music, also not seeming noisy, but instead having a kind of beauty where they complemented and harmonized with each other.

—"Insects respond while dogs leave the fence, jackdaws perch on phoenix branches!"

Princess Pingzhao sobbed as she knelt on the ground, crying out this line.

—"Now His Majesty has widely opened the imperial examinations, greatly selecting worthy talents. We have instead become idle men of wealth and leisure."

—"Even the poor scholar who copied books for my family has betrayed his master, going red-eyed to take those Classics exams!"

At the same time, the wealthy young masters who spoke these lines flashed by in the background one after another. The editor adjusted their footage to be semi-transparent, overlaid on the tearful face of Princess Pingzhao as they toasted and exchanged cups. As fine wine gurgled out from the pot, a tear also slid from the corner of Princess Pingzhao's eye.

The figures of the noble young masters faded. The scene changed to the Old Emperor's furious face. The camera shot turned, showing the scene of the Imperial Consort's family, hundreds of people, being executed.

—"If the Princess can uphold justice for this commoner woman, I am willing to repay you with my life and family's fortune!"

—"This is the petition written for my family of over ten people by the kindest teacher in our village. I beg the Princess to present it to His Majesty! The Eighth Prince killed over ten people in my family... over ten..."

Princess Pingzhao timidly helped the peasant woman, whose tears fell like rain, to her feet. At the same time, scenes from "White Crane" flashed in the background of the footage.

—"The Fifth Highness was furious, he strangled to death the three palace maids who burned his Crane-Feather Cloak!" This was the voice of a palace eunuch.

—"Lao Wu, you should rein in this perverse temper of yours. Confined to quarters for one month, copy one volume of the 'Sutra of Rebirth' to pray for the three wrongfully killed palace servants. Now get out." This was the Old Emperor's indifferent voice.

The scene changed. Princess Pingzhao apprehensively received the Duanying Brocade box sent by the Eighth Prince's maternal family, the Hong family.

—"The trivial matters of lowly commoners should not be taken to disturb His Majesty..."

—"Just three lowly maidservants, take them to the mass burial ground. If this reaches Father Emperor's ears, watch your skins!"

Princess Pingzhao knelt respectfully in the lower seat, presenting a brocade box to the Emperor with utmost reverence.

The Emperor opened the brocade box, seeing it filled with brocade as beautiful as the morning clouds.

—"The eldest princess did not give that lowly commoner's petition to His Majesty, Eighth Highness, you can set your mind at ease!"

—"Nansang offered two bolts of Duanying Brocade this year. I think it would suit you just right..."

The scene flashed to the treasury of the Eighth Prince's maternal family. Half a treasury of brocade shimmered brilliantly under the firelight like a sky full of evening clouds.

—"The Hong clan exterminated."

—"Even if all under heaven were to die, this son would still not be made ruler!"

The Eighth Prince's maternal family, the Hong clan, flashed by rapidly in the footage. The sky full of setting sun was like blood, then faded into that box of gorgeous and magnificent brocade.

The scenes transformed faster and faster. The head in the box, the old eunuch who passed by the princess, the only senior minister who would bow to the princess, Wu Zhi...

The rhythm of the background music gradually slowed down.

—"The eldest princess heard that His Majesty was losing sleep day and night worrying about court affairs, so she specially cooked a bowl of Calming Soup and sent it over."

—"Reporting to Your Majesty, this soup was personally stewed by the eldest princess in the evening. Afraid it would get cold, she ordered us servants to keep it warm over the fire."

The Emperor drank the Calming Soup personally stewed by the princess, spoonful by spoonful.

Until the moment the Emperor lay down, the rhythm of the background music finally completely slowed. An aged voice leisurely sounded:

"In a hundred battles on yellow sands, who gets enfeoffed as a marquis? Old trees yearly give birth to crow fledglings."

This line was paired with scenes of the Emperor's many princes living in luxury, with fine clothes, food, precious horses, and fragrant carriages.

"Behind vermilion gates, wine and meat; on the street corners, bones. Drawing jade dragons to die for their lord."

The generals who fought to establish the empire with the Emperor gradually aged, and finally scenes flashed of them being executed, their families exterminated, or exiled one by one.

"When heaven is cold, snow chill, mats broken—precisely the time to receive new grace and favor."

Scenes of the Rear Palace consorts at the height of their favor and at their deaths interwove one by one.

"..."

Finally, at the very end.

The screen was split into two frames. In one frame was the tragic sight of the Old Emperor being strangled to death by the palace servants. In the other frame was Princess Pingzhao ascending the high platform to ascend the throne.

"Long live my Emperor, ten thousand times ten thousand years! I have heard that even immortals have death!"

All scenes disappeared.

The screen lit up again. Emperor Pingzhao wielded her brush, splashing ink, writing the character "Zhen" (imperial "I") on an Imperial Edict.

At the same time, the final line paired with the video played. However, it was not a line from "Tale of Cloud Incline," but a line from Zheng Bohan's old work from years ago, "Western Garden."

"He is an autocrat, he is a thief of the people, he who steals the world—that is the Emperor."

Chapter 129: A Descent from Heaven

This video was edited so incredibly well.

Even though she was intimately familiar with every shot and foreshadowing, after watching it, Shang Yechu couldn't help but feel a surge of excitement. Music's ability to stir human emotions is unparalleled, especially when paired with such excellent pacing and such perfectly matched visuals.

The editor of this video was named "Ye Luochen," with over twenty thousand followers. Shang Yechu clicked into their profile and couldn't help but draw in a breath—so prolific!

This Madame Ye Luochen basically updated with a new video every two or three days. All of them were edits related to Shang Yechu.

Scrolling further down, she gradually saw that Ye Luochen had also made many edits of other celebrities, even some anime characters. It seemed like they had very broad tastes. Around the time "Tale of Cloud Incline" started airing, Ye Luochen's homepage became exclusively dedicated to Shang Yechu.

The video "Know me, condemn me, only the Spring and Autumn Annals will tell" currently had a whopping three thousand people watching it simultaneously, making it their most popular work. Shang Yechu had just followed Ye Luochen with great interest when Yi Tianzhao's weary, lifeless voice rang out.

"Cut, cut cut—Li Yi, how many times have I told you..."

Yi Tianzhao grumbled a couple of sentences, then felt it was utterly pointless herself. Molding Li Yi was a high-difficulty task; the same old lectures had been repeated countless times, to absolutely no effect.

"Yechu, you come here," Yi Tianzhao suddenly called her name.

Shang Yechu put down her phone and hurried to the center of the set. "Director Yi."

Yi Tianzhao pinched the bridge of her nose and stated bluntly, "Li Yi performs a bit better when he's with you. Let's push this scene back a bit, shoot the one where you two clear up the misunderstanding and laugh away your enmity first—it works out since the costumes are the same set anyway. Let him find his groove."

Shang Yechu had been filming since morning, not even having time for breakfast. She had only been resting in her chair for about twenty minutes before Yi Tianzhao dragged her up again.

"Alright," Shang Yechu nodded without a hint of complaint. "Then I'll go for touch-ups."

"Xiao Fengque: The Heaven-Sent Journey" was adapted by combining the third and fourth books of the original "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" novel.

After the first two books of the "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" series became hugely famous, Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng inevitably fell into the same trap as many renowned authors: she started padding her writing with filler. At that time, the pay for martial arts novels was calculated by word count, so Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng stuffed the original "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" with extensive scenery descriptions, psychological descriptions, and many inexplicable, superfluous background characters. Now that the film adaptation was underway, Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng boldly and decisively cut all that

extraneous material.

After appropriate trimming, the content of the two books was just enough for one film.

The third and fourth books of the "Phoenix Plays with Roaming Dragon" series are the two where the relationship between the female protagonist, Xiao Fengque, and the primary male supporting character, Xie An, is at its most strained and hostile. In these two books, significant friction arises between them due to their differing philosophies on handling cases. This conflict leads them to operate independently, refusing to cooperate, ultimately causing a delay that allows a notorious, havoc-wreaking master thief to escape right under their noses.

This major failure didn't make Xiao Fengque and Xie An repent; instead, it plunged their relationship to a freezing point. Minor friction escalated into major conflict, finally erupting.

They fought a fierce, exhilarating battle. They were heroes of the martial world, bold and chivalrous, not ones to hold onto petty grudges. After the fight, they finally decided on a temporary truce. End of the fourth book.

The scene Yi Tianzhao wanted Shang Yechu to film was this final reconciliation moment.

Shang Yechu let the makeup artist work on her face while recalling the content of this part of the script.

Due to their dereliction of duty, Xiao Fengque and Xie An each went to the master of the Heavenly Secrets Pavilion to receive their punishment, both receiving fifty disciplinary lashes.

After the beating, Xiao Fengque and Xie An emerged from the punishment chamber and, unfortunately, crossed paths in the narrow corridor. Both were pale-faced and unsteady on their feet, completely devoid of the red-faced, neck-bulging, rooster-fight aggression they'd shown during their brawl.

Seeing each other's sorry state, somehow, they both froze for a moment, then burst into loud laughter at the exact same instant. It seemed like they were laughing at each other, and also at themselves.

In that shared laugh, the enmity of the past melted away like ice and snow. Xiao Fengque strode forward and gave Xie An a punch—not too light, not too heavy. Xie An returned the punch in kind...

This scene wasn't particularly difficult; it just needed to capture the carefree, unrestrained spirit of martial world heroes. Yi Tianzhao wasn't being completely inhuman; she wasn't making Shang Yechu, who had been busy all morning, perform scenes that demanded heavy emotional expenditure.

The makeup artist transformed Shang Yechu to look pale, with lips lacking color, her costume stained with plenty of blood. She looked exactly like someone who had just endured severe corporal punishment. They didn't even let her wear her signature eye-patch-like black headband, revealing her pale, sweat-beaded forehead.

As soon as Shang Yechu stepped out of the makeup room, she saw Yi Tianzhao standing and talking to someone. Looking closer, it was actually Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng!

The old lady had visited the set once during the filming of the first movie. Who would have thought she'd come again on the very first day of shooting for the second installment.

Shang Yechu walked over to greet the old lady. "Teacher Jiang."

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng's gaze, hidden behind her reading glasses, swept over Shang Yechu, and she nodded with satisfaction. "Little Ye is getting more and more handsome too."

Shang Yechu smiled politely. Just then, Li Yi also finished his makeup and came out. He too had a pale face and blood-stained clothes. The moment he saw Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng, Li Yi's footsteps involuntarily paused for a second before he obediently walked over.

"Grandma," Li Yi smiled brightly. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"What's wrong, Little Li," Old Lady Jiang said cheerfully, "afraid I'll come to embarrass you?"

A hint of helplessness appeared on Li Yi's face. "Grandma..."

Jiang Shang Nong Chaosheng turned her head toward Yi Tianzhao. "Little Yi, this kid has caused you a lot of trouble, hasn't he?"

"Not at all," Yi Tianzhao also smiled. "Li Yi has improved tremendously. You'll see when you watch him film in a moment."

With Shang Yechu present, she could somewhat carry Li Yi's painfully bad acting, preventing him from losing face in front of Old Lady Jiang.

It wasn't that Yi Tianzhao was unaware of Shang Yechu's influence on Li Yi's acting; on the contrary, as the director overseeing everything, she was crystal clear about it. She wasn't even ignorant of the immense toll this situation—one person dragging a dead weight—took on Shang Yechu herself.

It was precisely because she was clear about it that she had to utilize it effectively. Having fought her way up in the industry for so many years, Yi Tianzhao had long seen that Shang Yechu wasn't made of fragile clay; this little thing wouldn't break her. The entertainment industry was getting increasingly fickle and superficial; it wasn't easy to come across a promising talent who was willing to listen and endure hardship. Yi Tianzhao couldn't help but develop a desire to hone and polish Shang Yechu.

"Then this old woman will wait and see," Old Lady Jiang clapped her hands happily. "You go about your business, I won't disturb. Just pretend I'm not here."

With the venerable, highly respected original author on set, everyone couldn't help but feel a bit nervous. Shang Yechu herself quietly took a few deep breaths.

The set was cleared. Rolling.

"Action!"

<https://wn-img.s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/content/20251017/72b3140c82344869aedcfb85d0335f91.jpeg>