

The background is a dark, stylized illustration of a futuristic city or industrial complex. It features curved, metallic-looking structures and a grid-like floor. A person in a dark suit with a glowing red light on their chest is walking in the lower-left foreground. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, greys, and blacks, with some orange and yellow highlights.

by Lazy Cliché

Superstars of Tomorrow



QIDIAN
webnovel.com

SUPERSTARS OF TOMORROW

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- VOLUME 2 -

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Chapter 51

Exam Time for Secondary Students Again

The movie Zaro was starring in was on a tight production schedule. In contrast to the film itself and the buzz it generated, the score was hardly mentioned. No one cared who wrote the score apart from a select few members of the music industry. When the token few music publications did discuss the score, all that appeared was a passing reference that the composer was a non-local and speculation over where the composer was from.

No one bothered to delve further. Wireless Media simply said they had signed a composer without identifying the person.

While the entire Leizhou entertainment industry was following the production closely, so was the entertainment press corps in Yanzhou.

Silver Wing had issued a statement saying that the third movement of "The 100-Year Period of Destruction" series was scheduled to be released at 8 a.m. on Jan. 1.

The first movement, "Divine Punishment," had launched on Oct. 1 in the 531st year of the New Era. The second chapter, "Coccon Breach," had followed a month later.

Yet there was a two-month gap between the release of the second and third movements. The long production cycle suggested Silver Media had gone all out and had high expectations for the single.

If the second movement revealed Silver Wing's ambition, then the third chapter would be a testimony to its staying power.

Every member of the Yanzhou entertainment industry was waiting to see how explosive the combination of a virtual idol and an epic pop series would be.

Many fans left messages on the message boards on Silver Wing's official website. Some were fans of epics, others simply curious. Another group was Polar Light's fans. The latter group was more interested in the music video than the music. What they cared about most was whether Polar Light would star in the video and if Polar Light

merchandise would be released.

Silver Wing assigned dedicated staffers to monitoring the message boards. They even put two staffers on the message board for Polar Light. Their job was to identify the most common questions and post responses.

Recently, the message board monitors started noticing a fourth demographic.

"When is the third movement coming out? It's almost exam time."

"Hurry up! Hurry, hurry!"

"We have to wait until Jan. 1? So late!"

"Thank God, it'll be released just in time. Our exams won't have happened yet."

"I hope the third movement is even better. That way I'll have more motivation."



Messages of this kind suggested the authors were students. And if you listened to the voice messages, you would notice that many of the voices sounded quite young. Some were clearly prepubescent, others going through puberty.

Secondary school students?

How come they were all secondary students?

"Did you guys hire fake fans?" the message board monitors asked their marketing and PR colleagues.

"No. Even if we did, we wouldn't hire that many secondary students." Their colleagues were clueless too.

"Speaking of secondary students, I think they have final exams in January," a message board monitor said.

Speaking of exams, they were reminded of the news coverage back in November about the popularity of the second movement among secondary students.

When the second movement, "Cocoon Breach," was released, it was midterm time at most Yanzhou secondary schools. Students were looking for inspiration, so they preferred songs that were up-tempo or loud. "Cocoon Breach" was the most popular choice.

The students were still young and lacked professional music training, so they couldn't appreciate the subtle and painful evolution of emotions in "Cocoon Breach," but that didn't prevent them from being moved by the explosive parts of the song. This was a psychological process—to put it more bluntly, it was a stimulant of sorts. The climaxes in the song had an awakening effect, dispelling any trace of laziness or weariness.

During their midterms, the students used the second movement to stimulate themselves. But they forgot all about the song when they finished their exams. There were too many other things that captured their attention. Other than music, they had video games and other forms of entertainment.

Now the term was nearing its end, and the academic calendar showed that finals were imminent. Finals were even more important than midterms. If the students didn't do well, they would be scolded for starters. Winter break and Chinese New Year would be torture. No red packets stuffed with cash, no gifts—they would also be forced to do more problem sets and have their Internet access restricted. What a bummer.

So how about sucking it up and cramming for a few days?

There was little incentive.

As exam dates approached, some students tried to seek inspiration in song. They searched for songs that resembled "Cocoon Breach." Unfortunately, repeated searches yielded few matches.

An online news search revealed that more chapters were forthcoming in the "100-Year Period of Destruction" series, but they got tired of waiting. So the students started complaining on Silver Wing's official website in droves.

The students could have returned to the second chapter, but listening to the same song over and over again was exhausting. The stimulation effect also diminished. That defeated the purpose of listening to the song in the first place, so now they were hoping that Silver Wing would release the third movement soon so they would have a stimulant for their finals.

The third movement became the focus of their attention. Whenever they were free, they would flood the Silver Wing message boards with messages demanding the third movement be released. When Silver Wing finally announced the release date, they still showed up every day in the message boards to count down.

So every time the message board monitors spotted a countdown message, they knew it was the secondary students again.

The two Polar Light monitors thought they were just secondary students, adorable in their own way. As former secondary students, they could empathize. Plus, finals were around the corner and the pressure was immense. Finding a way to vent was totally understandable. Let them be.

But as the day passed, the two monitors realized they were being naive.

The number of secondary students grew, and they showed up at the same time every day, as if by appointment.

Leaving a countdown message had become part of their daily routine.

Initially, it was only a few people, but as the group grew, it became a nuisance. The message board monitors had to select representative questions and post answers. But now, the questions had been overwhelmed by countdown messages, which had to be filtered. It was too much trouble.

The monitors decided to take action to stamp out the nonsense.

The students who showed up to leave countdown messages the next day noticed a new announcement: the number of countdown messages would be capped to maintain order.

So many countdown messages ended up being deleted.

The monitors were relieved to find their message boards less cluttered. Now it was easier to browse fan questions.

But in a few days, the two monitors noticed the secondary students had started leaving countdown messages on behalf of entire classes.

"Second Year Class No. 7 of Qi'an No. 1 Secondary School reporting for duty! Nine days

until the release of the third movement."

"Third Year Class No. 1 of Qi'an No. 12 Secondary School reporting for duty!"

"Second Year Class No. 4 of Yanxi No. 5 Secondary School reporting for duty!"

"Fourth Year Class No. 2 of Gong Xu No. 3 Secondary School reporting for duty!"

"Wait, I'm from Yanxi too. Fellow students from Yanxi No. 5 Secondary School, any sign of our friends from No. 6 Secondary School?"

"Second Year Class No. 8 of Yanxi No. 6 Secondary School reporting for duty!"

"Anyone from Third Year Class No. 2 of Yanxi No. 6 Secondary School? Please sign in on my behalf too."

"Friends from Second Year Class No. 7 of Qi'an No. 1 Secondary School, we're from Class No. 8."



Some of the older fans were amused. They asked in a patronizing tone, "Aren't you afraid of being banned again?"

The students thought, *they have a point*. There were so many secondary schools in Yanzhou. Every school had six grades and every grade about a dozen classes, even more in certain areas. The numbers added up. The message board monitors didn't say what the cap was. If the students pressed on, they could very well be banned.

So, two days later, they tweaked the wording in their messages.

"Second Years at Yanxi No. 6 Secondary School reporting for duty. Seven days until the release of the third movement."

"Third Years at Qi'an No. 12 Secondary School reporting for duty!"

"Second Years at Qi'an No. 1 Secondary School reporting for duty!"

"Wait, when were you chosen to speak on behalf of second years at Qi'an No. 1 Secondary School? Which class do you belong to?"

"Class No. 1. What, you got a problem?"

"This m*fo is from Class No. 8. Yeah, I gotta problem."

"See you at the gym after class."

"See you there! Don't chicken out!"



Reading the deluge of new messages, the monitors went from surprised to dumbfounded.

What's up with these secondary students?

Do they have too much free time on their hands?

*M*fo this, mo*fo that—how old do they think they are?*

Have you done your homework? Have you finished memorizing your passages? Done with your problem sets? Do you know what you want to do with your lives?

The two message board monitors were baffled by the influx of group countdown messages. They couldn't delete one and not the other without pissing off one side. These secondary students didn't have the best of tempers. If they weren't careful, they could spark a war of words. If complaints of unfair treatment were lodged, their pay could be docked.

But curious bystanders were mighty amused.

An epic lover who was more than 100 years old commented, "It's good to be young!"

Initially, only students from Qi'an, Yanxi, Gonguxu, and a few other larger cities left messages. But soon the trend spread.

Yandong, Yannan, Yanbei, Jिंगgang, and even the remote Magu—their secondary students started showing up too.

Some students just wanted to join the fray out of mob mentality. And when one grade at a school left a message, other grades followed suit.

Rival schools in the same city couldn't leave their voices unheard.

Secondary school students from other cities also joined in to prove their existence.

Six days until the release.

Five days.

Four days.

Three days.

—

Faced with all the fun the students were having at their expense, the two message monitors wanted time to speed up. Once the third movement was released, the craziness would stop.

A day before the release, the two monitors each took a deep breath, looked at each other, and smiled.

"It's finally time."

Chapter 52

Third Movement

"Mission"

532nd year of the New Era. Jan. 1. First day of a brand new year

Silver Wing Tower, 50th floor.

Pang Pusong was feeling nervous. He was not even able to gauge how he had performed. When recording was underway for the third movement, Fang Zhao's demands were even greater than before. Over the past month or so, Pang Pusong had been practicing everyday, sometimes even taking a week or two just to perfect a single verse. He had not even heard the final product and could only wait for the music video to be released.

The nervousness was not limited to Pang Pusong. The entire Virtual Idol Department was jittery.

Returning from their vacation after the second movement was released, the team had worked overtime for more than a month. The second movement decided whether they would succeed. The third movement was to see how far they could go.

Having experienced the sweet taste of success, even without Fang Zhao's instructions, the motivated team pushed themselves harder. When tired, they would head to the gaming room to relax a little before sleeping, continuing to work the moment they woke.

Silver Wing media had assembled a backup technical team to lend their support should the Virtual Idol department require additional resources. Therefore, the team needed not worry about being shorthanded, lacking funds, or welfare. All they needed to do was complete the tasks that Fang Zhao assigned. As for how the final product would turn out, all they could do was believe in their project head.

Zeng Huang was woken up by an alarm. As he emerged from his room, he did not see Fang Zhao anywhere, so he turned and asked Zu Wen, "Where is Big Zhao?"

"In his office," Zu Wen replied.

Glancing around the department and seeing everyone, Zeng Huang asked, "Nobody went home yesterday?"

"Of course not. Nobody would even be able to sleep," Zu Wen replied with a yawn. Zu Wen went to wash his face before taking a seat in the office along with the rest of the team, waiting for the clock to hit eight.

Everyone left Fang Zhao alone. It was evident that, during the composition and arrangement of the third movement, Fang Zhao's temperament had not been great. Just as actors needed time to get out of character after a movie, a composer who poured his emotions and soul into his work needed some time to get the emotions out of his system.

Thus, all Zeng Huang and Zu Wen could do was complete the tasks at hand, leaving Fang Zhao with less to worry about.

In the newcomer department, Chu Guang was rather unperturbed seeing Polar Light taking the No. 1 spot of the label's marketing plan for the month.

In the final season of the previous year, he had already been crowded out to No. 5 on the New Pioneers Chart. Still, it was a cause for celebration that the third movement had not been released in December. Otherwise, the No. 5 spot might not have even been his.

After "Divine Punishment" and "Cocoon Breach," the third movement, "Mission," was also about to be released on public channels. The quantity of downloads would not be lacking either. Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment no longer seemed like they wanted to compete against Polar Light, focusing instead on promoting their two biggest stars, the virtual idols Mi Yu and Andy Leo.

Are they giving up on the newcomer scene?

Whatever the reason, for Chu Guang, two less virtual idols to compete against was a good thing.

At the top floor of Silver Wing Tower, Duan Quanji and the other senior executives were gathered in the conference room to watch the official release of the third movement's music video on the projection system upon its release. Amongst them,

only Duan Quanji had heard the final cut and watched the completed music video. The rest were seeing it themselves for the first time.

All the staff from Silver Wing Media already at the office or on the way to work, regardless of whether they were singers, actors, technical staff, or from operations, were eagerly monitoring the development to come at 8 a.m.

Alone in his office, Fang Zhao pulled down the blinds to block out the sunlight. Turning on the projection system, at 8 a.m. sharp, it played the broadcast of the music video for the third movement.

The third movement diverged from the modulating style of the previous two installments. Right from the start, a combination of string and woodwind discharged the distinct, surging grandeur of an epic.

The music video picked up where the second movement had left off. The desolate blue sky full of haze seemed to be mourning. Lightning streaked across the skies amidst the thick clouds.

Many silhouettes on the surface were running. Hurried and brief drumbeats perfectly reflected the tense atmosphere. In between the brief drumbeats, a familiar male voice began to sing as symphonic music and and opera combined in the background. Some New Era musical styles were blended in as well, giving off a wild and primitive vibe, as if ready to strike. In the music video, the scene of a prelude to battle unfolded with the two sides at a standoff.

With the horrific crises everywhere, the building tension was surging and billowing, threatening to overflow.

A figure leapt into the sky, like an eagle soaring through the clouds. At a glance, its branches, seemingly knotted with what seemed distinctly like muscles, gave off the impression of raw and explosive power contained deep inside.

With one foot, the falling figure trampled on the mutated beast at the front of the pack before brutally raining blows from his boulder-like fist onto the throat of the beast.

Explosive drum beats, combined with the crackling electronic music, sounded like the crisp shattering of bone.

It was not the sound produced from the instruments but rather the image and

temperament that resonated with the viewers who, in turn, produced that bone-crushing sound in their own hearts.

Soil and blood splattered in all directions. Some splashed onto the tree man's face in between his eyes. This diverted the attention of the viewers to his eyes.

That pair of eyes radiated an immense murderous aura. Akin to the violent fury of a ferocious beast shaken awake from its slumber.

A bone-chilling sensation crept down the spines of the viewers witnessing this scene, insinuating doubts in their minds. Who were the mad ones? Was it the savage and violent mutated beasts, or was it the previously peace-loving and gentle tree man that wouldn't hurt a fly?

This extreme change was not only limited to the figure of the tree man at the front. Around him, the other figures were emanating this murderous aura too.

The shrill blare of a brass instrument signalled a variation as the string melody increased its vigour. The intense and frantic beats of the timpani portrayed an unyielding spirit.

Compared to the first movement, the appearance and the temperament of the tree men had undergone a massive transformation.

This was how they adapted to the battlefield and this dark age.

Becoming what they were most adverse to was their way of resisting the cruel fate that befell them.

In line with the expectations of all the people who followed the "100-Year Period of Destruction" series, the third movement had a theme of struggle and combat.

Frantic alternating of the brass rhythm and woodwind variations set a fierce and intense tone of confrontations and close quarter combat. The immense and visually stunning images, coupled with the perfectly synced accompaniment, continuously battered the hearts and souls of the viewers. The third movement was in no way weaker than its predecessors.

The transformed trees and mutated beasts collided violently against the dark and gloomy sky.

Despite it being a virtual image, it brought about a realistic and overwhelming sense of bitterness that transcended time.

The timid and gentle tree men were long gone, drowned out by the continuous battle to determine their survival. In order to seek a peaceful land to call home, the tree men were willing to release their inhibitions and fight!

From the highest mountains to the lowest valleys, a peaceful land was nowhere to be found, and danger was lurking in every corner.

Only this time, in the third movement, they no longer held on to the depressed notion of resigning to their fate.

The tree men started off timid and cowardly. Making a stand, they fought against their fate, and after countless battles, they grew numb to war and death. Throughout the journey, they lost some comrades but gained some new companions too. Finally, they found a relatively peaceful place—Polar Land.

Blanketed by snow, Polar Land was a frigid and unforgiving place. Most viruses and mutated creatures were incompatible with the climate here. Ironically, this was the last pure land in the diseased world.

Devoid of the reddish-brown smog and air pollutants, the sky here was clear. Sunlight shone freely in the day, and at night, the stars that were hidden for quite some time came out to play. On certain nights, the illusive colors of an aurora would flash across the sky.

Like the calm after a storm, the intensity of the music receded. Ethereal sounds of a zither interweaving with the soothing flute gave the flustered spirits of listeners a moment to relax. This was a time for peace.

Polar Land was a sanctuary for the tree men. A place where they could stay without worrying about dangers and mutated beasts lurking around every corner. This place might have been cold, but it was certainly safe.

With slight smiles on their faces, a few young saplings were running stiffly on the snow-covered ground. When they were about to slip, a sturdy branch reached out and fished them up before setting the saplings down on its broad shoulders.

The image and score induced a feeling of warmth in people's hearts.

With this sort of backdrop, it seemed as if a scene of peace and stability was about to unfold.

But for those watching the projection, they understood that Polar Land was just but a brief period in the true history of the Period of Destruction.

Toward the later stages of the Period of Destruction, a summit meeting was held at Polar land. Back then, the world had not been divided into the twelve continents, only warzones. Leaders from nearly a hundred warzones had congregated for a comprehensive discussion on the war.

This temporary period of peace was not the conclusion but a foretelling of the explosive finale that was to come.

The music switched to a melancholy cello solo.

While not absolutely safe, Polar Land was still a place of peace and tranquility compared to the the various regions they had passed through. However, at the same time, this place was not suitable from them to have a normal livelihood.

Most importantly, they no longer had to live like wandering nomads and could settle down.

In the New Era, most books regarding the history of the Period of Destruction had records and excerpts of the words spoken at that Polar Land summit meeting. Even though the original speakers were long forgotten, their words were passed down.

"We can end it all in our current generation. There is no need to leave it to the next. Since we are already at this point, what harm is there in staking it all on one last push?"

"We have already become battle-hardened warriors and martyrs, but most importantly, we have also experienced a momentary period of peace. Whereas those born in the this era, amidst fire and blood, have never known what peace is."

The historical recording of the Period of Destruction might have been glossed over, but they were not fabricated randomly. Fang Zhao remembered that, back then, similar words were spoken. He himself might have spoken out too.

"Why are we not able to go back to living in our beloved homeland?"

Why do we have to give the world up?

We are already strong, aren't we?"

In the projection, a group of tree men in the vast land of snow and ice gazed longingly at the heavens. Under the night sky adorned with stars, the magnificent aurora was like a bright and flickering flame lighting up the dark.

The beating of a drum seemed to increase its intensity in layers, as if to emphasize a steadfast conviction.

At the head of the group stood a familiar figure. His eyes were no longer clouded by madness and killing. Rather, in that moment of serenity, his eyes were filled with a slight reluctance and longing, as if parting ways with an old photograph.

The flickering aurora gradually dissipated as night turned to day.

Without any hint of reluctance, the lead tree man turned around to leave. The back of his wide trunk was full of scars. Nobody but himself knew that there was not a lot left in him. The next injury might be the last he could take before collapsing. Such was the burden he had to bear.

Many of the other tree men were in the same situation. As long as their injuries did not hinder their movement, they joined in the ranks of the leaving.

Some of the tree men were playing with the young saplings. Upon seeing the procession, they lifted the saplings from themselves, carefully placing them on the ground before heading to join the ranks.

A tree man lightly pressed his finger against a sapling's forehead, as if to prevent the young one from following. Soon after, he turned to leave, exchanging fistbumps with a fellow treeman heading in the same direction. With a slight smile, he headed out without glancing back. He was afraid that he would lose the courage to leave if he looked behind.

The young sapling was puzzled observing the leaving figures. This was a safe place. The world outside was fraught with dangers. Why was everyone still leaving?

The departing figures increased, joining the ranks of the leaving. All that was left were those old and weak tree men who were incapable of combat. Polar Land was harsh

and unforgiving, but at the same time, it was still the safest place to be.

A quick-paced string medley played, and paired with a unique sequence of electronic music, it set a tense atmosphere foreboding combat. In that dark period, against their chaotic and unreasonable destiny, they were forced to make a cruel choice.

The aerial view of the numerous figures against the background of the snow-covered land formed a long, snaking line. The numbers were so great that it was not possible to see where the line began.

A loud horn sounded along with the vigorous beats of the timpani. The increasing tempo and intensity washed away any downcast feelings. Alongside the dampening from the double bass and the woodwind score, the accompanying singing grew in stature. Just like the scene of the leaving procession, it was a display of extreme determination.

Contained within was an immeasurable strength and hope.

The volume of the chorus gradually increased as the footage left Polar Land, crossing over mountains and hills.

The rustling and flapping sounds made listeners imagine a harsh and chilly wind. In the projection, a greyish figure was rushing across the land in leaps and bounds. In a flash, coming face to face with a mutated beast. He raised his branch arm, as if swinging an axe. Throwing caution to the wind, with an unrestrained fury, he pierced the beast's chest.

The combination of explosive sounds and music was a constant barrage to the ears.

Freed of any apprehension, the tree men gave into their unbridled and frantic madness and clashed against the beasts as broken twigs, bits of wood, and blood scattered everywhere.

A fierce wind swept through the silhouettes of trees and beasts in the fight for survival. Viewers could apparently even smell the fresh blood and chipped wood.

The thundering timpani was followed by a frantic clash of acoustics. The arrangement that ensued was complicated. An amalgamation of classical symphonies, New Era music, church music, electronic music, even a military march amongst many other contrasting musical styles. It was as if a volcano that had been dormant for millions of

years had suddenly erupted, triggering a tidal wave that could blanket the entire world.

The principal color of the footage had gradually changed from a stifling blue to a brilliant yellow glow, the color of the sun shining through a layer of clouds, the brilliance of an intense blaze. The brightness of the projection had doubled since the beginning of the projection and was getting stronger.

"When are trees able to shine so brightly?"

When one has a burning desire."

The projection faded as the deeply moving symphony came to an end.

Lead character: Polar Light

Species: Longxiang Tianluo

Song Title: "100-Year Period of Destruction" Third Movement, "Mission," producer: Fang Zhao

Production team: Polar Light project team, Fang Zhao, Zu Wen, Song Miao, Pang Pusong, Zheng Huang, Wan Yue, Fu Yingtian, Stiller, Zhang Yu, Rodney.

A Silver Wing Media release

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Fang Zhao turned off the projection and audio equipment before raising the blinds. He did not check the web for opinions, nor did he observe the number of downloads. Rather, he gazed out the window on the 50th floor of the tower, taking in the view.

Reminiscing a conversation he'd once had with an old friend.

"What exactly is a mission?"

"Who knows? When we are fighting here and there and we suddenly feel like we ought to do something."

Without going through hardships, one would possibly never know how much one could change.

People could transform into something they absolutely loathed, yet they could also become something worthy.

In the beginning of that period of endless struggle, people fought in order to survive. Yet toward the end, accepting that they might not get to see the flourishing world they were fighting for, many still voluntarily participated in the fight, trading their lives so the future would burn much brighter;

During that dark age, people were the real miracle.

Fang Zhao had attended the summit at Polar land in person. Ultimately, toward the later stage of the all-out war, he had died during a military campaign. During the period depicted at the end of the third movement, he had lost his life at the Qi'an warzone, which would come to be known in the New Era as Qi'an city, the center of Yanzhou, one of the twelve continents.

"Farewell, my old friends."



At the same time, in the continent of Leizhou, with a three-hour time difference.

8 a.m. in Yanzhou was roughly 11 a.m. in Leizhou.

The first day of a new year was also the highly anticipated showdown of the two blockbusters the entire Leizhou entertainment community had been waiting for. However, Wireless Media had announced that "God of War" would be screened at 11 a.m. sharp on the Jan 1.

This piqued the curiosity of many. Rarely were there premiere screenings in the afternoon. Some believed that this was a disguised form of backing down.

However, "King of Snipers" responded in the same way, pushing back the screening to 11 a.m. as well.

Zaro's agent had been very busy the past few days marketing "God of War." Even though he did not have high hopes for the movie, in order to break even, he and his

team had been generating as much buzz as they could. As long as there was enough buzz, lots of people would watch the movie, and when that happened, only then would they be able to recoup the expenditure.

As the clock struck eleven, all that he could possibly do was done. Whether the expenses could be recouped or not, he left that all up to the heavens.

Chapter 53

Great Grandfather

After postproduction for the third movement had been completed, Silver Wing media had sent a copy to Zaro.

Zaro was pleased with the music and was very satisfied with himself for making that decision. However, the score was just an accompaniment for a part of "God of War." The movie's plot differed from that of the music video. Under normal circumstances, Zaro would have just used it right away. This time, he was under heavy pressure and was taking his work seriously. Therefore, after discussing with Silver Wing Media, he forked up another sum for the composer to make some changes in the arrangement to better fit the movie.

Wireless Media had no shortage of arrangers, However, Zaro felt that the original composer would do the job better.

On Silver Wing's side, the adjustments were done personally by Fang Zhao after Duan Qianji had passed on a clip from "God of War."

In a movie scene, there would be an abundance of sounds. Should the musical score's arrangement be inappropriate, the sound effects of the movie and the score might affect or conceal the other.

Therefore, when Fang Zhao was producing the revised version, he watched similar movie clips in order to blend it with the music. He made adjustments to the tone, pitch, and tempo, as well as the harmonizing and acoustics. Some of the electronic tones were removed and instead made use of the movies sound effects for a seamless blend.

On Wireless Media's side, the soundtrack did not garner much attention. Zaro felt that the soundtrack was very suitable for his grand entrance. Zaro's agent considered the soundtrack to be decent, but he didn't think it would impact the film much.

As the clock approached 11 a.m., the staff of Wireless Media kept their eyes glued to the digital chart, paying attention to the sales for the premiere.

Due to advancements in technology, projection equipment and sound systems had improved tremendously. Besides the major movie theatres in the commerce center of every city, most people could catch movies upon their release directly through the internet.

Actual cinemas were a thing of the past, with the entire industry moving toward an online and virtual direction.

People in every city of Leizhou had readied their projection equipment and prepared themselves. Most just wanted to see what sort of production the famous Zaro Renault showcased this time. Some genuinely just wanted to view the film before writing reviews.

Zaro has specially invited a few of his close friends of the same ilk to watch the premiere in his own luxurious projection room.

"Its starting! Ha ha, let's see how Senior Master saves the world!"

Zaro did not bother checking the amount of online marketing done. Although he was hedonistic, he certainly was not stupid. He knew that the movie could not compare to "King of Snipers," but he had already made a stand and there was no backing down. Having achieved what he had set out to do, box office numbers and reviews were just secondary.

Most people did not have high expectations for "God of War." Just watching the trailer would give one the gist of the plot. In the end, it would just be the age-old plotline of the hero saving the damsel in distress and saving the world. According to people online, watching one of Zaro's movies was the same as watching all of them.

"God of War" had a simple plot. The male lead was an outstanding soldier in the army. The female lead was a reporter. When a certain metropolis encountered an attack by a monster, the female lead headed to the disaster zone to report. In the time of crisis, the male lead led his team to the rescue, beating the monster and saving the beauty in a happy ending.

Movies should be enjoyable. Logic goes flying out the window when the movie is taken too seriously. Perhaps due to Zaro himself starring in the movie, compared to the previous seven, every single actor and actress, the female lead, and even the extras acted seriously. Every effort was made for the casting as well. Even Zaro, whose acting

was not that great, put in a lot of hard work. Unlike the seven movies before, the eighth move was not just an extravagant and pompous affair.

On this note, it was a great improvement.

However, some sharp-sighted members of the audience could immediately tell the similarly sized Zaro from his body double.

These naysayers were quick to point out the parts where the body double stood in. Other than the times where Zaro's face could be seen, the rest, including his back profile and silhouettes, were done by the body double.

'Not professional at all, bad review!'

Halfway through the story, the film focused on the disaster-stricken area under attack from the monster. Billowing clouds of black smoke and large scale explosions contrasted with the tiny human figures. The flames threatened to consume as the heavy smoke and dust set a suffocating tone.

The whole scene looked so realistic.

At this moment, those watching this scene had two words popping up in their minds—crappy film.

Commercial films laden with special effects and a cliché plot were a dime a dozen. One glance was more than enough to know how it would turn out. Especially in the New Era where film and television were thriving, a typical film without much logic would be termed by the public as a "crappy film."

Having watched how the film played out, most people already had a gist of the plot; it was similar to what they had expected.

Great. It was about time for Senior Master Zaro's lead character to lead his troops to save the day. Most people treated this movie as a joke, and now it was time for the highly anticipated climax that the masses had been waiting all along to laugh at.

This movie that Zaro had invested in was melodramatic and lacking in logic, but at least it had a stunning atmosphere and special effects. This redeeming factor made the movie easier to endure.

"Almost there! In a moment you guys can marvel at how the great master steals the thunder!" Zaro exclaimed as he lay on the sofa, excitedly shaking his legs.

At that moment, outside Zaro's mansion, a flying transport was descending slowly.

For this kind of detached residence, the large garden out front was the landing spot for flying cars and transportation.

Zaro's housekeeper was busy preparing food and drinks to be brought to the theater. As he saw the descending vehicle, he immediately dropped what he was doing and called out to the rest of the servants in the house to hurry over and welcome the guests. Even though his hair was in a mess, the housekeeper did not raise a finger to fix it. Instead, he stood rooted to the spot as if he were a statue.

When the hum of engines died down, the cabin door opened. The housekeeper and servants dropped their heads lower, afraid to make eye contact. Peeking from the corner of their eyes, all they saw was the boots of a few security personnel.

An elderly man with a head full of white hair stepped out from the transport. The personal doctor beside him raised a hand to offer his support but was waved away.

The elderly man scrutinized the house in front of him with a faint smile. With a slight smile, he sighed. "Seems like it has been more than a decade since I last came." Turning to the respectfully waiting housekeeper, he asked, "Is the young punk Zaro in?"

"The young master is currently in the theater screening the premiere with seven of his friends," the housekeeper replied politely, his voice wavering softly from the nervousness

"Great," the elderly man said as he walked forward.

The housekeeper took a few large strides and opened the doors. Only after the elderly man had entered the room did he raise his head and worriedly glanced across the room. The housekeeper was not worried that Zaro might receive a scolding. Rather, he was concerned that Zaro might get annoyed at this old man. He was no ordinary man; he was the head of the Renault family. Even up to today, many of Leizhou's top officials paid their respects to the man considered the founding father of Leizhou.

This was the man Zaro addressed as great-grandfather.

Chapter 54

Anguished Tears

This old man still held the most seniority in the Renault family. Despite having stepped down from power quite some time ago, all his glory and titles still remained, and people treated him as such. Nowadays, he was no longer involved with the government, but people still respectfully acknowledge him as "Old General Renault."

As one aged, one's bodily functions deteriorated. Ever since Old General Renault had stepped down, the amount of idle time made it easy to ponder. He thought about his family, wistfully remembered his late wife, and reminisced about his old comrades-in-arms.

That was not a beneficial situation, and thus his doctor had recommended that he should head out more for some fresh air. Staying at home made it easy for him to overthink, which was not necessarily a good thing for someone his age.

As for where to go, after some thought, Old General Renault decided to pay a visit to the great-grandson who was always causing trouble for the other members of the Renault family. In front of Old General Renault, the other members of the family only mentioned tactfully that the little brat was "lively." The truth, though, was not hard to find out. Although Zaro might have been slightly pampered and prone to trouble, as long as his behaviour was not out of line, Old General Renault would turn a blind eye.

Awhile back, when Old General Renault went online, he had found that the internet was abuzz with news regarding Zaro. Thus, when he went out for some fresh air, he decided to pay his great-grandson a visit.

The personal doctor tagging along was a little concerned. He just hoped that Zaro would not upset his great-grandfather too much. Originally, the doctor had only planned for five members from the dedicated medical team to come along, but after a little consideration, he had decided to increase it to seven for some added insurance. Of all the relatives he could visit, the old master just had to pick the Zaro that could not go a day without stirring up the media.

The old master rejected the housekeeper's suggestion to call Zaro over. Instead, he

walked in the direction pointed out by the housekeeper. He wanted to personally see for himself what his troublemaker great-grandson got up to normally. He also wanted to see the younger generation in their true form.

The door to the projection room was slightly ajar. Someone had not closed the door properly after a visit to the washroom. The sounds of rowdy heckling and jeering mixed with the jarring sound effects were seeping out into the doorway.

The housekeeper followed behind closely, keeping his head down. His hands were grasped tightly as beads of sweat formed on his forehead. In his heart, he was praying, *Young master, you must absolutely keep your mouth shut, do not say anything out of line. Even if you have to talk big, please do not do so now!*

The old master stood in the doorway, leaning on his cane. Even though his aged figure made him appear hunched, standing there, he seemed like a huge boulder that could not be shaken.

His personal doctor was paying close attention to his every expression. He knew what that bunch were like every other day and was worried it would affect the old master.

More than ten people stood outside the doorway, not making a single sound. The tension in the entire house was stifling. The staff in charge of cleaning were shaking with fear and every single action was done cautiously. Thus, the sound of activity coming from the projection room was clear and distinct.

Inside, the oblivious Zoro was bragging about his own acting experience.

"I don't mean to show off, but when I was acting, I think I displayed the same demeanour as my great-grandfather back in those days! Aren't they alike? Not everyone can act out the vigour!"

The others hooted in agreement as Zoro continued his bragging. Yet they clearly knew what they had seen; the figure that just leapt into the flying vehicle was obviously the body double!

In the movie, numerous troops were heading for the disaster zone. The other movies that Zoro had worked on might have lacked logic, but for this movie, with all the real military equipment and weapons, they could not afford to be careless. Of course, the real equipment only accounted for a small portion, as computer generated special effects made up the rest. Having actual military equipment according to the scale of

the movie would have been considered a military operation rather than shooting a movie.

The scene now showed all sorts of aircraft and flying vehicles dispatched by the Air Force. As the grand spectacle unfolded, a timpani started beating in the background, gradually rising in volume. A shrill whistle from some sort of horn abruptly rang out, jolting the senses of audiences everywhere. As if an electrical current had just run through them, the languid audience was now alert and excited.

The roars of the aircraft, together with an orchestra in the background, created a vast, majestic atmosphere. A brass march frantically alternated with a woodwind score to the clash between humans and monsters. The realism was stunning and, when combined perfectly with the accompanying music, was a nonstop auditory and visual barrage for the viewers.

"Haha! How is it? Can you feel the 'God of War' vibes? Ah, here it is! I'm exiting the plane!"

Everyone in the project room straightened up and watched the scene attentively. The door of a transport aircraft opened, revealing the soldiers inside who were armed to the teeth. A close up of Zaro's character followed before he donned a pair of goggles and led his squad to rappel out of the aircraft.

And after that? There was no after.

Only half of Zaro's face had been shown when he was exiting the aircraft. The following stunts of rappelling out of the aircraft had been done by the body double.

No matter how badly the others in the projection room wanted to ridicule Zaro, all that came out from their mouths was praise.

Outside, the doctor could guess what all the flattering was about. *Oh, right. The young master's movie was called "God of War"? How thick-skinned can he get? How could the soldiers in the movie measure up to the real "God of War" division? Hmph. The real "God of War" is right here.*

The housekeeper dropped his head even lower, hoping the ground would open up and swallow him.

The personal doctor glanced quickly at the old master's face. Any traces of a smile had

all but disappeared off his face. However, he did not look angry. Rather, he seemed deep in thought. He was not paying heed to the young master. Instead, the old master was deeply engrossed in the sounds that were coming out.

He might have been old, but he certainly was not deaf. Even without watching the movie, he could differentiate the models of aircraft, fighters, and bombers just from the roars of the engines. From the explosions, he could tell the cannon model and the armour plating of the tanks as well as the type of munitions that were being used.

Even after leaving the battlefield for a long time, he still kept an eye on the happenings in the military. Expecting to have forgotten all these, the memories that came back were clear as day.

Beside him, the equipment for monitoring the health of the old master started beeping out warnings.

"General?" The doctor realized something was amiss.

Veins were appearing on the hands tightly gripping the cane. That wrinkled face was trembling slightly as if he was enduring an immense pain.

"General? How are you feeling?" The doctor was worried. The old master's recent mental state had not been great, and at his age, even the doctor did not know how such a change might affect him.

Old General Renault just stood there, not making a sound. It seemed like he could not hear the doctor's words. He stood gazing into the distance, as if attentively listening to something, as if reminiscing. His eyes were red and watery. As the background music and sound effects reached a climax, he closed his eyes as the tears freely flowed. His entire body started trembling uncontrollably.

The doctor was at a loss. Ever since he'd taken over the job from his own father, he had never seen the old master in this state before.

*F*ck! This is bad!*

"Medical team! Hurry!"

Only the personal doctor had followed the old master. The rest of the medical team were on the transport standing by.

Upon receiving the call, the medical team rushed into the house.

As the door of the projection room was not closed, the sudden commotion could be heard by those inside. Zoro had a bad feeling about this. Stepping out into the doorway and witnessing the scene, he felt an icy-cold wind running through him. His legs turned weak as he knelt down in the doorway.

It's over. I'm finished , Zoro thought to himself. He had made the most senior Renault shed anguished tears.

Chapter 55

What Is the Title?

In Wireless Media's headquarters, after the premiere of "God of War," Zaro's manager and a few other senior executives were checking the ratings of the movie online.

"Five... five points!?"

Seeing this, a few of them double checked to make sure their eyes were not playing tricks on them. Upon further inspection, there were already more than three hundred reviews for the movie. After a quick check of their IDs, they found that amongst them were the reviews of some reputable film critics as well.

Glancing once more at the rating, they slowly counted each and every star. Their eyes had not deceived them. Five stars! A full five stars!

It was inconceivable. How could a movie with a crappy plot receive such rave reviews!?

A rating of five was only half of a perfect rating of ten. Whether the film was good or bad, the rating was only given after watching the movie. Movies similar to "God of War" termed by the masses as a crappy film would normally receive a rating of about three stars. That was the average rating Zaro's previous seven films had received. The five star rating was still not comparable to the 8.6 rating of "King of Snipers," yet when compared to Wireless Media's previous productions, this was an unprecedentedly high rating indeed.

In the eyes of Zaro's team, five stars was very high. This was the highest rating ever received for one of Zaro's productions.

Screenshot it! Take a photo!

This was solid proof!

Zaro's agent was worried that the system had experienced some errors, hence the high ratings. He trusted the reviews of the critics, but this high rating was just beyond his expectations!

Every username was tied to the user's terminal. A large influx of fake fans was also impossible. If there were too many obvious fake fans, an investigation would take place.

What called for the high ratings?

"Are you f*cking kidding me? 'God of War' has a rating of five! There is something suspicious going on!"

"Already 5.1 stars and still rising!"

"Where are the ones who caught the movie immediately after it was released? Shed some light on the truth!"

"I just watched the premiere. How do I put it in words... rather straightforward with a crappy plot. Yet it was really cool. Especially the stunning spectacle of the final battle. I give it five and a half stars."

"The visuals of Senior Master Zaro's movies are always more or less satisfactory. Just that this time it left a profound impression on me, perhaps due to the soundtrack. I originally wanted to give it three stars, but on account of the amazing soundtrack, I made it five."

Amongst those voicing their opinions, there were also professional critics who were rather famous.

"My rating is five and a half stars. The plot deserves only one star, as everyone should be able to tell. Production deserves two and a half stars. Compared to the previous works, there has been an improvement, especially the acting. Although not great, it is evident that they were serious about their craft. I gave two stars for the previous seven movies. This time, based on the same criteria, the movie would have received three and a half stars on the account of their improvement. Alas, what prompted me to give an extra two stars was that short but exquisite soundtrack. I am sure others in the industry have given an extra two stars as well just for the music."

"Indeed." Another reputable film critic chipped in. "The soundtrack of a film is an important component when it comes to making a film. Without a soundtrack, a movie is just like an empty shell. Music can accentuate a story, draw out emotions, and shape perceptions. Great soundtracks can enhance a film. Just try remembering all the classical greats. Most people might have forgotten how the plot goes, but the the epic

soundtracks will remain everlasting.

"The soundtrack in the climax of 'God of War' was indeed breathtaking. During my university days, I minored in movie soundtracks. Thus, from a professional view, I was unable to detect any flaws. That piece brought out the essence of the joys and sorrows of the battle. The bloodshed and glory were all nicely depicted. I just wish to know which great composer produced this masterpiece. To anyone in the industry who has such information, I will be waiting online for any news."

Due to protectionist measures, in Leizhou, music from other continents was not distributed freely. Most people in Leizhou were not familiar with the "Period of Destruction" series. Even with the big hoo-ha of the second movement, the news here was censored. Therefore, some people did not even know of the existence of the virtual idol Polar Light.

As the release of the third movement and the premiere of "God of War" had happened simultaneously, even though there might have been a minority that followed the music industry in Yanzhou, those that had listened to the song had not watched the movie. At the moment, nobody had deduced the source or the composer of the soundtrack yet.

Some people thought that the soundtrack would be under the film's copyright and would not appear anywhere else. Therefore, in order to hear it, they had no choice but to watch "God of War."

There were also soundtrack enthusiasts who went to watch "God of War" a second time. A large number who saw the reviews online decided to catch it too.

Thus, during the second screening of the movie, Zaro's agent and production team realized that the second screening had even more viewers than the premiere!

This had never happened before with the seven previous movies.

This was a happy occasion!

It called for a celebration!

Zaro's agent tried calling Zaro to pass on the good news. However, Zaro was totally uncontactable.

Finding Zaro uncontactable, he moved on to contacting the members in Zaro's social circle. Alas, not a single one could be contacted.

Had some sort of accident occurred?

Thoughts of kidnapping, blackmail, and hostage situations flashed across the mind of Zaro's agent, and he nearly wanted to make a police report, but after remembering that Zaro was a member of the Renault family, the agent made a call to an uncle of Zaro's. From that uncle, he received the news that Zaro and his friends were at home and was told not to worry. Refusing to comment further, the uncle hung up.

Zaro's agent could tell that something was amiss.

Could it be that something had happened?

At the same time, in Zaro's residence.

Zaro's friends were seated quietly in the projection room. All communication devices on hand had been confiscated and they were not allowed to leave. Even a trip to the bathroom required someone to follow them. Two armed security personnel were standing in the doorway, giving off icy stares. No matter which family they belonged to, there would be no such preferential treatment given. The bunch of them sat in fear, afraid to even make a single sound.

None of them even knew what had happened. At that moment, nobody had even dared to go out. All they saw was Zaro kneeling down moments after opening the door, all hints of his normally insolent attitude gone. Before they even had time to look out, security personnel had already entered the room with their guns raised.

In the Renault family, quite a few members were able to boast of having armed security personnel tag along. Yet given Zaro's reaction and the tense atmosphere in the house, it was highly likely that the rarely seen Old General Renault was here.

But why would the Old General even be here? To visit Zaro?

Given the current situation and seeing the gun-wielding security personnel, one of them came to a conclusion—something had happened to Old General Renault.

The health and well-being of this very important person was an important affair. Before the Renault family had done any preparations, it was important that no

information was to be leaked. Therefore, even if Zaro's friends had not seen anything, their communication devices had to be confiscated and they had to be confined to the room.

Why had Old General Renault suddenly encountered a health problem? Seeing Zaro's kneeling figure, perhaps Zaro had angered the old man and triggered a reaction?

At the thought, the friend shivered. All he could do was offer Zaro his condolences. If Zaro had indeed offended the old general, even if he was the beloved grandson of Leizhou's current governor, Zaro would not be spared.

At the moment, Zaro was very pale. He was still kneeling, but at the doorway of another room. He did not know what was happening inside right now, but seeing the situation with his great-grandfather just now, he did not have high hopes.

Five other members of the Renault family were already in the house. They were his uncles and aunts. The Renaults of his grandfather's generation held important positions and were unable to set aside everything and rush over.

Zaro's father had also rushed over. After confirming that the old master's life was no longer in danger, he proceeded to rip into Zaro.

In the past, whenever Zaro's father had scolded him, there would always be others to intercede. This time, nobody even bothered. Zaro's mother sat to one side, her face fraught with worry. When she tried to interject, she was stopped by one of Zaro's aunts. The members of the family did not know the entire story, but considering Zaro's past actions, they came to the conclusion that Zaro was at fault for the Old General's current condition.

Sporting a bruised face, Zaro sobbed silently while still kneeling. Any trace of his arrogant manner was gone.

Zaro might have been pampered, but he had a conscience. He had not wished for such a situation. Even he did not know what had caused his great-grandfather so much anguish. Could it have been the bragging he had done in the projection room? If he had known that the old man had been standing outside, he would not have dared to say anything.

As he knelt there sobbing, the door opened. His father gave him a cold stare and said, "Old master wishes to speak to you."

Zaro blew his nose, grabbing onto the doorframe to support himself as he got up. After contemplating, he decided to go back to kneeling and, in that position, shuffled into the room.

The old master had his back to the door, so Zaro could not see his expression. All he could do under the icy cold stares of his elders was tremble.

"Gr-great-grandfather," Zaro mumbled softly.

Having prepared himself for whatever punishment might come, Zaro instead heard something totally unexpected.

"That song. What is its title?" the old master asked.

"Eh?!" Zaro grimaced.

The others in the room were bewildered as well.

"What eh? Hurry up and answer!" Zaro's father said as he rasped his knuckles down onto the top of Zaro's head.

"Oh!"

Zaro relaxed a little and tried to think. At that moment, it should have been the part where he was acting. The soundtrack was titled...

"Mi-Mission. That piece was called 'Mission,'" Zaro hurriedly said.

"Mission," the old master repeated the word with a longing gaze and a light sigh.

Chapter 56

Battle for the Composition

When some people heard the third movement, they felt that the music was cool and pleasing to the ear. Just as when Zaro heard it for the first time, he felt the music could heighten the scene's atmosphere, complimenting him in the process.

However, when Old General Renault listened to it, the music did not lift him; rather, it stirred a sense of sorrow.

There was a saying: "Music only furnishes the ambience. Every listener only hears his own story."

This saying was exactly what Old General Renault was going through.

Regardless of what the composer was thinking about when he'd created this music, when Old General Renault listened to the music, all his past experiences came flowing back to him.

A long time ago, when Old General Renault was still young, he'd taken part in many military campaigns. These military campaigns were not known to the masses because they had taken place on another planet. The 100-Year Period of Destruction had left Earth bare and lacking resources. At the rate the New Era was developing, lots of resources were needed. The resources on Earth would have been exhausted before long, and that would have led to the real end of the world. Hence, there had been a need to look for resources and materials outside of the planet.

It was no easy task, but somebody had to do it. Few people knew the terrible price that was paid for all the glory of the thriving New Era.

How many lives had been lost in the unbounded universe, on foreign planets where the remains were never claimed?

Recently, he kept remembering his comrades who had traveled to a distant planet together with him. If they had not perished, they would certainly have a standing equal to his. Hearing the familiar sounds of guns and machinery unconsciously brought him

back that period. The soundtrack directed his thoughts toward the desperate scenario he had wished to forget.

People loved exalted heroes. Movies and films had no shortage of sparkling superheros, but he rarely watched those. No matter what righteous mission they were given, no matter how valiant or great they were, in reality, heroes would bleed and heroes would die.

He had watched and read enough films and books regarding heroes and heard many songs praising heroes. But all of them were flawed. They might have depicted war, but they shied away from the true image of war. The cruelty and irrationality of war, the cost of lives, was all but neglected. Regardless of the glory or destruction, heroes were glorified while the normal man was swept aside. Heroes, whether in reel-life or real life, were just but a small part of humanity. The other end of the spectrum was overlooked. For every victory, there were always those that went through the sorrow of losing a family member. Because of these reasons, Old General Renault could not appreciate real art. Perhaps he was old and was unable to keep up with the times. Maybe the younger generation reveled in the beautiful world without sorrow and anxiety.

Perhaps only those who had been on an actual battlefield would understand the implications of war and the cost of lives.

With a deep breath and another long sigh, the old master spoke. "You did well finding this soundtrack."

The kneeling Zaro widened his eyes, doubting his own hearing. Was the old master actually praising him?!

Zaro was astonished that the old master was interested in this piece of music. It was at this moment that he realised that it was upon hearing the soundtrack that the old master was so moved it triggered something.

That meant...

The old master's tears were not from anger but rather because of the music?

He had gotten beat up for nothing?!

Still kneeling, Zaro glared at his father.

Upon making contact with Zaro's barely recognizable and bruised face, Zaro's father let out a light sigh and turned his head away.

The other elders in the room were also slightly awkward. Who would have thought that the old master's condition was a result of him listening to a song? They had nearly hit Zaro themselves, but hearing that the old master's condition was stable, they had controlled themselves. Luckily, they had saved themselves from an even more awkward situation.

"Who is the composer for 'Mission'?" the old master asked.

"Ah. I don't know." Zaro felt the piercing stares of the few elders in the room after his reply. He winced and continued on. "R-really, I don't know. The composer is someone in Yanzhou. Yanzhou's Silver Wing Media. They didn't tell me who the composer was. But that composer has two other works before 'Mission.' Great-grandfather, let me source them out for you to listen... Sss." At the end, he let out a little sound like a hiss.

Zaro's father clenched his fist. He could tell right away what that little punk was trying to pull off!

As expected, hearing the "sss," the old master turned his chair around and saw the bruised face of Zaro. Startled, he asked, "What happened to you? Stand up. What are you kneeling down for?" He had been deeply immersed in his memories and had not noticed his surroundings. Only now was he fully awake.

Zaro got up, massaging his knee and wincing as if in pain. "Father hit me. It hurts."

At his age, Old General Renault could have guessed. He laughingly said, "You deserve it! What similar to God of War, far from it!" He could tell from the look of it that Zaro was only suffering some bruises. A little discipline would be all right as a deterrent for the young punk.

Zaro gave a cheeky laugh. Acting coy and cheeky was what made him so endearing to his grandfather, the current governor of Leizhou.

Zaro's father rolled his eyes. Of all the things to learn, this little brat had learned to act like this!

Zaro was an expert at currying favors with the elder generation, yet he knew when to draw the line. Too much flattery would make him annoying. Thus, he showed some

restrain. "Great-grandfather, do you want to listen to them? I can get the other two pieces and the complete 'Mission' for you." With that, he glanced at the personal doctor beside the old master. He did not want the old master to lose himself and cause an incident again.

The personal doctor chuckled. "No objections."

For humans, releasing pent-up emotions was beneficial. The old master tended to bottle up his feelings and regrets, storing them in the deep recesses of his heart. After many long years, the scars and pains deep in his heart were a lot for him to bear. Crying it all out was as if letting his spirit finally relax.

Just that this had been a big scare for him. Anyone who had seen the old master in that state would have panicked.

Having received approval, the bruised and battered Zaro happily ran out of the room. Watching the scene, his mother thought that her child had suffered brain damage from the beatings.

"It's alright to be a little lively." The old master chuckled as Zaro went out. He meant the words for everyone in the room, and specifically for Zaro's father, to hear.

What could Zaro's father say? He could only flash a smile and nod. That child had already grown up this way, how much could he change? As long as Zaro refrained from outrageous activities, they also did not need to keep him on a tight leash.

In a short time, Zaro brought the full copies of "Divine Punishment," "Cocoon Breach," and the original "Mission" to the old master.

"It is even better when watching the music video. Let me help you set it up."

Although Zaro said he was helping to set up, he was actually directing the security personnel and the servants to do the work.

After all three music videos had been played, even though the old master was not as shaken as before, his eyes were all red and misty.

"An excellent piece of art!"

A few of those in the room gave their surprisingly good reviews.

Zaro's father muttered, "How does this not belong to Leizhou?"

"Whichever continent's composer, being able to produce this sort of music deserves respect," the old master said. Music like this that was capable of evoking emotions could transcend politics and time.

Having finished watching the music video, Zaro was chased out of the room by his father. The door was closed as the Renaults inside discussed important matters.

After Zaro exited the room, he did not bother to check on his friends who were still under the watchful eyes of the security personnel. Instead, he called his agent.

Receiving the call, Zaro's agent immediately relayed the good news regarding the showing of "God of War" at the box office and its rave reviews. Before he could ask about what had caused Zaro to be uncontactable, he was interrupted by Zaro.

"I don't give a f*ck about any of that! Contact Silver Wing Media right away. No matter how much it costs, purchase the copyright for 'Mission.' Remember, I want the full copyright."

Zaro's agent was shocked. Although the soundtrack was great and gave the movie extra points, was it worth it to spend another large sum of money to buy it?

He wanted to ask what had happened within the Renault family, but before he could speak, Zaro had already hung up.

At the moment when Zaro's agent contacted Silver Wing Media with the intent to purchase the copyrights, Duan Qianji received a call inside the headquarters of Silver Wing.

A rough voice came through the line. "Dear Wife!"

Hearing this, Duan Qianji wanted to sever the call. She knew that every time she heard this tone, there would be a troublesome request.

"The new song 'Mission' that your company just released, leave it for me! Don't ever sell it!"

"What? Didn't you have no interest in music?" Duan Qianji asked.

"Ah, I don't have interest in other music. But I really like this series. Especially the third movement. Make sure to leave it. Yanzhou's military is planning on expanding. We have shot a publicity film and are hoping to use the music alongside it."

Chapter 57

Battle Date

The theme song for a recruitment drive had to project a commanding presence. It couldn't be soft. It also had to be hefty. Naturally, Duan Qianji's husband, Major General Hong Lou, was clueless about music and couldn't tell the difference. But others who belonged to the Yanzhou military command could. They had spotted a gem, and when they noticed it was a Silver Wing release, they sought out Hong Lou.

You had to save the good stuff for your own. Even though she stood to suffer a loss, given that Hong Lou had asked for the song specifically, Duan Qianji decided to keep the rights of the song within her home continent.

The song was noticed by the Yanzhou military command and slated to anchor a recruitment drive, which meant the series was quite popular. Even if the masses didn't like the song, as long as the military did, that was a good thing. Silver Wing had to borrow equipment and locations from the military for its film productions every year. Now the military wanted something from them. It was good to do this favor. There would be less backlash the next time they wanted to borrow equipment from the military.

After hanging up with her husband, Duan Qianji asked her assistant, "Any word on the Fiery Bird poll?"

"Voting has started in Huangzhou. Voting in Yanzhou might be held off until Memorial Day."

The online poll of virtual idols for the Fiery Bird endorsement deal was actually organized by Rising Dragon, a world-renowned gaming publication. It had nothing to do with Fiery Bird, but it received quite a bit of attention globally.

Given that Rising Dragon was a media outlet from Huangzhou, voting naturally kicked off in Huangzhou. The voting order of the other continents was determined randomly by computer. By custom, voting in all 12 continents took three months. Fiery Bird was scheduled to finalize its virtual idol endorsers for all continents by May.

Typically, Fiery Bird consulted Rising Dragon's online poll before making their decisions. Most of the time, the top vote-getter in each continent was awarded the endorsement deal.

Rising Dragon typically completed voting for four continents in a month. Yanzhou was the sixth continent on this year's list, scheduled for early February.

"Send word to Fang Zhao to try to complete the last movement before New Era Memorial Day and aim for a Feb. 8 release," Duan Qianji ordered.

Jan. 28 was New Era Memorial Day. The Period of Destruction ended and the New Era began on that day 500-plus years ago. It was a day celebrated worldwide, the most important festival in all 12 continents. The occasion was typically marked by a holiday of at least seven days. The exact length of the vacation was determined by individual companies in each continent.

Silver Wing gave its employees a week off, although entertainment industry types could never really take a vacation. They were typically busy hitting the road and attending various celebratory events in different cities. It was the busiest time of the year and the most profitable. Even if you ordered them to take time off, they wouldn't be willing. Celebrities who rested during this period were either ill or out of favor and couldn't swing a single invitation.

Duan Qianji wanted to ask Fang Zhao to attend a few events with the Polar Light project team to boost their profile, but she eventually decided against it because she was concerned about the progress of the fourth movement. The most important thing now was to focus and complete the fourth movement with a flourish. Memorial Day celebrations were secondary. An even more crucial endorsement deal was up for grabs after Memorial Day. That was of greater importance to Silver Wing.

As for Ming Cang, the deputy head of the Yanzhou Music Association, Duan Qianji had given him a heads up.

After the third movement was released, Ming Cang had posted an emotional video on Yanzhou's largest social media website. It was impossible for him to be unbiased because of his son's illness, so he couldn't post comment on the official website of the Yanzhou Music Association. He could only speak in a personal capacity.

Ming Cang was still quite moved, but compared to his response to the second

movement, he seemed in better spirits. His cheeks were flush. The jaded look brought on by his son's condition had disappeared. He wore a bright smile.

"Ming Ye's condition has improved. His medical team is following up. His attending doctor says that the series clearly has an impact on the Hull virus, but only the entire series, the four movements altogether, qualifies as a full course of treatment. A breakthrough probably can't be expected until the full treatment is completed. I'm looking forward to the fourth movement. Thanks again to Polar Light and the Polar Light project team."

Duan Qianji's concerns had vanished after she watched Ming Cang's video. Quite a few hospitals in Yanzhou had already dubbed the "100-Year Period of Destruction" series the "Hull Virus Treatment Tune." From a business perspective, once research had proven the series' efficacy in treating the virus, the sky was the limit.

"Tell Fang Zhao the priority is quality. Now that he has completed three movements, the fourth movement will be easier. As long as the quality is there, everything else will fall in place. All he has to do is focus on completing the series. As for marketing and other matters, tell him not to worry about it," Duan Qianji ordered her assistant.

"Then... what about our client in Leizhou?" the assistant asked.

"Tell them that the rights to the third movement have been sold."

Leizhou.

Zaro's agent relayed Silver Wing's message to his client.

"What? The rights have been sold? They don't want more money?" Zaro was furious.

The agent nodded vigorously. Ten million for a song could be written off as Senior Master's one-off indulgence, but as for sweetening the offer, he would be cautious. Zaro had ordered him to spare no expense in buying the full rights to the song, but as the Senior Master's bookkeeper, he would never spend more than 50 million on a song. In his mind, it wasn't worth it. It was uneconomical and irrational. So he could finally rest easy when he got word from Silver Wing.

"Silver Wing are adamant about not selling us the rights," the agent said.

"Then let's poach the composer."

"We can't. Silver Wing has done a good of keeping him under wraps. Even folks in Yanzhou have no idea who he is."

The agent was in a tough spot. Poaching talent was harder than buying a song. Silver Wing was no fool. You could tell by the way they guarded the composer's identity. Businesses acted out of self interest. Every move was calculated. Silver Wing had to have bigger plans in mind. But that was the purview of the music industry. They were just making movies for fun. They wouldn't be affected. They were also from a different continent. In the worst-case scenario, they could buy another song from Silver Wing next time.

"Then let's poach him when he un.masks himself. Aren't there four movements in total? Three are already out. The fourth will be released soon." Another thought struck Zaro and he started laughing. "It won't be long. Silver Wing wants Polar Light in the running for the Fiery Bird endorsement deal."

Online polling had started in Huangzhou already. Leveraging his status as a Renault and the favored grandson of the Leizhou governor, Zaro had learned from a Rising Dragon source that Polar Light was Silver Wing's candidate for the endorsement deal in Yanzhou.

"We can afford to wait." Zaro kicked up his feet. "What's the latest score for 'God of War?'"

"It's 5.3 now."

"What about 'King of Snipers?'"

"8.2"

"Hahahaha!" Zaro started laughing with no regard for decorum.

His agent flashed a cynical smile too.

Why were they so happy?

Because the rating for "God of War" was rising while the score for "King of Snipers" was slipping. In three days, the second film had lost 0.4 points. It was an alarming rate of decline for the critically acclaimed movie.

The following comment had appeared online: "I don't know why, but when I was watching 'King of Snipers,' all I could think of was the song that played during the final battle scene in 'God of War.'"

"Actually, the score for 'King of Snipers' isn't bad, but in contrast, after watching 'God of War,' it lacks oomph."

It was like having a heavy dish and then trying one that was lighter, of the gourmet variety. There was bound to be a difference.

Many fans searched online for the soundtrack for "God of War." There were calls for Wireless Media to release the song played during the final battle as a single, but the studio never responded. Eventually, someone discovered that the memorable song was part of a series performed by a virtual idol over in Yanzhou.

"Yanzhou?"

"They actually used someone from Yanzhou?"

"What's the name of the virtual idol? What's the name of the song? Let me check."

"Polar Light, from Yanzhou, and the song is called 'Mission.' It's the third movement of the '100-Year Period of Destruction' series. Oh, the first three movements are available for download in Yanzhou for one dollar a pop."

"Wow, copyrighted music is actually available for download in Yanzhou? Us music fans in Leizhou can forget about it."

There were many jealous fans in Leizhou. Copyrighted music in Leizhou was usually made-to-order and appeared only in ads and videos. They were not available for download. If you wanted to listen to a copyrighted song, you had to watch the ad or the original video—unless the record label released a single.

The quandary made many think about Zaro, the Senior Master with little restraint but plenty of cash to splurge.

"Have Senior Master Zaro buy the rights to the song. Actually, have him buy all the rights to the song. That way we can listen to it."

Zaro read comments along these lines, thinking, *I want to buy the rights too, but Silver*

Wing ain't selling.

While the song generated quite a bit of interest online, not everyone was willing to watch "God of War" just to hear it. "Mission" could not be sampled in Leizhou. Even if the Leizhou fans managed to log in to a streaming website in Yanzhou, they could only play the first two movements. Silver Wing had blocked sampling of the third movement outside of Yanzhou.

Just when Leizhou fans thought they would never hear "Mission" in a context other than the movie, a video started circulating online. It was titled "A Mission Calling—the Earth-Shattering Army of Yanzhou."

The Yanzhou military command released rare footage of its three divisions taking part in drills and engaging in combat. The cinematography was slick and explosive, especially the Air Force footage, which projected power and elegance. And the score was a magical touch. Anyone who watched the video would be burning with passion and inspired to fight.

The video generated heated discussion online. Many folks compared it to the recruitment videos in their own continents. They realized that their videos were visually OK, but somehow, they paled in comparison to the Yanzhou video.

Folks in Rongzhou were genuinely pissed off.

"Earth-shattering? Have you forgotten about Rongzhou?"

The planet's 12 continents were split into eight main continents and four special continents. Yanzhou was one of the eight major continents, populated mostly by civilians. Rongzhou was one of the four special continents, home to the world's largest military base and the headquarters of the global military alliance. The entire continent was under military-style management. Most of its residents were descendants of soldiers. All local schools—from the primary level to university—were structured in the manner of military academies. Rongzhou was widely considered the most powerful continent in terms of military might.

That was why people in Rongzhou were miffed after the Yanzhou recruitment video went viral.

"Mission calling my ass! It's a f*cking propaganda video, pure and simple."

"Just cut to the chase. If you want to brainwash folks, get straight to the point."

"How can a tiny, crappy military district like Yanzhou shatter the world?"

Folks from Yanzhou and Rongzhou started quarreling online, while people from other continents took in the spectacle.

But everyone knew that online talk meant nothing. Who was willing to actually fly over and fight?

That was implausible, so they would battle in a different way.

"See you in 'Battle of the Century' in October!"

The world-renowned gaming studio Fiery Bird was launching their new game, "Battle of the Century," in October.

Chapter 58

Ten Military Postings

Yanzhou's military turned a deaf ear to all the questions and debates online. They did not concern themselves with the buzz. All they wanted to do was show off their military might to spur on more citizens of Yanzhou to enlist, instead of coming up with other methods.

When the recruitment video was released on the internet and went viral, it brought about a sense of patriotism. Duan Qianji's husband, Hong Lou, also received a commendation during one of the meetings.

Just as people needed clothes, a video required accompanying music. Yanzhou's publicity film could not match up with Rongzhou's military recruitment video in terms of the equipment and scale shown, but the other continent's recruitment videos were not as memorable, and this was largely due to their inferior soundtrack.

This was the reason companies spent large sums of money to produce custom-made music for their movies, games, and advertisements. The returns were way greater, far more than the average person could imagine.

Yanzhou's military had shown itself in a different light, and Silver Wing Media had benefited from it too.

On the other continents, protectionist measures and censorship were put in place with regard to film, music and other entertainment. Stringent measures were in place to protect the interests of their own continent's entertainment industry. However, the measures only affected commercial items. Yanzhou's recruitment video did not fall under this category. There were no obstacles preventing it from being viewed by anyone.

Silver Wing Media also took the opportunity to announce themselves globally. If not for that short four-minute soundtrack in the recruitment video, the series by the virtual idol Polar Light would not have spread so quickly.

The soundtrack spurred on many people from other continents to search for

information regarding Polar Light and the "Period of Destruction" series.

Gaining publicity for his work, and at the same time advertising for his wife, Hong Lou was very pleased. This was a win-win situation.

Even Leizhou's own 'God of War' had an increased amount of discussions and attention. Zaro's agent and the rest of Wireless Media grabbed the opportunity and promoted the film with added effort. They even managed to deny "King of Snipers" the award for "Best Movie Soundtrack," and they watched as "King of Snipers" kept dropping points down to a measly eight.

Before the premieres of the two movies, most people were certain that "King of Snipers" would run away with quite a number of awards at Leizhou's biggest movie awards event. However, when "King of Snipers" and "God of War" were simultaneously screened, many people feared that "King of Snipers" would lose the "Best Movie Soundtrack" award.

Everyone knew that a "crappy film" like "God of War" had no way of winning any awards. It was unlikely that Leizhou's Film Association would give the movie any awards, as they felt it was beneath them. However, if they were to award "Best Movie Soundtrack" to "King of Snipers," it would certainly cause an uproar. Many people could tell that Leizhou's Film Association would instead hand over the award to a different movie, hence avoiding the head-to-head clash of soundtracks.

The investors behind "King of Snipers" were raging. After all, the soundtrack was one of the top priorities. They had put in a considerable sum to hire a celebrated band to produce their soundtrack. Yet it had all gone to waste, as their plans for the award were wrecked by that imbecile Zaro.

Some investors had also hired a bunch of professionals to stir and discredit Zaro and his team in the media. However, Zaro hit back with a public interview.

"Yes. We may be smelly dogshit. But even a pile of dogshit has its merits. Putting in so much effort on a comprehensive effort to discredit Wireless Media is a despicable means. Rather, that effort could have been put to a self-reflection of your flaws and faults and finding out where you went wrong. Just being arrogant everyday and you expect to be the undisputed best?"

For all those that criticized "God of War" and said that the ones who enjoyed "God of

War" were handicapped, Zaro shredded them. "Just watching and criticizing a movie makes you feel all superior? If you're that capable, why not join the military and embark on a trip to search for new resources?"

Zaro was not afraid of any criticism. No matter how vicious the comments were, he paid no heed. This "crappy film" he had starred in had a soundtrack that had denied the other side an award. Although not being able to compete in terms of box office sales, ratings, or awards, denying them the "Best Movie Soundtrack" award was satisfactory and made him happy. It was a heroic deed. He deserved a raise!

Zaro's agent was equally ecstatic. Not just because they had managed to deny the award but because the film had broken even and made a profit of more than 60 million! Purely profits!

The revenue might be a small matter in other companies in the film industry, but given Zaro's tendency to splash out cash to make a crappy movie, the target every time was to break even. This time around, after deducting the expenses, promotion fees, and salaries, they had profited more than 60 million! This was a tremendous improvement. Once in awhile, Zaro's agent wondered if it would have been even better had they managed to secure the rights to "Mission." Although he would quickly forget about it and shift it to the back of his mind.

In Yanzhou.

Fang Zhao paid no mind to the happenings in the global entertainment circle, instead leading his team to work. Even if Duan Qianji had not said anything, he had already decided to complete production for the fourth movement before Memorial Day so the entire team could have a long and relaxing Memorial holiday.

Since the rights to the third movement already belonged to Yanzhou's recruitment video, for the masses, they could only listen to the third movement by viewing the video online. Television stations, studios, advertising companies, etc. were not authorized to play it. Doing so would be an infringement and the offending party would have to go to court.

The rights of the third movement had been sold to the Yanzhou military for its use in their recruitment video. Yet Silver Wing Media did not receive a single cent, because Duan Qianji knew that, no matter how much the military offered, it would not even come close to what Zaro was willing to pay. Instead, she used the rights of the song to

exchange for other benefits. Some were for the benefit of the entire Silver Wing Media and some were specifically just for Fang Zhao.

Fang Zhao was giving Pang Pusong some vocal coaching when he was summoned by Duan Qianji to the top floor office.

"I have two issues I wish to speak to you about." Instead of having her assistants inform Fang Zhao, she chose to speak with Fang Zhao personally, as it was important.

"The first matter. Yanzhou Military's recruitment video's global circulation brought a lot of attention to the third movement." Duan Qianji opened a projection and showed Fang Zhao a screenshot of an online discussion.

Now that the third movement had garnered much reputation, more people realized that they did not understand the lyrics of a portion of the song.

"Does anyone know what it is? What language is it?"

"Preliminary investigations have shown that it is some sort of ancient language. Possibly from an era before the end of days. We need someone to shed light on the matter."

"Anyone online who has studied linguistics? Please explain!"

...

What Duan Qianji showed Fang Zhao was an online discussion where people from every continent discussed the lyrics, and it was even picked up by the media.

Many people who studied music knew that songs were mostly expressed in a few globally fashionable languages. Just that, when the languages mixed and got complicated, it was harder to understand the meaning of the song. Thus, not many people would actually try to decipher the meanings behind the many languages.

Still, no matter how many languages were used, there still existed music that was beyond the control of languages—using an unknown language to convey the song. To put it bluntly, it was self-created musical language.

This sort of language on its own had no significance. Normally, it would just be for the sake of complementing the melody. Alternatively, it could be some sort of ancient

language that had died out. No matter the reason, it would not be able to clearly express much. But it could convey the feelings that the artist had in mind.

Whatever the reason, when nobody could figure it out, the remaining option was to ask the composer himself. This was the question on the minds of internet users of every continent.

Previously, Duan Qianji had not paid much attention. She had felt that with regards to Fang Zhao's composition, lyrics were secondary. The composition was what attracted people. Therefore, she did not find any issue with the lyrics and hence paid no heed. It was only after the lyrics generated much buzz on the internet that it caught her attention.

"The company plans to keep this matter under tight wraps to deal with the matter. Therefore, whatever the meaning of the third movement, please do not divulge any information. For the time being, do not give an explanation online regarding the lyrics of the third movement," Duan Qianji emphasized in a serious tone.

"Don't worry about it." Fang Zhao laughed as he continued, "Even I do not know what it means."

'...' Duan Qianji thought to herself, *Is he messing with me?!*

"I heard it before and felt that it suited this part, so I decided to use it. As for the meaning, I can't help you there," Fang Zhao said.

After the end of days, many dialects and languages went extinct. When Fang Zhao had been composing the score, he remembered the words and sounds he'd heard during the all-out war. Some were farewells to family and friends, and others were the roars of battle cries. The people they came from no longer existed. Fang Zhao did not know what they meant, but when he was composing, the words came to him as he was writing the score. Thus, during recording, he then instructed Pang Pusong on how to sing them.

Duan Qianji just stared at Fang Zhao, seemingly finding it hard to speak.

She had no way of understanding what went through the mind of a talented and eccentric artist.

Perhaps only such a person could produce such astonishing music.

"Cough... That's settled, then. Now for the second matter." Duan Qianji scrutinized the expressions on Fang Zhao's face as she said, "'Mission' belonged to Silver Wing Media and the rights were given to Yanzhou Military's publicity division; we did not charge them a single cent."

Although the matter of entrusting the rights of the third movement to the military had already been discussed with Fang Zhao and he had given his approval, Duan Qianji still felt the need to explain the situation clearly to Fang Zhao. From the looks of it, Fang Zhao was still young and might not have thought things through and instead held back his misgivings. Duan Qianji did not want such a promising talent to the company harboring any doubts.

"Of course, it was not entirely free, in a sense. We managed to obtain quite a bit of privileges, some that cannot be bought." Duan Qianji watched Fang Zhao's expression and behavior closely as she spoke. Yet from the start, Fang Zhao had projected an image of cool and calm, as if the two were just engaged in idle gossip.

Duan Qianji had been overthinking things. Fang Zhao was not really fazed by this matter. He had already given his approval. All he had wanted was for the few compositions of his to see the light of day. Profit-wise, it was just not as great as the previous installments.

Also, Fang Zhao believed that, as a business person, Duan Qianji knew best how to receive the most profit. Thus, he was not worried about losing out. Duan Qianji would also not have any shortage of cash, and receiving privileges, as she'd mentioned, could not be bought easily.

"There are some things that I am not liable to tell you, but I can tell you this." Duan Qianji chuckled. "Other than privileges, I took the opportunity to obtain ten positions for you. Military positions."

In the New Era, there were some things that were unavoidable. Military conscription was one. There were different types of soldiers, different divisions, and different vocations. Some would be assigned to a certain squadron and sent to a remote planet to mine for resources, whereas other positions might require doing simple administrative work in a city without the need for active duty.

Duan Qianji saw that this had piqued Fang Zhao's interest and continued, "I have checked up on the Polar Light production team. The others completed their military

service during their time at university. Fang Zhao, only you have not completed the mandatory service. When you decide to enlist, you can select a posting they have given—pick one that has rather light duties and even lets you stay in Qi'an. During that one year of military service, you can continue to compose your music without many disturbances. Of these types of postings, I have obtained ten!"

This was her preferential treatment toward Fang Zhao and a chance to do him a favour.

Chapter 59

Arrested

There were many ways to complete military service. Those enlisting would be divided according to their physical condition. Those with physically weak bodies would be assigned to less taxing places and, as Duan Qianji had mentioned, did not need to leave the planet. For those with poor health, they might be assigned to a city office to help with easier jobs, such as administration. However, these jobs were also restricted by the postings. The majority of people were thus assigned accordingly, and more than 70% of postings required the person to leave the planet.

Every year, many military personnel were sent to foreign planets. Not for holidays, they were required to undergo rigorous training and would need to toil hard there. Therefore, most people were unwilling to get sent there, and families with pressing or dire circumstances would try various methods to get a more relaxed posting.

This resulted in many underhanded transactions happening on the black market every year, especially so in remote areas. By manipulating the assignments, one could even use this as a means of revenge.

It had already been 500 years since the New Era had started and many laws and policies had lost the significance they'd had when they were first introduced. Yanzhou's military was no exception. Officials in the military would sometimes turn a blind eye. After all, the end of days were over, and in order to go on living happily, sometimes corners had to be cut.

This situation was not just limited to Yanzhou. It existed in every single continent as well.

Fang Zhao had not yet enlisted, yet he already had these postings. He did not need to worry about being assigned to an arduous foreign planet. Duan Qianji also hoped that Fang Zhao would remain in Qi'an City and be of use to Silver Wing Media. After all, the nucleus of the Polar Light team was Fang Zhao.

Fang Zhao left the rooftop office and headed for the 50th floor, taking advantage of the afternoon's free time to summon his team over.

"Wasn't the project meeting scheduled for tomorrow?" Zu Wen yawned. He had been about to take his afternoon nap.

"This is not a project meeting. I have received a number of military postings," Fang Zhao said.

Zu Wen was snapped out of his daze. "Is it what I'm thinking it is?"

"Is it the type... that grants preferential treatment?" Rodney rubbed his palms gleefully.

Everyone else stared at Fang Zhao, awaiting his reply

Fang Zhao nodded. "That's right"

"Ah Hah—" Zu Wen let out a strange sound. "Why did I clear my military service so early?! I could have been living the life and enjoying special treatment! I wouldn't even have to travel to foreign planets to mine for minerals!"

"Zu Wen, were you also assigned to mining?" Zeng Huang asked.

"Yeah. Where else?" Zu Wen felt his stomach clenching when he remembered his time in the military. "Luckily, my family pulled some strings and spent a million dollars so that the person in charge would assign me to a planet with a well-developed base."

"You had it good. The planet I was assigned to had horrible conditions. The weather was bad, too, and it snowed all year long." Zeng Huang shuddered as he spoke.

"Zeng Huang and I completed our military service during year three of university. During year one and two, we completed the curriculum for year three as well, so when we returned, we could directly continue with year four and have it not affect our graduation," Wan Yue said. "But it seems like Fang Zhao has not served in the military yet."

Generally, students would try to complete their military service together with close friends or family. Waiting till after graduation would only serve as a hindrance to their work.

During university, the original owner of Fang Zhao's body had been kept busy by composing, dating, and striving for good results and awards. Therefore, he had not

completed his military service.

"I have also completed my service. But, Boss..." Fu Yingtian paused. He had joined the team through Zu Wen's recommendation and followed Zu Wen's way of calling Fang Zhao "Boss." However, he was still not used to speaking to Fang Zhao in the same easy manner as Zu Wen.

Seeing Fang Zhao glance over, Fu Yingtian got a little nervous. "My little brother is in his third year of university. He spends most of his days coding and severely lacks exercise. This year, he and his classmates decided to defer their studies and serve in the military. He... he is really talented in science and technology... It's just that he loses track of time when he gets busy. He frequently stays up all night and his health condition isn't that good. Last year, he also contracted an illness... Boss, the postings that you have... could you sell me one?"

Hearing Fu Yingtian's words, Fang Zhao nodded.

Fu Yingtian felt relieved as Fang Zhao consented. Having joined the Polar Light project team, he had saved quite a bit of money. It would be worth it if he could purchase a credible posting. He had asked around on the black market, but there were no guarantees and there was a risk of being conned.

He knew his own brother best. If his brother was posted to mine at a planet with poor weather and working conditions like the one Zeng Huang had mentioned, chances were, he would be sent back halfway through due to illness or health issues. Military service was not that bad to the extent that people died, but according to his experiences, he knew how tough it could be.

If it was absolutely fair and people were assigned their positions according to the rules, he would have accepted it with no questions asked. However, now that everyone was using their own means and methods, why should he abide by the rules? He had not done so previously, but this time, given the circumstances, he could let the people he cared about suffer less.

Struggling hard, was it ultimately to give his family and himself a better life?

"How... much?"

Fu Yingtian had only intended to ask how much a posting cost, yet he heard Fang Zhao say, "Mhmm, you can have one. Anyone else?"

Fu Yingtian was flabbergasted. The few people around froze like statues as they watched Fang Zhao.

A few seconds later, Zu wen took a deep breath. "You mean you are giving them to us?!" Still finding it incomprehensible he added, "Really, you giving them to us for free?"

Fang Zhao nodded.

"Wait, Boss. Do you know the market rate on the black market?" Zu Wen rubbed his eyes, struggling to control himself. "10 million!" Without giving Fang Zhao a chance to reply, Zu Wen continued, "On the black market, it is 10 million! The lowest it has ever gone was also 5 million! Those are the ones you have where you can choose your own posting. Back then, I would have gotten one for myself but I just didn't have the money."

Fang Zhao replied to Zu Wen's incessant chatter with two words: "I know."

I know...

That was all?!

Zu Wen's eyes widened.

Fang Zhao glanced at the people in front of him. "Zu Wen, Song Miao, Pang Pusong, Zeng Huang, Wan Yue, Fu Yingtian, Stiller, Zhang Yu—the eight of you can have one each. Use it on whoever you see fit. Let me know when you've made the choice."

"Ha!" Zu Wen roared with laughter. "I love you, Boss!"

As he shouted, Zu Wen went in for a hug. Fang Zhao sidestepped and shoved him into a room. "You have all received benefits, make sure you give me good work."

"Yes! I guarantee all the work will be done to perfection!" Zu Wen was no longer sleepy. He was really excited. If not for the fact that this could not be publicly announced, Zu Wen would have shown it off in front of his friends.

Other departments distributed red packets; here they distributed postings!

Military postings that were worth millions!

Even if there was no urgent need to use them within the family, it would still not be sold. The postings given by Fang Zhao still had value even if there was no immediate use for them.

Pang Pusong wasted no time and made a call to his mother. "Hello, Mom, I obtained a posting. Let Uncle and Cousin know that they no longer need to worry!" Pang Pusong's cousin was his maternal uncle's daughter who was going to be of age soon. Her body was frail and she was frequently sick. His uncle had recently been borrowing money and asked for favours just so that his daughter could get sent to an easier place where she did not have to suffer.

Back when Pang Pusong had been a freelancer looking for jobs, his uncle had been of great help. Previously, having the chance to audition at Silver Wing Media was due to his uncle pulling some strings. If not for his uncle, Pang Pusong would not have met Fang Zhao. Pang Pusong was very grateful to him and hence had no qualms about giving the posting to his cousin.

Two days later, Fang Zhao received Pang Pusong and Fu Yingtian's requests and passed them on to Duan Qianji.

Duan Qianji was astonished at Fang Zhao's decision to give the postings to his subordinates, but she respected his decision.

"I will ensure that this matter is handled properly. Fang Zhao, what about your choice? Have you decided when to enlist? Which position do you want?" Duan Qianji paid no heed to others. She was only interested in Fang Zhao's decision.

"I wish to complete the Polar Light project first," Fang Zhao replied.

"That's true. If Polar Light wins the endorsement deal, you will be busy. You will probably be unable to serve your duty this year. You are still young, you will still be eligible to serve in the next couple of years. As long as you still have the posting and it is within the time period, you can enlist in the military as and when you want to."

Duan Qianji hoped that, when the time came, Fang Zhao would be assigned somewhere within Qi'an City, in the vicinity of the company. She had not known that Fang Zhao had spent the last two days reading up on mining on foreign planets and had taken a special interest in the most far-off ones. If Duan Qianji had known, she would surely have recalled the postings.

After returning to the office and informing Pang Pusong and Fu Yingtian, Fang Zhao filled up the self-feeding machine with food for 'Curly Hair' before deciding to retreat to his office to rest. That was when he received an incoming message.

"Big Zhao, what's up?" Zeng Huang asked as he emerged from the washroom and saw the weird expression of Fang Zhao's.

"I'm going to drop by Qi'an Police Station."

"What happened?" Zeng Huang was worried. Why would he be called to the police station for no reason?

"Don't worry. It's not a big deal. I will be back in no time."

Hearing Fang Zhao's words, Zeng Huang relaxed a little. "All right. As long as it's nothing."

"Fang Sheng has been arrested, thats all," Fang Zhao replied.

Chapter 60

Sideshow

Fang Sheng was arrested on account of his song theft and alleged assault.

He had been struggling since he'd been kicked out of Neon Culture. He wasn't a talented composer, so he set his sights on music school students.

Qi'an was home to some of the continent's best music schools. Other than the Qi'an Academy of Music, there were two other decent music academies. Quite a few students attending these schools lived on a shoestring budget. Some worked part-time jobs, but competition for music-related part-time gigs was fierce, so some students chose to cover their tuition and expenses by other means. They would not take credit for their work, instead posting excerpts of their songs online to draw buyers and then selling the songs to the highest bidder. That was how certain pop starlets came by their original compositions. It was an open secret in the industry.

Fang Sheng was planning on buying a few decent songs from these poor yet talented students. He was more or less blacklisted in Qi'an, so he would move to a city far from Qi'an and sell the songs there to turn a profit.

He targeted students who were consumed in the creative process yet clueless about the business side of things, cheating them out of the fruits of their labor with extremely low prices. When he had built up a collection, he would flee to another city.

His marks were often students whose personalities resembled that of the original owner of Fang Zhao's body.

He really got addicted to stealing.

The real reason was that this was such a killer shortcut. When he'd stolen the initial three songs, next thing he knew he had a new apartment and a company car. The temptation of overnight riches was too seductive. If Fang Zhao hadn't intervened, Fang Sheng would have done just fine.

Yet Fang Sheng's latest ploy had failed. A prospective seller had balked at his offer, but

he went ahead and tried to steal the student's song anyway and was caught red-handed. The victim petitioned police to use a lie detector on Fang Sheng.

Fang Sheng crumbled under the dual pressure of the lie detector test and interrogation and confessed to stealing Fang Zhao's three songs.

After arriving at the police station, Fang Zhao had his ID checked and was brought to a conference room. This wasn't an interrogation room, so it wasn't as intimidating. The walls were transparent. You could see the movement in a neighboring hallway. The room was also furnished with snacks and refreshments.

A man in his 40s with a square face, sitting in the room, raised his head and asked, "Fang Zhao?"

"That's me." Fang Zhao sat down at the same desk to face the man.

"Did you bring the items we requested?" the man asked.

"I did." Fang Zhao removed a notebook from his bag and handed it over.

The notebook was what the original owner of his body had used to compose. In it, he had jotted down all his scores. When Fang Zhao got the call from the police at the office, he was asked to bring proof that he was the actual composer of the three songs.

A second officer took the notebook for verification. Current-day technology could determine the rough date the notebook was written in and establish the timing of the compositions. Even though Fang Sheng had confessed to stealing the three songs from Fang Zhao, the laws of evidence required further proof. Having the actual compositions was even better.

The man who stayed in the conference room, the notetaker, noticed Fang Zhao turning his head and looking outside. He asked with a laugh, "Do you recognize the man in the blue-checkered shirt and the two folks next to him?"

"Who?" Fang Zhao responded as he gazed at the surface of the desk.

"The girl who is crying is called Wei Qian. She's a student at one of the local music academies. Fang Sheng almost stole a song from her. If she hadn't buried a signature code in her score, it might very well have been registered under Fang Sheng's name."

"The man standing in the middle, wearing the blue-checkered shirt, is her older brother, Wei Chi. He's a student at the Qi'an University of Science and Technology. When he found out his sister had been robbed, he started asking around about Fang Sheng's whereabouts. When he got a tip, he tracked Fang Sheng down. He caught Fang Sheng taking pictures of another person's score, so he detained him and called the police. He also borrowed money to hire a kick-ass lawyer. Multiple thefts and assault—I'm guessing Fang Sheng will be locked up for at least 10 years. You should thank them. If they hadn't requested a lie detector test, we might not have found out about the theft of your songs."

Since Fang Sheng's hired guns had failed to steal Fang Zhao bracelet and the attempt backfired on him instead, this time, Fang Sheng hadn't dared outsource the job again. He'd done the deed himself, but he was caught in the act.

"Hey, how come you didn't sue him when your songs were stolen?" the officer asked Fang Zhao.

"I had no proof. I had no case," Fang Zhao responded.

"True. This kid's a sly bastard. He never left any concrete proof. Typically, the lie detector isn't used before a conviction." The man gave Fang Zhao a sympathetic look. Knowing your work had been stolen but not being able to do anything about it, seeing someone profit from the fruits of your labor—that had to have been a horrible feeling.

There were strict rules governing the use of the lie detector. They could only be used in certain types of cases and the scope of questioning was limited.

The officer who processed evidence returned to the room and returned the notebook to Fang Zhao.

After the notebook was deemed legitimate evidence, Fang Zhao proceeded to fill out a bunch of paperwork that reverted ownership of the three songs from Fang Sheng to himself.

Neon Culture had immediately recalled the three songs that Fang Sheng had stolen when they got word from the police, transferring their rights to Fang Zhao.

"Can I see Fang Sheng?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Certainly."

Fang Zhao was led to a temporary detention center.

"There are headsets on the wall." The officer who'd brought Fang Zhao to the detention center showed him where the headsets were located and left. The Qi'an police were quite careful about privacy issues.

Fang Sheng looked skinny and downcast. He didn't know what had gone wrong. He didn't get it. Was it simply bad luck? Everything was supposed to go according to plan. How come things always went south at critical moments?

Fang Sheng had intended to buy Wei Qian's song for 50,000. Fifty thousand was a bonanza for someone like her who didn't know the market and wasn't calculating. It was enough to cover her tuition for six years and obtain certain luxuries. But just when she'd been about to sign the contract, a call from her older brother sowed doubt in her mind.

But Fang Sheng hadn't wanted to wait, so he'd stolen Wei Qian's score instead. Who knew that it was planted with her own signature code?

What was worse was that, after he stole Wei Qian's score, he'd moved on to another school where he got a student drunk and was about to steal his score. He had wanted to buy it for a bargain, but this student was more business savvy and asked for at least 150,000. Fang Sheng had no intention of shelling out that much money, so he decided to steal again. He had even planned on fleeing Qi'an that very night, yet Wei Chi had caught him red-handed.

If he'd had a choice, Fang Sheng wouldn't have confessed to stealing Fang Zhao's songs, but he'd known he couldn't beat the lie detector test. And if he'd stonewalled, he would've face an even heavier sentence. After weighing his options, he'd decided to come clean.

There was no escaping jail time now. But in the worst-case scenario, he would be locked up for 10 years—no big deal. He might be released earlier on good behavior. In the end, he would have served six or seven years. He would be only 30 then. There was plenty of time left. Even though he had depleted his savings, he could still mount a comeback.

Fang Sheng plotted his next move. He wasn't feeling great—his face was still swollen and he was missing a few teeth.

As he pondered, he saw an officer bring in Fang Zhao.

"Fang Zhao! Big Zhao! I'm sorry. I shouldn't have stolen your songs. Please forgive me on account of the fact that we grew up together."

If Fang Zhao forgave him and spoke on his behalf, he could apply for parole. Even if he couldn't shave a few years off his sentence, a few weeks or a few months was still something.

After shouting for about a minute, Fang Sheng realized they were separated by a transparent barrier and Fang Zhao couldn't hear him. He scrambled to grab his headset and indicated Fang Zhao to do the same. He thought Fang Zhao didn't know he had to use them.

But Fang Zhao stood there motionlessly and stared at him coldly, as if observing a stranger.

That reminded Fang Sheng of the look on Fang Zhao's face when he'd returned to his black street in a company car to move after signing with Neon Culture.

A lightning bolt flashed through his head. Fang Sheng raised his head and stared at Fang Zhao blankly.

"It was you?"

Fang Sheng looked like he'd seen a ghost.

When he'd hired thugs to grab Fang Zhao's bracelet and was robbed instead, he'd thought that was on account of Yue Qing. He thought the thugs had been afraid of Yue Qing, so they'd turned around and robbed him instead. Now, he realized...

It was Fang Zhao.

It was Fang Zhao all along.

He was the one who had turned the two black street thugs against him. He was the one who had played saboteur every time he was on the cusp of success.

Gritting his teeth, he glared at Fang Zhao, mumbling the words:

"It was you!"

He finally got it. He'd never suspected because he had always based his thinking on Fang Zhao's old personality, but the Fang Zhao standing before him struck him as a completely different person.

Coincidence or luck—that was all irrelevant.

Fang Sheng turned pale, his eyes became bloodshot, and he gripped his fingers tightly, as if he was getting ready to rip his headset to shreds. But soon, his gaze went from projecting hatred to fear, because he noticed Fang Zhao laughing at him.

It was a casual laugh, but it sent through Fang Sheng a deep chill. He felt frozen all over.

If Fang Zhao had set everything up, what awaited him in prison? The more he thought, the more panicked Fang Sheng became.

"Let me out! Let me out!" Fang Sheng yelled at the top of his voice. On the other side of the divider, Fang Zhao had stopped looking at him and left.

After leaving the detention center, Fang Zhao picked up his documents and left the police station. He walked along the street and made a right turn, where he met up with Wei Chi, who had already been waiting.

"I've received your last installment. I've taken care of the legal fees," Wei Chi said.

Fang Zhao'd had eyes on Fang Sheng all this time. When he had found out that Fang Sheng was targeting Wei Qian, he reached out to Wei Chi and struck up a partnership. Fang Zhao funded the operation while Wei Chi was in charge of entrapping Fang Sheng.

"You're not going to tell your sister?" Fang Zhao asked.

Wei Qian didn't not know that Wei Chi had set a trap for Fang Sheng so he could steal her song easily. Later on, Wei Chi had seized the moment and caught Fang Sheng while he was stealing another person's score.

"I'll definitely tell her at some point, but not now. The whole point of this plan was to make her more guarded. As the saying goes, never set out to screw people, but also never let down your guard. She was too gullible, all set to pounce at the bait. Creative

types like her don't know how to watch out for schemers. She's only going to be taken advantage of when she enters the real world. I won't always be around to protect her. Thanks for your help; otherwise, I wouldn't have come out of this unscathed."

Fang Zhao always carried a knife with him and he'd had someone protect Wei Chi in secret. Otherwise, Wei Chi wouldn't have emerged unharmed after detaining Fang Sheng.

Fang Zhao looked at the time. "I gotta run. They're still waiting for me. Next time you wanna scam—no, I mean deliver justice—remember to count me in."

Fang Zhao watched Wei Chi leave and kept walking. For him, Fang Sheng was only a sideshow. He had simply wanted to reclaim the three stolen songs as a gesture for the original owner of his body.

Zap.

A flying car appeared in front of him. Fang Zhao checked the license plate. It was the cab he had ordered. He boarded the car in a hurry.

"Headed to Yanzhou Cemetery for Martyrs?" the driver asked.

"Yup."

"It's almost Memorial Day. The cemetery is getting a lot of visitors. I've made two runs already."

"Is it always crowded this time of year?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Of course. You've never been? The Yanzhou Cemetery for Martyrs in suburban Qi'an is the biggest such cemetery in the continent. It's also one of the world's 12 major cemeteries for martyrs. Word has it that everyone who died in Qi'an during the Period of Destruction is buried there."

Chapter 61

His Own Grave

Yanzhou Cemetery for Martyrs mainly housed the bodies of martyrs who'd died in the Qi'an warzone during the Period of Destruction. After the New Era was established, many graves were shifted over from other areas of Yanzhou. According to official estimates, there were tens of thousands of graves here, and most of the corpses had been cremated and compressed, taking up very little space. There were some without even a corpse, just leaving behind personal belongings or a personal record with their names.

The people of the New Era had a custom where, every Memorial Day, they would head to the Cemetery for Martyrs to pay their respects. Some people felt that paying their respects to the large congregation of martyrs would bless and protect them and make their wishes come true. Others just felt obliged to follow tradition and just came for a walk about.

As it was approaching Memorial Day, there were quite a lot of people visiting the Cemetery for Martyrs. During the journey there, Fang Zhao took the advice of the driver and got a queue number online.

The Cemetery for Martyrs had a place set up specifically for people to pay their respects. However, the space was limited. Thus, it was always full during the few days around Memorial Day, hence the need for a number.

There were too many people here to pay their respects. Fang Zhao's number was quite far back and he had to wait approximately two or three hours before it was his turn. However, before it was his turn, Fang Zhao had decided to take a stroll through the Cemetery for Martyrs.

As he was approaching the cemetery, from a distance, Fang Zhao spotted the landmark of this area. A huge tombstone exceeding 500 meters in height.

The cab driver drove Fang Zhao somewhere close to the cemetery. There were too many people and the parking lots were full. Occasionally, gun-toting police officers could be seen patrolling. At this time every year, there would be large numbers of

police officers situated here to maintain peace and order.

Seeing this, Fang Zhao alighted and made his way in by foot.

No fees were needed to enter the premises. All visitors were subjected to an identity check. As long as there was no issues with the identity and the number of people inside was still within the limits, the person was allowed to enter.

The path toward the cemetery was congested, but after entering, it was wide and spacious. This cemetery was huge and there were many different areas. The core cemetery, the Period of Destruction memorial hall, the plaza, loose graves, public worship area, etc.

That huge tombstone belonged to the core cemetery area and it had restricted access. Most people would head to the public worship area to pay their respects before heading to the cafes beside the plaza for some tea and chitchat. Descendants of martyrs would head to the loose graves or the core cemetery to pay their respects.

On both sides of the main street were two sidewalks sheltered by trees. The variety of the tree was Longxiang Tianluo, a tree that stayed green all year round. Even if a frigid winter season arrived at Qi'an City, the trees would still maintain a green glow full of vigor.

Ahead of the main street was the cemetery's plaza. It was teeming with people, and the shops beside the plaza had a steady stream of visitors.

Only when they were paying their respects did people have solemn expressions. Everywhere else, be it walking through the plaza or taking a rest in a cafe, most people were in high spirits.

This was by no means disrespect for the martyrs. At the beginning of the New Era, a solemn and respectful attitude was the norm when visiting a cemetery. However, it all changed sometime later. There was a high-ranking veteran from the Period of Destruction who had been approaching the end of his life. Before he'd died, he had instructed his children and grandchildren to smile and laugh more when they came to pay respects to him in the future. The New Era that he and his comrades had fought so hard for was one where he did not want to see his descendants sullen and crying.

Little by little, people became less solemn when it came to paying their respects.

Memorial Day was, after all, a celebration. Since people came to pay their respects, they brought the same jubilant and festive spirit to thank the martyrs from the Period of Destruction who had fought for and secured a peaceful New Era for them.

Having experienced the end of the Period of Destruction, people of the New Era firmly believed that those lying here were their saviors.

When paying their respects, the elderly would pray for blessings for the younger generation. The younger generation would hope their wishes came true, hope for peace, hope for fortune, and hope for love.

It was still too early for Fang Zhao to head to the public worship area, so he headed in the direction of the huge and tall tombstone toward the core cemetery.

"Are you a descendant of a martyr? Can I verify your identity, please?" the receptionist at the core cemetery asked Fang Zhao.

"Nope. I'm not."

"Sorry, sir. Since you are not a descendant of a martyr buried inside, we require a thorough screening of your identity as well as a 1,000 dollar deposit. May I know whether you still wish to enter?" the receptionist asked politely.

The deposit would not be returned. This restricted most people. The core cemetery held a greater importance and it was not a place where anyone could enter. Thus, this rule was carefully drawn up by the managing board of the cemetery after much consideration. The deposit money collected would not be channeled to anyone's personal pockets but would be used for the maintenance of the cemetery.

"Yes."

Fang Zhao handed over his identification information, and after the screening of his identity, paid the 1,000. The receptionist helped Fang Zhao put on a blue bracelet that would track his position at all times to ensure he did not enter any restricted areas.

Most of the people entering the core cemetery area were wearing bracelets of different colors. Blue was for normal people paying their respects. Red bracelets were for descendants of martyrs. White ones were government officials, and black indicated that person was special.

Although normal visitors were required to pay a rather large sum, Fang Zhao observed that there were quite a number of people sporting blue bracelets walking about inside. However, under the watchful eyes of police officers and monitoring devices, the people had to think twice even if they wanted to do anything.

The huge tombstone was the most prominent landmark in the core cemetery. The people standing next to it appeared tiny in comparison. The gigantic ash-colored tombstone seemed like a pillar supporting the earth. Steadfast and silent, it had braved the weather for more than five hundred years, a figure of pride and sorrow.

Fang Zhao spent quite some time standing before the huge tombstone. After he had his fill, he went around and headed to the back.

Behind the huge tombstone, hiding in the shadows, were a bunch of neatly arranged smaller gravestones. With the huge tombstone as the apex, the smaller gravestones extended behind in a circular manner.

Each of these gravestones represented a deceased person.

The first row, which was closest to the huge tombstone, had ten gravestones. These gravestones were larger than the ones behind. The closer they were to the front, the larger they were. The larger ones had more words carved on them and held a greater significance.

From the left, the first gravestone belonged to a man known by everyone. General Wu Yan, who helped create the New Era. The Yan in Yanzhou was obtained from his name.

Other than Huangzhou, where the alliance headquarters was located, the eleven other continents got their names or dubbed them from the eleven generals who had founded the era. For example, the continent of Leizhou got its name from General Harmon Renault. Since then, the alliance had abolished the rank of "Great General" as a mark of respect.

"Wu Yan (17th year of the Period of Destruction—56th year of the New Era). A founding era General, 2nd in command of the 5th Corps. Recaptured Yanzhou..."

Wu Yan's gravestone had a brief writeup on his lifetime achievements, mostly on how he ended a period of disaster and helped found the New Era in an awe-inspiring and domineering manner.

Reading the words that the government had carefully sculpted, Fang Zhao broke into a little grin.

Probably no one knew that little brat Wu Yan was actually a scaredy cat. All he was really good at was hiding himself.

Continuing forward, the smile on Fang Zhao's face was extinguished.

The words on the second gravestone were: "Fang Zhao (?—99th year of the Period of Destruction), Commanding Officer of the 5th Corps..."

The 5th Corps was the predecessor to the Yanzhou Military. Created toward the later stage of the Period of Destruction, the 5th Corps had become the Yanzhou Military in the New Era.

Using the system for tracking time in the New Era, from the year the Period of Destruction had started to the founding of the New Era, in total, it had lasted for 102 years.

99th year of the Period of Destruction...

In the historical records of the New Era, after the difficult first 99 years of the Period of Destruction, by the 100th year of the New Era, the fighting had more or less ceased. Most of the two years that followed was disposing of the remnants and, at the same time, rebuilding their homeland.

Literally just a step away.

Fang Zhao's gaze fell from the gravestone to what was underneath.

Was he was really buried under this gravestone?

Fang Zhao was in a complicated frame of mind. He did not even know what background music to play inside his head.

Chapter 62

Where Have They Seen This Name Before

Paying respects at his own grave left Fang Zhao with mixed feelings. A sense of sorrow as well as a bit of rejoice.

He might not have survived to see the founding of the New Era, nor had he become one of the eleven legendary generals. Yet, he got to live all over again!

Even though he never got to see the founding of the New Era, he got to see the rewards of what they were fighting for. The glorious New Era over 500 years into the future. If not for his retained memories from his past life and seeing the records on the gravestones, he might not have believed he was still on the same planet.

The changes had been absolutely revolutionary.

As for the meritorious deeds and eulogies of his past life on his gravestone, Fang Zhao did not give more than a passing glance. He was sure that whoever wrote it down had not been familiar. That was because "composer" had not been written there. That had been his original job, and anyone close to him would never have forgotten that.

Fang Zhao spent a long time deep in thought by his own grave. He thought about the end of days and he thought about the records that were written in books about that period. He thought about the world in the New Era and wondered what belongings he would find if he dug up his own grave.

As Fang Zhao bent down to gaze at his grave, a man walked by.

"Sorry to bother you, I have to see your ID."

Fang Zhao raised his head. A youthful police officer had come over. The police officer showed Fang Zhao his badge and at the same time his white bracelet which meant that he was on official government business.

In the distance, a few other police officers were also watching. They had been assigned to situation response teams. Every year during this period, a number of these teams

would be assigned to various locations throughout the cemetery to keep an eye out for suspicious persons. The officers assigned here were all experienced and were experts when it came to catching criminals and maintaining order.

Although there had already been a screening at the entrance of the core cemetery, if the officers noticed any suspicious behavior, they had the right to do a second investigation.

There were some people in the core cemetery area who were walking over to pay their respects. Seeing the situation, they immediately turned back and walked away, and when they were far enough away, they glanced back and discussed something in hushed voices.

Fang Zhao raised his eyebrows. Had spending too much time in front of his own grave made him look suspicious?

Acceding to the the officer's request, Fang Zhao used his bracelet to transmit his identity information over.

The officer studied the information on his display and checked whether his appearance tallied and he was not an imposter.

"Fang Zhao? Sounds familiar. I think there is someone here called..." the police officer caught the name on the gravestone "...Fang Zhao".

Glancing from the name of the tombstone to the name on the display, the officer was a little surprised but quickly broke into a smile. "That's a great name."

Among the billions of humans, there were many people who had the same names as heroes and martyrs of the Period of Destruction. Every year during this time, it was not a rare sight to see people paying their respects to their namesakes.

"Thank you for your cooperation, please continue." The police officer replied politely after checking Fang Zhao's identity. With that, he turned around and walk away, signalling to his colleagues in the distance that everything was in order.

After the inspection, Fang Zhao no longer lingered on his own gravestone. Instead, he moved to the others. Names both familiar and unfamiliar showed up, evoking a number of memories.

Fang Zhao could still feel the gaze of someone on him. It was those police officers. He paid them no heed.

Every year, these people guarded the cemetery and ensured the safety and order. Unless there were people with malignant intentions, they normally did not need to worry about the gravestones being damaged.

In the 500 over years, the gravestones and garden had not suffered much damage. On normal days, the cemetery workers guarded the place, while during crucial times, these people were called in to stand guard.

The younger generation is pretty impressive , Fang Zhao thought.

The group of officers watching Fang Zhao did not know what Fang Zhao thought of them.

"Lian Jie, are you sure that person is all right?" a young police officer asked.

Lian Jie was the officer that had previously gone to investigate Fang Zhao.

"Yeah. No issues," Lian Jie replied, eyeing Fang Zhao who was strolling amongst the gravestones.

"Then why did you go over and check his identity?" another officer asked.

"I don't know, I just had a strange feeling that he seemed like he wanted to dig that grave up." Lian Jie continued, "Another one with the same name as a martyr."

Hearing this, the rest of them came to a sudden understanding.

"So what was his identity?" one of them asked Lian Jie.

"A composer," Lian Jie said. "There are three types of people I don't understand. One kind are philosophers. Another kind are artists. The thoughts and ideologies of philosophers are too profound for someone with my IQ to understand. As for artists, they are a fusion of crazy and calm. Unlike politicians who are able to have a firm grasp on the mundane world, an artist is like a narcissistic person living in their own world. I have no idea what goes on in their brains either."

"What about the third type?" the officer beside Lian Jie asked.

"The last type are perverts."

"...So do we still have to keep an eye on that fellow?"

"Let's just watch him. Although I doubt he is going to do anything that would pose a threat to public security at the moment, who knows what would happen later. Keeping an eye on him would be better," Lan Jie replied.

Fang Zhao paid no mind to the gazes of the officers and continued walking by the gravestones of the first row one by one. After he was done, he looked up at the densely packed gravestones arranged on the uneven earth. There was no end in sight.

The area was too wide. Fang Zhao could not hope to cover the entire area within such a short time. His turn at the public worship area was coming up. Thus, Fang Zhao followed a trail and headed out of the core cemetery area. Raising his head, he realized he was in another cemetery area with a boundary that was indiscernible.

Behind the core cemetery area was the loose graves area. Some were moved over after the cemetery was completed. Others were slowly added on later and were all martyrs of the New Century.

Although this was called the loose graves area, they were not dishevelled or in a bad condition.

There were more people paying their respects at the loose graves area. The security here was not as high as the core cemetery area. Here, there were parents bringing their children about, respectfully bowing, placing flowers, and then giving a long-winded talk about who knows what. They were most likely family or descendants of martyrs.

The cemetery was really big and it would take quite a while to travel the area on foot. Running was not permitted in the park, so those in a rush had to ride on the train within the cemetery. Train tickets were not expensive, only costing a dollar.

Fang Zhao boarded the train and found himself a window seat. He watched as the train departed from the loose graves areas and the train passed by the core cemetery area. However, as the train passed by, the buzz and chatter of the passengers aboard got louder all of a sudden.

Fang Zhao saw a lot of people gathering at the core cemetery area. However something

was blocking their way, so they could only stand at one side tiptoeing to see what was going on.

Five black flying cars descended from the skies into the vicinity of the core cemetery area, followed the pathway, and drove in.

Vehicles were not permitted inside the cemetery. The airspace above the cemetery was restricted to private cars. Private vehicles seen in the cemetery were special enough. Vehicles that could be driven straight into the core cemetery area were special even amongst the privileged.

"Looking at the number plate, it belongs to the Wu family," a male student holding a pair of binoculars at the front said.

A bunch of girls who were beside promptly came over and asked, "Was Wu Yun there? Fellow student, could we borrow your binoculars?"

"There is nothing to see, the car has already gone in," the male student replied.

Wu Yun was a famous film star in Yanzhou. He did not belong to any the three big media conglomerates. He had the wealth to engage his own business team because he was a member of the Wu family.

Yanzhou got its name from the great general Wu Yan. But unlike the Renaults of Leizhou, the Wu family had experienced civil war after Wu Yan passed away. This nearly led to the extinguishing of the Wu family. This was the reason why, in the history of Yanzhou governors, there were very few that had the Wu family name.

However, even though they had not become the ruling family like the Renaults of Leizhou, they were not to be taken lightly. Especially in recent centuries, the Wu family's businesses had been thriving. Even if they were not Yanzhou's number one, they were easily amongst the most influential families.

What about the younger generations of the Wu family?

Looking at the crowded gathered outside the core cemetery area, he remembered that, when he had received his new life, he had read up on the Wu family's history. He had wondered, back then, if Wu Yan was still alive, would he have shot his unworthy children who had thrown Yanzhou back into a period of internal strife?

Wu Yun, who was mentioned by those students, could only be considered among the younger generation of the Wu family. In those five cars, other than Wu Yun, there should be a few other members of the Wu family. Fang Zhao felt it was unfortunate that he did not get a chance to meet the younger generation of Wus. However, he still had a long time to live, so he was bound to run into them in the times to come.

The train had already left the core cemetery and was headed in the direction of the public worship area.

At the same time, the five lengthened black cars of the Wu family had entered the core cemetery. The most senior person was at the front, with the young generations following behind.

Every year before Memorial Day, the Wu family would visit the cemetery once to pay their respects. This was their own custom. On the actual Memorial Day, they would join the Yanzhou governor as well as other officials of importance to take part in some memorial activities.

Whatever the younger generation was thinking, at this time, they had to put on the same expressions as their elders. Facing the gravestones, they put on an expression that was thirty percent respectful and seventy percent solemn.

It had been so long since then. There were not many sentiments. After all, the people they were paying their respects to had already been gone for over 500 years. However, there was still a little sense of respect. After all, without Wu Yan, there would not be the Wu family of today.

According to Wu family customs, after they had paid their respects in front of Wu Yan's grave, the Wu elders paid their respects to the grave beside it and place a bunch of fresh flowers down.

Every generation of Wus would feel an unbounded sorrow upon seeing the grave that was after Wu Yan's.

If this person had not left first, Yanzhou would not have been named Yanzhou.

However, today, upon seeing the name on the grave, a few members of the Wu family felt a little puzzled.

Fang Zhao?

Where had there seen this name before?

Chapter 63

Immortality

Fang Zhao did not get to see anyone from the Wu family, nor did he return to the core cemetery area. It was almost his turn at the public worship area, and if he missed his number, he would not have the time to queue again. Paying his respects was more important.

Compared to the core cemetery area and the loose graves area, the public worship area was much more lively. There were a number of large and grand halls. The color theme was a solemn and ashen grey. Sculpted on the outside of the walls were murals depicting battles during the Period of Destruction.

The main hall was obviously more grand compared to the side halls. At the entrance were two thirty-meter-tall statues. The first being Yanzhou's most famous character, Wu Yan, and the second... was Fang Zhao.

The words carved on the base of the statue were the same as the ones carved on the gravestones.

Back when Fang Zhao had been looking up the Cemetery for Martyr's online, he had already found out that he was a door guardian of the place. However, seeing the statue personally gave him a complex mood.

The statue was molded after his image during the latter stages of the Period of Destruction. Just that, during the sculpting process, it was beautified. His facial features were made sharper and his muscles more defined. His cheekbones were raised and his eyes were enlarged. Although there were wrinkles and scars on the statue, it made him look like he was from the middle ages. Clad in his uniform, he looked bold and imposing. His head was raised, as if gazing at some far off battlefield, and he seemed as if he was watching over the land.

The expression on Wu Yan's statue seemed milder and had more warmth. That image was quite similar to the Wu Yan of stories that were passed down from people that had actually seen him in person. During the period of the founding of the New Era, Wu Yan was smiling most of the time and gave off a friendly and amiable vibe. Even though

the statue was not as sharp, it did not lose to its neighbor in terms of being imposing. This was the great person who had brought Yanzhou toward the New Era and had rebuilt their homeland.

The two statues silently watched over the people visiting the memorial halls everyday.

Qi'an city had many statues. Some were a means of signifying something, whereas others were meant for fun. Here, people respected these two statues that were a tribute.

Unlike music, sculptures had a sort of ability to inspire and impact people, and also they had the power to immortalize something.

Nothing was truly immortal. Immortality was just a relative concept.

Every era would give rise to a few immortal characters. Through events that were worth remembering, commemorating those times would immortalize those characters.

Never in his wildest dreams had Fang Zhao dreamt that he would become one.

Gazing at the statues for a while, Fang Zhao then headed over to the open-air waiting area.

Paying of respects was done at the main hall. The side halls were meant to serve as a place to rest. If there were many people, those who had obtained a number and were waiting for their turn could have a room to rest as they waited.

At the waiting area, seated next to Fang Zhao was a middle-aged couple. They were discussing which methods to use for paying their respects this year. From their conversation, Fang Zhao found out that they were mainly praying for their children, especially their eldest son who was in the midst of his military service.

"Hai... I wonder if they are still digging now. Do you think they get a holiday on Memorial Day?" the lady kept repeating in a low voice. "It has been a while since we last heard from him. Has he been eating well? How is his health? Hopefully he gets a break on Memorial Day?"

The man patted his wife's hand and comforted her. "It has only been five days since we received his video call. There are still five more days till we get his next video

message. They will get a break on Memorial Day. Just that it is not going to be as extravagant. Most likely, they just take it as a day of rest."

During the period of military service, service personnel could not communicate with their family freely. They were limited to sending a video message to their families every ten days. Even if it was Memorial Day or any other holiday, they were not allowed to go home. All they could do was wait till their service came to an end.

On his way here, Fang Zhao had encountered many families in the same situation who were praying for the blessings of members in the military. Every year, there were lots of enlistees and thus lots of families who came to pray.

At the back was a group of youthful looking students discussing which posture they should pay their respects in so as to not fail in school.

For people in the New Era, all sorts of patterns had emerged from the simple custom of paying respects to the martyrs. There were even some people who believed that, even though the previous year's wishes were unanswered, by changing the method, posture, materials, or even circumstances, their wishes might come true this year.

As he was watching his surroundings, Fang Zhao's bracelet reminded him that his turn was up.

Following his reminder, Fang Zhao collected his ticket and entered the main hall.

The hustle and bustle from outside died off all of a sudden. The atmosphere inside the main hall was more tense and solemn. In the same area were many sculptures and projected images pertaining to the Period of Destruction. Some were photos of people, and others were scenes of events. These provided a brief introduction to the martyrs.

Fang Zhao spotted his own image. The photo was taken toward the end of the Period of Destruction. Fang Zhao appeared quite aged and sported many scars. He looked a little scary even though the photo had undergone some embellishment.

Fang Zhou doubted that he would be recognized even if his body from his previous life was standing right beside. He was different from the people who had survived till the founding of the New Era. He had not left many images, and those that he had left were not meticulously taken. During the Period of Destruction, there was no time to pick out clothes or choose suitable lighting or backdrops or even to pick a pose. Photographs back then were taken when they were in a situation where they could

head out to battle at any time.

Looking at the ticket in his hand, Fang Zhao headed to area A in the main hall.

In the public worship area, area A contained smaller rooms. As Fang Zhao was alone, he was allocated to area A.

Following the number shown on the ticket, Fang Zhao found his assigned room and slotted his ticket into the machine at the door.

This was the first time Fang Zhao was paying his respects according to the customs of the New Era, and the experience was rather fresh for him. To ensure privacy, there were no monitoring devices or other people. The only thing in the room was a screen. Displayed on it were a few popular methods and recommended packages to pay one's respects. Also on the screen was a guide on how to do so. Fang Zhao overlooked all of these and just selected an altar, a 500ml bottle of wine, and a retro wine bowl.

Although people had different practices and methods for paying their respects, they could purchase different items here at a cost. The screen was just like a self-service shopping machine. Whatever items were to be used as offerings or donations, all proceeds went to the yearly maintenance of the cemetery.

Fang Zhao did not change anything in the room. He had not even requested a cushion for kneeling. He held the wine in one hand and the wine bowl in the other. In the room was a holographic projection of a smaller core cemetery area. The giant tombstone only appeared two meters tall here, and the rows of tiny gravestones behind were glowing like stars.

Standing in front of the holographic projection, Fang Zhao knew that he was facing the huge tombstone of the core cemetery area. He stood there gazing at the projection of the giant tombstone followed by the rows of glowing gravestones behind it for two minutes before pouring the wine.

Fang Zhao poured the first bowl of wine straight onto the altar.

A toast to all who had lost their lives during that period.

Fang Zhao drank half of the second bowl and poured the other half onto the altar.

A toast to all the old comrades he would never get to see again.

Fang Zhao downed the entire third bowl in a single mouthful.

A toast to himself!

After the three toasts, Fang Zhao put down the wine and bowl. Taking a last look at the projection of the tombstone, he turned and left. Before leaving, he donated a million dollars. He did not need to purchase any of the virtual items to use as offerings. Directly choosing to donate was easier and more straightforward.

Other than the room, Fang Zhao did not take a look at any of the other furnishings in the main hall, instead just leaving and passing by the plaza on his way out.

Many people were walking about in the plaza. Children were playing under the sun with bright smiles on their faces. In the plaza, a shopping area had been specially set up. A few small shops were lined up and people who were passing through would stop to browse through their wares and purchase a few souvenirs.

"It has already been more than 500 years!"

Fang Zhao once again was clearly reminded of this fact.

He was no longer the Fang Zhao of that apocalyptic period. Now that he was a person from the New Era, he should no longer cling on to the past. No matter how hard others wished, they would not get a second chance like him. He should look forward and appreciate the new and prosperous world.

Looking at the atmosphere in the plaza, Fang Zhao uncontrollably let out a smile. He might not have gotten to see the day the New Era was founded, but he got to experience and live in the glorious new world 500 years later.

"Hey brother, two commemorative paintings for you?"

A shout from a nearby vendor woke Fang Zhao from his daze and he glanced over.

This temporary stall had many paintings of all sizes on display. This small stall specially sold paintings. These vendors were the staff in charge of cleaning and maintaining the cemetery on normal days. Every year during this period, they would double up as vendors and peddle items in a designated area of the cemetery.

There was only one main religion in the New Era, and that was believing in the martyrs

who founded the New Era.

The people did not believe in gods, and yet, whether it was due to common folk coming up with the practice or merchants finding the opportunity to push their sales, the people adopted the practice of pasting two paintings beside their doors. It was to commemorate and also to pray for blessings at the same time.

What was there to paste?

Of course it was the portraits of the heroes from the Cemetery for Martyrs.

Noticing Fang Zhao's interest in the commemorative paintings, the vendor's smile widened. "Come take a look. This year's latest, drawn by a famous designer. Waterproof and dirt-resistant. We are the only place in the entire world selling this new design. You can buy one to stick in your office or home. Even if you don't use it, it makes a good gift for relatives and friends!"

The vendor rattled on trying to market his goods. Fang Zhao was a little distracted. Pointing to the two paintings in the vendor's hands, he asked, "Who are they?"

"You don't recognize them?" The vendor exaggeratingly dropped his jaw before breaking out into an earnest smile. He thought that Fang Zhao had bad eyesight. Pointing to the two paintings, he exclaimed, "The two heroes guarding the doors of the Main hall, The great general Wu Yan and Commander Fang Zhao."

"..." Fang Zhao felt as though he was choking on a glutinous rice ball.

Unlike ordinary people, the staff of the cemetery had to be familiar with information pertaining to the martyrs. Closing their eyes, they could recite at least a hundred names, and not just the more famous characters. This was a test the staff of the cemetery had to go through every year. Who would even work in the cemetery if the staff could not even recognize the martyrs?

Once the vendor's lips started moving, they would not stop. Other than introducing the "main hall heroes," he went on to talk about other heroes and elaborated on their glorious feats that were recorded in history books. He went on and on passionately as if buying a painting was like bringing back a god of war.

Fang Zhao looked through the vendor's other paintings without a hint of expression. The art that was made into commemorative paintings, although slightly exaggerated,

still brought out the features of the person—for example, a large moustache, a clean-shaven head, or a mole—as long as it suited them.

As for Fang Zhao's portrait, the scars on his face were still there. But under the watchful hands of the artist, he looked less menacing. Fang Zhao admired the artist's ability to be able to accomplish that.

Just that...

What the heck was that red cape? Since when had he worn it?!

Watching Fang Zhao eye that painting, the vendor went on. "This year, there are a few new painting styles for the main hall heroes. Lots of people have bought them. Even if you don't intend to paste them somewhere, they can be kept as a means of commemoration as well. Oh, there are others too, all famous heroes from our very own continent. Both from the Period of Destruction and the New Era. All these are also the year's latest designs. Take a pick if you have any family members who are descendants of martyrs."

Using his fingers, Fang Zhao browsed through the stalls entire collection. "These paintings of heroes, regardless of the styles, I would like to have one set each. As for Fang Zhao... give me ten each."

"Sure thing!" The vendor grinned and diligently proceeded to pack his order.

Chapter 64

Custom-Made Invitation

Fang Zhao brought his pile of commemorative portraits and left the cemetery, heading to his new home—the top floor penthouse he had bought from the elderly musician Xue Jing.

After moving in, the renovations had been completed quickly. Fang Zhao had only added a few newly bought pieces of furniture and did not change much else. After all, most of his time was spent in the office.

He left all the other commemorative portraits at home and only brought the "Martyr Fang Zhao" series back to the office, distributing a set to each member of his staff. One set contained six styles.

"Boss, what is this?" Ying Futian was a little dumbstruck when he received the portraits. He did not really have any interest regarding commemorative portraits. Contrary to him, his parents liked them a lot, and every year, they would buy a few martyr portraits from the Period of Destruction to stick outside their doors. Sometimes they would even stick them outside the individual rooms in their house. He did not know whether they did so because of custom or if they believed in the blessings of the martyrs.

"I know who this is!" Wan Yue exclaimed. She immediately recognized the person upon seeing the scarred face.

"Who is it?" Zu Wen and the others looked over.

Glancing at Fang Zhao, Wan Yue said, "Big Zhao, what made you buy portraits of your namesake now?" In the past, Fang Zhao had showed no interest toward commemorative portraits.

"Namesake?" Zu Wen exclaimed. "Don't tell me this set belongs to the person mentioned in historical records?" They all knew the famous characters of the Period of Destruction and had discussed them in history classes. If this person had not passed away so early, Yanzhou would have had a different name.

However, people named after martyrs were very common. From primary school all the way to graduating from university and the start of a working life, one would meet many such people. On this subject, most people would find it surprising, but as it went on, people became indifferent toward it. Even if they had heard that the Virtual Idol project would be handed over to a new guy named Fang Zhao, it would not have rang many bells.

"Oh, so it is him." Zu Wen glanced at the portraits in his hands. "Back in secondary school, we had a test with him as the exam question."

"Yeah. I remember seeing students complaining on the message boards about the question of who the two statues standing guard outside the main hall of the Cemetery for Martyrs were. Most people could not even answer. Some only managed to guess Wu Yan—after all, we are in Yanzhou, so General Wu Yan is pretty familiar to us. As for the other one, many were left dumbstruck," Pang Pusong said as he examined the portraits he'd received.

"We never ever got this question wrong." Zeng Huang laughed as he snuck a glance at Wan Yue. Wan Yue was smiling too. This sort of question was like free marks for them. Ever since they'd learnt about a martyr by the name of Fang Zhao, it'd stuck to their memory forever.

The rest of the staff were thinking that their boss was really great. Just before the memorial holidays, he'd given out military postings, and now he was handing out commemorative portraits of his namesake martyr. Was the mind of an artist really that special?

Remembering something, Zu Wen said, "Hey, Boss, let's say you become popular and famous. Do you reckon that you will be invited to act as Fang Zhao during the Period of Destruction? Hehe, you could start practicing your acting first!"

Fang Zhao did not reply, he just gave Zu Wen a dazed look.

Zu Wen caught the look Fang Zhao shot him and felt that what he'd said was absurd. How could a situation like that happen?

The others thought this to be laughable too. Fang Zhao was a composer. When the composer behind the "Period of Destruction" series was revealed, he would become a famed composer, highly reputed within the music industry. This was certain. After all,

the previous three movements were the best proof. Yet Fang Zhao was not an actor.

Besides, shooting a film based on an actual person during the Period of Destruction required the approval of the global film association, as well as the martyr's descendants. The entertainment industry during the early years of the New Era was a mess. Many accounts of the history of the Period of Destruction were distorted, be it through film, music, or virtual idols. These capitalized on the martyrs to attract the attention of viewers. After some vehement opposition by descendants of martyrs, the entire world set up a restriction to stop this madness. Any films related to actual persons during that period would require a thorough audit as well as approval from the descendants of the concerning martyr.

As the restrictions were widespread, whenever each continent did a film based on actual characters, they would only select one or a few important people who'd had a great impact from that period. This was due to the fact that, if too many characters were lined up, the approval process would be much more troublesome and complicated. Hence, since the restriction set by the global film association up until this moment, there had not been a film made about commander Fang Zhao of the Period of Destruction.

Little did Zu Wen know, Fang Zhao's expression did not mean that it was impossible. Rather, he was thinking, *I am still me. Do I even need to act?*

"Eh? Come to think of it, didn't the global film association intend to shoot a film regarding many important characters from the Period of Destruction? Has it been done yet?" Rodney asked, remembering a piece of news he had read during his university days.

"It has been shelved. Apparently for quite some time. They tried to reboot it a few times, but it was never successful. I have no idea why," Song Miao replied, as she generally paid more attention to the entertainment industry. "However, in recent years, it has been brought up much more frequently. I reckon there is hope for this program yet."

"If they do start it, it is going to be a revolutionary, groundbreaking blockbuster," said Zu Wen.

The other nodded their heads in agreement. If such a program was really announced, the big investors would surely be the influential families of every continent, such as

the Renaults of Leizhou and the Wu Family of Yanzhou. After all, it was their ancestors that would be portrayed in the film, and they were all famous founding characters of the New Era. The casting would, of course, be way more stringent, the main characters would definitely be played by global mega stars. Even the A-listers in Silver Wing media could only hope to achieve a bit-part role in this sort of film.

That would be a really impressive film program. They was no way they had the capability to participate, so they could only stay here and discuss it like losers.

"Anyway, no matter how big the program, it still can't do without accompanying music." Song Miao turned to Fang Zhao. "Boss, work hard. Who knows, when the time comes, you might contest for the rights to the soundtrack. There won't be only just one soundtrack for such a big program, and it will not only be from just one company. On that note, when the time comes, we will fight with you."

Even though she said all that, Song Miao was not too optimistic for Fang Zhao. From what she understood, for such a production, the soundtrack would normally be sourced from experienced and established studios or from reputable master composers in the music scene. Given Fang Zhao's age and influence, the odds of him being picked were not high. Maybe in another hundred years he would stand a good chance, but by then, the production would have already been completed.

Fang Zhao seemed deep in thought, as if he had taken Song Miao's words seriously. Zu Wen was thinking of changing the topic to something more realistic to raise their spirits when Fang Zhao's bracelet rang. Someone was calling.

"Director Duan?" Fang Zhao answered.

"Come up for a while," Duan Quanji said. "Alone." With that, she ended the call.

"Director Duan wants to enquire about the progress of the fourth movement again?"

"Most likely, given the importance Director Duan places on this series. Or she might just have questions pertaining to the project." Zu Wen and the others continued to discuss.

However, Fang Zhao felt that it was not related to the fourth movement. He had submitted a progress report to Duan Quanji yesterday. It was unlikely that she would ask again so soon.

"I shall head up first."

The others went back to their individual stations to continue working while Fang Zhao rode the escalator to Duan Quanji's top floor office. Entering, he noticed that, aside from Duan Quanji and her four assistants and secretaries, there were two other strangers. As Fang Zhao walked in, the two strangers watched him. The one of a similar age eyed him with obvious apprehension, whereas the more senior of the two seemed to be sizing him up. His expression showed neither suspicion nor contempt. He was purely examining Fang Zhao,

The two men were neither extravagantly dressed nor wearing any luxurious ornaments. At first glance, they just seemed like any normal technicians. However, emblazoned on their chests was an emblem of a fiery red bird in the shape of an 'S.'

That tiny emblem was more than enough to make anyone take notice. It was the best proof of their identities.

They were from Fiery Bird.

"Fiery Bird." The undisputed number one gaming company in the world.

"Sit." Duan Qianji pointed to a seat. Following that, she faced the two men and said, "This here is the creator of the first three movements of the 'Period of Destruction,' Fang Zhao." She then turned to face Fang Zhao and introduced the two men. "These are the department heads of Fiery Bird's sound effects department, You Chuan and Mr. Bi Fu."

"Deputy department head. Deputy." You Chuan waved his hands, not thinking that there was anything awkward about adding the word "deputy".

After which, he turned to Fang Zhao and smiled. "The members of our department enjoyed the three movements of the 'Period of Destruction' series very much. We are all eagerly anticipating the release of the fourth movement. As for the purpose of our visit, it has nothing to do with the endorsement. We are just in charge of sound effects and related stuff. This time, we came with an invitation for Mr. Fang."

"Invitation?" Fang Zhao repeated.

"Yes. We wish to request Mr. Fang compose a piece."

"A custom-made one?"

"That's right. Accompanying soundtrack for a portion of a two-minute animation in 'Battle of the Century.' To be honest, we had already prepared four pieces of music and were going to choose one out of the four. However..." At this point, You Chuan examined Fang Zhao once more. "After hearing the three movements of 'The Period of Destruction,' our department head found three of the previously prepared pieces to be unsatisfactory. It wasn't that they were no good, just that, in line with the game itself, they did not seem to blend well, as if they were lacking a little something. Therefore, we have already approached 18 soundtrack composers and studios across the 12 continents to request a custom-made composition. As for Mr. Zhao, this is our last stop, and we were tasked to personally hand over the request by our department head."

"I am number 19?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Yes."

Fang Zhao remained silent.

Fiery Bird had requested 19 compositions and promised to purchase the rights to all 19. However, for the game, Fiery Bird would only pick the one they were most satisfied with.

It was really... inhumane.

Chapter 65

Going Back

"Mr. Fang is the 19th and also our last invitee." You Chuan smiled at Fang Zhao. There was still a slight air of seriousness about him as he continued, "However, if Mr. Fang has his own commitments or he finds the time frame too short, he can choose to reject the offer. I forgot to mention, but the first draft of the piece has to be submitted before March."

As You Chuan spoke, he observed Fang Zhao's expressions. Ever since Fang Zhao had entered the room, he'd felt that this youngster was not like his peers. His calm demeanor was not faked. Even upon seeing the Fiery Bird Insignia, he'd only been a little surprised. He had not made any effort to conceal or suppress his emotions either.

Even now, upon being informed that he had been invited to create an accompaniment for a game by the reputable Fiery Bird company and compete with great composers across every continent, Fang Zhao did not have much of a reaction. He just sat there, listening attentively, as if... he was listening to a report.

Listening to a report?

You Chuan's figure of speech flashed across his mind, startling himself. After that, he found it quite funny. Perhaps he had been traveling a lot recently and had been too busy handing out invites, so his mind was playing tricks on him. Brushing aside the thoughts in his mind, You Chuan turned back to Fang Zhao, but he just saw Fang Zhao drumming his fingers without rhythm on his thigh. As for Fang Zhao, he looked... like his mind was wandering elsewhere.

"Cough!" Duan Qianij could not stand by and watch idly, so she coughed to catch the attention of Fang Zhao.

Fang Zhao's fingers stopped and, tilting his head toward You Chuan, he said, "I would need to see the opening animation."

In his heart, You Chuan was thinking, *He was still listening while his mind was wandering?*

"Sure. But Mr. Fang has to first sign a confidentiality agreement," You Chuan answered. Fang Zhao's request was reasonable. If Fang Zhao had agreed without first watching the animation, You Chuan would have been disappointed.

"I understand the rules."

After the confidentiality agreement had been signed, You Chuan passed over a miniature projector with a palm-sized Fiery Bird insignia on it.

As the image was projected into the air, Fang Zhao watched the short two-minute opening animation attentively. "Animation" was what they called it in the industry. But in reality, as Fang Zhao watched, he felt that it was very real, as if an actual scene had been shot. This animation was comparable with the movies that Silver Wing Media invested in every year.

As Fang Zhao was watching the two-minute-long clip, You Chuan was still examining him. In his heart, he wondered whether this person really had the ability to create such quality music and whether there was a possibility of them working together in the future.

Fang Zhao was seriously watching it. At the same time, his fingers started drumming once again. The extent was not large, and You Chuan could not see the rhythm this time either.

After the two-minute clip ended, Fang Zhao turned his head to You Chuan and said, "No problem. One month. That's more than enough time."

Everyone in the room stared at Fang Zhao. Duan Qianji had wanted to stop Fang Zhao, but he'd spoken too fast. Beside You Chuan, the other Fiery Bird staffer, Bi Fu, widened his eyes in disbelief at Fang Zhao's show of self-confidence. Having self-confidence was a good thing, but having too much was just downright stupid.

Bi Fu had gone with You Chuan and invited 18 parties to compose a soundtrack. Of the 18, when some heard the limit of "Before March," they found it a little difficult. After watching the animation, some had said that they would "try their best," meaning that they would only strive to do it but had no guarantee it could be completed by March. The higher one flew, the more they cherished their wings. These people would only submit if they themselves found it satisfactory. If it was unsatisfactory, they would rather give up the opportunity than harm their reputation.

Yet Fang Zhao was number 19 and the last among the list, also possessing the lowest status. He was simply a composer with no reputation at all. To think that after watching the animation, he had the cheek to be that self-confident!

Bi Fu could not bear it and wanted to say something, but You Chuan stopped him with a glance. Bi Fu then could only swallow his words.

"In that case, we look forward to some good music."

You Chuan did not stay long. Taking his leave, he and Bi Fu headed straight to the rooftop garage and left in their flying car. The car the two of them had come in did not bear the distinctive Fiery Bird insignia and was inconspicuous. They did not want to let the outside world know that, even though they were approaching the publishing date, the opening sequence animation was still lacking a soundtrack.

Inside the car, Bi Fu puzzledly asked You Chuan, "Why didn't you probe more? Test him a little to find out if he was really the creator of the three movements and if he is really capable enough of producing work with sufficient quality within a month or so?"

It was already nearing the end of January. A deadline before March meant that, essentially, there was only the month of February to come up with a composition. A month's time to produce a compatible soundtrack to such a large-scale gaming project was really difficult. Even a newcomer in the industry would know that.

You Chuan laughed and shook his head. "There would be no meaning to that. We do not understand Fang Zhao, nor do we understand Silver Wing Media. This is all our own assumption. The answers will be made known to us when their work is submitted."

After the two left, Duan Qianji no longer had any misgivings. She told Fang Zhao, "You don't have to force yourself. If you are uncertain, it is still not too late to retract your previous words." As long as You Chuan and Bi Fu had not left Yanzhou, Duan Qianji could still stop them.

"I'm not forcing myself. I agreed to their invitation because I could guarantee that, within a month, I can create a piece that is satisfactory to me. As for whether they like it or not... that I cannot guarantee."

"Other than the four movements of the 'Period of Destruction' series, do you still have

the inspiration to create something of a similar quality?" Duan Qianji was astounded. Although she did not know much about composing, she also knew that inspiration was very important to creative personnel. For the deputy department head to personally rush around every continent to hand out requests, the difficulty for this task would certainly be high.

"Previously, no, but now I do."

Duan Qianji watched Fang Zhao silently for two seconds. "OK. Got it."

Fang Zhao went back downstairs to keep an eye on the production of the fourth movement. In Duan Qianji's office, an assistant with a concerned and puzzled look asked, "Director Duan, are you sure handing it to Fang Zhao is all right? When the time comes, if Fang Zhao's finished work does not match up to the expectations of Fiery Bird, will Fiery Bird take it up against our company?"

"Do you all reckon the specialized staff members of Fiery Bird's sound effects department would understand music and know how to differentiate quality?" Duan Qianji asked.

The assistant did not reply because the question was too simple. Would an unreliable person be able to stay at Fiery Bird? Previously, You Chuan had mentioned the one who requested a personal invitation for Fang Zhao was the sound department's own department head. To be able to make it all the way to the top of the sound effects department of Fiery Bird, the undisputed best game company in the world, there was no way the department head was a knucklehead.

Duan Qianji was not testing them. She continued on by saying, "From what I know, of the 19 parties that You Chuan handed the invitation to, there is only one from Yanzhou."

In Yanzhou, there was Silver Wing Media's "Flying Pegasus," Neon Culture's "Metal Torrent," and Tongshan True Entertainment's "Fourth Dimension." These three elite cooperatives of the respective media conglomerates had each worked with Fiery Bird before. Silver Wing Media had not had success with virtual idols in the past, but as You Chuan had said, Fiery Bird had many different departments, each with their own duties, and they would not interfere with each other. Virtual Idols were just virtual idols, and music was just music. You Chuan's side was in charge of music.

Downstairs, after Fang Zhao returned to his department, he made no mention of Fiery Bird's request. The others did not probe Fang Zhao. Their expectations were not high. They would be happy just by working hard and making more money.

Fang Zhao sat down in his own office, brought out a notebook, and starting jotting down some scores. He wrote down all the inspiration in his mind that he'd gotten from watching that two-minute animation.

The first three movements of the "Period of Destruction" series were something Fang Zhao had come up with in his previous life. After getting a second life, Fang Zhao only made minor adjustments to the arrangement of the scores. The fourth movement was a collection of his inspiration after he had been reborn. As for the little characters and scribbles appearing on the paper, this was his inspiration gathered after his visit to the Cemetery for Martyrs today and after viewing the two-minute animation provided by You Chuan.

After the first draft was completed, Fang Zhao continued thinking about the day's experiences, especially the Cemetery for Martyrs and the two-minute opening sequence. The first draft needed amendments, so Fang Zhao continued to look for places that could be improved to make it more outstanding.

At this moment, Zeng Huang came over to find him.

"Big Zhao, the fourth movement is progressing smoothly. We can probably complete it before the 25th. You mentioned that, after the fourth movement is complete, the entire department will be given a vacation. Just like previous years, Wan Yue and I are not going back."

What Zeng Huang meant by "going back" was going to the city where they were all born, Yanbei City. Back then, after the accident with their housing block, the government had given them quite a bit of compensation. There were a few relatives who'd lusted after the compensation, but Zeng Huang was unwavering and held on to it. Wan Yue was in a similar situation, just that it was not as severe as Zeng Huang's. However, Wan Yue did not want to go back either. After graduating from university, the two of them had never gone back to Yanbei City.

"Will you be joining us to celebrate Memorial Day? After all, it's only me and Wan Yue; one more person would would make it more lively. This year, we got a new house that's even bigger, and the guest room has already been prepared," Zeng Huang said.

Following Fang Sheng's betrayal, he was now behind bars in some prison. After breaking up with Fang Zhao, Xi Hong had yet to reappear. This year's Memorial Day, Fang Zhao would celebrate it alone—no, there was still a dog.

"I won't be going over to your place." Seeing Zeng Huang about to say something, Fang Zhao opened his mouth first. "I'm going back this year."

"Going back?" Zeng Huang clearly had not expected that Fang Zhao would make that choice. Back when they were all in university, they never wanted to go back. At the start of university, he still heard Fang Zhao saying that he never wanted to go back, and at that time, he was at loggerheads with his second uncle.

Not understanding the family situation of Fang Zhao's original body, all Zeng Huang heard was Fang Zhao's complaints. Thus, hearing that Fang Zhao wanted to go back, Zeng Huang was flabbergasted and skeptical.

Fang Zhao did not say a word, he just selected an electronic mail from his bracelet and showed it to Zeng Huang.

[Second Uncle: Are you coming back for Memorial Day this year? (Jan 20, 10:23 p.m.)]

[Fang Zhao: Going back. (Jan 21, 7:02 a.m.)]

[Second Uncle: What happened?! (Jan 21, 7:36 a.m.)]

[Second Uncle: What did you change your contact number to? (Jan 21, 7:36 a.m.)]

[Second Uncle: My number is *****, give me a call! (Jan 21, 7:37 a.m.)]

...

Zeng Huang realized that of the full page of electronic mails, there was only one reply from Fang Zhao, The others were all sent by his second uncle. Most likely, he had been shocked by Fang Zhao's reply. In the past six years, he had never received a reply. Every year, he only received a "Not coming back" answer. This year, Fang Zhao's second uncle was probably prepared to receive the same reply.

This, this, this... this was confirmation that something had happened!

This was the first thought that came to Fang Zhao's uncle's mind, thus his urgent

questioning.

"You haven't returned a call to your second uncle?" Zeng Huang was guessing that Fang Zhao deliberately did not want to return the call.

However, Fang Zhao had really forgotten. He had settled the matter regarding Pang Pusong's and Fu Yingtian's military posting in the morning before being called upstairs by Duan Qianji. After coming down and checking on a few notifications, he was informed of Fang Sheng's situation. After heading down to the Police Station, he then went to the Cemetery for Martyrs and was called back for the meeting with the Fiery Bird staff when he returned to the office. Only after Zeng Huang had mentioned it did Fang Zhao realize he had received a number of notifications but had not yet replied.

He had no choice. In his previous life, toward the latter stages, Fang Zhao simply did not have any relatives. Unconsciously, he still did not realize that he had relatives.

"I forgot," Fang Zhao said.

Zeng Huang did not believe him one bit. Leaving the office, he advised Fang Zhao, "Have a good talk with your second uncle. I feel that he is really sincere. It is getting late, hurry up and return the call. If your second uncle believes that something happened to you, what if he makes a police report?"

Fang Zhao glanced outside the window. Indeed, it was getting late. The sky had turned dark.

Chapter 66

Candy

When Fang Zhao returned the call, that second uncle of his was apparently shaken and could not speak properly. But from his gasps and grunts, it was obvious that he was delighted. He even sent a photograph.

From the original owner's memory, Fang Zhao remembered that there were four members in his second uncle's family. His second uncle and aunt and two younger male cousins. In the photograph that was sent, there was one more little girl. During the original owner's university days, the aunt had given birth to a girl. Now, she was already six.

In the following days, the entire department worked around the clock. Finally, on the 24th, production for the fourth movement was completed. This signified that the virtual projects department's Memorial Day holiday had begun. On the 25th, Fang Zhao took the entire team out for a big feast, and after that, the members respectively left.

Fang Zhao would not be bringing Curly Hair. Instead, he left the dog in the care of Zeng Huang and Wan Yue.

On Jan 26, Fang Zhao rode in the car of a technical staff who was on friendly terms with Zu Wen as they departed from Qi'an City for Yanbei City. This technical staff was from Yanbei and only went to Qi'an to work. When he heard from Zu Wen that Fang Zhao was also heading back to Yanbei, he suggested he give a lift to Fang Zhao.

However, this staff member's final destination was different from Fang Zhao's. The two of them were heading to opposite ends of the city. Fang Zhao politely refused the staff member's offer of sending him straight to his doorstep and instead called a cab upon arrival in Yanbei City.

"To Kerria Street?"

"Yes."

"It will be a little crowded there. Recently, there have been lots of people, so I will have to drive slower. The charges will be slightly higher," the cab driver explained.

"Understood."

Fang Zhao glanced out the window. Passing by the throes of people strolling through the streets and the plaza, Fang Zhao felt a sense of déjà vu. If the world had not gone through an apocalypse, during a large scale holiday, the world would pretty much still be the same. Crowded yet bustling, everywhere filled with festive spirit.

However, that feeling quickly faded away. The 100-Year Period of Destruction had been real, and the New Era had since taken over.

Trains sped along the railways and the sky was filled with flying cars coming and going. There was no returning back to that time, because the world was continuing to progress.

"We have reached Kerria Street!"

Outside, skyscrapers towered on either side. Residential housing was all concentrated together. At least here, the distance between the buildings was larger and the streets below did not appear dusky in broad daylight.

The housing blocks had approximately 100 floors. For every five floors, there would be a passageway that extended outward that had enough space for two cars to fit through. However, cars were not allowed to travel at high speeds along these passageways. Above the passageways, there was a more protruding semi-circular platform that served as a drop-off point. Numbers were written on top, representing the pick-up bay's number on the building.

"Twenty-fifth floor, stop at the next drop-off point," Fang Zhao told the cab driver.

Fang Zhao's memory of the address of his second uncle had long since gone fuzzy. However, when he had called a few days back, his second uncle had foreseen the situation and had sent him the address. Fang Zhao just needed to follow according to the written address to find his uncle's house.

Fang Zhao paid the driver and got out of the cab. He noticed a group of kids running over. Some of the slower ones were red in the face and panting. The lift had a limited capacity, and missing out meant they had to run.

Turning around to look behind him, Fang Zhao noticed a festive car slowly pulling in, landing on the drop-off point that he had arrived at.

Whether it was in Qi'an or Yanbei, it was common to see a bunch of cutely decorated festive cars about everywhere. These festive cars sold candy, which little kids loved.

The festive car wound down its windows to reveal candy of all shapes and sizes. With dazzling multi-colored candy, the waft of sweet fragrance and signature music of the candy-selling festive car, it was little wonder that, wherever such a car was found, it was surrounded by kids.

As the festive car stopped, the kid running at the front rushed over and skillfully ordered his favorite kinds of candy like a pro. The slower kids still running over called out anxiously, worried that their favorites would be sold out.

A smile broke out on Fang Zhao's face as he saw the kids heading to the festive car.

His own memory of his childhood was fuzzy. However, seeing the kids vigorously chasing the car, a few vague memories came back to him. Even though the memories were not that distinct, they were fond memories.

Fang Zhao was about to withdraw from the place and leave it to the kids who only had eyes for the candy. Just as he was about to leave, Fang Zhao spotted a familiar face among the group of kids.

The six-year-old little girl nimbly bypassed two larger kids in front of her and arrived at the window of the car, tiptoeing and making her order. Beaming, the brightly dressed salesperson picked out a few types of candy and handed them over to the little girl.

After receiving the candy, the little girl raised her hand wearing a bracelet adorned with little bears and tapped it at the payment scanner at the window. She turned to leave, but not before raising her head with a reluctant gaze at the little bear-shaped candy that was displayed right at the top.

Festive cars arranged their candy according to the district's level of affluence. The more expensive candy had less sales here and was displayed higher up.

The surrounding kids would look through the window enviously at the sweets right at the top but could only covet them. They knew that they could not afford it as their

families were not that well off.

"I would like one of those."

Used to facing kids, the friendly salesperson looked up when he heard that. Seeing a young man, he stared for a second before a smile returned to his face and he proceeded to pick out the candy that the man had selected.

The little girl who had just bought candy raised her head and immediately exclaimed, "Brother Zhao?"

"Little Bell Fang?" Fang Zhao asked in a low voice.

This little girl was his second uncle's six-year-old daughter, Fang Ling. When she'd been born, his second uncle and aunt had heard the sound of bells, thus giving her the name Fang Ling. Her nickname was Little Bell.

"That's me!" Fang Ling nodded her head enthusiastically. Her dad had kept showing her a photo of Fang Zhao over the past few days. The photo was taken before Fang Zhao had gone to university. In the past six years, there had been changes, yet Fang Ling guessed who he was at one glance. Maybe she really recognized him, or perhaps it was just the subconscious mind of a child associating a candy-buying person to someone she knew.

The surrounding kids glanced at Fang Ling enviously. So it was Fang Ling's brother. Fang Ling was so lucky to have someone buy candy for her.

"Hello, here's your candy." The salesperson handed over the candy sealed in a wrapper over to Fang Zhao.

Fang Ling's eyes widened. Her eyes seemed to be shining like stars. Then she watched as the stick of candy that she had longed for for such a long time disappear into the mouth of the cousin she was meeting for the first time in six years.

Seeing the now headless bear candy on the stick and then glancing at Fang Zhao, Fang Ling was dumbstruck.

The salesman in the festive car and the surrounding kids were all stunned as well. Had he actually bought the candy for himself!?

Under the watchful eyes of the surrounding bunch, Fang Zhao calmly proceeded to finish the entire candy.

During the end of days, they'd also had candy. Just... that sort of candy was created as combat supplies. It did not taste good and was as hard as a rock. However as long as it provided enough energy, they liked it. The aim was all about replenishing sufficient energy, and thus they would not complain about how it tasted. As for this sort of candy that was purely meant as a snack, Fang Zhao had not enjoyed one in a long time.

Soft candy wrapped in icing slowly dissolved in his mouth. The lingering sweetness brought about a certain warmth, as if dispersing a cold winter chill.

Actually, Fang Zhao had just wanted a taste and to tease the little kids at the same time. He did not especially like these kinds of things. He cast a glance at the still-dumbfounded Fang Ling before scanning the interior of the festive car and asking the salesperson, "Is that for sale?"

The salesperson turned his head to where Fang Zhao was pointing. A transparent box in the shape of a bear was sitting there, the inside filled with more of the bear candy that everyone had just seen.

"Y-Yes."

"Then I would like that."

"Ah? Oh. Sure!" The salesperson shifted over the box that was nearly half a meter tall. "There are 50 pieces of 'Little White Bears' inside. Here, you can count them." On a normal day, the salesperson would have found it hard to sell even one stick of this candy. He had never expected to sell an entire box when he came out today.

Fang Zhao opened the box and eyed the surrounding kids that had not yet dispersed. "If you kids can line up from the shortest to the tallest within ten seconds, I will give everyone one piece."

The gaggle of kids had not grasped the concept of ten seconds, but as soon as they heard the word 'seconds,' they starting moving about haphazardly.

"Ten, nine, eight..."

There were kids of similar heights disputing their positions in the line, but upon

hearing Fang Zhao's countdown, put aside their petty squabbles and promptly got into line.

Fang Ling watched the forming procession then glanced at Fang Zhao before shuffling to find her spot in the line and slotting herself in.

The salesperson in the car gaped in astonishment. The rowdy bunch of kids that had been crowding around the window had formed a line in the blink of an eye. The line stretched to the end of the drop-off area before winding back, forming a line in the shape of an "S."

Passerbys in the airspace passage on the 25th floor looked over in curiosity. Some people within the building also opened their windows to take a good look.

"...Three, two, one, times up! It's time for my inspection."

A grave looking Fang Zhao inspected the line, making the kids nervous. They were afraid that standing in the wrong spot might have destroyed their chance of having the candy.

"Seems fine. Okay, now, starting from the first in line, come and get your candy from me."

After all the 32 kids present had received one piece each, the box still contained 18 pieces. Fang Zhao handed the remainder, including the box, over to Fang Ling.

"For... for me?" Fang Ling was so startled that she nearly dropped all the candy she was holding. "Is it really for me?"

Fang Zhao nodded. "You don't want it?"

"I do! Thank you, Brother!"

The dumbstruck look on Fang Ling's face turned to foolish laughter as she hugged the box tightly.

Thus, when Fang Zhao's second aunt opened the door, she saw two people, one large and one small, with traces of sugar on their lips.

Chapter 67

You Are Also Children

From Fang Zhao's memory, the original owner of the body had only stayed within his second uncle's house for only a short period of time. That was after the incident with their original homes. After a short while with his second uncle's family, Fang Zhao had then stayed in school. In addition, the government had allocated a compensation home for him as well as compensation money. Thus, having grown up together with Zeng Huang and the rest, they all decided to live in the same housing block, and they rarely met anyone else. For this reason, he'd never needed the assistance of his relatives.

The original owner of Fang Zhao's body had had a rather estranged situation with his other relatives. Perhaps it was due to seeing the situation that Zeng Huang and Wan Yue had with their relatives, or perhaps it was due to Fang Sheng's influence. The original would rarely visit his relatives. However, in university, his second uncle, who had doubled as his legal guardian, had still helped him quite a bit. Just that, communication between the two of them was not always good, so before university, Fang Zhao started to isolate himself from his uncle.

Before the original had killed himself, he had remembered what his uncle had said. Early on, his uncle had warned him to be wary of Fang Sheng. Because of this, the relationship between Fang Zhao and his uncle worsened. It was also because of this that Fang Zhao became much closer with Fang Sheng. When he changed his number, he also did not inform his uncle. Every year, the only form of communication was through electronic mails. There were some things the original owner would reply to, while other times, he would ignore them.

People always make mistakes. However, some mistakes can be deadly, and regret cannot make things right.

His second uncle had a squarish face with two rough eyebrows sticking high up his head. His face was slightly flush, probably from drinking some wine. It was obvious from his eyes that he was really excited to see Fang Zhao, yet his face had on the solemn expression of a senior. A few times, he opened his mouth as if to say something, but he quickly swallowed the words, as if he was afraid to say the wrong thing.

Rather, it was Fang Zhao's second aunt who pulled him over to do some questioning. She asked about his experiences over the past six years and what he was working as.

Fang Zhao went through his memories and selected a few stories to share. Watching the warm smile on his aunt's face, he felt a sense of regret. If they knew that the original Fang Zhao had committed suicide, what would they be thinking?

"That means you signed a contract with Silver Wing Media and are producing songs for them?" His second aunt thought for awhile before continuing, "Xiao Zhao, don't mind Second Aunt being long-winded. When composing, make sure you guard your completed works properly. Don't let yourself be swindled. Be wary of others. A while back, I heard there was an incident with a large company regarding the stealing of songs. Whatever it is, once you complete a song, make sure you make a production record; don't just write it down on a piece of paper. If... I'm saying if by any chance it really gets stolen, even in a lawsuit, at least there will still be your earliest record. If the piece of paper is lost, there is no hope."

Fang Zhao nodded his head. "I know."

Second Uncle could no longer hold back his words any longer and interrupted. "Be especially wary of that Fang Sheng who is always sticking with you guys!" After saying that, both Second Uncle and Second Aunt looked at Fang Zhao, wondering if those words would cause an argument yet again.

"There is no longer any need," Fang Zhao replied.

"What do you mean 'no longer any need'?! One look at that fellow and you can see the bad intentions all over him..."

Second Uncle was still thinking what else to say when Fang Zhao continued, "Fang Sheng is already in jail."

The words that Second Uncle had not yet said remained stuck in his throat.

"Jail?" Second Aunt was surprised.

Fang Zhao gave a simple explanation of Fang Zhao's song stealing, but he did not mention creating the movements of his series yet. He was still under a strict confidentiality agreement with Silver Wing Media and could not yet reveal it.

Second Aunt sighed. "So the news I heard was about him, huh."

The news reports on the case regarding Fang Sheng's thefts were not comprehensive. The reports had excluded his full name, and the main point of the report was to remind other artists to be wary.

Neon Culture had some part in the hushed reports. Fang Sheng was just a lowly employee. If the reports were too extensive, they could hurt the company's reputation. Most people who did not follow the creative industry, after hearing about the matter, did not really care where it happened or who was involved.

"I told you back then to be careful of that fellow. He was a little schemer!" Second Uncle was still mad. His already sharp eyebrows were like knives as they rose up. "If only you had been wary of Fang Sheng, this wouldn't have happened. It's a pity you didn't listen back then."

He had good intentions, he just didn't know how to express himself well to the younger generation. The words that came out of his mouth seemed like a reprimand. Realizing his words were too much, Second Uncle stiffened up and changed the topic. Pointing at the fruit juice on the table, he said, "Have some juice. Yesterday, someone brought it all the way from Muzhou. Don't you kids love to drink this type..." Second Uncle suddenly remembered that Fang Zhao had already graduated from university and started working. He was no longer the little kid from his memory.

"Don't mind him. He always has that bad temper. Actually, your second uncle is concerned about you. Although you are no longer a student and have started working, in our eyes, you are still a child," Second Aunt said, smiling at Fang Zhao. It was not looking down on him; rather, it was the kind of concern that elders couldn't help but show. Furthermore, Fang Zhao was the only son left behind by Second Uncle's own brother.

Hearing this Fang Zhao thought, *In my heart, you are also children.*

Can 45 years be considered old?

Oh, I'm over a hundred years old.

At the same time, his second auntie, who was oblivious to what Fang Zhao was thinking, felt moved. In the six years they had not seen Fang Zhao, he had matured and was much more settled. When she had opened the door and seen Fang Zhao, for a

second she had been stunned. Fang Zhao had seemed a little different.

The Fang Zhao six years back had seemed as though he had drawn himself a circle. He would always distance himself from people and wear a guarded and alienated look. Now, the Fang Zhao in front of them... The feeling couldn't be described, but he was no longer the same as his past self from six years ago. Although still not that warm, he no longer had that guarded behavior.

At that moment, the door opened. Second Uncle's eldest son, Fang Yu, and his second son, Fang Qi, came in carrying quite a number of items. Fang Yu was 20 this year and Fang Qi was 12.

Seeing Fang Zhao sitting on the sofa, Fang Yu's originally smiling disposition faded somewhat.

Second Uncle's eyebrows spiked up once more. "Why are you only back now? Did you have too much fun playing?!" He was displeased with the behavior of his two sons. He had told them early in the morning to come straight home after buying the stuff, but the two of them only came back at this time.

Twelve-year-old Fang Qi looked at the floor as his dad got angry. Fang Yu, on the other hand, seemed indifferent. After all, he was used to his dad's temperament already.

Probably because Fang Zhao was here, Second Uncle only said a little before stopping. Glaring at the two of them, he said, "Come over, this is your brother Zhao."

"Brother Zhao."

"Brother Zhao."

Compared to Fang Qi's, there was an obvious dissatisfaction in Fang Yu's tone.

Second Uncle's eyebrows shot up again, and he wanted to say something, but he was stopped by a tug from Second Aunt.

Fang Zhao did not mind Fang Yu's attitude. From his memory, Fang Yu's attitude was not without reason.

"Oh, right," Fang Zhao took out two boxes from his backpack and handed them over to the two brothers. "Here is your Memorial Day gift. I wasn't too sure what you guys

would like now, so I asked my entire department before picking these out. I tried out my fellow colleague's version, the sound quality is quite good."

What seemed like a simple transparent case held two bean-sized items. They were shaped like the beak of a bird, part red, part black. The intense clashing combination of fiery red and jet black was eye-catching. For anyone familiar with earpieces, the color scheme would only bring to mind one company.

Fang Yu's and Fang Qi's eyes were fixated on the jet-black portion of the earphones. On them was a fiery red "S" shape.

"F-F-F-Fiery Bird earpieces?! F-f-f-for us?" The younger Fang Qi was so excited he'd started to stutter. If he had a tail, it would have started wagging non-stop.

Fang Yu tapped his younger brother on his head. In his heart, he felt disgusted at his brother for his turncoat behavior. However, his own eyes unconsciously kept looking at the earpiece.

Regardless of whether it was music, films, or games, earpieces were indispensable. In the New Era, whether one was young or old, everyone grew up using earpieces for the internet or various electronic appliances. Even if one was not proficient with earpieces, they would at least have a basic understanding.

Second Uncle also knew the name of "Fiery Bird" and told Fang Zhao, "Don't spend money recklessly!"

Second Aunt clapped Second Uncle on the back, giving him a look that said *Keep your mouth shut if you do not know how to speak!*

What reckless spending?! His nephew only did this out of kindness, and his own children were on the receiving end. What sort of tone was he using! It was no wonder that, back then, uncle and nephew quarreled often.

"Okay, enjoy your gifts. Fang Yu, go and tidy up your room." Second Uncle waved his two sons off.

"No need, I bought a place in Yanbei," Fang Zhao said.

"When did you buy it? Are you coming back to Yanbei to work?" a surprised Second Uncle asked.

"I just bought it. I won't be coming back to Yanbei to work, I just bought a place here, that's all,"

Second Aunt could immediately tell what his purpose was. Fang Zhao had bought the place as an occasional lodging for when he returned to Yanbei from time to time.

"Just stay here tonight. We haven't seen you in six years and we are all very happy to see you. Your second uncle woke up early just to buy groceries to prepare his speciality dishes—"

"Cough!" Second Uncle's face became redder and he decided to change the topic. After some thought, Second Uncle's smile faded and he firmly asked, "Little Zhao, have you done your military service?"

If Fang Zhao had enlisted for the military, there was no doubt someone would've informed his friends and relatives to prevent having uncontactable family events in the event of an accident. According to the information in the government records, Second Uncle would've received a notification, as he used to be Fang Zhao's legal guardian. He used to wonder if Fang Zhao had replaced his contactable personnel with someone else. He'd asked Fang Zhao about it a few times back when Fang Zhao had been in university but was ignored. Today, finally seeing Fang Zhao, he could not help but ask.

At the mention of this matter, Second Aunt also became serious.

"I haven't, but I will not be serving this year. My schedule is still a little tight," Fang Zhao replied.

"If it is like this, then it's okay. When the time comes, let Second Uncle know if you need any help. I have two classmates that I am close to who are working in the military. Every year, they will need those clearing their military service. Xiao Yu decided in spring that he was going to serve his military service too. He is in year three of university and is more than 20 years old. As his contact personnel, I hope to arrange for Xiao Yu to be sent to my friend's division." Second Uncle shared his own plan.

The place he hoped to arrange for Fang Yu to go was not an easy or comfortable place. It was a relatively newly opened planet and mineral resources were not the main priority. They were still busy with construction, so military service personnel would likely be sent to help with the construction there.

"Military service is to toughen him up, so a little hardship is fine. It's just that we would worry about other stuff." Having cleared their military service before, Second Uncle and aunt were both very clear what it was like. With someone to assist, a little suffering was manageable, and when training, it would polish one's temperament, which went a long way and helped even after the service was completed. What they were most afraid of was that the atmosphere among that batch would be bad and the place he got posted to would have little security, making it easy to be bullied. Fang Yu was not a very smooth person, and it gave them conflicting thoughts. Considering the impulsiveness of young people that age, there was no telling what sort of unpleasant events could occur.

Although Second Uncle knew people who were in the military and his old classmates were willing to help, when it came to arranging for a person to be transferred to their division, they were totally helpless.

When it came to military service, people in the New Era always had two responses. Find people or find money. Money had already been collected, and Second Uncle's family had spent recent times finding someone who could mediate and hopefully help get Fang Yu a posting at Second Uncle's old classmate's division.

Fang Zhao sighed in his heart. The way people in the New Era saved up money to obtain favorable postings was like how people before the apocalypse saved up money to buy a house. Some families started having a target and saving up even before their children were born.

"Have you decided on the place to go?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Yes. The place I told you about just now. It would be best if he could go there," Second Uncle said.

"You don't have to continue finding anybody for the time being. Let me see if I can settle the matter with Fang Yu." Fang Zhao sent a text to Duan Quanji. As he did not know if Duan Quanji was busy, he only sent a short text. Fang Zhao asked, "What is Fang Yu's student ID, Personal ID, and the place you want him to be sent to? Which divisions are your classmates assigned to?"

Second Uncle was a little too stunned to react, but his Second Aunt's reaction was quick; she replied immediately.

Beside them, Fang Yu, who had originally decided to head back to tidy up his room, stood rooted to the ground and looked in Fang Zhao's direction. He did not understand whether Fang Zhao was just talking big or if he really had the means, but as the matter concerned him, Fang Yu also listened in.

Duan Qianji could not have been very busy, as she returned Fang Zhao a text a few moments later.

"Xiao Zhao, Second Uncle understands that you wish to help, but with regards to this matter, a lot of things are not as simple as you think they are..."

Second Uncle had not yet finished speaking before Fang Zhao handed over a serial number.

"This serial number is Fang Yu's military assignment number. Check it out and see if it matches."

Chapter 68

Winging It

Handed the serial number, Second Uncle didn't know how to respond. Second Aunt got busy. Folks from their generation had all served, so they knew where to look up an assignment.

After she found the official website, Second Aunt entered the numbers and letters in the serial number. When she was done, she triple-checked her input before hitting enter. Then she gazed at the computer screen waiting for the result.

When Second Uncle saw the result, he questioned his eyesight. He checked the website. It was the right one. It was where they had checked their assignments when they served.

"This... This..." Second Uncle looked at the result then looked at Fang Zhao. He couldn't manage a complete sentence. Fang Zhao had changed so much in six years. He could understand the change in personality—that wasn't uncommon. Six years was enough to transform someone's personality, but not anyone could swing a preferential military posting with a phone call.

Fang Yu joined the scramble to check the search result. The length his jaw dropped revealed how surprised he was.

"Company perk for Memorial Day," Fang Zhao said.

"Your company hands these out as perks?" It was the first time Fang Yu had heard of such a thing. Even though past events had soured his impression of Fang Zhao, his cousin was now helping him out, and he couldn't give him simple, perfunctory attention any more. He was in an awkward position. He was also curious how Fang Zhao had secured the posting. People usually kept preferential postings for themselves. No one handed them out so casually like Fang Zhao.

Second Uncle and Second Aunt were wondering the same thing.

"Little Zhao, aren't you due to serve too? Why don't you keep the posting for yourself?"

Second Uncle asked in a worried tone. "You may not understand the importance of a plumb posting, but let me tell you..."

"I still have one for myself."

Fang Zhao's comment left Second Uncle speechless. He paused before saying, with a confused expression, "That's... that's great." The hand with which he was carrying his glass was trembling. He wasn't as calm as he seemed.

One preferential posting was enough to blow them away. To think Fang Zhao had one more.

"Little Zhao, Second Aunt thanks you from the bottom of her heart," Second Aunt said while looking at Fang Zhao in earnest. "What a difference six years makes. You're your own man now. And to think that Second Uncle and I were worried that you would struggle at work. You must be much tougher than we'd thought. But even so, if there's anything you need, Second Uncle and I will do our best."

"Of course, of course. Little Zhao, if you need help with anything, don't be a stranger," Second Uncle added.

The huge favor that Fang Zhao had done for them left Second Uncle and Second Aunt at a loss. It finally dawned on them that the Fang Zhao of today wasn't the kid they used to know. He was someone in charge.

"Little Zhao, Fang Yu will take you to your room. If you don't have anything else planned, do spend the night." Second Uncle wasn't particularly articulate. After mumbling a few orders, he joined Second Aunt in the kitchen. They ate takeout or instant food most of the year. There was a dazzling selection of instant food products in the New Era. When the couple was busy at work, they would order from the company cafeteria or have takeout or instant food. The kids ate at school. Only when the family reunited on holidays did the couple cook for themselves.

Second Uncle was in a great mood. First, the issue of Fang Yu's military assignment had been resolved. Second, Fang Zhao had turned out to be quite competent. He was delighted. After all, Fang Zhao was his nephew. As for how Fang Zhao had obtained the two preferential postings, if Fang Zhao wouldn't volunteer, they wouldn't press the matter either.

As Second Uncle and Second Aunt took in Fang Zhao's changes, Fang Yu took Fang

Zhao to his room. His father had asked him to vacate his room for Fang Zhao the day before. He would bunk with his younger brother for the time being. Since leaving for university, Fang Yu hadn't spent much time at home. He didn't want to tidy up his room. He only put up appearances with his father breathing down his neck, so his room was still a bit messy.

"Uhm... let me clean up a bit." Fang Yu felt embarrassed. After Fang Zhao took care of his military assignment with two text messages, he had put his cousin on a pedestal.

Fang Zhao had only brought a small suitcase. Apart from the gifts for his uncle's family, he only brought two changes of clothes. He scanned Fang Yu's room. Much of the 20-odd square-meter space was cluttered, but his bookshelves were in neat order.

"Do you mind if I read your books?" Fang Zhao asked, pointing at the bookshelves.

"Feel free. I haven't read them anyway," Fang Yu responded.

The shelves were lined with mostly Fang Yu's secondary school textbooks. There were two types of secondary textbooks: paperbacks and the electronic versions.

Maybe it had something to do with the fact that electronic communications were jammed and telecom equipment occasionally malfunctioned during the end of days, but despite the rapid advancement of technology in the New Era, paperbacks were never completely retired.

Students used electronic textbooks for the most part. They were convenient, and physical books took up space. By graduation, their paperbacks were often intact. It was the same case with Fang Yu's textbooks. They were arranged on the top shelf as decoration.

Fang Zhao pulled out a Secondary Two math textbook. The Secondary One and Secondary Two textbooks had been thumbed through somewhat, but the books for years three and onward were all brand new.

When he opened the textbook, he saw the first page inscribed with the large characters: "Fang Zhao is a major idiot."

Fang Zhao: "..."

He flipped some more and discovered scribbles and drawings. Scanning his memory,

Fang Zhao realized that, when Fang Yu was a second year, the original owner of his body had just graduated from secondary school. That was also when his relationship with Second Uncle and family was at its worst.

Fang Yu was under his father's tight supervision at the time. One ill-advised remark and he'd be confined to his room reading, so he vented by scribbling in his textbook.

When Fang Yu turned his head after tidying up, he noticed Fang Zhao holding his Secondary Two math textbook and caught a glimpse of the page he had turned to. Images of the insults he had scribbled as a second year came rushing back. He snatched the textbook and shoved it into a drawer. "Oh, I was a clueless brat back then."

Fang Yu was so embarrassed he wanted to hide under a rock. Just half an hour ago Fang Zhao had secured him a preferential military posting, and now he was staring at an insult directed at him scribbled in Fang Yu's Secondary Two math textbook.

Fang Zhao actually wasn't upset. "Decent drawing," he said.

From his point of view, considering what went down between the original owner of his body and the Fang family, Fang Yu wasn't off the mark. But the original owner was no longer around, so Fang Zhao refrained from passing judgment on past events.

Fang Yu didn't want to discuss the past and his previous grievances anymore. He pondered briefly and said, "Oh, Big Brother, are you going to visit Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother on Memorial Day?" He remembered that Fang Zhao would tag along with their family on their previous visits after his own parents passed. But after quarreling with his second uncle a few times, Fang Zhao had stopped going. He hadn't visited his great-grandparents since.

Fang Zhao canvassed his memory and found a bit of relevant information, but not much. He only had vague memories of the great-grandfather and great-grandmother that Fang Yu had mentioned. He only remembered the couple were the most senior members of the Fang family. They lived in a retirement home for former government officials in Yanbei. They should have been in their 150s, even older than Fang Zhao was in his previous life.

"Yeah, let's go," Fang Zhao said.

"Every time we visit, Great-Grandfather hands out red packets. You haven't been in 10

years, no? If you're on your best behavior, maybe Great-Grandfather will be impressed and give you all the red packets you were due for the past 10 years."

Great-Grandfather Fang had retired with merit. Even though he no longer retained his military title, he enjoyed a comfortable retirement package. He didn't have to worry about daily expenses and was entitled to a considerable pension.

At the Yanbei retirement home for former officials.

Elderly residents were starting to get busy. Their daily chores were taken care of—what occupied their time was brainstorming how much cash to stuff in their red packets.

"Old Fang, you're skipping your grandkids again?" a neighbor yelled from his window.

In a room equipped with quasi-antique decor, the spirited old man who sat in his chair leafing through a ledger responded, "Yes. They're so old. Even if I give them red packets, are they thick-skinned enough to accept them?"

"Then it's down to your great-grandkids and great-great-grandkids, then," the voice next door said.

"I'm thinking of skipping my great-grandkids as well. A bunch of little brats. None of them have amounted to anything," Great-Grandfather Fang fumed.

The old woman sitting next to him laughed.

"What are you laughing about? That's exactly what they are," Great-Grandfather Fang grumbled.

Great-Grandmother Fang went silent. Even though her old companion complained that none of his great-grandkids amounted to much, he always included every single one of them on his list, including Fang Zhao, who was alive and well but hadn't shown up in 10 years.

The old lady's laughter subsided when her thoughts drifted to her grandson and his wife who had died young and the great-grandson they hadn't seen in 10 years. Word was that the great-grandson had been accepted to a decent school and moved to Qi'an, but he hadn't bothered visiting before leaving for university. Little did Fang Zhao know how much his great-grandparents had intervened and staved off trouble behind-the-

scenes.

So be it. If he doesn't show, he doesn't show. Family members easily became distant to each other in the New Era. If the two of them weren't receiving such a huge pension, few of their kids and their kids' kids would visit on Memorial Day.

Great-Grandfather Fang couldn't keep quiet while doing his math. "That kid Fang Yu is due to serve soon, no?"

The old lady put down her book, removed her glasses, and responded slowly, "I heard a while back about our third son's kids, not Fang Yu, though."

"Tsk." Great-Grandfather Fang shook his head. He was about to speak again but held back. "Whatever. There's no point. Same routine again—if I like what I see, I'll give them a bit more cash. If not, I'll wing it."

Chapter 69

The Odd Great-Grandson

Fang Zhao spent the night at his second uncle's home. In the morning, he visited the apartment he'd bought in Yanbei and tidied it up a bit. It was just a place to crash—80-odd square meters, a bedroom, and a study. After he was done, he went to the cemetery to pay his respect to the parents of his body's previous owner.

In the New Era, cemeteries for the masses weren't typical cemeteries. They were run by individual companies. The parents of his body's original owner had died in an explosion. The entire building was reduced to ashes, so the cemetery held not their remains but some of their personal items.

The original owner of his body never visited his parents' gravesite in Yanbei. Instead, he would pay his respects remotely by logging into the website of the company that ran the cemetery where his parents were enshrined. You needed to make an appointment in advance to pay your respects in person. You were assigned a waiting area, and the remains of the deceased or their personal items were pulled from central storage. In contrast to the martyrs' cemetery, these centralized corporate cemeteries were more compact. When Fang Zhao arrived, he was told he owed a year in back fees. After paying the overdue bill, Fang Zhao went ahead and paid for 10 years of storage in advance.

In the New Era, rank-and-file citizens weren't allowed to be buried. Their remains were housed in cemeteries like this one. You chose from the various private cemetery companies according to preference and affordability. Some were backed by the government. Others were completely private. The cemetery where the parents of the original owner of Fang Zhao's body were enshrined was funded by the government. Even though it wasn't something to write home about, it was managed with more discretion. Despite incurring a year's worth of back fees, the Fang parents' storage box hadn't been cleared. All the cemetery company had done was send a reminder via text message. Fang Zhao had not been pestered endlessly.

Second Uncle wanted the whole family to visit Great-Grandfather Fang at his retirement home on Memorial Day. He also wanted Fang Zhao to meet other elders in

the family, so he kept Fang Zhao for the night. As a result, Fang Zhao had yet to spend a single night in his new apartment in Yanbei.

Fang Yu's military assignment had been settled and Fang Zhao was back, so Second Uncle couldn't stop smiling. This gave Fang Qi, who'd almost flunked his exams, some breathing room. But what Second Uncle and family felt awkward about was the fact they were still guarded in front of Fang Zhao. It wasn't entirely due to the favor Fang Zhao had extended, although that was part of it. Second Uncle couldn't quite explain himself. He just followed his gut feeling.

Fang Yu also felt that the way Fang Zhao looked at him reminded him of the old man who lived upstairs. Fang Zhao's gaze was somewhat paternalistic, to the extent that Fang Yu felt inferior in front of his cousin. He even spoke with caution.

Fang Yu tried to figure out why he acted this way. Maybe it was like his father had said—people who are competent command a sense of respect.

Fang Zhao also noticed that Second Uncle and family were wary of him, but he couldn't change overnight. He didn't know how to act young, or rather, he didn't know how to pretend to be a young man. The reason for his visit was simple—he wanted to see what Yanbei looked like in the New Era. It had been six years since his last visit. Even if his personality had undergone massive changes, friends and family wouldn't make a big deal of it.

On Memorial Day, Fang Zhao, Second Uncle, and his family took a public train to a retirement home for former officials in the suburbs of Yanbei.

It was a bustling day at the retirement home.

Rapid advancements in technology and improved human health after the Period of Destruction had increased life expectancy. The retirement age for most industries was now around 150. At that age, it was common for five generations of the same family to be alive. As a result, families were quite large. Some families had six or seven kids. The numbers added up.

But in the New Era, what counted was personal ability, not the size of your family. Jobs in the New Era were demanding, which put a strain on family relationships. Even siblings could easily grow apart.

The various branches of Great-Grandfather Fang's family decided whether or not to

visit the head of the family on their own. They never coordinated their visits.

When Fang Zhao and Second Uncle's family arrived at the retirement home, their first stop wasn't Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother's living quarters but rather the neighboring woods.

"The two elders get many visitors on Memorial Day. If everyone visits at the same time, it's way too crowded in their residence, so the retirement home allocates a small house for the family reunion." Second Uncle was worried that Fang Zhao wasn't familiar with the protocol.

When Fang Zhao and party arrived, there was already a crowd of 20-odd people. They sat at adjoining tables. The family members on good terms chatted in groups, while relatives at odds with each other ignored their enemies.

"The two elders will also chat with the younger Fangs, but the time they spend with each person varies. The more they like you, the longer they'll spend with you. Last year, they spent a lot of time with a female cousin, and the year before that, it was a male cousin. But I don't know either cousin well. We've never spoken." Fang Yu filled Fang Zhao in on scenes from previous Memorial Days as he walked. Second Uncle's family typically dropped by to pay their respects. They were never the center of attention.

"I don't see Grandad. Maybe he's come and left. Grandad doesn't like our family. He typically shows up every year with Third Uncle and Third Auntie," Fang Yu continued in a whisper.

Not only did Second Uncle struggle to communicate with his nephew's generation, he got into arguments with his own dad easily because they had similar temperaments.

"Oh, you're here, Fang Lang," said a man sitting at a table beneath a tree.

Fang Lang was Second Uncle's name. The man who noticed Second Uncle was his cousin—their fathers were siblings—although they weren't close. They got to know each other better recently after working on a project together.

"Who's that over there?" the man asked, gesturing to Fang Zhao.

"That's Fang Zhao, my late older brother's only son," Second Uncle responded.

The man pondered briefly before making the connection. "Oh, him." He had too many relatives to keep track of. He didn't want to bother with minor characters.

Second Uncle's cousin was more interested in the box Fang Zhao was carrying than in Fang Zhao himself, but it was their turn to meet Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother; otherwise he would've pried.

Fang Zhao watched Second Uncle's cousin and his family enter a neighboring house. The houses located in the woods were all rather retro, resembling the homes with tiled roofs from before the apocalypse. This was the only house in the vicinity. It was winter already. Although it had been sunny the past two days, temperatures were quite low. The two elders were holed up inside.

"Why don't you take a seat. My cousin's family will be at least half an hour," Second Uncle said.

Fang Zhao was about to sit down when he heard someone inside the house yell his name.

"Fang Zhao! Hey, Fang Zhao! Yes, you. Hurry up. Your great-grandfather and great-grandmother want to see you."

It was Second Uncle's cousin. He must have mentioned Fang Zhao to the two elders, so they let him cut in line.

"Oh, they didn't ask for you, Fang Lang. You and your family wait here." Second Uncle's cousin gestured at him to stay put, letting only Fang Zhao through.

"Little Zhao, you be careful." Second Uncle was worried. He himself was super nervous every time he met with the two elders. They projected a dominating aura. He was worried Fang Zhao was too young and would cave under the pressure.

Fang Zhao picked up the gift he had prepared for his great-grandparents and walked in confidently.

The house was quite warm. About a dozen people were sitting in the living room. They spoke in whispers. They whispered to each other when they noticed Fang Zhao entering. Their gaze also landed on the box Fang Zhao was carrying, as if gauging its contents.

"In here." Second Uncle's cousin pointed to a room. "I'll take you."

Second Uncle's cousin led Fang Zhao into the room and left. But when he left he made a sly move. He didn't shut the door completely, leaving a small gap, so he could eavesdrop from the living room.

Inside the room.

Fang Zhao saw the two gray-haired elders sitting inside. The old lady looked friendly, wearing a gentle smile. She gauged Fang Zhao, as if comparing his stature now to the small child from 10 years ago. However, the old man sitting next to her was in a foul mood. His gaze was hawk-like and he projected an intimidating aura. An untested young man would have felt nervous.

"You two look like you're in good spirits," Fang Zhao said with a laugh. He placed the box he'd brought onto the table and opened it to remove its contents.

Great-Grandfather Fang was going to throw a tantrum. The kid hadn't shown up in 10 years, after all. He needed a dressing down. But when he saw what Fang Zhao removed from the box, he couldn't maintain his composure.

"The Sirius?" Great-Grandfather Fang exclaimed.

What Fang Zhao removed was a silver-gray spaceship model about 30 centimeters long. It was emblazoned with a logo and lettering.

The Sirius was a battleship built by mankind for space exploration during the New Era. One of the pioneering spaceships, the Sirius had already been retired. But even though it was retired, it was still a popular design among model manufacturers, not because of its historical significance but for its economic value.

And the reason Fang Zhao had picked the Sirius was that Great-Grandfather Fang and Great-Grandmother Fang had served on the spaceship.

When Fang Zhao handed over the model, Great-Grandfather Fang played cool and didn't lift a finger. It was the old lady who accepted it.

She was stunned the moment she felt the model.

"This material..." She also examined the detail before looking at Fang Zhao and saying,

"How thoughtful of you."

Their children and other grandkids had bought them models of the Sirius before, but Great-Grandfather Fang had tossed all of them. His descendants were under the impression that they didn't like models, but the fact was that those models were poorly made and got many details wrong. Only model makers who understood the history of the spaceship would notice the finer features.

But the model Fang Zhao presented got all the small details right and was made with the exact same material as the real spaceship. The model had to have cost a fortune.

Great-Grandfather Fang's mood improved somewhat. At least Fang Zhao had put some thought into the gift. He and his wife loved it.

Now that Fang Zhao had extended an olive branch, Great-Grandfather Fang stopped pouting.

"It's been 10 years since we last saw you. Looks like you're doing well. Where are you working?" Great-grandfather Fang asked.

"An entertainment company." Fang Zhao sat down on a chair next to the elderly couple.

"Oh, the entertainment business." Great-Grandfather Fang was intrigued. Another thought struck him and he asked, "Where did you complete your military service?"

"I haven't yet. I've been too busy. My schedule for this year is full," Fang Zhao responded.

"Oh, you haven't served yet?" Great-Grandfather Fang straightened his back. "You're that busy? What are you busy with?"

"Gaming."

"..." Great-Grandfather Fang withdrew the hand with which he was about to offer a red packet.

Chapter 70

Wait till You Are Well-Known

Hearing Fang Zhao's reply, those eavesdropping in the living room nearly broke out laughing.

They all knew that Great-Grandfather Fang hated hearing the younger generation mention gaming. Occasional gaming was fine, but addiction to gaming, that was a total waste of life.

Great-Grandfather Fang felt a little depressed. On account of the fact that this youngster had finally come to visit them after all these years, he had intended to give Fang Zhao the 10 years worth of red packets that he had missed out on, but after hearing his reply, he no longer felt in the mood to do so.

Seeing the eyebrows of her husband rising, Great-Grandmother Fang patted his back then looked toward Fang Zhao. She was not at all angry; instead, she amiably told Fang Zhao, "We feel relieved that you are doing well. Starting work shortly after graduating is not always smooth sailing, did you encounter any difficulties?"

"Yes."

"Ah?"

"I am not too familiar with military service. Could you tell me about both your experiences serving on board the Sirius all those years back?" Fang Zhao asked.

Great-Grandmother Fang had thought Fang Zhao was going to take this opportunity to seek their help. Amongst all their descendants, many who rarely came to visit in ordinary times would come running over seeking assistance and help when they encountered a problem they could not resolve themselves. Great-Grandmother Fang had seen too many of such descendants, so when Fang Zhao said "Yes," her heart felt a little disappointed, but Fang Zhao's following words surprised her.

"Experiences aboard the Sirius?" The old lady scrutinized her great-grandson sitting before her, wondering if Fang Zhao really wanted to know about the two elder's

experiences or if he was going to use this topic to ask for help regarding military postings?

"When we were on the topic of military service, Second Uncle had mentioned that the two of you served on board the Sirius, and I was a little curious." Fang Zhao looked straight into the eyes of Great-Grandmother Fang, his eyes full of seriousness, and he continued, "I'm guessing that the confidentiality period has already passed."

Great-Grandmother Fang retracted her scrutinizing gaze and thought back to those days. Although it had been a long time ago, when she thought back, her recollections were surprisingly clear and distinct. When the Sirius had been retired from service, all those who had served on board also received some recordings and photographs.

After retirement, whenever Great-Grandmother Fang had nothing to do, she would take out those old videos and photos to browse. Thus, even if she were to choose to forget about it, she could not do so. The existence of videos and photos were to remind people of their past experiences. Even if 100 years had passed, because of the existence of videos and photos, memories became way more vivid.

"On the Sirius all those years ago—"

"You should ask me about this matter. I spent more time on the Sirius than her. Back then, during my days in the military on board the Sirius, I was around your age. Back then..."

Great-Grandmother Fang had only just started when Great-Grandfather Fang could not bear it any longer and interrupted his wife. He rambled on and on to Fang Zhao about his military experiences on board the Sirius all those years back. The eyebrows that were about to shoot up a while back now flew upward.

Outer space was unlike the army or the navy. The unpredictability was much higher, and unexpected crises could occur at any time. That was the reason lots of people would think up any method possible for their children to stay on the planet for their military service.

But Fang Zhao was different. His former battlefield had been on land; he had never experienced space travel. Before their military service, many people would gain some experiences from their own parents. What was available online was limited, and it was mostly only government-issued information. There was very little private

information, as outer-space service personnel were required to sign confidentiality agreements, and even after the expiry of the agreement, what they spoke of was what everyone knew. Only their closest relatives or trustworthy friends would get to hear the truth and their true thoughts.

From Second Uncle, Fang Zhao had heard a little. However, Second Uncle's military service experience had been more ordinary. On the other hand, his great-grandparent's experiences were full of ups and downs. During their military service days, they'd received meritorious service awards, and when the service was completed, they had decided to stay with the military. Great-Grandfather had served and achieved regimental rank before he was unable to climb any higher. At that time, he was getting old and regrettably had to transfer to civilian work, working in Yanbei City's Governmental Office till he retired. However, for Great-Grandfather Fang, his life while working in Yanbei City's Government Office was no different from his lifestyle after he retired, as he reminisced often. After retirement, he would often take out his collection of military medals and tell his wife about "those days."

Great-Grandfather Fang especially loved talking to people about his military experiences "back then." It was a pity that most of his descendants did not like hearing these stories. A few members of the younger generations would be slightly more curious, but once they started listening, their minds would wander, and thus, Great-Grandfather Fang would not continue.

Great-Grandfather enthused till his spit splattered all over. Beside him, Great-Grandmother Fang held on to the model of the Sirius, showing and telling Fang Zhao on which parts of the spacecraft the incidents her husband was explaining happened.

Great-Grandmother Fang observed Fang Zhao at the same time. She found out that Fang Zhao had not deliberately raised the topic to attract their attention but was actually listening attentively!

Great-Grandmother Fang felt that this great-grandson was a little odd. Seeing the two elders, he had not felt uncomfortable or been nervous. Hearing his great-grandfather's military experiences, he would continue with a few words of his own, each time emphasizing the important points. This made Great-Grandfather Fang elated, and he did not stop talking even when his mouth was dry. With this, Great-Grandmother Fang felt that they were not talking to a great-grandson but rather as if they were chit-chatting with an old friend of a similar age.

Fang Zhao filled up the cups beside them with warm water before handing them over to the two elders.

Great-Grandfather Fang took a sip from the cup and then picked out a few photographs that he had stashed away. "Have you ever seen this gun? And this, back then when we were on a foreign planet mining, when we encountered an attack by an organism from that planet... It ate two members of our squad, and I used this gun to kill it in the end. Oh. And there is still..." A number of photographs were of Great-Grandfather Fang holding a gun when he was young. Some were solo shots, while others were group photos.

"However, all those inside, only this gun followed me throughout my career and into retirement."

Fang Zhao looked over. It was a black so dark that seemed like it was radiating coldness. Not large, it seemed slightly low profile.

Watching Fang Zhao's gaze that was fixed onto the gun, a proud expression appeared on Great-Grandfather Fang's face. "Envious? An average person will not have this gun." He became even more excited and continued, "When you become well-known throughout Yanzhou, I will give this gun for you to play with..."

The moment he said this, a slap from Great-Grandmother Fang landed on the arm of her husband. "What nonsense!" Could this sort of gun even be given to anyone for them to play with? By violating the law, the gun might be confiscated, and even at their age, punishment was still unavoidable.

"I am not speaking nonsense. If Fang Zhao really becomes well-known all over Yanzhou, what is wrong with giving him a little extra protection. We could also sneakily give..." Seeing the room door not fully closed, Great-Grandfather Fang was jolted awake. Some words could not be revealed casually; even if they thought that way, it still should not be revealed.

"Cough, what I said was just a joke, teasing the younger generation. Right, Little Zhao?" Great-Grandfather Fang looked at Fang Zhao.

Fang Zhao returned a smile.

But that smile made Great-Grandfather Fang shake slightly, as if he felt there was something amiss.

"Enough of that, let us continue with the story. Where was I just now?"

In the room, Great-Grandfather continued and did not look like he would be stopping. Outside, those in the living room were not in very good condition.

"Never did I expect that little Fang Zhao, who was absent for 10 years, would show up and give such a precise boot-licking," someone mumbled.

Another's lips twitched. "No one has ever kept Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother Fang occupied for so long, right? With the momentum he has, he does not appear to be stopping."

The people outside grew impatient from the waiting and came over to scout the situation.

The one setting nearest the door said, "I never even got the chance to enter before my turn was cut by that little fellow. Now Great-Grandfather is talking talking to him enthusiastically and is not willing to see anyone else who comes. Just wait to one side for your turn."

Great-Grandfather Fang continued for an hour, until he had no voice. He never talked this much on normal days, so today, his throat could not take speaking so much.

"All right, then the two of you, please take a rest. I will make a move. Today I came with Second Uncle's family to pay a visit to you two. Although you did not bring it up, I know how much effort the two elders have put in."

This was what Fang Zhao surmised from his memories. Back then, when the original owner's parents met with that accident where the entire block exploded, the original owner was still a young child. He could not have received all the compensation on his own. That he smoothly managed to get his the compensation paid out as well as a compensation lodging was no doubt due to the assistance of someone. Second Uncle's family did not have that sort of power. With some thinking, it could only be the two elders.

"As long as you understand, all is well. Don't play games everyday and let it affect proper work! What is your terminal number? Here is a red packet for you," Great-Grandfather Fang said.

After Fang Zhao told him, he received a notification on his bracelet that a gift had been

sent to him. Clicking on it, a red envelope appeared. The sum of money displayed on top made Fang Zhao arc his brows.

Twenty thousand dollars.

According to Fang Yu, the average amounts in red packets that the younger generation received from the Fang great-grandparents was 1,000 dollars. The amounts might differ slightly depending on Great-Grandfather's mood. Given the averages, ten years worth of red packets was only 10,000 dollars. Now that Great-Grandfather Fang had given him 20,000 dollars, did it mean that he was in a very good mood?

"Oh, right, for your military service situation, what are your opinions?" Great-Grandfather Fang asked.

Those eavesdropping outside the door were flabbergasted. Amongst them, some had insinuated the subject before for their own families or children, but Great-Grandfather Fang only had one approach when it came to this. "Settle your own problems yourself. This old man does not care."

But now...

The old man wanted to help Fang Zhao? Were his previous words all bullshit?!

Inside, Fang Zhao replied, "I do have some opinions."

"Oh? Let's hear it." Great-Grandfather Fang had decided to listen to it.

"I haven't contemplated fully yet. When I'm done thinking, I will consult the two elders."

"Hey, are you putting on airs?!" Great-Grandfather Fang wanted to be difficult, but it did not work. He was still in a good mood. "All right, when you have finished thinking, come tell us about it. We will advise you properly."

Fang Zhao stood up and walked toward the door. He did not leave immediately, instead shutting the door tightly so the people outside could not hear the conversation clearly.

"The words you said just now, do they still count?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Which words?" Great-Grandfather Fang had slight misgivings.

"When I'm well-known all over Yanzhou, you will give me the gun to play... to protect myself with."

Great-Grandfather Fang did not take it seriously. "It counts. Make yourself well-known first. Don't let me wait too long. I'm already so old, and I don't have that long to wait."

Fang Zhao laughed. "You aren't old, only a hundred and fifty years old."

Fang Zhao opened the door and was preparing to go out when he heard Great-Grandfather Fang speak once more. "Wait, don't you do something stupid like commit a crime! What I mean by well-known isn't the same as being infamous!"

"You think too much. Goodbye, I will come back to visit when I have time." Fang Zhao walked out and closed the door at the same time.

In the room, Great-Grandfather Fang pondered for a bit before telling his wife, "Hearing what the young fellow said before leaving makes me feel like he is up to something, eh?"

"You are thinking too much... I guess?" Great-Grandmother Fang glanced at the Sirius model that was placed on the table, seemingly entranced by it.

Chapter 71

Is That You?

When Fang Zhao emerged from his great-grandparents' private room, he was greeted with a host of curious stares that scanned him from head to toe. They wanted to know who the hell had commanded the attention of Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother for more than an hour.

"He doesn't look that impressive," someone whispered.

"I've never seen him before. Never heard of him before."

"He looks quite plain. What's so special about him that the two elders chatted with him for such a long time?"

When Second Uncle saw Fang Zhao emerge, he rushed forward and asked, "How come you were in there for so long? Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother weren't angry, were they?"

Second Aunt glared at him. Second Uncle made it sound like Fang Zhao was bound to upset the two elders.

"What kind of mood were they in?" Second Aunt asked.

"A pretty good mood. They were in good spirits," Fang Zhao responded.

"You had such a long chat. Seems like Great-Grandfather has taken a liking to you," Fang Yu said.

Fang Zhao smiled but didn't speak.

Noticing the probing looks that surrounded them, Second Aunt dragged Fang Zhao to a corner and whispered, "Fang Zhao, did Great-Grandfather give you a red packet?"

"Yes, he gave me 10 years' worth."

When she heard the answer, Second Aunt got a sense of where Fang Zhao stood. She didn't press him for the exact amount. She had just been wondering if her nephew left a good impression. The fact that he remembered Fang Zhao, gave him 10 years' worth of red packets, and chatted with him for such a long time meant Great-Grandfather was in a good mood.

"The two elders were reminiscing about their military service. That's why it took longer than usual," Fang Zhao said.

Fang Zhao didn't raise his voice much, but it was just loud enough for curious bystanders to hear.

Once they heard that Great-Grandfather had been rambling on about this military service, the onlookers exchanged knowing looks. No wonder it had taken so long. Great-Grandfather had gone down memory lane again. That explained everything and dashed their curiosity.

Great-Grandfather didn't have much to say to the relatives that followed Fang Zhao, probably because he had talked too much with Fang Zhao. His wife did all the talking, although she didn't say much either.

Seeing a series of younger Fangs who stuttered through their sentences put Great-Grandfather Fang in a bad mood again. As an elder, he wanted to be generous, but he couldn't fake laughter. All he could do was keep a stern face, which terrified the young ones even more.

Great-Grandfather Fang signaled his wife to keep her comments brief and send them packing with their gift money. It was all about the red packets, wasn't it? Or they needed a favor from the two elders. Just listening to the requests was painful. The couple were happy to lend a helping hand to younger Fangs who were regular visitors. As for those who never showed and stuck their hands out for red packets and favors, not slapping them in the face was courtesy enough. What else could they expect?

Faced with his descendants that fell into the second category, Great-Grandfather Fang regretted not keeping Fang Zhao longer.

Great-Grandfather Fang was a bit more inquisitive when granting Second Uncle and his family their audience. He asked about Fang Yu's upcoming military service. He was surprised to find out the issue had been resolved.

Fang Zhao didn't bring up his role in the matter. Second Uncle was worried about causing Fang Zhao trouble, so he hadn't told anyone about it, but he still brought it up in passing while meeting with Great-Grandfather Fang.

"Fang Zhao took care of it? Who was his connection?" Great-Grandfather was curious now.

Great-Grandfather Fang waited until Second Uncle and his family had left before turning to his wife to ask, "Say, what is that kid Fang Zhao up to? If he can land a preferential posting on his own, why did he ask about our military service? Did he genuinely want some advice?"

"How would I know?" Great-Grandmother Fang was surprised too. She had never expected Fang Zhao to wield such influence at a young age. She had underestimated him.

"Hmm... I still think the kid is up to something." Great-Grandfather Fang started getting suspicious.

"If you're still not convinced, just keep an eye on the news," Great-Grandmother Fang said.

By then, Second Uncle and his family had left the house. They had no idea what Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother were thinking. They headed straight home after the meeting.

During the train ride, Fang Zhao noticed many big-screen displays showing news reports about "Battle of the Century" and the latest trailers.

Gamers were bound to be ecstatic this year. It was just the beginning of the year and "Battle of the Century" had yet to be released, but the buzz had already started simmering.

The online poll for the game's virtual idol endorsers for each continent organized by Rising Dragon was about to kick off. It would start in Huangzhou and continue in other continents. Yanzhou would be up soon.

Fang Yu was browsing headlines on his bracelet. Various news outlets were speculating who Fiery Bird would pick as the game's public face in Yanzhou. Would it be Tongshan True Entertainment's top idol Mi Yu? Or Neon Culture's Andy Leo? Or

Silver Wing's Polar Light, the bombshell that debuted at the end of last year?

"Say, Big Brother Zhao, who do you think will win the endorsement deal?" Fang Yu asked.

"I don't know. That's Fiery Bird's decision," Fang Zhao responded.

"Speaking of Polar Light, Big Brother Zhao, is this you?" Fang Yu showed Fang Zhao a screen capture.

It was a screen capture combining the credits at the end of the three music videos from the "100-Year Period of Destruction" series. The name of the producer had been circled.

Fang Zhao glanced at the image and nodded. "Yes, that's me."

Fang Yu took a deep breath. "Big Brother Zhao!"

"What?"

"Big Brother Zhao, think you could get me a signed photo of Maqiyaduo?" Fang Yu was in his face.

Fang Zhao knew about Maqiyaduo. She was one of Silver Wing's top actresses. She had a sweet face, although Fang Zhao had never worked with her and didn't know how the film department operated.

"I'll look into it. If I can get one, I'll send it over," Fang Zhao said.

"I want one too. I want one too." Fang Qi wanted a piece of the action as well. "Big Brother Zhao! Big Brother Zhao, I want Vicky's signed photo. You gotta hold onto it if you can swing one."

Vicky was another actress signed to Silver Wing. She was a grade A star. Fang Zhao would have never thought a young kid like Fang Qi would be a Vicky fan.

"No problem. I'll hang onto them if I get them." Fang Zhao then smiled at Fang Ling. "Little Bell, are you a fan of any celebrities? If they're signed to Silver Wing, I'll try to get a signed photo for you."

Fang Ling pondered the question briefly and shook her head. Then she took out a card she'd gotten from a young female staffer at the retirement home. Upon inserting it into a card reader, it displayed an animation of song and poetry. It was an early education product.

Fang Ling handed the card to Fang Zhao.

Fang Zhao was confused. "This is for me?"

Fang Ling blinked her eyes and said, "Big Brother Zhao, will you sign it for me?"

Fang Zhao froze then said with a laugh, "I don't have a pen. I'll sign it for you when we get home."

When they got home, Little Bell brought out some 20 similar cards she had collected and had Fang Zhao sign all of them. She was still young and didn't have an idol, but she had heard someone say that if you meet your idol, you should get his or her signature. In Little Bell's eyes, Fang Zhao, who had bought her tons of candy, was her idol.

Fang Yu and Fang Yi joined the party. They found cards of their own and had Fang Zhao sign them.

"Big Brother Zhao, did you compose the first three movements of the '100-Year Period of Destruction' series?" Fang Yu asked.

"What do you think?" Fang Zhao said.

"Haha, I have no idea. But you don't have to explain, Big Brother Zhao. I read online about the confidentiality rules for virtual idol staffers."

Fang Yu thought the mainstream press speculation was right—the credits Silver Wing had revealed were a front. The real composer had yet to be unveiled.

Who was it?

Ming Cang had suggested it was just one person and not an entire team. The answer had to wait until the release of the fourth movement.

Still, not everyone could be a front man. From the perspective of Fang Yu and his siblings, Fang Zhao was already a stud for being able to take credit as a producer, even

if he was being used as cover.

After Memorial Day, Fang Zhao spent another three days in Yanbei before returning to Qi'an.

As the launch of the Rising Dragon online poll neared, Yanzhou's Big Three entertainment companies started jockeying for position. They rolled out their respective online ad campaigns. The entertainment media was caught up in a frenzy, as if journalists had been injected with amphetamine.

Huangzhou.

Rising Dragon headquarters.

"Online voting in the fifth continent has begun. Next up is Yanzhou. They have three candidates this year?"

"Yanzhou is typically a two-way race. That's because the third member of the Big Three, Silver Wing, never produces virtual idols, but they did this year. I think the idol was tailor-made for the race for the endorsement deal."

"Regardless of Silver Wing's actual intentions, in terms of voting, an extra competitor means more news. This is good for us."

The Rising Dragon editor in charge of the online poll called the publication's Yanzhou bureau. "Get ready to launch online voting in Yanzhou on Feb. 8."

Feb. 8 was also the release date for the last movement in the "100-Year Period of Destruction" series.

Chapter 72

Fourth Movement: "Eternal"

On Feb 8, in the early hours of the morning, the internet was abuzz.

The three big entertainment companies had mobilized all their stars to campaign for votes. Polar Light, being the only successful virtual idol that Silver Wing Media had produced, received the full backing of the entire company.

Regardless of whether they were fresh newcomers or A-listers who had finally made it to the top, they all chipped in to campaign for votes. In all the years of Yanzhou's history, this was the first time on the virtual idol stage that all three big entertainment companies were having a public competition.

However, there was a different group of people who were paying close attention to the new song releases at 8 a.m.

At over 160 years old, Xue Jing did not follow his usual routine of heading to the garden downstairs for his morning stroll. Instead, he sat in his study and turned on his audio and projection systems as he waited for 8 a.m to arrive.

On his table was a paper notebook and a pen. He wanted to jot down his thoughts and analysis moments after he finished listening to the fourth movement. Compared to electronic recording methods, Xue Jing was more inclined toward manual records, as they had more feeling.

Beside the table was a pile of books. Some were a compilation of Xue Jing's teaching materials, and some were books written by other people that he used as reference. Many people of the same profession felt that Xue Jing's mission to compile analysis and production guides for symphonic musical compositions was an unwise decision. This genre was too arrogant and unpopular. Talented people in this field tended to conceal themselves. Publicly writing them out would not amount to much, as they were viewed as specious nonsense. From past textbooks of symphonic music, some people who purchased the books would give a poor review after flipping through and whoever compiled it would get a scolding. It was simply an arduous and unrewarding task.

Yet every time Xue Jing heard this sort of talk, he would only smile. When people asked for names of other contributing composers, Xue Jing would only smile but not reply.

As Xue Jing analyzed the three movements of the "Period of Destruction" series, the deeper he delved, the more apprehension and admiration he felt. He admired Fang Zhao's drive and ability and was astonished at his audacity and progress. In the three movements, many times there were unfashionable methods that had been neglected for years, but in those three movements, they perfectly fit in the movement and expressed the artistic concept.

"Just one more left," Xue Jing muttered.

Actually, after hearing the first two movements, one could understand the intention and purpose of the creator. The third movement's theme was war and the fourth movement should be a conclusion.

At the stroke of eight, Xue Jing turned on his audio visual platform and adjusted his equipment, and the music video appeared clearly before him.

The image displayed a somber scene at the crack of dawn. Continuing at the end of the third movement, the comprehensive fighting continued. However, the scene was not as bleak and gloomy. The essence of the music was not as urgent and restrictive as before.

At the beginning of the fourth movement, an alternating rhythm appeared. Differing by a semitone, the two tones were the opposite: one dark and gloomy, one bright and upbeat. The sounds of a treble violin and double bass as different as heaven and earth created a vastness and made the imagery of the music distinct. The short brief notes portrayed the fierce wind at daybreak that chilled one to the bone. Every strand of hair on the body felt as it was feeling the flow of air. The tremor of a cello added to the emphasis as the killer intent emitted from this battle to survive made one shiver.

The bodies of tree men who were on an all-out attack were splattered with mud. Every branch seemed to be oozing thick blood and killing intent as they carried their valiant selves forward in a reckless fashion, attacking every savage beast within their sights. These beasts that plundered their place in the world!

A trombone and a woodwind score combined together alongside some muted whistles from a trumpet. The originally stiff tone became rough and bleak as the

savage beasts became timid, cowering under the relentless counter attacks of the tree men. The brutal beasts that were unparalleled in slaughter became weak and exhausted as the cold wind of the morning screamed through and they trembled in fear.

Unlike before, the strength of the woodwind tones was gradually accumulating.

In the image, the tree men were pushing on as the sinister-looking beasts were put on the back foot and forced to retreat. In the midst of a rough-sounding brass whistle, the eerie and vicious beasts reached their final struggle, snarling and snapping, appearing fierce while they were actually cowardly at heart.

A fist enveloped by a biting-cold killing intent locked on to the front beast's heart area. Like a pike that had been grinded sharp, it pierced through without the slightest hesitation.

The savage beast that had just been attacked flew through the air in an arc and landed in a nearby lake. The surface of the lake split apart as the beast landed in it, struggling for two seconds before sinking.

On the surface of the lake, there were also some broken tree branches, scattered about messily.

The figure took a look at the lake.

A powerful string symphony started, carrying a sorrow that had been held for so long. Yet at the same time, the unceasing string symphony also brought a sense of tenacity and unyielding spirit.

Compared to brass and percussion, string had a sort of gentleness, but it was not invariably gentle. Amidst the gentleness, it could be firm. The sorrow was no longer derived from them being weak but had transformed into a firm and explosive form.

The figure in the image turned around and began running toward the hilltop facing him. As the figure ran up the hill, sparse wild grass swayed in the wind brought about by the figure's footsteps.

Beast after beast was beaten and stomped on.

The coordination between the tree men was seamless. This was the result of an

understanding borne by countless fights to the death.

Step by step, they moved forward. Step by step, they climbed higher.

When the figure finally reached the summit, in the midst of the combination between trombone and woodwind scores, the woodwind tones that had been gradually accumulating eventually exploded.

The woodwind score separated by three octaves played, assembling a vast tone, describing the view from the summit of the hill: wide and extensive.

The battlefield at the bottom was littered with corpses of both beasts and trees. Compared to the start, most of the silhouettes moving about on the ground were not the plundering beasts but the tree man's fellow comrades.

Everywhere, in all directions, were the brave figures of comrades in combat.

A bugle call signaled the harmony in full swing. The reverberating sounds signified that this war was finally reaching its epilogue. The drumbeats were no longer that urgent, now raising one's spirit. The beating of the timpani that people of the New Era were familiar with was the foundation. A more primitive drumbeat combined. This was music from a different time and space fusing magically and perfectly.

It seemed as if they had survived through an endless winter without any sunshine. When the figure on the summit raised his head, he watched as the clouds slowly parted and the golden beam of sunlight shone down from the heavens. The pair of bloodied fists that had just slayed countless beasts began to tremble nonstop. In his eyes, it was clear that he was moved after enduring silently for so long. His eyes were brimming with tears.

The sunlight seemingly brought about a scorching warmth as it melted away all the coldness in them brought about by the war and touched the most gentle parts of their hearts.

They had last seen this sort of sunlight a long time ago. It represented warmth and hope.

They had been a group of ordinary creatures who had endured suffering on the land they stood on. They had experienced unimaginable hardships and despair.

In their most dire of straits, they had made a stand in the frigid land and won themselves freedom and a new life, but what they wanted to win... was a world!

The turbulent feelings erupted as a rallying cry came from the summit of the hill. The majestic music matched up with a resounding male voice seemingly bringing about immeasurable strength, as if rallying the entire world.

In the middle of the brass and string ensemble, an impassioned harmony signified the merriment of seeing the sunlight once again, celebrating this hard fought victory.

The drawing of the bow on a violin. As if the time had come for the world to recover and be reborn.

The once muddy water of the lake became clear as the dithering clouds in the sky reflected off it. Broken branches and remains that were floating on the lake had all but sunk in. The previously sparse ground beside the lake was now covered with an exuberant underbrush.

The tempo was vigorous and free from inhibitions as the drumbeats blended. Tree men both big and small ran around, stepping in the now lush grassland. There was no hint of urgency or tension, only joyous excitement.

"From today onward, those savage and bloodthirsty figures will never be seen again.

From today onward, they need not worry about being homeless and running for their lives.

From today onward, the world will become a new world!

So, is it possible to rest yet?

It is."

In the vigorous harmony, the woodwind impetus was powerful and expansive. The string score was continuously rising. The forceful drum beats beat down. Combined together, it seemed like it was foretelling the scene that was about to unfold.

The figure right at the front of the tree men stood up on a high slope, watching his idle and free comrades all around. Treading on the soft soil below, he let out a bright and relieved smile.

Under the warm sunlight, he relaxed and extended both arms, his fists finally spread apart. His arms became branches stretching out in all directions. His legs became roots, penetrating deep into the soil and taking root.

Seemingly reborn.

The tree men all around after finding a suitable place, spread out the fists and arms and took root. Under the sunlight, the bare branches sprouted out tender green leaves filled with the iridescence of life.

Some exotic humming of a man was accompanied by electronic music as a brand new, rich, and diverse world unfolded.

Sounds produced by different instruments of the string family played different roles. Like the departed spirits of those who had sacrificed themselves in the war were looking down from above on the new world. It also seemed like the quiet muttering of those who had never experienced this new life before and the complicated and excited voices of the tree men who had once again taken root.

The corpses from the war were covered by dust and newly grown vegetation. That catastrophic war had destroyed many lives, but at the same time, it fostered a newly awakened life.

The earth, full of opportunities, had freshness, yet it also had decay, but at least it was expanding in a proper direction.

From above, looking down on the boundless land, the whole world had once more become tranquil and peaceful, as if the catastrophic calamity had never befallen.

But beneath the peaceful appearance of this world were the tenacious souls who had survived this difficult time.

"What is eternal?

How long is an eternity?

No one knows.

If another calamity happens, they will rise up once anew.

Life goes on without stopping. War does not stop it."

In the image, the scene zoomed through the land that already had flourishing forests. In the places where sunlight did not reach, there was no haze nor gloom. Only a bright and mystical sky full of stars.

The harmony gradually quieted down. An elegant yet slightly rueful and distressed string score slowly became lighter. The deep and low male voice gradually dissipated in the midst of the strings.

Words appeared on the screen.

Lead character: Polar Light

Species: Longxiang Tianluo

Song Title: "100-Year Period of Destruction", Fourth Movement: "Eternal"

Producer: Fang Zhao

Production Team: Polar Light project team: Fang Zhao, Zu Wen, Song Miao, Pang Pusong, Zeng Huang, Wan Yue, Fu Yingtian, Stiller, Zhang Yu, Rodney.

A Silver Wing Media release.

...

Xue Jing stared at the list of names on the screen, sighing and shaking his head. Partly in disbelief and partly glad that he had found a gem.

"Fang Zhao, that little fellow!"

Rocking his head, Xue Jing picked up a pen and wrote this in his notebook:

"Polar Light, from an ordinary peaceful creature all the way till he led the colony to counter attack, was an epic journey. Every melody in the movement brought about an intense realism and was stunning. As if the creator had actually experienced it for himself."

Chapter 73

Unexpected Foreign Aid

When all four movements of the "100-Year Period of Destruction" series had finally been completed and released, those specializing in music turned their focus to analysing it.

Yanzhou Music Association, widely regarded as the industry's most authoritative organization, had a post on their production, "Voice of Yanzhou." On their home page, Dina, a deputy head of the music association, had written an evaluation.

"Is it the pursuit of life or the pondering of the spirit? In the '100-Year Period of Destruction,' the techniques included in the four epic movements have given rise to a new round of investigative probing..."

Shortly after, other professionals followed with their own analysis.

"Explaining the golden points of the fourth movement in the '100-Year Period of Destruction'..."

"Today, where music is so commercialized, symphonic music welcomes yet another peak..."

Other than professionals involved with the industry, yet another group of people were also paying close attention to the music releases.

The medical team setup to observe Ming Ye's condition had been waiting. From their point of view, the four movements constituted to an entire course of treatment. As soon as the fourth movement was released, they entered a busy stage. The Hull virus was researched by the whole world and seemed to be a difficult problem. It had always seemed as if there was a door blocking the way of research. Now it was as if they had their hands on a set of complete keys to open the door. How much further they could step inside was all up to them.

However, only music industry professionals and medical professionals were following this piece of news. The attention of the rest of the populace was online, following the

highly discussed voting battle and other entertainment related topics.

Rising Dragon's branch in Yanzhou had set up the voting platform. Silver Wing's Polar Light, Tongshan's Mi Yu, and Neon Culture's Andy Leo, these three popular idols were up for votes.

"Who is going to win the endorsement deal for 'Battle of the Century'?"

Previously, some people had said that even if Silver Wing Media produced a virtual idol this time, the competition would still be a two-way battle between the virtual idol powerhouses Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment. But looking at the numbers on the voting board, the distance between them was not that large.

"The gap might seem close, but just wait and see. In two days, there will be an obvious gap. Right now, all three big companies have mobilized their personalities to campaign for votes. In two days, when the buzz dies down, we will then be able to see the influence of each individual virtual idol. Polar light relied on the four movements to get popular, but in terms of influence, he definitely is not as strong as the other two," a reviewer from the media deduced.

Whether it was Mi Yu or Andy Leo, both had been developing for two years already. Two years accumulated to give rise to where they were now. As for Polar Light, whether it was his appearance or the debut appearance, it was somewhat a novelty and not in line with mainstream tastes.

"Polar Light's fan base is mainly made up of older people or those with enriching military experiences who would know how to appreciate this sort of music. Younger people will not like it."

However, these remarks received a slap in their faces shortly after.

At the voting platform, each candidate had a message board.

Silver Wing Media's operations team watched, dumbfounded, as the message board on the voting platform for "Polar Light" was continuously flooded with comments.

"Did you employed fake fans?" one operation staff member asked another.

"Nope. Weren't we supposed to gauge the situation first?"

The operation staff member seated in front turned his head and said, "Secondary school students have a long memorial holiday. They are on vacation. It is just them having too much free time."

At this moment, those watching the voting for the endorsement deal realized that from Silver Wing Media's Polar Light's column came a flood of comments in a different style.

"For the New World!"

"For the tree men's glory!"

"Tree men have nothing to fear!"

"The enemy is crafty, to actually call for backup!"

"Stand firm, brothers! Second year of Qi'an No. 1 Secondary School leading troops to provide assistance!"

"Qi'an No. 12 Secondary School contingent reporting!"

"Yanxi No. 6 Secondary School contingent reporting!"

"Eh, fancy meeting a schoolmate here."

"Those behind, brothers from Yandong, Yannan, Yanbei, hurry and catch up!"

"Oh! I have enrolled, my imaginary branch fell off!"

"Pick it up! Comrades, catch your imaginary branches."

...

The masses observing the continuous rolling comments: "..."

"Every word is a drama," someone moaned.

"Getting too engrossed in shows. To really think they are tree men covered in branches from head to toe? Why don't they say that their heads have started blooming?"

Nevertheless, the bizarre style of comments continued.

"Magu city, follow me!"

"Where is Jinggang city's squadron?!"

"Soldier on, reinforcements will arrive at any time!"

"Leizhou reinforcements reporting in!"

"..."

"..."

This comment that had just appeared not only made those who had been playing about happily stop, it also caught the attention of the observing masses, as well as the companies.

"Leizhou? Renault's Leizhou?"

"How did people from Leizhou end up here?"

Originally, only a small number came from Leizhou to join the fun, but following that, more and more people from Leizhou appeared at the message boards.

"Which superstar celebrity of Silver Wing Media managed to do this?" some tried to guess.

But quickly, these thoughts were easily denied after thinking it through.

An intercontinentally developed superstar celebrity would not enter the fray that easily. Participating in such an event would bring about much more influence, even to the point of completely controlling votes. An internationally recognized superstar would have taken a lot of time and effort to reach the top, and their company would not rashly play their card. Besides, the company's control over such superstars would not be strong. Whether the company said it was for employment relations or for collaborations, the company could not forcefully make such a request.

Therefore, this kind of voting was normally limited to within the continent, and participating in campaigning were only the companies' A-listers and those below. In terms of influence, there were limitations, and there was the blockade of foreign media too. Generally, people from other continents would not take part.

But what was happening now?

"Why are there people from Leizhou?"

Neon culture's staff thus enquired with Rising Dragon's branch about such large scale intercontinental campaigning. How was it not against the rules?

Rising Dragon's Yanzhou branch said that the rules and regulations had never been restricted to the region. This round's Yanzhou voting platform also had no restrictions regarding voters from other continents.

If one had the capability to garner votes across the world, Rising Dragon would approve with two thumbs up. This was a testament to one's popularity.

In no time, everyone found out that, on Leizhou's side, it was Wireless Media that was campaigning for votes.

The industry's media began to guess that Silver Wing Media and Wireless Media surely had some secret transactions!

At the same time, Leizhou's Wireless Media had contacted Silver Wing, and they were discussing collaboration matters.

It did not involve music. Wireless Media was a film company. They still had no plans to disrupt Leizhou's music industry. The collaboration they had in mind was regarding a film arrangement.

Zaro's Wireless Media had started preparations for the next movie. However, Zaro was not trying to flatter anyone. Rather, he wanted to curry favor for his great-grandfather.

The third movement had gotten him an influential shortcut. Thus, Zaro was serious now, spending a considerable sum to engage a well-known scriptwriter and director. He had decided to film a movie depicting exalted heroes of the war. Zaro himself was going to be acting, and he was brushing up on his acting skills. At the same time, he instructed the company to contact Silver Wing Media regarding a collaboration. Silver Wing's Polar Light had only started a while back, right? Movies and films will surely come about, so why not collaborate with Wireless Media?

Generally, Leizhou's film companies would use their local actors. Regardless whether they were real people or virtual idols, using actors from their own continent made it

easier to receive the support of the viewing masses. After all, actors had their fan bases within their own continent, making it easier to garner box office sales. However, Zaro's aim now was not to earn money but rather to win the favor of his great-grandfather. When the fourth movement came out, Zaro used certain means to get the final movement of the "100-Year Period of Destruction" series and send it straight to his great-grandfather. To appear frequently before his great-grandfather would bring about many benefits.

Nowadays, whatever pleased his great-grandfather, Zaro would do. His great-grandfather did not mind people from foreign continents, so he would not either. It did not matter if he earned less or paid more as long as he was able to be in the good books of his great-grandfather, he would have achieved his purpose.

Helping to campaign for votes was a show of Wireless Media's sincerity.

Even when it got noisy outside, Fang Zhao paid no heed. He sat in his office writing down his composing thoughts as well as some techniques and feelings he used when composing.

He had written some before, and today he would write down the remainder. As for others, he would decide when the time came.

After finishing, he sent the electronic file to Xue Jing.

Somewhere in Qi'an, Xue Jing was writing down his analysis of the fourth movement when he heard a notification and saw that he had received a file from Fang Zhao. After reading through it, Xue Jing just stood blankly on the spot.

For the textbook he was compiling, Xue Jing wanted to discuss with Fang Zhao about his composing philosophy and sources of inspiration. He hoped that Fang Zhao could impart a little of his experience, allowing more people to come in contact with music of this style and learn a few techniques. How much Fang Zhao wanted to impart was all up to him. Xuejing had never expected Fang Zhao to write so much.

A textbook like this normally contained over 100,000 words, at most 200,000. The book would also contain various musical scores and analytical diagrams. Xue jing had only planned to write about 100,000 words, touching more on newer topics that were never raised and briefly mentioning older topics.

The file sent over by Fang Zhao contained 30,000 words! That was already a third of

Xue Jing's estimated word limit. Moreover, it all contained Fang Zhao's production experiences as well as composing techniques. All that was written was not at all vague. Even though he had included ancient techniques, all his ancient and modern musical techniques were explained very thoroughly.

When Xue Jing finished reading, he immediately contacted Fang Zhao.

"Fang Zhao, do you know the implication of what you have written?!"

One could start a paid training class or accept a few disciples as a means of extra income. Lots of people in the industry did so. However, Fang Zhao had actually written all of his methods down! When this was all placed into a publicly available textbook, it would not bring Fang Zhao as much income.

"I know," Fang Zhao replied. "Are there any problems with the content?"

"There are no issues. I just wanted to ensure that you are really all right with compiling all this?" Xue Jing asked once again.

"Whether to compile or not, the decision lies solely in your hands."

Fang Zhao knew what Xue Jing meant. It was just that he had chosen to share his own experiences and techniques publicly.

He did not know how long he would get to stay in this world. He was grateful for having the chance to once again open his eyes and see the world.

During the end of days, he had thought that, if he had the chance, he wished to pass on every single one of his skills and techniques, if at all possible. Who would not want to live longer?

This life was an unlikely accident. Not everyone would get a chance like this.

He would use whatever experiences and techniques he had learned in his lifetime and leave them in a book that would be passed on to future generations. He hoped that this time, on his gravestone, the words "A composer" would be on it.

Xue Jing sighed deeply upon receiving Fang Zhao's confirmation.

"...I got it."

Hanging up, Xue Jing remained silent for a while. He then removed Fang Zhao's name from the column for "Contributors" and placed him in an empty column labeled "Deputy Editor."

On the other end, after the call with Xue Jing ended, Fang Zhao received yet another call from Duan Qianji.

"Come to the top floor office. Ming Cang wishes to thank you in person."

Chapter 74

The Real Composer

After the fourth movement was released, Ming Cang spent some time with his son alongside the medical team checking on the progress of the treatment. As soon as his son had shown signs of a reaction, he came over to Silver Wing media looking for Duan Qianji.

Ever since the first movement had been released, he had wanted to meet the composer of the piece. Just as he had previously said, the composer behind the four movements was like a god to him and his family. The composer had pulled them out from their despair that had lasted for a long time, giving them hope. Therefore, Ming Cang wanted to thank that composer in person.

But previously, Silver Wing Media had continuously prevented him from doing so. Furthermore, they did not want any disturbances for the composer before all the movements were completed. Thus, Ming Cang had waited and waited until this day, when the four movements had all been released, and he hurriedly rushed over. Besides, Silver Wing Media were going to publicly announce the name list of the real project team, so why not let him thank the composer first?

After Duan Qianji had informed that composer to come up, Ming Cang felt somewhat nervous. Perhaps it was the excitement that he was going to meet his benefactor, or perhaps it was the expectation that he was going to meet some great master.

Drinking another cup of water, Ming Cang heard Duan Qianji's office door open. Raising his head to look, he saw a young man walking in. Behind him, there was no one else.

Ming Cang knew who Fang Zhao was. He had checked up on all the names listed on the end credits of the music video and thus knew the youngster who had been placed as the front. However, this was their company policy, so he did not say anything. He guessed that, from what he knew about Duan Qianji, this youngster that had been chosen to act as a shield would have received lots of benefits as well. Ming Cang was just here to see his benefactor and did not intend to involve himself with any of Silver Wing's internal affairs.

Ming Cang gave Fang Zhao a kindly glance, like that of an elder. His look was partially encouraging, partially sympathizing, and the remainder was courtesy. Nodding his head slightly, Ming Cang retracted his gaze and continued to wait. In his heart he wondered which great master from the industry would show up. However, the techniques and methods used in the four movements were unfamiliar. Within the industry, he had asked at least half but had had no luck. Could they have been under a confidentiality agreement and thus did not dare to tell the truth? But seriously, there was not even a little bit of information.

Who could it be? Ming Cang pondered hard.

Fang Zhao was puzzled by the look Ming Cang had given him. He walked over to a chair and sat down.

Duan Qianji coughed lightly. "President Ming."

Ming Cang looked over, not understanding the situation.

Duan Qianji pointed at Fang Zhao. "This is the person you are looking for. The composer of the four movements in the '100-Year Period of Destruction.'"

Ming Cang: "..."

He glanced at the seated Fang Zhao then twisted his neck over to look at Duan Qianji. Seeing Duan Qianji nodding once again, Ming Cang's jaw nearly dropped to the ground.

So the shield that was placed in front of the masses by Silver Wing was actually an armored tank capable of besieging a city?!

Before coming, Ming Cang had thought about all the possibilities. Whether it was someone he knew, whether it was someone he had good ties with, whether local or foreign, whether famous or unknown. He had spent a lot of time thinking this through, but when he really heard Duan Qianji confirming it, Ming Cang was momentarily shocked into silence.

After around a minute of silence...

"Fang Zhao?"

Ming Cang still found it slightly difficult to imagine. This was totally unexpected. Just

listening to the four movements, the thought had never crossed his mind that the young person who was not even half his age would actually be the one he was looking for.

"That's me," Fang Zhao replied.

"The composer of all four movements of the '100-Year Period of Destruction?'"

"That's right."

"...That is unexpected." After saying that, he felt that his words might have been a little inappropriate. It sounded as if he was looking down on Fang Zhao. Ming Cang hurriedly said, "Sorry, what I meant to say is that it is rare to see someone so young produce that sort of work. It just feels so astonishing..."

As he went on, Ming Cang lowered his head and laughed, took a deep breath, got up and bowed toward Fang Zhao. "Thank you! And I apologize for my lack of manners just now."

Ming Cang meant the look he had given Fang Zhao when he entered. Thinking back about his gaze that was filled with sympathy, Ming Cang felt a bit embarrassed.

"You are welcome, President Ming. I'm just a composer of music. Being able to contribute to the treatment of the H1N1 virus was an unexpected blessing. I am glad too." Fang Zhao indicated for Ming Cang to sit down and talk. Now, he was still just a twenty plus year old nobody, it would not be right for him to let the deputy president of the highly esteemed Yanzhou Music Association remain standing.

"It's not just you. Back then, when Professor Xue first met me, he was very surprised too," Fang Zhao told him.

"Professor Xue? Is Xue Jing Professor Xue?" Ming Cang asked.

"Yes."

Ming Cang knew that Duan Qianji would not lie to him. And with Xue Jing's name, it verified the authenticity of this matter.

The four movements of "100-Year Period of Destruction" were really composed by a recently graduated youngster in his 20s!

After confirming, Ming Cang dragged Fang Zhao away and he talked for quite a bit. Not as an elder or as a deputy head, rather he conversed with Fang Zhao as a fellow music professional and as a father. He told Fang Zhao about the research into Fang Zhao's works and about his son's treatment progress.

They chatted for an hour and only stopped when Ming Cang received a call. A friend from abroad had arrived in Yanzhou and was looking for Ming Cang, so he had to leave. Before leaving, Ming Chang thanked Fang Zhao once more, and they exchanged contact details. Ming Cang also said that he would drop by whenever he was free to look for Fang Zhao for some discussions.

As Ming Cang left Silver Wing Tower, he made a call to Xue Jing.

"Teacher Xue! You know that Fang Zhao?!" Although Ming Cang might have been a deputy head of Yanzhou Music Association, when facing the elder generation like Xue Jing, he was still very respectful. When Ming Cang was still schooling, Xue Jing had taught him. In a more formal setting, he would address Xue Jing as Great Master.

Receiving the call from Ming Cang, Xue Jing was caught by surprise at first. But after remembering the situation with Ming Cang's son, he understood.

"I know him. You got the truth from Duan Qianji?" Xue Jing laughingly said.

"I'm just leaving there. What a big shock." Ming Cang was also smiling. "It was really unimaginable."

On his way, Ming Cang thought back to his discussion with Fang Zhao. He realized when Fang Zhao was face to face with him that it did not feel like he was talking with a deputy head of Yanzhou Music Association. There was no nervousness or restraint coming from Fang Zhao as they conversed. It was really just a talk between two ordinary people who shared a common industry.

"You do know that I received an assignment to compile a textbook," Xue Jing said.

"Yes, I heard some mention of it within the community. Many said that you were getting foolish with age." Ming Cang was in good spirits and joked with his old teacher. "But at your age, it seems like you no longer care about reputation or benefits."

Xue Jing sighed ruefully. "Oh, I am foolish indeed, but there is someone even more foolish."

Ming Cang could hear gratification and admiration from those words. "Who are you talking about?"

"Just Fang Zhao."

"Oh. Is he one of your contributors?" Xue Jing was compiling a textbook on symphonic structures. Ming Cang understood the logic of wanting to use the four movements as an actual example.

"No. He is the deputy editor. If not for Silver Wing's plans, I would still want to publicly announce it right away.

Xue Jing briefly went over with Ming Cang the contents of the file that Fang Zhao had sent him. He trusted Ming Cang's character and was not afraid that he would divulge anything.

Hearing Xue Jing's unconcealable delight and appreciation through the communication device, the originally smiling face of his became serious.

"Ming Cang, I hope to pass on something genuinely meaningful and valuable. And not some elaborate assembling of shoddy work." This was what Xue Jing said to Ming Cang before he ended to call.

An hour later.

On the homepage of Ming Cang's personal social platform, a piece of information was posted.

"Today I got to meet the composer of the '100-Year Period of Destruction' series. A surprising yet admirable person."

Ming Cang's post triggered a buzz within the industry. But whoever asked, Ming Cang only replied with this: "Everyone will get to know the mysterious composer in two days. Silver Wing Media will publicly announce it."

Ming Cang's words were quoted by many media reports. Silver Wing also had intentions to push forth with it.

They wanted to guarantee Polar Light's popularity and continuous topics for the voting during the next few days. Other than these few bits of news, they also wanted

to guarantee as much media coverage as possible.

Thus, there was going to be Polar Light's first interview. This sort of interview was to let people understand this virtual idol and bridge the distance, so he would not just be limited to an image in a music video. This was a channel to attract more fans and boost popularity and was advantageous for future development.

Polar Light's interview had been arranged by Silver Wing Media beforehand. Whether they could attract audiences or boost his popularity, it was in the hands of a Silver Wing team that was more experienced than Fang Zhao. The person in charge was more experienced as well. The other members of the project team only needed to work according to the arrangements and did not need Fang Zhao to keep an eye on things.

As for Fang Zhao, he was called up by Xue Jing to help compile materials for the textbook. Fang Zhao's thoughts and techniques written in the file could not be pasted straight into the book. They still needed some amendments. As Fang Zhao was purely a composer, he had no experience with compiling and writing books.

Xue Jing found communicating online to be too much of a hassle. Hence, when he asked Fang Zhao about his working schedule and found out that Fang Zhao had no pressing matters to attend to personally, Xue Jing pulled Fang Zhao over making it easy for them to discuss and work together.

On the second day after Polar Light's first interview was announced, the fourth day of online voting, A Silver Wing Media representative officially dropped a "bombshell."

A beaming presenter appeared on screen and said, "Everyone has been paying attention to the production team behind this virtual idol, trying to guess the number of great masters that were behind the '100-Year Period of Destruction.' The following name list contains the real members behind the scenes of the 'Polar Light' project team, including the composer of the four movements."

On the screen, the two presenters faded, and a big and bright credits list appeared.

"Polar Light Project Producer: Fang Zhao

The '100-Year Period of Destruction' four movements composer: Fang Zhao

The '100-Year Period of Destruction' four movements songwriter: Fang Zhao

Vocals: Pang Pusong

Main production team members: Fang Zhao, Zu Wen, Song Miao, Pang Pusong, Zeng Huang, Wan Yue, Fu Yingtian, Stiller, Zhang Yu, Rodney."

All the audiences online: "...” Are you f*cking with me?!

Chapter 75

How Scary

Let us compare the ending subtitles of the four movements of the Music Video "100-Year period of destruction" with Silver Wing's latest news.

Was there a difference?

Was there?

Had they just added songwriter and composer to the four movements of "100-Year Period of Destruction"?!

"What treachery. After I heard the gossip, I had been waiting here since early morning, only to be made a fool!"

"This is merely a scheme to make a fool out of others, as there isn't any change in the music video's subtitles."

This was not the end, though, as one scrolled up the subtitles, it revealed the undisplayed detailed name list. For example, remixers, classification songwriters, recorders, background singers, consultants, or whoever and whatever department that contributed to the whole spectrum of the project, in order of importance.

"Why does symphony remixer and electronic music songwriters only show Fang Zhao's name?"

"And there is only one consultant?! Fang Zhao?"

Do you think we will believe that?

Hehe...

We. Will. Not. Reply!

"Is there a problem with the producers, composers, or consultants?"

"What about the consultant team that was mentioned? Why is there only one person?"

"I am guessing Silver Wing purposefully found a few people with the same names. Yes, this must it. Haha, I am so quick witted, which is why I can identify all the similar names!"

The media who were initially enthusiastic about the headline grabbing news were also stunned. Now, how were they going to write the news with this?

Was Silver Wing trying to make a fool out of others early in the morning?

The editor-in-chief of Qi'an city's famous media company Prairie Fire, Qian Cheng, drummed his fingers while silently looking at the words on the company's television screen.

"Boss, what do we do? Should we issue an article? I noticed that others have already published," said a staff member beside him.

Qian Cheng looked at the sent message from his employee. Written on it were different categories of news from Yanzhou, all ready to trend, no matter if they was real or fake, ramblings, gossip, or even conspiracy theories.

"Wait a while," Qian Cheng said while setting the messages aside. Prairie Fire was not some shortsighted media company. Though they might publish rubbish at times, they still needed the rubbish to attract readers. He understood that there were a significant number of readers who would read his news. Hence, they should not do anything rash just because of Silver Tower's ridiculous issue.

Two minutes later, Qian Cheng received two sets of news, which turned his grave expression into a smile. He handed the two messages over to his editorial staff.

"We can publish now!"

Though many people might have received a rude awakening from Silver Wing's news, at this point of time, they still tended to believe Prairie Fire more.

In these turbulent times when other small and medium media companies were issuing unbelievable news, Prairie Fire chose to survey the situation as usual. Their patience was thus rewarded with the issuing of a statement citing a new direction from Yanzhou Music Association's deputy head, Dina.

Only two minutes had passed since Silver Wing's "bombshell" when Dina had announced her views on the issue.

"During the issuance of the second movement, I once said that, behind the scenes, there was an excellent symphony remixer and electronic music composer. Moreover, I have tried to derive an explanation for this by asking many others on the noble style that is unheard of in the industry, but I was left without an answer. Only through Ming Cang yesterday was I able to understand the truth.

"I always thought that the background symphony remixer and electronic music composer had to be pioneers of the industry. However, it now seems that not only are they the same person, but he is also a fresh graduate that graduated from university less than a year ago! The youngster will indeed be a force to be reckoned with in the future!"

A momentary confusion spread across the people who read this news.

"What should we make of the situation?"

"Is Dina trying to mislead others just like Silver Wing?"

During the heated discussion, Prairie Fire again published another piece of cited news, but this time, it was from not Dina but Ming Cang.

Ming Cang had posted a photo he'd taken with Fang Zhao before he left Silver Wing. Underneath, he'd written, "As mentioned, I met my benefactor two days ago. A surprising yet admirable person indeed."

"So the person beside Ming Cang in the photo is Fang Zhao? The same Fang Zhao mentioned in the subtitles?"

"There is no doubt that it is him! I graduated with him! I can provide proof!"

The two public issuances from Prairie Fire caused much hesitation among the public.

Since both Yanzhou Music Association's deputy heads Ming Cang and Dina had already given their assurances, it couldn't be a scam, right?

Did this mean it had to be true? Silver Wing had not just lumped people of the same name together?

Was Silver Wing's fictitious producer really the same Fang Zhao as shown in the music video's credits? Composing, songwriting, remixing, and consultancy were all done by the same person?

"Sigh, how scary is that!"

After the assurances from these two high-ranking music industry officials, the layman could only marvel at the brilliance of this young musical talent. However, those in similar professions felt shocked, as they found it hard to believe that someone could achieve such an impossible task.

It seemed like Prairie Fire's previous prediction of a famous consultant backing Silver Wing's production was entirely wrong.

Two professors who'd given their comments regarding the first movement—Professor Bradley from the Yanzhou University's history faculty, who specialized in the Period of Destruction, and Professor Kou Da from Yanzhou Academy University of Science and Technology, who specialized in animal mutation during the Period of Destruction—both fervently expressed their interest to interview this young consultant, who held simultaneous roles, on academia and also his life story.

Musical professionals who were in the same industry also expressed their disbelief at this news.

"The strong influence of the song, which brings to life the era of the 'Period of Destruction,' can only be produced by someone with extraordinary skills. How can a fresh graduate produce a song that has such strong influence? "

Apart from readers who found it hard to accept this news, even the manager of Silver Wing's Music Composing Department thought that Fang Zhao was an extraordinary musical freak!

Before the recording, Fang Zhao was researching interesting sounds and melodies of the new century and also artistic works from the preceding era. As the computer skills of the 21st century were not that proficient, Fang Zhao had provided guidance to the electronic composers to produce the tune that he expected. In every single movement, with the hundreds of electric instruments and sounds, Fang Zhao simultaneously had taken on the roles of symphony remixer and electronic music composer to produce this brilliant musical piece.

Meanwhile, the former head of Silver Wing's virtual project, Master Glifetz, who was currently resting in Jinggan city, was sick again.

Overshadowed and unable to compete, reality was the best medicine. After hearing the news from the employees back there, he finally gave up all thoughts of going back to Silver Wing. All this while, he had been trying to come to terms with his situation. However, after hearing the news, he once again suffered a huge emotional setback.

Of course, unavoidably, he still gave his opposing views.

"I have analyzed Fang Zhao's previous works, and they do not match up to this style. For the identities of the producers of the '100-Year Period of Destruction,' I still maintain my previous stance."

"There could even be more big news incoming."

"Has anyone checked on the identity of Fang Zhao? We can't just let Dina and Ming Cang guard it without us knowing, right?"

Though some people might have fancied "Hehe, my dear" when it had first appeared on the New Pioneers Chart, in the expert's eyes, there were many more inadequacies than the four movements of the "100-Year Period of Destruction." The difference was merely too vast to compare.

"Though I have heard that Fang Zhao's results have been excellent, we must note that Qi'an Music Academy has many remarkable students. I was also unable to observe anything spectacular about his previous works."

To such suspicions, Qi'an Music Academy quickly issued a reply.

"Some people are just unable to listen to the explanations of others and have a stance of 'As long as I am unable to do it, nobody else can. Hence, you must be the one with the problem, and I am definitely right.' What fools these naysayers are."

At present, the fashionable style of music was different from symphony structures. However, composing was just like cooking. Though one dish might not be your forte, you might be able to produce another dish that is of a high standard. Perhaps Fang Zhao was merely able to find his own forte and was able to grow into it. In the world of art, these things were fairly common. It would be unusual if such a thing did not happen!

Composing, creativity, and epiphanies were very mysterious things. You might be helplessly lost at one moment and bursting with inspiration in the next. One should not look down on others, as there were many talents in the world, though some might take longer than others to shine.

The topic of whether or not Fang Zhao was the true creator of the "100-Year Period of Destruction" was still undergoing a heated debate online. Silver Wing welcomed such discussion. As long as it remained a hot topic, they would naturally find a way to allow observers to vote.

However, Fang Zhao was not in the office over the last two days, as the company did not currently require him to do anything. Moreover, there were lots of media personnel lying in wait near the office. Some were awaiting other celebrities, but some were awaiting him, the latest hot topic.

In the past, when he'd had no reputation, even if his name was included in the credits, no one would come looking for him. Even if he stepped out, he was not afraid of being recognized. Now, even on a public train, he would be approached by others. News on the internet spread too quickly.

Thus, Silver Wing had arranged a private car with a personal driver to fetch him every day from his residency to Xue Jing's house.

He had set off earlier today. Before embarking on the journey to Xue Jing's house, Fang Zhao had told the driver to take him to a bookshop. His notebook was full, and he preferred drafting on a hard copy notebook when composing. He had no fear of it being stolen, as his scores were written in codes that nobody else except himself was able to decipher.

Xue Jing had introduced to him a shop that specialized in selling such hard copy notebooks. Many other producers with similar habits liked to use their notebooks, as it gave them a sense of comfort.

In the antique shop, the shop owner who was beyond his middle-age years hummed a tune while looking at the latest entertainment news. When Fang Zhao stepped into the shop, it so happened that the news simultaneously featured his graduation picture from Qi'an Music Academy.

The shop owner looked at Fang Zhao before turning back to the screen. Recognising

him, he turned back to Fang Zhao and greeted him with a warm smile, "Welcome."

As there were many people who frequented his shop to buy notebooks, including great masters, although he might have been momentarily stunned, he was able to regain his composure fairly quickly.

"Whichever notebooks you like, feel free to browse around. There are samples at the top and pens at the sides for you to test out."

As Fang Zhao did not have any strict criterias on the type of notebooks that he preferred, he merely tested a few samples that Xue Jing introduced him to before making his purchase.

Only when he was leaving the shop did he find out that he was unable to proceed.

Fang Zhao silently watched the people approaching him. His first instinct would have been to draw his gun. Luckily, he did not manage to feel any murderous intent and he remembered that this was not the end of days; thus, he was able to control himself.

"Good day, I am an intern from Prairie Fire's music department. Could you please provide us with your views on the doubts that have been raised against you these past two days? Do you have any other evidence to prove that you are indeed the original pr-producer of the '100-Year Period of Destruction'?" the interviewer stuttered as he looked at Fang Zhao's emotionless eyes.

Although he was unable to notice any obvious anger in Fang Zhao, he suddenly felt a lack of confidence. Even his voice started to break apart, as though someone had pointed a gun to his head. He quickly retracted his hand that was clinging on to Fang Zhao's car upon his gaze.

As Fang Zhao stood by his car door, his eyes swept the surroundings and realized three people surrounding him. Two guys and a girl, all in their 20s. Probably all interns who had not yet graduated either.

As it was the start of February, Qi'an city's weather was not too fine. It was colder than usual and there were strong winds. All three of them were not well protected, with their noses and faces turning red from the cold.

Fang Zhao thought for a moment before passing them a card.

"Photograph it when you are back. And don't forget to send it back to Silver Wing when you are done," Fang Zhao said, stepping back into his car.

The driver quickly sped off, though he had never expected Fang Zhao to be approached by the media here. Why was he getting so much attention when he was not even a famous singer or movie star?

The three personnel who had approached Fang Zhao waited for him to leave before moving their somewhat rigid legs while looking at his card.

"What the f*ck!"

After taking a good look at the design of the card, the person's hand trembled and almost dropped the card before quickly grabbing tightly to it.

"Is... is... is... Is this really true?!"

"Fier... fiery..."

On the small card was an image of a bird in the form of an S-shaped flame, looking as though it was about to ignite and burn others.

Chapter 76

Evidence

Previously, Fiery Bird's sound effects deputy department head You Chuan had left a miniprojector regarding the opening scene of "Battle of the Century" for Fang Zhao. Besides that, he had also given Fang Zhao a storage card that was meant for Fang Zhao to store his completed composition on. It was a very secure means of storage and had been jokingly coined by people within the industry as an 'invitation card.' Only people that had been 'invited' by Fiery Bird could receive such a card.

Duan Qianji had left a message for Fang Zhao the previous day saying that, should anyone approach him, he could just produce the outstanding card with the Fiery Bird insignia emblazoned on it. Duan Qianji had discussed with You Chuan and had obtained his clearance. As long as Fang Zhao did not divulge information regarding the composing of a piece for the opening scene, it was all right. On the other hand, the miniprojector containing the opening scene was not suitable to be handed out.

Duan Qianji had asked You Chuan, "If the card were to fall into anyone else's hands, would there be any consequences?"

You Chuan had confidently replied, "As long as the music piece has not been stored inside, falling into other's hands doesn't matter. Losing it is of no concern either. We have our methods to retrieve it."

When he saw the three interns a while back, Fang Zhao had examined their attire and equipment. The Prairie Fire internship was also real. Besides, the three of them exuded the air of newbies. It did not matter who he handed the card to. Since he had run into them, so be it. After they had taken enough photos and reviewed the authenticity, he would get it back.

Handing it over to Prairie Fire was in line with Duan Qianji's interests.

Fang Zhao was not worried that those people from Prairie Fire would hide the card. Even though the people there really loved finding nonsense topics to attract the attention of the masses, they were still a rather reputable and popular media organization in Yanzhou's entertainment circle. They would not dare to do such a

thing. Besides, Fiery Bird's representative had said that they had means of retrieving it, so there was nothing to worry about.

Fang Zhao had done up a part of the composition for the opening scene of "Battle of the Century." However, he felt that it was not enough and required amendments. Once he was done with Xue Jing's side, he would make the adjustments. Anyway, the matters with Xue Jing were almost done, at most another two days.

Fang Zhao had headed to Xue Jing's place with a laidback attitude. The three interns that had been left behind shivered in the chilly wind. They looked around and hurriedly kept the card, afraid that if they were any slower someone might see them. Luckily, it was still early, and the shop was not that eye-catching, so nobody's attention was here.

Interns like them had been dispersed to various locations. The superiors had given out a few locations and required that someone lie in wait. As editors were busy with work, this task fell to the newly employed interns, and they were made to run errands. At this sort of location where the target might show up, meeting the target was good fortune. Just that they had never expected that their luck today would be so great. Not only catching Fang Zhao at the location they were at but even receiving such an important piece of "evidence."

The three of them hurried back to Prairie Fire's headquarters and looked for a senior that had graduated from the same school as them.

Chief editor Qian Cheng was skimming through newly received information when he saw a young editor under him leading three interns over.

"Boss! My juniors stopped Fang Zhao today!"

"Oh?" Qian Cheng's gaze never left the screen. He just asked, "So what are the results?" He did not place much hope on the interns. Even if they managed to stop the target at the location they were stationed at, there was no guarantee of getting the desired information.

"Fang Zhao did not say anything, he just handed this over." The editor indicated to his juniors to bring it out.

The intern fished out a pouch from his pocket with slight reluctance. Opening the pouch, he took out the card. During the journey back, the three of them had touched

the card a number of times. This was Fiery Bird's storage card! A storage card only granted to certain collaborators! The average person had no chance of touching it!

Qian Cheng, whose eyes were still glued to the screen, shot a little glance to at the side. He paused for a second and stood up with a "whoosh."

"Fiery Bird's storage card! Where did you obtain it?!"

There were no pirated copies of it. Those who tried were already in jail.

"It was given by Fang Zhao," the intern muttered.

"Fang Zhao? Why does Fang Zhao have this?"

Holding the card, Qian Chen circled the spot twice and pointed at the three interns. "Come to my office and give me a detailed breakdown of the entire encounter."

In the afternoon, Prairie Fire released yet another piece of news in the middle of a live broadcast.

"Recently, there has been nonstop discussions regarding the original composer of the four movements in the "100-Year Period of Destruction" series. I believe that many people just like us are waiting for the next compelling testimony. Today, we were fortunate enough to encounter Teacher Fang Zhao and asked for his thoughts regarding the doubts posted online. After that, Teacher Fang Zhao gave us this—"

Four photographs appeared, taken from every angle. On each of the photos was a card. The "S" shaped insignia on the card was very distinct.

Whether it was really a "coincidental encounter," nobody even cared. Everyone's attention was on the four photographs.

A "Teacher Fang Zhao" had meant this for all the detractors familiar with Prairie Fire. Prairie Fire, which was neutral, had taken a stance. Now that they saw the four photographs, they would understand Prairie Fire's opinion.

"What did I just see?!"

"The fabled 'invitation card'?!"

"This is Fang Zhao's? From whom did he get it?!"

"Impressive. Where are the people who yesterday said that Fang Zhao has a powerful hidden backer? In your faces. Fiery Bird never hides in the shadows!"

Fiery Bird was the number one game company worldwide. Every single game produced by them had very high standards. Production requirements were stringent. For sound effects, from interlude music for loading screens, to accompaniment music, all the way to subtle sound effects that would not raise an eyebrow, attention was given to the finest detail. As for background music, that was really high-end and custom made. Fiery Bird would absolutely purchase the exclusive copyright. Other than in the game, it would not appear anywhere else. Certainly "exclusive" and closed off.

The music used in the production of their games alone might not necessarily have good reviews, but Fiery Bird was essentially a game company. They picked music based on the suitability. However, in the past, those that had received invitations were relatively reputable and capable great masters. Therefore, in the eyes of the masses, people capable of receiving an "invitation" were esteemed masters.

First-rate games and top-notch custom-made music, this was the impression the masses had all along.

Regardless of whether or not a composition would be used, receiving an invitation card was a testament to one's capabilities. Going through the list of parties who had received the invitation, which one of them was not at the rank of a great master? Which one of them was not from a rather reputable studio? Even if one had not attained that rank, they would have made people take notice. Never before had there been a fresh graduate in his twenties that had received an invitation.

Especially among Fiery Bird's faithful fans, gamers of every age group, they did not believe that Fiery Bird would make an exception. If Fiery Bird had given Fang Zhao an invitation, there could only be one possibility—Fang Zhao was capable enough to deserve it!

Soon after, Prairie Fire release some statistics and a list of all known invitees in the past 100 years. This year, Fiery Bird had issued quite a number, but the reason was still undisclosed. Qian Cheng had tried to inquire about the information of the other invitees but had had no luck. However, he believed, even if their identities were

publically announced, there still would not be anyone younger than Fang Zhao.

"The youngest invitee in 100 years!"

Fiery bird only had a history of a hundred years, and Fang Zhao, among all the people ever invited, was the youngest!

If he did not have the capability, would Fiery Bird's 100 years of reputation be put on the line?

Although it was not know what sort of sounds Fang Zhao would be making for the game, the number of people doubting that he was the real composer was shrinking.

The evidence displayed in front of their eyes was just too dazzling.

Yanzhou Music Association's deputy head Ming Cang and Dina had already stepped out to verify it. Do you believe it now?

Still not believing?

Good. What about Fiery Bird, then?

Nothing to say now, right?!

However, just when everyone had accepted the fact with great difficulty and discussing Fang Zhao being the youngest ever invitee, yet another piece of news caused a sensation. If it was solely watching this piece of news, the scope of influence would only have been limited to the music industry and the academic world. However, being released now, it caught the attention of all parties.

Xue Jing had posted an article on his social platform mentioning that he was compiling a textbook "New Voices in Symphonic Compilation." The article mentioned the process of his compilation, the contents of his book, as well as people he would like to thank. Included inside were two photographs that caught everyone's attention.

The first was a photograph of Xue Jing in the process of compiling in his study at home. The long-retired Professor Xue Jing was sitting there, leaning over slightly to discuss something with the person at his side, and the person beside Xue Jing was the Fang Zhao that had been dominating all the topics over these few days.

The second photograph was a page in an electronic book that listed the "New Voices in Symphonic Compilation" chief editor and deputy editor, as well as ten other contributing parties.

Inside, the list of contributors contained many familiar names. For example, Ming Cang, Dina, and a few other celebrated foreign persons in the music scene. However, they were only contributors. Whatever contents were contributed by them in the book were not major.

Xue Jing's name was in the column of chief editor—that went without saying—but what surprised people was that the column for deputy editor actually listed Fang Zhao?!

It was known that, for such a compilation of teaching material, to be acknowledged as a deputy editor, sufficient material had to be provided for the book.

The tail end of Xue Jing's article cleared up any doubts that people had.

"At least a third of the contents in this book were written and compiled by Fang Zhao. Inside, he has written about his experiences and techniques used when producing and composing. It also includes any difficulties he faced when producing the four movements of the '100-Year Period of Destruction' and how he tackled it. Everything was written and nothing was hidden. Anyone with an interest in symphonic structures should take a look. I'm sure everyone learnt a little back in secondary school. 'New Voices in Symphonic Compilation' will be launched in two weeks time in both electronic and paperback forms. Please look forward to it."

Following Ming Cang, Dina, and Fiery Bird, yet another hammer had been dropped.

How much ability and potential a virtual idol had depended on the team's decisive function. This was something that the masses followed closely. As for Fang Zhao, he was the core of this team. Now, this core was starting to glow.

Yanbei city, retirement facility.

The nurse at the facility had come to promptly deliver dinner for the elderly living here. However, after pressing the doorbell without any response, and just as she thought that the house was empty, the door opened.

It had been opened using the central command system by someone inside. The nurse

entered the house and saw no one. The voices of two elders drifted out from one of the rooms. Walking in, she found two elders huddled together, watching the news on the screen.

Chapter 77

The Decision

"Dinner is served, retired leaders," the nurse whispered.

No response.

The nurse raised her voice and repeated her message.

She heard back this time.

The old lady turned her head and smiled apologetically. "Just leave it there. We'll eat later." Her gaze returned to the computer screen.

The nurse was curious what kind of program had so captivated the two elders, but professional ethics prevented her from peeking. She could only hide her curiosity.

The two elders remained glued to their computer screen after the nurse left.

"I'm not done yet. What the hell are you doing?" The old lady scrolled the page back up.

"You're too slow!" the old man grumbled. But he didn't stay idle while he was waiting—he saved a screen capture of the page so he could send it to a few old friends later.

Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother read the news occasionally, but they never followed the entertainment headlines. But after Fang Zhao's visit on Memorial Day, the two elders had started scanning the entertainment items when reading the news every day. Their great-grandson had left a deep impression. They were free all day anyway; reading an extra section of news took minimal effort, so they were on top of the controversy in Yanzhou.

The two elders had watched the Yanzhou military recruitment video too. They loved the theme song, so they searched for it online to download. They ended up watching the music video and the credits at the end of the video. Initially, they'd thought their

great-grandson had a namesake—until Silver Wing revealed the truth.

The old man and the old lady were naturally worried about all the skepticism online. This was family, after all. They were upset by the insults and condemnation. They had no jurisdiction outside of Yanzhou, but the least they could do was stick up for their own on their home turf. Even though they were retired, they still wielded some influence. Their former colleagues, veterans formerly under their command, and other young ones could respond to the allegations online.

But before the two elders could act, a mountain of evidence in favor of their great-grandson started piling in.

The two deputy heads of the Yanzhou Music Association, the world-famous computer game studio Fiery Bird, and the renowned master composer Xue Jing—they all vouched for Fang Zhao.

"Ha! Now they have nothing to say, right?"

Great-Grandfather Fang slapped his leg in jubilation. He didn't know the deputy heads of the Music Association, but he had heard of Fiery Bird and had come across some of their products. As for Xue Jing, they knew the name well. Xue Jing had already made a name for himself when the two elders were still in school. The name Xue Jing might have been alien to today's youngsters, but Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother had followed his career trajectory closely. Journalists had closely documented his evolution from "genius" to "promising young talent" to "famed teacher" to "master." He had a profound influence on several generations.

So the two elders were especially excited to see Xue Jing's fulsome appraisal of Fang Zhao. They also pre-ordered the electronic and paper versions of Xue Jing's new textbook, "New Voices in Symphonic Composition." They would receive it once it launched.

Soon, the two elders also started noticing new categories of results when they searched for Fang Zhao's name.

Medical journals.

"Silver Wing Genius Composer Fang Zhao Cracks the Code, Yanzhou Hull Virus Researchers Announce Breakthrough."

The Yanzhou research team had published their latest round of research results. "Breakthrough" wasn't an embellishment or exaggeration. They had genuinely achieved great progress. Researchers from related fields were now flocking from other continents to join the team. Even if they couldn't join, they wanted to observe. Yanzhou was on the cutting edge of Hull virus research.

History journals.

"Respecting History: A Discussion of the Chaotic Entertainment Industry under Capitalism."

The article lashed out at the trashy productions that emerged in a capitalist context. The movies that took historical liberties aside, historical films had to stick to history. It was understandable if you had to fudge for artistic purposes, but you should be meticulous when it came to the core elements of the movie, no? Otherwise, the billions of lives sacrificed during the Period of Destruction would come off as a joke.

The music video for the fourth movement of the "Period of Destruction" series was held up as a counterexample.

But most folks in the entertainment industry laughed off articles like that. As long as we rake it in, who gives a damn what you have to say? If you're so smart, why don't you get into film production? As for the kid who composed the series, you just watch—he's not going to last long. Silver Wing is trying to milk its profits now; that's why they're tooting his horn so aggressively. When the buzz dies down, no one will remember him. How many shooting stars emerge every year and die an anonymous death?

"When a tree is burnt down, all that's left is ashes," a Yanzhou producer commented.

But Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother didn't know about the industry gossip. All they noticed was that Fang Zhao's name kept popping up in music, entertainment and current affairs headlines and on TV shows. In some cases, his name was mentioned in passing. In others, he was the centerpiece.

"Did I save the photo just now?"

"Yup."

"Did I save the picture of him with Xue Jing?"

"Yup."

After saving yet another screen capture, the two elders realized it was late.

They heated their dinner and had some of it, but Great-Grandfather was in a hurry to find a conversation companion.

When Great-Grandmother was taking out the trash, she could hear her husband's loud voice projected from their neighbor's room.

"Hey, Old Yang, let's not discuss matters of state today. Let's talk about our descendants. Do you know the kid who's been in the news? That's my great-grandson. He's in the entertainment industry. It's a tough industry. Unlike the other celebrities, he's just a composer, but he's already composed an epic series of four songs at such a young age." Great-Grandfather Fang tried to sound humble, but in reality, he was bragging hard. At this point in his monologue, he lifted four fingers, then retracted three. "One of the songs was used in a military recruitment ad for Yanzhou."

Neighbor Old Yang: "..."

"What's going to happen if things continue down this path? I'm worried he's too young and can't cope with the pressure. I heard even that company Fiery Bird has sought him out as a collaborator. Oh, you know about Xue Jing, right? He's the one your mom always invoked as a role model for you. The guy who's 10 years older than us? My great-grandson coedited a textbook with him. He's the deputy editor."

Old Yang: "..."

"Have you been browsing the web?" Have you read the news? No? Let me show you my news clippings."

Old Yang: "Get lost!"

When Great-Grandfather Fang returned, swaying his head and whistling an off-tune melody, he noticed his wife wearing a knowing smile.

"What are you smiling about?" Great-Grandfather was puzzled.

"Did you forget something?" Great-Grandmother asked.

Great-Grandfather pondered the question. "I watered the plants on the balcony already."

"Who cares about that?"

"Then what are you talking about?" Great-Grandfather was still confused.

Great-Grandmother had no illusions about her husband's memory. "Don't you remember what you said when Little Zhao left on Memorial Day? You remember what you promised?"

It finally dawned on Great-Grandfather. "Did I promise him?"

He was in no mood to chitchat any more. Great-Grandfather paced in circles in his room then called Fang Zhao via videoconference.

Fang Zhao had just returned to his office after having dinner with Xue Jing.

"Something the matter?"

"Of course! Why else would I call? Am I bored out of my mind?" Great-Grandfather glared at his great-grandson.

Great-Grandmother laughed. They were retired. They had all the time in the world.

"You're in your office?" Great-Grandfather asked after examining Fang Zhao's backdrop.

"I just got back from Professor Xue's."

Great-Grandfather wanted to smile, but a thought struck him and he turned serious. "I was going to bring that up. I've been following the news these past few days. You've done a good job, but at times like this, don't let all the fanfare get to your head. Don't get carried away. Keep a level head."

Great-Grandmother glared at her husband. Weren't you bragging about him just now? And now you want him to stay grounded? Such a reversal.

But Great-Grandmother agreed with Great-Grandfather.

Even though they were in quasi-retirement after quitting the military, they had gone through quite a bit and witnessed others' ups and downs. They understood that the brightest stars always made for the biggest targets. Fang Zhao was one of their rare descendants who had made a name for himself. They didn't want his success to be fleeting. Fang Zhao's parents were gone, so as elders, it was their duty to offer a few words of caution.

Both Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother had much to say. Fang Zhao had already heard similar advice from Ming Cang, Xue Jing, and Duan Qianji. When you became famous, controversy naturally followed. You were going to face heat whether you were doing the right thing or not. People would seize on you to advance their own causes. Some of the noise would be helpful, some harmful, but this was a necessary rite of passage on the road to success.

In reality, Fang Zhao was not bothered much by all the feedback and pontification. He was someone who had been through a lot. In his previous incarnation, he was older than Ming Cang and Duan Qianji. He wasn't that much younger than Great-Grandfather, Great-Grandmother, and Xue Jing. The apocalypse was a different period than the New Era, but Fang Zhao had been exposed to the vagaries of life.

Great-Grandfather was still rambling on. "If you can't settle down, you could take a trip. Do you need bodyguards? One of my old army buddies owns a security company. Do you want me to send you a few guards?"

"There's no need. The label has taken care of it. The bodyguards should arrive tomorrow," Fang Zhao responded.

"The bodyguards your label has hired may not be up to par. What is their training?"

"I hear they're former special forces."

"Oh." That gave Great-Grandfather pause. "In any case, keep your composure. Let your colleagues deal with all the other crap. You just focus on writing your music and editing your textbook. Got it?"

"Got it."

"OK. That's it."

Great-grandfather ended the call, went to his bedroom, and removed a box from his

nightstand.

"So you've decided?" Great-Grandmother asked.

Great-Grandfather sighed. "You know, sometimes you might as well rely on yourself. I have no use for the gun anyway. Don't you still have yours? If we need one, we'll use yours. I'll lend mine to the kid. He might not need it, but it's just for peace of mind."

Chapter 78

Heading Out to Gather Materials

The second day after Fang Zhao spoke with Great-Grandfather was a Saturday. Second Uncle did not have to work, so he borrowed a car from his colleague and made a four-hour drive from Yanbei City to Qi'an City.

The previous night after dinner, Second Uncle had decided to head out and chitchat with a bunch of friends from the same housing block. He had seen all the news and information regarding Fang Zhao and, in the past two days, had chatted with people in the vicinity. Previously, Fang Zhao had bought candy for the kids within the vicinity. Fang Zhao had also come to stay with Second Uncle on Memorial Day. Lots of people had met Fang Zhao here; thus, when the news erupted, many people recognized him and dragged Second Uncle out to chat everyday.

As he was preparing to leave last night, he had received a call from Great-Grandfather Fang. Having always been the one to make the call, there had never been a situation where Great-Grandfather Fang had taken the initiative to contact him. Seeing the terminal displaying the word "Grandpa" gave Second Uncle a scare and made him think that something had happened to Great-Grandfather Fang

However, Great-Grandfather Fang only asked about the situation with Fang Yu and then enquired as to whether Second Uncle had any plans on Saturday. Upon finding out that Second Uncle did not have to work and had no other arrangements, he asked if Second Uncle could make a trip to Qi'an City.

It was rare to be assigned a task by Great-Grandfather Fang, and Second Uncle was feeling excited. He immediately went to borrow the flying car from his colleague, and early on Saturday morning, he went to the retirement facility, received an item from Great-Grandfather Fang, and pledged to complete the task successfully before driving straight for Qi'an City.

Fang Zhao had received a message from Great-Grandfather Fang on the second day. Great-grandfather had something to give him and Second Uncle would deliver it over; thus, on Saturday morning, Fang Zhao was up early and waiting at home.

Second Uncle followed Fang Zhao's given address. As he neared this district, the car's in-built computer beeped a speed limit warning, and the security personnel requested identification, a verification number, and other information. Only after all that was he able to drive to Fang Zhao's block.

Fang Zhao was already waiting in his top floor penthouse.

"Seems like this area's security measures are rather stringent. You probably don't have to worry about being disturbed."

Before coming, Second Uncle had been worried that, with all the attention Fang Zhao was getting, his lifestyle would surely be disrupted. But seeing the tight and secure environment, he felt at ease.

"Indeed, there are not many disturbances." Fang Zhao guessed that Xue Jing had purchased the place all those years back to avoid trouble too. If he was still living in the black street, reporters would have already been camping outside his door. Maybe some journalists even knew the black street rules better than the tenants themselves.

"Great-Grandfather Fang wanted me to pass this to you."

Second Uncle did not know what Great-Grandfather Fang wanted to give to Fang Zhao, nor did he check what it was. He did not even touch the tea upon entering the house, choosing to hand over the wrapped box to Fang Zhao straightaway.

After delivering the item, Second Uncle did not stay long. Knowing that Fang Zhao's situation was safe and well, he did not worry anymore. Since he seldom came to Qi'an City, he took this chance to find a couple of old friends for a chat.

After Second Uncle left, Fang Zhao tore off the wrappers on the box and input in the passcode Great-Grandfather Fang had given him to unlock it. Opening the box, he saw the black gun that was lying inside.

The black gun in the box did not have a casing. The body of the gun emanated an icy-cold glare. From the gun's structure, it was different from the one he had picked up from the black street. He had seen this sort of gun in games before.

There was also a note inside the box which read: "If you want something done well, do it yourself."

Below it was another line: "Only for self-defense."

Looking at the gun and the note, Fang Zhao laughed. He burned the note, kept the gun, and sent his great-grandfather a return text: "Received."

Fang Zhao had still thought that he would need to raise his reputation even higher before asking Great-Grandfather Fang for the gun. Little had he expected that Great-Grandfather Fang would send it over that quickly.

Great-Grandfather Fang had sent the gun over mainly because he had made the deal with Fang Zhao. Other than that, he felt that being a celebrity was dangerous, as attention would always be on Fang Zhao when he went out. What would he do if he ran into a crazed person? He might also run into unscrupulous people with bad intentions. Fang Zhao did not have any reliable friends in Qi'an and could not completely trust Silver Wing. Even if they arranged a bodyguard for him, how much assurance was there that he could be completely at ease? The world would always have crazy people who would do crazy things over small matters. What would he do if he encountered such a situation?

Great-Grandfather Fang felt that his great-grandson was an artistic youth who would not be able to raise his arms in a fight. With a gun for protection, the two elders would be more at ease.

Upon receiving Fang Zhao's reply, Great-Grandfather Fang had more words for Fang Zhao. "Don't think that having a gun makes you invulnerable; be wary whenever you head out!" A long winded speech from Great-Grandfather Fang who at this moment treated Fang Zhao like an ignorant doll.

"You think too much. I know how to handle a gun. I won't use it anyhow."

"You know my ass! Sigh, whatever. Youngsters nowadays just will not listen!"

"You are really overthinking. Right now I'm only slightly famous; I still cannot compare with all those big celebrities. There won't be much trouble at all," Fang Zhao replied.

Great-Grandfather Fang nagged on a little longer before ending the call.

Having obtained the item, there was no longer any need for Fang Zhao to stay home, so he headed to the company. He submitted an application with Duan Qianji, an application to head out and gather materials.

Great-Grandfather had said something right. He had suggested Fang Zhao head outside more often. Even though he was not affected by all the discussions in the outside world he had decided to take a walk to somewhere a little far.

The accompaniment piece for Fiery Bird's game was not yet complete. Fang Zhao wanted to head out to look for inspiration. When he did his worshipping at the Yanzhou Cemetery for Martyrs, he got quite a bit of inspiration, but it was still not enough. Fang Zhao decided to visit other Cemetery for Martyrs in other continents. He had long wanted to visit the graves of his old friends.

Silver Wing Media's top floor office.

Duan Qianji was listening to reports. There were still two days till the end of online voting for the Rising Dragon poll. The standings for the three candidates were all very close, with each candidate having over 20,000,000 votes. Yet the gap between them was less than a thousand. At present, Polar Light's votes were the lowest, but looking at the total quantity, one thousand votes was in fact an insignificant gap. One could say that all three candidates were evenly matched.

Seeing the application that Fang Zhao had sent, Duan Qianji frowned.

Head out to gather materials?

And to other continents to gather them?

Was there a need to visit every continent's Cemetery for Martyrs to look for inspiration?

However, Fang Zhao had no pressing assignments to handle even if he stayed within Yanzhou. Regarding Polar Light's development plans, Fang Zhao had already seen and given his approval. Furthermore, since many media organizations were keeping an eye on Fang Zhao, Duan Qianji thought that letting Fang Zhao out to avoid the limelight was not a bad idea.

After some consideration, Duan Qianji agreed. Even if Polar light was not chosen for the endorsement deal, if Fang Zhao's completed piece was selected by Fiery bird, it would not be that bad.

Duan Qianji thus approved his request and even arranged for an intercontinental flying transport for Fang Zhao.

"The assistant I arranged for you can only reach Silver Wing at night. He has a flying license and will accompany you to gather materials. He will double up as a bodyguard too."

An hour later.

Silver Wing Tower 50th floor. Virtual Projects department.

Zu Wen had finished a game and came out to stretch his legs. A young man around his age had walked in, his eyes throwing curious glances all around.

"May I know who you are looking for?" Zu Wen asked.

The young man walked over, smiling. "Hi, I'm the new assistant assigned to Fang Zhao."

"That's you?"

Zu Wen had heard Fang Zhao mention that the superiors had arranged for an assistant cum bodyguard for him. He had never expected it so quickly, though. However, the person in front of him did not look special. This person was of a similar height to Zu Wen, and his body was not well-built, unlike the large chunks of muscles seen in movies.

However, since it was arranged by the top, Zu Wen kept whatever doubts he had to himself, smiled, and introduced himself. "Nice to meet you. I'm Zu Wen, the Virtual Project Department's top technician."

"Nice to meet you too. I'm Zuo Yu. May I ask if Fang Zhao is in?" Zuo Yu asked.

"Boss is in his office, that way." Zu Wen pointed Zuo Yu in the direction.

"Okay. Thanks."

When Zuo Yu arrived at Fang Zhao's office, Fang Zhao was just arranging the last piece of a manuscript that he was going to send over to Xue Jing tonight.

"Hi, Boss Duan arranged for me to come over. Starting today, I am your assistant. Is there anything you require me to do?" Zuo Yu asked with a smiling face.

Fang Zhao raised his head and looked up at him. After thinking seriously, he said, "Yes.

Could you feed the dog. The self-feeding machine broke. It has not yet returned since it was sent for repairs."

Zuo Yu: "...Sure"

Although it was not what he had expected to be doing, Zuo Yu went about it seriously. Just... the dog seemed to dislike him. Whenever he got close, the dog would run.

After Fang Zhao completed the manuscript, Zuo Yu drove him over to Xue Jing's place. During the trip there, he had thought that Fang Zhou would ask him some stuff about his duties in the special forces and had already prepared what to brag about. Unfortunately, other than stating the address, Fang Zhao did not say anything much.

When they reached Xue Jing's place, Fang Zhao instructed Zuo Yu to head back first. He was going to stay at Xue Jing's place and finish the last bit of proofreading.

"You have one day to pack your stuff and prepare the flying transport. We leave at 7 a.m. the day after tomorrow." Fang Zhao told him.

"Where is the destination?" Zuo Yu asked.

"I will let you know when the time comes." As soon as he finished, Fang Zhao headed inside.

Zuo Yu watched as Fang Zhao's back view disappeared. Shaking his head and pursing his lips, he said to himself, "Tsk. An artist."

...

On Monday, Du Ang headed upstairs to look for Fang Zhao.

Du Ang was very pleased recently. As the head of the newcomer's department and Fang Zhao's manager back when he was a newcomer, Du Ang had received lots of compliments and congratulations when Fang Zhao's popularity was on the rise. In the elevator, whenever he ran into other managers he knew, they would all come chat Du Ang up.

"Old Du, when you were the manager of the newcomer composers, what means did you use to excavate a fine gem like Fang Zhao? Composing, songwriting, remixing, what an all-rounded talent!"

Du Ang was especially pleased. "I don't even know myself. I just kept digging and digging and I found myself a gem."

Today, the head of operations, Julian, had wanted to throw a celebration and had invited everyone to have fun. Thus Du Ang personally headed to the 50th floor to ask if Fang Zhao wanted to go with him.

But when the jubilant Du Ang reached the 50th floor, there was no sign of Fang Zhao.

"Where is your boss?" Du Ang asked Zu Wen.

"He headed out to gather materials," Zu Wen replied.

"Headed out to gather materials? Isn't that like a company-sponsored trip?" Du Ang felt extremely envious. "When will he be back?"

"We don't have a clue either. A minimum estimate would be between ten days and half a month, I guess."

Chapter 79

Landowners Are Very Much Like Dogs

The world was made up of twelve continents—eight normal continents and four special continents.

The eight normal continents were ordinary residential continents. The other seven normal continents besides Yanzhou did not have many differences. The four special continents, however, were relatively unconventional.

Zuo Yu had expected Fang Zhao to pick the closest continents to Yanzhou: Lazhou and Leizhou. However, he had not expected that, on Monday, Fang Zhao would tell him that their destination was Muzhou, one of the four special continents.

Muzhou was a huge agricultural continent. In the twelve continents, it played the role of a granary. Eighty percent of the world's natural foodstuff was produced in Muzhou. In this age where synthetic food was the norm, the prices of natural foods had increased. Muzhou's produce would have been even higher, especially those produced at Muzhou's Su Family Farm. These could be considered a luxury good, but many people bought them. Many families with conditions would purchase natural foodstuffs straight from Muzhou, and affluent families would purchase agricultural produce directly from the Su Family Farm every month.

Other than that, Muzhou also had many tourist attractions. When people from other continents were sick of life in the city, surrounded by skyscrapers and a concrete jungle, they loved to relax in Muzhou, to see the vast and expansive earth and the clouds in the clear blue sky.

Muzhou was vast but sparsely populated. It was said that, many years ago, when the great general Su Mu had lead his people and reclaimed Muzhou, he had aired his views. He had wanted to build a few more farms at the land they had reclaimed. After that, when the New Era was established, Su Mu had really gone ahead with his plan. However, some people chose to leave Muzhou and headed to other continents that were developing. They felt that, compared to other continents that were rapidly building skyscrapers and cities, Muzhou was simply full of peasants. Less than one tenth of the original inhabitants had chosen to stay behind in Muzhou, and after that,

there were still people that left gradually. Thus, the people remaining were not many. Even today, among all the twelve continents, Muzhou still had the lowest population.

Zuo Yu had been to Muzhou once. Back then, he was on an exchange exercise with the forces and thus did not have much time for sightseeing. However, what left a deep and unforgettable impression were the boundless farmlands and pastures.

The flying transport they were on had an optimal flight height. The transport was transoceanic but could not handle flying out of the atmosphere and into outer space. Upon entering Muzhou, Zuo Yu flew the craft lower so that Fang Zhao could view the vast fields and winding rivers from the window.

Zuo Yu was a rather talkative person. Since he got an all-expenses-paid trip so soon after becoming an assistant, he was in high spirits. As Fang Zhao did not seem to say much, Zuo Yu tried to find a topic to talk about.

"Can I call you Boss? Director Duan said that you would be paying my wages. Since I'm your subordinate, I should be calling you Boss, right?" Zuo Yu asked.

"Sure." Fang Zhao had no expectations when it came to how people addressed him.

"Boss, what made you pick Muzhou first? Could it be that you had wanted to travel here all along? I think you already know this, but Muzhou is really not too bad. Here the people lead a carefree and leisurely lifestyle. Have you heard this saying? Muzhou's landlords are very much like dogs!"

This was people from other continents teasing Muzhou. Of course, the saying carried some envy and jealousy as well.

Muzhou had many landowners, and the family of Su Mu, a great general of the founding era, were the largest landlords and the richest amongst all the landowners.

"If only I was a Muzhou citizen. I could have received a large farm or pasture from my parents and been a leisurely landlord. Then I would hire some cheap labor from foreign continents and get them to work the land or herd animals. I wouldn't need to keep an eye on them much—as long as they could use machines, it'd be fine. Then I would fly my transport and travel the world. Perhaps I could even be like the Su family and own my own spaceship. Every month I could head to a foreign planet for an extended holiday. Oh, those days!"

Compared to other continents, the pace of life in Muzhou was much more relaxed. The thoughts that Zuo Yu had were not just limited to him. Many people who came to Muzhou also had the same daydreams.

"However, that is only wishful thinking on my part. There are restrictions in Muzhou! Even money won't necessarily allow one to purchase land here. In Muzhou, only those who had stayed behind with great general Su Mu during the Founding Era were given land. This was the rule set down by Su Mu. Even if people from other continents migrated over, they could only purchase a small piece of land for a farm. Only if there were special circumstances where the Su family would treat one specially, only then could someone obtain a sizeable piece of land."

Zuo Yu's face was green with envy as he spoke. "In short, I really admire this Su Mu person; he had vision. The descendants of those that followed him to take back Muzhou are all big landlords. As long as they own a piece of land, they can enjoy all they want. What a bunch of nouveau riche! I heard that before the end of days, Su Mu was a cow herder—"

"Shepherd," Fang Zhao interrupted.

"What?"

"Before the end of days, Su Mu was a shepherd, not a cow herder," Fang Zhao replied.

"...Oh. The meaning is similar. My history isn't that good, I can never get my facts right."

Zuo Yu remembered that Duan Qianji had let him see Fang Zhao's information. It had stated that Fang Zhao's history was very good, especially the history of the Period of Destruction. Compared to many reputable historians, his knowledge was not inferior.

Looking at the color of the sky and checking the weather forecast, Zuo Yu asked, "It is going to rain soon. Seems like it will be a heavy downpour. Should we continue on our way to Qingcheng, or should we find a place to wait it out?"

The Qingcheng that Zuo Yu mentioned was not a town but a city. It was the capital of Muzhou as well as the political and financial hub. Muzhou's government was located there as well as the Muzhou Cemetery for Martyrs.

Fang Zhao also browsed through the weather news for this area of Muzhou. After a short consideration, he said, "Let's stop first."

"Got it!" Zuo Yu searched for a place nearby where he could land. "There is a farm ahead where we can land the transport. I shall send them a request."

Many of the larger farms in Muzhou were equipped with garages meant specially for flying cars, vehicles, and other transports, as there were always many tourists who come to Muzhou, be they free and easy or following tours. Sometimes, should they encounter special situations which required them to take temporary shelter, they would have to stop at the nearest farm.

Stopping was not free, though. There was a fee to be paid. The amount depended on how much the owner's family decided. If the farm owner wanted to collect more, he would. If he was in good spirits, he might even let them stop over for free.

"The farm owner has agreed. Ten dollars per hour." Zuo Yu laughed as he saw the offer. "Seems like this farm owner is in good spirits today. That is a cheap price. I knew a guy that came to tour Muzhou—when he stopped, the fee was a few hundred!"

Fang Zhao paid for an hour first as he did not know the situation at the farm. If it was bad, they could leave straight away. If the condition was fine, topping up more to rest a while longer was no issue.

The traffic light at the farm had already lit up. Zuo Yu steered the vehicle to make a descent.

Two people dressed in the working attire of the farm ran over. They should be workers that the farm owner employed.

Fang Zhao had only just stepped out from the transport when he saw a young employee hurry over to him and ask, "Do you require food and lodging? We provide guest rooms for tourists at a cheap price. Today the owner is in a good mood, so prices will be very cheap. Do your energy cells require changing? We have most mainstream energy cells here; we charge according to market rate."

Fang Zhao had not replied when he heard "woof woof woof." It sounded like a large dog.

The sound became louder and closer. In no time, Fang Zhao saw the figure of a large black dog that was over a meter tall. Perhaps it had seen an unfamiliar flying vehicle and caught the scent of strangers and came bounding over to stand guard. It did not get too close, standing about 20 meters away, howling at Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu. The

fur on its body seem like it was going to explode.

This was a descendant of a meritorious service dog that had been in Muzhou.

After the end of days, service dogs were no longer needed on battlefields anymore. Every continent had some service dogs. Other than those that remained with the military, many were kept as pet dogs and bred from generation to generation. Now, the majority of descendants of such service dogs living in the city only kept the appearance of their ancestors but not their temperament. They still grew big, but as people in the New Era no longer required them to do much, most had become docile and meek.

However, Muzhou was a special exception. After the founding of the new era, Muzhou's service dogs were split into two portions. One portion remained in the military as combat dogs and continued training. The other portion were trained as shepherd dogs and became the farm owners' helpers.

In Muzhou, killing dogs was prohibited. Many farm owners held greater regard for their shepherd dog's lives than those of tourists.

As Zuo Yu faced the black dog baring its teeth and howling at them, he thought to himself, This is a real dog. How could Fang Zhao's Curly Hair back in the 50th floor of Silver Wing be considered a dog. It can only be considered a toy!

Chapter 80

Play a Little?

Although the black dog looked huge, its juvenile nature could still be seen. This was not a fully grown dog; its primary function on the farm was probably not to herd the animals but rather to stand guard.

The black dog was quickly led away from the garage by a worker. Fang Zhao scanned the rest of the garage. Other than their flying transport, there were five flying cars and one other large transport.

"There is a tour group here," Zuo Yu told Fang Zhao. "Approximately twenty-odd."

When the weather did not look good, tour groups were the first to look for a place to land. Certain places in Muzhou had weather that was extremely unpredictable. The weather forecast would issue a more detailed announcement one hour before any changes. Other than Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu, the others had found this place as soon as they'd heard the announcement. After all, this was the only place in the vicinity that seemed big enough for flying vehicles to land.

After arranging the accommodations, the farm employee told Fang Zhao, "Today is the competition day. The owner as well as owners of smaller neighboring farms are viewing the competition here. There is a tour group from Jizhou as well who have gone ahead to the viewing hall. A relative of the owner is taking part in today's competition, so the owner is in a good mood and has invited everyone to watch. The competition is going to start at any moment. Do you guys want to go? Refreshments in the viewing hall are all free."

Besides being famous for agriculture and tourism, Muzhou was famous for one other thing: Muzhou's sheep herding culture.

Muzhou's sheep herding competition had existed since the founding of the continent. In the beginning, it was Great General Su Mu who had organized it to add some entertainment and bring the people closer. He had believed that, in life, work and entertainment went hand in hand. However, back then, the competitions had been on a much smaller scale. Today, the sheep herding competition already had 500 years of

experience and had a proper system and rules. The feelings that Muzhou citizens had toward this sheep herding competition was something the people from other continents were incapable of understanding. This was an entertainment activity that had followed generation after generation of Muzhou citizens.

If one spoke to a Muzhou citizen about a celebrity, even if it was an international superstar, a Muzhou citizen might not necessarily find him familiar. At most, he would remember the name or the face and maybe have an impression of roles the superstar might have played, but if one were to speak about a famous Muzhou shepherd dog, they would be able to recite the color of the shepherd dog's fur, its height, age, affiliation, competition years, awards, etc. They could even trace its lineage back three generations and spend an entire hour just talking about it. As for which farms the shepherd dogs belonged to, this was everyone's favorite leisure topic.

Therefore, it was not that Muzhou had no entertainment industry, just that their entertainment industry was different from that of other continents. Shepherd dogs having a higher standing than tourists was not without reason.

Fang Zhao was a hot topic back in Yanzhou but was not necessarily that well-known in other continents, let alone Muzhou. Until now, Zuo Yu had only seen a few lines regarding Fang Zhao in an electronic medical journal. There were no mentions in other magazines and news. However, this was beneficial, in a sense. Zuo Yu's job would be much easier, as he would only have to double up as an assistant and driver.

When Fang Zhao had been looking up information on Muzhou, he'd come across an introduction to Muzhou's sheep herding culture and a few videos of the competition. He had not yet had the chance to experience a live broadcast of the competition.

Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu unpacked lightly in the guest room before following the farm employee to the viewing hall.

There were still 40 minutes left until the start of the competition. When Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu reached the viewing hall, it was already packed and very lively.

The 400-square-meter viewing hall was like a small theater. The best positions for viewing were occupied by the farm owner and his neighboring farm owners. The invited tourists were all situated at the sides and allowed free seating.

When the two of them reached the hall, only the table right at the side of the hall and

a few seats in the corner were empty.

According to the arrangement of chairs, one table could seat around four to six people. However, since the members of the tour group were all not that familiar with each other, some tables only had two or three members.

Fang Zhao did not mind where he sat as long as he could see the large screen.

"Here." The employee had brought them in through a side door. Fang Zhao then sat down at a table to the side.

After Zuo Yu entered, he shot a glance at the people situated near the main and side doors of the viewing hall. The corners of his mouth curled slightly before he straightened them out. When entering, there was a security check, and weapons were not allowed inside. However, when Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu had entered, the guys standing guard did not hear any warnings from the scanning apparatus.

Fang Zhao noted that in the middle of the viewing hall, it was very obvious who the owner's family were. Their seats were the best and biggest. Their area took up about 10 square meters, and two dogs guarded the area they were in.

When the flying transport was landing, they could check the farm as well as the owner's information.

This farm was the Shanmu Farm, The owner was Wu Yi, an 80-plus-year-old man. In the New Era, 80-odd was considered middle-aged. Wu Yi looked robust. He was a tall and burly man with a fierce face, who spoke in a low and muffled voice. When Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu entered, he shot a glance at them and paid them no more attention after, choosing to discuss with the other farm owners his predictions for today's competition.

Nowadays, people did not take part in the sheep herding competition. Instead, teams of shepherd dogs from individual farms would take part. The teams had minimum of six and maximum of ten dogs. Every competition would have 100 sheep released on a field. When the shepherd dogs were released, the timer would start and only cease when all 100 sheep were inside a fenced area. The team that took the least time would be that day's winner. The seven teams here would be placed according to their times.

Every competition day, there would be guessing activities with attractive prizes to be won.

Fang Zhao took a look at the prizes for today's activity.

Guessing the first place correctly, one would be able to win a cash prize with a twofold bonus.

Guessing first and second place, one would be able to get a fivefold bonus.

Guessing first, second, and third would grant a 12 times bonus.

Guessing the first four places would grant a 35 times bonus.

Guessing the first five places would grant a 100 times bonus.

Getting all standings correct would grant a 200 times bonus.

Every competition day, the number of participants varied, as did the prizes of the interactive activities.

According to the Muzhou's Shepherding Competition rules, one entry was five dollars. Purchasing one entry and getting the day's standings all correct would let one win a thousand dollars.

For Muzhou tourists, five dollars was an insignificant amount. Many people would try their luck and take part, Of course, those that could guess correctly were few and far between.

In the tour group, there were quite a number that were visiting Muzhou for the first time. They did not understand the farms at all and were even more puzzled by the participants taking part in today's competition. Reading an expert's online analysis? It just made them more confused.

Thus, many people strained their ears to listen to the conversations between the farm owners in the center of the viewing hall. After all, these farm owners were speaking loudly, so there was nothing wrong with openly listening. In a while, they would follow suit and submit their entries.

The large screen was showing the situation at the competition grounds. Currently, they were having precompetition interviews with some of the participating farms.

The farm Fang Zhao was resting at was near the eastern border. The competition was

on the other end of Muzhou's eastern district, close to Muzhou's central district. The weather there was bright and sunny, unlike the dark clouds that were gathering here.

"The weather at the competition is not bad. Who knows, Big Sis Carla might take home first place easily," one of the smaller farm owners said to Wu Yi.

Team No. 3 in today's competition was Wu Yi's cousin's farm's team. His cousin's farm was called Carla Farm and had a carrot as its symbol. Therefore, people who were familiar with it liked to call it Carrot Farm.

"I have high hopes for them too." Wu Yi's face was full of smiles. He was in a cheerful mood. He then submitted his entry for the activity, with his cousin's farm as his pick for first place.

"Ho! One million?! That's a lot of faith, man!" Another small farm owner spoke in an exaggerated tone after glancing at Wu Yi's entry wager.

"Then I shall buy some too, for Big Sis Carla, 500,000. To show my support for her."

"Me too. However, I only have a small farm, not as lavish as you guys, 100,000 to show my support."

As Wu Yi and his fellow farm owners happily chatted, the tourists sitting to the sides had complex looks on their faces. They had heard that the people of Muzhou were nouveau riche, but they had no idea of the wealth a normal-looking little farm had. Today, they could consider themselves as having experienced it. This group of people did not have to go to work, did not have to slog their lives away. Just by watching their own lands, they could play around freely.

Envious? Jealous! Almost dying from jealousy!

"Hey, you guys from overseas, are you interested in playing a little? When you are in Muzhou, how can you not take part in these activities? Who knows, you might even win yourself some money," one farm owner told the people in the tour group.

The tour leader only smiled and replied, "I also bought one entry. A small gamble only."

However, many members of the tour group were interested now and chatted with some of the farm owners there. The farm owners shared with them a bit of their own experiences and explained to the tour members the rules of the competition and

things to take note of, such as how to know which was the team's lead dog, how to see them finding the lead sheep, their running positions, coordination, and other things.

"Boss, do we follow?" Zuo Yu asked Fang Zhao. Zuo Yu did not have much money to play with, just enough for a small gamble or two. There was no way he could match up with the rich landowners who dumped in thousands in the blink of an eye. However, Fang Zhao was different. How much Fang Zhao would earn from the four movements, Zuo Yu was very clear on that.

"Mhm," Fang Zhao replied with a groan but did not say anything, instead continuing to browse through information and videos online on the participating shepherd dog teams taking part in today's competition.

As Wu Yi was chatting, he swept a glance across the room and realized that all the tourists were gathered together and discussing. Only the two latecomers to the side were still sitting down seriously watching past videos of teams' performances in past competitions. One of them was even writing stuff down on a notebook.

"Tsk, acting like they know alot," Wu Yi muttered. He had seen many foreigners who came to Muzhou and took part in these activities. They went through all sorts of analysis and calculations, but at the end, they achieved not a damn thing.

Muzhou's shepherd dogs were not something that foreigners could easily understand. Even when a few experts on dog species and behavior came here, out of ten competitions, if they could guess five correctly, that was already not too bad. There were also foreign livestock owners who thought that they knew a lot coming to take part, but in the end, they left in silence.

Therefore, Wu Yi's advice to foreigners was to place less trust in online analysis and instead follow their gut feeling. Who knows they might even win. All the analysis online was just a smoke screen meant to make people muddled. There were no professionals who could pass on their experience in Muzhou, nor was there anybody who could have consistent winnings!

The submission for entries ended ten minutes before the competition started. Fang Zhao submitted his entry two minutes before the deadline.

Beside Fang Zhao, Zuo Yu stretched his neck over and copied Fang Zhao's entries. He did not know what he was doing, so he just blindly followed the artist. Originally, he

had only wanted to purchase one entry, but after some consideration, he added another two zeros behind it and submitted 100 entries. One entry cost five dollars, so his total wager was 500 dollars. After all, he had already started work. The wages that Fang Zhao paid were not less than 500 dollars; losing it all did not really matter. He just took it as a contribution to Muzhou since he had come all the way over. Great General Su Mu was the person he admired most, after all.

Chapter 81

Winning

Several generations of mechanical dogs had been developed for shepherding purposes, which enabled farm owners to better monitor their flocks, but good ol' shepherd dogs were still preserved. When the weather was bad or other forces of nature affected the electricity supply or the broadband grid, those silhouettes that breezed through the pastures like wind came in handy.

The people of Muzhou wanted to preserve their shepherd culture, even though it had been questioned by natives of other continents many times. The shepherding contest had lost its purpose from General Su Mu's days and turned into a profit-making business, they alleged. Still, the contest continued until present day because the people of Muzhou kept benefiting from it.

Each season of competition lasted a year, from the beginning of the calendar year till the end.

The competition format at the beginning of the year was straightforward. Teams that placed well in the first round of competition would advance to the next round. Each round was progressively more difficult. Fang Zhao and company were taking in early-round action, so the tasks weren't that challenging.

Fang Zhao had never been a shepherd before, but he had heard about the profession quite a bit from his pal Su Mu during the end of days. When his friends had gatherings, Su Mu loved to talk about his shepherd days. Toward the end of the apocalypse, when he no longer remembered what normal life was like, Su Mu'd had a crystal clear memory of his days as a shepherd. His management skills as a general had derived from his tenure as a shepherd.

Fang Zhao had also learned about shepherd dogs from Su Mu. Su Mu's squadron had the most battle canines. It also included several canine auxiliary units.

After the devastation of the end of days, sheep had evolved from their original form before the apocalypse, but after careful breeding by agricultural scientists, sheep of the shepherding variety had reverted back to their original state quite a bit. However,

they were still larger in size than before and less meek in personality.

The broadcast of the competition began on the big screen.

"Team No. 1 has set off!" the commentator announced.

The first challenge evaluated the shepherd dogs' ability to round up sheep. For Muzhou's old hands, this was a telling skill that revealed the team's competence.

The respective farm owners coached their own shepherd dogs. In the early days of Muzhou's shepherding competition tradition, human contestants were allowed to direct their shepherd dogs, but eventually this proved to be too easy, so people were barred. The shepherd dogs had to act independently. Their trainers could only watch from afar. They had only three opportunities to intervene. When their dogs were struggling, the farm owners could ask for their images to be projected onto a designated area of the grassland. They would use hand signals and a conducting baton to instruct their dogs.

The first team ran into trouble soon.

"Dog C of Team No. 1 is out of position. It's veered off path, off course. It still hasn't corrected itself," the commentator announced loudly. "Oh, Team No. 1's farm owner has asked to instruct by projection. He has no choice. If the dog isn't corrected, they'll jeopardize their chances when they lose sheep."

It was easy to miss sheep if the dog attacked a single flank. The task was only complete when the dogs shepherded all 100 sheep into the pen. Thus, single-flank shepherd dogs didn't make for great competitors. Even the single-flank dogs that had been retrained would relapse. That was what was happening in Team No. 1. The farm owner wasn't mad. He just asked for instruction via projection with a resigned laugh. Using hand gestures and a baton, he redirected the out-of-position dog to the correct location.

Thanks to his owner's intervention, the shepherd dog that had veered off course corrected itself, but that resulted in a delay. Their final time was 8 minutes and 5 seconds—not a great result. At competitions of this level, finishing under 7 minutes was considered a good time.

When Team No. 1 wrapped up, Team No. 2 took off. One of its dogs was too aggressive and bit a sheep, causing it to bleed, which resulted in a penalty of 15 seconds. The

second team finished in 8 minutes and 1 second, slightly better than Team No. 1.

The third team was the most hotly discussed team among farm owners before the contest. Many of the tourists had bet on it placing first.

"Oh, Team No. 3 has adopted a circular approach. Moving into position... a blockade formation... Beautiful!" the commentator yelled.

The farm owners in front of Fang Zhao started getting excited.

"My little babies, fall into position! Pay attention. Don't mess up now!" Wu Yi climbed onto his reclining chair and screamed at the top of his voice, which crowded out all other noises.

"Keep up! You're a bit off. Come back. That's a good boy!"

The farm owner was so agitated, it seemed like he wanted to run onto the pasture and give the dog that had veered off course a little kick.

"Head dog, follow the head dog! Good! Very good! Yes, that's the one. Stay in control!"

Fang Zhao watched on the big screen TV as the scampering shadows barked loudly as they herded the dispersed sheep into a single cluster. As for the farm owners, whether they were ringside or watching on the big screen, they looked like they had been injected with amphetamine. Even the dog next to Wu Yi was glaring at the screen.

Meanwhile, the tourists that were sitting nearby were a bit spooked by the show of emotion. They had probably never thought anyone could get this excited watching dogs herd sheep, but a few of the younger tourists were also quite engaged because they had placed money on the third team. Even though they were clueless about positioning and blockades, they could figure out the gist of the action and read the timer in the upper right corner of the big screen.

When the dogs of Team No. 3 had successfully rounded up the sheep and steered them into the designated pen and the commentator announced "mission complete," the farm owners howled.

"Five minutes and 32 seconds! Team No. 3 from Carrot Farm is in first place. They have a 2-minute lead on the second and third teams. Looks like our champion has been decided," the commentator said.

The winning result for the round was outstanding. After the teams finished, the big screen played expert commentary of Team No. 3's performance. The analysts broke down the limb movement and change in direction of every single dog using slow-motion replays, lavishing praise on their physical qualities.

"Big Sister Carla's farm is going to be famous again," the owner of a smaller farm said enviously.

"Haha, I'll have to ask big sister to lend me a helping hand, then." Wu Yi was happy for his cousin's team. "Do you know who the lead dog was from the team that competed just now? King Kong! He's the father of our dog Chubby Black. Hey, where's Chubby Black? Chubby Black!"

Wu Yi kept yelling for his dog. Soon, the black dog that had barked at Fang Zhao and company in the parking lot surged forward, wagging its tail vigorously and whining for attention. Come to think of it, the dog was indeed a bit chubbier than the shepherd dogs that had just taken part in the competition.

Wu Yi dragged Chubby Black to his side and kept talking. "Many of you may not be familiar with the name King Kong, but I'm sure you've heard of its great-grandmother Tornado."

"Oh, you mean the dog named Most Valuable Dog about a dozen years ago? Word is it was worth tens of millions."

"That's it. That's it. That's the one. So, strictly speaking, Chubby Black comes from quite the royal lineage."

As talk began of former MVDs and royal bloodlines, the tourists went blank. Amazing. A shepherd dog was actually worth more than all of them combined.

After bragging about his dog's lineage, Wu Yi nursed a glass of wine and glanced at the opening formation of Team No. 4 on the big screen before turning toward the tour group. "So you're blown away by how much Muzhou shepherd dogs are worth? You know, most humans from other continents don't live as well as our dogs."

It was a stinging comment, but coming from a Muzhou native, it wasn't mean-spirited or derogatory, just a factual description.

Muzhou natives treasured their shepherd dogs. Some of their famous dogs enjoyed

greater stature than people from other continents. That was why many shepherd dogs in Muzhou were more obnoxious than people, totally milking their edge over the human race.

"Lots of folks from other continents want to move to Muzhou, but unfortunately, Muzhou land is not open to foreign ownership," Wu Yi said as he kicked up his feet.

Some of the lessons Wu Yi had learned were passed on generation to generation from his ancestors who were the original settlers. He had heard some of these stories since he was a young boy. The most important story was the tale of the folks who left for other continents when the plot was first being cultivated. To each their own. There was no need to pass judgment. But if you wanted back in when the farmland was bearing fruit? Sorry, why don't you stay where you are?

From an emotional standpoint, those folks who left and regretted it were viewed as traitors. Thinking purely from self-interest, no one wanted newcomers to stake claims on their land or future plots waiting to be cultivated. A protectionist stance was necessary. If you decided to leave in the first place, don't bother coming back.

That was why Muzhou residents presented a united front. Few outsiders had been able to land a major piece of farmland in Muzhou since the continent's founding.

But there were other ways of obtaining land in Muzhou. Among the prizes for punters who placed bets on the shepherding competition was land. Many foreigners dreamed about winning a piece of land from the competition venue of Muzhou's shepherding contest. The problem was that few outsiders realized that dream.

Wu Yi laughed as he watched, on the big screen, the fourth and fifth teams post poorer times than the third team. The competition was evolving as the commentator had predicted, with Team No. 3 taking the title early on. But he wasn't as ecstatic as the tourists expected. They thought to themselves, He's living up to his reputation as a member of the Muzhou nouveau riche. All this prize money is nothing to him.

Meanwhile, members of the tour group who'd bet big money on Team No. 3 taking first place were now quite excited.

Zuo Yu looked at his betting slip and smacked his lips. I was right—can't count on this artist-type too much.

But the farm owners turned serious again when the final team in the competition,

Team No. 7, set off.

When the third team emerged, the farm owners had been delighted. They'd chatted loudly and gesticulated wildly as they cheered the team on. But they looked less emotional when Team No. 7 appeared. Their eyes were burning with anticipation and hidden angst.

The seasoned tour guides thought to themselves that their intuition was that the seventh team was what the farm owners were truly looking forward to. Who said you could only place bets on one team? Some of the farm owners might have bet on teams entered by their friends out of loyalty but also placed other bets in secret.

Team No. 7 burst out of the gates in fine form. The commentator got emotional again.

"The eight dogs of Team No. 7 have adopted a pear-shaped formation. Good, very good—they've set up a blockade. They've rounded up the flock in no time. They're dissolving the blockade now. Beautiful! Perfect coordination. Now they're attacking the sheep. Pay attention to their eyes. Check out the gaze of the head dog."

"Keep your eyes on the head dog, Team No. 7's A dog. This is a dog with a kamikaze aura. It's tracked down the head sheep now. They had a brief stare down. The dog has the upper hand. Impressive! This is its first shepherding competition, but that was the best performance of the day. I sense a future star in the making!" The commentator oozed passion. Viewers could hear him pounding his table. Judging from the force of the pounding, they knew his hands had to hurt.

The best shepherd dogs could control the head sheep and contain its emotions with a stare. The stare was more effective than barking or biting.

"The sheep are arriving in the pen. They're all accounted for. Four minutes... 4 minutes and 6 seconds! Team No. 7 has taken a commanding lead and clinched first place with their time of 4 minutes and 6 seconds!"

The tourists who were thinking they had just won big were now dumbfounded.

Team No. 7 is first? Team No. 3 has been bumped to second place? How is that possible?

Zuo Yu also froze.

He glanced at the final ranking on the big screen then looked at his betting slip. He coughed lightly, picked up his mug, and wolfed down a glass of water to calm down.

Zuo Yu had followed Fang Zhao's lead in placing bets. Unlike folk who had only picked the champion or predicted the entire ranking, Fang Zhao bet on the order of the top five finishers and placed a 20,000-entry buy.

And Fang Zhao's prediction had been spot on.

Chapter 82

Really Don't Have One

When the standings came out, some people were delighted, while some were anxious. Now only sighs came from the previously high-spirited tour group. However, most people wanted to try their hand, and losing some money did not make them regret. They were more curious regarding the farm owners who had placed their bets on Team No. 3.

The farm owners there were not disheartened. Their faces were still smiling as they discussed the possibility of Team No. 7 breaking into the top four of the eastern region and how the lead dog of Team No. 7 was so incisive.

"Shoubei Farm seems to have great ambitions this year. In the previous two years, they were just a mid-tier team. I heard that this year they have a trump card they've been hiding."

"Shoubei don't even need to buy any ads this year. That dog is the best advertisement. Who knows how many investors they will pull in this year. I'm so jealous, man!"

On the screen, the onsite commentator seemed to really like the lead dog of Team No. 7. "Shoubei Farm's Team No. 7 has achieved first place today. The lead dog, Dog A is today's most valuable participant. Let's take a look at its information. Today it is celebrating its first birthday as well as being a debut participant, the golden-colored shepherd dog, Gold Colt! Lots of people here are rushing over to get a photo with Gold Colt. Lots of tourists from other continents are here as well..."

After watching the introduction on screen, Zuo Yu whispered to Fang Zhao, "Boss, how did you know that dog would win?"

"Feeling," Fang Zhao replied.

That dog really looked more menacing than the rest and had a penetrative stare. Perhaps many people had felt that, when it lead the herding, it would be very impulsive. However, in reality, it did not attack that incisively. It was restrained and very smart. Just like a well-trained soldier, it knew how to execute its tasks at the right

moments. Indeed, it led the other dogs in its team well and carried out the instructions that it had honed on normal days to perfection.

When Fang Zhao was checking up on the information of the participating teams, he'd felt a sense of familiarity when he came across that dog. It reminded him of combat canines during the end of days. Although Gold Colt was still some way from a combat canine in the New Era, as a shepherd dog, it had done very well. Coupled with some of the experience that his old friend Su Mu had imparted to Fang Zhao back then, he had chosen Team No. 7 for first place.

As for the rest of the teams, Fang Zhao had used information from analyses of past results to make his decision. As some luck would be involved, and for positions six and seven, the variables were way too high, Fang Zhao had only bought an entry for the first five positions.

"Oh, seems like Muzhou farm owners are used to these activities already. They don't even feel anything after lumping that much money for nothing," someone muttered.

Wu Yi heard that and snickered in his heart.

Feel nothing?

How could that be? Did he really think that all that money fell from the sky?

It was just that this time his older cousin was taking part, so he had to give some face. When the time came, other than all the literal support, he still had to place his bets and show them to the others. This was proof of his support. Who knew, maybe if his old cousin was happy, she might send him a puppy.

Why was he not dejected? That was because, when he had placed his bets, at the same time, his wife had placed a million dollars on Team No. 7's Shoubei Farm. Although he really had hoped his older cousin's farm would win, her farm's strength was limited. Comparing the teams, Shoubei farm had been making waves in the scene this year. Thus, he had let his wife place a side bet. They did not make any money from the two bets combined and instead paid out some transaction fees, but those additional fees were insignificant. As long as they did not make a large loss, he was still satisfied.

The other small farm owners would have placed bets on Team No. 7 secretly as well. They just would not openly declare it, especially not to people from other continents. They actually looked forward to the foreigners following their bets. Despite losing,

they were still able to make a contribution to their own continent. Muzhou spent a large amount of funds on improving the land, crops, and livestock, as well as technological advancements and construction. Every year, the sheep herding competition would bring in a lot of funds from the hands of foreign tourists. This made the farm owners very happy. They found joy in swindling others.

Wu Yi was very happy to see the foreign tourists losing money. As he glimpsed the hanging heads and dejected spirits of those people, he was secretly delighted. But when his gaze fell on Fang Zhao's table, he paused.

"Hey, the two youngsters over there, you placed bets too, right? How did it go?" Wu Yi loudly asked. "Looking at your expressions, you must have hit your predictions, right?" The farm owners were not good-for-nothings. If they had not even had half a brain, how would they have steadily managed medium-sized farms? Judging body and facial expressions was not that hard. The two men there had smiles on their faces. Even if they had not made a windfall, they had certainly hit a few bets.

"Eh, someone managed to hit the prediction for first place?" The people from the tour group looked toward Fang Zhao's table with curious gazes.

Fang Zhao was not smiling because of his winnings; he was smiling as he remembered how Su Mu had talked about training his shepherd dogs. Hearing Wu Yi's question, he replied, "Our luck wasn't too bad."

"Really picked Team No. 7?" A smaller farm owner asked in astonishment. He knew that before the competition, even many people in Muzhou had tipped Team No. 3 as a favorite. It was only that the owners here had received some secret tips, only then did their intentions change. If even their own people would not have picked Team No. 7, why would foreigners even consider that? Besides, in previous competitions, Team No. 7's results were not impressive. It was only because they had changed a dog that they rose to prominence. Foreigners placing bets on Shoubei Farm was indeed unlikely.

"Looking at that dog, I felt that it was not too bad." Fang Zhao raised his chin toward the screen. On the screen was a recap on the performance of Team No. 7 and an analysis of the lead dog, Gold Colt.

"Not just that," Wu Yi said abruptly. "Since you could see Team No. 7 having a chance at victory, you surely would not have just placed a bet on first place. How many places

did you buy? You bought second and third, right? Friend, share some knowledge with us. How many positions did you buy?"

With that, Wu Yi stood up, walked over, and stood facing the table where Fang Zhao was seated, a warm smile on his face.

"Top five," Fang Zhao replied.

"What?" Wu Yi thought that he had not heard correctly and asked again.

"I bought the top five positions."

"All... hit?"

"Our luck wasn't too bad."

Wu Yi was stunned for a moment, and then a wide smile appeared on his face. "Haha, awesome. Let's be friends. You guys are first time visitors? If you need any advice, feel free to ask me. I haven't seen anyone hit the top five in a really long time. To think that it would be on my farm, too. Haha, that's great. Come, order more, order more!"

Wu Yi instructed the employees to bring more food out. He had to have a good chat with this person.

"Top five?" Did he mean placing a bet on the placings of the top five positions? The other tourists that were listening to the conversation were flabbergasted. After all, one wrong entry would mean failure. Unless all five of his picks were in that exact order, only then would it be considered a win.

"Wait a minute, let me see the odds for predicting the top five positions—a hundredfold?! How much did that little fellow wager?"

"No idea, shall we ask him?"

"Haish, people would not say how much they wagered. Asking him would be a waste of breath!" an elder said in an experienced tone. As soon as he said that, they heard Wu Yi asking the same question.

"How many entries did you submit?" Wu Yi asked.

"Twenty Thousand," Fang Zhao replied.

Wu Yi: "..."

The smaller-farm owners who had gathered around: "..."

The people in the tour group: "..."

A small child aged around eight or nine who had followed his parents on the tour asked his father in a hushed voice, "That older brother said that he submitted 20,000 entries, and one entry is five dollars. That means that older brother waged 100,000 dollars. If he hit the prediction for the top five placings, that is a hundredfold pay out. That means it is 10 million dollars?"

The child's father laughed and said, "That's right!" He had wagered 10,000 dollars on Team No. 3 to win behind his wife's back. He had hoped to bask in glory after winning and telling his wife and child to buy more stuff, but now... he would just keep his mouth shut.

"If I remember correctly, I heard that you are friends from Yanzhou?" A few of the smaller farm owners had warm smiles on their faces too.

In certain places, people forged friendships over literature. In certain places, they bonded over alcohol. As for Muzhou, they possibly bonded over sheep herding.

When talking about other stuff, such as farming or businesses, they tended to be more reserved. For all the things said, nobody would know whether one spoke the truth or if it was all cr*p. It was not possible to check whether whatever the tourists said was true or not. Unless it was seen personally with one's eyes, there was little credibility. But sheep herding was different. Watching a competition was interaction. As for those that were able to wager and make the right picks, the farm owners were always willing to talk to such people. They treated them as decent people who were capable.

Therefore, after knowing that Fang Zhao had made a wager and correctly predicted the top five places, their attitudes toward him changed immediately. They saw him as a fellow enthusiast.

Originally, there was only Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu at the table. Now, the table had become crowded. There were some farm owners who could not find a chair and hence pulled some over from the neighboring tables to squeeze in with them. The core of the

viewing hall had shifted from the central area over to the table at the corner.

"Guessing the top five is not easy at all. The strength of the third and fourth placers are about the same. I believe you when you said you got lucky. However, if it was all luck, that would be a joke. Friend, you have owned a shepherd dog before, haven't you?" Wen Yi asked.

"Never had one," Fang Zhao replied.

The farm owners put on a show of disbelief. If one did not understand shepherd dogs, how could they make such accurate predictions. Luck? Even if luck was a component, it only accounted for a small portion.

"You definitely have a shepherd dog, and not just one!" a farm owner at the side exclaimed.

"I really don't. I do have a dog, just one. I picked it up from the streets. It's rather small, not a shepherd dog," Fang Zhao replied seriously.

Zuo Yu imagined that little curly-haired dog running into the pastures and barking at the flock of sheep. However, the flock of sheep would pay it no mind and continue grazing on the grass. That scene made Zuo Yu want to laugh.

After that, Wu Yi invited Fang Zhao to join his family for dinner. In Muzhou, when a farm owner invited someone to have dinner together with their family, it meant that the farm owner regarded the person as important—it was a show of approval.

As for the rest of the people in the tour group, Wu Yi did not care about them. Regarding them, they did not have a common interest, so they could stay wherever was pleasant to them.

Fang Zhao asked Wu Yi about Muzhou's history. The information he'd seen online would still be different from hearing the words of a local.

Wu Yi spoke of a lot, of the stuff that could be found online and that which could not. When he heard Fang Zhao mention the Su family, Wu Yi felt that perhaps Fang Zhao wanted to form relations with the Su family.

"Till today, Muzhou is still the Su family's Muzhou. Sheep herding competitions are also organized by them. If you want to find someone from the Su family to discuss

business, that might be quite hard. If you want to gamble on the competitions... listen to a word of advice. Don't show off. Earning more or less is enough. With your foresight, splitting up to earn over a few rounds is fine too. But if you keep winning large amounts, I fear it may get you noticed. I'm not saying that the Su family will take action or do anything, but there could be trouble."

It was because Wu Yi had seen Fang Zhao wager so much money and be so accurate. He felt that Fang Zhao's character was good—that was why he told Fang Zhao all this.

"In Muzhou, among those that can accurately predict the top five, as well as all the other positions, the Su family makes up 70%. If you had not told me that you had no relations whatsoever with the Su family, I would have thought you to be an illegitimate child of theirs. Rich families have their own problems too. If you are looking to build relations with people of the Su family, make sure you think carefully and pick the right person. Otherwise it could be troublesome." Wu Yi only dared to say this much in front of Fang Zhao. Anything more, he was unwilling to say.

Wu Yi was overthinking. Fang Zhao had no interest in the matters concerning the younglings of the Su Family. The one he was familiar with was Muzhou's Su family's "Grand Master."

Chapter 83

It's from Kowtowing

The weather was decent the next day, so Fang Zhao didn't linger in Shanmu Farm. He set off for Qingcheng.

Wu Yi was sad to see him leave. He had enjoyed discussing shepherding with Fang Zhao the day before. The more they had talked, the more he had realized how knowledgeable Fang Zhao was. He had offered advice that could be applied to raising shepherd dogs in Muzhou, which made him more enthusiastic about his guest. He had pleaded with Fang Zhao to stay longer to no avail. When Fang Zhao left, Wu Yi saw him off in person.

"Do drop by if you have time. You can bring Curly Hair. He can have a friendly matchup against my dogs. My farm pales in comparison to the big farms that can host formal competitions, but there's enough land to run around. You know, dogs are fast learners. Even if he doesn't know how to shepherd, he'll pick it up after hanging out with my dogs for a bit. When you visit in the future, don't worry about the lodging fee, just give me a heads up. Let me know if you need any fresh produce and the like. I'll save some for you ahead of time." Wu Yi rambled on as he directed workers carrying bags of produce onto Fang Zhao's flying transport.

Wu Yi felt he'd learned a lot from his conversation with Fang Zhao yesterday and should make it up to him. Wu Yi thought it impolite to take advantage of a younger friend that way, so he'd prepared quite a few gifts for Fang Zhao. Even though, as a general rule, he didn't like foreigners, he welcomed folks like Fang Zhao. That was how he operated—if he connected with someone, he would treat that person extra well. If not, he wouldn't bother with a single look.

Weather conditions were stable during the flight from Shanmu Farm to Qingcheng. The journey was smooth.

Although Muzhou was made up predominantly of fields, every continent had its major cities. Just like in other continents, you could find high rises in Muzhou. It was just that the buildings were spaced out, so black streets were unheard of, and every city was equipped with a shepherding competition venue, which served as an entertainment

center and a site of cultural preservation.

As Muzhou's capital, Qingcheng was home to many large farms, and it boasted a lavish central business district populated with skyscrapers with unique designs. It was also equipped with the world's largest shepherding competition venue. Traveling from Qingcheng's suburbs to its central business district was like moving from one extreme to another—one was the natural abode of farms and ranches, the other a high-tech hub of the New Era.

Qingcheng had dedicated parking spaces for flying transports, but the movement of foreign aircraft like Fang Zhao's was limited. They were barred from the martyrs' cemetery. To get to the cemetery, Fang Zhao's party had to find an alternative.

After parking his flying transport, Fang Zhao called a cab.

The makeup of the martyrs' cemetery in Muzhou was similar to the one in Yanzhou. It consisted of a square, a grand monument, an area for scattered graves, a public worship area, and a memorial hall. But the martyrs' cemetery in Muzhou had a unique feature, which was widely known—a burial site for service dogs.

The martyrs' cemeteries in other continents also housed decorated service dogs, but not as many as the one in Muzhou. The Muzhou cemetery was also the only one to dedicate an entire area to service dogs.

Fang Zhao also knew that Su Mu's squadron had been the one with the most dogs. During the war, many of the dogs had been sacrificed. Their purpose had been to fight side-by-side with mankind and take their place in deadly missions, so it made sense that Su Mu had built a dedicated burial site for service dogs during the New Era.

The reason shepherd dogs in Muzhou enjoyed a rarefied status also had to do with the burial site for service dogs. The area was marked by a sculpture of Su Mu and a dog. Fang Zhao knew the dog well. Out of all the dogs Su Mu had raised, this one held a special place in his heart. When Fang Zhao's previous incarnation had passed, the dog had still been in combat with Su Mu in Muzhou. After being reborn into the New Era, Fang Zhao had learned from history books that the dog had saved Su Mu's life. Otherwise, Su Mu would have been missing among the founding generals of the New Era. But the dog didn't live to see the New Era.

Fang Zhao underwent an ID check when he reached the core area of the cemetery. It

took some time because Fang Zhao was a foreigner and therefore scrutinized carefully. Zuo Yu's ID check took even longer.

"Here's the deal: outside of Yanzhou, many special venues will require thorough vetting. It's a pain in the ass," Zuo Yu told Fang Zhao. "Even if you're cleared at the entrance, you might get vetted again when you reach the cemetery's core area."

"Cemetery guards?"

"Right. The guards assigned to the cemetery have especially strong instincts. They're usually loaned from the police. The cemetery is a fixed rotation in the force. Their sense of smell is even better than a dog's. One of our instructor's army buddies was certified as a cemetery guard. He was assigned to the cemetery's core area every Memorial Day."

Just as Zuo Yu finished his sentence, they were approached by a guard. They had just set foot in the core area.

"He must have noticed something about me," Zuo Yu whispered to Fang Zhao. Zuo Yu was former special forces. It was understandable if he set off alarms.

Zuo Yu volunteered his ID when the guard approached.

After checking Zuo Yu's ID, the man turned to Fang Zhao. "Excuse me, your ID please."

While he was checking Fang Zhao's ID, the guard glanced at him a few times, especially when he noticed that Fang Zhao listed "composer" as his profession. He gauged Fang Zhao carefully, as if in disbelief.

When the officer left, a curious Zuo Yu asked Fang Zhao, "Why did it take him longer to check your ID?" Zuo Yu was puzzled.

"Probably because he thought I am a bigger threat than you are," Fang Zhao responded.

"Hehe." Zuo Yu didn't buy the explanation.

Fang Zhao paid no attention to Zuo Yu. He approached a tall tombstone and examined its carvings.

The carvings depicted a battle in Muzhou. It featured a few service dogs and a few humans joking around. They were less serious than soldiers in battle, even casual.

This was a group of old friends. One of them was Fang Zhao's previous incarnation.

Fang Zhao smiled at the carving, took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly.

Fang Zhao left the big tombstone to examine the rows of smaller tombstones behind it. When he approached, he noticed someone sitting by the first tombstone in the first row. He looked around 13 or 14, a bit chubby. He was hugging his knees, so his face was obscured. Judging from the pool of water on the ground and the ongoing drool, you could tell the chubby kid was sleeping.

Sleeping in a cemetery? And by the first tombstone in the first row of graves in the core area of Muzhou's largest martyrs' cemetery at that. And he had drooled profusely without reprimand.

Considering how vigilant the guards were and the cemetery's strict security protocols, this was a far-fetched scene. Unless the kid was someone special, like a member of the Su family.

Only a Su could get away with sleeping in the cemetery without being kicked out by security guards.

"Hey, kid!" Fang Zhao gave the teenaged boy a gentle push.

"Huh? What's up?" The boy lifted his head, still drowsy, and wiped the drool by his mouth with his right hand, then repeated the motion with the back of his hand. He shivered and shrank his hand abruptly just as it was about to touch the tombstone. He then wiped the hand on his clothes and turned to examine the tombstone, breathing a sigh of relief when he made sure it was untainted by his saliva.

Fang Zhao knew who the boy was the instant he saw the boy's face.

It was Su Hou, a member of the Su family. His immediate family had been in the news. Fang Zhao had come across his picture when he'd searched for news reports about the Sus.

Su Hou had an older brother and two younger sisters. They were named Wang, Hou, Jiang, and Xiang respectively. Su Hou's father had quite a few lovers and produced

children out of wedlock as well, so there was plenty of competition among his offspring. Su Hou's brother Su Wang was a nerd studying at the Academy of Agricultural Science. His two younger sisters were still young. As for Su Hou himself, well, he just liked to eat.

Folks in Muzhou were waiting to see which of his children Su Hou's father would gift a farm. There was even a bet going on.

The Su family was a big family. Su Hou's father was one of its more accomplished members. Su Hou's family had been in the news recently. It had been reported that Su Hou's father said at a recent reception that he planned on giving one of his farms to one of his children. He did not specify the recipient.

The people of Muzhou loved their gossip, especially when it came to Muzhou's storied Su family. They paid attention every time Su Hou's family was in the headlines.

Su Hou might have been one of the reasons behind the tight security in the core area. Even though it had been some time since Memorial Day and the number of visitors had dwindled, it wasn't normal for the core area to be this empty.

When he found his bearings, the chubby kid wiped his mouth again and stared at Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu with alarm. "Who are you?" He then scanned his surroundings, relaxing once he realized there weren't any uniformed guards around.

"We're here to pay our respects." Fang Zhao examined the wound on the chubby kid's forehead. "This is from kowtowing, no? Shouldn't you get it looked at at the hospital?"

The wound was a piece of cake, considering the level of medical treatment in the New Era. It would heal in two days.

"No!" The chubby kid was furious when he heard the wound being mentioned. "I'm not getting it treated."

Fang Zhao didn't press the kid. He examined the wound more closely and asked, "This is from kowtowing? Seems like you kowtowed more than a few times."

"No kidding. I kowtowed 49 times." Su Hou touched his wound.

"Were you kowtowing before General Su Mu?" Fang Zhao asked with a laugh. The wound wasn't fresh—it looked a day old. It looked worse than it was because the kid

had refused treatment. Children his age were hard to figure out.

Su Hou fumed. "No. I just need to kowtow three times for General Su Mu. I was sent to kowtow in Yanzhou."

"Yanzhou? Which relative in Yanzhou would require so many kowtows?" Fang Zhao asked.

"He's not a relative. He's the late friend of a family elder. We send someone to pay our respects every year. My older siblings misled me into believing that, the more I kowtowed, the more the spirit of the deceased would watch over me. But when I got back, they said it was the gesture that mattered and called me a fool."

Zuo Yu wondered. Your older siblings probably didn't expect you to be stupid enough to believe them. This level of intelligence—is he really a member of the Su family?

"We're from Yanzhou. Let's see if we know the person you kowtowed for?" Zuo Yu asked.

"You're from Yanzhou? Have you heard of Fang Zhao?"

Zuo Yu: "Yeah..."

Chapter 84

My Boss Is a Crazy Fellow

Zuo Yu knew that the chubby kid was not talking about his own boss. Given his boss's age and status, how could he have a member of the Su family paying him respects every year?

The chubby kid was still trying to cover up what he had just said. But anyone who had half a brain could guess what he was talking about. A "Fang Zhao" that would make a member of the Su family travel to pay their respects every year would most probably be the one lying in the Yanzhou Cemetery for Martyrs.

"You mean the one in the Cemetery for Martyrs?" Zuo Yu glanced at Fang Zhao as he was asking Su Hou. He really wanted to know what it felt like when people with a martyr's namesake were discussing that particular martyr.

Fang Zhao's face was smiling but he did not say anything. He just listened to the conversation between Zuo Yu and Su Hou.

"That's him! Do you know what sort of person he was?" Su Hou asked curiously. Before being sent to Yanzhou, he had done some research online on "Fang Zhao." There were too many Fang Zhaos, as it was a common name, but there was only one who was an important martyr. Unfortunately, the internet had too little information on him and much of it was incomplete. Therefore, he had gotten to know a little from his brothers and sisters who'd told him that Fang Zhao had been a good friend of the Su family's Su Mu. His gravestone in Yanzhou was second only to Yanzhou's great general Wu Yan.

"Oh, him. I know. Back in history classes, they talked about him."

Zuo Yu scanned his surroundings, and there was no immediate danger. The cemetery guard was still watching them. This made Zuo Yu feel more at ease to tell his story. As the guards were watching the area here, should there be any danger, the guards would surely detect it first. As long as they moved out, Zuo Yu would have time to promptly react and protect Fang Zhao.

Actually, Zuo Yu knew little regarding the Yanzhou martyr "Fang Zhao." Most of his

knowledge was from his secondary school classes, and after that, through other's hearsay. However, he could still manage bragging a little in front of Su Hou.

All the stories that people knew were apparently good stories that sang the praises of the martyrs and their glorious achievements. As Zuo Yu narrated the stories in Yanzhou's history books, Su Hou sat in front of the gravestone.

Fang Zhao stood aside and listened quietly. The stories were somewhat unfamiliar and exaggerated. However, this was not the first time he had experienced such stories. Back when he had visited the Yanzhou Cemetery for Martyrs before Memorial Day, there were people in the memorial hall telling stories that mentioned him. Those stories had been way more exaggerated.

He silently laughed and shook his head as his eyes looked up toward Su Mu's gravestone.

Su Mu's gravestone was similar to Wu Yan's. Two lines of a brief biography, followed by his contributions toward Muzhou.

Compared to Wu Yan, who was a generation younger, Fang Zhao had been closer to Su Mu and the others of the same generation who had experienced the peaceful era and struggled together during the end of days.

Visiting the tombs of his old friends left Fang Zhao feeling complicated. This was a feeling that he did not know how to describe. When he was reborn and saw the New Era that his old friends had helped found, Fang Zhao had felt a little envy. But if those own friends of his knew that he had been reborn 500 years later, they would probably be jealous, right?

Zuo Yu talked nonstop for half an hour. The face of the cemetery guard who was watching had begun to twitch, probably thinking of a plan to remove him from the place.

When Zuo Yu finally stopped, Su Hou still could not get enough of it.

"What's next? Could you tell me how Fang Zhao, Great General Mu Su, Great General Lu Xi, Great General Wu Yan, and the other martyrs met during the apocalypse?" Su Hou asked, anticipating the story that was to come.

"There is too much to finish in a day," Zuo Yu replied. In reality, he himself did not

know. The knowledge he had stored on this matter was nearly all used up. Fabricate a story? That would be disrespectful to the martyrs, so he did not say any more. "Anyway, all you need to remember is that all the martyrs buried in cemeteries on every continent, whether they were well known or nameless, each and every one deserves our respect and admiration. Especially those who have gravestones near the front, they are all great people," Zuo Yu concluded.

Su Hou felt a little disappointed that there would be no more stories. Rubbing the wound on his forehead, he smiled and said, "I guess."

He had heard plenty of stories of how his ancestor Su Mu had reclaimed Muzhou. He had also watched many films and shows of that period. Every youth in their secondary school days would have a superhero dream, and his idol had been Su Mu. When he had been given the task of going to Yanzhou to pay respects, he had been more than happy to do so. After all, he had grown up hearing stories of Muzhou and other related stories. As for the other leaders during the end of days, he had not known much at all. If things were as Zuo Yu had said, Su Hou felt that all his kowtowing was worth it. Originally, he had been misled by his elder siblings, but after listening to Zuo Yu, he was no longer as pissed.

Once his anger had subsided, Su Hou realized his forehead was hurting quite a bit. He also knew that continuing to stay here was not a good idea. If he happened to run into a media company looking for news, it would be troublesome.

As Su Hou got up to leave, he turned to Zuo Yu and told him, "Your stories were not bad, let's be friends. When I'm free, I'll pay a visit to Yanzhou and hang out with you guys."

Su Hou felt that the two he had just met were decent people. Although he was not smart, he could still feel the kindness or malice coming from people. As for these two, they did not ask about the matters of his family or seem to have any purpose of wanting benefits. By making friends with them, it would be easy to find them when he got bored and wanted to listen to more stories.

"This is my contact number, I am... Su Hou." After he gave out his own name, he watched for Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu's reaction.

"I know. Your photographs appear periodically in entertainment news. Try not to wander around recklessly, it would be better if you bring along a bodyguard. I have

seen many of you rich kids from rich families get kidnapped because they run around without a care," Zuo Yu advised while adding him as a friend.

Su Hou glanced at the person beside Zuo Yu. "What about you? Let's be friends too!"

"My name is Fang Zhao."

Su Hou: "..."

Su Hou walked a few steps toward the exit with a blank face before he turned back and faced Fang Zhao. "Fang Zhao?!"

Zuo Yu explained, "This is my boss, Fang Zhao. He shares the same name as the 'Fang Zhao' that you kowtowed to."

"Oh." Su Hou scratched his head, feeling a little embarrassed. He knew that there were many people who shared the same name as the martyrs. It was just that, meeting under these sort of circumstances, there was bound to be a little awkwardness.

"What you just mentioned, about other continents, do they send someone over to pay respects every year?" Fang Zhao asked.

A while back, when Zuo Yu had been telling his story, Su Hou had mentioned that. Just that he had not elaborated and Zuo Yu had not taken note of anything special. Every year, when people from other continents traveled to Yanzhou's Cemetery for Martyrs, they would pay respects to the martyrs. This was very normal.

"Did I mention it?" Su Hou scratched his head and thought for a moment. "Oh, right. Actually, I am not too sure myself. I only heard about it before. Just like our Su family assigns someone to pay respects, other continents have families who do the same. The timing might not necessarily be the same, but they usually visit within a month before or after Memorial Day. As for which families, I'm not too sure. Yesterday, when I was there, I ran into someone from Xizhou."

Fang Zhao laughed and did not ask anything further. He told Su Hou, "Hurry up and go home, those people seem to be looking for you. Get the wound on your forehead treated as soon as possible. Even if you are angry, don't take it out on yourself. Head injuries that don't get treated in time make one stupid."

Zuo Yu thought to himself, Boss, you know that you are lying to a kid, right?

However, Su Hou believed it. He already did not consider himself to be smart. If he became more stupid...

"Save me!" Su Hou shouted as he ran toward a squad that had just entered the core cemetery area, making the squad members assume that Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu were trying to kidnap Su Hou. Some even drew their guns.

However, the leader of the team was frowning, probably from hearing Su Hou's account and realizing that it was totally different from what that had assumed was happening. Thus, he instructed his team members to put away their guns and then flashed Fang Zhao a courteous smile. With that, the entire team surrounded Su Hou as they left.

A faint sound of someone being berated came from outside the cemetery's core area. The scoldings were not meant for Su Hou. It was probably some paparazzi or some nosy bystanders who were being reprimanded by the cemetery staff.

"The young masters of rich and powerful families." Zuo Yu sighed, although he did feel a little glad. "Our luck this time round isn't too bad. We got to meet a young master. Speaking of all these families of great generals who founded the New Era, they are all publically known as aristocratic families. Boss, imagine how awesome it would be to be descendants of such great people."

Fang Zhao only smiled but did not say much.

He stood silently before Su Mu's gravestone before moving on to the next gravestone as he had done before at Yanzhou's Cemetery of Martyrs.

This was not Fang Zhou's main battlefield, but some names were very familiar to him. Even if they were not that familiar, he still had some impression of the names.

There might not have been a grave for "Fang Zhao" here, but there were still people here that remembered him.

To still assign someone to pay respects after 500 years, even if it was a formality and the people went with the mentality of completing a task, Fang Zhao had nothing bad to say. Even for people related by blood, feelings would fade over time, more so after many generations and without any blood relation. For someone like Su Hou to really kowtow, and kowtow over ten times at that, was a rare sight indeed.

After leaving the cemetery, they arrived at the plaza in front of the giant tombstone. Standing in the plaza, they could see the front of the core area's magnificent monument.

As Memorial Day had already passed some time ago, there were not many people here. After Memorial Day, the working class had gone back to work and students had gone back to school. The paparazzi that were following Su Hou had left as well.

People in the cemetery were quietly walking through the plaza, probably having paid their respects to somebody. There was no longer any Memorial Day buzz and the plaza seemed spacious and empty, occasionally with other sounds. A gust of wind blew through, causing the falling leaves to create a light scraping sound as they hit the stone floor.

This was really the most common scene in the cemetery.

Fang Zhao's footsteps slowed and he inclined his head slightly, as if to resolve something.

"What's wrong?" Zuo Yu thought that Fang Zhao had discovered something abnormal and immediately became alert. However, looking all around him, he found nothing amiss.

"Listen," Fang Zhao said.

"What?" Zuo Yu still did not understand.

"Listen to the sounds."

Zuo Yu listened carefully but still did not find anything worth his attention. "Boss, what did you hear?"

"The sound of gravestones."

Zuo Yu: "..."

Zuo Yu scratched the goosebumps that appeared on his arm and asked, "Do gravestones have sounds?"

"Yes. Every single gravestone, whether big or small, near or far, will have their own

sound. So do the trees, people, and even the stone floor of the plaza. The entire cemetery has its own voice." Fang Zhao stopped in his tracks, closed his eyes, and let his arms hang down, not moving at all.

Zuo Yu: "... My boss is a crazy fellow!

A gust of wind blew across. Even though the wind brought about a gentle warmth, Zuo Yu shivered, cold sweat dripping down his back as all the hairs on his body stood up.

"Boss, we have to respect science!"

Chapter 85

This Is It

Fang Zhao had not meant to scare Zuo Yu, but neither was he talking nonsense. He was seriously listening. It was just different from what Zuo Yu imagined. The sounds that Fang Zhao heard were converted into a sort of language deep within his brain—music.

Emotions, scenery, and sounds were sources of inspiration. Although back in Yanzhou, Fang Zhao's walk in the cemetery had provided him with a rough draft, he had still felt that there was something lacking. Now he was looking for it slowly.

Muzhou's cemetery gave Fang Zhao a different feel. The emotions, scenery, and sounds were all different. The melodies playing in his mind were different too. As Fang Zhao listened, he adjusted the melodies in his mind until they suited his ideal result.

However, as Fang Zhao was in the process of soaking in all the inspiration, Zuo Yu was different. He would subconsciously examine his surroundings for anomalies then turn back in the direction of the tombstone to see if there were any changes. He had doubts about having accepted the job of "assistant." Perhaps he felt that he did not suit this profession, or perhaps, after having spent some time beside Fang Zhao, he had become crazy too?

Each time Fang Zhao walked a little, he would stop to listen. Sometimes he would listen for an extended period, other times he would only listen for a short while.

When the time came for them to leave Muzhou, Zuo Yu let out a sigh of relief in his head. He was relieved to finally leave this place. However, when he thought about having to visit the cemeteries in other continents, he felt a little disheartened.

If it was as Zuo Yu expected, for the following continents, they would head straight for the Cemetery for Martyrs in each continent. Unless it was late or there were sudden weather changes, only then would they stop to rest. As the destinations were rather clear-cut, even if there were any delays, it would only be for a short while.

Xizhou, Tongzhou, Jizhou, Lazhou, Azhou, Rongzhou, Mazhou, Jinzhou, Leizhou and Huangzhou, every continent they went to was the same circumstances. Zuo Yu had the

same experience in every continent, repeating it ten times up till the point where he could remain calm and enjoy the scenery whenever he saw Fang Zhao "appreciate" the mysterious sounds of the cemeteries.

On Feb 25, Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu returned to Yanzhou.

As Fang Zhao walked into the virtual projects department on the 50th floor, Zu Wen and the others were all there. They carefully observed Fang Zhao's facial expressions. They were worried that Fang Zhao would get angry over the results of the online voting for the endorsement deal.

For the endorsement deal for "Battle of the Century," according to the votes of the public, Polar Light remained in third place, losing to first-placed Mi Yu by only 300 votes. With the huge number of voters, this was a tiny disparity. But still, even losing out by one vote was a loss. Losing was just losing, there was no doubt. Now, the results of the voting were still on the internet.

They might have received assistance from Leizhou voters, but the other two companies were not going to sit idly by. They had also campaigned intercontinentally for votes. Thus, Zu Wen and the rest were worried that Fang Zhao might be moody from losing the vote. If the superiors were in a bad frame of mind, the underlings would be out of luck.

Fang Zhao knew the results of the vote, but he did not express anything. First, this was just an online vote organized by the media and not one officially organized by Fiery Bird. It was only a disguised inquiry to see public opinion and would not yet decide who the spokesperson was. Second, operations and publicity had been in charge of this matter. Fang Zhao had only completed the tasks he was required to. He had left the other matters in the hands of Silver Wing staff.

"If there is nothing else important, do not disturb me," Fang Zhao said, going into his office.

Watching the door close, Zeng Huang said, "Is Big Zhao going into isolation again? Seems like this time he gained quite a lot."

"Indeed, he gained quite a bit." Zuo Yu pointed at the Muzhou specialty products that were placed to one side. "This is all that we gained. Free of charge."

Zuo Yu briefly recounted their experiences on this trip, placing added emphasis on

Fang Zhao's unusual behavior when he was at the cemetery.

Zu Wen sympathized and patted him on the shoulder. "Get used to it. You just have to know that the mind of an artist is not something normal people can understand. Anyway, up till now, I still don't understand him.

Fang Zhao did not know that the people outside were discussing him. He did not have the time or mood to take notice of them anyway. He organized all that he had gained from this trip and turned on the miniprojector given to him by Fiery Bird's sound effects deputy head You Chuan. He started making amendments to his scoresheet, which he had adjusted many times before.

The next day, after a night without sleep, the musical piece was finally completed. Fang Zhao made a call to Duan Qianji. "We can arrange for the recording."

The storage card that he had given out for photographs had already been returned. Now, all that Fang Zhao needed to do was record the completed piece, fit it with the animation, and store it onto the card.

Feb 28.

Huangzhou, Fiery Bird Headquarters.

Sound effects department head Hua Li knocked his forehead with his fist and took a few deep breaths. After that, he plucked out his earpiece and asked You Chuan beside him, "What do you feel about this?"

What they had just been listening to was the eleventh demo piece. It was not yet completed, just a portion. The final draft had not yet been submitted. Given Hua Li's and You Chuan's capabilities, they could naturally deduce how the completed piece would sound just from the demo piece and the first draft.

You Chuan also pulled out his earpiece and shook his head. "If the final draft does not have many changes, then it is just like that. If you hear the tune on its own, it seems quite good. However, if you add it to the animation, just like the previous few, there is just something lacking."

Hua Li sighed deeply. Pondering awhile, he asked, "Is there still no news on the other eight invitees?"

"Seven masters have replied. Two of them will submit their demo piece and first draft by tonight. Five others have said they tried their best but were unable to come up with anything. They will return the card and projector to us."

"Isn't there one more?" Hua Li asked. He had sent You Chuan to deliver 19 invites and they only had 18 replies now. Where had the last one gone?

"There is still one more, Fang Zhao. Until now, there has been no news from him," You Chuan replied.

"Fang Zhao? That freshly graduated twenty-something fellow?" Hua Li knew who Fang Zhao was, because amongst all the great masters, a youngster like him had appeared and that left a lasting impression. There were still the four movements of the "100-Year Period of Destruction," something that Hua Li listened to everyday.

"When we went to invite him, he personally agreed to it. It's just that there has been no news at all," You Chuan answered.

"Let's wait a little while more." When Hua Li finished speaking, he heard a new message notification from You Chuan's side.

"Eh?" You Chuan was surprised. "Fang Zhao replied saying the recording went somewhat smoothly. The completed piece together with the final draft have been stored inside the card. He has already contacted our Yanzhou division, and they will send it over to Huangzhou very soon."

"Completed piece?!" That was what Hua Li paid attention to. After pondering for a while, he said, "Ask who is in charge of the storage card at Yanzhou's side. Get them to send the contents over through an encrypted channel."

You Chuan was also curious. He contacted the Yanzhou person and requested they send the card's contents right away.

"Listen, listen!" Hua Li put on his earpieces once again.

You Chuan put on his earpiece and broadcasted the music file that he had just received.

At the start, both of them did not have any expressions, but as the tune hit the twenty second mark, excitement could be seen on their faces, and their expressions became rather serious.

After one minute, both let out a deep breath.

When the broadcast reached the one-and-a-half-minute mark, Hua Li pressed the pause button and yanked his earpieces out. "To the sound effects studio!"

You Chuan had the same intention. The both of them hurried to the sound effects studio and turned on the opening scene animation before broadcasting the received file at the same time.

Outside the studio, the rest of the people from the sound effects department were guessing what had happened after both the head and deputy head had hurriedly rushed in. Thinking back to how they had been recently discussing the accompaniment music for the opening scene, they wondered which great master had sent a new piece that satisfied the two.

Thus, the entire sound effects department began discussing why the two heads were rushing and which great master had just sent in their work.

Inside the sound effects studio. The best audio and projection equipment in the entire Fiery Bird company was installed right here.

Both the head and deputy head watched the opening animation and listened to the musical composition over and over.

After completing their fifth time, Hua Li clapped his hands on the table and exclaimed, "This is it!"

"Just like that? Are you not even going to consider the other pieces?" You Chuan asked. He had the same opinion as Hua Li. It was just that some of the others had not yet sent in their final drafts. Were they really going to come to a decision now? Wasn't it too early?

"No need. Just this!" Hua Li knew that there were others that had not yet sent in their final drafts, and there were even two that had not yet sent in a demo piece or a first draft, but Hua Li had dealt with these people for many years already. He knew the styles of these people; there were no big surprises.

"I have no idea how those from the music industry would evaluate this. I'm just looking at this as a game from a sound effects department head's point of view. It is just 'perfect,' it is the most suitable accompaniment for the opening animation. It fits

perfectly!" Hua Li said. "Composing, arranging, remixing, directing... producer of Polar Light virtual projects team."

Hua Li looked at the information on Fang Zhao. Back when he had first seen it, he had been shocked and not been able to believe it. But now he had no doubts. He had heard this phrase before. "In this world, there will always be an omnipotent crazy fellow."

Sighing ruefully, Hua Li got up and left the studio. "Contact Fang Zhao, we can begin discussions."

Chapter 86

Cash or Console?

Duan Qianji had not been in a great mood originally. Polar Light had lost the online poll and a whole host of sarcastic comments had followed. Even though she had gone through the same routine countless times before and was mentally prepared, she was still disappointed. After all, it was the first time Silver Wing had successfully launched a virtual idol. Maybe she had set her expectations too high because they had gotten off to such a great start.

Then again, even though they lost, they didn't lose by a big margin. And it was still far from clear who Fiery Bird would pick in the end.

As her train of thought made this twist, Duan Qianji started looking forward to Fang Zhao's progress on the Fiery Bird score. Just as she was pondering the matter, she got a call. It was her assistant.

"What? We've been picked? So soon?" Duan Qianji listened to her assistant's briefing in disbelief. Fang Zhao had just submitted his data card yesterday and now Fiery Bird had made up their mind?

This was the score for the new game's opening animation. Eighteen other masters had been invited to submit scores.

How come they had decided so soon?

If she hadn't vetted Fang Zhao, Duan Qianji would have wondered if Fang Zhao was in cahoots with Fiery Bird. Otherwise, how come they had decided on the score so quickly?

Duan Qianji was thinking Fiery Bird's sound effects team would have to convene a meeting to sift through the submissions and take a vote. The whole process would take two or three days at least.

But the fact of the matter was that Fiery Bird had decided yesterday. The reason they had waited until today to make contact was because they were still debating how to

compensate Fang Zhao.

Fiery Bird's custom was to invite submissions from composers and then offer a price based on the final submissions. Even pieces that ultimately weren't placed would be evaluated and paid for. This was a practice that industry insiders were familiar with and didn't take issue with.

"What are they offering?" As a businesswoman, this was Duan Qianji's foremost concern.

Fang Zhao was signed to Silver Wing, but after the completion of the four movements of the "Period of Destruction" series, he had signed a new contract. The deal gave Fang Zhao a certain degree of freedom. It was a quasi-partnership. He could take jobs on his own other than his assignments from Silver Wing, but he had to notify the company. He was also banned from defecting to another label before the end of his contract.

Compared to other composers, these were already exceptional terms. This was an act of generosity on Duan Qianji's part. She cherished the fact that she had landed someone who could carry a virtual project, someone talented enough to rival the entire Flying Pegasus cooperative. Duan Qianji had moved on the new contract quickly after consulting Fang Zhao, but it was never made public, listed only as an A-grade contract in the label's internal database.

As for Fiery Bird's assignment, this was a collaboration between the game studio and Fang Zhao, not between the studio and Silver Wing. In this case, Silver Wing was riding on Fang Zhao's coattails, so regardless of how much Fiery Bird offered, the sum would be pocketed by Fang Zhao entirely. But now, Silver Wing's fate was intertwined with Fang Zhao's. The better his work, the higher his pricing, the better prospects for Silver Wing.

But Duan Qianji wore a puzzled expression after hearing her assistant's response. "That's what they said? OK, got it."

After ending the call, she instructed her driver, "When we reach the office, head to the 50th floor, not the top floor."

When she arrived, the entire virtual projects department stood in attention.

The big boss was dropping by. Of course they had to be on hand to welcome her.

Zu Wen was a little nervous. He was afraid of Duan Qianji. Even though he had been to the top floor with Fang Zhao quite a few times and was less nervous now, he was still tense.

The others didn't fare much better. Thinking back to the Polar Light interview they had completed a while back, they didn't remember any big hiccups. The technical aspects and director had been confirmed well in advance. Pang Pusong's dubbing had gone smoothly. He had delivered his lines according to the script. There shouldn't be any issues. Why was the big boss visiting now? Surprise inspection?

Even though Duan Qianji wore a faint smile, she still projected a serious aura. The 50th floor went silent and everyone became extra cautious.

The only calm person was Fang Zhao, who arrived even later than the big boss.

Fang Zhao had rushed back from home after getting word from Duan Qianji. He ended up being slower than his boss.

"You're here." Duan Qianji's smile deepened. "I have some news. Your score has been picked by the Fiery Bird sound effects department."

The only people present were the core members of the Polar Light project team. Their discretion could be counted on and they could use the morale boost. That was why Duan Qianji didn't bother keeping the news a secret, although she didn't specify where Fang Zhao's score would be used. She didn't have to elaborate. Fang Zhao knew what she was talking about.

Fang Zhao was happy to find out that his work had been chosen by Fiery Bird, but he wasn't overemotional. He merely smiled and waited for Duan Qianji to continue. She wouldn't have come to the 50th floor in person just to share that piece of news.

Duan Qianji observed Fang Zhao's facial expression. She was impressed that he could maintain his composure.

"The head of Fiery Bird's sound effects team, Hua Li, has approached us with an offer. As you would probably expect, they will definitely pay more for the chosen piece than the other submissions, but they haven't offered an exact price yet. They want to give you a choice." Duan Qianji paused before continuing, "Do you want to get paid in cash or receive Fiery Bird's once-in-a-decade limited edition gaming console instead?"

For most of the people present, this was a no-brainer.

Who would go for the gaming console?

Most people would choose the former without hesitation. If the pay was meager, that would be cause for consideration, but the amount was no doubt generous. That Leizhou film studio had spent 10 million to license one movement exclusively for a month. Fiery Bird wouldn't be cheap. After all, everyone knew that Fiery Bird was loaded.

But after Duan Qianji asked the question, Zu Wen and the other tech geeks, whose ears were perked, looked conflicted. Even though this had nothing to do with them, they still wondered how they would choose.

Such a tough call.

Cash?

Of course, regular joes like them liked cash even though they were already getting paid handsomely with the success of the Polar Light project and the rise of the virtual projects department. Who would turn down more cash? But the other choice was a Fiery Bird console. It was the latest once-in-a-decade release, a limited edition console. Who knows how many of them Fiery Bird would make. It couldn't be more than a handful.

Word had already traveled in tech geek circles that Fiery Bird's new console would be significantly more advanced than their last console. It was rumored the console was developed in conjunction with army technicians. Tons of folks had been dying to get their hands on one. Zu Wen had never thought something like this would happen to someone he knew.

A real tough one. Such a tough call.

How would I choose?

But before Zu Wen and company became consumed in mock indecision, Fang Zhao had already given his answer.

"I want the console."

Duan Qianji's expression was one of resignation when she heard the answer. She felt she had fallen behind the times. It was hard for her to figure out what was going on in the minds of these youngsters.

While he had still been working on the "Period of Destruction" series, Fang Zhao had applied for gaming equipment. During quite a few of Duan Qianji's previous visits, Fang Zhao had been gaming in the department's dedicated gaming room when she arrived. When she had heard Fiery Bird's offer from her assistant, she had a hunch that Fang Zhao would make the unconventional choice.

"You're positive?" Duan Qianji asked.

"Positive."

"Then send a message to You Chuan. They're waiting to hear from you."

The person who had reached out to Duan Qianji had been Hua Li, the head of Fiery Bird's sound effects team. Why hadn't Fiery Bird contacted Fang Zhao directly? Because Fang Zhao was napping at home and had set his bracelet to alert him to calls from VIPs only. You Chuan was not listed as a VIP, so his call went unannounced and unanswered.

Duan Qianji left after chatting with Fang Zhao a bit more.

"Boss, a Fiery Bird console!" Zu Wen's eyes burned with envy. "When is it arriving? Can I touch it? Can I take a picture with it? I want to show off."

"The limited edition consoles are the most advanced consoles. It's hard to put a price tag on them. Boss, I think you made the right call. Even if you suffer financially, you'll be rewarded spiritually," said an equally jealous Rodney.

Fang Zhao sent You Chuan a message. You Chuan immediately responded, "The console will arrive between late August and early September. The exact timing still has to be confirmed. The console is still being tested. We'll give you a heads up before we send it out. You've made the right choice. You'll make a decent profit if you resell it."

In reality, Fang Zhao wasn't as conflicted as others thought he might be. For someone who had survived the apocalypse like him, money wasn't a big deal as long as he had enough to cover his expenses. Of course, no one would mind making more money, but in contrast, Fang Zhao was more curious about a gaming console from the New Era.

He liked to try out new things in the New Era. Plus, he was also looking forward to "Battle of the Century." The right hardware was a must. He could only enjoy the game if he had the proper console.

That afternoon, Silver Wing announced that Fang Zhao's score had been picked by Fiery Bird, but again, the statement didn't mention where the score would be placed. Still, the news itself was enough to dispel some skeptics.

"He was really chosen?"

"Who knows? We only have Silver Wing's word for it. No one can back up their story."

"Are we sure this isn't a charade staged by Silver Wing?"

"I don't think they would stoop so low as to lie, but there will be so many scores in the game. Fang Zhao may have written some token sound effect that doesn't feature prominently in the game."

"Who cares? It's just another composer, not an A-list celebrity."

To respond to the noise, Silver Wing released an additional video. It was an excerpt from an interview with a few key members of Fiery Bird's production team. Silver Wing had isolated a comment from Hua Li, the head of Fiery Bird's sound effects team.

Hua Li said the sound effects for the game had been more or less completed. He also thanked the composers that worked on the scores and mentioned Fang Zhao by name.

"Fang Zhao is composer full of surprises. We look forward to working with him again."

The fact that Hua Li identified Fang Zhao as a composer suggested Hua Li held him in high esteem. It was confirmation of Fang Zhao's talent.

Chapter 87

On Account of Your Forehead

The interview of the few key members of Fiery Bird's production team was broadcasted to the entire world. Everyone who paid attention could see it, and Fang Zhao's name became known by more people. However not everyone cared about it; mostly only those within the industry paid attention.

"Not bad, Fang Zhao!"

Ming Cang was the first to contact Fang Zhao after seeing the interview. A lot of people had said that Ming Cang had totally become a Fang Zhao fanatic. Nowadays, the information posted on Ming Cang's social feed was mostly concerning his son Ming Ye. At the same time, he would mention Fang Zhao. Therefore, people close to Ming Cang, whether they were in the industry or not, had also become familiar with Fang Zhao's name.

"Actually, I know of a few invitees who received the invitation from Fiery Bird. I didn't expect that you would land it in the end."

When Ming Cang had gone down to Silver Wing to personally thank Fang Zhao after the fourth movement was released, a foreign friend of his from the music industry had come to visit, stating that he had urgent matters and wanted to meet. Hence, Ming Cang had to leave Silver Wing and head home early. And that friend was one of the other invitees of Fiery Bird this year.

As he had signed a confidentiality agreement, he had only told Ming Cang what could be revealed and listed a few difficulties he had encountered. Even if Ming Cang did not know what the animation was or the scenery, he knew about the difficulty of creating an accompaniment piece. He had even invited a few friends who specialized in soundtracks for games and films to come over for a discussion. In the end, even a bunch of influential people in the industry still could not compete with that youngster.

This year's invitees were to make a piece for a portion of the game. Since the final piece had been selected, the other submissions would not be used anymore.

Knowing this bit of information, Ming Cang felt a little rueful, yet at the same time he felt a sense of pride. Look, a person of Yanzhou, and still a youngster. Just as Xue Jing, who was compiling teaching materials, had said before, the new waves of the Yanzhou music industry would most likely to rise on the backs of Fang Zhao and other youngsters.

"By the way, Fang Zhao, do you know 'Qi'an Department'? I can rope you in."

In the global context, creators would very often unite and join forces to cooperate and fight over more resources and opportunities.

Some of these organizations were formed with the alma mater of an academic institution as the core, while others were spontaneously formed by private organisations. The globally renowned organization, "Qi'an Department," was one of many.

The group that Ming Cang wanted to pull Fang Zhao into the core of was "Qi'an Department." The group currently had 99 members. With Fang Zhao, it would be an even 100.

All of them were from the music industry. A third of them were similar to Ming Cang's grade and were rather reputable within the Yanzhou music industry. Even if Fang Zhao did not pay attention to news regarding the industry, he would still find those names rather familiar. Of the remaining two-thirds, half of them were older members who had not yet achieved a status similar to that of Ming Cang and the remaining half were youngsters who had started to make a name for themselves.

Of course, these youngsters only had a reputation within the music circles. If in the context of the entire entertainment industry or the whole of Yanzhou, not many would have heard of them.

"Ho! Fang Zhao! Should have roped you in a long time ago!" exclaimed a professor who was still teaching at Qi'an Academy of Music.

"The younger ones will surpass us in times to come!"

"From what I understand, Fiery Bird sent out over ten invites this year, right? This time, only inviting Fang Zhao from Yanzhou and, in the end, picking his piece, I'm really curious to find out what sort of piece it is," said a retired professor who had established his own orchestra and performed across the globe.

...

Mostly it was the bunch of big shots in the industry that said anything. Occasionally, some middle-tier members would add in a line or two. As for the youngsters who were at the lowest point, they still did not dare to hastily interrupt.

Fang Zhao was probably the only exception.

"Greetings seniors." In terms of seniority, Fang Zhao was still considered a "junior." However, in terms of influence, Fang Zhao indeed had the qualifications to compare with the "seniors."

Refuse to accept it?

If you refuse to accept, produce an invitation card from fiery bird, or for those in pop music, show your sales volume!

Cannot produce it?

If you cannot produce it, then shut up!

Letting one's strength do the talking was a rule that many industries had. Even if one had the experience but not the capability, their rank would be at the back, just like the people in the "middle-tier" of the organization.

"I wonder what the price Fiery Bird quoted was. Fang Zhao, are you at liberty to share?" someone asked.

"I am curious too. Sigh, I have come into contact with various games company and even recommended a few of my students; however, none of the companies can become like Fiery Bird..."

Should there be any good assignments, many teachers would give opportunities to their favor pupils. For example, if a film or gaming company approached those masters to request a soundtrack or composition for their film or game, these masters would come up with various reasons why they were unable to do it personally or alone and hence rope in their own students, slowly giving them a chance to take the stage.

This was something many graduates in the New Era would experience.

However, this sort of situation was not required by Fang Zhao at all.

Teacher?

He did not need the help of a teacher to get a recommendation. He had already made a name for himself with the four 'epic' movements as well as personal recognition from Fiery Bird's sound effects department head. Would he still need referrals? There would probably be people who would look him up, right?

What everyone was curious about though was definitely the fee that Fiery Bird would pay to Fang Zhao.

"You don't have to give a concrete number. Just an estimate would be fine; it is rather secure here," Ming Cang said, at the same time letting Fang Zhao know that the people here were rather tight. This sort of thing could be partially mentioned here, as it proved one's ability, and they were not just comparing achievements over here. Ming Cang continued, "Of course, there is no need to force yourself if you are unable to reveal it. Everyone here understands it well."

"Yes, everyone here is just curious, but we are not forcing you. If you are under a confidentiality agreement, we totally understand. Everyone here has experienced it before," a professor from the Qi'an Academy of Music said.

"Right, right, right, I collaborated with Fiery Bird before, on the game that was released ten years ago. My composition was used as background music for a 30-second interlude. Back then, they paid me over 10 million dollars. I heard that there were people who received even more—for example, those longer opening animations or those more pivotal interludes. Pieces that by them would garner a rather high fee. Your situation should be similar to mine. I just want to know, after 10 years, whether the fees are any different," said a musician who had already founded his own studio.

"Hey, maybe Fang Zhao did a composition for their feature-length film? Even if he is not able to hit that standard, who knows, maybe he could do so in future?", someone jokingly said. They all, of course, did not think that Fang Zhao would be picked to create the background music for the feature-length film in the game, but some fun and laughter within the group was normal.

"It's all right, say only if you want to do so. No one will blame you if you choose not to reveal.", said the current headmaster of the Qi'an Academy of Music. But his thoughts

were different from his words. Fang Zhao's situation could be considered an accomplishment for me too. I could brag about this for a year. If I know Fiery Bird's quoted fee, I could bring it out to brag even more when I go abroad to take part in exchange programs. Look, our school's alumni, less than a year after graduating, Fiery Bird offered him X millions! Awesome, right? Shocking? Frightened now?

Thinking of that situation made the headmaster feel excited as he anticipated Fang Zhao's figures.

"Gaming console," Fang Zhao replied.

"What?" Ming Cang was puzzled.

"Fiery Bird gave me two choices: cash or a gaming console. I chose the console," Fang Zhao replied.

Then, the group suddenly went cold.

Including Ming Cang, who had continuously helped to liven up the atmosphere, everyone seemed to lose their voices.

No one had the chance to break the sudden silence of the group, because Fang Zhao received an international call.

"Su Hou?" Fang Zhao was surprised.

"That, I just saw that Fiery Bird interview." Su Hou's tone was a little unnatural, slightly stiff. "Impressive."

"And then?" Fang Zhao could not believe that the chubby kid had called him just for this.

"Then, are... you... interested... in investing in a farm?" Su Hou stammered out.

"Are you having trouble?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Cough, a little."

What Su Hou encountered was not a slight problem but rather quite a large and troublesome one.

In order to compete with his half-brothers and half-sisters who shared different mothers, Su Hou had decided to work hard. He had set himself a faraway target—to win the sheep herding championship.

Even though 500 years had passed, the impact of the Period of Destruction still lingered. Every continent had many lands that were not suitable for planting crops. Other continents would construct buildings on such land. In Muzhou, this was under the jurisdiction of the land resources department. Every year, they would give out a few such lands that had been treated and were now suitable for growing stuff. And every year, the prize for the grand champion of the sheep herding competition was a newly released piece of land!

Everyone who had given their opinions to Su Hou regarded his goal as very "far" indeed.

The sheep herding competition was already underway, and it would be too late to take part now. However, Su Hou received the news that the owner of a participating farm wanted to sell off their land; hence, Su Hou had frantically borrowed money and bought the farm.

He had been scammed.

He did not know who had set him up, but Su Hou had fallen headfirst into it. Not only was the purchased farm devoid of anything, even the competing dogs on the farm had already been transferred out!

Su Hou did not have the guts to continue asking his elder brother and mother for help. More importantly, he could not let the other members of the Su family know. Needless to say, if this matter was made public, many people would laugh at his stupidity.

Just at that moment, he saw the web broadcast of Fiery Bird's interview. Hearing Fang Zhao's name and checking up on it, he realized it was the same person he had met at the cemetery. This excited him, and he made a call to Fang Zhao straight away.

Hearing Su Hou's simple explanation, Fang Zhao did not say anything

Fang Zhao's silence made Su Hou feel apprehensive. He was worried that Fang Zhao would not be willing to help. However, shortly, he heard, "Sure, I will help you."

On account of your forehead, I will help even if it means losing money , Fang Zhao

thought to himself.

Chapter 88

Master Zhao

"R-really?! Thank you very much! Do you know anyone who owns shepherd dogs? Eh? I hear a dog barking; do you own a dog?"

At that moment, Zuo Yu was teasing Curly Hair, provoking a series of barks from him that Su Hou heard.

"I own one, but it's not a shepherd dog."

"No worries, bring it along the next time you come to Muzhou. We can let it try out some sheep herding training."

Su Hou had not hidden the fact that he had bought the farm from Fang Zhao. He had only mentioned that, although the farm's land was huge, the soil was no longer suitable for planting anything.

Muzhou's farm owners were not as carefree as people thought they were. They paid attention to the weather, agriculture, farming soil improvements, and crops. All of that was knowledge they needed to know, and it was stuff that they personally paid attention to. However, there would always be lazy farmer owners who were ignorant and let their arable soil go to waste after a time.

The plot of land that Su Hou had bought was just like that. The images and information he had received were totally different from what he'd seen personally. The land had already wasted and he had been tricked. If he wanted to plant new stuff, he would need to hire a professional to make amendments.

As for the ones who had tricked Su Hou, they had played on the urgency of Su Hou's need to find a farm. All he needed was a little push to fall for it.

It was rather evident that the ones who had tricked Su Hou knew him very well. Just by using one's brains a little, it was easy to guess who they actually were. However, Fang Zhao had no interest in the trivial matters of the Su family. Once he attended to the matters at hand, Fang Zhao was going to submit another application to go overseas

again.

"Collecting materials again?" Duan Qianji felt her head aching.

"Nope. This time it is to expand my professional service," Fang Zhao said.

Duan Qianji felt it was funny. Expand his professional service. Are you able to garner support or get an advertisement? Muzhou advertisements were still a tough ask even if one was famous.

Polar Light's development plans within the continent had already been arranged. There were two paths that could be taken. One was if Polar Light was selected for the endorsement deal, the other was if he did not get selected. Whichever path it followed, Polar Light was Silver Wing's most promising virtual idol. Duan Qianji had no plans to let it go to waste. Fang Zhao had given Polar Light such a gorgeous debut; if they let this trump card get ruined, Silver Wing Media did not deserve to be among the three big entertainment companies of Yanzhou.

Fiery Bird's eventual spokesperson would be publicly announced in May. During this period, Silver Wing Media would release a war movie in which Polar Light would have a role. Therefore, the entire virtual projects department except the producer, Fang Zhao, was busy as usual.

Although his original job was a composer, Silver Wing did not need him to be in charge of every film that they made. Otherwise, why did Silver Wing have so many other composers on their payroll? Was Flying Pegasus a bunch of useless good-for-nothings?

Thus, now that Fang Zhao had accomplished all his work at hand and was idle, and since Su Hou had a situation over there, Fang Zhao decided to go over for a bit.

This time around it was different. Other than Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu, the flying transport had one more dog.

Perhaps it was his first time on board a flying transport, as Curly Hair did not seem at ease and was pacing around impatiently, finally deciding to lie beside Fang Zhao's legs.

Looking at the dog beside Fang Zhao's legs, Zuo Yu said, "Boss, is it appropriate to bring this dog over? The dogs at Muzhou are generally larger, just like that black dog we saw at Shanmu farm, wasn't it big? Actually, that was still a puppy. As for this dog,

compared with the professional shepherd dogs at the farms, it is little more than a toy. Wouldn't it get bullied over there? And if you consider the builds of the sheep, and looking at this dog, it might even be scared of the sheep."

Fang Zhao, who was reading a history book said, "Curly Hair has a high IQ. He learns fast too. When the time comes for him to learn herding with those professional sheep dogs, even if he can't herd, learning more is always beneficial."

Following the coordinates the Su Hou had given, Zuo Yu flew the transport to a farm situated in the eastern part of Muzhou. It was different from all the other farms that were full of vitality as they flew past. This farm seemed desolate and nothing was going on. Even the grass on the pastures was sparse. A few lifeless dogs were lying on the side yawning, too lazy to even react as they saw a flying transport approaching.

Su Hou was already waiting there with an embarrassed smile on his face.

"Brother Zhao, you have arrived!" Su Hou rushed forward.

"Call me Master Zhao," Fang Zhao told him.

"Yes, Master Zhao!" Su Hou did not care what Fang Zhao wanted himself to be called. Now, Fang Zhao was a rich man, and it was hard to find a person who could help. Furthermore, when Su Hou had looked up information on Fang Zhao, Su Hou had come to admire him. He had heard that, in the past, they would call rich men "something master." There were people who still used the term in Muzhou, so Su Hou did not find anything wrong with addressing him that way.

"First, tell me the current situation. The honest truth, do not conceal anything. You have only one chance." Fang Zhao looked at Su Hou. He would not ask how Su Hou had gotten tricked first. The kid had pride, and harping on that matter would be met with a little resistance. One would learn from his own mistakes. As long as he was not an idiot, he would gain something.

Facing Fang Zhao's unreadable expression and stare, Su Hou felt all the skin on his body tightening up. As if it was his grandfather staring at him before he received a scolding.

Su Hou shrunk back and lost all trace of his normal arrogant self, yet he also let out a sigh of relief. He had thought that Fang Zhao would deride him for getting conned, but he had not expected that Fang Zhao would not mention it at all after arriving. Looking

around at the predicament he was in, Su Hou recounted the entire matter honestly.

"Oh, it was like this..."

Among Su Hou's attendants were some that knew how to manage a farm. Su Hou then recounted what had been told to him to Fang Zhao.

After the farm was bought, they were unable to find the sellers to return it. A lawsuit was also impossible. Since he had already bought it, rather than spending more time to trace down the con men, why not settle the situation before them and come up with a solution to bring the "dead" farm back to "life." Bringing it back to "life" was not that hard, the only difficulty was the funding.

Was cash required to fix the soil? Was cash required to purchase seeds and livestock? Was cash required to build large sheds and pens? Was money required to hire workers and experts?

If the soil was not good, how about fixing up the irrigation system first? An irrigation system would cost quite a bit too!

Su Hou's voice became softer and softer. Even he felt embarrassed to continue talking about the matter. He was not familiar with managing a farm and had not studied much agriculture and farming. The amount of help he needed was by no means small. Most importantly, he needed to assemble a sheep herding team.

His motive for purchasing the farm was to buy out a shepherd dog team as well as their accumulated points and take part in the eastern region's sheep herding competition. Now, if he were to shift his attention to the farm, wouldn't the order be reversed?

"So your most pressing issue is to find dogs and a trainer?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Tha-that's right! The next round of competition is in a week's time. If we miss it, our ranking will drop even more," Su Hou replied.

"What plans do you have?"

"I was thinking of getting a few dogs that can herd—borrowing is fine too. A lot of participating dogs in the sheep herding competition are borrowed too. As long as they can coordinate, it will be fine. Oh, and a training field. I'm afraid that th-this place is

current unusable."

Su Hou felt an aching in his heart when he thought about the farm that was totally empty. All that money in exchange for a lifeless farm, that were firstly without sheep, secondly without dogs, and thirdly without a pasture. Totally nothing at all!

Su Hou had originally wanted to find people he knew for help, but after some thinking, he was afraid of getting conned once more.

"Brother Zhao... Master Zhao, do you know any farm owners who own dogs, sheep, and a pasture?" Su Hou asked cautiously.

Dogs, sheep, and a pasture?

Fang Zhao had just thought of a person.

"Wait a moment, let me contact someone," Fang Zhao replied.

"Sure!" Hearing things turning for the better, So Hou was suddenly full of vigour.

Nobody else came to Fang Zhao's mind but Wu Yi, the owner of Shanmu farm, who they had encountered on their first visit to Muzhou.

Chapter 89

The Styles of Most Dogs

Fang Zhao contacted Wu Yi and asked him whether he was interested in taking part in a sheep-herding competition and working together.

Fang Zhao selectively mentioned the matter regarding Su Hou to Wu Yi. Even if Fang Zhao had not said anything, news traveled fast, and Wu Yi had some idea of what had happened. Choosing what to make of it was up to Wu Yi himself.

This really lifted Wu Yi's spirits. The competition between the younger generation of the Su family such as Su Hou did not threaten him here, so a partnership of mutual interest was enticing.

Wu Yi's farm in the eastern region was not considered large, but he was not a man without ambition. It was just that there was a limit to his funding and he had not assembled a sheep-herding team before and could only support his relatives who were capable enough and hope that it would bring him some benefits. However, now, he felt that these benefits were not able to satisfy him.

Fang Zhao's proposal excited Wu Yi. Even if he was not able to gain much benefits, his own farm's shepherd dogs would gain a chance at free training. The procedures and expenses would also be handled by others. This was the best possible scenario he could have.

Wu Yi gave his affirmation. He was thinking, if his own dogs from his farm performed well at the sheep-herding competition, he would sign up for next year's competition. Even if he did not get a good position, appearing would also raise up his farm's name in the eastern region, which was still a good thing.

Wu Yi's decision came as no surprise to Fang Zhao. Most Muzhou farm owners were not stupid, especially those from bigger or medium-sized farms. They were not farm owners but businessmen. They were not the happy-go-lucky good-for-nothing people that the external world perceived them to be.

Although Wu Yi was a person who had no lack of ambition, he was still considered an

upright person. Under the current circumstances, cooperating with him was the choice that was the fastest and most beneficial for both.

After confirming the time, Fang Zhao brought Su Hou to Shanmu Farm. Su Hou did not look at anything else but the land. The farm that he had bought was bigger than Shanmu Farm but totally did not have the liveliness of Shanmu Farm.

"Hahahaha, we meet again!"

Wu Yi had been waiting at the garage. When he saw the transport land, he went over to exchange greetings, and he introduced himself warmly. He might not have thought highly of Su Hou, but he did think highly of Fang Zhao.

"I heard that Xishan Farm was bought by someone, but I didn't expect it to be you," Wu Yi said.

Xishan Farm was located at the the western side of the east district. There were not many reputable farms there and the facilities were not very good. On normal days, there was not much sense of belonging. It was only because a sheep-herding team from that area had caught the attention of everyone. But the information on the internet was very different from the truth. Only those that had personally been there knew the actual situation. Wu Yi had also only heard about it in private from a friend who liked to investigate.

However, the information online was inconsistent with reality. This sort of situation was rarely seen, so even if they knew about it, no one would mention it. They only paid attention to the sheep-herding competition. Never had they expected that it was Su Hou who had bought the farm.

Given Wu Yi's decades of experience, even without asking, he could tell that there had been a trap involved and Su Hou had fallen into it. As for why Fang Zhao had entered the mix, Wu Yi was not sure. However, as long as he was able to benefit from it, Wu Yi was willing to play dumb.

"The grass on this field grows really well! Totally unlike the farm that I bought. It hasn't even revegetated yet." Even though Su Hou did not know much about farming, comparing the farm he had just bought to the one before him, the difference was clear as day. If he could not even see that, he would be blind.

"Over here, our field revegetated early!" Wu Yi did not ask why the grass on Su Hou's

farm had not regrown yet, he just led Fang Zhao and Su Hou's party to the field where the sheep were at.

"Eh? Fang Zhao, is this the little fellow that you own?" Wu Yi eyed the curly-haired dog that was following Fang Zhao's legs closely.

"Yeah."

"This dog looks quite smart. In a bit, my farm's Bingo will do some demonstrations. Let's see how much it can learn." When Wu Yi spoke, he seemed rather pleased. The Bingo he spoke of was the shepherd dog on his farm with the best temperament to be a lead dog.

Taking Wu Yi's car, in no time, the party arrived at where the flock of sheep were at. Wu Yi's farm had over 300 sheep and only seven shepherd dogs, but not every shepherd dog was capable of carrying out instructions precisely. There were workers to tend to the livestock as well as mechanical dogs.

The mechanical dogs that farm owners used were not at all like dogs; the shape was totally different. They were invented to provide assistance for herding livestock, so people coined them "mechanical dogs." Wu Yi and the other farm owners could control these mechanical dogs from their homes and observe the situations at the pastures.

The car stopped on a plot of higher ground as they stood there watching the sheep being herded.

"At this current period, pastures have to be changed frequently, so we cannot just leave them in one field. Today, we might let the sheep graze here; tomorrow, we will bring them somewhere else," Wu Yi told Fang Zhao and Su Hou. From what he saw, one was an amateur from a foreign continent and the other one was an ignorant young master of the Su family. As an experienced party, he had to show off a bit of his professional knowledge.

"In this season, we cannot let the herd walk too quickly. There is a need to control their speed, to obstruct the stronger sheep and wait for the weaker ones. Sometimes I will use this sort of job to train the shepherd dogs to complete it." As he said this Wu Yi, shouted in that direction, "Bingo!"

Among the few dogs that were herding the sheep, a large dog with brown spots sprinted over. It had a rugged body, its fur was glistening brightly, and it was extremely

quick-witted. Seeing Fang Zhao and the rest of the party, it did not bark or show any intention to attack. It just looked at Wu Yi, and only after Wu Yi made a hand sign did it run over to his side.

"Fang Zhao, what does your dog normally do? Can it understand simple oral commands?" Wu Yi asked.

"Simple oral commands are fine."

Fang Zhao had not deliberately trained Curly Hair, but probably because it had interacted with the people in the department for quite some time, it could understand simple words.

"It should probably know fetch and follow. What about directions? 'Left,' 'Right.' Never mind, how about we see whether it can herd sheep first."

Wu Yi brought Fang Zhao and the rest close to the flock. Su Hou watched the dogs surrounding the flock curiously. Some of them let out low warning growls and showed an intention to attack. It was only when Wu Yi made a hand sign that they stood down, wagging their tails as they headed to Wu Yi.

Giving each a reward, he instructed them to continue standing guard. Wu Yi then pointed at some stray sheep a short distance away from the flock. "Go herd those sheep that have wandered too far away from the flock, Bingo!"

In the next moment, Bingo rushed out. The sheep that had strayed off were driven and ran back toward the herd. As for Bingo, he slowed to a walk upon nearing the flock and turned back.

"See, it is just like that. Although it might look simple, training takes time, and most of my shepherd dogs have been trained since they were young. Matured dogs whose qualities have been determined already are not suitable. Fang Zhao, your dog is not suitable for herding sheep, but a little training might be beneficial, and it might learn a thing or two. Look, there is still another sheep in front. Why don't you let small Curly Hair try it out," Wu Yi said.

"Curly Hair, go try it out."

"...This is not how you train a dog." Wu Yi saw Fang Zhao standing there not moving and looked a little helpless. He thought to himself. A foreigner is just a foreigner. If

training dogs was really that easy and they did exactly as you said, I would already have brought my farm's dogs to take part in a competition.

Of course, Fang Zhao knew that really training a dog was not like this, but he had found out early on that Curly Hair's capacity for leaning was very impressive. Furthermore, he had gradually started to understand a lot of words. Thus, he was just trying it out by saying this.

Just as Fang Zhao finished his sentence, Curly Hair left and scampered over to the lone sheep.

Curly Hair was not as big as Bingo. When compared to the sheep, it was even smaller. The hooves of a sheep could crush him easily.

As Zuo Yu had expected, the sheep was not bothered as Curly Hair walked toward it, unhurriedly chewing on the grass. At most, it lazily raised an eye to look as Curly hair neared it but showed no sign of a reaction.

The curly-haired dog was at a loss and turned back, not knowing what to do.

"Still no good. This dog has no killing intent." Wu Yi sighed. "When most shepherd dogs cannot make a sheep move, they bark or threaten to bite. Your dog is too small. It probably does not dare to do so. However, it is normal for an untrained dog to do this. How about I get somebody to bring a small sheep over and let it build up a little courage? Carnivores have an innate knack for hunting. Deep down, it definitely has the instinct to do so. With a little training it, will learn."

Looking over at Curly Hair, he realized that it was observing the few shepherd dogs, probably trying to imitate them. "There is no rush, wait a moment."

A minute passed, then two minutes...

Wu Yi tore off a bit of straw and placed it in his mouth while chewing the end. This was his habit when he was bored.

"I wonder whether we should..." Wu Yi had not finished what he was saying when he saw the curly-haired dog lower its head and face the sheep in an attacking position. The originally unbothered sheep that was chewing on the grass stopped in its tracks. Suddenly, with a 'thud,' the sheep took off as if it had stepped on a spring. Behind it, the curly-haired dog chased after it closely.

Su Hou's gaping mouth could swallow an egg whole. "So sheep can run that fast?!"

The straw in Wu Yi's mouth fell. "This is my first time seeing it too."

The sheep seemed like it was running for its life and rushed straight into the flock of sheep. The originally peaceful flock that had been grazing became restless. As for the curly-haired dog, it stopped as it neared the flock.

The restless flock took a while before calming down.

Wu Yi turned towards Fang Zhao. "That dog... That dog, i-i-is-is it part wolf?" Otherwise, why had that sheep run as if its life was in danger?

Zuo Yu asked, "What do you think?"

"I think that it is rather suitable to herd sheep." He then told Zuo Yu, "Head to the transport and bring over my equipment case."

Fang Zhao had prepared an equipment case before leaving for Muzhou this time. Zuo Yu had seen it and heard that in it were tools for gathering materials.

Chapter 90

Collecting Materials

At least a minimum of six shepherd dogs were required to participate in the competition. Therefore, according to Wu Yi, they were going to pick six and add Curly Hair in for a total team strength of seven. As an old, experienced farm owner, he personally took charge of training. Although there was less than a week till the next round, with additional practice, they should be able to get it together.

Fang Zhao let Curly Hair go over before turning to Su Hou beside him. "What are you standing around for? Go over and learn!" Fang Zhao told Su Hou who seemed like he was watching an interesting scene.

"Ah?" Su Hou was at a loss. "I have to learn herding too?"

"When the time comes, is it you or Wu Yi who is going to be standing at the instructor's position?" Fang Zhao asked.

Su Hou was silent.

Most of the time, the instructor's position at the sheep-herding competition was where the respective farm owner or their successor stood. There would be recording and broadcasting of the instructor's positions during the competition. Standing there was a mark. Fang Zhao's question was to ask if Su Hou was going to stand there proudly and publicize himself when the time came or if was he going to give the chance up to Wu Yi?

Su Hou was temporarily at a loss. Looking at the flock of sheep, he stammered, " B-but there are no more extra cars."

"If there are no cars, you still have your legs."

Running?

Su Hou wanted to object, but under the stern gaze of Fang Zhao, he shuffled over in that direction. In fact, Su Hou wanted to enjoy standing on the instructor's position at

the sheep-herding competition, just that standing there required too much investment. He was not familiar with any of Shanmu Farm's dogs—would they listen to his commands?

If the Shepherd dog team was capable of acting independently herding sheep, Su Hou would not mind just standing there as a decoration. But now, this was a newly formed team, and it was impossible for them to reach that standard.

Sigh. Just try it out.

Su Hou ran over to where the flock of sheep were and observed Wu Yi's hand gestures and commands when training the dogs.

Wu Yi also understood Su Hou's intentions and explained to Su Hou as he was training the dogs as well as allowing the dogs to have more interactions with him.

Su Hou had brought along three people. His attendants saw to his dietary and personal needs and doubled up as bodyguards. However, Fang Zhao did not let the three bodyguards help Su Hou. All he allowed them to do was ensure Su Hou's safety and not worry about the rest. Su Hou also agreed; therefore, the three bodyguards stood some way off, watching the little fatty Su running around with the dogs and sheep.

Fang Zhao noticed that, at the start, Curly Hair did not blend in well with the team and was not familiar with many commands. However, after an hour, his mistakes were much fewer, and he could correctly carry out Wu Yi's instructions to herd the sheep. Although it was not a very good blend, they managed to herd the sheep with some difficulty.

Fang Zhao felt that sheep herding opened a new world for Curly Hair. This dog was very strange; it could learn very quickly, but up to now, it had never shown any signs of menace or intention of attacking the people around it. Although it would have its own thoughts, it never hid them. It was just a dog that was as straightforward as one could get.

After the apocalypse, many new things appeared. Was this dog one of them? Fang Zhao thought to himself.

"Boss, I brought your equipment case." Zuo Yu placed the case he'd taken from the flying transport at Fang Zhao's side and looked over at the field. "Oh. Little Curly Hair seems to be doing quite well. However, he looks like he still doesn't fit in."

Zuo Yu had no experience at sheep herding, but he could still see that Curly Hair was not fitting in well. The dogs of Shanmu Farm were excluding Curly Hair. Many times, when they were running according to Wu Yi's instructions, they would steal Curly Hair's spot.

"Soon," Fang Zhao replied.

Zuo Yu did not understand what Fang Zhao meant by that, but in no time at all, he realized that the shepherd dogs were having a conflict.

When Curly Hair was running, he was obstructed by Bingo and his position was stolen. This time, Curly Hair was angry, and his low growls were like a declaration of war. Bingo also did not continue to run forward. He turned around and faced off with Curly Hair. The two dogs were barking at each other. A distance of about one meter separated them. Both their bodies were taut, baring teeth and claws, making low threatening growls.

Su Hou wanted to go over but was stopped by Wu Yi.

"A pasture only has one lead dog. That is the rule,"

From what Wu Yi saw, this pasture was Bingo's domain. Now that the small Curly Hair had joined, if it had taken up a subservient stance, all would have been well. However, that little fellow was rather passionate and had no intention to back down, instead provoking the original lead dog.

Wu Yi did not stop them. A real battle between two dogs might result in accidental injury to people. He controlled the mechanical dogs to fly over and stand by to prevent any bloodshed.

However, what surprised Wu Yi was that, where the two dogs were facing off, Bingo's growls were gradually getting softer. His erect ears had also drooped, Wu Yi knew then that Bingo was terrified!

Terrified?!

It was actually terrified of a dog half its size?

Even if body sizes were not compared, if another dog threatened its position on its own turf, how could he get terrified that fast!

Wu Yi glanced over at Fang Zhao and received a hand gesture of "continue" from him. For the time being, they were not going to look into what caused the incident to happen. They just continued training as per usual. However, Bingo no longer tried to snatch positions this time, which made Wu Yi feel depressed.

The original plan to let Bingo be the lead dog had been shattered, and adjustments would have to be made.

"Control the area! Good, very good! Maintain distance! Positions, pay attention to the positions... Bingo! Faster, what are you afraid of! Run forward faster!"

Wu Yi directed them awhile before letting Su Hou try, no hand gestures, just oral commands.

Letting his employee's in charge of herding watch over, Wu Yi walked over to Fang Zhao and downed half a glass of water. His face was still gloomy. "Fang Zhao, that dog, did you really pick him up from some street in the city? Are you sure you did not pick it up from some laboratory or some alien planet?"

"You watch too much television," Fang Zhao replied.

As shepherd dogs were very smart and well known in Muzhou, there were many dog-related films. The virtual idols that were most popular in Muzhou were not humans but dogs.

However, other than the scenarios he saw on film, Wu Yi could not think of any other explanation. According to logic, Fang Zhao's Curly Hair was not a purebred descendant of a service dog, and the whole world knew that the IQ of Muzhou dogs were the highest in all the twelve continents. Dogs that could herd were not stupid, but now, Bingo was losing out to a small curly-haired dog whose origins and lineage were not even known.

Comparing IQ and vigor, it had lost!

Wu Yi could not understand at all. Sitting on the grass and chewing on a strand of straw, he felt a little heartache. His outlook on life had been changed.

If it really continues like this, the lead dog... would it be that little curly-haired dog?

When the time comes for the competition, the audience wouldn't mock them, would

they?

Eh? No way!

Wu Yi's shrewd mind had begun working.

If they do not think highly, that would be less people betting, and the payout odds would be very high.

As the sheep-herding competition progressed, the rules for the rewards would change too.

As Wu Yi watched his six dogs nearby herding sheep alongside that curly-haired dog, his eyes started to shine with glee.

Midway through a break, Su Hou came over to discuss something with Fang Zhao. He wanted the dogs to listen to his instructions at the next competition. For that, he would need the selected dogs to approve of him. Curly Hair was not an issue, but the other six dogs saw Wu Yi as their master. Unless Wu Yi renounced them, they would not take anyone else for a second master.

"Wu Yi said to make them approve of me in the shortest time, other than interacting with them when herding, I would need to eat and sleep with them to increase my time spent together. From what I understand, I have to treat myself as a dog," Su Hou said.

"What about your own decision?" Fang Zhao asked.

Su Hou scratched his head. "I think that if that can help us win, it is not that big of a deal."

Fang Zhao laughed and did not continue the topic. Instead he said, "I heard that if you get in the top eight of the eastern region, there is a five-minute dedicated advertisement segment."

"Yes, yes, yes!"

When Fang Zhao mentioned this, Su Hou then remembered, for normal sheep-herding competitions, although there was an introduction for each farm, the time frame for each was not much, just a few brief lines on each farm before they introduced the dog's accomplishments. But at the Eastern region finals, where the top eight were cut down

to the top four, when they decided the qualifications, there would be an opportunity to exhibit themselves. And that period was when everyone in Muzhou would be paying attention.

"If we do get that chance, I will make sure to make myself even more handsome for the shoot!" Su Hou had started thinking of how cool and dazzling his image would be at the finals.

Thinking of this, he felt inspired. "Master Zhao, for the publicity film, would you personally craft the background music?"

"Of course."

"Hahahaha!"

Su Hou laughed excitedly and ran toward the flock of sheep. He felt that, in a while, he would be able to ride dogs into battle.

Wu Yi walked over and suspiciously asked, "What's up with that little fellow?" Previously, he had seen the little master looking listless, but now it seemed he was all perked up. "And what are you doing over here again?"

Seeing what Fang Zhao was doing, Wu Yi forgot about his previous question. He saw Fang Zhao attaching a fingernail-sized object to the curly-haired dog's head.

"A sound recorder, for collecting material." After attaching the equipment, he patted Curly Hair. "Go on."

"Is straw nice to eat?" Fang Zhao asked upon seeing Wu Yi chewing on yet another stalk.

Wu Yi had a profound look on his face. "You wouldn't understand. The four seasons are contained inside a stalk of straw."

Walking over to Fang Zhao's side, Wu Yi listened to the sounds of the earpiece. It was all the sound of wind. This should be the sounds from the curly-haired dog's recorder. However, this was a very common sound. Why would Fang Zhao need it? Did he need to collect this sort of material?

Totally not understanding, Wu Yi curiously asked, "So composers like you have an

interest in common sounds like this?"

Fang Zhao laughed and shook his head. "You wouldn't understand. The world is contained within sounds."

Wu Yi: "... " First time meeting some who who can pretend better than me.

Chapter 91

Dongshan

Shepherd dogs did not have easy jobs. Every day, they would run at least 30 kilometers. If they needed to consistently change pastures, the distance was even greater. For arduous tasks, sometimes times they might even cover 100 kilometers in a single day. However, there was no way Su Hou could compare with the professional shepherd dogs. Without a car, and given his weaker constitution, using just his two legs would be an impossible ask.

Luckily he was only playing the role of an instructor. There was no need to frequently run with the dogs. However, just slowly following them and shouting commands nonstop was enough to tire Su Hou till he was on the verge of collapsing.

When they were heading back from the pasture, Su Hou rode the car back. He was too tired to run anymore.

At dinner, Su Hou ate with the dogs. That did not mean that he ate dog food, but rather, after feeding the dogs, Su Hou would have his own food beside them. When it came to sleeping, Su Hou slept in the kennel. However, the place where the dogs slept on the farm had rather decent living conditions. Not as good as Su Hou's own home, but it was better than some of the living quarters of normal employees.

People from Muzhou said that the shepherd dogs lived better than the average working-class person from another continent, and that was not without reason. This also caused a lot of jealousy and hate among others. Their lives could not even be compared to a dog's.

With Su Hou sleeping in the kennel, his three bodyguards could not wander off too far. They had to stay nearby and monitor the area where Young Master Su was.

During the day, Su Hou was dog-tired. At night, he could just lie down in the kennel and fall asleep straight away. However, there was a strange laughter coming from the kennel.

"Hehe... Heiheihei... HAHAAHA..."

The three bodyguards cautiously headed over to check it out. They realized it was their young master having a dream. It was probably a good dream, as he kept laughing. The dogs in the kennel had looks of irritation. Bingo let out a dissatisfied whimper before changing positions and continuing to sleep. The shepherd dogs were tired out and left the guarding of the farm at night to Chubby Black and a few other specially trained guard dogs.

The Su Hou was pushed by the paw of a nearby dog. He smacked his lips a few times, turned his body the other way, and continued sleeping. In no time at all, the intermittent laughter came back.

Seeing the situation, the three bodyguard felt a little helpless. They cared for their young master dearly, but seeing this situation, they had no idea what to feel. Their young master seemed rather comfortable just sleeping in the kennel.

Unlike Su Hou and the rest who slept early, Fang Zhao still went running at night. As his bodyguard, Zuo Yu also followed, although he had no idea why his artist boss was running in the pitch-black farm at night.

Curly Hair had joined them and was running beside Fang Zhao's feet.

The farm was huge. Fang Zhao ran two rounds from the cultivated farmlands to the pastures before heading back.

"It's really quiet," Fang Zhao said.

Zuo Yu thought to himself, What nonsense is he saying? "Muzhou is like this. There are few people and the farms are big. Everywhere is just fields and pastures," Zuo Yu said.

Fang Zhao laughed but did not bother explaining.

Back during the end of days, nights had not been like this.

As they were running back to the residence Wu Yi had prepared for them, Fang Zhao realized that, although the farm was very quiet, there were many "eyes" behind them. The whole farm was being monitored. Every night, there were people in the monitor room, prepared to investigate any unusual happenings. The dogs of the farm also doubled as their "early warning system." Even if their eyes were closed, their ears were always listening for any suspicious sounds.

This farm was run well. Fang Zhao knew that, even if they had not collaborated this time, Wu Yi would still have been able to expand his farm. All he needed was more time.

When they returned back, Fang Zhao did not head out anymore. Zuo Yu also went into his own room. If his boss did not head out, he could also rest a little. Midway through a yawn, Zuo Yu suddenly halted as he remembered something. No wonder he kept feeling something was amiss. After they had returned back from running, Fang Zhao surprisingly had not been panting as he had expected. How was that possible?

According to the information on Fang Zhao's file, he was supposed to be the sort that lacked physical training and was an artist that only knew how to use his brains to make money. But after running such a distance, why had he still seemed so relaxed? Could it be that it was as the people in the virtual projects department had said, that Fang Zhao spent a lot of time training himself every day?

But even if it was normal training, it was still not possible to reach this sort of level. Unless Fang Zhao's training had increasing intensity. But what would an artistic worker need such a high degree of training for?

Zuo Yu realized that he understood Fang Zhao less and less. Shaking his head, he took two steps then stopped. He remember that the curly-haired dog at Fang Zhao's feet had not panted either. During the day, it had sheep-herding training, and at night, it still kept up with Fang Zhao for the run. To think that it was not even panting. If it were another dog, it would probably have laid down and gasped for air after returning.

Zuo Yu was even more depressed. Even that dog made no sense!

The next day, Su Hou emerged from the kennel in high spirits and ran over to find Fang Zhao. Yesterday, he had run the entire day, but at night, after spraying medicine, it was as if his muscles were not sore at all. Instead, after his nice dream last night, he'd woken up smiling.

"I heard that Young Master Su had a good dream last night? What did you dream about?" Wu Yi asked when he saw Su Hou.

"I dreamed that... dreamed that... sigh, I already can't remember, but it was a good dream. Hehe, Master Zhao!" Su Hou shouted when he saw Fang Zhao coming. "The application for the farm's name was successful. We will have a new name for the next

competition!"

Su Hou wanted to change the name after he had bought Xishan Farm. After all, with a new owner, there was no need to use the previous name. Even if the farm had nothing, it still was his own property. A name change would make him feel more at ease.

However, after thinking of quite a number of names, Su Hou could not decide on one. After that, Fang Zhao had said, "If you don't like Xishan, how about Dongshan; it means to make a comeback."

Hence, Su Hou had gone and applied for the change of name and received news that it had been approved early this morning. From today onward, their farm was no longer Xishan Farm but Dongshan Farm.

Although he was unclear of what he had dreamt about last night, Su Hou remembered it having something to do with the sheep-herding competition. As Fang Zhao had said, he was eagerly anticipating entering the Eastern finals. When that happened, everyone watching the competition would know Su Hou's name! With the success of the name application, Su Hou was in a good mood, and he begun putting in added effort to learning herding.

For the following few days, Su Hou followed the flock of sheep every day, giving instructions to the seven shepherd dogs on his team.

Wu Yi picked out a hundred sheep for training from his own livestock. The sheep were selected by their breed and characteristics to be similar to the sheep used in the sheep-herding competition. These sheep were the most commonly seen sheep in Muzhou.

Su Hou's three bodyguards lamented every day. At the start, Su Hou had been at a loss all the time, but now, he had both form and shape. At the start, he'd taken half a day to think of commands to issue, but now, when he saw the changes in the flock, he could immediately come up with hand gestures. In just a week, the young master had lost weight.

Wu Yi imparted some sheep-herding tactics every day, but he no longer concealed anything. After all, they had chosen to cooperate, and he had chosen to bet on Dongshan farm. He considered it an all-in gamble, so if he kept anything to himself, it would not benefit anyone at all.

But what made the three bodyguards puzzled was the composer from Yanzhou, Fang Zhao. What was he up to every day?

In the day, Fang Zhao just sat there with his earpiece, fiddling with some music software. At night, he took his dog out for runs. When Su Hou was herding sheep, Fang Zhao would even place some sort of recording equipment on the sheep, dogs, and even on Su Hou's body.

Any instrument to be placed by Fang Zhao had to go through a stringent inspection by the three bodyguards. The inspection found that the equipment was indeed a sound recorder and, furthermore, it was to be placed closest to the ear. The sounds it recorded were sounds that the ear tended to not hear. This made them even more bewildered.

Eavesdropping? What was there to eavesdrop on? And so much effort just to do so.

Collecting materials? What sorry of materials did this collect?

They had all heard the sounds from the recordings. It was just a bunch of sounds all mashed together; there was nothing much to hear. Sometimes they could hear the wind, but the sound of wind was not that special either.

As for the symbols Fang Zhao wrote down in his notebook, it was rumored to be a musical score, but no one could understand it.

Indeed, the world of an artist was different from that of a normal human.

In the blink of an eye, the day of the competition arrived. In this round, other than their Dongshan Farm, there were seven other teams from the Eastern region. In total, there were eight teams.

"Boss, what are you betting on this time? Top five again?" Zuo Yu asked.

"No."

Wu Yi had said that, in Muzhou, most of the people that could correctly guess the top five were from the Su Family. Fang Zhao guessing all correctly once could be down to pure luck. But out of ten times, hitting predictions correctly three times would attract unwanted attention. If the frequency of correct predictions increased, it would attract more attention. Fang Zhao currently did not want any trouble. Furthermore, he was

not short of cash, so there was no need to take such a risk.

After all, making less guesses did not mean not being able to win big.

Fang Zhao looked at the odds for the payouts. Perhaps there were a number of teams of a similar standard, so the payouts were slightly higher.

Guessing first place correctly would give a threefold bonus.

The places that followed were the same, higher than the previous time.

"This time, there are no slight favorites or underdogs. Guessing the top five is hard," Fang Zhao said.

Zuo Yu looked at Fang Zhao. He did not know if Fang Zhao really could not guess or if he did not want to. Pausing awhile, he asked, "So how do you intend to buy?"

"You don't have to overthink. As long as we are taking part in the competition, wagering on ourselves will be good enough," Fang Zhao replied.

Zuo Yu understood and nodded his head. Just as Wu Yi had done so to support his cousin, whether it looked good or not, he could always wager some and have a side bet in the shadows.

Zuo Yu wanted to know if Fang Zhao had any secret side bets but could not ask him so publicly. so he walked over and whispered, "Boss, how much did you place on us this time around?"

"All the winnings from our previous trip to Muzhou," Fang Zhao replied.

Zuo Yu was startled. "Are you serious?!"

"When am I ever not serious?"

Chapter 92

Little Pet Dog

Inside the viewing gallery, staffers from Shanmu Farm were massaging their dogs.

Fang Zhao and Wu Yi hung out in the official viewing gallery. The competition venue was too big. They could never take in the entirety of the grounds. Some viewers used binoculars, whereas others who were lazier were ensconced in their chairs, watching the live broadcast.

"We're third up today. It's a decent position. Relax, Master Su. Don't worry. We'll keep you updated through your earpiece," Wu Yi said. "Master Su, you can warm up with the dogs right now. Even roaming around or jumping up and down will do. It will help calm nerves and prevent your muscles from stiffening. Just follow your routine in practice. We should be able to post a time of under 7 minutes."

Zuo Yu glanced at Wu Yi then at Fang Zhao before dropping his head. Even if they managed a sub-7 minute performance, a first-place finish would likely require a time 5 minutes or less. If they didn't place first, then Fang Zhao's 10 million dollar bet was gone.

The order of appearance for the eight teams from the eight farms had been determined in the morning by a draw of lots. The results of the betting would be announced after the competition. After Fang Zhao placed his bet, he started monitoring betting activity on this eastern regional contest online.

There was some discussion of the third team to appear, Dongshan Farm.

"Dongshan Farm? How come I haven't heard of it before? It's got 30-odd points already."

"Dongshan Farm is what was known as Xishan Farm. There was a change of ownership, so the name changed."

"Let me check who the owner is. Oh, it's a member of the Su family. And it's one of the Su kids. Who is this kid?"

"Isn't it Su Hou, the kid who was caught on camera by paparazzi a while back? Now he's buying farms?"

"I'm not worried about the farm being renamed or a change in ownership. All I care about is the dogs it's entered in the competition. I checked. Dongshan's lineup won't do. Apart from its A dog, the others don't look promising. And there's actually a tiny puppy. Ha—were they that short on talent that they had to draft a pet dog to beef up their numbers?"

Many folks noticed the list of dogs that Dongshan had entered. The last one was a curly-haired dog that stood out. These experienced dog watchers could tell right away that this was not a professional shepherd dog. They scrutinized its listed weight. Wow, it's that small?

"There's actually a team that fielded a pet dog to boost its numbers."

From a Muzhou native's perspective, a pet dog was different from a work dog. In their eyes, a pet dog was a house plant pampered in a greenhouse. It was sissy, fragile, and served no practical purpose whatsoever, so when they spotted a small curly-haired dog on Dongshan Farm's roster, some folks completely lost interest.

"To be fair, Dongshan Farm's A dog isn't bad. It's a shame that..."

More often than not, the A dog was the lead dog. That was why it was the first dog that fans paid attention to. They evaluated the entire team, its herding patterns and so on based on the strength of the A dog. But Dongshan Farm's unprofessional lineup on paper disappointed many.

Apart from the official betting pool, other private companies organized their own pools, but their bets were capped at 1 million. After Wu Yi placed an official bet, he bet through a private platform as well.

Unlike the official pool, the private platform offered only one type of bet—first place.

Different odds were listed for the eight teams. Dongshan Farm was the least favored with the lowest odds.

"5.4? That is to say, if we place first, I'll receive 5.4 times the amount I bet?" Zuo Yu was going to enter the official pool like Fang Zhao, but when he noticed Wu Yi betting on a private platform, he switched over as well. They were only betting on

themselves—might as well pick the platform with the bigger payout.

Zuo Yu bought 10,000 entries in the private pool for a total sum of 50,000 dollars.

"Boss, you're not going to place a heavier bet?" Zuo Yu asked casually. Lo and behold, Fang Zhao placed another 1 million.

By the time betting had ended on all platforms, final preparations were underway at the competition venue. Workers inspected the pasture, a scene that was shown in the live broadcast to highlight the fact that organizers conducted a meticulous sweep. There would be no cheating.

When the first team performed, Su Hou started jogging in circles, but the warm-up didn't alleviate his nerves, instead aggravating his anxiety. Every time he stopped, he would get antsy and check the timer obsessively.

"Six minutes and 51 seconds! The first team finished with a final result of 6 minutes and 51 seconds. That's a decent time." The commentator evaluated the performance of the first team of dogs.

The first team of shepherd dogs wasn't fast, but they didn't make any big mistakes. Posting a sub-7 minute time was a decent showing. At least they wouldn't finish last.

By the time the second team was competing, Su Hou had to lead his dogs out into the field. Wu Yi followed and returned soon. He kept wiping the sweat on his forehead. He was a picture of calm just now, but this was his first competition as a contestant. While the team was named after Dongshan Farm, six of the dogs were from his farm. No wonder he was so nervous.

By the time Wu Yi returned, the second team had completed its routine. He checked the time on the big screen: 6 minutes and 43 seconds.

Two consecutive teams posting times under 7 minutes put quite a bit of pressure on the third team. A time of 6 minutes or so wasn't stellar, but it wasn't bad either. Wu Yi was getting more and more nervous. He didn't expect his dogs to be spectacular—just as long as they could herd all the sheep into the pen. After all, it was their first contest. Who knew what could go wrong?

Wu Yi rummaged through his pockets impatiently. He couldn't find anything. He was so tense when he left the farm he forgot to stuff straw in his pockets. Now he couldn't

fight his jitters by chewing on a piece of straw. He glanced to his side instead. "Fang Zhao, aren't you worried?"

"I am."

"I couldn't tell. You seem quite calm. What are you jotting down? Tactical notes?" Wu Yi approached and craned his neck, then went silent.

The piece of paper was covered with scribblings that Wu Yi couldn't decipher—Fang-style musical notations.

Wu Yi was about to say something when he heard Zuo Yu comment: "We're up."

On the big screen, the camera paused on the instructor's podium. Su Hou was very tight. He kept on mumbling.

"Little Mr. Su is probably memorizing his gestures, hehe." The commentator followed with a knowing laugh. "As many people know, Little Mr. Su bought was used to be Xishan Farm and renamed it Dongshan Farm. The shepherd dogs he entered aren't the ones from Xishan Farm that people know so well. These are all new faces. Oh, and there's a small pet dog on their team. Little Mr. Su doesn't seem that confident either, but that's understandable. Debutant's jitters. OK, let's get back to the competition. The countdown has started. Let's see what kind of result this new team of dogs led by Little Mr. Su can manage."

Tick, tick, tick.

The sound of the countdown clock reverberated through the field.

"Off we go!"

One hundred sheep rushed into the field, and the seven dogs emerged from passageways on their two flanks.

"Off we go! As we can see, the dogs from the third team, Dongshan Farm, have adopted a circular approach. Pay attention to how they cluster the sheep. This positioning... That's not right. Dog A doesn't seem to be in the right position." The passionate commentator became confused. "Is Dongshan Farm switching tactics?"

Inside the closed viewing gallery, Wu Yi was watching in a pseudo-praying position.

He kept repeating in his head—stay in position, stay in position!

But Wu Yi was rudely interrupted by the menacing voice of the commentator.

"It's Dog B. Dog B is in the wrong position. It's gone down the wrong flank. It seems a bit nervous. It's probably realized its mistake and is now slowing down. Let's see how Little Mr. Su adjusts."

Wu Yi slapped himself in the face. He couldn't watch any more. Dog B? Little Lucky? Little Lucky was typically such a steady performer.

It was the dogs' first shepherding competition. The new surroundings were bound to take some getting used to and would lead to discomfort. But if even Little Lucky was making mistakes, the others were probably faring worse.

Wu Yi might have been quite talkative under normal circumstances, but at a time like this, he was at a loss. His head was spinning. He couldn't verbalize his thoughts. He turned his head toward Fang Zhao, who had already picked up his walkie-talkie.

The commentator continued, "Su Hou has asked to intervene. But it's a bit too late. The sheep are dispersing again. One group of sheep is peeling away from the main group. This is what happens when a dog attacks the wrong flank."

The commentator was delighted by the rare sight of a sheep cluster gone astray. He sounded like he wanted to jump. "We're losing sheep! Let's see what Little Mr. Su signals to Dog B and if Dog B can return to the right position. Wait..." Halfway through his spiel, Su Hou's projection appeared not in front of Dog B but rather Dog G.

Dog G?

The curly-haired one?

Su Hou made a hand gesture. He was so nervous he got it wrong initially but quickly corrected himself. Following Fang Zhao's instructions, he signaled Curly Hair to round up the sheep.

When he was done, Su Hou didn't look very confident.

"Little Mr. Su's signal is to round up the sheep. Unbelievable. He actually signaled a little pet dog to lead the roundup. I think he made the wrong hand gesture." The

commentator was about to elaborate when he saw Curly Hair dash like the wind.

"Such amazing speed! Great coverage! But it's too far from the sheep. It can't accomplish the task. Woah, the sheep are converging. The lost sheep are returning to the fold."

The commentator wiped away his sweat. It felt like he had not been able to utter a complete sentence since the third team had taken off. He had to switch gears mid-sentence every time.

On the field, the small cluster of sheep that had left the main group like a wayward branch veered back toward the core group on a parabolic trajectory.

"Setting up a blockade. The sheep have converged. Impressive—a tiny dog actually set up the blockade for the third team."

The commentator stopped using the word "pet."

Chapter 93

New Voices in Symphonic Composition

First, to gather a flock of sheep, the sheep at the front had to be obstructed and their speed restricted. Next, the loose sheep at the sides and back had to be harried into the flock. And this process of gathering was part of herding. During that process, whether sheep or dog, all of them would be running.

"The flock has been gathered, remove the blockade! They are beginning to drive the flock! Running positions! Lead dog! Where is the lead dog!" The commentators began searching amongst the seven dogs.

Dog A?

Probably not. Dog A's running position at the start did not have the imposing manner of a lead dog.

What about Dog G, who had worked hard during the crisis? Nope, Dog G's current position was at the back.

Observing the few dogs on the field, the commentators then realized the Dog B that had previously run to the wrong position had returned to the correct one,

Generally speaking, after the flock had gathered and it was time to herd the flock, the lead dog would seek out and suppress the lead sheep. Then it would force the lead sheep to run toward the desired destination. When the lead sheep ran, the entire flock would run after it.

Today was somewhat special. There was no lead dog that went to seek out the lead sheep. However...

"Today, the flock seems to be running a little fast." Obvious suspicion could be heard in the commentator's voice.

In the field, the flock was picking up speed, and the few shepherd dogs that eventually understood the situation also increased their speed. Once the gathering was complete

and the running positions were correct, what followed was the herding process. As long as no unfortunate accidents happened, the sheep would be smoothly herded into the pen.

"The speed of the flock is still increasing!" The commentator's glance at his colleague was questioning what was happening, but the look the colleague returned was one of equal bewilderment.

They did not manage to catch which dog had exerted a "suppressing glare." Barking? There were indeed a few dogs barking, but all of them were excited barks as they ran; they did not seem aimed at the head sheep.

Scaring the sheep by biting?

No one saw any dog biting. But why was the flock of sheep acting like there was something frightening chasing after them?

The audiences watching the broadcast were equally puzzled. However, for those not participating, they were paying more attention to the timer.

At this moment, Wu Yi's eyes locked onto the numbers at the top right corner of the screen.

Four minutes and 10 seconds...

Four minutes and 13 seconds...

Four minutes and 50 seconds...

Five minutes...

"Almost there! Persevere, my dears!" Wu Yi shouted. He could feel his adrenaline pumping.

Five minutes and 10 seconds...

Twelve seconds...

Thirteen seconds...

"They are in! They are all in the pen! Five minutes and 16 seconds! Team No. 3, the shepherd dogs of Dongshan farm, five minutes and 16 seconds! That was totally unexpected!"

The commentators were deeply moved. Wu Yi, who was in the viewing hall, was so stirred up that he roared with joy. He had never expected the results of his first competition would be better than his cousin's results. He had enough to brag about for an entire year already.

Wu Yi wanted to share the joy with Fang Zhao but realized that Fang Zhao had retracted his gaze from the screen and continued writing and drawing in his notebook.

What a wet blanket! Wu Yi thought.

Turning around, he ordered a few employees who were standing beside. "Faster, faster, faster, follow me over to retrieve my little babies!"

On the screen, Su Hou had run from the instructor's platform to the pen's entrance. The instructor's platform was near the final destination, making it easy for farm owners to control their own dogs immediately.

The overly excited Su Hou, smiling nonstop, had rushed inside and was rolling around with the seven dogs, getting bits of grass all over his body. "Looks like Young Master Su is very satisfied with the results of his debut performance, hehe." The commentators laugh was no longer the sardonic laughter from before the start of the competition but rather a merry laugh.

Su Hou could not wipe away the smiles on his face as he brought the dogs back to the viewing hall. His original target was to only use hand gestures when necessary and let the shepherd dogs complete the herding. As for the timing, he had not even thought about it and had never expected it to be within six minutes. To think that it would be just a little over five minutes!

Seven days was too short. He had only forced himself to memorize the commands and gestures. The time he spent with the seven dogs was not nearly enough. When he had been standing on the instructor's platform, he'd still felt a little dumb. Never had he expected to get this sort of result.

"After you are done being happy, continue watching the competition. Is five minutes very little? Think about Shoubei Farm's four minutes and six seconds. If you want to

enter the eastern region finals, you still have to cut down your time to below four minutes and thirty seconds. There is still much more training to do when you get back," Fang Zhao uttered.

This was meant for not just Su Hou but Wu Yi as well. If Su Hou had been able to come up with a quick reaction when the situation occurred at the start, probably a few seconds could have been shaved off the time. This time, it was thanks to Fang Zhao's direct instructions. Otherwise, Su Hou really would not have known what gestures to show to Dog - Little Lucky, or the other dogs.

As for Wu Yi, he needed to increase the intensity of training for some of the dogs. They could herd on their own fields however they liked. As long as the job was completed, it was fine. However, the previous standard was not good enough for the competition. They could not afford to have another error next time.

"Right, right, right, more training when we get back. Little Lucky, come over!" Wu Yi had originally decided to slap the dog that had made a mistake. However as his hand descended, it became a heavy pat on the head. He was in too good a mood, and as it seemed like Little Lucky had realized its own mistake already, Wu Yi could not bring himself to do so.

With their team's part in today's competition done for, the excitement from the group gradually died down and they started to watch the following teams' performances.

The teams that followed mostly finished around the six to seven minute mark. There was one other team that gave an extraordinary performance and managed to finish within six minutes, but they were slower than Dongshan Farm by 29 seconds.

Once all eight teams had finished, many people looking at the standings today were left dumbfounded.

No one had expected that Dongshan would actually obtain such a result. During their run, Dongshan Farm's tactics were too hard to understand. Till now, there was still no analysis of it.

After the competition, there will still people that complained, saying that there was a problem with the dogs of Dongshan Farm, especially the small curly-haired dog. There were some that said the dogs were surely doped.

Toward these, Wu Yi was extremely angry. "These people losing their money by

betting on the wrong team are none of our godd*mn business! The dogs have already undergone anti-doping tests. I am going to sue them for slander!"

However, as there were too many people complaining, the competition organizers dispatched a professional team over to test the dogs once more. In the end, the results were still the same.

This time, no matter how many people vented their frustrations and made noise, the organizers had this to say. "You may suspect others, but you cannot call into question the competitions justness and impartiality. Any complaints require evidence. Otherwise, see you in court."

Having won first place for today's competition, Wu Yi was excitedly waving his hands around. "Let's head back to celebrate!"

He was happy today. One reason was that his own farm dogs' had won first place in their first ever competition. The other reason was that he had won money! He had wagered a million on Dongshan Farm in private. He had never expected to win it back; he had only done so to boost his own morale. Losing it was fine, he would've just taken it as a wager for memories of the first time taking part. Never had he expected that he would actually win!

At 5.4 times, deducting the original one million, he had earned an additional 4.4 million.

While Zuo Yu excitedly counted the money, he used the corner of his eyes to watch Fang Zhao. This time around, Fang Zhao had also earned quite a large sum, but till now, his attention was not on the money but on his notebook.

"Boss, are you not going to share your thoughts?" Zuo Yu asked.

"Thoughts?" Fang Zhao raised his head. "We are heading to Qingcheng tomorrow."

"What are we going there for?" Wu Yi and Su Hou were curious as well.

"Have you heard of Qingcheng's Odd Music Company?"

"Odd Music Company? Nope." Wu Yi shook his head repeatedly.

"I might have heard of it somewhere but I don't remember what they do." Having

grown up in Qingcheng, Su Hou only felt that this company's name sounded a little familiar, but he was unclear about anything else.

"Odd Music Company is a company that provides recording studios. Other than a few big entertainment companies and music academies, their company's recording studios are highly rated. I made a reservation just now. I will check it out tomorrow," Fang Zhao said.

"Music recording? Are there a lot of people?" Su Hou did not understand.

"There will be a queue. Seems like Muzhou's musical ambience is not too bad." Ever since coming to Muzhou, he had listened to quite a number of the native Muzhou songs. At Shanmu Farm, he had also heard Wu Yi playing his bamboo flute.

Not just native Muzhou music, when Fang Zhao had made a reservation for a symphony recording studio, he had realized that this style of music was also rather popular and he would be required to queue. Tomorrow, when he went down, he did not even know if he could start recording.

"Then what about Curly Hair?" Now, Su Hou felt that among the seven dogs, Curly Hair was the most reliable. If Fang Zhao went to Qingcheng, would he bring Curly Hair along?

"Curly Hair will stay and train with you. Stop thinking about relying on him all the time. I heard that the difficulty will be increased for the finals. Just relying on one dog will not do," Fang Zhao replied.

"Hehe, got it, got it." Su Hou felt that the dreams he had every day about the finals now had a chance of becoming reality.

The party brought the dogs back to Shanmu Farm. Currently, they were still living on Shanmu Farm. Fang Zhao used a long range video projection to check on the situation at Dongshan Farm. He found out that the renovation work he had requested was already complete and new grass had already been grown. Crops for the current season would be sowed on the fields and would germinate in a bit.

After arranging everything, the next day, Fang Zhao headed for Qingcheng with Zuo Yu in tow.

Odd Music Company's building was shaped like an erected flute, tall and cylindrical,

and had many windows that were made circular.

Fang Zhao had made a reservation for their symphony recording studio. When they arrived, there was a private studio that were doing their recording, The forecasted time was in a short while, so Fang Zhao waited in the building's waiting hall.

There were a few others who were waiting just like him. Fang Zhao saw a few youngsters holding onto a book engaged in discussion. Fang Zhao was very familiar with the cover. It was the book he had written with Xue Jing, "New Voices in Symphonic Composition."

The paperback and electronic versions of "New Voices in Symphonic Composition" had been published worldwide. Xue Jing had mentioned to Fang Zhao that sales of the electronic book were great and that the paperbacks required additional reprints, as the reviews were good.

At a table behind Fang Zhao, a student raised his head to look at the people in his surroundings and whispered to his companion, "Nowadays, the people doing symphonic styles have increased. In the past, the symphonic recording studio was always empty, and at times, they would lend it out to other styles of music. Never did I expect that we would have to queue despite booking a day in advance."

"Seems like it started when 'New Voices in Symphonic Composition' came out. A classmate in an orchestra told me that, every day, he is busy from morning till night. Previously, the amount of idle time made him consider changing professions and he felt that there were no prospects for him. Now he is crazy busy, but he laughs when he dreams. You know, now that their orchestra is gaining popularity and their charges have doubled, surprisingly, they are still that busy."

Chapter 94

See Fang Zhao

Xue Jing had once told Fang Zhao that, in the music world of the New Era, symphonic structures had a rather refined flavor and were different from the more common musical styles in the New Era. The public did not have a high acceptance toward it, and there were not many who would study this, instead choosing to play with electronic music.

Fang Zhao's emergence had let symphonies and electronic music blend perfectly. Even though it was still not truly fashionable, at least more people were more accepting of it.

In the world, the number of people who could perfectly blend symphonies with electronic music was not just limited to only Fang Zhao. However, to build a reputation for oneself and be willing to selflessly share all his techniques, there was only Fang Zhao.

This was also why there had been so much hype within the community for "New Voices in Symphonic Composition" before it had even been released. This sort of situation was rarely seen, and just by spending a little money, one would gain the knowledge that he wanted. This sort of chance was hard to let go.

In the past, even if people wanted to learn, they would be put off by the "high entry requirements" and "hard to understand," and use these excuses to cower. Now, people who were interested could first read up on the explanations in the book and the shared experiences while getting a feel of things. Interest was all the foundation that one needed.

Although music software could synthesize many sounds, many people would still rather use traditional methods of recording, such as hiring a band or an orchestra to play at a professional studio. This way, they could listen to and feel the details, find places that needed improvement, and make changes on the spot. Apparently, in these sorts of circumstances, it was easier to gain inspiration. This was probably the "human" factor. Because when an orchestra played according to the score, their own feelings would be assimilated inside. This was something that could stir up the

emotions of a composer.

It could be said that Muzhou was the continent that had the least symphonic music. Just as that student had said, in the past, the symphony recording studios were often empty and used for other styles. However, now, despite having an advanced booking, there was still a queue.

If even Muzhou was like this, what about the other continents?

While Fang Zhao was pondering that question, a few more people came in from outside.

One of them scanned the hall and grumbled, "There are too many people. I think the CEO of Odd Music Company has plans to increase the number of symphony recording studios, but I have no idea when it will be ready."

The person beside him, with eyes full of anticipation, plucked out his earpiece and said, "I think this piece of mine will be very successful. I used the music software at home to produce a demo piece, and it sounds very good. Who knows, I might become popular soon! Or maybe I can be like Fang Zhao and be regarded by Fiery Bird?"

Everyone wanted to be the second Fang Zhao. Youngsters in the music industry paid attention to Fang Zhao. One reason was his talent and achievements; the other reason was also the main factor: his earnings.

Artists were human too. Other than certain madmen, the majority of them were common people who would have desires. Upon seeing Fang Zhao making so much earnings from his few symphonic movements and even receiving an invitation from Fiery Bird, who would not be tempted by that fame and fortune?

They were all of a similar age group, they all enjoyed music, and they were all from various schools from all continents. If Fang Zhao could do it, why not them too?

Therefore, more people attempted to take up the challenge, resulting in better recording companies in Qingcheng being fully booked almost every day. Good orchestras needed to work overtime every day, and the ones with better reputations had to be booked several days in advance.

Fang Zhao glanced at the newly arrived youngsters before looking at the time. The ones ahead of him in the queue, "Wheat Dish Studio," had given 1 p.m as the forecasted

time that they would be done. They had already overshot by ten minutes and had not given an explanation.

Upstairs, the people from Wheat Dish were also in a bad mood. Their recording had not gone smoothly. The problem did not lie with the orchestra's performance; instead, it was that the finished recording was different from what they had expected.

Wheat Dish Studio was set up by three year-four students from Muzhou Music Academy and had only been recently established. Other than those three, the other people in the studio that were helping them temporarily were their juniors from school.

"Something is wrong!" A youngster dressed fashionably scrutinized the scores he had written himself, his face full of distress. "Ding Xiaotao, how do you think we should correct this?"

The short haired girl beside him leaned against the back of her chair, both legs on the control panel and facing the ceiling. Hearing her companion, she took a deep breath and sighed. "Let's properly correct it when we get back."

"No! I feel that it's just lacking a little something for me to find out where the problem lies. Let the orchestra play once more. Maybe I will be able to figure out the answer." That youngster was unwilling to give up.

In the past, they had tried out electronic music and not Muzhou's traditional music styles because they'd thought that the people who did electronic music were cool. After watching many blockbusters, they had felt that the stunning background music was also pretty cool, so they had switched over to try it out, but they hadn't had much success. Originally, they had made plans to return to working purely on electronic music, but the release of "New Voices in Symphonic Composition" had given them renewed hope. The three of them had sealed themselves off for a period of time and then came here to produce the results of their seclusion. However, reality was a harsh slap in the face. It was as if their fiery and passionate hearts had been doused with cold water.

"Obviously, this portion should harmonize really well. Why does it sound wrong?" The last youngster was also at a loss as he fidgeted and studied the patterns on his sleeve tattoo.

"Shi Duo, go and see who is queueing up behind us. If it is no one important, tell them something to continue waiting or to queue up for another recording studio. We are going to extend our stay here for another two hours. I can feel some inspiration coming my way. In a moment I will start all over. You go outside and check it out first while I amend the scores.

"Jiang Hang, you are saying this for the third time today." The tattooed youth unwillingly got up to head out. His uncle was a senior executive at Odd Music Company, so he could directly take a shortcut for some small matters.

Normal clients were not able to check the background or detailed information of the people queueing up after them. The information online only stated what the client who made the booking left behind. The people from Wheat Dish could only find out that the person behind them had made a individual application and nothing more.

The tattooed youth had gotten used to this and went to find someone who could check the information of the party behind.

"Oh, little Duo came?" The person in charge of Odd Music's technical department did not even need to raise his head. Just glancing at the tattooed sleeve, he knew who had come.

Shi Duo's nickname was Duo Duo. As he'd gotten older, Shi Duo had felt that every time someone called him it sounded like they were calling a dog, so he did not let people call him that. Now, only people who were close to him used that name.

Shi Duo cackled as he walked in. "Uncle Wylie, are you busy?"

"Say it, what do you want to check this time? Your studio has exceeded the time limit." There was no rebuke in Wylie's voice. Exceeding the time was a small matter. A little compensation fee to the party behind them would resolve it.

"I want to see who is queuing up after me, maybe tell him to wait a while more or perhaps queue for another studio," Shi Duo said.

Wylie understood. Shi Duo wanted to find out the other party's identity and detailed information.

"Let me see, behind you is... a booking by a foreigner from Yanzhou," Wylie said. "If he isn't from Muzhou, that's even better. We don't have to bother about foreigners. We

have priority for locals. I guess we will ask him to queue for another studio. However, this name seems a little familiar, as if I have heard it somewhere."

"Is he famous? What's his name?" Shi Duo asked.

"He's called Fang Zhao."

"Fang... Fang Zhao?!"

Shi Duo did not bother about the rules any longer. He rushed over and pushed Wylie aside and squeezed in front of the screen, carefully examining the information and photograph of the person who made the booking.

"You know this person?" Wylie asked.

Shi Duo took a deep breath then took another look to make sure his eyes were not playing tricks on him. "Can I check the surveillance footage of the waiting hall?"

"No way!" Wylie shook his head. Company policy. Other than the technical staff in the monitor room, no one else was allowed to view the surveillance footage. Doing so was a breach of privacy, and the company had strict rules regarding it. If it were not for the backing of his uncle who was a senior executive in the company, Wylie would not even have considered helping him.

"Hey. You haven't told me, who is this Fang Zhao?"

Shi Dou did not bother to reply and instead rushed straight out. When he ran into the waiting hall, his sudden braking caused the soles of his shoes to create a sharp squeaking sound.

The ear-piercing sound made everyone, including Fang Zhao, look over.

Shi Dou scanned the waiting hall and his line of sight stopped at Fang Zhao. After that, he turned and rushed straight up and into the recording studio.

"You guys, you won't believe who is queueing behind us! Guess who I just saw!" Shi Duo was so excited he was practically shouting.

Jiang Hang and Ding Xiaotao were discussing where the music score had gone wrong, but their train of thought had been scared away by Shi Duo's abrupt shouting. The two

of them stared at Shi Duo as if they wanted to peel him alive.

Shi Duo did not care one bit, excitedly continuing, "Fang Zhao! That Fang Zhao!"

"Tha-that Fang Zhao?" Jiang Hang and Ding Xiaotao were both stuttering.

Shi Duo picked up the copy of "New Voices in Symphonic Composition" and pointed at the name under the deputy editor segment. "This one!"

Jiang Hang and Ding Xiaotao looked at each other and ran out at the same time.

Shi Duo also followed and did not forget to show off to a bunch of his good friends in a group chat. "Today I ran into Fang Zhao!"

Somewhere else in Qingcheng, in a dormitory at Muzhou Music Academy.

"The F*ck! Fang Zhao is in Muzhou!"

"Who did you say?!"

"Is Fang Zhao really in Muzhou?"

"Shi Duo said it in a group chat. They met him when recording over at Odd Music."

"Let's go to Odd Music!"

"You all are going? I still have two more periods of optional lessons."

"Skip classes!"

In a classroom at the teaching block.

A teacher stepped into his classroom for his lesson on arrangement and realized that there were only a third of the students in class, and he was left puzzled. This round, there were not many students from far away, and he had not received any absence-from-class requests.

"Where is everyone? There are supposed to be many more people, where did they go?" the arrangement teacher asked.

"Teacher, they all skipped classes to go see Fang Zhao," a student answered.

"Outrageous! Even if they were chasing a star, they can't... Who?! Who did they go see?!" The arrangement teacher was stunned.

"They went to see Fang Zhao, the deputy editor of 'New Voices in Symphonic Composition' who became popular in a short time.

"...Fang Zhao came? Where?" the arrangement teacher asked.

"Odd Music Company's building. I heard a fellow student was recording over there when they ran into him."

The student had just finished his sentence when the arrangement teacher said, "This class will be self-revision." With that he hurriedly left.

Chapter 95

Live Broadcast Lesson

The news that Fang Zhao, the deputy editor of "New Voices in Symphonic Composition" was in Muzhou recording at Odd Music Company spread fast within the Muzhou music scene.

The fastest to react were students of the Music Academy who were interested in the symphonic genre. Many skipped classes and rushed over to Odd Music Company.

Thus, on an afternoon where there was no sheep-herding competition, many cars appeared at the entrance of Odd Music Company.

Odd Music's security guards did not think much of it. Recently, there had been a lot more people coming to the recording studio. Today was just a little more than normal. However, they quickly realized more and more people were coming and they were asking the same question: "Where is Fang Zhao?"

Fang Zhao?

Who is Fang Zhao?

They were just in charge of the company's security and knew nothing about the music scene. They might have known some popular singers or superstars, but not much of others in the industry.

Only when a supervisor in the company told them did they know that a rather impressive person had come.

In the large waiting hall, the three members of Wheat Dish Studio had ran in front of Fang Zhao.

Earlier, when Shi Duo had rushed in and glanced over, Zuo Yu's professional instincts had been placed on alert. He was ready to obstruct the three of them when Fang Zhao waved his hands, signaling not to.

"Greetings, Teacher Fang, we are year four student from Muzhou Music Academy."

The three of them handed Fang Zhao their student IDs. Ding Xiaotao and Jiang Hang passed over the books in their hands, flipped open the cover, and bashfully asked, "Teacher Fang, could we have your autograph?"

After thinking for quite a bit, Ding Xiaotao had settled on addressing him as "teacher." Since he had imparted knowledge to them, they would call him "teacher."

Fang Zhao smiled at the three of them, took the pen and books, and proceeded to sign them.

"We are working on our composition right now, blending symphonies with electronic music, but we have encounter some problems; could we consult you?" Jiang Hang asked.

"Go ahead," replied Fang Zhao.

Jiang Hang spoke about the process and some of his thoughts about blending the sounds for their composition

"Did you have a general plan?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Yes, yes! Just that, when we listen to it, something does not sound right, as if it was not blended properly."

"Can I take a look at the scoresheet?"

"Sure! Sure!" Jiang Hang handed over the scoresheet that was full of amendments. He was not worried that Fang Zhao would copy their score. This was the Fang Zhao—would he even need to copy their messy and half-completed song scores?

However, looking at the piece of paper full of corrections, the three of them felt a little embarrassed.

"How about letting me tidy it up first and show you a brand new copy after all the amendments? This copy does not look good," Jiang Hang asked.

"No need." Fang Zhao studied the scoresheet in his hands seriously. Although this scoresheet was messy and the paper was full of markings and corrections, it showed

the number of times they had tried to improve their draft. Fang Zhao could see what the three of them were thinking from it.

"Lend me the pen," Fang Zhao said.

"Sure, free free to use it!" Ding Xiaotao hurriedly fished out from her bag and handed it over to Fang Zhao.

Fang Zhao used the pen and circled out a few places. He proceeded to analyze it and tell them his opinions.

Jiang Hang and the other two listened attentively. They realized that Fang Zhao not only talked about the scoresheet, he could also speculate as to their thought processes through the amendments. He also accurately pointed out the points in their general plan where they had felt something was wrong and gave them a few reasons. This way, they could finish the rest by themselves.

As Fang Zhao was explaining to them, others in the waiting room also curiously watched. Upon hearing "Teacher Fang," some guessed whether it was the Fang Zhao that they knew. When they saw him signing on the copy of "New Voices in Symphonic Composition," their suspicions were confirmed.

"Is it really Fang Zhao?!" someone cried out.

Someone else from another genre had a blank look on his face. "Who is Fang Zhao? Is he famous?"

"Probably some rich master from an aristocratic family. He even has a bodyguard."

"Not necessarily. Who knows, he might be a celebrity."

"I have never seen him among any Muzhou stars."

"A foreign celebrity?"

"All this for a foreign star?" They looked down on the behavior of the bunch of young people trying to chase a celebrity.

Those who did symphonic genres could not put up with it any longer.

"You guys do pop music, right? It's normal not to know him. Now only those who do symphonies and New Era electronic music would know the name Fang Zhao. Have you heard of 'New Voices in Symphonic Composition'? He was a contributor and subeditor. Yesterday, I think a well-known musician said that symphonies and electronics would bring about a new wave of music. Just take a look at all these people sitting there. All of them have a booking for the symphony recording studio."

A slightly older person asked, "Are you talking about Yanzhou Silver Wing Media's Fang Zhao? The one that composed the '100-Year Period of Destruction,' received an invite from Fiery Bird, and helped great master Xue Jing compile 'New Voices of Symphonic Composition,' that Fang Zhao?!" Even if they did not have interest in the symphony genre, a while back, the book had been all the rage within the community, so they would still know of it.

"No wonder I felt that he looked familiar! I also want his autograph!"

"Me too!"

"Wait for me, let me inform everyone in the chat group."

Therefore, Zuo Yu watched as a bunch of people came over. There were still others that rushed over upon receiving the news. In a moment, the waiting hall became crowded.

"Hello, I'm from Qingcheng University's arts group. Recently, I have been studying the style of symphonic structures..."

"I'm a student from Muzhou Music Academy too..."

"I'm from XX company..."

Zuo Yu observed everyone that came close. He could use his arms to block off the nearest people, but as there were too many, even if Zuo Yu had more limbs, there was no way he could block off everyone in the surrounding area.

"Boss, I feel that we should..."

Zuo Yu wanted to leave the place when he saw a middle-aged man in a suit head over. The people he brought along cleared a path. "Teacher Fang! Teacher Fang, I am Si Wai, deputy CEO of Odd Music. The company has prepared a room for you to rest." Afterward he addressed the crowd, "Everyone, please do not worry. Later on, Odd

Music Company will provide a chance for interaction."

Recently, the company's symphony studio was overbooked every day. The higher-ups had naturally paid attention and understood the reason. Of course they knew what the name "Fang Zhao" implied.

This was a chance to raise the company's reputation!

All of Odd Music Company's departments had started to move. They had also increased the number of security guards at the entrance and spent money to engage temporary workers from a protective services company. Even their deputy CEO, Si Wai, had personally come out to invite Fang Zhao.

Fang Zhao also knew that staying here was not a good idea. After signing a few more books from people beside him, he returned the pen to Ding Xiaotao.

"Pardon me, I have to leave for a bit."

Fang Zhao had never thought that something like this would happen. However, he was not intimidated by the scene that unfolded as he followed the deputy CEO and left the waiting hall. They arrived at a lounge for distinguished guests, and he realized there were people waiting inside.

There were five people in total. Three were top executives from Odd Music, and the other two were the Principal of Muzhou Music Academy and his granddaughter, who coincidentally happened to be recording a song today.

The principal had brought his granddaughter to his good friend's company to do a recording and had never expected to have such a great opportunity. But having met quite a few great masters in the industry, he was not like the bunch of rowdy youngsters who were so stirred up.

After the customary introductions, the principal finally stated his true objective. "Young Teacher Fang, are you interested to come to Muzhou Music Academy to give a lecture?"

...

Half an hour later, Odd Music Company opened a large hall capable of fitting more than a thousand people. In the past, this place had been used to demonstrate their newest

models of sound recording equipment and installations. The hall was a place for promotion and publicity, and now it being used to house a temporary meet and greet session.

Fang Zhao would answer questions for one hour, and after that, there would be an autograph session.

Before leaving for the meet and greet session, Fang Zhao made a call to Duan Qianji and told her about the situation here and how he would be cooperating with the Muzhou Music Academy's principal, who would arrange a place for Fang Zhao to lecture. As there were way more interested parties for his lecture than seats, they had come to a decision that the class would be broadcast online as well. At Muzhou's side, it would be an exclusive broadcast by Muzhou Music Academy. As for Yanzhou, Fang Zhao decided to leave it to Silver Wing to arrange the broadcast. Other continents were having discussions to stream the broadcast at the moment.

Duan Qianji was very happy when she received the news and immediately got her staff to set up the frequency for the broadcast as well as announce the news of Fang Zhao's lecture and post the details online.

After a series of orders had been handed out, Duan Qianji sat down in her own office and browsed through the discussions online as she chuckled to herself. "He really went out to expand his profession indeed."

Xue Jing had been invited all over the world to lecture due to the release of "New Voices in Symphonic Composition." As Fang Zhao was contracted to Silver Wing, he did not have complete freedom, and due to matters that he had to attend to, he had not gone along with Xue Jing. This time, Fang Zhao had been caught in Muzhou. Having received the news, Xue Jing was rather supportive of Fang Zhao personally lecturing and contacted him right away.

"When the time comes for your lecture, there will surely be a lot of industry seniors, but you don't have to be nervous. Just take it like how you were discussing with me and say whatever you wish to say. I have spoken to a few old friends in Muzhou. They will not post any tricky questions and will help you when there is a need to..."

In a tone of a old senior looking after the younger generation, Xue Jing exhorted again and again.

When Xue Jing finally finished, Fang Zhao said, "Thank you. I don't get nervous."

"Hey, when you are standing there with a thousand pair of eyes glued to you, can you still be so sure? When is your lecture?"

"Tomorrow afternoon."

"So fast? Don't you need to prepare?"

"There is no need. I have something to attend to now."

"You little—never mind, don't put too much pressure on yourself for your first class."

"I don't feel pressure."

The next day, when Fang Zhao left the residence the school had arranged for him, there was already somebody waiting for him to escort him to his lecture.

The place where the lecture would be held was a communication center. On most days, professors and masters with high reputations would give reports or lectures there. It was rare that the speaker today was a young person who was of a similar age to students of the school.

Muzhou Music Academy's principal picked out ten questions from the students suggestions and went backstage to see Fang Zhao sitting there watching a sheep-herding competition.

Was he watching the video to relieve stress or was he born senseless? the principal thought to himself.

When it was about time, Fang Zhao stepped into the hall and walked up the stage. He calmly scanned the hall that was filled to the brim, briefly gave an introduction, and went straight to the main topic.

Fang Zhao's was not the plain and simple kind of teaching method, yet he was able to use simple words to make the questions more penetrating. He also used a few famous Muzhou songs as examples. Even people who had never come into contact with the symphony genre could mostly understand what he was saying. Fang Zhao's examples were not just limited to Muzhou songs; he used songs from other continents as well, which made viewers of the live broadcast feel involved.

Oh? To think it could be used like that?

Wow, you can blend this sort of sound? Who knows, I might be able to use it in my own compositions!

How did I never think of this?

How does he know so much?!

...

Those present at the lecture or watching the broadcast felt as if their hearts were deeply stirred.

The formless manner of Fang Zhao's words and actions carried some pressure. The student leaders sitting in the first few rows fidgeted in unease.

The arrangement teacher also straightened his back. He kept feeling a little nervous and wondered what was up? When he was giving lectures, he would not feel anything. Now, he was all tensed up just listening to a lecture, weird!

In the hall that could fit more than a thousand, the front ten rows were filled with student leaders, teachers, and other interested Muzhou citizens of reputable fame. The students were seated behind, and many more that were unable to grab a spot were watching the live broadcast online.

The academy's forums were also having heated discussions.

"I finally know why Fang Zhao rose so high despite being just two years older than us. Take a look, everyone, wherever he stands, that aura... Tsk tsk, reminds me of my form teacher back then."

"To actually reveal everything, isn't he even the least bit afraid that, once others learn his methods and techniques, they will trample down on him?"

"Do you know what some industry insiders call Fang Zhao? 'Big Fool Fang!' It came about when Fang Zhao would not keep his experiences and techniques to himself and was willing to share it with everyone. However, today, after watching Fang Zhao's lecture, I feel that Fang Zhao is not one who doesn't know how to maximize benefits. It is more like he doesn't care and isn't afraid. Impressive!"

Those that had previously doubted Fang Zhao's ability and those that had previously questioned him had one thing on their minds as they watched the broadcast: The style of a master.

Xue Jing was in Huangzhou after being invited to lecture, but that did not stop him from watching the live broadcast. A few of his friends beside him were surprised. "Tsk, Old Xue, this fellow speaks even better than you!"

Xue Jing was not the least bit angry—rather, he sounded gratified. Beaming, he said, "Yesterday, when he told me he didn't get nervous, I did not believe him. Now I understand. I feel this little fellow is meant for this profession!"

At Shanmu farm, Su Hou was taking a break from the training and scrolling through his news feed. He realized the top news story mentioned Fang Zhao.

"To think that he would become popular before me!"

Hearing Su Hou, Wu Yi walked over. He was amazed as well. "To think that Fang Zhao was so famous? He seems really impressive. Many well-known Muzhou great masters went to his lecture? That means that Fang Zhao is considered a great master too?"

Chapter 96

Global Lecture Tour

Fang Zhao's lecture at Muzhou Music Academy was a huge success. You could judge from the number of web hits.

The president of the academy was smiling so broadly his creases deepened. He was cocky about his wise decision. After the lecture, at least 10 percent if not half of the global music-student community was now interested in symphonic genres. People who tuned in were also exposed to the name "Muzhou Music Academy." That was the biggest achievement.

Still, time was limited. There was only so much Fang Zhao could cover in one lecture. Many viewers hadn't gotten their fix when the lecture ended.

The president started brainstorming about how he could work with Fang Zhao again. Didn't he need a recording studio? "The academy has a recording studio. That would spare you the queue at Odd Music. We'll prepare the best recording studio for you."

But others had the same idea. The chief executive of Odd Music had already extended an invitation in person.

The Odd Music CEO responded to the president's offer with a casual laugh. "Old friend, why don't you save that outdated equipment for your students. For a professional recording, you'll need to come to Odd Music. Let's put it this way: the best recording equipment in all of Muzhou is at Odd Music. Didn't you bring your own granddaughter to record here on account of our new equipment? Don't fight me on this one."

The Odd Music CEO said that, as long as Fang Zhao was willing, he could offer him a recording studio for free right away. While the official word was that their studios were fully booked, the company reserved two studios for internal use in case of emergencies. They were equipped with the best gear.

The Odd Music CEO was quite enthusiastic and very polite. He also offered many perks. Fang Zhao had no reason to refuse.

"Have you contacted Teacher Fang from the symphony? If not, we can recommend a few alternatives," the smiling chief executive said.

Among the attendees of Fang Zhao's lecture were several key members of Muzhou's major symphonies. They had been waiting to approach Fang Zhao since the end of the lecture. When the Odd Music CEO made his comment, the small group, whose ears were already perked, pounced to pitch their own symphonies.

Musical tastes were not as sophisticated in Muzhou compared to Leizhou. There were few symphony orchestras and none of them had a global reputation. That was why every one of their collaborations with world-renowned master musicians was hard earned. With Fang Zhao's visit, the few major orchestras went at it again. Given that symphonies were gaining popularity among youngsters again and that Fang Zhao was a key figure behind this renaissance, this was too good an opportunity to pass up.

The Odd Music boss stood silently nearby and ignored the imploring looks from the folks that crowded over. He just stood and smiled, waiting for Fang Zhao to respond. Saying too much would come off as sycophantic and backfire. He had secured his deal. Everything else could wait.

Fang Zhao scanned the folks who had rushed forward to tout their services. Some of them were leaders of their orchestras. Others were first chairs of their respective sections.

"What's the name of your orchestra? How big is the orchestra? What's the latest?" Fang Zhao zoomed in on of the people in the crowd.

"I'm Daller, the leader of Soundcloud Philharmonic. I'm also first violin. Our orchestra is 10 years old. We have 80 musicians."

Daller passionately gave Fang Zhao the lowdown on his orchestra. Soundcloud was one of the larger orchestras in Qingcheng. Now that symphonic music was more popular, he wanted to recruit more musicians. All these years, they had never worked with a master. It wasn't a matter of quality. The few large orchestras in Muzhou were comparable in skill, but things just never came together for Soundcloud. Lo and behold, he had been called on by Fang Zhao this time. Of course he would make a hard sell.

An orchestra comprising 80-odd musicians was a large one for Muzhou, where

symphonic music wasn't the rage, but it still paled in comparison to the orchestras in Yanzhou.

Even Silver Wing had a company orchestra made up of 100-odd musicians, and there were many outstanding instrumentalists on the waiting list. Even if they were short a few musicians, they could find replacements easily. They could also expand on short notice. It was a well-endowed department.

But things were different over here. Even though Muzhou boasted many orchestras, most were smaller ones. There were no more than five large orchestras in the continent. Even though they advertised themselves as professional orchestras, they weren't up to par by global standards. A regular performance calendar was the first step toward professionalization. All top professional orchestras had fixed seasons, but not in Muzhou.

Muzhou's orchestras weren't treated with respect. They were invited for the occasional performance, such as at a major farm owner's banquet or the opening or closing ceremony of a shepherd-dog contest. Their sole purpose was entertainment.

It wasn't fair for Fang Zhao to evaluate orchestras in Muzhou based on Yanzhou standards. The reason he had called on Daller was because Daller had listened attentively during the lecture and showed a dogged passion. The enthusiasm brimming from his eyes suggested a purity of purpose lacking in the others. Of course, Daller was also angling for his own personal interests, but genuine music lovers were hard to find—one in a million. To spot someone in this crowd who was relatively pure was a decent find.

To prove his orchestra's worth, Daller summoned his fellow musicians to perform a few pieces at the recording studio Odd Music had arranged. Even though they couldn't rival Silver Wing's highly paid orchestra, Fang Zhao couldn't spot too many mistakes.

"These were all original compositions?" Fang Zhao asked Daller after the set.

"Yes. It's nothing compared to what you find in Yanzhou, but we learned a lot from your lecture and will improve from here on out." The middle-aged Daller was quite uptight before Fang Zhao, who was dozens of years his junior. His tone conveyed a mix of caution and expectation, like a student showing off in front of a teacher.

Since Daller himself acknowledged there was room for improvement, Fang Zhao didn't

offer any feedback. He instead asked, "You plan on going professional?"

"Yes, that's the plan, but we still have a lot of work to do." Daller didn't hide his ambition. When he had founded the orchestra, he'd wanted it to become Muzhou's first professional orchestra in the New Era.

Fang Zhao slapped Daller on the back and said, "Pretty good."

Daller instantly felt more confident and couldn't refrain from smiling. But when he turned around to manage the orchestra, his serious face returned.

Many of Soundcloud's musicians were puzzled. He's so authoritative when he speaks to us. How come he acts like a primary student in front of that kid Fang Zhao?

Fang Zhao started recording soon after. Sometimes composers would double as conductors. Such was the case with Fang Zhao. Because of his high standards, the session didn't start smoothly, but things eventually improved.

Zuo Yu was a bit baffled. It was only a matter of days before they returned to Yanzhou. Why not wait and record with the orchestra at Silver Wing? They might even finish earlier.

Was Fang Zhao worried about fuel costs for the flying transport? Considering his winnings from the shepherd-dog contest, there was no point in being stingy.

But Fang Zhao had decided to stay put in Muzhou and work with a local orchestra at a local studio.

The recording ended up taking up 10 days. After completing a rough cut in seven days, Fang Zhao recorded additional segments in the final three days. And these were all preliminary recordings. Postproduction would be necessary for a finished product, but that would wait until Fang Zhao returned to Yanzhou.

All parties had signed a confidentiality agreement, including Soundcloud and Odd Music. They would be barred from divulging the contents of the recording session before their official release.

"Done yet?" It was the third time Xue Jing had called Fang Zhao.

Fang Zhao had been busy recording the past few days, so he was in sparse contact. Xue

Jing had waited until he felt the timing was right before reaching out to Fang Zhao again.

"We just finished," Fang Zhao said.

"Then hurry on over to Huangzhou. We're waiting for you."

Xue Jing wanted to go on a global lecture tour with Fang Zhao. He'd made up his mind after watching Fang Zhao's live webcast. He had sorted out the details with the Music Association and more or less confirmed their itinerary. All they were missing was Fang Zhao.

After finishing recording in Muzhou, Fang Zhao packed up his things and headed to Huangzhou with Zuo Yu in tow. Curly Hair stayed at Shanmu Farm to continue training and entering competitions with Su Hou. Before he left, Fang Zhao gave Wu Yi 10 million dollars to bet on Dongshan Farm every time they competed.

The point of the global tour was to promote his own book, but Xue Jing also wanted to give Fang Zhao the exposure. How many musicians of Fang Zhao's age could stage a global lecture tour? It would help pad Fang Zhao's resume.

Many people thought Fang Zhao had practically become Xue Jing's final disciple. Why else would Xue Jing spend so much effort helping this young man?

Xue Jing's close friends in the industry also brought up the matter with him in private.

"Final disciple? You mean Fang Zhao?" Xue Jing got a kick out of the question. "Perhaps you have overestimated me and underestimated the kid?"

Xue Jing's answer was also made public, but no one bought it. Everyone thought Xue Jing was simply promoting Fang Zhao. Even though he gave a decent lecture, it didn't mean that Fang Zhao had achieved the same stature as Xue Jing.

Out of the world's 12 continents, the most frequent stops on any global lecture tour were the eight regular continents. Because of their unique histories, musical tastes were less sophisticated in the four special continents. Even though Fang Zhao's appearance in Muzhou caused a stir in the local music industry, for the masses, it was still less important news than other local happenings.

But the eight regular continents were a different story. Xue Jing and Fang Zhao drew more attention. Many folks marked their calendars well in advance.

Rare was the fool who was willing to reveal his trade secrets. Who didn't want to tune in? Admission wasn't that expensive and it would spare you the agony of figuring things out yourself. What a great deal. Why not attend?

Fang Zhao had no time to play tourist after arriving in Huangzhou. The next day, he kicked off his lecture tour with Xue Jing. Their stops were mainly higher education institutions. In continents with a greater passion for music, they scheduled extra sessions to include stops at other schools. Even though these stops were less popular than stops at music academies, attendance was still decent.

Fang Zhao's name was gaining more and more currency in the music industry by the day.

Chapter 97

Complete

No matter how high one flew, there would always be detractors. Furthermore, Fang Zhao was so young and only had a few compositions. Even if his global lecture could raise his status in the music world, compared to many other figures with power and prestige, he was still quite far off.

It was not that Fang Zhao did not speak well, rather that the rules were set this way. Although Fang Zhao did compose a few decent movements and received an invitation from Fiery Bird, that did not mean he was of the same standing as many famous great masters across the world. One's works and experience were considered too.

Fang Zhao did not have enough works, and his experience was not as rich as other great masters. Therefore, for the global lecture tour, Xue jing would speak for three quarters of the allocated time and Fang Zhao would speak for the remainder. Even if Xue Jing wanted to allocate a larger portion to Fang Zhao, it was not possible.

Everyone conceded that Fang Zhao had talent and outstanding works. However, he was still young. Who knew if he'd use up all his talent quickly?

Talent was something hard to define. It could accompany a person throughout his life, or it could diminish in the next moment. Elders in the music circles had seen many such examples. Thus, how far Fang Zhao could climb and whether or not he would reach the expectations that Xue Jing had, many of them still had reservations.

However, they approved of Fang Zhao's willingness to share his knowledge with everyone. Whether they had any thoughts behind the facade of approval, they would still publicly praise Fang Zhao's selfless sharing.

Of course, there were people who felt that Fang Zhao's musical style was lacking in experience. He might have been an expert in the heavy and thick styles for large scale events or battle scenes in big productions, but in the eyes of those experienced people in the music circles, it was still inadequate.

Not to say that he had to be an all-rounder. He had to touch upon other aspects or

produce more works. Otherwise, there was not enough proof that he deserved the title of a great master.

People who had seen Fang Zhao's background felt that his foundations were not solid enough and he had risen thanks to Xue Jing as well as the music association's publicity.

According to an age-old saying, with only a few compositions, it was not enough to prove he was a great master. Every great master could only prove their worth with time and works.

"Fang Zhao? He still isn't qualified enough!"

This was the evaluation given by a certain great master when interviewed during the lecture tour.

Xue Jing was worried that Fang Zhao would be affected by the assessments of people both within and outside of the music circles. After every lecture, the media would always raise that certain great master's evaluations and want to know Fang Zhao's response.

But Fang Zhao's reactions to this was always the same: "Oh."

"Oh?!"

"That's all?!"

The person in charge of interviewing was helpless. Why doesn't this little fellow give more of a reaction!

The evaluations and judgements within the music circles were all different. Fang Zhao himself paid no heed. He was very busy; how could he find the time to browse through every single evaluation from the music circles? Fang Zhao was not interested in seeing all these either.

Outside of the lectures, Fang Zhao was always busy. Xue Jing realized that, although Fang Zhao had less speaking time and fewer conferences to attend, Fang Zhao was still busier than himself.

"What are you preparing this time?" Xue Jing asked.

"Settling matters for Muzhou's side," Fang Zhao replied.

Xue Jing knew that Fang Zhao had jointly purchased a farm with a friend from Muzhou. He was not particularly interested in farms. Every year, many people would send him some Muzhou agricultural products as gifts. He did not really cherish these goods, so he did not ask much.

Fang Zhao was speaking the truth—he really was very busy. He was editing a video from the footage that both Dongshan Farm and Shanmu Farm had sent over. He watched both once before editing a portion and then playing the edited version together with the accompaniment music. After that, he made adjustments to it.

Silver Wing's virtual projects department was roped in to help Fang Zhao with editing the video and compiling the music. Combining video and music required a lot of adjustments and amendments to improve on it till the artistic result was satisfactory.

Other than that, Fang Zhao would receive a report every day from Wu Yi regarding information from their side and the situation over there.

Today, Wu Yi made a call to Fang Zhao.

"Your dog..." Wu Yi wanted to say something but hesitated.

"What happened?" Fang Zhao asked.

"I told you before, his capacity for learning sheep herding is very strong," Wu Yi said.

"Yeah."

"...I used to think that your dog did not know anything about herding sheep, and that after coming, he would surely learn a thing or two from the dogs on my farm."

"Mmmhm." Fang Zhao indicated that he was listening attentively.

"But I realized that I was wrong, very wrong! The dogs on my farm have been lead astray by your Curly Hair!"

When Fang Zhao had still been in Muzhou, he would bring Curly Hair out running every night. After Fang Zhao had left for his global lecture tour, Curly Hair would still retain that habit and head out to run while the other dogs slept. Fang Zhao had

mentioned this to Wu Yi and told him not to mind as long as it did not leave the farm compound. After all, this was also training.

At the start, Wu Yi had personally monitored Curly Hair. After becoming used to it, he'd only instructed his workers to pay a little attention every night. Until, one night, Bingo and a few other farm dogs followed Curly Hair out of curiosity. The one dog out running every night had become an entire pack.

During the first few days, Wu Yi had not found it to be a big problem and just thought that maybe it was helpful for his own dogs. Running more would strengthen their bodies and could be useful for the last Eastern region finals. After that, the employees told Wu Yi that the dogs had actually gone hunting for field mice! Furthermore, it was Bingo who'd taken the lead. As the farm's ex-boss, Bingo was familiar with the farm and naturally was familiar with the field mice too.

The situation rapidly developed, and the pack of dogs would run out to hunt field mice every night.

Wu Yi was distressed. That was the job of mousetrap robots. Why had this bunch of shepherd dogs joined in!

Wu Yi specially hired a veterinary team to look after them and prevent parasites, bacteria, or other harmful organisms that might affect their competition performance.

The news he'd received from Su Hou was like this,

"Master Zhao, we have won! Today was intense, and there were no wrong commands. Hopefully, they will maintain today's condition."

...

"We have won! There is no doubt!"

...

"Won again and again!"

...

"Today we lost, only fourth place. We only got one point to add to our accumulated

score. Bingo ate a field mouse and ended up with diarrhea and did not perform. Wu Yi said that the 10 million he wagered on Master Zhao's behalf was lost. However, we have earned quite a bit from the previous few rounds. Still earning despite losing this time. As long as we win it back next time, all will be fine."

...

"As long as we can get a first place finish we will squeeze into the top 10!"

...

"Top 10 achieved! Next target, top eight!"

...

"One more win! The competition is tough, the other teams frequently score well too."

...

"Top eight! Top eight! We achieved top eight!"

...

"We have secured our place in the finals! The finals! Hahahaha!"

In two months, Dongshan Farm's accumulated points had risen rapidly, and the farm's reputation kept increasing. Everyone knew that Dongshan farm's lead dog was a little curly-haired dog that was particularly impressive. As their strength and reputation rose, the odds became lower and lower, to the point that Wu Yi did not even have the intention to wager but did so anyway to support their own team.

With the rise of their reputation, many people in the Eastern region knew that it was Su Hou that had purchased Xishan Farm and changed the name to Dongshan and collaborated with Shanmu Farm to take part in the competition. Of course, there were people who joked about Su Hou buying a desolate farm and having no choice but to request assistance from another farm, disgracing the Su family name.

Regarding all those words, Su Hou paid them no mind. Now, what he wanted most was to be victorious every round. Every victory was a boost to his confidence.

Due to the running together, herding together, catching field mice together, and getting scolded together, the camaraderie between the seven dogs had gradually grown deeper. The most obvious show of this was that they no longer needed Su Hou to issue commands. Even if there were mistakes during a competition, a bark from Curly Hair would get a quick reaction from all the other dogs.

Only the top eight teams that acquired the most points during the preliminaries could enter the Eastern region finals, where the top four teams would qualify for the continental sheep-herding competition. However, this time around, the eighth, ninth and 10th teams had the same number of points and all entered the Eastern region finals. Out of the 10 participating teams, the top four would be chosen to continue competing with the top four teams of the western region.

Having entered the Eastern region finals in seventh place, Su Hou was so excited that he ran circles around the field.

"Master Zhao, can you make it back in time for the Eastern region finals?" Su Hou asked Fang Zhao during one of their long distance calls.

"I can."

"Hey, Master Zhao, actually, what I wanted to ask is... you mentioned that when the time came and if we qualified for the Eastern finals, you would compose a piece of background music to use for a publicity film? Hehe, I have filmed a decent film over the last two days. Master Zhao, is your music ready?" Su Hou knew that Fang Zhao had done the recording at Qingcheng previously, but before Fang Zhao had fully completed it, he'd had to leave for his global lecture tour. Now, he still did not know if it was complete.

"Send over your footage and let me take a look," Fang Zhao said.

Su Hou sent the best footage he had shot over the past two days to Fang Zhao.

Viewing the video, Fang Zhao felt a dense, childish style assaulting his senses. Su Hou, who thought himself rather dashing in the footage, was doing parkour. But people who were watching would get the impression that "this child resembles a spasming sheep."

"We had better use mine," Fang Zhao told him.

"Eh? Master Zhao also made one? When did you shoot it?"

"Times when you do not know:"

Given Fang Zhao's reply, Su Hou suddenly had an ominous premonition.

"...Can I see it first?" Was he handsome and cool? Would it be able to make the crowd shriek? That was what Su Hou wanted to know the most.

"Sure, but do not send it out first."

Fang Zhao encrypted the completed video and sent it to Su Hou through a secure channel. He did not wait for Su Hou's reply; Xue Jing had called him over. Fang Zhao shut off his communications device and entered the conference hall. Today was the last session of the global lecture tour. After this was done, there was still an exchange session with all the "old seniors." He would only be able to leave the following day, but he would still be able to make it for Muzhou's Eastern region finals.

Chapter 98

Publicity Film "Chasing Wind"

Fang Zhao managed to rush back to Muzhou and reach Shanmu Farm one day before the competition. Wu Yi and Su Hou were waiting for him, the two of them unable to suppress their grins.

"Fang Zhao, what is that dog made of? You know, when Bingo ate a field mice and had the runs, I was so scared I nearly had to visit the hospital and lie down myself." Wu Yi had not expected that his one decision would have such returns, and he had placed the hopes of the farm on this competition. Back then, when he had found out that Bingo's stomach was upset, his soul had nearly left his body. Throughout the night, he had spent quite a bit to hire a few famous veterinarians from the Eastern region. Luckily, there were no complications and it only affected the next day's performance in the competition. However, all this was secondary. As long as it could recover, the competitions that followed would be no issue.

After that, Wu Yi had gotten the vets to check up on every single dog. Probably because they only ate dog food in the past, this time when they ate indiscriminately, there were some reactions. Other than Bingo, the other dogs had some ailments—they just were not so obvious. Only Curly Hair, who had eaten the field mice and nibbled on wild grass, was not affected. The vets checked a few times and their assessment was: "Perfectly healthy! Not a single parasite!"

However, Fang Zhao could not answer that question either. Back then, on the black street, the boss of the drug store, Ai Wan, had raised this matter and even done a genetics test. That also had not yielded any precise results. Hence, Fang Zhao did not know either.

Wu Yi only asked out of curiosity and had not really expected an answer. As he continued, Wu Yi laughed happily again and told Fang Zhao about his cousin bringing her dogs over to the farm two days ago.

Wu Yi's cousin was the owner of the Carrot Farm that had been very popular early on in the season. Unfortunately, they had not made it into the finals, whereas the little fellow who had collaborated with Wu Yi had qualified for it. Hence, Wu Yi's cousin had

brought her dogs over for an exchange session and to share their thoughts.

No one had expected that the two teams of dogs would have a fight. Even the farm's guard dog Chubby Black had joined the fracas and was bitten a few times. It was Curly Hair that helped it take revenge by biting back and removing a few bunches of fur from the other side. Because of this incident, Wu Yi and his cousin had almost had a falling out.

Remembering the circumstances then, the sides of Wu Yi's mouth curled slightly. Winning a fight was a good thing!

And through this incident, Wu Yi's cousin deeply understood that the small curly-haired dog being the lead of this sheep herding team was not without reason. That fighting spirit that it possessed was just too strong!

However, compared to before, Su Hou was more silent. When Fang Zhao and Wu Yi were talking, Su Hou did not utter a single word.

"I have no idea what's wrong with that little fellow. Two days ago, he cooped himself up in his room for another day, and when he came out, he had become all silent. Could it be that he had an argument with his family?" Wu Yi was puzzled. He had asked Su Hou a few times, but every time, he realized that Su Hou seemed embarrassed to reply him and mumbled about not replying. As his attitude toward training was still all right, Wu Yi had not pursued the matter. Young kids were probably like this—as they were maturing, it was normal for their moods to be unstable.

Early the next morning, everyone took the flying transport and headed for the competition grounds of the Eastern region finals.

Compared to the previous rounds of competition, the competition grounds for the finals were much bigger. Many celebrities would be there to spectate and a number of old farm owners who had past glories would be there to commentate. Not only that, the live broadcast would have an explosion in viewer numbers.

During the normal competitions, generally, people from the Eastern region would watch the Eastern competitions and those from the Western region would pay attention to the Western competitions. But when it came to the region finals, the entire Muzhou would tune in. People from the Western region also wanted to know which four teams would pit themselves against their own superstar teams.

Su Hou had received messages from his classmates back in Qingcheng. Qingcheng was situated an area located right in the middle of the Eastern and Western regions. In the past, it was considered part of the Eastern region, then considered part of the Western region after that. Thus, before this, people from Qingcheng observing the Eastern region competitions were lesser. Most people there only knew that Su Hou had bought a farm and stormed into the finals only through media reports.

"Come on, Brother Hou! We will all be watching!"

"Young Su, I will wager on your team to win! You must put in extra effort!"

"Young Su, yesterday, I eavesdropped on our form teacher saying that if you stormed into the continental finals, she wouldn't hassle you about your absences for class as long as you do not fail your exams."

The sheep-herding scene was so big in Muzhou that, during crucial competition periods, a lot of those working and schooling could watch the live broadcast and most companies and student leaders would approve. This sort of situation would never happen in other continents.

Seeing all this, the calm and collected mentality that Su Hou had trained up with great difficulty during the normal rounds of competition unraveled and he began to get nervous.

Watching the competition were not just his classmates and teachers but other members of the Su family as well. Members of the Su family might not have paid attention to the normal rounds of competition, but for this sort of important day in the competition, they would surely be there.

He felt some excitement and some apprehension, and thinking about the publicity video that Fang Zhao had created for him made him feel even more complicated. He had handed the video over to the organizers yesterday. He had watched that video a number of times, and every time he saw it, he felt a different feeling.

However, compared to Su Hou's complicated feelings and Wu Yi's nervousness and anticipation, the shepherd dogs were still their old selves. To them, the Eastern region finals were not too different from the other rounds of the competition. The competition grounds were just a little larger, the terrain more undulating, and the herding a little more difficult. What was nervousness? They did not know anymore—

in any case, as long as they followed Curly Hair, it would be fine.

Curly Hair was lying beside Fang Zhao's feet, licking his front paw. Occasionally, when someone mentioned him, he would raise his head and cast a glance before continuing to lie down.

Su Hou had also received a few messages. It was from one of his older female cousins. What she meant was that many members of the Su family were watching the live broadcast. She had already wagered a sum on Dongshan Farm to win—as for how much, she refused to say.

An elder male cousin of his sent: "Come on! Little Fatty Su!"

Su Hou wanted to cry. He was still young and could not bear that much pressure. He thought for a bit, found an excuse to retire to the lone restroom, and watched the video Fang Zhao had given him twice more.

Much better.

Wu Yi realized that Su Hou seemed too stressed out today and had originally wanted to find him for a pep talk. Although he was nervous too, as an elder, he needed to act calm in front of the younger ones. He had not expected that, when Su Hou came out, he was full of fighting spirit and vigor. This made Wu Yi swallow the words he had prepared.

Every single team's viewing gallery, as well as the other viewing halls for spectators at the competition grounds, each had their own holographic projections and sound systems.

Muzhou people were nouveau riche. Even if they did not understand hardware equipment, they still used very high quality ones. This was because, when they could not tell when the equipment was spoiled, they would just purchase a more expensive one.

Before the competition, there would be a segment where every team got to have an introduction and publicize themselves. This was a good time for an advertisement and it was free of charge. Almost the entirety of Muzhou would watch it.

Su Hou had drawn number eight for his entering sequence, which would be toward the back. The publicity film would also be shown in the order of the entering sequence.

The previous seven teams' brief introductions were more or less the same. They were all reputable farms and were just promoting their brand name. Therefore, in their publicity films, the ones that occupied the most screen time were the farm owners, followed by the star dog of each team, and then all sorts of that farm's products.

"Almost there!" Wu Yi was a little excited. He had not seen the video yet. Su Hou had been too embarrassed to show it to him. However, Su Hou had told him that, other than the participating dogs, the video would also feature Shanmu Farm's name and Wu Yi would make an appearance. That was enough for him.

"Next up is the team that rose abruptly in this year's Eastern region sheep-herding competitions. I'm sure everyone is already familiar with them. Moreover, the owner of this farm is extremely young. The rapid rise was a surprise to many, but now they have achieved the qualifications to enter the Eastern finals using their own strength!" The commentator's voice echoed all around and was followed by a broadcast of the video submitted by Dongshan Farm.

Those watching the competition perked themselves up, especially those from the Western region of Muzhou. They did not know much of the Eastern terms, but they were curious about Su Hou! What sort of publicity film would Little Fatty Su put out? Would he publicly declare war on his half siblings? Woah, even thinking of that made all these people excited!

...

At the start of the film came Su Hou's voice.

"I wish to take part in a sheep-herding competition! I want to take part in the finals!" This was something Su Hou had said many times.

A youngster with a child-like face appeared on the screens to go along with those innocent, stubborn words. His eyes held a crazed self-belief, as if he had grasped tomorrow in the palm of his hands.

Even if people did not recognize Su Hou by name or background, just by looking at the image, most people could see that he was a pampered fatty from a rich family. And his straightforward talk of "wanting to take part in the finals" was in fact "an exaggerated opinion of his own abilities" and a display of "the ignorant have nothing to fear."

The background music bellowed and brought with it incredible thickset emotion. It

was not intense but slow, and the flimsy string tones seemed to foretell something.

A string of words appeared on the display:

[I borrowed money to purchase a farm, but it was not as I had expected.]

Su Hou had only appeared a month after the sheep-herding season had started through buying a participating farm and obtaining their qualifications. This sort of thing happened every year and it was not a rare sight.

Before Dongshan Farm had risen to prominence, the information that everyone could obtain online was only a few images of how Xishan Farm used to look like. The small majority who were well informed knew only limited information through word of mouth. Later, when Dongshan Farm became more well known and more people wanted to get to the bottom of the matter, the farm was no longer like that.

What was Xishan Farm like when Su Hou had purchased it?

After the words on the display appeared and faded, the image changed.

An exquisitely clothed rich young master brought his bodyguards and rode a superior flying transport, traveling a great distance to the western part of Muzhou's Eastern region, to a remote and vast farm.

The sound of a flute joined in the melody. It was a flute the Muzhou people were familiar with, a flute that was manufactured in a furnace using clay. It was an ancient method. This sort of flute was rarely used in other continents, at most brought back to keep as a souvenir.

In the middle of the bleak and lonely flute melody, the image depicted rotting, worn-out wooden fences surrounding a vast and desolate patch of earth that only had a few weeds growing on it. The rundown courtyard seemed like it had been left alone for who knows how long, braving the winds, sun, and rain. The door was swaying off its frame in the wind. A few dispirited dogs were lying there sleeping, completely uninterested. In the dusky twilight, the tall and faded signboard of "Xishan Farm" looked insignificant and laughable against the mountain ranges in the background.

Two images appeared on the display. One was of the images that were publicly available online, and the other was an image of the farm the first time Su Hou had seen it after purchasing it. At the same time, an image of the certificate of ownership that

Su Hou owned, which showed the large sum of money used as well as the name of the original owner of Xishan Farm. However, everyone understood that this person would have long escaped.

They did not hide anything. This had been added in to Su Hou's accord, just like a failure displaying his scars for all the curious people to see.

Some people would play it down, but it let people understand what had actually happened with one look.

"This is the rumored incident where Young Master Su got cheated?"

"Su Hou was too anxious."

"Kids are like this, too impulsive."

People who saw this began to discuss.

During that time, lots of people online viewed this incident with a "look at the fool" attitude.

There was a woodwind solo as the piano and string accompaniment gradually dissolved. The low sound of a violin played a frail harmony that seemed like slow sighs.

In the display, Su Hou's eyes, which were full of eager anticipation, turned murky, like a fish that had leaped out of the water expecting to transform into a dragon. However, as it was falling, it realized that it would land itself in an even worse problem: dry land.

A harmony of high- and low-pitched strings played, and a feeling of experiencing a drop in elevation, as if an icy cold wind blew across on top of a summit, chilled listeners to the bone.

The display faded to black. A square window appeared, glimmering with a little light. Under the window and lit up by the glow was a figure sitting down with his head in his knees. From the plump figure, one could tell that he was probably Su Hou. The dusky image of Su Hou sitting alone in the cold and gloomy room was like a young animal caught in a trap, helpless and at a loss.

The soft flute tune that carried an air of sorrow diluted. With the blare of a trumpet, the music's sorrowful mood gradually weakened. Drumbeats set a measured rhythm,

with each beat sounding closer to the ear.

In the display, through the square window, the rays of light gradually became brighter. The surroundings of the figure were covered by a sheen of golden light.

It was a new day, the sun had come up.

Not just from the window, the sunlight entered through the holes in the wall and the doorway. The dark became brighter, dispelling the gloom.

The figure that had been quietly sitting there raised his head and slowly moved. He turned to face the window and squinted as the light shined on his face. Looking out the window, the glass had a spiderweb-like crack on it, creating a psychedelic tint as light passed through it. The cracked glass did not block out the entire scenery. After his eyes adjusted to the light, he looked through the window as though he saw something.

Getting up, he walked to the dilapidated door and pulled it open.

As the sunlight shone on Su Hou's body, the scene warmed up. His disheveled hair was blown by the wind, and the fresh buds of grass beside his feet swirled up as if they were dancing.

A woodwind score brought about a bright and cheery tune full of warmth, as if the lush grassland had faced a gentle and fresh wind that dispersed all the gloomy coldness. The low pitched sounds of brass, wood, and string carried a firm and mighty tone, giving it a forceful theme.

At this moment, the music had a little variation. The accompaniment of brass and string, through a detuning method, became even more intense. Within the persistent beating of the drums, the flute carried a rising strength. The strings were like an explosion of life. Just like the passing of winter, flowers would bloom once more, and the grasslands would return to their former green glory.

Two lines of words appeared on the display:

[I do not know anything.]

[But... I will learn.]

Previously, the stifling and sorrowful sounds had become more and more feeble. With the base of a piano, bright and expansive sounds joined in. Every note seemed to be kneaded into the deepest recesses of one's soul.

In the display, Dongshan Farm had a few more employees. Su Hou followed this people as they worked. One of the workers pointed at the soil and was talking; afterward, he pinch a little soil and placed it in his mouth to try. Su Hou followed suit and his entire face contorted in disgust. The old man laughed and continued speaking, and Su Hou squated at his side, listening attentively.

A few old farm owners would not just look at but would try out the soil to understand their farms. Many elders watching this live broadcast flashed knowing smiles.

Wu Yi had once said that straw contained the four seasons within, and he'd meant it. From the taste of the straw, they could tell its growing process, speculate the changes in the condition of soil, and understand whether changes in climate had affected the harvest. For the same reasons, those that tried soil were just like this too. And in the eyes of many old farm owners, people who did this were responsible farm owners who treated their plot of lands seriously, totally different from a foreigner's impressions that they were "merchant landowners."

What followed immediately after in the display was Su Hou talking on his communications device and, after that, running toward the flying transport. He did not even have time to change out of his suit. His legs were full of mud, and bits of grass were matted in his hair.

After that, the flying transport took off and flew high up. The gust created from the transport blew away all the dried grass on the parking ground. The roar of the engines blended in with the accompaniment, creating an uplifting tempo, and brought about a feeling of flying, heading upward and forward into an empty sky.

[To know nothing about the world, to be ridiculed, to be treated with contempt. All these are insignificant, as long as we keep moving forward.]

The melody carried on from the first part and unfolded. The main theme was a string score with a flute accompaniment. The layer tones became thicker and more distinct as the accompaniment expanded. The trumpet's blare continuously uplifted the spirits of the listeners. The tense music became lively and vibrant.

The display was now showing an overhead view. Large grasslands full of life could be seen.

A flock of sheep was walking about slowly, and a few shepherd dogs were running about vigorously.

Beside Shanmu Farm's signboard, a cap-wearing Wu Yi stood there smiling. He extended both his arms and gave the youth a hug.

"To a pleasant partnership!"

[I want to stand on the instructor's platform for a sheep-herding competition.]

In the display, there were eyebags under Su Hou's eyes. His hair was made even messier by the wind, as if he had not taken care of it in a long time. Paired together with that pale, chubby face of his, it seemed a little comical, yet those two youthful eyes were burning with a steadfast desire.

From being ignorant to clear-headed, from being at a loss to having an unwavering determination, step by step, they pressed on against this predicament. How it would all end—success or failure? That was not important.

The brass leading the tune became high spirited, and the sonorous beating of the drums became more forceful with each beat, as if following the choice his heart had made.

Wu Yi's voice sounded. "You need to get them to acknowledge you quickly and let them accept you."

After this was a scenario where Su Hou ate and slept with the shepherd dogs.

In the display, after Su Hou fed the dogs, he would carry his own bowl and sit randomly beside the dogs at the doorstep. He gulped down food that did not look very good. The people of Muzhou could tell right away that was not some exquisite food; it was even worse than what they normally ate daily.

At night, he slept with the dogs in the kennel.

At the start, when the dogs lazed around, they kept a distance from Su Hou. The display returned to Dongshan Farm's dog A, Bingo, and a close-up shot of the apparent dislike

in his eyes.

However, the image changed. Every day, Su Hou would close the gap with these shepherd dogs, to the point where some dogs would rest next to Su Hou.

No longer with any self-pity, the string music became more vigorous, like a sword drawn and ready to attack. The melody became heavier once again and the rhythm and tempo increased, gradually intensifying, as if power was flowing in bit by bit. The tone of the harmony changed, symbolizing him constantly working hard.

Su Hou ran through the lush green fields with the shepherd dogs.

Over the music, Wu Yi's coarse voice echoed across the grassland. "Very good! Continue giving them instructions. Keep up, you have to keep up! Don't be left behind! Run after them!"

Why not use the field car?

Because many shepherd dogs would remain guarded against the field car, and it was not beneficial for getting closer to the shepherd dogs. Competition instructors basically would run together with the dogs at the start of training till the dogs had good enough judgement and were capable of reacting on their own. Only then would the distance gradually increase, as the instructor would not need to be close by, feeding instructions.

With running came falling. After falling, he would climb back up and continue running. The three bodyguards did not stay beside him—they just watched from nearby. Every day, they helped spray medicine and treat all the wounds and cuts on Su Hou's body.

Su Hou's fair and chubby face lost its fat, and he became tanned.

Su Hou was a newbie, and he did not have adequate time to slowly adapt. Therefore, he needed to spend even more time together with the shepherd dogs, running together, herding together, shouting out commands non-stop, shouting the names of every single dog and letting them remember his voice. He had no time to worry about shouting till he became hoarse; he needed to remember all his commands.

The display switched to Su Hou's first competition. He had been so nervous he'd turned pale, his body had froze, and his frantic mistakes had told everyone that he was a newbie,

Seeing this, lots of people thought, With that poor skill, don't even bother appearing and losing face!

However, many people watching the broadcast, especially those from the Eastern region, fell silent. Because they knew what would happen next.

Dongshan Farm's success, as well as their continuous accumulation of points.

"Su Hou requests to issue commands!"

...

"Su Hou requests to issue commands!"

...

"Su Hou requests to issue commands!"

...

At different competition venues, different commentators all said the same line. From the display, everyone could see Su Hou's transformation from his first time giving out commands. From being hesitant and nervous, he became firm and steadily issued the correct commands.

In the cheery melody, there would occasionally be a few cumbersome chords. However, these were only momentarily there. It was as if the melody had been entrusted with a sort of intense and unwavering disposition. The rustling of the wind moved forward as the sound of flute and piano seemed a hopeful smile.

The display split into two. On one side appeared Su Hou requesting to issue commands. On the other side was an everyday situation of Su Hou training together with the dogs.

The tune's turnaround, with the shrill of brass and the flowing piano, was akin to a seedling that had struggled to emerge from the earth and, through much hardship, had grown up into a tall tree capable of withstanding the harshest winds.

Even if the later competitions no longer required Su Hou to step in, everyone knew at that moment that he was not simply standing up there as a decoration.

The brass and string medley rapidly ascended, and ascended, and ascended, all the way till it hit a splendid instant!

"Dongshan Farm have taken first place again and have gotten themselves ten points. With this, they have secured qualifications into the Eastern region finals. Congratulations, Dongshan Farm!" the commentator's voice rang out from the display.

Su Hou, who looked like a normal farm employee now, rushed down from his spot on the instructor's platform and hugged the seven shepherd dogs emotionally as carefree laughter floated from the area.

Now at the conclusion of the competition, the screen displayed Dongshan's placing. Su Hou stood up from the grass, not bothering to wipe away the fragments of grass, sheep wool, and dog fur. Panting, he looked up at the screen and brought a fist to his chest. His heart was throbbing intensely from all the joy, his eyes shimmering with tears.

That was the jubilation of victory, and a triumph that his heart had earned.

Amidst the cheery melody, each musical note was robust but not conceited. The music was not overpowering nor romantic but intimate yet unyielding—akin to the firm belief that the people of Muzhou held toward their motherland and this competition.

In the display, the newly constructed "Dongshan Farm" signage was set up on the grass. The once sparse and empty spaces had been partitioned out, and new shoots were growing in the fields. Amidst the drizzling rain, a new lease of life had been breathed into the farm.

Back at Dongshan farm, Su Hou was standing in the middle of two fields. He took off running against the wind then suddenly stopped. Turning back in the direction of the muddy road he'd taken, a grin appeared on his muddied face.

[I might have wept bitter tears after encountering problems, but as I kept moving forward, I realized how far I had come by gritting my teeth and moving forward.]

The piano played out a beckoning pitch as woodwinds, brass, and strings joined the fray as the entire orchestra converged for the epilogue. The majestic blend of sounds brought about a victorious and proud vibe as warmth flooded the entire body and raised the spirits up. It was as if a young eagle was spreading its wings, waiting for the wind to pick up before flying off in search of new glories. Surging forward with a clear heart and unafraid of the future, this was the spirit of youth.

The ending of the video was a group photo. Su Hou and the seven shepherd dogs were at the forefront, and at the background stood two people. One was Wu Yi, and the other was Fang Zhao.

End credits:

Videography: Wu Yi, Su Hou, Fang Zhao

Editing: Fang Zhao, Su Hou

Soundtrack: "Chasing Wind"

Composer: Fang Zhao

However, very few people paid attention to the end credits. Even more people were thinking about the Su Hou depicted in the video. This short publicity film had made people view Su Hou in a different light.

After the video ended, the commentator was silent for close to five seconds before he lightened the mood with a joke, "Do you know the sort of person that I dislike the most?"

An invited esteemed guest sitting beside the commentator asked, "What sort?"

The commentator replied, "Those that are born well off but are still especially hardworking."

The esteemed guest laughed, "It can't be helped. We might not be able to see it, but Su Hou has put in a lot of effort. He is a real role model."

Those that were familiar with Su Hou were bewildered.

Huh?!

Role model?!

Su Hou, that retard?!

Of course, people watching the live broadcast online thought differently.

"I took a screenshot of the last photo at the end of the video. Everyone take a look at the person standing at the back; doesn't he look familiar?"

"You were not paying attention when watching. It was obviously mentioned that the person was Wu Yi, the owner of Shanmu Farm."

"Rubbish. Obviously I know that is Wu Yi. I was talking about the other person beside him!"

"Who is that? I don't think he appeared in the publicity video."

There were people who quickly recognized him right away.

"What the f*ck, Fang Zhao!"

Chapter 99

Takeoff

Interest in music was indeed lacking in Muzhou. Locals were clueless about many genres and they didn't follow any pop stars, let alone symphonic composers. They didn't bother with musicians except for reading the occasional news item about them.

But now, people were interested in the unfamiliar name that appeared in the promotional film for one of the teams competing in the Eastern regional finals of the local shepherding competition.

"Who is Fang Zhao?"

The curiosity of people who normally only followed agriculture, the weather, and shepherding contests was piqued.

They learned from music students that Fang Zhao was a rising star in the world of pop composition. He was widely praised by senior composers and admired by younger fans. This is how some Muzhou natives responded when they got the lowdown: "Sounds impressive, but how was Su Hou able to commission a piece from him?"

Right, how had Su Hou managed to get Fang Zhao to compose the background music for his promotional film for the Eastern regional finals?

But even if they were curious, they had no way of finding out the truth.

Of course, what the masses of Muzhou cared about most was Su Hou and the seven dogs of Dongshan Farm.

The focus of the promotional clip wasn't Dongshan Farm itself but rather the evolution of the farm's young owner. The combination of video and music was quite memorable. The film made people regret teasing Su Hou in the past. After all, this was a kid still in secondary school, and a hardworking and tough kid at that.

Older folks were always drawn to youngsters who worked hard.

Some of the parents watching the live broadcast started nagging their children. "Look at how hardworking Su Hou is, blah, blah, blah."

Su Hou probably never would have imagined in his wildest dreams that he'd become a role model, but he had no time to bask in the glory. He was preparing for battle.

Maybe it was the promotional film, but Su Hou felt a lot more relaxed. In its place emerged an indescribable fighting spirit and a sense that a long-awaited occasion had arrived.

When Su Hou described the feeling to Fang Zhao, Fang Zhao smiled and responded, "That's called confidence."

After the promotional films for all the teams had played, the folks watching the live broadcast realized that the one that left the deepest impression was Su Hou's. It painted a vivid picture of the young farm owner's personal growth.

"OK. The promotional films were a showdown of marketing prowess. Now it's down to business." The spectators settled down and started looking forward to the competition.

The Eastern regional finals determined which four teams would qualify for the grand finals. The size of the venue was bigger than regular-season venues, the courses were longer, and the pasture was more uneven. It was easy to veer off course, and instructor intervention was much more common than during the regular season. Completion times were also longer. Generally speaking, a decent time was under 10 minutes. Teams that had made the grand finals in previous years typically posted times of under six minutes, while contenders for the overall first and second places usually finished in about five minutes.

The goal Wu Yi set for his team was eight minutes. Under 10 minutes was a bare pass, and a lowly ranked one at that.

"As long as you exercise good judgment, ask to intervene in a timely manner, and signal correctly, you'll be OK."

As an instructor, Su Hou could only monitor the competition venue and master the correct route from a few screens near his pedestal. The route for every final was different. Sometimes the dogs needed to make an unexpected turn. That was when the instructor stepped in.

The theme music for the shepherding competition began to play, which meant the finals were about to kick off. Competitors and the viewers scattered all over Muzhou set aside what they were working on to focus on the contest. Discussions were left unfinished. Not only were the viewers passionate about this traditional sport in Muzhou, but many of them had bet on their favorite teams to win.

The first team to compete was a veteran competitor. Six of their eight dogs had appeared in the regional finals last year. Their preparation was probably precise and methodical, since their dogs didn't betray any signs of nervousness or discomfort. The farm owner also stepped in at the right moments. You could say that the first team completed its routine smoothly.

"Seven minutes and 16 seconds!"

That was a decent time, but the farm owner didn't seem to be pleased. His dogs had taken 10 more seconds than they had the previous year. Ten seconds might not be a major gap during the regular season, but in the regional finals, it was enough to make the difference between a top four finish or not. Even though he wasn't happy, the farm owner didn't show his temper. He just shook his head, saying during his interview, "The sheep are different this year. They're hard to herd."

Hard to herd? The viewers were confused.

The commentator didn't elaborate. The second team took nearly half a minute longer than the first, the reason being that the dogs took too long with their turns.

"The sheep this year are slow," the farm owner who fielded the second team said.

Comments like that initially struck viewers as excuse-making, but after the third and fourth farm owners started voicing similar sentiments, people started wondering.

"I paid special attention during the second team's routine," Wu Yi said in the viewing gallery. "The sheep used in the regional finals this year are different from the ones used in the regular season. I should say they look the same but their temperaments are different. They're bolder and grumpier. That's the problem the fourth team ran into. Halfway through their routine, their flock of sheep nearly dispersed. Several of the sheep even stomped their hooves at the dogs, even snarling at the head dog and almost bumping into it. They're not easy to handle at all." Wu Yi was worried, but he couldn't afford a drop in morale now. He turned and patted Su Hou on the shoulder.

"No worries. It's the same challenge for everyone. Everyone will be taking longer than last year. Don't put too much pressure on yourself.

"The fifth team to compete is Shoubei Farm. Let's take a close look. Word is their top dog is angling for MVD in the grand finals." Wu Yi and company turned serious. Their stiffest competition was no doubt Shoubei Farm. They were first in the regular season and a top contender for first place in the East finals, even the overall final.

Shoubei Farm's head dog Gold Colt sparked squeals of excitement the moment it entered the venue. The squeals naturally couldn't be heard on the pasture, but there was no doubt Gold Colt was the center of attention among viewers both attending in person in the viewing gallery and watching via live broadcast. This was truly a champion dog that could shepherd by stare.

Other continents had their celebrities, while Muzhou had their star dogs. The amount of emotion Muzhou natives poured into their shepherd dogs wasn't something foreigners could comprehend. For them, the dogs competing in shepherding contests were as captivating as star actors or singers. The discussion board of the official website for the shepherding competition had long been flooded with messages. If you watched the contest via virtual reality webcast, the cries were literally shuddering.

As the previous few farm owners had said, the sheep used in this year's competition were especially hard to round up. But it was a different story when the dogs of Shoubei Farm took charge. The sheep trotted much more quickly than in the previous four rounds.

"We're coming up on a curve. Shoubei Farm has had good luck so far. Their top dog, Gold Colt, is speeding up. It's attacking the head sheep."

...

"Change in direction. The sheep have changed direction."

...

Compared to previous teams, Shoubei Farm mastered the same turn with incredible speed. The whole process was seamless.

"How about Shoubei Farm's head dog, Gold Colt? Spectacular! Now that's herding by staring."

...

"All in. All sheep are in the pen. Perfect! Four minutes and 32 seconds. Four minutes and 32 seconds! That would have been good enough to place first last year, let alone this year with the new sheep." The commentator was so emotional his voice went off pitch, a flaw that was broadcast loud and clear through the excellent sound equipment. He didn't hide the fact that a new species of sheep was used this year. "That's the best time of this contest so far. And Gold Colt is a likely candidate for most valuable dog in the grand finals."

The commentator turned to his guest, an elderly farm owner. "Someone once said that a heavenly dog like this comes only once every 10 years, or even every 20 years. Take Lightning, for example, which won you five championships, or King Kong from about a decade ago. And now we have Gold Colt from Shoubei."

The elderly man's farm had won five straight championships 20-odd years ago, until his champion dog had passed in an accident. The farm was able to train a new top dog and clinch the overall title again, but they never repeated their legendary run of five straight championships.

This old farm owner was a top expert when it came to breeding, training, and judging shepherd dogs. That was why the commentator wanted him to offer his input.

The old farm owner recalled his beloved champion dog. "Gold Colt has definitely cut a dashing figure this year, reminiscent of the heavenly flair of our own Lightning."

The atmosphere was tense in the viewing gallery where Fang Zhao and company sat. Everyone was quiet. The only sounds were the speakers relaying the passionate voice of the commentator and his guest's lavish praise.

"Heavenly dog?" Fang Zhao said in a puzzled tone.

As soon as Fang Zhao uttered the phrase, he heard an "achoo" from near his feet. He followed the sound. It seemed that Curly Hair had sneezed.

"Does he have a cold?" Wu Yi shifted his attention immediately. He looked like the sky was about to collapse.

The folks in the viewing gallery got even tenser. Wu Yi and his family, as well as their vet team, rushed forward to check on Curly Hair.

"How does he look?" Wu Yi felt like his innards were shuddering. He was worried that Curly Hair might have eaten something outside of his regular diet. Even though the dogs had undergone thorough body checks yesterday and today and were cleared, who knew if they would catch some weird disease at the venue or suffer from stomach trouble?

The vet team inspected Curly Hair meticulously. The experts shook their heads. "Nothing unusual."

"Really?"

The vets were upset their medical judgment was being taken to task. "Are you questioning our competence? Or do you want it to be sick?"

Wu Yi shook his head vigorously. "No, no, no, of course not."

Fang Zhao watched Curly Hair scratch his head with one of his hind legs. He said to Wu Yi, "Don't worry. He's fine. Let's keep watching."

Shoubei Farm's stellar performance had indeed blown many folks away and put a lot of pressure on the two teams that competed next. Even though the sixth and seventh farms posted decent times, neither came under seven minutes. If the commentator hadn't revealed the fact that organizers used a new breed of sheep, perhaps some doubters would still have written that off as an excuse. Not everyone could tell the difference between different species of sheep.

When the seventh team appeared, Wu Yi and company escorted Su Hou and the dogs to the competition venue.

After the seventh team was done, Dongshan Farm was up next.

"OK, the eighth team appearing this year has been closely watched. Dongshan Farm also boasts a very special dog..."

Wu Yi had rushed back by the time the commentator began his spiel. He sat on his chair and his eyes were glued to the screen, as if he didn't want to miss a single frame.

"And we're off!" The commentator raised his voice, putting everyone on notice.

"The flock has gathered quickly. The herding is going smoothly too. So far, Dongshan

Farm's dogs are doing well. Their times are quick. They're the quickest besides Shoubei Farm," the commentator observed while examining data from his statistician.

Wu Yi couldn't sit still. He got up and walked closer to the screen. He clenched his fists and started biting them. His lips were quivering, as if he were praying.

Fang Zhao also glared at the screen. He knew a crucial juncture was coming up.

The final destination of the flock—either the pen on the left or the right—was decided at the last minute and randomly. It was impossible to predict, often coming down to luck. It was a test of the dogs' and instructor's ability to adjust.

About halfway through rounding up the sheep, the destination appeared on the big screen.

It was the pen on the left. This wasn't good news for Dongshan Farm, because their head dog, Curly Hair, was situated on the left flank. By custom, the head dog on the right flank would be responsible for ushering the sheep into the left pen. If your head dog was on the left flank and you wanted to steer your flock left, you had three options. The first was for the lead dog to shift to the right flank and force the sheep left. The second involved the instructor directing the No. 2 dog on the right flank to steer the flock left. The most conservative option was to stop the flock altogether, then change direction, but that was too time-consuming.

Dongshan Farm's No. 2 dog was Bingo. The team had rehearsed such a scenario before the contest. They had decided to go for the first option, as Fang Zhao had suggested.

"The flock is making a turn. They're about to shift direction. Watch the positioning of the dogs. This is the time when the head dog shows what he's made of. Let's see if it can force the sheep to shift direction based on the instructor's guidance, or if they'll stop the flock altogether and then change direction." The commentator pressed on, saliva flying from his mouth. "Su Hou has asked to intervene. Oh! Has Su Hou decided to order Curly Hair to switch flanks?"

Su Hou was shown on screen asking for an intervention. He gave Curly Hair a direct order to switch flanks and steer the flock into the left pen.

"Pay attention. It's speeding up. Looks like it's going to take a detour. Oh! It's flown straight to the right flank."

Not only did the commentator go off pitch, he started stuttering. His guest, the elderly farm owner, also exclaimed, as if he had seen something earth-shattering.

The TV screen showed Curly Hair making the cross by speeding up toward the flock, leaping, and then treading on the backs of the sheep, like crossing a pond by stepping on stones. "Flying" was an exaggeration, but it was indeed a jaw-dropping move.

This was a very rare move. Not only was it a test of the dog's leaping ability, the most important thing was not to miss a step or lose footing and plunge amidst the stampeding flock. The dog could get killed either way.

Wu Yi's heart was thumping so hard it felt like he was about to vomit it. He barely felt the biting wounds on his fists. His eyes were peeled open. He had seen Curly Hair make a similar move during practice, but he would never order him to try it in competition. It was too dangerous. The slightest slipup and the dog was gone.

The commentator responded quickly and passionately. "MVD! MVD! No doubt, if Dongshan makes the grand finals, Curly Hair will be a top contender for this year's MVD award."

Viewers tuning into the broadcast were miffed by that comment. Hadn't homeboy just said that Gold Colt was shoo-in for East MVD? And that it was a leading contender for MVD in the grand finals? What a quick reversal. Where was his integrity?

The commentator kept on as if he had forgotten what he'd just said—and his integrity at that. He had thrown himself to the wolves on the first day. He was still lost in revelry. "I can see his market value growing exponentially."

The MVD label could be taken literally or figuratively.

Every dog competing in the final would see their market value rise, especially the head dog, and the market price for the MVD in the grand finals would go through the roof.

"The flock hasn't stopped. It's shifted direction. Su Hou has asked to intervene again. Very good. His timing is great. Dog A on the other flank needs to stay on course. The dogs in the back need to hurry up too. This is too sudden of a turn. The flock is speeding up. I have a hunch..."

The commentator took a deep breath as he examined the latest data. "They might..." He hemmed and hawed.

Inside the viewing gallery, Wu Yi was so nervous he could bite his fingers off. His eyes kept darting between the timer in the upper right hand corner of the screen and the action in the center of the screen. He was so stiff he felt like a fossil.

Fang Zhao took in the action on the big screen and laughed. He spit out the four words the commentator had held back, "set a new record."

Wu Yi's ears twitched. He clearly heard what Fang Zhao had said, but his brain didn't seem to process the information. His teeth, which were still biting his fists, started clattering.

"The flock is heading into the pen. Into the pen!"

"They're all in!"

"Four minutes and 20 seconds! Four minutes and 20 seconds!" The commentator screamed at the top of his voice and howled hysterically. "Since the format of the competition was reformed 80 years ago, the best time posted in the east has been four minutes and 21 seconds. That record was set by the team led by the so-called 'heavenly dog' Lightning, which won five straight national championships. Now Dongshan Farm has broken the record by one second. If we didn't swap sheep, the record would have been slashed by at least 10 seconds."

Wu Yi felt like he had taken everything in and his brain went blank at the same time. His lips were quivering and he could barely put a sentence together. "N-new... record?"

"Yup," Fang Zhao responded.

Fang Zhao thought to himself, if these were battle dogs from the end of days, the sheep would be in the pen within a minute, at most two minutes, without instructor intervention.

But considering this was the New Era and that Muzhou had enjoyed a peacetime of some 500 years, this was a decent showing by ordinary farm dogs.

Fang Zhao started to understand why Muzhou's founders decided to make shepherding a tradition.

It was just like mandatory military service in the New Era. Even though vested interests were at play, the competition and the training leading up to the contest kept

the service dog or wild dog DNA in these dogs alive. If the geopolitical landscape changed, these dogs could be quickly drafted as battle dogs, just like during the apocalypse.

The melody of "Chasing Wind" at its climax was played and Fang Zhao turned to look at the big screen. Su Hou had left the instructor's podium and dashed toward the seven dogs resting by the finish line. His face was covered in tears. He cried and laughed at the same time. Organizers used "Chasing Wind" as the background music for this scene. It was the BGM of the moment, of Su Hou's moment.

Chapter 100

The Dog with a Value of 50 Million

Su Hou was hot stuff.

The entire Muzhou internet was in disarray from all the buzz.

The team that had broken the record in the Eastern region finals sheep-herding competition. Su Hou was the farm owner and instructor. Furthermore, given that he was a younger generation Su family member and had been labeled a model youth, how could the media give up such an opportunity for a topic that would generate and capture a lot of attention.

It was not just limited to Muzhou's entertainment media. The political news segment, education news segment, sheep-herding segment, agriculture segment, and even the weather forecast also mentioned the matter. Especially the education segment. Now that they had found an exemplary model, naturally, they had to proclaim it.

The influence sheep-herding competitions had in Muzhou was something that foreigners would not understand. From being an aristocratic retard, with one leap, Su Hou had become a young star.

The shock of the three words "broke the record" covered the entirety of Muzhou. Whenever anyone from Muzhou talked about this year's sheep-herding competition, they would surely mention Dongshan Farm and thus naturally mention Su Hou. With the precompetition's publicity film to lay the foundations, no one could say that Su Hou did not deserve it.

Of course, when people praised, there would be those that criticized as well.

"Even if Su Hou is a younger member of the Su family, given his age, there is no way he had that much money to hire workers to totally sort out the farm after he bought it. What about the shepherd dog's competition training and food. Furthermore, they still had a veterinarian team. All of those do not come cheap."

"Are you all blind?! An 'exemplary model'? A 'miracle production'? Can you all take a

look at the end credits of the publicity film?! Fang Zhao! The main person for composing and editing was Fang Zhao! He who single-handedly propped up Silver Wing's virtual projects department and just completed a global lecture tour. That Fang Zhao! Surely he has done something. To be able to revive Silver Wing's virtual projects department back from the dead, surely this is a scheme of his. Who knows, maybe the entire thing from start to end was a conspiracy!"

"Yeah, who knows, there might be someone behind the scenes supporting. How else would a Su Hou who knew nothing hire Fang Zhao to compose a piece so easily, and how he could collaborate with Shanmu farm that smoothly. And how coincidental that he would get those few shepherd dogs, especially that 'flying' dog."

...

However, Su Hou paid no heed to all the doubters online. In the past, he would have cared about how the media judged him, but now, he never even bothered to check them. Furthermore, he did not have the time to do so. After the end of competition, he kept receiving calls nonstop.

He received congratulations from his classmates and other members of the Su family. His older brother had found time despite being in the middle of an experiment to give him a call. This was a very rare occurrence. After he ended the call with his brother, he received a call from two of his younger sisters who said they wanted to visit Dongshan Farm and take a photograph with Curly Hair, but the maid looking after them had disapproved, saying it was too dangerous and to wait after the buzz to die down before looking for a chance.

Muzhou central district, Qingcheng, Qingtai Mountain.

Qingtai Mountain was not the highest mountain in Muzhou—it could not even be considered high, as it looked like a mountain that had its top two-thirds shaved off. At the summit, there were a few courtyards and traditional buildings. No skyscrapers could be found there. But in Muzhou, this mountain held a special significance. The earliest Muzhou government had been located here, and Great General Su Mu of the founding era and other important leaders had stayed there. After the number of descendants had increased, the government had made new plans to shift elsewhere. Now, those living on Qingtai Mountain were the earliest descendants of those leaders. Most of them were already retired elderly. The young were not willing to coop themselves in that sort of restrictive place and be observed.

On top of Qingtai Mountain, inside an old residence.

A few white-haired seniors were sitting in the center. Surrounding them were a few middle-aged men and women, sitting reservedly. The room was very quiet. The younger generations that were sitting at the sides and corners wished they could find a place to sneak off to.

Originally, those few elders had arranged to watch the competition together, but never had they expected to see a youngster of the Su family. To those elders with over 100 years of age, that generation of Su Hou's age did not leave much of a lasting impression on them. They could not even count the number of great-grandchildren they had with the fingers on both hands, let alone their great-great-grandchildren. Unless they were outstanding or good at making themselves stand out, these elders could not even match their names to their faces.

However, just one round of the Eastern region sheep-herding finals was enough to make them remember Su Hou's name.

An elder sighed. "I never expected that among the youngsters of the Su family there would still be such a fellow!"

"To be able to achieve this sort of result, he has indeed done well!" another elder exclaimed.

This bunch of oldies had experienced a lot. Whether Su Hou had any support behind the scenes, they could guess as much without investigating. However, whether his luck was good, or whether he found anyone to help him, it was all down to Su Hou's own ability. Of all the people he could help, why had Fang Zhao specifically chosen to help him? The Su family had many promising youngsters; why would Fang Zhao, who had a reputation in the music industry, choose to help Su Hou, who was often looked down upon and even called a retard?

In the end, luck was but a part of one's ability.

"That Fang Zhao person, I heard he is a composer from Yanzhou?"

"Mhmm, I heard as well. This year, when Su Hou went to Yanzhou to pay his respects, he probably met this Fang Zhao there. The exact same name. What a coincidence."

In this world, there were many people who shared the same names, and many who

shared the same names as martyrs. They guessed that, during Su Hou's time paying his respects in Yanzhou, he coincidentally met a person called Fang Zhao and hence got to know each other.

"We can investigate it when the time comes. However, that is all secondary. What I wish to know is who set up that scam!"

Originally, the elder was speaking in a warm tone, but when he reached the last part of his sentence, his tone abruptly intensified and his eyes flashed with anger, like a sword that had been unsheathed.

They ignored the younger generation of Su's internal squabbles and competition. With competition came motivation. The more outstanding ones would achieve better resources. Small squabbles and fights would pass. However, they absolutely could not allow the act of defrauding a fellow family member for one's own benefit! If they wanted to compete, they had to go about it fair and square!

To hurt another family member was absolutely forbidden. These were the words Great General Su Mu had left for the Su family descendants. Anyone who broke this sacred rule would be made to leave the Su family. If it was not a Su family member that had defrauded another, then all the more reason why they had to investigate. Who dared to cheat the Su family? Even if he was a retard, who were you to bully him as you please?!

"Investigate!"

The resounding "investigate" word made the youngsters in the room shiver. It looked like certain people were going to be out of luck.

...

Su Hou had just ended the call with his younger sisters when he received a video call from an older female cousin in Qingcheng.

"Su Hou, you are gonna have it good!"

"Ah?" Su Hou had a blank look.

"Hehe, a few people are gonna get unlucky real soon." The girl in the projection smiled as if she took delight in the misfortune of others and proceeded to tell Su Hou what

had happened in the room on Qingtai. This was followed by another round of getting to know Su Hou all over again. "Su Hou, you changed so much, skinnier and tanned. Hey, previously in the publicity film, did you intentionally act, or was it really just an edit of your normal everyday routine?"

"Of course it was the editing! Everything inside is completely real!" Su Hou asserted. All the footage from the film was taken by his three bodyguards, Shanmu Farm's security cameras, and Fang Zhao's own objective recordings, as well as his own video recordings. The footage had been collated and edited into a short film, with some slight artistic touches added in. Back then, he had not even known that his three bodyguards were monitoring him. After he found out, he was a little pissed, but thinking it through, he was accident-prone and had a past record. The three bodyguards were only doing their job ensuring his safety, so Su Hou did not blame them but instead assigned new tasks for them.

"I was just asking. Don't get so worked up. Was the film edited by Fang Zhao or was it completed by you?"

At the mention of this, Su Hou felt a little embarrassed. "Master Zhao edited it. Two days before the submission, I passed a portion of a video to Master Zhao, who did the rest. I only did a little bit. Actually, I had edited a version of the publicity film, but when I saw Master Zhao's video, I couldn't bring myself to take it out."

"Master Zhao? Sounds like this person is rather good at putting on airs. Wait a minute, did you say you made your own video? Send it to me. Don't be shy, we are family; if it sucks, I won't say a word to anyone." Even if she intended to spread it, after seeing the fury of the elders on Qingtai Mountain, she would not even dare do so.

Su Hou thought for a bit and felt that letting his own Su family members see it was no big deal, so he sent that video over to her. In a short moment, his elder female cousin had sent a reply.

"In the future... it would be better to leave these sort of artistic matters to a proper artist. Oh, i almost forgot. How did you get to know Fang Zhao?" This was what Su Hou's cousin really wanted to know.

Su Hou spoke about the circumstances at the cemetery and how he had approached Fang Zhao for help.

Su Hou's cousin remained silent for quite a bit this time before, finally, faintly saying, "Seems like your 49 kowtows were not for nothing."

After ending the call, Su Hou's cousin related the story to a few other Su family members of the same generation. Some of them were wondering whether they should head over during the next memorial day for some kowtows? Su Hou had gone to Yanzhou and, after some kowtows, had met a prosperous helping hand. They wondered if they would maybe become popular next year if they kowtowed before Su Mu's grave!

Su Hou also felt that the kowtows had totally been worth it. He might have been gloomy over his siblings fooling him back then, but now he realized it had been worth it. If he had not knocked his head that many times, he would not have run over to Su Mu's grave in a bout of fury to complain and would not have met Fang Zhao, and things would not have turned out this way.

Over at Muzhou, Dongshan Farm had become all the rage because of the Eastern region finals. Su Hou and Shanmu Farm had all become popular. Needless to say, the competition dogs had all featured on this year's ranking charts, especially the lead dog, Curly Hair. In human competitions, there was always a most valuable player, and sheep-herding competitions similarly had such an award. After the competition, there was a vote, and Curly Hair unanimously won the most valuable dog award. At the same time, the sheep-herding competition organizers posted the value rankings of the eastern region competition dogs on their homepage.

Curly Hair had a value of 50 million and was worthy of its title of most valuable dog.

Wu Yi was even happier than Fang Zhao. Six out of the seven dogs in the team were from his farm. Although Bingo was worth a few million, still far off from Curly Hair, Wu Yi was already very satisfied. The added value of his six dogs also amounted to at least a hundred million. Furthermore, this was only temporary. When the finals started, their value would continue to rise, perhaps by a few times.

The creases from Wu Yi's face had become deeper from all that smiling. He sighed ruefully and said, "Fang Zhao said back then that this dog had wandered for who knows how long in the black street. When he picked it up, it was all skin and bones and could not even stand."

For the people of Muzhou who loved dogs, the circumstances that Fang Zhao had

mentioned were unimaginable.

Muzhou's laws safeguarded the interest of the people of Muzhou. Every law-abiding citizen of Muzhou would have their own plot of land other than those inherited from their parents or elders. There were charities that would give those with special circumstances plots of land or perhaps work. As long as they were not lazy and did not abandon themselves, they would be able to have a life. Dogs were different. They did not have land or jobs. However, there were no strays in Muzhou. Even if they were abandoned by their old farm owners, the new farm owners would also take care of them. Otherwise, those farm owners would be viewed by others as wicked and heartless. In other continents, people would term this as emotional blackmail, but in Muzhou, they felt that this was the right thing to do. After all, deciding to raise them, it was their responsibility. Even if they were not raised well, it was up to the farm owners' own decision.

"Fang Zhao has some good luck!" Who would know that a stray that was picked up could achieve the unexpected status it had today?! If everyone had known, what would have happened all those years in the black street?

And since Curly Hair occupied the top ranking in the Eastern region, its life story also came into the light.

"What?! It is not a Muzhou dog?!"

"To actually be from another continent?"

"Screw everything else, let's not waste time and buy it over!"



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