

The background is a dynamic, painterly illustration of a futuristic city. The architecture is characterized by sharp, angular lines and a color palette dominated by cool blues and greys, with occasional warm orange and yellow highlights. The perspective is looking down from a high vantage point, creating a sense of scale and depth. In the lower-left foreground, a person is depicted in silhouette, wearing a dark suit with a prominent red glowing light on their back. The overall style is reminiscent of digital art or comic book illustrations.

by Lazy Cliché

Superstars of Tomorrow



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SUPERSTARS OF TOMORROW

– 未来天王 –

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Chapter 301

Premiere

As the days passed, the number of people who had finished filming all their scenes increased, but very few people left the cast and crew. They only left if they had important matters or other arrangements to attend to.

During free time, one actor asked another, "When are you going to receive your bento box?"

The one who was asked stared at the sky in frustration. "Given the pace of filming, probably in two days."

The person in front patted the other's shoulder. "You can do it."

"What about you?"

"Me? Haha, my bento box is already cold."

"When did you receive it? When are you leaving?"

"I'm not leaving, I still have to stay here and study. What a good learning opportunity!"

Those who had finished filming all their scenes were not willing to leave. They felt that leaving early was losing face. They could stay on for a period by paying for their own food and lodging. To put it nicely, this was termed "retained cast studies." Of course, there were indeed many benefits, and there was a lot to be learned.

These people that stayed behind at their own expense provided manual labor, moving stuff and carrying equipment, and they were also on standby. Perhaps if they were lucky, they would be pulled into an extra role and have a few minutes of screen time. Even if the makeup for these extra roles was so thick that they couldn't recognize themselves, they felt satisfied anyway.

These people were more than delighted to work and fork out their own money. The companies behind them were also supportive and would reimburse part of their

expenses. Generous companies directly covered all their expenses. Only by staying on with the cast and crew could they continue riding on the large ship that was "Founding Era." Whether it was the actor's own value or the company's commercial benefits, staying on was the best option.

The production team never chased anyone away. Many actors that were able to get into the cast were capable. They could act as old people or pretend to be young and could even portray a different gender.

Fang Zhao's filming went smoothly, and there were no situations where he released his full imposing aura. He was here to act, not to crush people with his aura—that wouldn't be beneficial for cooperating.

A historical serial wasn't history. Other actors were not the actual people from back then.

Fang Zhao could clearly differentiate reality from his memories.

From an artistic point of view, now he was just working together with other actors to bring an adaptation of actual history to life in the form of "Founding Era." This would let many more people remember what had happened during that time and the people that had sacrificed so much for these lands.

From a cultural and artistic aspect, it would leave its mark in history.

As Fang Zhao's motive was different from others, he treated this very seriously. Furthermore, in his own words, he did not consider it very arduous, so when compared to others, it seemed much more effortless for Fang Zhao.

It could not be said that he had very little to do. In fact, in the Yanzhou chapter's filming team, his duties were much heavier. Filming was tougher, and he did not use a body double, instead doing everything by himself. If he were anyone else, they would probably have laid down from exhaustion, but Fang Zhao still seemed enthusiastic and full of vigor every day. His appetite was also good; others might not even be able to finish a meal, yet Fang Zhao could finish up to three on his own!

Some people in the cast and crew loved to see Fang Zhao eat. Watching him eat a lot with relish, others would feel slightly more ravenous and stuff a few more mouthfuls of food in.

An old actor noticed Fang Zhao eating with such relish and could not help but ask, "Fang Zhao, how are you able to eat so much?"

Fang Zhao swallowed and replied, "Because I'm hungry."

That old actor hiccuped, following which he turned to the person beside him and sighed. "Given Fang Zhao's physical and mental qualities, it is no wonder he rose up through the ranks during his military service."

When the cast and crew were filming, who wouldn't be tired and hungry? But there were times where one would just feel unwell deep down. It might also be due to being too immersed in their character and being unable to completely separate oneself. When one was feeling stifled or panicky, it could give rise to a physiological rejection and they would not be able to bring themselves to swallow their food.

But take a look at Fang Zhao. A short while ago, he had been even more immersed in his character, but when filming was done he, squatted at the side and dug in.

While others were still holding onto their food in a daze, this person had already started on his second portion.

When others finally adjusted their state of mind and separated themselves from their character and were about to start eating, this person had already finished his third portion and was helping others in the cast and crew.

When others had finished forcefully stuffing food into their mouths, memorized their lines, and adjusted their state of mind, this person came running back to let the makeup artist touch up his appearance, and he got into character in one second.

"A really natural actor," yet another old actor lamented.

"How many years has it been since I have felt that sort of pressure!" old actors said as, with complicated expressions, they watched Fang Zhao as he entered his filming state.

This was also a reason why many successful old actors from the cast felt pressured. When juniors performed too well, it would make these seniors feel like their zeal wasn't sufficient and they were not professional enough

The pace of the production team's filming was very quick. Now, the second season's filming was almost done. Actors had already adapted to the situation and environment

and were used to this sort of intensity. They were all quality actors, and after adapting, the filming of the second season had proceeded even more smoothly and quickly than that of the first season.

Nowadays, face makeup was simple. Every actor and role had special prosthetics that could be stuck onto their face. With a little touch-up from the makeup artists, even through a high definition camera, there would not be any traces of makeup, and it saved a lot of time.

Apparel, scars, and others were all the same. Everything had become much simpler with technological advancements, and not a lot of time was required for makeup. Naturally, efficiency had increased as well.

While filming for the second season was underway, the first season was in postproduction. It was rumored that postproduction was almost complete.

Although filming might have seemed quick, the cast and crew had put in a lot of effort. Also, they had prepared for a long time.

The cast had not made preparations only after the "Founding Era" project's reboot had been announced. Rather, plans had been made some years earlier, but they hadn't been carried out then.

The script had also been released earlier, but only after it had been rebooted had the consultation team looked through it and made amendments. Design plans for the construction of sets had long been prepared beforehand and had already been meticulously drawn up.

As for actors, those that had internal information had started preparing a few years earlier and had just been waiting for the project to be rebooted.

On the accompaniment music side, the music team had been hoarding pieces. Some extremely capable teams could even create accompanying music that better fit the plot at the last moment. With so many elites and talented people, Roman could use whoever's work best suited his requirements.

Quick filming did not signify that large quantities were being churned out at the cost of quality. Postproduction was also tightly supervised and had stringent requirements. With a lead director like Roman, who had very high standards, nobody could even think about just going through the motions.

From filming all the way to postproduction, everyone gave their all. The entire cast was like a well-oiled machine that was running precisely and efficiently.

Besides filming, every once in a while, Fang Zhao and other actors playing important roles in the same team would have to visit psychologists for a talk.

This was an arrangement of the production team's, and it was a clear-cut requirement. For Fang Zhao and other actors who held more important roles, they were required to visit the psychologist once every seven days. The production team was worried that these actors' mental health might be affected if they got too deeply immersed in their characters.

The production team cared about the physical and mental health of their actors and had also considered many aspects.

Actually, the original plan after filming started had been to be in a completely sealed mode without any access to the internet all the way until filming ended. Ultimately, following suggestions from the psychologists, it had been changed to two hours of internet access every seven days of the week. The reason was that people needed to release tension. This gave actors a time to drain all their pent-up feelings and emotions.

The psychologist in charge of Fang Zhao and the others was called Dai Yu.

Dai Yu knew many of these actors. As he was in the cast and crew, although he was not participating in the filming, he found out by talking to those actors that this might be the actors' toughest ever challenge yet. He could understand the mental states of these actors through conversations with them.

From Dai Yu's professional viewpoint, "Founding Era" was like a dark and gloomy forest fraught with strange dangers. When actors stepped inside, they were extremely careful even when it came to brushing away a single leaf. As they advance further in and fell even deeper, it got even more dangerous, and any object had the possibility of being a threat.

What Dai Yu needed to do was guide those actors deep in the darkness back out.

All the other actors were fine. The only one Dai Yu felt was a difficult problem was Fang Zhao. Every time he faced Fang Zhao, Dai Yu felt like...

Every time Dai Yu was dissecting Fang Zhao's mental state, the Fang Zhao sitting in front of him seemed to be scanning Dai Yu's mental state as well.

Dai Yu coughed lightly, relieving the strange atmosphere that had built up. He remembered his previous chats with other actors and continued, "People of those times seemingly became like beasts. Supposing they lost their humanity, it would signify that they would lose many things."

Fang Zhao replied, "Lose your bestiality, you lose everything."

Dr. Dai paused and looked at Fang Zhao before looking away quickly and nodding his head. "That's right. They were forced into it. Without change, they had no way of survival."

Dai Yu then took the initiative to talk to Fang Zhao about some other topics for around 10 minutes before he ended this session.

After Fang Zhao left, Dai Yu poured himself a glass of warm water. His finger that was hooked around the cup was trembling slightly. After finishing his water, he stared at the chair Fang Zhao had sat in and pondered.

If he was more attentive, he would have realized that every time Fang Zhao came over, the chair's position was slightly further away compared to others.

From several conversations here, Dai Yu had found out that Fang Zhao was a dangerous person. Fang Zhao might look rather harmless, but his true nature might be even closer to the role he was playing.

Fang Zhao was unlike others. Other people would seem to sink into the dark and dangerous forest because of acting. As for Fang Zhao, his head had an expanse of gloomy forests that was deeply rooted and could not be removed. Dai Yu was powerless.

The sort of temperament Fang Zhao had was probably close to what people during the Period of Destruction had had. It was probably because of this that Roman and the Committee of 100 had selected him.

But all those issues had nothing to do with the psychologist Dai Yu. All he had to do was make sure the actors would not delve so deeply they could not get out. Apparently, during this period, the others had a tendency to sink too deeply and needed lots of

talking to, as well as some guidance.

As for Fang Zhao... he just had to go through the session as a formality.

When many young actors came here, they were nervous, but when Dai Yu was speaking with Fang Zhao, the psychologist was the one who felt pressured. Every time Fang Zhao came, Dai Yu would feel uneasy, as if he was being watched by a wild beast.

That's right, over here, Fang Zhao wasn't nervous; Dai Yu was the one all tensed up.

December passed by really quickly. As the new year and a new month came, a half-minute-long trailer for "Founding Era" subsequently appeared.

The accompaniment for this trailer had been created by a reputable music association.

A piano played at the start, supplemented by a violin. It sounded gloomy and restrained and also seemed quiet and lonely.

The opening sequence of the trailer:

A truck driver leaning against a steering wheel, his fist clenched tightly. He looked through the shattered windscreen and hesitated...

A shepherd held onto a machete with his trembling hand as droplets of blood trickled down the knife's sharp edge.

A prison guard in a prison sat down on the floor and quietly lit up a cigarette.

A lady in an elegant dress stood on a castle wall and looked out into the distance.

People crawled out from a series of ruins, staggering step by step, as if they were entering an abyss.

...

The whole country in ruins, homes shattered, the sun and moon no longer visible, meteors raining down, struggles in the fires of war, moving forward in the darkness.

A bloodied feather against the light floated downwards.

Two steps from hell!

Calamities that did not cease and battles without any rest!

As the melody's tempo started to rise, drumbeats became even more powerful. The coloration of the image started to become even more intense.

Rising up abruptly from the darkness and being reborn from the ashes!

In that very long and desolate period, freedom, existence, blood, guarding...

Twelve massive monuments appeared.

Countless names flashed across.

The history of the Period of Destruction that only appeared in history books unfolded before the eyes of later generations.

A long journey, a hundred-year reflection!

"'Founding Era' will premiere on January 28, 12 p.m. Huangzhou time. Eleven chapters will be simultaneously broadcast."

This wasn't a warped fantasy but actual historical culture combined with video and music to form a work of art!

On January 1 of the 535th year of the New Era, on the first day of the new year, following the release of the trailer, every forum, video streaming site, social platform, newspaper, and magazine was occupied by "Founding Era"!

Without a doubt, the main theme for the coming year had been set!

Scenes of great jubilation happened online.

"Ah ah ah ah, it is finally going to be broadcast!"

"I'm counting down every single day!"

"Everyone is a big name!"

"The feeling of just randomly pointing my finger and it landing on a celebrity feels great. What an unprecedented grand allocation; I can't wait!"

"Were the 12 people that appeared right at the start of the trailer the 12 great generals?"

"Idiot! Did you sleep in history class? There are only 11 great generals! Fang Zhao isn't one!"

"Hahaha, the Wu Yan in the trailer is still a baby."

"Eleven Chapters, as a Yanzhou person, I will watch the Yanzhou chapter first before watching the others. How great!"

"Ahh, 11 chapters being broadcast simultaneously. What a difficult choice... Which one am I going to choose!? I'm from Huangzhou. Why isn't there a Huangzhou chapter among the 11 chapters!"

There were 12 continents in the world because of the Period of Destruction. Huangzhou was slightly special and was the only one without a local great general, and it was the only continent not named after a person.

Nowadays, Huangzhou was the world's political core. The people of Huangzhou always felt a sense of superiority, but this time, people of Huangzhou were depressed.

"Us Huangzhouans have been reduced to a supporting role in 'Founding Era'."

"No idea when we will be able to see a storyline concerning Huangzhou."

"We will have to wait till we're closer to the end. Only then will we get to see our continent's part."

"Whatever. Everything is good as long as we can watch it."

Once it premiered, there would be two episodes aired every day from Monday to Friday—none on the weekends. But the series wouldn't start until the 28th, and it was only the 1st now. How were people going to endure for another 20-something days?

If the series could not be watched yet, then head to the Cemetery of Martyrs to pay respects first.

Fans found out which characters their idols were playing and headed to the Cemetery of Martyrs to find out where these heroic characters' graves were.

Thus, on the first day of the new year, the number of people visiting each continent's Cemetery of Martyrs saw a sharp increase.

"This... Isn't there still some time till Memorial Day? Why are there so many people?" asked a puzzled worker at a Cemetery of Martyrs as he saw the number of people walking around the cemetery grounds.

"The impact of 'Founding Era'," another staff member replied.

Someone else joined in the discussion. "Commemorative portraits of martyrs are selling especially well this year!"

"In the past, nobody bought commemorative portraits. This year, right at the start, they have all been swept up. My superiors have even said that more artists have been hired to work around the clock, and there are a lot of portraits of characters I have never even heard about before."

In the month of January, it seemed as if the number of visitors to the Cemetery of Martyrs was increasing every day.

Very quickly, given the bombardment of information, even people who did not pay attention to these aspects also found out about the premiere "Founding Era" on Memorial Day.

All military districts, regardless of whether there were on Earth or a foreign planet, also received news about it, and they were eagerly waiting. There was much lesser entertainment in the military, and it was rare for there to be a series that the top brass supported. Naturally, this was highly anticipated.

In people's daily lives, whether they were at work, in school, or online, "Founding Era" was always unavoidably mentioned. This had already become a sort of phenomenon for the entire population.

"Founding Era" was going to premiere on Memorial Day. Schools and companies

would be on vacation, and the streets would have much fewer people. For the Cemetery of Martyrs, this would be a rare occasion where it was quiet.

Finally, the day came. Some people were gathered together with their family members, some with their colleagues, and some were staying home alone, but they were all waiting. In some places where it was the middle of the night, people had stayed up waiting.

At the appointed time, the first episode starting airing, and everyone turned it on full of joy and expectations.

But their pleasure was short lived.

Chapter 302

Starting at the Apex

As the trailer time was limited, the majority of stars had only appeared in a flash. Only the faces of those playing lead characters or important supporting roles had been seen. Now that it had officially launched, the majority of fans were here to count stars as they watched "Founding Era."

Others were either curious or here to join in the fun. People that were actually interested in the subject itself were a small minority.

After watching two consecutive episodes, the most intense feeling fans got was: brutal!

Brutal deaths!

Right at the start, large quantities of bento boxes distributed. How could it not be brutal?!

The first episode started off gently building up the Old Era's exquisite and peaceful ambience. However, what followed was chaos, blood, and cruel catastrophes that created an obvious contrast. The Period of Destruction had officially arrived, and it signified that many more people would die.

"Founding Era" had its own rich historical vibe and sense of solemnness. Even this impressive lineup of stars was unable to dilute the main ideology it was trying to propagate. This was the first official, profound dialogue the creative team had with audiences regarding that period.

Everything people of the New Era knew about the Period of Destruction was from historical books and various historical resources and records. This was just akin to a skeleton. For the majority of New Era people, their sentiments toward that period were not deep. After all, it had already been so many years.

And this cultural film was bestowing flesh to the skeleton!

Flesh and spirit!

It was only through this method that more people would understand the culture of that period and have a greater sentiment toward this history!

From the beginning, Roman had requested that battle scenes be as realistic as possible, so much so that it would scare viewers. He felt that this was the only way to make those people who had emerged in that time stand out and show their mettle! Regardless of whether they made their mark on history or not, regardless of whether they were from the influential families or they were a little-known person, nobody could be missed!

Because of Roman's high standards, the opening of all 11 chapters were all coherently realistic. The sound effects also helped maintain the lifelike state of these scenes.

Take the Yanzhou chapter, for example. In the first episode, there were two large-scale battle scenes. Without any accompaniment music, the sound effects took the lead in creating extremely realistic battle scenes. However, in the battle scene toward the end of the first episode, there was tragic and stirring background music playing. This stirred up the audience's feelings and created a deeply emotional effect. After that scene finished came the end credits, where a list of the names of those who had died in battle was shown. Included on it were the martyrs' names and grave numbers.

Along with the extra effort put in by the actors, it produced a multipronged battering effect.

In the past, whenever fans had heard about anyone receiving a bento box, they had laughed and joke, but now they could not even smile.

Harsh, cruel.

This was history.

Not every chapter started before the calamity. Every chapter's timeline was different. Yanzhou's chapter simplified the preceding happenings and began when Wu Yan was young. The Fang Zhao of that time had already gathered a bunch of people by his side.

Leadership was a sort of authoritative circumstance. This was why, right from the start of the chapter, "Fang Zhao" had the aura of a leader wielding power.

And the temperaments displayed by other characters in the Yanzhou chapter was slightly different from characters in other chapters. According to Yanzhou chapter's timeline, these people had already adapted and had learned the ways of survival during the Period of Destruction.

Because the timeline was different from the other chapters, that Yanzhou chapter's list of lives lost in battle at the end credits was longer than other chapters. These names had all been recorded in history.

The list of names here was longer, but that did not mean that the officially distributed bento boxes here were great in number. On the contrary, bento boxes were seemingly distributed wholesale in the other chapters.

The beginning of the other chapters was when the apocalypse started, where the peaceful world was pounded till it became hell on earth. Some small celebrities and internet personalities with minor roles received their bento boxes right at the opening sequence.

Each celebrity's fans were treated so brutally that their insides were all jumbled up.

This was just the opening sequence, and looking at the current circumstances, the wholesale distribution of bento boxes would definitely not be little!

Online, 90% of hot topics were related to "Founding Era." Some had companies behind them generating buzz for their celebrities, others were topics that netizens had brought up themselves.

There were even people that listed the celebrities that had appeared in the first episode.

"A breakdown of the poor little things that received their bento boxes right at the opening sequence..."

Even with all the promoting by their companies in the past, nobody had concerned themselves with these less popular celebrities. Now, everyone was especially stirred up, and the companies behind these celebrities seized the chance to promote their assets. The benefits that "Founding Era" could bring had started to show.

Some celebrities that weren't too famous but who played rather impressive roles, even if they only appeared for a few minutes, with their companies' operations, the fame of

these celebrities could rise greatly.

Of course, the ones that were most evident and had the ability to dominate mainstream entertainment headlines were the various leads of every chapter.

And for Yanzhou chapter, before Wu Yan grew up, Fang Zhao was the lead.

After all, according to the timeline, during the first season, Wu Yan was still young and had less screen time than the leads of other chapters. During this period, there was no way to simplify Fang Zhao's role in the story, as too many matters revolved around Fang Zhao.

"That aura of Fang Zhao's! Dope! [Image][Image][Image]."

Some people took a few screenshots of Fang Zhao's fight scenes in the Yanzhou chapter's first episode. Among them was a closeup of Fang Zhao's face.

"A death gaze coming from Zhao-god! When I was watching this segment, my back shivered."

"Let me upload a screenshot too [image]! This was the predicted fight scene with the beasts that flashed by so quickly! I never expected that he would take on six at once!"

"It's seven! There was one more hidden behind him."

"It seems quite casual, but when you look at it carefully, it isn't casual at all. How ruthless. Every move is efficient, and the killing intent that follows after... And there is still the scene of a meeting where Fang Zhao glances in the direction of the camera. At that moment, I felt a constricting pressure! That is probably the aura of a leader?"

"Awesome! He doesn't look one bit like a newcomer. Fang Zhao is indeed rather impressive."

"Wait a minute! Which Fang Zhao are you people actually talking about? I can't tell the difference. How are we going to differentiate them in future discussions?"

"Cough! Fang Zhao is only a newcomer in the acting circles, but he has made a name for himself in the gaming and music circles already!"

"Gaming fans have brought out the 'scripture' videos from 'Battle of the Century' to

watch once again. It has the same effect even though they are different media."

Reputable film reviewers from Yanzhou also gave their evaluations of Fang Zhao.

"Some people can soar up to the heavens when just given a chance. Fang Zhao is that sort of person."

"Starting his career at the apex," yet another reviewer said.

Starting his career at the apex might have sounded very impressive, but actually, there were two ways it could be interpreted.

The first was that he had come flying out of the blocks, vastly exceeded other actors of the same grade and status, and stepped on the summit many newcomers had no way of achieving even after many years. The other meaning was: starting off at the top, he could only go down from there.

That was the intention of the reviewer. Right now, according to the audience's understanding, these were good words that were praising Fang Zhao, but if Fang Zhao went downhill, that reviewer would give a different sort of interpretation all the same.

Even so, there were many media news outlets that used this reviewer's evaluation of "Starting his career at the apex," with the majority appearing to praise or lament.

A newcomer, someone not from the showbiz circles, an amateur who could not even be considered an actor! Relying on "Founding Era," he had truly made a name for himself in the showbiz circles!

At a certain military district.

There were a group of people gathered to watch "Founding Era" together. All 11 chapters were being watched one by one.

After they had just watched finished the Yanzhou chapter, one person among them pointed to the screen and asked another, "The person you selected to play the role of Fang Zhao was him?"

"Yes, it's this actor. I even voted for him! Now it seems like I made the right choice."

"Indeed, he acts rather well and makes the role memorable. That flair of his is just

something else!"

It was too dazzling when there were too many stars. Some people might not be able to recognize this face of Fang Zhao's, but they could remember his flair. The next time they saw this, even if they could not recognize the face, they would be able to correspond it to the role.

Many stars were unrecognizable after putting on makeup. Their originally mild impressions would be even more insipid, but the impression Fang Zhao gave off was very profound. Perhaps people were slightly biased toward Fang Zhao. After all, Fang Zhao had originated from Baiji military district. Just checking the news back then would reveal all this information.

"This actor was once a soldier. He has really fought against terrorists."

"No wonder you can feel that killing intent from his fight scenes. Other actors can portray this somewhat, but their killing intent isn't as realistic." Military personnel that had experienced real battles were more sensitive to this.

"The other actors aren't bad either. This is much better than those so-called war flicks from before. The filming is great! This series lets everyone see that it isn't the same as those nonsense series of the past, and the acting isn't exaggerated either. Those fight scenes are especially immersive for us."

Multiple fight scenes filmed in one take were grim, nimble, and not at all gaudy.

This series did not have many gaudy fight scenes. When the actors of the cast and crew had been training, they found out that this was unlike any previous series they had acted in before.

Fight scenes in past serials were just for the sake of looking cool, but the fight scenes here were to be as realistic as possible.

For artistic purposes, Fang Zhao had actually added an appropriate amount of depth to his acting. Not too little or too much but just the right amount so that he would appear even more natural before the camera. This effect was needed for the filming and was a change that Fang Zhao had made according to Shen Wei and Roman's guidance.

Of course, others did not know that Fang Zhao had deliberately made adjustments to

his acting for filming. From what many older precursors in the industry saw, Fang Zhao's understanding of the role, his dialogue, fundamentals, and techniques were satisfactory. This made those among the Committee of 100 that had voted for him feel relieved.

Relieved and somewhat pleased. What did so many positive evaluations prove?

It proved that their foresight was good!

Look, we picked out a no-name among a field of big-name actors, and he is the most suitable!

Now that they were emboldened, when these people accepted interviews or were asked for their comments, they naturally praised Fang Zhao. Praising Fang Zhao was the same as praising themselves! And at the same time, it was smacking the bunch of people who had previously refuted and doubted their choice. My own foresight is better than yours! This also lets those students of film and art academies see clearly for themselves who had the perception to choose this talent!

At this time, they could more or less understand how Roman felt.

This sort of feeling was rather pleasing.

Yanbei City retirement facility.

Great-Grandfather Fang wiped away tears; his eyes were red. He had no idea whether he had been affected by the solemnness of the series or by his great-grandson.

After he finished watching the two episodes, Great-Grandfather Fang sat in front of the screen, staring at nothing in particular and remaining silent throughout.

Beside him, Great-Grandmother Fang's eyes were red too. She sighed. "Surviving during that period was no easy task... Little Zhao has acted really well. Word online is that these one-take fight scenes require many tries to be successful. It is very tough on the actors, and they might suffer injuries. And Little Zhao has many more of these sorts of scenes than others. I wonder how much he has suffered. To be able to act until he gets this sort of result isn't easy at all."

"That goes without saying! Could this result be achieved if it wasn't tough?!" The tears that Great-Grandfather Fang had just held back starting flowing again.

For more than an hour, the two old Fangs sat there talking about the cruel fate of survivors in the Period of Destruction and then about how Fang Zhao was holding up while filming.

"Are we going to watch the other chapters now?" Great-Grandmother Fang asked.

The two of them had told the younger generations of Fangs that if anyone wanted to visit, they should come beforehand and come looking for them today. Therefore, nobody would disturb the two old Fangs, and these two old folks had decided to spend the whole day watching the serial.

"Nope, let's wait for a few hours before watching," Great-Grandfather Fang replied.

After he had calmed down, Great-Grandfather Fang browsed some news online. When he saw those compliments and praises for Fang Zhao, he smiled till his creases were on the verge of blooming. He wiped away his tears and snot, which had flowed out once again, and washed his face, then headed out to look for his old comrades for a chat.

Fiery Bird Yanzhou department.

The Diting series earpieces and sound equipment that Fang Zhao endorsed saw another round of buzz. There was a significant increase in sales after the first and second episodes of "Founding Era" aired. Some warehouses in Yanzhou were already out of stock. Other continents had stored less stock, and there were many more empty warehouses.

The influence that "Founding Era" had was global.

"Fang Zhao's momentum..."

"If we extend our contract with Fang Zhao, his endorsement fees surely have to be increased. Otherwise, he might not continue with the endorsement."

"Then do we still sign with him?"

"You don't say! Of course we sign! The planning department made plans early on, but the circumstances with Fang Zhao after the broadcast of 'Founding Era' were unknown, so it was set aside. Now that Fang Zhao's momentum is ascending, the new product plans have to be implemented. Diting series's newest model, a high-end

version."

Fang Zhao had already played the role of a leader. Naturally, there was a need for a corresponding high-end version, the sort that would cost a minimum of at least five digits.

"All right, I will leave a message for him. They only get two hours of internet access every seven days. We still have to wait a few days for a reply. Why does Fang Zhao not have a manager?"

Fiery Bird approaching a party for an endorsement and even having to wait a few days was extremely rare.

This was something unavoidable because these were the rules of "Founding Era," not something decided by Fang Zhao or certain actors, so Fiery Bird had no choice.

Fang Zhao was not the only actor that endorsed Fiery Bird products, but now, if Fiery Bird wanted to look for any actors to film new advertisements, they would need to wait.

In time, there would surely be many more manufactures headed to planet Wai who would take the opportunity to film advertisements during actor's rest times.

The sales volume of items endorsed by lead roles, important supporting roles, and other roles that appeared multiple times saw a great increase alongside the rising internet popularity.

The large ship that was "Founding Era" carried many people's interests along with it.

But at the same time, the original purpose of this film project was still in the midst of being completed.

Every continent's Cemetery of Martyrs saw a peak in visitors. Some graves that did not have any visitors in normal years suddenly received a lot more people paying their respects.

Chapter 303

Immense Pressure Too

The internet was full of praise for "Founding Era." There was also a reputable reviewer that claimed "Founding Era" was the most realistic historical drama ever made in the New Era.

As for the actual history? According to Fang Zhao, it was still far off.

However, this was but a film series and a form of art. To come close to the original history was hard enough.

Seeing news reports about people visiting graves that saw no visitors other than cleaners in past years, Fang Zhao felt rather happy. Having someone remember them was a good thing, even if they were only remembered now.

As a milestone historical drama, "Founding Era" was sure to air again in the future. There were certainly going to be even more online broadcasts. Even many years later, as long as people watched it, they would know about these martyrs and the things that had been done.

Being remembered was fortunate. There were many more people that never got to leave behind their names, let alone gravestones.

Fang Zhao agreed to Fiery Bird's endorsement contract extension. Fiery Bird's conditions were decent, and all Fang Zhao needed to do was find some time to take some photos for an advertisement. This wasn't a lot and would not delay filming.

In the cast, there were many people that accepted endorsements and advertisements. The production team allowed the cast to accept these endorsements; their only requirement was that it did not affect filming. Advertisements could only be filmed during the few days of break after a season of the series concluded filming. Also, the advertisements could only be done at the region designated by the production team. As before, actors could not leave the filming area. Commercial firms were also required to apply to enter the filming area and needed to sign confidentiality agreements. Also, not every commercial firm could send people to planet Wai.

Therefore, some actors that had finished filming felt that they could not wantonly accept advertisements while staying here, which would affect their earnings, so they decided to leave the cast and return home.

Roman was actually rather unwilling. He hoped that his actors would not accept endorsement deals or advertisements during the filming period, but "Founding Era" was a little special as it touched on the dark side of human nature. Even if it was unable to be portrayed completely in front of the cameras, the actors would deeply be affected when they analyzed the characters they played.

"There will be problems if it goes on this way. Just let them find other things to take their mind off things. After all, shooting a commercial won't take long, perhaps half a day," the head of the psychologist team told Roman. "I don't even know how those people during the Period of Destruction lived. Under that sort of living environment, it is really easy to be forced to become crazy or perverted, right? Those that didn't break were really strong people."

Roman gave a "tsk" and did not say more. Deep down, however, he agreed with what the other party had said.

Sometimes when Roman thought too much about it, the darkness and bloodiness of the Period of Destruction made him feel breathless. There was a lot that wasn't suitable for audiences, and Roman was clear on that. Thus, although he wasn't very pleased with actors accepting endorsements during filming, he ultimately approved of it. He was almost going crazy himself, and he shouldn't make others go crazy with him.

"I heard that Fang Zhao accepted a commercial?" the head psychologist asked.

When talking about Fang Zhao, Roman's face beamed. "It's a Fiery Bird endorsement, just some photographs and a short video. It can be completed within an hour. Furthermore, with Fang Zhao's condition, filming for another day won't be an issue. I feel at ease when it comes to him."

Roman had also seen those evaluations online, and naturally, he was pleased.

"Have you watched it yet? How was it? Didn't this young fella act really well?" Roman asked.

"Very well indeed," the psychologist replied. "Fang Zhao... is very suitable for that

role."

He had heard from the psychologist in charge of the actors from Yanzhou about Fang Zhao's circumstances, and it was something that they could not resolve.

In private, they had previously discussed a type of black: Period of Destruction black.

Deep inside Fang Zhao was this sort of color.

Roman, who was currently very pleased with himself, did not take much note of the strange expression on the psychologist's face when Fang Zhao was mentioned. When Fang Zhao was mentioned, Roman could not help but think about another member of the cast that was giving him a headache. The smiles that had just appeared on his face were wiped clean in an instant.

Zaro, the person that Leizhou's governor had personally called about.

Fang Zhao and Zaro were two extreme opposites in the heart of the lead director.

One was incomparable, and the other was... incomparable.

When it came to Fang Zhao, Lead Director Roman felt that there was nobody in the entire cast that could compare to Fang Zhao.

And when Zaro was mentioned, Lead Director Roman felt that even if he just randomly picked an actor from the cast, they could act much better than Zaro!

The training classes that had been arranged for Zaro previously might as well have been for the dogs!

There was simply no effect!

Zaro only had two appearances in the second season. He had spent three takes and the result still hadn't been satisfactory. Finally, after some guidance, his results had been finally passable.

In the second season, Zaro basically only had to show his face, and the number of lines he had could be counted with one hand, yet such a simple task took many takes. The director in charge of the Leizhou chapter hadn't been in a good mood these past few days, and he looked gloomy. As the head lead director with high requirements, Roman

was even more irritable. Thinking about it made his stomach hurt.

As of now, filming for the second season had concluded and was in postproduction. The third season's filming was underway as well. In the third season, the character that Zaro played saw a significant increase in screen time. Included was a scene where Zaro's character argued with another character. From what the lead director had seen, Zaro was still a long way off from portraying the emotional outburst a capable actor could do in an instant.

If Zaro really wasn't able to do it, the director might have to adjust the angle of filming and place the focus on another character. However, he could not always do so. Lead Director Roman was seriously contemplating making a call to Leizhou's director and just sending Zaro back.

Zaro could roughly guess the directing team's opinions, because when the lead director had gotten angry with him, he had clearly said. "If you can't act, we will change you."

When Zaro had started filming for the second season, he had received a face full of spittle from the lead director after his first scene. Zaro had swallowed his anger and had not dared to take it up straight away with the lead director. Otherwise he would receive a call from his governor granddad.

But thankfully, back then, the lead director had brought him aside to scold him. If he had done it in front of everyone, Zaro would have lost all face.

Filming is so tiring!

Zaro slightly regretted entering the cast. This was a whole different experience from his previous movie filming. There were times when he felt the entire atmosphere of the cast and crew was really stifling.

In Zaro's own words, face was very important. He could quit himself, but he could not be driven out by the directing team. Thus, Zaro had spent more time studying the script over the past few days. The more he studied, the more difficult he felt it was.

How to portray an emotional outburst? Zaro felt that he acted rather well every time, but other people had expressions like the spectacle was too horrible to endure.

News online was full of praise for "Founding Era." Leizhou people would surely focus

on the Leizhou chapter, and when Leizhou people talked about the Leizhou chapter, they could not avoid mentioning someone who always generated discussion: Zaro.

Since the first episode of Leizhou chapter, Leizhou netizens had not seen Zaro at all.

"I didn't see Zaro at all in the first episode. Did I miss him?"

"I also tried searching, but I could not find him. Could it be that his makeup is so good that we can't discover him?"

"Has anyone found out where Senior Master Zaro appears?"

"It's best if he doesn't appear. Zaro's acting skills are fine if it is for kicks and giggles, but for 'Founding Era,' he is sure to get bashed."

"When I think about Zaro's acting skills, I actually reckon he will get killed in the show right away."

"Haha, I can't wait to see Zaro."

"I'd rather not. It is better to not let the Leizhou chapter become a laughingstock for other continents to joke about."

"Zaro will destroy everything when he appears! Without a doubt!"

"I say, Senior Master Zaro, for the sake of the whole of Leizhou and the Leizhou chapter that was produced at great length, it's best if you withdraw from the cast."

"I support Zaro! But Senior Master, when will you appear? Could it be that you can't act well so you have already left the cast? Perhaps you are hiding and not uttering a single word."

"Haha, it might be just that. Even if he has the support of the Renault family, could a lead director with such high standards as Roman bear to see his series get destroyed?"

"The illustrious name of the Renault governor is just ruined at the hands of this grandson."

The many inquiries on social platforms were very effective against Zaro.

Seeing all these messages and comments, Zaro was pissed. This time, even he could not even filter them out if he wanted to. It simply could not be disregarded!

A furious Zaro straight away updated a new status on his social platform account: "Appearing at the start of the second season! Commit suicide if you ask again!"

Zaro could not reveal which episode he would be appearing in, but the second season would be released soon, and Zaro leaking that he would appear in the second season was acceptable, so the production team would not find fault with this. This also helped increase audience anticipation levels. How many people in Leizhou were waiting to watch and joke about Zaro?

The moment this status was updated, many Leizhou netizens came rushing over to join in the fun.

"This 'commit suicide'...Does Zaro mean he will kill himself or does he want the askers to commit suicide?"

"Rubbish! Certainly Zaro commits suicide!"

"Yes! That's right! Zaro is talking about himself!"

"So I see. Zaro, are you really going to appear in season two?"

"Can't wait! Senior Master, are you certain you will appear in season two?"

"I didn't see it just now. Zaro, which season will you be appearing in again?"

"When I heard that Zaro wanted to commit suicide, I stopped whatever I was doing and came over to spectate."

"I'm here to see how Zaro kills himself too."

In no time, many Leizhou mainstream entertainment media's push-notification headlines were about "Zaro committing suicide."

With regards to this, many Renault family members hurriedly contacted planet Wai. Leizhou's governor even found some time to make an inquiry.

Zaro's agent had to explain one by one that it wasn't like what the media had reported.

The agent was also worried about Zaro's filming later on. There were so many people in Leizhou watching him and people from other continents waiting to joke about it, yet Zaro was still causing trouble. Zaro's agent was so worried he felt he was going to go bald soon. What can I do? I am under immense pressure too!

After explaining to various parties, the agent was preparing to have a proper chat with Zaro when he saw Zaro sitting quietly and staring at a mirror. There was a rare hint of self-doubt on his face, and he seemed desolate.

Zaro had put on a forced smile when he had replied to the call from the family elders and promised to act properly and film seriously with all his heart. After that, when the call had ended, he had sat in silence, staring at himself in the mirror.

One minute.

Two minutes.

The room was eerily quiet.

"Handsome!" Zaro slapped the table as he got up. "Motherf*cking handsome!"

A powerful and resonating voice full of self-confidence!

The dispirited Zaro a moment ago had disappeared and been suddenly replaced by one with a glowing spirit who was full of vigor and radiating self-confidence!

Zaro's agent: "..."

Self-doubt. Bullsh*t!

Where did you suddenly get that f*cking self-confidence from?!

After his mental state recovered, Zaro's mind starting revolving. Thinking about it for a bit, he turned to his agent and said, "Go and get me a bottle of water, the packaged spring water from the gourmet food city."

Zaro's agent looked carefully at Zaro and then nodded. "All right." Without saying anything else, he stepped out.

Once his agent stepped out, Zaro also went out. He had decided to endure the

humiliation and would look for Fang Zhao to ask for any good suggestions. He had sent his agent away, as he did not want to let his agent see him going to look for Fang Zhao personally. Not long ago, he had said that he would not seek out Fang Zhao even if it killed him.

Currently, it was getting late here on planet Wai, and the majority of filming teams had wrapped up filming for the day. Only a few night scenes were currently going on outside.

Like a thief, Zaro ran over to Fang Zhao's quarters. Everyone here stayed in single rooms. Rooms were allocated based on two criteria: one was based on the roles, and the other was based on special privileges. Actually, the two did not have much difference.

When Zaro got there, Fang Zhao was eating.

For today's dinner, Fang Zhao had eaten three portions of packaged meals. After filming concluded for the day, Fang Zhao had returned to continue and have his supper.

When he saw this, Zaro thought to himself, He can really eat! Fang Zhao's supper was rather lavish. It wasn't food the production team provided, nor was it from the dining hall.

"This, where did you buy it?" Zaro asked as he glanced at the few delicately made pastries. He had never tried them before.

"These were sent from the people at the base," Fang Zhao replied.

They were actually a new foodstuff produced at a certain experimental plot. A scientist there loved experimenting with food and would create a lot each time. Every time he did this, he would send some to Wai base. When it was sent to Wai base, it would be sent straight to Commanding Officer Huo Yi.

Recently, Curly Hair had rendered some meritorious services at the port, which pleased Huo Yi. The buzz of "Founding Era" on the internet had also brought about quite a lot of popularity to planet Wai. Thinking back, planet Wai's change in fortunes started when Fang Zhao had come.

And when Huo Yi heard that the filming conditions here were tough and many people could not eat well, Huo Yi felt that he should take care of Fang Zhao, or at least show

some concern, so he had gotten his men to deliver some food to Fang Zhao when they headed over. He would get his men to send some stuff to Fang Zhao from time to time as a form of gratitude.

Fang Zhao brought out a clean plan and distributed some food to Zaro. "These are pretty good, try them."

The food displayed on the plate in front of him looked really appealing and was very fragrant, but...

One who is unaccountably solicitous is hiding evil intentions! 1

But when he thought about it, Zaro felt that he was wrong. It was the other way around. He was the one looking for Fang Zhao; it was not Fang Zhao who had a request to make.

Looking at things this way, Fang Zhao was just sharing some food.

"You are a pretty good person." Zaro did not worry about his table manners and started eating.

Zaro had not eaten much for dinner. He had been pissed by all the opinions online and had lost his appetite after talking with those family members. Now, when he saw Fang Zhao eating something so fragrant, he felt famished.

After finishing his food, Zaro awkwardly brought up his purpose. He had come over to exchange pointers about acting experience.

Although Zaro had not said it very clearly, Fang Zhao understood his intention. Zaro had come to ask for help, but he was too conscious about his reputation and had to find other excuses, so he couldn't spit it out properly.

Fang Zhao felt that Zaro still had ambition. Most importantly, no matter how much pressure he was under, his vigor was always very strong.

Zaro normally acted lowly but made himself out to be impressive, but he had never done anything that was really exceeding low. In the cast and crew, where the atmosphere was tense and stifling most of the time, having a bubbly person like Zaro around was rather meaningful and fun.

This was probably the reason Leizhou's governor doted on his grandson so.

Zaro felt goosebumps appearing on his skin under Fang Zhao's gaze.

This... was exactly the same sort of gaze his grandfather had had during the video call!

Zaro thought to himself, You really think you are more senior than me? Yet another person who has become too obsessed with the role he plays!

Chapter 304

Innate Talent That Isn't too Mainstream

Because Fang Zhao saw Zaro as a junior and knew Zaro's character, he would not get too bothered about Zaro's bearing, which was especially good at offending people.

"Being an actor isn't easy. Studying the script, memorizing lines, attending training classes, refining our roles, polishing our artistic concept—all this is really tiring!" Zaro grumbled. Most importantly, he felt that he had already worked hard, but other people did not agree. Zaro was really sullen. If not for the fact that he wished to be vindicated, he would have packed his bags and called it quits on the spot.

Fang Zhao smiled. "From an artistic aspect, you all are also people that change the world. The time and energy invested is worth it."

Zaro totally did not pay attention to the more profound meaning of "you all." When he heard what Fang Zhao had said, Zaro felt rather proud of himself. Changing the world indeed!

Right. A while back, he had seen a reviewer say that "Founding Era" had impacted people of the New Era in spirit and ideology.

"Cough, that's what we ought to do. Although I act really well already, I still wish to have an even more profound portrayal of this role! And impact even more people's spirits and ideology!"

Saying this, Zaro waited for Fang Zhao to give some suggestions. No matter how important or pretentious his position was, Fang Zhao would still give some suggestions, right? Otherwise, there would be no meaning in all this!

Fang Zhao did not understand much about the Leizhou chapter, especially the earlier chapters. Fang Zhao wasn't too familiar with it and had not finished looking through the Leizhou script. In the consultant team, he had only handled the Yanzhou chapter.

Zaro spoke about the scene he was going to act in and the role he would be playing. Fang Zhao listened attentively and then pondered it.

Actually, those training classes had still had some effect. At least when it came to understanding the role, Zaro had indeed made some improvements. It was just that the coach's professional acting knowledge and practical techniques had not been absorbed by Zaro.

For the next scene, Zaro would be playing a character that had clashing views with a comrade. These sorts of conflicts had frequently appeared in the Period of Destruction, but they weren't easy to act out well, at least according to Zaro.

Given Zaro's own personal experiences and the abnormal way his brain worked, producing a result that the director wanted was too much of a challenge. Even if he could understand the what sort of character he was portraying or he knew what sort of mood the director wanted, he still wouldn't be able to act it out. When he acted, he directly fell into his own character, and the role he was supposed to be playing was twisted.

This was the reason Zaro felt he was acting very well and was immersed in his character but other people felt like he was destroying the character.

Zaro wasn't suitable for acting in this sort of solemn historical flick, but since he had already come all the way over, Fang Zhao would think of something to help out.

After pondering seriously, Fang Zhao said, "If you want to act according to what the director requests, that isn't entirely impossible."

In season three, the character Zaro played saw an increase in screen time, but as before, his role wasn't important. Therefore, if there was no way to improve Zaro's acting skills from the basics, then an alternate path had to be taken—finding a way to save him.

"If we are just looking at the filming outcome, there is one method that might be suitable for you," Fang Zhao said.

Zaro jolted up. "What sort of method?"

"There might be a little suffering involved," Fang Zhao continued.

"...How much suffering?"

"It can't be considered suffering, just enduring a little pain. However, it is only for the

duration of the filming of the scene."

Zaro pondered it seriously for a bit and then asked, "Will it hurt my face?"

"It won't."

"Say it!"

...

Elsewhere, Zaro's agent, who had gone to the gourmet food city to purchase mineral water, had been gone for two hours.

Actually, the entire thing would have taken half an hour, but Zaro's agent had been able to guess what Zaro was up to with one look. He had not left after stepping out and had watched as Zaro went to look for Fang Zhao. Only then had Zaro's agent gone to the gourmet food city. However, Zaro's agent would pretend that he did not know anything, and he even sat at the gourmet food city for more than an hour after purchasing the mineral water.

It was rare that this Senior Master Zaro would actually lower his head and seek help. His agent was just worried that a conflict might arise.

Actually, there were still famous actors among the cast that had some relationships with the Renault family, such as the actor playing the role of Great General Renault. He had graduated from a military college. After becoming famous, he'd had frequent dealings with the Renault family and had both means and power. This time, he had been specifically selected by Old General Renault for this role.

Because of his relation to the Renault family, this actor would also show concern for Zaro, but with a lead role, his assignments were too important and he had greater pressure than others. He had been unable to find time to chat with Zaro, and when he had finally managed to free up some time, the conversation had not turned out well. Zaro had straightaway pissed the other party off.

Zaro's agent had lamented on countless occasions. If Zaro wasn't a Renault and didn't receive the family's protection, he would have long been beaten to death.

There were other actors with ties to the Renault family as well, but basically, nobody could calmly have a conversation with Zaro that lasted for more than five minutes.

Zaro's agent knew what those other people were thinking when they talked to Zaro.

I'm not even your granddad, what reason is there to go along with everything you want? Who can afford to take your mood into consideration at all times! We also have status and power!

Who in the cast isn't busy? Who doesn't feel heavily pressured? Being dog-tired every day and emotionally affected by the roles, I don't even have the time to see a psychologist, yet I still have to contend with your moods? How thick skinned can you be? Which Renault of your generation isn't better than you? At most, I can hug the thighs of other people in the Renault family! If you were not a Renault, you would have been slapped to death a long time ago!

Among those of the same age, there didn't seem to be anyone that could stand Zaro.

Thus, this time, Zaro's agent was very worried about Zaro going to look for Fang Zhao.

Given Zaro's moral character, what would happen if he accidentally offended the other party?

Given Fang Zhao's military prowess, he could beat up 10 Zaros without breaking a sweat.

However, Zaro's agent never expected that when he was nervously waiting for Zaro to return, Zaro would actually come back bubbling with joy, the sort where one had just gotten a cheat code for a game and couldn't wait to try it out.

His agent tried to probe. "Something good happened?"

"Not telling." Zaro's face was full of mystery. He wanted to give everyone a surprise.

The day of filming the scene arrived.

After many actors in the Leizhou film unit had finished their own scenes, they did not leave right away and instead found a spot to observe.

Today, Zaro, who was being talked about by all the Leizhou netizens, had a scene. Zaro could not be compared to those few leads or important supporting roles, but he was a character that was where the winds and waves were the strongest.

The actors also naturally paid attention to this. They were worried that it would be just as those netizens had said, that Zaro would destroy everything. If that was really the case, all their efforts would have been for naught!

However, today, Zaro was full of drive and was brimming with confidence. There wasn't any hint that he had been affected by all the opinions online.

"He seems to be handling the pressure well," someone muttered.

"Most likely he just has a simple mind," another actor whispered.

Today, the Leizhou film unit director was looking all gloomy as usual.

"Are you ready yet?"

"Wait a moment..." Zaro stuffed something into his mouth and signaled the director.
"All right!"

Action!

A thunderous roar that seemingly contained a mixture of emotions resounded. "Save people? Who can you save? You are just sacrificing another life!!"

That roar wasn't the sort of shout that Zaro had previously so painstakingly forced out. The emotions here were too intense and too real, so much so that it deceived the ears of older actors.

When he finished his line, Zaro took a large gasp of air. His facial muscles were twitching, his eyes were all red, and they were even glistening with tears. This sort of oppressive fretful feeling that gripped the heart could be even felt from 10 meters away!

The director could not help but do a close-up.

Surprise!

A huge surprise!

This was exactly the result he wanted!

The director's previously overcast and gloomy expression became clear and sunny.

All the other actors and staff that were sitting around spectating had blank looks of shock. Their jaws were almost touching the ground.

Is that Zaro?

Is that really Zaro? How has he portrayed it so precisely? Could it be a body double wearing a Zaro disguise?

Can Zaro do an emotional outburst as and when he wants to?

Nobody could understand it—how could this idiot have suddenly gained enlightenment? All the previous training classes had not been effective, yet after a few days without seeing him, he had actually transformed so much?

At the moment, the other actor opposite Zaro was also performing at a high level. His lips were trembling and veins were bulging out of his temples as he silently endured. His fists were clenched, and it appeared as if there were about to fly up to beat the other person if not for him forcibly restraining his emotions.

The other person was acting rather well too. His skill could deceive everyone's eyes as well.

Previously, the two had kept having frequent flubs; how were they coordinating so well now?

Could it be that these two had rehearsed together? Had they been practicing in private?

After this portion was over, the director was extremely stirred up. "Pass!"

The gloom on his face had faded, and the director flashed a rare satisfied smile at Zaro. "Very good, very good! Keep it up!"

When he had seen those evaluations online, he had really thought that Zaro would be a burden and the Leizhou chapter film unit would become the laughingstock of other film units. But now it appeared that Zaro wasn't too bad when he was serious.

Therefore, he still had to give the youngster a chance and some time. He could not be

prejudiced against Zaro because of what had happened in the past.

It seemed like Zaro's condition today was really sharp!

Sure enough, with a little pressure from the outside world, hadn't Zaro achieved this state?

Standing at the side, Zaro's agent's eyes were feeling irritated. He was so stirred up that his eyes were brimming with warm tears. If not for his surroundings, Zaro's agent would be crying.

This was too easy!

Zaro had acted in so many shows, but this was the first time his expressions had radiated the surroundings. Even standing so far away, Zaro's agent could really feel that outburst of emotions. That was something only really capable actors could achieve!

He had finally taught Zaro... Finally brought Zaro up!

He had finally accomplished the heavy responsibility he had always been shouldering.

Accomplished the mission of a specially appointed agent!

All sorts of feelings welled up in the agent's heart. As he saw Zaro running over, he grinned widely.

There was a spring in Zaro's every step as he half hopped and half ran like an antelope till he was in front of his agent's face. Before his agent could say anything, Zaro exhaled deeply in his face.

A dizzying odor wafted into his nostrils.

"Can you smell it?" Zaro asked proudly.

Zaro's agent: "...". There was a hint of despair in his smile.

B*llshit acting skills!

Zaro did not take note of what his agent was going through. Currently, he was elated.

This time's success had made him extremely excited.

The director that had always had a gloomy face when facing him had actually given some praise! Actually, this director wasn't that bad; he had foresight!

The more Zaro thought about it, the more pleased he became. Although eating that stuff had been awful indeed, to stimulate his state of mind and for the sake of achieving the result the director wanted, it had all been worth it!

"Hehehe, how satisfying!"

That day, Fang Zhao had said that one could invoke some emotions by eating some stuff—for example, garlic. It was best to have the sort that was grown natively on planet Wai. The stronger the flavor, the more stimulating it would be. Zaro had developed it further and added a little sauce as well. That feeling... he had been able to understand what his character was going through in just a short while.

After he had shared his thoughts, Fang Zhao had suggested Zaro try it out.

Zaro had never expected that he would succeed in one try!

A pass in one take!

Just as he was gloating, the other actor that had just shot with Zaro came over. He had a complex expression on his face as he made a sincere request: "Senior Master, in the future, if you are going to do this again, please give me a warning first."

Back then, when the odor had wafted over and assaulted his nostrils, his brain had suddenly gotten all dizzy and he had nearly forgotten his lines.

"No problem, no problem!" When Zaro was in a good mood, he was very easy to deal with. Zaro turned towards his agent and said, "I acted well, right? Was it gut wrenching? But my gut was really wrenching. That was my first test—I probably ate too much garlic and sauce, so my stomach really felt uncomfortable. Didn't Fang Zhao say tea, milk, or other stuff can alleviate it? Hey, I forgot to bring the stuff he helped prepare! Hurry, hurry, hurry, let's go back!" Zaro dragged his agent along as they left.

Zaro's agent wasn't too bothered by the scent, which reminiscent of smelly feet. He was worried that Zaro might have eaten some unhygienic food. If anything happened to Zaro, he would have to carry Zaro on his back. No time could be wasted; they did

not even return back to their quarters. Instead, Zaro's agent brought Zaro to the area's hospital for a check. He wouldn't rest easy until Zaro had had a thorough check-up.

Having gone to the hospital, Zaro took some relieving medicine, as there weren't any big problems. After that, Zaro fished out a phone and impatiently called someone to share his joy.

There was no internet access in the filming area, but everyone here had been issued a phone. This phone could only be used for calls and was limited to the filming area.

"Fang Zhao, I have to really thank you this time! Once season three's filming wraps up, I'll treat you to a meal at the gourmet food city! Hey, by the way, if anybody mentions me, you can just tell them that from now on, in the cast of "Founding Era," I, Zaro, only need one take to pass! Hahahahaha!" Zaro's laughter was especially loud.

Zaro's agent thought to himself, Worry about diarrhea instead of talking nonsense!

Zaro felt like he was opening a door to a new world. His success today had let him find the navigation lights in his own acting pathway.

It was not that he did not have the fundamentals for performing but that he was unable to produce the result that other people wanted. However, if he integrated these sorts of techniques, he would be able to achieve it!

On the other end, Fang Zhao had just finished filming a scene. He was currently resting at the side with a few other actors from his unit. In a bit, they would have to continue filming.

After Fang Zhao answered the call and learned of what had happened, he had also laughed. In his past life, he had seen a subordinate do something similar for the sake of an assignment. When he had been analyzing Zaro's character, Fang Zhao had thought about this method. Zaro wasn't a newcomer that knew nothing. With a little oriented stimulation, perhaps this method could be effective.

Looking at it now, it really seemed to have been effective.

Observing Fang Zhao, an old actor beside him asked, "Who called? The sound of his laughter sounds a little familiar."

"Zaro. He says that filming at his end went well. It took just one take," Fang Zhao

replied.

The other actors taking a break had shocked expressions on their faces and were doubting their own ears.

Zaro?

The one from Leizhou? The one who has a good family background but nothing else and only drags everyone else down?

Only one take?

Were the standards of the Leizhou film unit's director so low? Did the lead director approve?

In any case, this was unimaginable.

"You believe that?" someone asked Fang Zhao.

"I do," Fang Zhao replied. "We will be able to see it for ourselves when the broadcast is out."

After Zaro ended the call with Fang Zhao, he made calls in succession to people he knew in the cast.

"Bar~bie, I heard that for your Lazhou film unit, you take at least two takes for many of your scenes? That's no good! I only took one take here. I'm not bragg—"

On the other end, Barbara expressionlessly hung up.

Zaro's lips curled as he heard the beeping sound through the phone. Then he dialed another number.

"Hello, Woo Tianhao? I heard your Tongzhou film unit's filming didn't go so smoothly yesterday. You too should attend more training classes and polish your acting skills. Don't just read novels every time filming ends..."

"Go f*ck yourself!!"

There was the sound of Woo Tianhao smashing something followed by beeping from

the phone.

Zaro inhaled sharply. "How petty."

His agent stared blankly at the ceiling.

Zaro continued to make calls to others.

Didn't you people use to mock me? Now I only took one take! Feeling foolish now?

Zaro continued to provoke others. "If you can't act, just leave the cast yourself!"

In the past, you people provoked me. Now I'm the one returning the favor and giving you all pressure. Any slaps I get, I return tenfold!

Zaro's round of flaunting finally ended and he was in a good mood. He asked his agent, "Fang Zhao has rendered a great service this time around. Do you think I should give him a big red packet? His compensation for this series isn't very high either. How pitiful."

Zaro's agent calmly said, "I heard that his endorsement fees have increased multiple times."

"How much?" Zaro asked, but he wasn't particularly interested.

His agent mentioned a figure.

Zaro, who was prepared to do a charitable deed, felt as if his face had been splashed with cold water. "What the!? His endorsement fees are that high?!"

His agent continued dousing him with cold water. "From what I reckon and from some calculations, I'm telling you that he has more money than us. He really isn't pitiful at all. However, if you act well, when the third season broadcasts, your rates when accepting endorsements won't be too shabby either."

"Certainly!" Zaro's self-confidence, which had just taken a beating, swelled back up. He tossed his phone aside and went to look at the script, studying what he should eat for his next scene and what else he should add in.

Lead Director Roman had also heard about Zaro's one take in the Leizhou film unit. He

heard about it not from Fang Zhao but rather from Zaro himself. Roman was full of doubt when he went to watch the segment filmed by the Leizhou film unit. It was as if he had seen a miracle, and he said, "That improvement is really huge."

"I heard he employed some tricks," said a member of the directorial team who had asked around.

Roman shook his head. "Not just anyone can use such methods. Do you think nobody has tried this in the past? How many can actually produce a result that is so fitting to the storyline? Zaro still has some innate talent, but his innate talent isn't too mainstream."

It seemed like he wouldn't need to make a call to Leizhou's governor.

As he was lamenting, Roman again asked, "Who gave Zaro that idea? This is a good method that has quick effects fit for Zaro's character."

"I'm not too sure about this, but I heard from someone that Zaro went to seek out Fang Zhao. After that, he completed his scene in one take," the director in charge of Leizhou film unit said.

Roman's creases became deeper from his smiling. "Oh my, Fang Zhao still has this ability!"

Fang Zhao could produce a miracle when given a rotten piece of wood. What did this mean?

This meant that Fang Zhao could still guide others!

It meant that Roman's foresight was good!

Look, this is my recommendation!

Three days later, there was yet another scene. Zaro, who had once been publicly known as a burden, did it in one take yet again.

In no time, everyone in the cast knew about this matter.

After that, the lead director go-to line changed. Now, if anyone was out of form, had other ideas, or were not acting conscientiously, Roman would spout, "Take a look at

Zaro!"

All the actors felt that this stab by the lead director was especially ruthless.

If he spoke about Fang Zhao, they could accept it. Given Fang Zhao's ability and energy in the past few months, they could not find any fault and were already immune to it. However, if Roman brought up Zaro, none of the actors could acknowledge it.

Shame!

Due to the global acclaim and public praise the first season of "Founding Era" had received, some actors had become conceited when all of it had gone to their heads. Now that they had received such a stab from the lead director, though, they were compelled to return back to before. If they could not compare to Fang Zhao, then so be it, but now they could not even compare to that idiot Zaro?

Chapter 305

Stage Name

Lots of folks were glued to the second season of the Leizhou chapter when it aired, hoping to catch Zaro in action. They were, as usual, put off by the limited edition bento boxes in the episodes.

But some folks felt that things would improve once Zaro showed up. He was bound to create tension. Zaro's acting style was only suited to nonsensical, exaggerated comedy, not serious period epics like this one.

Of course, there were also people who were more charitable. "The plot is killing me. At least Zaro will provide a change of pace. That's a good perspective to have."

Unfortunately, Zaro didn't show up until the second half of the season, and his appearances were fleeting. Even his close-ups were momentary. You couldn't make much out of his limited screen time. This was a major disappointment to the eager fans in Leizhou.

"I thought he had been cast in a major role. Turns out he ended up with this paltry bit of screen time."

"He hasn't picked up his bento box in season two yet, which means he'll show up in season three. I wonder if he will get more lines then."

"Based on my understanding of Zaro, his role will definitely get beefier down the road. Otherwise, someone with his personality wouldn't bother with a minor role like this. He'll definitely see more action in season three!"

On one of his internet access days, Zaro posted this message on his social media account:

"Me, Zaro, one take only! Shudder in fear, mortals! [picture]"

The accompanying picture featured an obnoxious-looking Zaro making an "oh, yeah" gesture. You could practically feel the cockiness oozing from the photo.

The people of Leizhou reacted as if they had discovered a new continent—they were downright incredulous.

"One take only? Is he referring to his latest scene?"

"I don't believe him."

"I'm not sure if I should believe him and there's no way to verify his claim now. Let's wait until season three comes out."

"Why don't we ask the other actors?"

But the other actors remained silent. Every time they saw a question in the comment section of their social media accounts asking if Zaro was telling the truth, they pretended they hadn't seen it. The truth was that they didn't know what to say.

However, the director of the Leizhou chapter unit reposted Zaro's message, adding, "Good job! Keep it up!"

That was his way of confirming Zaro's one-take claim.

This made the people of Leizhou look forward to season three even more. Even though they were looking forward to the storyline, the series meant something different to the people of Leizhou. Zaro was the star attraction of the entire Leizhou entertainment industry.

Many fans love dissing Zaro, but even they had to admit that Zaro's presence made the Leizhou entertainment industry more interesting. There was never a shortage of news.

The Renaults were also looking forward to Zaro's scenes. They had confirmed through their own channels how Zaro was faring on the set, that the single-take claim was in fact true. Still, they couldn't imagine what the final product would look like.

When season three finally aired, Zaro's first appearance generated countless dropped jaws.

"This is Zaro?"

"That's gotta be a double, no? Zaro can act like that? I'm not buying it, not buying it."

"They must have swapped someone in."

"I just studied the footage carefully. It's him all right."

"What an incredible transformation! What got to him?"

"His performance is so un-Zaro-like!"

"What are you suggesting? Could he keep his job if he acted like Zaro?"

"It's as if he has had plastic surgery. I can't possibly associate that performance with the Zaro I know from previous roles."

"I was wrong. Zaro can act too if he gets serious about it."

Soon, the Leizhou media was going nuts. One of Leizhou's most respected news outlets posted this headline: "I scare myself when I get serious about something."

The accompanying graphic was a picture of regular Zaro and a screen capture from his role in season three. The contrast was stunning.

The governor of Leizhou even took the time to call Zaro.

"Zaro, I'm watching season three too. You've made tremendous strides! This is worth applauding." The governor used a much gentler tone than he had in previous chats with his grandson. He was less serious.

"This is definitely a tough shoot; it's especially grueling, but there's no way out of it," Zaro said. He even managed to squeeze in a jab at his father: "Dad says that if I don't do a good a job, he's going to break my legs and lock me up at home."

The governor took the bait. "Don't be afraid of him. Let me have a chat with him tomorrow."

The governor was pondering the matter in his head. He had learned the secret to the so-called "improvement" from Roman, but Roman also provided balance, conceding that even with the secret boost, not everyone could have delivered the same performance.

Zaro's successful harnessing of emotion in season three had to have taken quite a bit

of work. The governor was worried that Zaro would break down if the family pressure kept up. After all, Zaro was still young, and his tolerance for pressure was limited.

After listening to Zaro complain some more about how tough his shoot was, the governor offered a few words of encouragement and hung up. The call lasted exactly five minutes.

As the chief executive of a continent, the governor was a busy man. The fact that he had taken the time to get in touch with Zaro was a major gesture of appreciation. It was impossible for him to stay on the line for 20 or 30 minutes or more. A five-minute call was already quite long by his standards.

On the other end, Zaro was thrilled to have his grandfather's approval. Granddad was the most powerful member of the family. As long as he had Granddad's backing, no one else posed a threat. If his foul-mouthed dad kept up his act, Zaro would keep reporting him to Granddad.

Filming for season four had actually already wrapped up by the time season three aired. The fifth season was about to start shooting, but the actors had a few days off in between.

Zaro remembered that Fang Zhao was the brains behind his acting turnaround and that he had promised to treat Fang Zhao to dinner, so he gave his fellow cast member a call. "Let's go for a meal at Gourmet Food City. I hear there's a new restaurant and the food is decent."

When Fang Zhao got the call, he had just returned from the Wai military base. He had nothing else going on, so he said yes.

The new restaurant was a fusion place featuring cuisine from all the continents. It didn't take reservations, so Zaro and Fang Zhao had to wait when they arrived.

"Let's sit on the side for a bit. You can bring me up to date on your filming," Fang Zhao said, pointing to two rows of chairs by the reception desk.

Unaccustomed to waiting for seating, Zaro was already a bit fed up, but he got excited once Fang Zhao mentioned his shoots.

"Right, right. I have to give you a proper briefing!"

What Zaro enjoyed the most was bragging to others about his scenes. He still had few lines. He had plenty of time after he was done to prepare for the next scene. Zaro wouldn't have been able to complete so many scenes in one take had his scheduling been tighter.

But as far as Zaro was concerned, the fact that he was completing all these scenes in a single take gave him tons of confidence. This was the first time he had ever felt so good about his acting. He felt as if he could treat all those award-winning actors and actresses like dirt in no time.

During his downtime, Zaro pondered his next career move.

"I think it's about time I come up with a stage name," Zaro said.

"Is that necessary?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Absolutely! I have actually thought of it before, but my agent shot me down. Now, though, I feel like I am in a different stage of my artistic career. What good is an artist without a stage name? My ambition is to become one of Leizhou's top contemporary artists."

Fang Zhao: "That's... that's a worthy goal."

"So which name do you think I should use? It should be something that stands out, best if it's reminiscent of the Old Era. It has to have substance and style. It should have personality and be classy at the same time, but I don't want to lose my current name either. I'm thinking something similar that rings familiar."

Fang Zhao: "How about 'Samoyed'?"

"Sounds good. What does it mean?" Zaro asked.

"It's the name of an Old-Era dog species that went extinct. Samoyeds were known as the 'smiling angels'," Fang Zhao said.

"They've gone extinct?"

"Yup."

"They were dubbed 'smiling angels'?"

"Yup."

"That's it then!"

"I suggest you do some more research during our internet access time. Coming up with a stage name is something you shouldn't rush. You should take it seriously and compare a bunch of names," Fang Zhao advised.

"That's true."

During the conversation, Zaro glanced at the entrance to the restaurant. He immediately yelled, "Hey, Woo Tianhao! Why are you running away?"

Woo Tianhao had invited a few actors who were party buddies from Tongzhou for dinner. They wanted to enjoy a proper meal during their rare break after slaving away for a season, yet lo and behold, the moment they set foot in the restaurant, Woo Tianhao ran into two people he didn't want to see. He had been getting ready to bolt when he'd been spotted by Zaro.

Woo Tianhao had no choice but to retreat. He raised his voice. "Who's running? Are you bloody blind?"

Woo Tianhao's dinner companions stayed silent. The two people facing off were both descendants from prominent families—one from Tongzhou's Woo family, the other a member of the Renault family in Leizhou. It was best if they didn't butt in on an argument between these two.

Woo Tianhao's good spirits had evaporated. Fang Zhao and Zaro were always being held up by the director as model actors, especially for their contemporaries.

Woo Tianhao had acting chops, but he couldn't manage to complete all his scenes in one take.

It was OK that he couldn't emulate Fang Zhao, but not being able to match Zaro was a downright insult!

They were both descendants of storied generals, and online pundits loved to compare actors with this kind of lineage. Zaro used to make everyone look good, but now his acting skills were suddenly off the charts, be it by gimmick or other means. The bottom line was that Zaro's performances turned out well and viewers bought into them. The

former critics now heaped praise with the same intensity they used to pour scorn on him—and they often used Zaro to dis actors from other continents.

Woo Tianhao really didn't want to see these two. They killed his appetite.

But Zaro was in a hospitable mood. He waved at Woo Tianhao's party vigorously. "Come, come. The more the merrier. Let's eat together. It's on me!"

That comment irked Woo Tianhao. "No need. It's on me tonight!"

But Zaro stood firm. "I got here first, so of course it's on me."

Woo Tianhao couldn't afford to lose face. "You think daddy can't afford a simple meal?" He had told his dinner companions that he was treating tonight. If Zaro ended up buying, who knew what they would say.

"Ha, and you're suggesting I can't?" Once Zaro's stubbornness came out, there was no stopping him.

The Tongzhou actors that Woo Tianhao had invited were dumbfounded. Are they really arguing over such a petty matter? Really? It seemed like a battle of egos, but it also came across as an excuse to stir trouble. If they started a fight, Zaro would definitely not be a match for Woo Tianhao, but Zaro had Fang Zhao. It was hard to say who had the upper hand.

The back-and-forth led nowhere. Woo Tianhao made a resounding noise from cracking his knuckles. He wanted to beat the crap out of Zaro, no doubt, but he held back on account of Fang Zhao. It would be an even bigger loss of face if he lost.

Chapter 306

When in Doubt, Call Fang Zhao

In their hearts, both Woo Tianhao and Zaro viewed the other as a stumbling block in their path to superstardom.

Given their similar lineages, they were often compared. They themselves liked to draw the comparison.

Achievement-wise, Woo Tianhao didn't think he was inferior to Zaro, but Zaro had the upper hand in one area. Zaro was backed by the governor of Leizhou, who doted on him. Everyone knew this. As long as Zaro didn't go too far, someone would clean up his mess. Meanwhile, Woo Tianhao had to watch himself. Even though the Woos were the most prominent family in Tongzhou, the governor of Tongzhou was a straight arrow. He never played favorites when dealing with the younger members of his family.

Secure in the knowledge that he had backup, Zaro was especially carefree, and he loved to mouth off. Every time Woo Tianhao saw the uninhibited look on Zaro's face, it drove him nuts, and now Zaro was always being held up as an example by Roman. That pissed Woo Tianhao off even more.

Meanwhile, from Zaro's end, the reason he disliked Woo Tianhao was simple: anyone more good looking and more pretentious than he was ended up on his sh*tlist.

The fact is that there were many reasons Zaro and Fang Zhao had become close. Fang Zhao had helped Zaro out, and they were business partners on several projects. Fang Zhao also wasn't double-faced around him and wasn't easily riled. Of course, as far as Zaro was concerned, there was another important factor—Fang Zhao wasn't as good looking as he was.

Zaro had gushed secretly more than once. Haha, Fang Zhao isn't as handsome as I am!

When Fang Zhao had invited Zaro to invest in Wai, Zaro had been motivated mainly out of curiosity and the planet's prospects. They had been business partners. Back then, he'd had few folks he could shoot the breeze with and Woo Tianhao's dojo had

seemed interesting, so he had liked looking Woo up when he was free.

Now things were different, especially after they had joined the same production. It was as if they were facing off in a coliseum.

They liked comparing themselves and competing on everything. Take the current dispute, for example. As far as the others were concerned, who picked up the tab was a trivial matter, and yet the two of them were butting heads and refusing to concede one inch, as if being able to pay the bill was a major victory.

Childish!

That was what everyone else present thought.

Judging that the feud was going nowhere, Fang Zhao, who had been a quiet bystander, asked a waiter for a pen and a piece of paper.

The waiter was curious, so he looked on. He couldn't follow Fang Zhao's finger, but before he knew it, the piece of paper had been transformed into a small piece of dice. Fang Zhao used the pen to mark its six surfaces with an increasing number of dots.

"Let's use this to decide," Fang Zhao said.

The two parties in the cockfight-like standoff looked over.

When he figured out what Fang Zhao was holding, Woo Tianhao gave a knowing smile. Ah, so we are kindred spirits.

Fang Zhao smiled and said, "The decision of who to pick up the tab is still up to you. How about the one who throws the odd number pay the bill?"

Woo Tianhao was about to smile, but he suppressed himself. He glanced at Zaro. "I'm OK with this."

"So am I," Zaro said.

Fang Zhao handed them the paper dice.

Woo Tianhao gestured at Zaro with his chin. "You first."

Zaro abruptly withdrew his hand, which had already reached out for the dice. "I don't need any favors from you. You first!"

This time, Woo Tianhao didn't refuse. He took the paper dice from Fang Zhao, weighed it and fumbled with it, then tossed it casually onto a neighboring table with a confident smile.

After rolling on the table a few times, the dice landed with one dot on top.

The smile on Woo Tianhao's face instantly grew. "It's settled, then. This meal's on me."

"What are you so cocky about? I haven't tossed yet." Zaro weighed the paper dice in the same manner as Woo Tianhao without seeming to reach any conclusions. He tossed it on the table. The dice rolled from one end to another, dropped to the floor, and rolled a few more times before stopping.

Woo Tianhao looked and burst out laughing. "It's two! You have nothing to say now, do you? Unless you want to play foul?"

Zaro was indeed about to propose a rematch, but he caught himself. "I'm not that type of person."

Fang Zhao said, "Then this meal is on Woo Tianhao. Next time, Zaro will pick up the tab."

The others in the party were incredulous. Uh, will there be a next time?

But in fact, Zaro was feeling much better. So be it—I'll treat next time, then. I threw a two, after all, a larger number than Woo Tianhao. That line of thinking improved his mood.

It was finally their turn to be seated. They were all young men, so naturally, they craved meat. All they ordered were meat dishes. They also asked for a barbecue platter.

Good food always served as a mood-changer. Despite being on the verge of a fistfight just moments ago, the two rivals were now bullsh*tting together.

After downing a few glasses of alcohol, the actors invited by Woo Tianhao also loosened up. They started chatting about the "Founding Era" storyline and when each character ended up with a bento box.

"Those were tough times. We are just acting. We're probably experiencing only one-tenth of the hardship our characters felt in reality."

"How would we have survived if we actually lived in the Period of Destruction?"

Zaro was engrossed in bullsh*tting with Woo Tianhao when that comment caught his attention. He interjected, "There's an old saying, 'a lone cat will always die young and a flock always thrives.' In other words, once a community reaches a critical mass, their chances of survival improve vastly. If I were born in that era, I'd definitely band together with other folks." Zaro then turned toward Woo Tianhao and said, "You were the one who told me the saying."

Woo Tianhao went blank. "Wait, when did I tell you that?"

"It was definitely you. You were telling me about this novel at your new dojo, the title was 'Soaring in the Skies and Escaping the Earth' or something like that. You mentioned quite a few couplets. That's when you told me that saying. I remember it clearly." Zaro pointed to his skull, then pointed at Woo Tianhao. "What's wrong with your head? Your memory is deteriorating."

Woo Tianhao fumed, pounding his palm on the table. "Bullsh*t! I swear I never said that."

The actor sitting next to Woo Tianhao tried to suppress his laughter in vain. He whispered, "What he means is 'a lone wolf always dies young and a pack always thrives,' right? I think we learned it in Chinese class."

The table went silent. All eyes shifted to Zaro.

Zaro rubbed his chin, not the least bit embarrassed. "Maybe. Oh, it's the same thing."

The others stared at Zaro as if he were a lone mushroom thriving in a desert.

What an oddball!

Woo Tianhao: "Pig brain!"

"Haha, glad you realized you're a bit pig-brained. Quick, eat some more so you're properly nourished," Zaro said.

Woo Tianhao's hands, which he had placed on the table, slithered toward the edge of the table.

He tried to flip the tabletop.

No luck.

Desperately wanting to shove all the dishes on the table onto Zaro's face, Woo Tianhao tried again. Still no luck.

That's weird. The table definitely wasn't bolted to the ground.

Woo Tianhao scanned the other folks seated at the table, his gaze eventually landing on Fang Zhao's hand, which was placed on the tabletop. He squinted.

Fang Zhao returned Woo Tianhao's glare with a friendly smile. He took the fresh dish being served by a waiter with his other hand, withdrew the hand pressing the tabletop and started serving the barbecued meat to everyone in clockwise order.

He served Woo Tianhao the biggest chunk on the plate.

Woo Tianhao glanced at Fang Zhao, then gave Zaro a look. He gauged the mood and felt his rage subside.

Why bother with an idiot like Zaro? Be classy! Be generous. People are watching. A veteran actor was sitting at the next table, as was an actress Woo Tianhao had the hots for. Can't leave a bad impression! If he actually flipped the tabletop, he would have no class left. Damn, I was almost blinded by my anger at Zaro.

As for Fang Zhao, Woo Tianhao had mixed feelings. Members of the Woo family had the utmost respect for people who were competent, especially folks who were good fighters, and judging from the situation, Fang Zhao didn't mean to instigate him.

Fine, I won't cause trouble today.

So Woo Tianhao kept chitchatting with Zaro.

Fang Zhao was pleased. These two kids are well behaved tonight.

He had noticed that even though the actors invited by Woo Tianhao hid their emotions

well, they were still a bit depressed because they were still in character. Although they were enjoying a day off, they were still in a bad headspace. The argument between Woo Tianhao and Zaro provided a timely distraction. Their thoughts were diverted elsewhere.

After the meal, Woo Tianhao paid the bill and left with his entourage. He threw Fang Zhao a knowing glance before he took off. "Fang Zhao, let's have fun together some time when we're free."

"Have fun doing what?" Zaro asked.

"None of your bloody business!" Woo Tianhao bolted without looking back.

Zaro was going to press Fang Zhao for details, but he got a call from his agent about a possible endorsement deal, so he dropped the line of questioning and headed back to his dorm room first.

Fang Zhao also returned to his dorm room, but he decided to jog back instead of catching a ride with Zaro.

The dorm complex was quite empty when Zaro arrived. The cast of "Founding Era" was on vacation. The actors were either resting in their rooms or binge-eating at Gourmet Food City.

Zaro was about to head upstairs when someone called his name.

"Sorry to bother. Could I have a few minutes of your time?"

Zaro looked over. The man who had just spoken was quite good looking, just slightly less handsome than he was. Yup, he's on my sh*list!

"Who are you?" Zaro asked.

The man choked a bit. He probably hadn't expected Zaro not to recognize him. He was quite popular in Yanzhou and had a sizable fan base around the world. Even if Zaro couldn't recall his name, surely Zaro should recognize his face, no? But Zaro glared at him as if looking at a stranger.

"My name is Si Lu. I'm an actor who appears in the Yanzhou chapter." Si Lu had been about to give a lengthy self-introduction, but Zaro clearly wasn't in the mood, so he

kept things short.

Zaro became slightly less confrontational when he realized the man wasn't an actor from Leizhou. "Oh, you're from Yanzhou. What is it?"

"I've run into some trouble with my acting. I was wondering whether the methods you used to improve your acting might come in handy," Si Lu said.

While Zaro's recent rise had its doubters with some senior figures in the industry questioning his technique, the success of the third season of the Leizhou chapter had silenced most critics. Zaro's performance had clearly turned out well.

Si Lu was struggling with his role, and his main scenes were about to come in the fifth season. He wasn't in his element. He had just returned from asking fellow actors for pointers, which had turned out to not be very helpful, when he had run into Zaro. So he had decided to give Zaro a shot too.

Zaro glared at his fellow cast member like was looking at an idiot. "Of course they come in handy, but they might not be useful for you. Also, why don't you look up Fang Zhao? He's from Yanzhou too. It's much easier talking to him. You Yanzhou actors are weird. Isn't it common sense to ask questions if you have trouble with something? And you have someone available for that purpose, yet here you are seeking out an outsider."

In fact, Zaro simply didn't want the hassle. He was in a hurry to get back to his room. He was worried about the potential endorsement deal his agent had mentioned. Also, Zaro was convinced that his secret weapon worked on him alone. That was what Roman had said. He wasn't making stuff up.

Si Lu froze, and Zaro waved him off and said, "OK, go look up Fang Zhao. He's an actor and an official consultant to the production. He's also filming on the same set as you are." With that comment, Zaro bolted. He mumbled as he left, "Something wrong with his head!"

Si Lu stayed put. His face twitched when he heard Zaro's parting comment. He was in a bind. He wanted to consult Fang Zhao, but they weren't signed to the same company. He was signed to Neon Culture, one of Silver Wing's traditional rivals. His agent had warned him before his shoot to stay away from Silver Wing artists lest he get conned without knowing.

So should he approach Fang Zhao in this case or not?

Chapter 307

Train?

Si Lu was at a loss.

Fang Zhao was able to guide Zaro, and as a member of the consultant team, he would surely be even more familiar with the Yanzhou chapter and would understand the roles better. Perhaps Fang Zhao's understanding was much deeper than other actors, but he would be willing to listen to reasonable remarks.

Si Lu had a habit. Whenever he was distressed, he liked to go to a gym and hit the weights.

There was an exercise level in every building in the housing area, but there were many people there. Apart from this, there was also a health center that Si Lu loved to visit.

There was actually another place specifically for the leads and important supporting roles of each film unit. The conditions there were even better and there was more personal space. The only problem was that Si Lu could not get in as he wasn't qualified enough.

Although the cast and crew were on vacation today, there were still many people in the health center. Some people would visit the gourmet food city to relieve some stress, whereas others would visit the health center to relieve all their pent-up stress and frustrations after a season of filming.

Si Lu was also a frequent visitor here. When he entered, he saw familiar faces from each continent;s film unit.

He did not greet anyone, and nobody bothered him. Although everyone was training their bodies, they all had their own train of thoughts. Greeting others could be considered disturbing them, so here, nobody would hastily talk to another unless they were friends.

It hadn't been like this at the start, but as season after season went by, this strange atmosphere had arisen.

Sometimes, when one was being polite, from another's point of view, it was like one was asking about their entire family.

Therefore, when one entered the health center and saw a senior from the showbiz circles, not greeting the other party wasn't considered a form of disrespect.

As Si Lu was training, he considered whether he should go seek out Fang Zhao.

At this moment, Fang Zhao had just entered the health center after running around the gourmet food city. Although he had just ran, he wasn't sweating—there was only some sand and dirt on his body.

As Fang Zhao had an important role in the cast, he had the privilege of using the special gym. However, he had loaned his right to another actor in the same company. That actor needed some physical training and a quiet environment. The other exercise areas had too many people, and the special gym for leads and important supporting roles was a little better.

Fang Zhao did not have many requirements for such things, so he had temporarily loaned his access card to that other actor.

The people at this health center frequently saw Fang Zhao. Knowing that he had lent his access card to others, they were quite envious of that other actor. If they could, they would naturally use a quieter and more personal environment for their own training. It was just too bad that there were too many actors and resources were limited. They could only blame themselves for not being capable enough to snag a lead role.

Si Lu also saw Fang Zhao, and he paused his training. He was hesitating on whether to go over, but before he decided, Fang Zhao had entered another training room.

Fang Zhao had entered a room with lots of sandbags. There were a few actors training there already. There were more people using sandbags here. Fang Zhao walked over to the side with suspended sandbags. This was the area with the largest ones.

The people here were already used to this sight. There were also people who had once tried to punch these sandbags and injured their fists. Therefore, those suspended sandbags were basically only used by Fang Zhao. Even when there were many people in the health center, this area would still be empty.

When actors from every continent came here to train and observed Fang Zhao's fighting prowess, they came to this conclusion: he can fight!

He could hit such a large and hard sandbag. If this wasn't considered being able to fight well, then what was?

As some people watched Fang Zhao start to hit the sandbags once more, a few of them started to discuss in muted voices. "Look, Fang Zhao is hitting that sandbag again. That sandbag is really pitiful; it gets beaten up every few days."

"You are mistaken. That isn't the previous sandbag. The health center has changed to a new one again. I heard that the previous one was beaten till it broke... No, I think the sandbag is changed after every session."

"Really impressive!"

"Do you want to go and practice with Fang Zhao? The people from our continent do not have much interaction with Fang Zhao. Why don't you go and practice with Fang Zhao first?"

The person who was asked looked at the new sandbag and then looked at Fang Zhao before vigorously shaking his head and replying, "No way! If he doesn't control his strength properly, what happens if I get crippled? My small frame won't be able to withstand a punch of his."

"He can fight so well, why is he an actor? He can go over to the Muzhou arena and be a boxer. One can earn more than an actor over there."

Someone else interrupted them. "Just a gentle reminder, Fang Zhao's actual profession is composer. He held his first career concert just last year. He graduated from Qi'an Academy of Music, which is a top-tier school in Yanzhou for the arts."

The other two silently pondered for some time before replying, "Then the question is, why does he want to be an actor? Is competing with us for our livelihood very fun?"

Fang Zhao did not know that he was being discussed. It was not that he could not hear, but whenever he came, he would not put in extra effort to take note of what other people were talking about. Otherwise, if he really wanted to, he could hear them even over the muffled sounds of all the sandbags being hit.

Since joining the cast of "Founding Era," other actors had also suffered from negative emotions. Although Fang Zhao himself was more clear headed, he wasn't entirely unaffected. He would also recall stuff that had happened before, and he wasn't completely at peace.

Actually, Fang Zhao wished that he could shoot to let off steam, but there were no shooting ranges that fit his requirement here. Eighty percent of the guns provided by the production team weren't real. Props were made in the image of guns from the Period of Destruction, and not many bullets were manufactured, as the production team was taking safety into account.

Therefore, Fang Zhao would punch some sandbags every few days. The largest sandbag here was actually set up according to a special request from Fang Zhao. He could hit it without any problems, but if other people tried, they would hurt their fists.

Fang Zhao also paid for the cost of replacing damaged sandbags out of his own pocket. He would not let the production team pay for them.

After his session, when Fang Zhao came out, someone called his name.

"Fang Zhao!"

Si Lu had finally set his resolve and had kept watch over the door. When he saw Fang Zhao, he got a little excited and his voice was a little loud.

Others present there simultaneously turned to look over.

Aware that he had caused a disturbance, Si Lu made an apologetic gesture toward his surroundings. Then he took a deep breath, walked in front of Fang Zhao, and opened his mouth. There were many people around, including a number of familiar faces from Yanzhou.

He was embarrassed. Originally, he had thought quite a bit about what to say, but the word that came out of his mouth was "Train?"

Everyone else: "... " A real warrior!

Especially those that had come out behind Fang Zhao, when they heard what Si Lu had said, they flashed him a thumbs up. His courage was commendable, but he wasn't being sensible. The large damaged sandbag that was hanging inside resembled a dead

body.

Even people who did not know the fate of the large sandbag had heard of Fang Zhao's capability. In the four successive seasons of filming, Fang Zhao was the only one that had not used a body double! Even the fight choreographer and people invited from military districts had said that if Fang Zhao was in the military, he would not be much different from special forces or elite troops.

Training with Fang Zhao? Was he not thinking things through? Was he under too much pressure?

Si Lu came to his senses after speaking and wanted to give himself a slap. Why did I say such a thing! I'm asking to be brutalized! Surely I have been under too much pressure; thus my brain isn't working too well.

Si Lu was regretting and praying that Fang Zhao rejected him. Following that, he heard Fang Zhao reply, "Sure. Where shall we go?" Fang Zhao pointed to a site not too far away. Normally, when actors wanted to practice and coordinate for their roles, they would head over there.

Fang Zhao had just seen the people inside come out and it was empty now.

Si Lu clenched his jaw and said, "All right."

Half an hour later, Fang Zhao and Si Lu came out one after the other.

Fang Zhao grabbed his coat and bag and returned to his living quarters. There didn't seem to be anything different about him.

As for Si Lu, he appeared dejected. He grimaced whenever he moved his arm. Clearly he was in pain.

An actor came over to ask him, "Were you beaten up?"

Si Lu shook his head. "No."

The others did not believe him, but they did not probe further and instead said, "You weren't hit in the face, nor did you receive serious wounds, so it's all fine as long as it doesn't affect filming."

Si Lu could not be bothered to explain further when he saw the looks of pity he was getting from the others. Now he was feeling vexed. He had said to train, but actually, Fang Zhao had given it to him. To make a similar analogy, it was like a master sparring with some young disciples. Clearly he was older than Fang Zhao by a few decades!

Si Lu did not spend much longer in the health center, soon taking his things and returning to his quarters as well.

Sitting down, Si Lu felt rather relaxed despite his body being physically exhausted. A fight was indeed the best way to vent.

His room wasn't like the single room that Fang Zhao had—it was a double room. However, his actor roommate had already received a bento box at the end of season four, and if he wished to stay on, he would have to arrange for other accommodations at his own expense, and the conditions would not be as good.

Now only Si Lu was left here, and it was a peaceful environment to ponder in.

Si Lu once again checked the message his manager had sent him when he'd last had internet access. Besides inquiring about his filming situation and physical condition, Si Lu's manager had also exhorted what should be done and how to handle different matters as well as to guard against people from Silver Wing.

Si Lu wasn't a person with a very high IQ. He had gotten where he was today partly because of his own qualifications and partly because he had an extremely capable manager. Although he would be getting his bento box in the upcoming season five, the role he played had some distinguishing features. When the time came for him to receive his bento box, his popularity would be there. Nowadays, his popularity in Yanzhou was also much higher than before.

He actually wasn't a person that hesitated a lot. He had gotten to these heights today and achieved so much because he relied on advice and plans from his company, his manager, and the teams behind him. His family members also told him to listen to these teams' arrangements and not to act by himself in case he was deceived and lost all the things he had worked so hard to achieve.

But now he had run into some difficulty.

He would be receiving his bento box in the fifth season, and it was the most crucial time for this role of his, yet he couldn't find his form now and wasn't able to produce

a satisfactory result. If this went on, when it came to the filming, he might not be able to succeed even after many takes.

Si Lu held a prop knife in his hands. This was the knife the character he played in the series used. He had applied for permission to bring it back so that he could gain some inspiration, but now it was as if his mind was enveloped in a thick fog. He just wasn't able to do anything.

After pondering for quite some time in his room, Si Lu decided that he would still seek out Fang Zhao. From what had happened today, Fang Zhao actually wasn't as scary as Si Lu's agent had said he was. Fang Zhao had practiced with him and had not even made any attacks. The reason his fists were hurting was because Fang Zhao's bones and muscles were too hard!

On the other hand, after Fang Zhao returned to his room, he had a routine meal to replenish the energy used up that day.

When he remembered the encounter with an actor named Si Lu today, Fang Zhao made a mental note.

When some people acted, the personality they exuded would inundate the role they played in the series, but there were also some whose personalities would get overshadowed by the roles they played, and it would impact them throughout out their lives.

It would be fine if it was some sunny series, but "Founding Era" was just like the psychologists had said: a dark and gloomy forest. It was too dangerous for just anybody to step in. If a person was not careful, he would be engulfed whole. The more important the part, the longer one touched upon the role, the longer he would be immersed in it.

It was fine if it were just a two- or three-hour movie or a series with something like 10 episodes, but "Founding Era" was too long. Every chapter was forecasted to have 10 seasons, and each season had 30 episodes. The actors spent too much time immersed in their roles.

Today, when Fang Zhao had seen the aura that Si Lu was exuding, it had been clear that Si Lu had been deeply influenced by his role, but it couldn't be considered too serious.

Of course, Fang Zhao had been able to see that the other party had had other stuff he

wanted to say, but Si Lu had not voiced it.

After Fang Zhao finished his meal, the doorbell rang.

When he opened the door, Si Lu stood outside with an apologetic look on his face. "Sorry for disturbing you. I have encountered some difficulty. Is it convenient for you to have a listen and give me some suggestions? Zaro said that if we in the Yanzhou film unit have any questions, you are the best person to seek."

After all, Si Lu did not wish to seek out Zaro again. When Zaro talked, he pissed people off too easily.

Chapter 308

A Pot Falls from the Sky While One Sits at Home

Fang Zhao knew what Si Lu meant, and his gaze went to Si Lu's hands. "You didn't bring the knife."

"...No." Si Lu scratched his head in embarrassment. He had not brought his knife along when seeking help. Wouldn't he get mistaken for a gang member?

However, when Si Lu heard Fang Zhao mention the knife, he had more confidence in Fang Zhao. The character he played was someone whose knife never left his hands.

"Come in." Fang Zhao poured a glass of water and handed it over.

Si Lu accepted it courteously. "Thanks."

But he didn't dare to drink.

His manager had mentioned to him many times that he should not randomly drink anything that others handed over. He was to guard against people even if they were from the same company. Everyone was a competitor—who knew if the other party might have some motives and add something else to the drink?

Before joining the cast, his manager had exhorted repeatedly that he should guard against other actors, especially those from rival companies, such as Silver Wing. Even if the other party might seem extremely cordial and friendly, he should still remain cautious. Work stress, mental stress, and the occasional bad weather already made it unbearable. With the runs added on, one would be half-dead.

Now, should he drink the glass of water that Fang Zhao had handed over?

"Do you wish to understand more about 'Qi Guan' as a person?" Fang Zhao asked.

Qi Guan was the character that Si Lu portrayed in the series.

"Yes!" Si Lu perked up, his attention leaving the glass of water. He continued earnestly,

"I have read a lot of resources, but like before, his image is still indistinct. The script doesn't present Qi Guan in a detailed enough manner either. When I was acting, the previous few episodes were still all right, but season five is a crux period. I want to act this role well and portray this role, this person, even better. I heard that you were a consultant team member for the Yanzhou chapter and so probably understand more about that portion of history. Perhaps you know more than me, so I came over to seek your help."

"Qi Guan, that... that person was very special. He wasn't suited to be born in peaceful times. The Period of Destruction was considered hell for others, but he was a natural there. His ideology was more primitive, and he liked to use knives but not guns. His senses were also not ordinary. In his own words, the strong did not need help, and he only helped the weak. Therefore, he could stand aside and watch coldly as many capable and strong people died, yet he could also sacrifice himself for the sake of two weak researchers—his body was never found..."

Fang Zhao remembered this person, Qi Guan. He had once requested Qi Guan join his own squad, but he'd been rejected.

"We are not the same kind of people."

This had been Qi Guan's reply before he had picked up his long and slender knife and left without turning to look back once.

He was just like those wandering swordsmen of old. Everything he did was based on his own guts. Even if other people had differing views, he would simply not give a damn. He seemingly appeared not to care about other stuff, yet he had his own principles and was obstinate. In a sense, he wasn't one of the good guys, but he wasn't entirely a heinous person either.

After Fang Zhao's rebirth, he had looked through some resources left behind from the Founding Era. Every person that had been shifted into the Cemetery of Martyrs had had to go through many rounds of audits.

Some people were not fond of Qi Guan's style of handling things, and during the Founding Era, when graves had been shifted, there had been some people who opposed it. Ultimately, however, his body had still been moved to the Cemetery of Martyrs.

In later generations, his deeds were considered very great, because some of the people he had saved had ended up as doctors that researched many antiviral vaccines and were among the first batch of senior members that founded the Academy of Science Headquarters.

Back then, Qi Guan would never have thought that he would save such great scientists.

In Qi Guan's grave at the Cemetery of Martyrs, there were no skeletal remains, just a battle-worn knife. When his grave had been built, it had been that doctor who had personally placed that knife in Qi Guan's grave. Today, the knife in the museum was just a replica.

The prop knife that Si Lu was using for filming had been replicated according to the one in the museum.

At the moment, Si Lu sat on the sofa listening attentively to Fang Zhao's analysis of Qi Guan. When he regained his senses... he found himself midway through drinking the water.

Looking at the glass again, there was only half left.

Si Lu: "!!!"

In the 10 minutes that had passed, he had actually, unintentionally drunk half the glass!

Would he get a stomachache?

Was there any poison inside?

It was not that Si Lu always thought about the worst that could happen but that his manager frequently scared him this way.

Yet Si Lu did not have any time to remain at a loss. Compared to this, he still wished to hear from Fang Zhao more about the stuff that Qi Guan had done. What was getting poisoned compared to this?

The Qi Guan that Fang Zhao spoke about was slightly different than the Qi Guan that Si Lu had researched through various resources, but this brought the person to life even more. Si Lu couldn't help but feel that the records of Qi Guan in the resources

were a little phony and incomplete, like it was a soul that was missing something important.

But when he listened to what Fang Zhao had to say, Si Lu's previously muddled thoughts seemingly started to get clearer. What Fang Zhao spoke about was the crucial point, and it was what Si Lu had been so anxious to know!

As he spoke, Fang Zhao walked over to where a music keyboard was placed. This was where he normally went to when he wanted to compose. Qi Guan was someone Fang Zhao had not seen in a long time, and when he was brought up, Fang Zhao subconsciously placed his hands on the keyboard.

A key was pressed, and the sound of a string instrument pinged out.

"Regarding the person named Qi Guan, in life, he was the wind. 1 In death, he drifted away in the wind. It wasn't that different."

Si Lu had no idea whether it was the impact of Fang Zhao's words or the magic from the musical notes, but he found himself being thoroughly immersed in his thoughts.

To heed not the outcome, to spare no effort.

A moment, a day, a month, a season, a year, a cycle, a lifetime.

Directly delving into his conscience.

Perhaps this was his life's principles.

When Si Lu had obtained the script and when he had researched his character, what he had seen was a loner in the wilderness who had no companions, but maybe that wasn't the case.

Si Lu had thought that when Qi Guan had been facing death's door, he might have been like other people and have had more sentiments. However, that might not have been the case.

It was as if Si Lu could peek into his own mind and see those gloomy and depressing sentiments.

When the sun was hidden behind the earth, there would only be chills when the wind

blew.

He apparently saw the solitary figure in the wilderness, but at the end of the journey, his heart wasn't as fretful as it had been in the beginning.

When contemplating, he was seemingly unresigned and somewhat desolate.

But after that, those emotions were gone.

It was as if he could hear the songs in the night breeze, as if he could see a star falling into a lake and glowing as brightly as before.

The surrounding world was as quiet as the deep sea.

Shutting his eyes, opening his eyes, faintly smiling.

No more being unresigned, no longer desolate.

In life, he was the wind.

In death, he drifted in the wind.

A wanderer wasn't bound by borders!

Si Lu clenched his fist, yet his heart was empty.

"Where's my knife?" Si Lu muttered.

"You left it in your own room." Fang Zhao removed his finger that had been striking the keyboard.

Si Lu turned around and left. If this were the old him, he would have courteously said something, but now, he did not say anything.

Fang Zhao watched the door close and sighed.

It had already been 500—going on 600—years since those people had left!

——

Elsewhere, having returned from Fang Zhao's place, Si Lu spent the next few days staying in his room, all the way until filming for season five of the "Founding Era" Yanzhou chapter began.

In the cast, Si Lu lost his normal reserved and polite demeanor and was more unrestrained. He was more unbridled, yet he constrained himself to a small area. His knife never left his hands.

The people in the cast and crew were aware of the change in Si Lu, but they did not say anything unnecessary. They were all in the same industry and could understand what these circumstances implied.

The director was happy knowing that Si Lu had found his form, yet he was also worried, worried that Si Lu would not be able to shed his character after filming concluded.

On the day when filming for his role wrapped up, the director noticed Si Lu still standing there blankly, and he went over to pat Si Lu on the shoulders. "Go pay a visit to Dr. Dai after this."

The director also got someone to collect the prop knife and put it away. Since Si Lu's scenes in the series were completed, it was better to collect these sorts of props, just to be safe. The directing team had too many people that had the same sort of circumstances as Si Lu. This wasn't a rare phenomenon. As the series went on, there would be even more actors like this. Yesterday, he had even heard someone from the psychologist team advise Director Roman to increase the number of psychologists.

"Hey, yet another one who has sunk in and can't get out," said a staff member of the production team to his colleague as they watched Si Lu, who seemed in a daze.

"After some visits to the psychologists and some time, he'll be fine and will be able to shed his character."

The cast and crew were too busy. Even if they were actors from the same company or even good friends, nobody could spare the time to take care of others. Therefore, the production team's staff that was in charge of handling these people would bring these actors over to the psychologists as soon as possible to receive therapy. The production team did not wish for the actors' mental states to be affected because of this series.

Si Lu was just like a robot, and he listened to the staff's instructions, changed out of

his costume, washed the "bloodstains" off his body, took a bath, put on a set of new clothing, and headed to the psychologist to receive treatment.

By the time he returned from the psychologists, it had already turned dark.

Si Lu wasn't as dazed as he had been before, but the staff did not leave. They instead brought him to the dining hall to collect the fragrant, extravagant, and abundant bento box.

"Have a good meal, and rest for the next few days. You must be tired after filming for so long, but you can wake up as late as you want to tomorrow!" the staff member said as he handed the bento box to Si Lu.

Receiving the bento box, Si Lu mumbled, "Thanks," and then turned around to leave.

When he returned to his quarters, Si Lu placed the bento box on the table and did not move as he sat in front of the table in a daze.

The dishes were clearly impeccable, but Si Lu just had no desire to eat. As before, his hands felt empty, and he didn't wish to pick up any utensils. Si Lu covered up the box and continued to stare blankly.

When Fang Zhao came over after finishing his filming, Si Lu's boxed meal still hadn't been touched.

Fang Zhao had seen the filming of Si Lu's scenes today. The filming had been very good, but as before, Si Lu's mental state seemed a little bit off. Even though Si Lu had visited the psychologist, Fang Zhao couldn't help but worry and had come over to visit.

"Can't bear to?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Mhmm," Si Lu replied softly.

Unresigned, reluctant, apprehensive, melancholic, just like a cavalryman who had lost his horse or a monk who had lost his religious way. However, these feelings were not because of the role—rather, they were Si Lu's own feelings. Even though his part in the series was over, he was still being impacted by the role.

When filming, Si Lu had felt that Qi Guan was himself in another world. And now, it was time to part with the role he played, time to bid farewell to his other self.

Sighing deeply, Si Lu removed the lid of the box meal once again with trembling fingers. Picking up his utensils, he starting eating ceremoniously, one bite at a time. He was unable to control his tears as large droplets trickled into the bento box.

Si Lu finished every single grain of food and every single drop of his drink. Following that, he wiped his face and told Fang Zhao. "Please wait a minute."

With that, Si Lu hurried into the washroom. When he came out, his face no longer showed any trace that he had been crying.

"Let's take a photo together. I'll post it up on my social platform to thank you for your help. I am really very grateful!"

Fang Zhao had no objections. After taking the photo, he didn't stay and bother Si Lu. Right now, what Si Lu needed was some personal space and time to recover his mental state.

After Fang Zhao left, Si Lu edited the photograph and set it to automatically upload to his social platform. The assignment his manager had given him was to update his goings-on whenever he had internet access, so as to let his fans know what he was up to.

The psychologist had scheduled a follow-up session for three days later. Only when he was given the all clear would he be able to leave the cast. Now he just felt really tired. His body and soul were weary, and he needed to have a few days of good sleep.

On the second day, Si Lu was woken up by the reverberating beeps of his communications device.

Si Lu opened his eyes just a little. Not knowing where he was, he reached out mechanically to answer the call.

"Hello..."

The thundering howl of his manager came through from the other end. "Do you wish to change jobs?!"

At a loss, Si Lu looked at the time and was astonished to find out that today was actually internet access day!

Time passed by so quickly?! I thought there were still two days!

However, on the other end, when his manager saw him not saying anything, he assumed that that was indeed Si Lu's intention. He got even angrier, and his roars were louder.

"You didn't even take a photograph of the bento box, but you took a photograph with Fang Zhao, even saying 'thank you'? What are you trying to imply? Do you want to jump ship and join Silver Wing? Now that you are famous, you have more guts and want to revolt!? I have said this many times, stay away from Silver Wing's personnel! Is this how you repay me?"

Si Lu thought back and suddenly remembered. Oh, I forgot to take a photograph of the bento box!

It seemed like his manager had even told him to find a proper angle when taking a photo of the bento box before and had mentioned many photography techniques. He had actually forgotten all about it.

"Now that you have found a new backer, a new master, you wish to kick away all of us that have put in our utmost to help push you up?! One moment I was guiding the teams to help you chart out your developmental plans, and the next moment I find you posting this sort of stuff. Si Lu, you f*cking have the guts!"

"No, you are mistaken!" Si Lu hurriedly explained.

Si Lu had gone from being a small insignificant actor to where he was today thanks to the toiling from his manager and the teams behind him. He really had no intention of jumping ship; all he had wanted was to tell everyone that the reason he had been able to find the best form to portray his character was thanks to Fang Zhao. Because his mood had still been somewhat stifled when he had edited his status, he had only written down two words: "thank you." He had never expected it to cause this sort of trouble.

After Si Lu had explained the before and after, only then did his manager on the other end of the call calm down.

"Don't do this sort of funny stuff in future. It is very easy to misunderstand your post! You don't know it yet, but because of your photo, many Yanzhou media outlets are in a frenzy circulating news that you want to jump ship. They're saying that Fang Zhao is

planning to poach from Neon Culture! Fang Zhao is really good at duping people. When he was gaming, he helped Silver Wing's gaming department poach a few e-sports gods. Now that he is acting, he is surely thinking of poaching their rivals' assets! Oh, right, the actor that joined Silver Wing last week was surely conned over by Fang Zhao!"

"I don't think Fang Zhao is that sort of person... How about, I delete that post now?" Si Lu asked cautiously.

"Delete my ass! That makes it seem like you have a guilty conscience! Post another status, a more detailed one, explaining the circumstances clearly... No, after you have written it, send it to me first. After I have vetted it, then you can send... Forget it, I think it will be best if I write it for you. You can continue sleeping first. Remember to visit the psychologist after you have woken up!"

After the call ended, Si Lu's manager lamented to the others in the team, "I'm probably the most dedicated manager among all managers."

Elsewhere, Fang Zhao was also being bombarded by messages. There were some inquiries from Silver Wing, and there was some probing from other companies.

Only after he had seen the "evidence" being circulated by all the different entertainment media did Fang Zhao know that he had started "poaching from rival companies" again.

A pot falls from the sky while one is sitting at home. 2

Chapter 309

Magical Object Diting Z Series

Entertainment media did not focus on what the truth was. What they focused on was whether it could attract the attention of the masses, and if it couldn't, they would stir things up.

A photograph with Fang Zhao, who was currently very popular in Yanzhou and played an important supporting role in "Founding Era."

A further glance at the source: a Neon Culture celebrity!

Neon Culture and Silver Wing Media were old rivals. Just investigating back a few years, one might discover that shortly after Fang Zhao had graduated, he'd had some issues with Neon Culture. Now Fang Zhao had such good relationships with Neon Culture's actors?

Normally, even if one had good relations in private, they would not frequently bring it out into the open, let alone reveal it on such a public social platform.

In actual fact, fans didn't think too much about it when they saw this photograph. What was the big deal about actors having a good relationship, helping one another, or giving thanks? There were many actors that had good relations with others, even if they were from different companies.

However, in no time, many editors of entertainment media outlets turned a "no big deal" into an "earth-shaking event," and they even dug out the incidents back when Silver Wing's gaming department had been recruiting. Evidence of Fang Zhao's poaching ability was brought up, and even the recent incident of Silver Wing poaching an outstanding actor from another company was also pinned as Fang Zhao's doing.

Regardless of whether he had been involved or not, all of these were pinned on Fang Zhao. Wasn't it his own fault for flourishing in the limelight now?

If these were not pinned on Fang Zhao, how would discussion be generated? How would attention be drawn?

At the same time, the entertainment media groups knew that it was rather inconvenient for the casts on planet Wai to get internet access, so before Si Lu could get internet access and before his team could craft a proper response, these people did their utmost to stir stuff up.

Afterward, Si Lu's manager cleared up the situation using Si Lu's words and once again earnestly thanked Fang Zhao for his help. Something written by a professional manager was definitely more thorough than something written by Si Lu, whose IQ and EQ weren't that high. Also, he expressed regret for having caused a misunderstanding and giving rise to these discussions. At the same time, he made sure it was satisfactory for the company.

Neon Culture had a few actors in the cast, including first-rate and top-rate superstars within the continent. However, the only one who had been able to help Si Lu truly find his form was Fang Zhao. However, on the surface, this would not be revealed. If this information was brought to light, it would be disgraceful for the company's experienced actors, who were seniors in the showbiz circles.

Once public relations teams had started to make their move, the matter also quieted down. There were many things happening every minute online, and discussion regarding "Founding Era" never ceased. Diverting the public's attention was very easy.

After entertainment media were satisfied with their increased traffic, they moved on.

The teams behind Si Lu had also gained a few benefits from this matter.

Fang Zhao... Fang Zhao had become a scapegoat.

Even if this matter had already passed, in the eyes of many entertainment media companies, Fang Zhao already had this image: this is a dangerous person! Each and every company would be more guarded and would get the celebrities under their flag to stay away from him. Especially celebrities who were slated for crucial development—they should have as little contact with Fang Zhao as possible. What would they do if Fang Zhao poached these assets in a moment of carelessness?

When thinking about it, it was seemingly like those entertainment reporters had said. Silver Wing's development in the past two years had gone very well, and their global influence had increased. Indeed, they were heading toward becoming a comprehensive entertainment juggernaut, and apparently, these developments had

sped up when Fang Zhao had entered Silver Wing.

Naturally, while these companies were guarding against Fang Zhao, they were also thinking about how to poach Fang Zhao over to their own company.

Planet Wai cast and crew.

Si Lu had specifically gone over to Fang Zhao's to extend an apology for causing trouble due to him not thinking things through before posting, thus harming Fang Zhao's image.

Fang Zhao wasn't angry. The entertainment circles were just like this, and he had already gotten used to it. Furthermore, for people who had experienced the Period of Destruction, such trivial matters couldn't be considered a big deal. Besides, Silver Wing's teams were not just for show. Even if the matter blew up, they would be able to resolve it.

Seeing that Si Lu had actually had no ill intentions, Fang Zhao consoled Si Lu instead and asked about his future plans.

"I will still be staying here for a period. Dr. Dai still wants me to come back a few more times," Si Lu replied sheepishly.

For actors like him that had had considerable scenes and had acted for four to five seasons, once their part in the series was over, they would receive some recommendations from the psychologists.

Si Lu might have seemed all right now, but he had not completely gotten out of character. The psychologist wanted to observe him for a while more and allow him to leave only after everything was in order. Si Lu was also advised to leave the cast right away once he was given the all clear.

For people that were immersed too deeply in character, even after shedding the role, continuing to stay on with the cast might result in them falling back into character again.

Si Lu was actually very reluctant. He had originally wanted to stay on with the cast to learn more, but now the psychologist and his manager had both advised him not to stay on. Si Lu trusted the judgment of these professionals.

"I will be returning once Dr. Dai tells me that I can leave. Oh right, Fang Zhao, what was the name of the tune you played that time? I don't think I have ever heard it before." Si Lu was asking about the tune Fang Zhao had played on the keyboard when he had come over to consult Fang Zhao and better understand the historical character Qi Guan.

"There isn't a name," Fang Zhao replied. "That was also my first time playing it. It has never been released on the internet before."

"An impromptu composition? Impressive!"

Now Si Lu really admired Fang Zhao. He had heard from musicians from his own company that Fang Zhao had also been invited to join the "Founding Era" music team. That meant to say that if Fang Zhao composed any pieces, he could compete with others for his music to be used in scenes inside the series. For example, the scene where Qi Guan, the character Si Lu portrayed in the series, died in battle had accompaniment music created by a musician from Yanzhou.

Before, Si Lu had not understood, but now he felt that as long as Fang Zhao wanted to compete, he might not necessarily lose to those precursors in the music circles.

A consultant team member and music team member, and he was even acting in an important supporting role—Fang Zhao was really a talented person.

Si Lu's admiration for Fang Zhao was increasing. Fang Zhao was genuinely capable, and Si Lu was almost becoming a Fang Zhao fan.

Some 10-odd days later, Si Lu received an all clear from the psychologists. He went through the cast and crew procedures, collected his luggage, and boarded a transport ship headed from planet Wai back to Earth along with others who had received their bento box.

On returning to Yanzhou, Si Lu first went to the Cemetery of Martyrs to pay his respects.

Qi Guan's grave number had already been engraved in his heart. After he arrived at the Cemetery of Martyrs, he went straight to Qi Guan's grave and bowed deeply.

He knew that there was only a knife inside the grave—not a prop knife but the actual one that Qi Guan had used. In the eyes of many people, Qi Guan's character might be

very flawed, but in Si Lu's heart, he no longer felt so. Perhaps his sentiments were from being too immersed in the character, as Si Lu felt like Qi Guan was another him who had wandered that hell on earth as he'd pleased.

When the Yanzhou chapter's season five was aired, the episode with Qi Guan's death scene earned quite a lot of tears from audiences.

A tragic hero always created a deeper impression. In the eyes of the people, he had already exceeded the ordinary and had become a fable.

Before the fifth season aired, some people had created a list of the names of those that would die this season according to the real process in history.

Fans of Si Lu and of the historical character "Qi Guan" all watched it as their hearts shuddered.

There was a main music piece for the episode where Qi Guan died. The piece had been composed by a celebrated musician in Yanzhou, and the quality of the tune was very high. Many people felt that this storyline was very fitting to the music piece and that it was especially tear-inducing.

However, after listening to it a few times, Si Lu felt that the accompaniment piece in the series was not as profound as the one he had heard Fang Zhao play.

Although he could not remember every single note clearly in his head, every time he recalled the song, there were always some faint sounds. He also sensed that these sounds had gradually vanished when he'd stepped out of the character of Qi Guan.

As for which of the two tunes was better, the two could not be compared.

The accompaniment music in the series focused on "tragic" and "sacrifice" and had a thicker artistic embellishment. As for the piece that Fang Zhao had played, that truly belonged to the person Qi Guan. The two pieces had different orientations.

Si Lu decided that he would search for Fang Zhao's concert and give it a listen when he got back.

Today, Si Lu was in a car headed back to the company after recording a program. He was listening to his manager tell him about what other arrangements he had this month when he suddenly looked out of the window.

An advertisement was flashing on the massive screen on the exterior of a high-rise building.

"Is that the latest earpiece that Fang Zhao is endorsing?"

Hearing that, his manager turned over to look and grudgingly replied, "Yeah. I heard that it is a luxury version. There were commercials and advance sales a short while ago."

Si Lu went online to search for the full video commercial.

Sunshine, mountain creeks; life, destruction, still water, daybreak; ancient temples and shrines, alpine glaciers; shrapnel splitting into pieces, guns blazing; day and night appeared fleeting, the vast starry sky seemingly right beside you... dream-like musical notes revolving beside the ears, a hand stretching out that looked to be able to pass through multiple worlds.

"Take off the earpiece and you are just a part of the world. Put the earpiece on and, you can possess the entire world! Diting Z Series; power arrives!"

Hearing the sounds from the commercial, Si Lu's manager said, "I didn't pay attention then, but after searching, this series of earpieces is rather high quality."

Entertainment circles had their own status hierarchy. Celebrities would endorse luxury goods to display their standing and let the masses have a much clearer idea of their status.

"Other people endorse luxury items too, either clothing, jewelry, makeup, or luxury cars and such, yet the first luxury item that Fang Zhao endorses is actually an earpiece!" Si Lu's manager also felt that it was strange. "An actor endorsing an earpiece... No, I think Fang Zhao wasn't an actor in the past—wasn't he from the gaming circles?"

"Composer," Si Lu said, slightly animatedly. "Fang Zhao's composing is especially impressive! When he was telling me about Qi Guan, he even improvised a tune. At the time, it was as if my entire self was brought into another world, and after that, I found my best form, all the way until I finished scenes. Don't you think that is especially impressive and mystical?"

"...You definitely have been poisoned."

"Hey, there wasn't any poison. Really. I drank the water he gave and was totally fine!"

Si Lu also did not bother to explain further to his manager. He had just seen the timing for the first round of advance sales for the Z Series. It was today at 2 in the afternoon. It was about time soon. Si Lu had been very busy traveling all over and attending activities, so he had spent very little time online and had not paid attention to news regarding earpieces. Thus, he only knew about it when he saw the advertisement outside.

Actually, Fiery Bird released a luxurious high-end earpiece model every year. That model would also represent Fiery Bird's greatest accomplishment in manufacturing earpieces. This year, there had been an even bigger breakthrough, and they were releasing a new earpiece system, "System Z," which once more brought about a heightened hearing experience.

But at the same time, as a high-end series and being viewed by the masses as a luxury good, the Z Series's price wouldn't be low.

As of now, among all the high-end earpieces, the most highly anticipated one was the model that Fang Zhao wore in numerous commercials: Old Era-style headphones. The standard version already cost above 100 thousand, and the superior version was over 500 thousand. As for special custom-made versions... Those were the for the nouveau riche.

From what the masses saw, Diting System Z was a luxury item. As for fans of music, they were more curious about the newest system that Fiery Bird had to offer.

Anyone familiar with earpieces knew that the Diting Series had always been about pursuing a hearing experience, and now the Z-series earpieces would be equipped with the rumored most-up-to-date earpiece technology that was the System Z!

People that normally did not pay attention to this were so shocked their jaws dropped upon seeing the price range. However, for people that took note of earpieces, this was normal; it happened every year.

Some people could never go back after using a high-end machine, not only because these earpieces could satisfy their acute ears and their demanding requirements for sound quality but also because of the degree of comfort provided. High-quality earpieces could let the user forget that the earpiece was even there as it assimilated

sounds into the ear, letting the user enjoy the sounds of the world.

Probably only fanatical music lovers would purchase such high-end machines every year... purely for the sake of being pretentious.

"Fiery Bird only releases a high-end series every year. To think that they would actually unleash a System Z!" A certain music zealot exclaimed in a chat group.

"Your information is lacking. Do you even pay your broadband fees? How long has it been since you accessed the internet?"

"I just finished writing my graduation thesis. I have been so busy lately and only managed to find some leisure time today. I actually thought that it was the series that was hotly discussed last year. Two months back, I heard rumors that Fiery Bird was coming up with the Z Series. Now, it is actually real! A new system too! This isn't something that happens yearly!"

"I heard that the manufacturing has been upgraded and that it is more resistant to harsh conditions. I don't know whether it is an exaggeration, but it is rumored that the earpiece that Fiery Bird sent over to Fang Zhao can withstand the harsh climate at the sets of 'Founding Era' and can still maintain perfect sound quality."

"I'm so envious of celebrities that endorse. We haven't even seen the goods yet, but he has already used it."

"All right, this year's magical object is about to be born. Ladies and gentlemen, are you ready to fight for it?"

"You don't say! I have already set an alarm. The moment I receive the notification, I will go out guns blazing! Every year, Fiery Bird's first batch just has too few items. In each continent, there are only 500 pieces for each style, and they're basically sold out in two hours. If you oversleep when the time comes, you won't even have time to regret."

In their own words, if one was just a step too late and didn't get to purchase it, whereas others did, then all one could do was stand aside and watch on with envy. Not only was it to be pretentious and to flaunt, these people hoped to be able to use this year's magical object at the first possible time. Outsiders had no way of understanding the pressing sentiments they had.

For people with better conditions, splurging once a year on this was still affordable. They did not have much interest in expensive cars or other such luxury items.

At 2 p.m. Yanzhou time, music fanatics and earpiece lovers fixed their eyes thirstily on the screen, waiting to be the first batch to purchase the Z Series.

However, after sales opened...

"What's going on? I just went to the washroom and there weren't any left when I got back."

"The standard version was cleared immediately, and I only hesitated a little for the superior version, but when I went to purchase it, it was already out of stock! [Cry]"

"Why can't we set the system to purchase it automatically! I want to complain!"

"Hahaha, I managed to snatch one! Luckily my fingers were fast! But I only managed to snatch the earplug-type standard version. I didn't manage to get the classical headphone type."

"I managed to get the headphone type, but it is in green. There wasn't any other choice. All the other colors were already sold out."

"If I can't get the earplug and headphone types, then I shall purchase the speakers. In any case, it is also one of the three big magical objects released by Fiery Bird."

"Don't even think about it! I just checked, and the speakers are also sold out! A bunch of gaming gods snatched our goods! Tsk, what are these gamers doing buying the Z Series! Isn't using the other series better for gaming? What are they coming to join the fun for! A bunch of ignorant outsiders!"

"Not just that, there are also fans of the 'Founding Era' series and fans of the ambassador Fang Zhao. This year's competition is just too f*cking stiff!"

"I just saw a very popular article online, the one that says 'Z Series' pairs up nicely with the 'epic flavor of 'Founding Era.' It was released in the afternoon, and it already has a view count of a few hundred thousand. Just reading it, you can tell it is someone from within the industry. Who wrote it? Admit it now!"

The author of that article was currently at home staring helplessly at his ceiling. He

also hadn't been able to get the goods. The article he had written in the afternoon had been to help advertise a singer friend of his. The article had even listed a song list and supplementary evaluations. For the sake of adding a hint of pretentiousness, he had specifically mentioned the Diting Z Series. Furthermore, with the traffic count hitting hundreds of thousands so quickly, it was obvious that there were actually some operations going on. Fortunately, he had used a dummy account when writing this article. Otherwise, if he were to be found out by people in the industry...

He shivered at the thought before replying in the group: "It is all Fang Zhao's fault!"

Whatever the case, he had to save himself first. For everyone that was unable to get the goods, the blame could be thrown on Fang Zhao.

Chapter 310

Fan Base

Yanbei retirement home for former officials.

A disgruntled Great-Grandfather Fang was frowning at his tablet.

He had wanted to buy the headsets Fang Zhao was endorsing. After all, it was Fang Zhao's first time endorsing a luxury product. The first time Great-Grandfather Fang had seen the ad, he had checked his savings and done the math. He had decided to buy the basic model.

But no such luck.

"What is Fiery Bird thinking? They're a big company, after all. Didn't they think to cater to elderly customers who are slower to act? How are we going to compete with those kids? What year is this that we still have to place orders manually? What's the point of smart automation? To put on a show? It's downright insulting to the elderly that we can't preprogram our purchases."

Great-Grandfather Fang was grumbling non-stop.

Great-Grandmother Fang, teapot in hand, was about to water their plants on the balcony when she heard her husband's rant. She raised her eyebrows, threw her spouse a glance, and continued with her chore. "This is called 'hunger marketing.' My understanding is that many luxury brands come out with limited edition products. This is quite common. It's not just Fiery Bird. Don't file a complaint and make much ado about nothing. You'll give Xiao Zhao a hard time."

"I know!" Great-Grandfather Fang was just venting. He had no intention of filing a formal complaint.

"If you really want those headsets, why don't you ask Xiao Zhao next time he gets internet access on Wai?" Great-Grandmother said.

Great-Grandfather Fang shook his head. "I'm not going to bother Xiao Zhao over

something trivial like this. What a tough shoot Xiao Zhao has. Who am I to waste his time over a pair of headsets? I heard just a few days ago that some of his fellow cast members got so immersed in character they needed to stick around for psychotherapy after they completed their scenes. It pains me to hear things like that. I had no idea that acting was so hard. Any kind of radical change requires hard work. Xiao Zhao must have paid a heavy price to deliver such a great performance. He won't be due for a bento box for a few more seasons. Sigh, the thought of him getting his bento box pains me even more."

One one hand, he wanted Fang Zhao to finish his shoot soon and get some rest at home. On the other, he didn't want to see Fang Zhao's character exit the show. Great-Grandfather Fang was quite conflicted.

Great-Grandmother Fang raised her eyebrows again and threw her husband another glance. The older this old fart gets, the more sentimental he becomes.

But soon, Great-Grandfather Fang shifted gears. Even though he was upset about failing to place an order for the headsets, he was also a bit emotional. It would have been even more embarrassing if a product Fang Zhao endorsed didn't move, but the new headsets Fang Zhao was endorsing were selling like hotcakes. What did that say?

That meant that his great-grandson was competent, that he had influence!

That line of thinking got Great-Grandfather Fang excited again. He tidied up the outfit he was wearing and told Great-Grandmother, "There's still some time before lunch. I'm going for a walk." He walked out with his hands folded behind his back.

There was a flat-screen billboard within the retirement home compound. Great-Grandfather Fang chose a route that passed the billboard on purpose. The flat screen played the latest commercials every day.

After taking in the ad for the Diting Z Series headsets endorsed by Fang Zhao as if he were admiring a work of art, Great-Grandfather Fang wanted to gloat. But when he turned his head, he couldn't see a single soul.

"Where is everyone?"

He canvassed the area. All of the folks who had been taking walks nearby were gone.

————

Maybe it was nostalgia for the Old Era, or perhaps it was the influence of "Founding Era." Anything that had to do with the Old Era was evoking strong emotions in folks.

The retro headsets from Fiery Bird's Diting Z Series sold out instantly on every continent, regardless of the model. It was impossible to snatch a pair unless you acted swiftly. The earplug model and stereo system from the same series also sold out quickly.

Several days later, the folks who had managed to land the first batch of headsets received their goods.

What was the first thing they did when they got their shipments?

Eight out of 10 buyers showed off their headsets on their social media accounts first.

One of the new stars of the professional gaming scene in Jinzhou posted a series of pictures on his account.

"My headsets have arrived! The same model that Zhao God uses. Come to think of it, Zhao God was the one who inspired me to become a professional gamer. Pity he has switched industries."

Professional gamers from other continents also showed off their new Diting Z Series headsets online. Most of them mentioned Fang Zhao. Some mentioned him in passing, but others did it intentionally to boost their own exposure and brag about their wealth at the same time.

But most of the gamers who had never faced Fang Zhao and yet were lamenting the fact that he had switched industries were merely paying lip service. They sure as hell didn't want to face off against Fang Zhao. Even though Fang Zhao's gaming career had been brief, he had made a significant mark. Footage of his avatar in action was often reposted and dissected. The reason some gamers still called Fang Zhao "Zhao God" was because no professional e-sports team or single player had been able to match his results since his retirement.

So Fang Zhao was truly the reason why some of the current stars of professional gaming coordinated with each other when ordering headsets from the Diting Z Series.

Jinro, the current captain of Silver Wing's professional gaming team, noticed all the posts claiming they missed Fang Zhao's presence in the e-sports industry and wanted

to face off against him. He screenshotted a few of the more representative posts and posted the pictures on his social media account with the following message: "I'll show Zhao God these screenshots after he finishes his shoot. I hope you're ready to face off against him then."

The gaming department at Silver Wing had new management, and the professional gaming team also had new leadership, but the gamers still referred to Fang Zhao as "Boss" internally. In public, they went along with the "Zhao God" moniker.

Jinro's post inspired gaming fans to follow suit.

"Captain Jinro, you're missing a few screenshots. Here are some more. [picture] [picture]"

"Here are two from mighty Tongzhou! [picture] [picture]"

"Five from mighty Leizhou!..."

"Here's 10 from Huangzhou, mightiest continent of them all!..."

After gaming fans from different continents and curious onlookers from outside the industry joined the screenshot frenzy, gamers kept posting pictures of their new Diting Z Series headsets, but few made any mention of wanting to face off against Fang Zhao.

The first few rising stars of the gaming world who had posted such messages now wanted to delete those posts, but deleting them now would be too obvious. They could only wait until the discussion died down. All we did was bullsh*t a little. Was it necessary to resort to screenshots?

Some gaming publications reported on the screenshots in their social media posts, which gave the phenomenon even greater exposure.

Of course, not everyone followed the latest developments in the gaming industry, so the screenshots weren't a big deal. Overall, they didn't cause a major ripple. No one took them seriously. After some kidding around, the controversy soon died down.

The hot topic was still the Z Series headsets. Music lovers and headset aficionados who had managed to land them were busy writing reviews. Folks who had failed to snatch a pair were either jamming Fiery Bird's customer service department with calls about

the official launch date or shifting their attention to the company's other headset lines.

There were also folks who had bought the headsets simply to show off. Simply posting pictures of their headsets online didn't give them their fix. They also wore their headsets in public, hanging out strategically in spots that had the most foot traffic.

At a major mall in downtown Qi'an.

Two young men were discussing headsets.

"Look, these are my new headsets. They cost some 5,000 dollars!" the first young man said gleefully. "You've had those headsets for some time, no? You should upgrade to a better pair."

"Oh, I think my 50-dollar headsets suffice," the other young man said.

"How can 50-dollar headsets compare to a pair that cost 5,000?"

The young men were feuding when they heard a third voice. "Aren't they the same? All you hear is noise with headsets that cost less than 100,000."

The two young men froze. Wow, now that's being pretentious.

They looked over and examined the headsets hanging over the neck of the man who had just spoken. The logo and unique design were unmistakable—they were Fiery Bird's Z Series retro headsets, the most popular among the three most anticipated headset models this year.

The first young man who had spoken raised his hands in surrender. "OK. Pretend I never said anything."

Only an idiot would compare hardware with a nouveau riche tycoon.

Not everyone could afford the Z Series, but even setting aside the Z Series, there were other more reasonably priced lines.

The previous Diting lines that Fang Zhao had endorsed were quite good value for the money. They were sufficient for folks who weren't that exacting when it came to sound quality.

The two young men rewatched the Diting ad on a neighboring flat screen. "I feel motivated to work hard again!"

Fiery Bird had adopted a blanket strategy for its ad campaign. Regardless of continent or city, you were bound to see their ads playing on a giant flat screen hanging on a tall building. The billboards in residential compounds, train stations, and plazas were dominated by the Diting Z Series print ads. Naturally, Fiery Bird knew that the folks who could afford their products were a minority. The reason the company had splurged on advertising aimed at a broader audience was to make a statement.

That's right. The hottest headsets of the year were made by Fiery Bird. Unless other headset makers can surpass the technical sophistication of the Z Series, Fiery Bird will continue to be the industry leader.

Of course, the masses only got the basics. They knew that Fiery Bird had developed a line of kick-ass headsets and that the ad for the line featured the actor who played General Fang Zhao in "Founding Era."

Fang Zhao wasn't that famous in other continents, but "Founding Era" was a global hit. It would be impossible to miss him even if you weren't a music or a gaming fan.

Audiences from different continents watched the various chapters of "Founding Era" in different orders. They mostly watched the chapter about their home continent first before moving onto other chapters. However, anyone who watched the Yanzhou chapter remembered Fang Zhao.

Fang Zhao's look in the Diting ad was different from his look in "Founding Era," but even if a person didn't recognize him in the ad, someone would point it out to them.

Fang Zhao's popularity also rose with every additional season of "Founding Era" that was released. Sales of the previous Diting lines he had endorsed also spiked.

Fang Zhao was the hottest star in Yanzhou, eclipsing even the three actors who played Wu Yan in "Founding Era."

At a small city in Yanzhou, on board the local circular train service.

An old woman took in the Diting Z Series ad that was playing inside the compartment. "Oh, that's Fang Zhao!"

A young man sitting nearby laughed. "That's correct. That was Fang Zhao, but that was only a fragment of the ad. You've got a keen eye, auntie!"

The old woman flashed a conceited smile. "Of course. I recognized him instantly. I've got great eyes. Everyone in our residential complex knows that."

A young lady in the same compartment asked, "Auntie, do you still follow celebrities?"

The old woman froze briefly before responding. "No, I don't follow celebrities. I follow TV series, 'Founding Era' in particular. I just retired. All I do is stay at home and watch 'Founding Era' every day. If you ask me, I still think the Yanzhou chapter is the best. I like the Fang Zhao character the best. Everyone in our compound likes him! After watching all the different chapters, I've realized that he has the strongest presence. You have to project that kind of aura as a leader. While others fill up the room, he fills up the entire building! I was a senior manager before I retired. I behave just like him!"

Fellow passengers: "... " Uhm, then you're wound a bit too tightly for a retiree.

"Anyway, I think he's the actor who leaves the deepest impression," the old woman said with a laugh. "He's my type of guy."

Fellow passengers: "... "

"Oh, what's the name of the actor who plays Fang Zhao?" the old woman asked.

"His name is Fang Zhao too. I thought you had just recognized him," the young lady sitting across from her said. "The ad featured the actor who played Fang Zhao in 'Founding Era.' His name is Fang Zhao as well, but he appears without makeup in the ad. He looks very different, but you still recognized him. What a great eye you have!"

The old woman paused, apparently confused.

"He has the same name as his character?" she asked.

"Yes, the same." The young lady enthusiastically pulled up a few news items from the time when Fang Zhao had first landed the role on her bracelet and showed them to the old woman. "Fang Zhao beat out many big stars from Yanzhou and other continents to get the part."

"Wow, that's quite something! He's only in his 20s. So young. I never would have

guessed that he's in his 20s, judging from the look of his character." The old woman had made up her mind to share the news stories with her bosom buddies from the same residential complex.

Folks who didn't follow celebrities like her were more taken by TV characters rather than the actors, who they wouldn't necessarily recognize. They used character names in daily conversation, but they rarely used the names of the actors.

The old woman rushed home after arriving at her station. She eagerly relayed to her friends, "The actor who plays Fang Zhao is also called Fang Zhao! Isn't that easy to remember? He's awfully, awfully young, even younger than my grandson!"

Word spread quickly in the residential compound.

Journalists in Yanzhou soon realized that among Fang Zhao's fans who were active online, many were middle-aged and elderly women who were retired. They mostly stayed home, watched TV, and chatted with their neighbors.

This particular demographic among Fang Zhao's fan base began growing rapidly.

A reporter at an entertainment publication who was monitoring online trends told a colleague, "The sky's the limit for Fang Zhao. The first luxury product he endorsed is already a success. His own market value has risen leaps and bounds."

"It's not just him. Take a look at the other actors in 'Founding Era.' All the ones with substantial parts are doing well. They've all seen their market value rise. Even those who have already picked up their bento boxes are doing OK. It's the 'Founding Era' effect. No wonder folks were angling to land roles when the director was casting. Heck, if I were an actor, I'd pay to get a role."

"The Diting Z Series is the first luxury product Fang Zhao has endorsed. I wonder what he will endorse next."

"Maybe it will be a fashion label. Word has it that a high-end men's tailor-made label is negotiating with his management."

"It might be a top-of-the-line outdoor attire brand too."

Another reporter sharing the same office space who was sipping water started spitting his drink as he watched his computer screen. He quickly summoned the

others. "I'm not sure what Fang Zhao will endorse next. All I know is that Leizhou's top star has endorsed garlic! If there's someone who could raise the price of garlic to the price of gold, it's him."

Chapter 311

Zaro + Garlic

Just when news about Fang Zhao's endorsement of Fiery Bird's Diting Z Series advertisements had started to wane and many operational teams behind famed celebrities were rolling up their sleeves and getting ready to get in on the action, news of Zaro endorsing garlic violently seized the headlines of each and every continent, and the entire world's entertainment circles were caught unprepared.

The combination of Zaro and garlic surprised people. The firepower from this news was so ferocious that it carved a bloody path through the community of celebrities that frequently threw money to purchase popularity,

Zaro, who called himself Leizhou's greatest internet celebrity, was a descendant of a great general, a son of an aristocratic family, and someone who frequently bounced around in the entertainment circles. But no one had really ever seen Zaro endorse a product, at most only shooting commercials for films and drama series that his own company invested in.

But now, such a person had actually gone and endorsed garlic!

What sort of blow had he suffered for him to go and consider endorsing garlic?

This was something that everyone found baffling.

And the garlic that Zaro was endorsing had a price that did not lose out to silverware!

A piece of garlic alone cost a few hundred, and there were still handpicked and preferred-choice grades that were above a thousand dollars! If special varieties came out in the future, would there be a grade that was worth tens of thousands?

Ripping people off!

This wasn't the way to hype. In the past, no internet personality's goods that were being hyped up were this exaggerated!

Many netizens were dumbstruck.

"This... Can garlic also become a luxury good?"

"We were talking about earpieces yesterday. Today, after taking a look at my own wages, I realized I can't even afford garlic!"

"No, no, no, it is only the garlic from whatever farm Zaro endorses. The garlic produced on planet Wai can be considered a luxury, but the garlic from Muzhou is still affordable."

"Never in my wildest dreams did I expect the greatest internet celebrity of Leizhou to actually endorse an item that is so down to earth."

"The brother who posted before, please take a look at its price and feel your own pockets before answering honestly. How can that garlic be considered down to earth!?"

"I just went online and checked. Muzhou garlic prices have swelled! Fraudulent goods!"

"Where is the Bureau for Commodity Prices?"

"Not only garlic, farm produce that have seen their prices falling recently have suddenly bounced back up.

There were many voices of protest online, but for Muzhou farm owners, Zaro was simply good news! Because of Zaro, farm produce that was used in everyday life and was gradually being neglected received attention once more, and the prices rebounded.

Because there was an increasing amount of farm produce from foreign planets in the market, prices kept falling year after year. Muzhou's status as the world's granary was becoming harder to maintain. Although a portion of fresh fruits and vegetables were still very expensive, compared to five or ten years back, they had dropped a lot!

Previously, there had even been people saying that unless it was a newly developed variety—for example, those higher in medicinal value—the value of agricultural produce would continue to fall in the future.

Comparing the level of variety and abundance, Muzhou was unable to compete.

Comparing nostalgia, planet Wai had the "Ark Project" major research base and had already resurrected many varieties from seeds.

For planets with immigration plans, farmlands were progressively being put into use. Even on planet Wai's side, private farms were already starting to be established, and furthermore, it was rumored that the soil quality on planet Wai was much more suitable for cultivating crops.

There were some breeds of agricultural produce that had been resurrected years earlier and were grown in Muzhou. However, these crops saw some changes, and their original tastes had also been altered. The longer it took for cultivation, the greater the changes, and not every variety changed in a way that people liked.

After all, Earth had seen a 100-year period full of fundamental changes, and the Period of Destruction had caused the soil to have changes that could not be restored. Even if it was possible to restore soil to its healthy state from the Old Era, it could take hundreds of years. Even thousands might not be enough. Who could wait so long?

In the past, there had been some products from foreign planet farms that had been transported back, but the quantities had been tiny and limited to special communities. They hadn't been for external distribution.

In general, commonly seen fruits and vegetables, such as onions, ginger, garlic and other such products, did not have much investment value, and the risk was high.

Today, Zaro had directly given these people a resounding slap.

The garlic that Zaro was endorsing was directly sold online.

For an item like garlic, not mentioning its medicinal properties, as a seasoning, it could be used for numerous culinary purposes.

Of course, there were also people that felt that even if garlic was special, having such a high price when it could only be fried once... Wasn't that going overboard?

Many people left messages on Zaro's social platform for this.

"Other than this garlic being grown on planet Wai, what other special characteristics

does it have?"

"Even if transportation costs and cultivation expenditure are included, the prices shouldn't be so high."

"I know that garlic can boost one's immune system and kill bacteria and germs, but with such a high price, could it be that it can even exorcise demons?"

"What does it have to be sold at such a premium?"

During his internet access time, when Zaro was undergoing an interview by a certain gourmet magazine arranged by his agent, he heard the presenter mention this question, and he replied with a question of his own: "Does this even require a reason?"

Zaro had listened to his agent's advice and so did not reveal the secret of his acting skills to the public. "I say that it is a magical object among garlic, so it is a magical object! It is worth its high value!" Recalling the circumstances when he had been filming, Zaro proudly said, "This garlic encapsulates human sentiment inside of it."

"Don't believe me?"

"If you don't believe me, buy one and eat it and you will understand."

And when some people watched the interview, their views changed and they thought: That's right, with the family background that Zaro has, he has surely tried all sorts of good stuff. If he says it's good, it is definitely extraordinary.

Gluttons that were unable to free themselves from the clutches of culinary delicacies and who had sensitive and fussy tastebuds were just like those music zealots and did not lack money either. These people would head wherever the good stuff was. It was fine if that could not head to planet Wai—there would still be advance sales online. Scramble for them!

Chefs inside some high-end restaurants or hotel chains were already sharpening their knives, ready to do battle.

They just wanted to see what sort of difference this garlic had compared to the ones from Muzhou. Would food prepared with this sort of garlic be even more delicious?

The first batch of five tons of planet Wai garlic would be put on sale at the appointed

time, and like before, they were sold out in a flash.

In just the blink of an eye, people discovered there was none left.

People that had managed to purchase this garlic tried it as soon as they received the goods, and they took to the internet to express their own thoughts and views about the garlic and share their own culinary skills with the world through bright photographs of exquisitely displayed delicacies.

"Really, the taste just hits the spot."

"I don't know whether it hits the spot, but the flavor is just right! Stimulating!!"

"This is probably true garlicky flavor."

"The taste is slightly pungent, and if you eat it raw, it is a little spicier than the ones from Muzhou, but I think there isn't that much of a difference."

"How can there be not much difference? Is your tongue so defective that you can't even tell a difference between superior and inferior garlic? You aren't suited to being a chef if you can't taste a real delicacy! Even Zaro is better than you!"

In no time, a new pretentious style appeared.

Garlic used in seasoning?

It had to be garlic flown back from planet Wai. Only then would there be enough flavor!

You can not appreciate this flavor, but you cannot say that it is ordinary. Do you think we are having garlic?

No!

What we are having is an aesthetic taste! A taste of pretentiousness! A taste of being an elite!

How many gourmets gave it acclaim and said it was authentic garlic flavor? If you can't taste the difference, it is definitely your tongue that is defective. You can't even be compared to Zaro.

The gourmet world saw a tide of good evaluations, but the price of this garlic was indeed too high. Thus, many people started thinking of ways to get those over at planet Wai to help buy some on their behalf. Isn't this garlic grown on planet Wai? Purchasing it from planet Wai would surely be cheaper!

Thus, many actors in the Wai film studio complex were bombarded with long distance calls from friends and family.

"Hello, when will your filming over there end? Help me bring back some of the native garlic. Over here, they cost too much! And there are even fakes!"

"What is the price of garlic over at planet Wai? If it is cheaper, help me bring some back. Any amount will do. Over here I can even finish a few hundred kilograms no problem."

Even conscripts serving on Wai base received requests from their relatives to help them purchase garlic. As for those with the right connections, they were contacted to purchase it internally and in bulk. If they could not purchase it immediately, the buyer would make an advance order and gladly pay the deposit first.

When Zaro saw his name appearing on the push notifications of entertainment news headlines across each continent and then saw the money in his account increasing, he forgot the initial unwillingness he'd had when his agent had first asked him to endorse garlic.

"Your endorsement is percentage based. Are you satisfied now? I told you before that there was no need to be envious of Fang Zhao. Now the market in which we are operating in is very big." Zaro's agent was encouraging Zaro at the same time he was discussing profit sharing with their collaborative partners. "Now all you have to do is concentrate on doing a good job for the filming that is to come and not bother about other stuff. When the time is ripe, we can generate hype again," Zaro's agent exhorted.

Zaro nodded his head in delight.

What was the big deal about earpieces? Had anyone ever endorsed garlic before?

No one!

A person with his sort of status should be unique and unmatched! He should stand out from the masses!

There were many people who loved music, but what about people who ate lots of good stuff?

Were there any!?

There were many people that bought earpieces, but were there many people that were addicted to gourmet foodstuffs?

Were there!?

The amount was too far apart!!

Zaro excitedly watched his own popularity soar while his agent pondered how to increase Zaro's value even further.

Back when planet Wai had first applied for the major research base, there had been some large Muzhou farm owners that had been eyeing land here. However, back then, the audits for private farmland here had been even more strict than the film studio complex, and it had not been something that Wai base could decide alone.

Now that it was finally open to public purchasing, Zaro's manager had contacted a bunch of farm owners on planet Wai to collaborate and generate a wave of hype for garlic before letting Zaro stand at the front to advertise.

In the past, there had been a limit to garlic on planet Wai. By joining hands, planet Wai's garlic had increased by about 80%. Still, the garlic produced by planet Wai was supplied to the military on Wai base, the "Founding Era" team, and those at the film studio complex. Basically, the supply only covered this bunch.

It was market dominance.

Now even if others wished to purchase the goods, they wouldn't be able to get much. Furthermore, the checks on freight transports from the Wai spaceport were very strict.

Zaro and this bunch might have established market dominance and generated a whole lot of buzz, but they still followed regulations and paid their taxes dutifully. All these taxes would become funds for Wai base, and because of the huge amount of taxes, Wai base would not make things difficult for them and would help out with the transportation of goods.

As of now, the Wai spaceport had increased its manpower, but there were still limitations to bringing goods out of planet Wai. Whether it was garlic or agricultural produce, people were not permitted to bring along too much and weren't allowed to evade the taxes! Experimental breeds still in the trial phase could not be brought out. If anyone was discovered to be in possession of these, they would be locked up in a small black room on the base, no questions asked.

Now, the Wai spaceport had the doubly guaranteed method of machines and dogs... although there was only one dog that was taking up a post. The other dogs that had arrived on Wai base had not grown up yet.

Celebrities from every continent were gloomy. It was all right if they were unable to compete for headlines with Fang Zhao. After all, besides having the operations teams of Silver Wing behind his back, he still had Fiery Bird's advertising to generate hype.

But now they weren't able to even compete with Zaro!

In the past, Zaro making the headlines had only been limited to having a great influence in Leizhou. On a global context, it had been nothing more than some entertaining news that could be treated as a joking matter. But now, the influence had expanded globally and everyone could not help but feel that all the continents would no longer be peaceful in future.

Over at the cast and crew of "Founding Era," during internet access time, every celebrity took note of the activity on the internet.

During his hard-earned two hours of internet access, Woo Tianhao logged on to his social platform to leave some online presence and saw the news.

"Zaro is a f*cking talent!"

When Zaro had been filming a vampire horror series, the prices of garlic and silverware had been stirred up. Now, the value of garlic had risen even more impressively.

At the same time, Woo Tianhao felt a little sullen. They were both descendants of great generals and they were both around the same age. In the past, he had always felt superior. Even when Zaro's acting ability had suddenly broken out, he still had not treated it as a big deal, but now Zaro had stirred up the price of garlic, and Woo Tianhao was envious of the profits Zaro was reaping.

He had invested in many projects and was always busying himself, yet those could not compare to how much Zaro had earned from generating hype for garlic.

Planet Wai was really a gold mine!

With the topic of Zaro and garlic erupting, Fang Zhao's buzz on the internet slowly declined.

Fiery Bird did not need to bombard the masses with advertisements all the time. Just letting everyone know about this product was enough. When the time for the official sales approached, they would have another round of publicity campaigns, but right now they were fine with leaving the spotlight to others.

Even if this wave of popularity was over, many people would still remember Fang Zhao and the first luxury item he had endorsed.

Before Fang Zhao had endorsed the Z Series, he had actually signed a contract to endorse something even more luxurious—the 10th-generation console. However, back when he had signed that, the contract had been region limited, not global. Furthermore, the 10th-generation console had yet to begin mass production, so any advertisements were still being pushed back. The outside world had no idea about this.

With regard to Fiery Bird seeking Fang Zhao to endorse the Z Series earpieces, besides valuing Fang Zhao's influence and potential, Fiery Bird had also had a mentality of it being a technological challenge.

They had felt that there was no challenge in seeking out other stars. Fiery Bird had never ever worried about sales volume. Seeking out an ambassador was not just for sales—what Fiery Bird wanted the earpieces to challenge was Fang Zhao's ears!

Whenever Fang Zhao endorsed an earpiece model, he shared with Fiery Bird his thoughts as a consumer as well as the pros and cons of the product. Even though the Z Series earpieces had been coined a magical object by the outside world, as before, it did not receive a "perfect" evaluation from Fang Zhao.

Fiery Bird did not think that Fang Zhao was going out of his way to find fault with their product. The frequency range of the Z Series was frightening, and it far exceeded the hearing range of the average person. Generally speaking, if one wanted to hear every single detail, he would need to have the abilities of certain beasts.

Fang Zhao seemed to possess such an ability.

"Divine Ears" and "Diting" were but some of the nicknames netizens had given Fang Zhao. Fiery Bird's technology development department staff also acknowledged this, and when they had time, these staff would communicate with Fang Zhao and inquire with him about his thoughts when testing certain products. This sort of collaboration was something that other celebrities had no way of providing.

At the "Founding Era" cast dormitory building.

Fang Zhao was seated in his own quarters with his earpiece on.

Although he had not given the Z Series earpieces a "perfect" evaluation, he also acknowledged that among all the earpieces he had used up to now, this series provided the best experience.

All the technology squeezed into such a tiny earpiece caused Fang Zhao to lament the marvel of technology. Science and technology had made the experience so different.

Fiery Bird had given the name "Z" to this new series that had a new system. The outside world saw it as representing the "Zhao" in Fang Zhao, but in actual fact, in the Old Era, the letter Z had a significance in cosmology. This represented the self-confidence and ambition of Fiery Bird as an industry leader.

Fang Zhao's fingers slid across the keyboard as musical notes drifted into his ear.

Sentiments carried by the musical notes without any modification passed through the earpiece and were directly transmitted into his ear.

If there were any blemishes, it would surely be the music keyboard being unable to keep up.

Beside the keyboard was a paperback notebook. The page it was turned to was full of undecipherable symbols.

He was composing.

Even if he was filming, Fang Zhao had never set aside composing. But there were too many distractions to do everything well, so during this period, his focus had been on filming.

As of now, season five was being broadcast and filming for season seven was already underway. Fang Zhao's part in the series would end at season nine. Before then, he wanted to complete the piece he was working on right now.

He would not compete with other members of the music team or precursors in the music circles to get his music in the series, but he would fight for one scene in the ninth season.

Chapter 312

Standing on the Shoulders of a Giant

Fang Zhao had a visitor when he was composing.

It was late. Production crews were wrapping up certain scenes, and actors were starting to head back to their rooms. For the most part, the actors rested, memorized lines, or started preparing for upcoming scenes after returning to their rooms. Recently, quite a few actors had been approaching Fang Zhao for acting tips.

After speaking to Fang Zhao, Si Lu had completed his remaining scenes in peak form. Word that Si Lu had found inspiration from Fang Zhao had quickly spread on the set of the Yanzhou chapter.

While Zaro had taken shortcuts by using gimmicks to enhance his performances, Si Lu was the real deal. He was an A-list actor in Yanzhou who had won quite a few prestigious awards. His quite moving mastery of his death scene in season five of "Founding Era" had won widespread acclaim from senior figures in the industry.

But the bottom line was that both Zaro and Si Lu had gotten their inspiration from Fang Zhao. Thus, when actors were struggling to find their form, they often tried their luck with Fang Zhao.

Eventually, folks realized that Fang Zhao was indeed a big help. They didn't make much of his handy advice, though, chalking it up to his impressive knowledge of Yanzhou history. As a consultant to the production, they figured he also had a deeper understanding of the script and the characters than the average actor.

When he heard the knock on the door, Fang Zhao thought it was another actor. Instead, when he opened his door, he saw Dina, the vice president of the Yanzhou Music Association.

Both Dina and Ming Cang had spoken highly of Fang Zhao when he had created the virtual idol Polar Light and produced the four movements of the "100-Year Period of Destruction" series.

Dina was a member of the team composing the score for "Founding Era." Ming Cang wasn't—not because he wasn't qualified but because his son Ming Ye was still receiving treatment. He couldn't get away.

"Vice President Dina?" Fang Zhao invited Dina in and offered him a glass of warm water.

"I'm just taking a walk after dinner. We haven't had a real conversation since we arrived in Wai, so I figured I'd see what you're up to. What were you doing? Memorizing lines?" Dina scanned the room.

Fang Zhao's single room wasn't that big. Apart from his bedroom, he had a living room that he used as a study. There was little storage space. Dina could see everything there was to see.

When he spotted the electronic keyboard and an open notebook and pen next to it, the smile on Dina's face grew.

"No, I was just composing," Fang Zhao responded.

"Sorry to intrude." Dina did feel bad, but he also felt encouraged.

He had dropped by to ask Fang Zhao about his future career plans. Fang Zhao was growing in popularity both in Yanzhou and globally. He had a big endorsement deal. His popularity was skyrocketing. Would he continue acting? What would his next step be?

Dina had been thinking that if Fang Zhao didn't want to give up composing, the young composer could stick around after he finished shooting his scenes. He could remain as a special guest of the music team. If he could produce a piece or two, that would give them even more leverage. If Fang Zhao wanted to switch careers, Dina would definitely try to talk him out of it.

In terms of music composition, Dina considered Fang Zhao one of the most promising talents among Yanzhou's young musicians. The last time Dina had had internet access and spoken to Ming Cang, they had wondered whether Fang Zhao was taking a break from composing. Little had Dina expected to come over and find Fang Zhao working on a new piece instead of memorizing his lines. Of course he was delighted.

And based on Dina's observation of Fang Zhao's patterns the past few years, he

realized that Fang Zhao either opted out of the game or was fully committed. Once he set his eyes on something, he would definitely deliver at a high quality. It was too early to say if Fang Zhao's new piece would be chosen for the "Founding Era" score, but Dina was happy about the mere fact that Fang Zhao hadn't given up on composing.

He had no use for the spiel he had prepared in advance, and Dina didn't want to interrupt this junior musician's composing. He'd rather not stem the flow of Fang Zhao's inspiration with a conversation.

"I'll get going, then. Keep doing what you were doing. You're very talented at composing pieces set against the Period of Destruction, but don't put too much pressure on yourself. The journey is more important. There are no winners and losers in music. Even if your piece isn't selected for the score, it doesn't mean it's a bad song."

"I know," Fang Zhao said.

"As long as you can stay sober-minded."

Dina got up to leave. En route to his dorm room, he ran into Fay Harmonik, the violin prodigy from Jizhou.

An old friend from Jizhou had just bragged about Fay Harmonik to Dina today, proudly noting that the young violinist had contributed to quite a few scores and songs recently. One of Fay Harmonik's pieces had been chosen for the "Founding Era" score. It would appear in season six of the Jizhou chapter.

Dina always treated talented young musicians well, regardless of which continent they were from, but he did not know Fay Harmonik well. They exchanged perfunctory hellos before going about their own business.

Later, Dina remembered that he had seen Fay Harmonik carrying a case. He wondered if it was a new violin that Fay Harmonik had shipped to Wai.

Meanwhile, Fay Harmonik was in a decent mood.

When he needed inspiration or to adjust his mood, he always put on his headset. Sometimes he listened to the sounds of nature, sometimes to classic songs. He listened to all sorts of genres and musical styles.

People like him who were sensitive to sound had extremely exacting standards when

it came to headset quality. They could pick up on every detail. Their ears had no tolerance for flaws.

He had brought just a lone headset to Wai, which had broken down. He had borrowed a pair but hadn't been able to stand the sound quality. They had been pure torture, especially when used outdoors.

The climate on Wai interfered with certain types of electronic equipment. Interference in headsets created a noise that Fay Harmonik found unbearable. He had taken advantage of his internet access day to ask his assistant to order a new headset. Price wasn't an issue as long as the headset was of good quality, sound quality was guaranteed, and they could function despite the crappy weather on Wai.

Knowing that Fay Harmonik was demanding when it came to headset quality, his assistant did careful research. He ended up deciding on Fiery Bird's Diting Z Series, hailed online as one of the three top new models on the market. He managed to snatch a pair and sent the headset to Wai immediately.

Half a minute later.

Fay Harmonik was dying to get his hands on his new headset, but he froze when he saw the face of the celebrity endorser on the box.

The joy that the new headset had just drawn out in him had vanished completely.

"Bad luck!"

At that moment, he wanted to smash his new headset.

But he hesitated.

Eventually, he removed the headphones and gave them a listen.

Five minutes later.

Fay Harmonik couldn't bear parting with the headset. Instead, he tossed the packaging into the trash can. What he couldn't see didn't bother him.

Fay Harmonik silently cursed Fang Zhao repeatedly. How come such a quality headset was endorsed by Fang Zhao?

Fang Zhao had no idea that someone was secretly cursing him in a nearby building. After Dina left, he didn't continue with his composing. Instead, he read the parts of his script that hadn't been shot and closed his eyes to meditate.

Wu Yan's role got more substantial toward the end of the story. The last few seasons of the Yanzhou chapter were told from his vantage point, describing how he gradually rose to a position of leadership.

Meanwhile, Fang Zhao had fewer scenes, which was why he had more time to compose.

The next day, after the morning's scenes had been shot, the cast had lunch together, munching on the boxed meals delivered from the canteen.

The younger actors had yet to completely remove themselves from their characters. They were a bit depressed. A few of the veteran actors sitting on the margins tried to liven up the atmosphere. They brought up the entertainment headlines they'd read the last time they'd gone online and speculated which actors would keep dominating the news.

"It's the young ones who are grabbing the headlines."

"We're too old. We can't compete."

One of the veteran actors had a great perspective. "Old geezers like us are frail and ugly. We should just focus on acting and leave the headlines and the limelight to the youngsters."

"What are you talking about? I just turned 100 and I look like I'm in my 70s or 80s. I'm still young. Not long ago, a fan called me an evergreen male icon."

"You can't believe what they say. Fans are biased."

"We're not competing on our looks but on our ability. Last time I was online, my agent told me that quite a few major brands want me to endorse their products. Hahaha, my career has been rejuvenated with youthful vigor!"

"After finishing 'Founding Era,' I'm going to shoot a few commercials and earn some travel money. I'm going to go on vacation and relax properly. I'm too tired!"

The light tone of their conversation was intentional. They wanted to help themselves and the young actors relax.

The veteran actors were more experienced and were tougher mentally, but they were still affected by their characters. They could let go only when they finished all their scenes and steered clear of anything related to the production.

"Fang Zhao, the ad you just did looks decent. My granddaughter managed to snatch a headset you endorsed. I'll have to get you to autograph them when we return to Yanzhou," one of the veteran performers said while looking at Fang Zhao, who was wolfing down his second boxed meal. Secretly, he was full of admiration. What a professional Fang Zhao is.

"No problem," Fang Zhao responded.

Another veteran actor was about to say something, but he was interrupted by someone who yelled Fang Zhao's name from a distance.

"Big Brother Zhao!"

A small figure darted toward the crowd.

The actors smiled when they identified the intruder.

"Xiao Tian, you're not with your dad today?" one of the actors asked.

The visitor was the child actor Lu Aotian, who played a young Wu Yan.

Lu Aotian was not his birth name. His parents had named him Lu Ao. He came from a family of artists that included musicians and actors, so Lu Ao had had a head start. Of course, he was quite talented himself.

He'd made his debut at age 3 in a TV series. His versatile acting had enabled him to turn a supporting role into a leading performance. He'd won his first major acting award when he was 4.

After rising to fame, Lu Ao had felt that he was born to be a leading man. After some online research, he had come up with the stage name Li Aotian 1. At age 6 1/2, leveraging his family background and his own talent, he had landed the role of young Wu Yan.

Common sense would suggest that Lu Aotian was closer to Wu Jun and He Lisi. After all, they played the same character at different ages. They shared a lot of common ground.

But in reality, the division of labor was a bit lopsided. Lu Aotian only had a limited number of scenes. There were few important events in Wu Yan's youth, after all, so Lu Aotian had a lighter load.

But Wu Yan's life became more eventful after he came of age. Wu Jun was under a lot of pressure to do a good job portraying Wu Yan in his early adulthood. Sometimes, the director found his performances lacking. He needed a lot of time to adjust, so he had no time to chat with Lu Aotian.

He Lisi was even busier. If Wu Jun was under considerable pressure, then He Lisi faced even more. He had little time to spare for Lu Aotian.

Perhaps because they had enjoyed good camaraderie in season one, Fang Zhao had left a good impression on Lu Aotian. After they had gotten to know each other better, Lu Aotian had begun to look him up for a chat even after the scenes they shared had finished shooting.

The little fella had endured some hardship to portray a young Wu Yan, losing quite a bit of weight. He had stayed away from high-calorie snacks and such for a long period, so what the audiences saw in season one was a malnourished, skinny figure, which was historically accurate.

But after completing those early scenes, the little fella had caught up on all the snacks he had avoided when he losing weight. In a few months, he had been back to his old self.

Lu Aotian had planned on maintaining his figure after completing his scenes as a young Wu Yan so he could become an extra. Random kids appeared in every season. Some simply served as a backdrop. Lu Aotian had badgered the directors to cast him as an extra, but he had been turned down and banned from all units. Most of the kids who served as backdrops were created by CG in post-production. Extras were the exception, not the rule.

Unable to serve as an extra, Lu Aotian had wanted to watch the older actors perform, but that request had also been rejected. Kids weren't mentally as tough as adults. It

wasn't a good idea for them to stay malnourished and spend that much time on a stressful set. The negative vibes that the veteran actors gave off when they performed were also a bad influence on kids of Li Aotian's age.

So Lu Aotian could only visit sets after the day's shooting had been completed.

Lu Aotian's father was an actor. He was shooting next door. His mother was a musician and was a member of the team that was composing and performing the score. He also had a few relatives working on the production who were heavyweights in the industry.

When he heard someone mention his father, Lu Aotian responded, "He doesn't have any scenes today. He's watching a performance at the concert hall. There are quite a few performances today. Quite a few actors who aren't scheduled to film today are there. Do you guys wanna join?"

The concert hall was where the music team was based. It was equipped with rehearsal space and instruments. There were also professional recording studios and performance halls.

Musicians working on the production put on shows there frequently. It was a way for them to interact and exchange ideas. Meanwhile, the on-set psychologists encouraged the actors who were free to attend the performances as a form of relaxation.

"Big Brother Zhao, are you going to check out the shows this afternoon?" Lu Aotian asked.

Fang Zhao looked at Li Aotian, who was staring at him eagerly, and nodded. "I don't have any scenes this afternoon. I'll head over."

"Then let's go together in a bit! Finish your meal first, Big Brother Zhao. I'll give Director Bai a heads up." Lu Aotian dashed toward the director's office.

One of the veteran actors chuckled. "Fang Zhao, you're quite popular!"

Fang Zhao used to be the center of attention of a few young actors led by Ji Polun. After they had finished their scenes, Fang Zhao had suggested they look for work as extras on other shooting units. Eleven chapters, 11 units. They were bound to be short on actors at some point. Working as an extra was good experience. Spending time on the sets of the other chapters, getting to know the other actors, and picking up a few acting tips was a good thing for Ji Polun and company.

Now, Ji Polun and friends rarely showed up on the set of the Yanzhou chapter, but Lu Aotian showed up from time to time to chat up Fang Zhao.

Lu Aotian returned soon. Noticing that Fang Zhao had finished eating, he said, "Big Brother Zhao, let's take a picture together again. I'll post it next time I have internet access."

"Didn't you post one already?" Fang Zhao asked.

"I'll post another one. I don't have any more scenes. If I don't show up, my fans will forget me. This time I'll have to hitch a ride on your popularity, Big Brother Zhao."

Lu Aotian was delighted to get Fang Zhao's OK. Instead of sitting quietly next to Fang Zhao, he climbed Fang Zhao's body as if it were a tree trunk. Using Fang Zhao's hands for support, he sat on Fang Zhao's shoulders.

After taking the picture, Lu Aotian excitedly yelled to the actors who were bystanders, "I sat on the shoulders of a giant again!"

There was a story behind Lu Aotian's comment.

General Wu Yan had said during an interview when he was elderly that the reason he had advanced so far in his career was because he had stood on the shoulders of a giant.

The only surviving photo of a young Wu Yan was a picture he had taken with Fang Zhao. In the photo, the diminutive Wu Yan sat on Fang Zhao's shoulders.

Much of the storyline in the Yanzhou chapter had been drawn from Wu Yan's memoirs.

Wu Yan had said in the book that without Fang Zhao, there would have been no him. Wu Yan had been mentored by Fang Zhao.

A similar scene was part of season one of the Yanzhou chapter. A tiny, skinny Wu Yan sat on the shoulders of a Fang Zhao still reeking of gunpowder and blood. Fang Zhao's eyes were watery with emotion. It was an exact recreation of the old photo.

Away from the set, Lu Aotian, who was fast gaining weight, and an out-of-character Fang Zhao struck a similar pose for pictures.

"I, Lu Aotian, have stood on the shoulders of a giant more than once. I'm bound to have

a bright future!" Lu Aotian followed up by asking Fang Zhao, "Don't you agree, Big Brother Zhao?"

"Xiao Tian, you've gained weight again," Fang Zhao said.

That little cub of a child had been eating excessively since giving up on his diet. He was rapidly gaining back the weight he'd lost.

"Rubbish! I haven't been eating much," Lu Aotian said, gazing at his chubby limbs. "I'm just a little chubby. Not to mention that you're a strong man, Big Brother Zhao. I'm just a baby. This is nothing for you!"

Knowing that Fang Zhao could carry him easily, Lu Aotian didn't dismount, instead showing Fang Zhao a bunch of pictures he had taken recently and starting to gossip.

"Big Brother Zhao, did you know they came up with a nickname for the private gym reserved for the prominent actors?"

"What's the nickname?"

"Guess!"

"'Cream of the crop'?"

"No, 'rec center for retired officials'!"

Chapter 313

Troublemaking Hands

Why was it said to be a rec center for retired officials?

Because when it reached the sixth and seventh season, the important characters portrayed in the series were all starting to become old.

Humans' physical constitutions had started to change during those 100 years. It had been a long-term process, not an overnight change. These changes had been more obvious in children born during the Period of Destruction. Other people had been able to see their constitutions change slowly day by day, but they still could not have been compared to people of the Old Era.

Even if the two types of people were both 100 years old, the people that had experienced the Period of Destruction right from the start would seem much older than people of the New Era. The plot for season six and seven roughly touched upon 60-plus and 70-plus years during that period. According to genuine historical video resources, during that time, many of these important historical characters had already been old, and as time passed, these characters would gradually get older. If they were to take into account the Old Era's way of counting age, if the Period of Destruction had not abruptly descended, the majority of this bunch would already have retired. They would really be a bunch of retired officials.

Fang Zhao laughed when he heard this term. He had also wondered what would have happened had the Period of Destruction never occurred. What sort of leisurely life would he have led upon retiring?

Ultimately, his ending had been to die in battle.

Noticing that Fang Zhao wasn't angry at all, Lu Aotian continued, "Big Brother Zhao, later on, when we go to the music center, give me your autograph. Not much, just a Diting Z Series earpiece and a few photographs. My entire family loves you, and my grandparents follow the series closely. They tell me that in the Yanzhou chapter, besides me, you are their next favorite."

"Sure." It was just signing his autograph. Fang Zhao would not decline this sort of trivial matter.

The music center here had been designed by a number of globally renowned architects. The building did not have the bright splendor of buildings of the New Era. Looking at its exterior, it seemed rather unsophisticated. It was as if the architects had used rather pious methods to suit the native topography and blend it together with the rocks, sand, hills, and earth.

Its exterior did seem crude and had an intense native flavor, but stepping in, one would find sophisticated technology all over. There were numerous teams with all sorts of different musical styles concentrated here and over 10 practice studios and concert halls, yet not a single note of a musical instrument could be heard on the first floor.

Stepping in through the main doors of the center, all one could hear was muted discussions. This was the sound of people walking on the first floor and sitting at the rest areas. On the whole, it was rather peaceful.

"Lu Ao!" Lu Aotian's father was carrying a bag, and he took quick strides over from the level-one rest area and exclaimed, "Get down! So old, yet you behave like a two-year-old? Do you still need someone to carry you when walking? How many times have I told you?" After carrying Lu Aotian down from Fang Zhao's shoulder, his father apologetically said to Fang Zhao, "Sorry, little kids are insensitive... Were you like this all the way when coming over from the film area?"

Father Lu looked at Lu Aotian.

Lu Aotian avoided his gaze.

Father Lu's eyebrows furrowed, and he opened his mouth to begin the lecture.

Lu Aotian leaned in to take the bag from his father's hands before he could speak. "Dad, have you brought all the things I asked for?"

Father Lu ignored his question and even blocked his son, raising the bag out of his son's grasp.

"This little rascal just loves giving people trouble. Fang Zhao, are you tired from carrying the little piggy all the way? You can rest for a bit over here. Now, it is the afternoon rest period; performances at the venues have not started yet."

Father Lu pay no attention to Lu Aotian's protest at being called "little piggy," and he brought Fang Zhao to the rest area.

"If I'm a little piggy, Dad, you are a big piggy... My bag! Dad, give me my bag." Lu Aotian picked up his tiny feet and chased after them. "Big Brother Zhao promised to give me his autograph. I won't bother him after he has signed it."

After speaking with Fang Zhao for a bit, Father Lu saw that Fang Zhao really did not seem to mind. Father Lu did not reprimand Lu Aotian as it was a public area, after all, and there were many people nearby. Later on, when they returned home, he would have a little private talk with Lu Aotian. To have the cheek to sit on Fang Zhao's shoulders? Taking a photograph is all right, but walking such a distance and making Fang Zhao carry you? Take a look at your own weight! This little brat needs some sorting out!

"Fang Zhao, if you have no urgent matters to attend to, have something to eat with us while you sign. The refreshments here aren't too bad, and what the performing artists eat here is more exquisite than what actors get over at the large dining hall. The taste might not be on par with the food at the gourmet city, but it definitely wins out in terms of artistic sense. These are the benefits investment firms have given them. However, only the cards here can be swiped, if you wish to eat here. People invited to the music team have the meal card for the music center. I will be using my wife's card."

Father Lu did not seem embarrassed at all and was even a little pleased as he showed off a little. But when he thought about it, Fang Zhao was also a member of the music team and had the meal card too.

"Big Brother Zhao, look, we can do the signing here." To the side, Lu Aotian had finally gotten hold of the bag and had taken out his earpieces, and handed it over to Fang Zhao together with a pen. "There are still two more photographs. For our photo together, you just have to sign here. When I have internet access, I'm going to flaunt your autograph, hehe."

Fang Zhao took the pen, earpiece, and photographs and proceeded to sign them.

Lu Aotian handed over another two photos. "Can you help me sign these two stills too? These are for my grandma and grandad."

After these two, there were another two, then another two, and then yet another two...

Seeing Lu Aotian fishing out photographs two by two, Fang Zhao laughed. "All right, bring out all the remaining ones. I will sign them all in one go." This rascal had too many patterns.

Lu Aotian brought all the photographs and cards in his bag out. Some were for his seniors and some were for his siblings. There was even one for the classmate who sat beside him in class... Altogether, there were more than 50 pieces.

"Hehe." Lu Aotian also felt a little embarrassed and did not know what to say, so he could only smile sheepishly. He had previously lied to Fang Zhao that there were only a few pieces, but in actual fact, the scene before his eyes seemed quite excessive. From the corner of his eyes, he noticed his father's face turning black.

Fang Zhao returned the pen and photograph cards back to Lu Aotian after he was done signing all of them.

"Heh! Thank you, Big Brother Zhao! Feel free to order whatever you want! I can swipe my mom's card too!"

Father Lu pointed to the oval-shaped couch not too far away and said to Lu Aotian, "Lower your voice. If you don't want to eat, go over and sleep."

Lu Aotian saw his father's expression wasn't too good, so he didn't dare to be stubborn. Grudgingly, he moved over to where the couch was, but he did not feel like sleeping and he wanted to keep himself occupied, so he scanned around looking for anything fun. At this moment, he saw a Muzhou actor bringing a dog in, and his eyes glowed.

There were quite a number of actors from Muzhou's filming team that had brought along dogs with them. These dogs were from Muzhou's famed police dog academy, were mature, and could understand a lot of commands.

The Muzhou chapter of "Founding Era" could not have scenes without dogs. Dogs had played an important role in Muzhou all along, and there were many records left in historical resources. In the Cemetery of Martyrs, there were also many graves and sculptures of dogs.

When the police dog academy was selecting dogs for filming, the dog's appearance, IQ, temperament, and other factors had been taken into consideration before this batch had been selected. Muzhou's actors had also familiarized themselves with the dogs

early on and now brought them along wherever they went, fostering a stronger bond so the coordination between man and dog would be even better during filming. There was no explicit rule prohibiting dogs, so whenever those Muzhou actors came, their dogs were at their sides.

Lu Aotian was both afraid of and curious about these dogs that were much larger than him, and he could not help but tease them whenever he saw them. These dogs had received training and were leashed, so even if the dogs were provoked and got mad, they would not chase after Lu Aotian or bite him, as there was a person holding them back.

And because of this, Lu Aotian got bolder. Even if his father had told him many times not to provoke the dogs, he was unable to stop his troublemaking hands.

This time, it was the same. The moment he saw the Muzhou actor bringing the dog over, Lu Aotian scurried over to it.

Father Lu was talking to Fang Zhao about the series as well as discussing other stuff, such as certain code words that people outside the cast and crew did not know. Any industry outsiders would not understand anything even if they heard, but insiders who had a few years in the industry would know right away.

Lu Aotian could be said to still be young and ignorant in the cast, so as his father, Father Lu had to take responsibility and remember and repay the help that others rendered to his son. To have been able to survive in the entertainment industry for so long, Father Lu also had his own methods. Although he was only considered a reputable actor in the showbiz circles, among netizens, he was considered quite the popular star. However, the cast of "Founding Era" had no lack of popular superstars, so with his background and contacts, he would not put on the airs of a senior when talking to a promising newcomer Fang Zhao.

Of course, when speaking to Fang Zhao, Father Lu also paid some attention to Lu Aotian. Noticing the little rascal provoking a dog again, he started to fume inside.

The actor from Muzhou had not been too familiar with Father Lu in the past, but because everyone had friends and relatives over here at the music center and frequently came over for meals, over time, they had gotten to know each other and would exchange some words when they ran into each other.

Thus, when Father Lu saw the Muzhou actor looking over, he made some hand gestures toward the other party.

Lu Aotian, this little brat, deserved to be taught a lesson he would remember.

At the moment, the unknowing Lu Aotian was staring at the obediently seated dog. In his hands, he held a straw for drinking fruit juice.

The average size of a Muzhou dog was very big so that, in the serial, more people would see how awe-inspiring Muzhou dogs were. Back in the police dog academy, the dogs that had been selected were especially impressive. Even when seated, the dog was taller than Lu Aotian by two heads.

The large dog noticed Lu Aotian when he started walking over and stared at him warily. It knew that this rascal provoked him every single time, and when Lu Aotian got close, some impatient growls formed in the dog's throat.

Lu Aotian closed the distance and nervously extended his hands, using the straw to poke the large dog lightly.

The large dog growled and suddenly got up and rushed two steps over to Lu Aotian. As this was the length of the leash, it generally did this to scare people only and would not struggle against the leash restraining him.

Lu Aotian had also been scared by this method a few times. After a while, he had stopped being afraid anymore, and he experiencedly took a few steps back till he was just out of reach of the dog.

Then.

Thud.

Boy and dog both turned to look at the leash, and they saw the leash handle had fallen on the ground.

Lu Aotian: "... Turn around, run!

The large dog looked at the leash on the ground, then raised its head to look at that Muzhou actor. Seeing the actor gesture, the dog chased after Lu Aotian.

Lu Aotian looked over his shoulder and saw the large dog catching up. Scared sh*tless, he shrieked and ran in the direction of his father.

How fast could those short legs of Lu Aotian's carry him? The large dog was closing in, but it actually was not even using its full strength. Everyone around witnessing the scene knew it was teasing the child.

Father Lu got up and walked over, spreading his arms preparing to catch his son while thinking to himself, Learned your lesson this time?

Who knew that Lu Aotian would change direction, bypassing his father and running over to Fang Zhao before expertly clambering up Fang Zhao's shoulders.

Father Lu: "..."

The large dog stopped about five steps away and twitched its nose while staring at Fang Zhao suspiciously. It took a step closer and sniffed, wary and curious. Following that, it warily turned its head toward the Muzhou actor and gave two low growls.

Black faced, Father Lu went over and picked Lu Aotian up from Fang Zhao's shoulders and smacked him on the butt. "Let's see if you still dare to provoke dogs in future!"

The Muzhou actor came over and picked up the leash before telling Lu Aotian while laughing, "Little friend, don't do this next time. If a dog isn't leashed, you might be bitten."

"Did you hear that?" Father Lu softly chided his son.

The Muzhou noticed his dog sniffing the air from time to time while taking a step closer to Fang Zhao.

"This dog is really well trained," Fang Zhao said.

Hearing praise for the dog from his own continent, the Muzhou actor was also pleased. "Of course. Our Muzhou dogs are all very smart. Besides, he even came from Muzhou's police dog academy. This is the cream of the crop. If you want to own a dog..."

The Muzhou actor paused midway through his sentence. When he had first learned of Fang Zhao, it had not been because of Fang Zhao's composing status. Nor had it been his because of his acting. It had been because of Fang Zhao's dog, which had caused

waves in Muzhou.

Thus, the Muzhou's actor changed his tune. "Your curly-haired dog is rather well trained too. Why didn't you bring him over?"

Fang Zhao replied. "He still has an assignment."

That Muzhou actor flashed a knowing smile. He guessed that Fang Zhao had surely had Curly Hair film some commercials or TV series for money. After all, that dog's value in the global charts was right at the front. People from other continents just loved these sort of things. But at the same time, inwardly, he felt a little disdain. He just could not stand it when people from other continents treated dogs as tools to earn money.

Regardless of what he thought, that Muzhou actor did not show it on his face. He just laughed heartily. After exchanging some words with Fang Zhao and Father Lu, he left together with the dog. Just as they were leaving, that large dog raised its head to look at Fang Zhao suspiciously and sniffed before releasing a low growl.

If its specialist trainer was here, the trainer would surely have known what it was trying to say: there is the scent of a dog on Fang Zhao!

Every few days, Fang Zhao would head to the base to visit Curly Hair. Even if he changed and washed his clothing every day unless Fang Zhao specifically tried to remove the smell, a tiny bit of Curly Hair's smell would always linger.

But that Muzhou actor did not know this and just thought the large dog was still angry with Lu Aotian. As for Curly Hair, who the Muzhou actor assumed had been left on Earth to make money, he was actually over at the Wai base working overtime.

Fang Zhao did not stick around. After talking with Father Lu, he headed over to the concert halls. He would first look at the list of each hall's performances before deciding which one to attend.

After Fang Zhao left, Father Lu brought Lu Aotian with him to apologize to everyone seated in the first-floor lounge and to treat them to a cup of tea. It wasn't anything expensive, just manners. There had been a bit of a commotion and some people had frowned. The Lu's could not treat it as if nothing had happened, and Father Lu used this as a pretext so that Lu Aotian would not create a ruckus or do things like provoke dogs in future.

After the rounds, Father Lu decided to bring Lu Aotian to watch a performance.

"Why are you dawdling? Hurry up," Father Lu urged as he saw Lu Aotian walking sluggishly.

"My legs have gone soft." Lu Aotian had been scared by the dog, and strength had not fully returned to his legs. When Lu Aotian had gone one round with his father to apologize, he had beared with it and not uttered a word. But now he could bear it no longer.

"You and your troublemaking. Let's see whether you dare to provoke dogs anymore!" Father Lu went over and picked Lu Aotian up. He had no way of being like Fang Zhao and supporting this little fatty on his shoulders, so he could only let Lu Aotian ride on his neck.

"Why did you run over to Fang Zhao when there was a problem?" Father Lu still took offense to that incident.

"I feel that Big Brother Zhao gives me a greater sense of security," Lu Aotian replied.

"Sense of security my foot... You better know who is your daddy!"

"Of course I know," Lu Aotian said seriously. "Don't worry, I will surely provide for you when you retire!"

"...In your dreams! Your daddy is still young." Father Lu, who was in the prime of his life, simply did not want to think about retiring. He decided to put this little rascal in order when they returned home today.

Chapter 314

That Is My Wife

Fang Zhao did not follow the father and son pair. The hall they were going to had a soothing musical style, whereas the place Fang Zhao was headed to had a different musical style.

When actors from the cast came over, they would pick a style or genre of music that suited their preferences. If they wished to relax, they would head to the soothing music hall. If they wished to gain inspiration or find their form, they could choose to head to other venues.

The majority of people in the music center were from the music circles, and in this place that was isolated from the external world, the rules within the circles were even more obvious.

A few young singers who had been popular online back in the past were very content here.

It had nothing to do with being suppressed or crowded out.

Separated from the internet and public opinion and away from the fans, in these circles, how high one stood and how many artistic achievements one had were clear for everyone to see.

Many faces that people in the outside world were unfamiliar with actually had high standing in the music circles, and some people who had once stirred up and generated buzz outside pretended to be quails when they returned to these circles.

Today, in the afternoon, five concert halls had scheduled performances. In theory, these were performances, but in actual fact, these were actually an exchange between individuals or teams. After Fang Zhao looked through the list, he chose a venue.

Stepping into the venue, Fang Zhao heard a person shouting to him from a short distance away. "Fang Zhao? Come over, there are seats here."

The person who had spoken was Qiao Tingzheng, a veteran actor that originated from Yanzhou. However, he had not signed with any managing company and had chosen to start his own studio to develop on a global scale. Most of Qiao Tingzheng's roles were as a villain, so people called him a specialist villain.

Qian Tingzheng had a villainous face. He wasn't ugly and could be considered attractive, but he did not seem particularly upright. With his acting abilities, portraying a righteous character was possible, but when he was acting as a villain, his portrayal of a crafty and sinister character left a deep impact in people's hearts.

In the words of netizens, Qiao Tingzheng was the total opposite of his name 1. Those roles he played... generally speaking, were not good people. Directors just loved to seek him out to portray these sorts of roles.

Because he frequently acted as a villain, he did not have as much support or as many fans compared to others, but he still had a rather high level of recognition. On a global scale, even if people did not know Qiao Tingzheng's name, they could remember his face and his temperament that was so suitable for a villain.

Qiao Tingzheng was helpless too. Who could he blame for looking like this?

In the Yanzhou chapter of "Founding Era," the character he portrayed was Zong Qian.

Anyone who had read a history book knew that Zong Qian had been ice cold and ruthless, his methods unyielding and bloody. He was a true bad guy in Yanzhou's history.

During the Period of Destruction, besides fighting against the elements, there had also been fighting amongst people.

The focus of season six of the Yanzhou chapter was fighting among people, as well as a turning point.

In Yanzhou chapter season six, Fang Zhao trampled over Zong Qian and his party to become one of the genuine core characters of this land.

Because he had been immersed in his character, actor Qiao Tingzheng seemed even colder than before. Especially when he wore an icy gaze along on his stiff face, which made people shudder as if an anaconda was staring fixedly at one's back. Little kids were especially frightened of him, and even Lu Aotian, who loved to play crazy, stayed

far away from Qian Tingzheng every time.

In the show, Wu Yan had some doubts about Zong Qian. In history, as a child, Wu Yan had nearly died as a result of Zong Qian and had personally witnessed Zong Qian murdering others.

Outside of filming, Lu Aotian and Wu Yun, who portrayed Wu Yan in the series, were unable to keep their composure when they came face to face with Qiao Tingzheng. After all, they were still young and could not remain calm under that stern gaze without any hint of emotion. Among the three actors that played Wu Yan, only He Lisi could resist him.

Naturally, being able to have such a result was a testament to Qiao Tingzheng's acting chops.

Qiao Tingzheng was smiling as he greeted Fang Zhao. He had already received his bento box toward the end of the filming of season six. Now that filming for season seven was already underway, there was no need for him to be immersed in his character. However, there were still some hints that he had not completely shed his character. His gaze when he looked at other people still seemed quite cold.

Thus, when people saw Qian Tingzheng smiling, they could not help but shudder and think to themselves, How can a smile be so terrifying?

Qiao Tingzheng did not care what others thought. In the show, Fang Zhao had trampled over him to ascend, but outside of the show, Qiao Tingzheng did not give Fang Zhao any attitude. Qiao Tingzheng instead greeted Fang Zhao warmly and invited him to watch the performance together.

There were actually many actors that came over to the music center. As "Founding Era" progressed to the later stages, there were even more people receiving bento boxes. Now that they had much more free time and were unwilling to leave the cast and crew, when these people had nothing to do, they would head over to listen to performances, interact with actors from every continent, and expand their contacts.

There were many people interacting with Qiao Tingzheng, but very few were willing to sit beside him to watch a performance, so at the moment, the two seats beside him were empty.

Fang Zhao did not reject the invitation. He walked over to sit with Qiao Tingzheng.

Qiao Tingzheng was very pleased with Fang Zhao's choice to come to this music hall. "You definitely won't regret coming here. These are all amazing singers all right at the top. Perhaps they might not have much fame online, but in the music circles, these are the ones." Qiao Tingzheng stuck up a thumb. "Oh right, I heard from someone that you brought that little fella Lu Aotian along?" Qiao Tingzheng asked.

"Mhmm, I handed him over to his father already," Fang Zhao replied.

Qiao Tingzheng scoffed. "Tsk, that little fella might be young, but he has many tricks up his sleeve, and he can be very determined. Otherwise, how was that kid able to snatch the role of child Wu Yan when there were so many people who had stronger family backgrounds and more awards? Perhaps one other reason is that he was determined to adjust himself, to be exactly like the role he would be portraying, ultimately causing the director and the Committee of 100 to select him."

Fang Zhao nodded. "How can he stand out if he doesn't strive his hardest?"

Noticing that Fang Zhao was not surprised, Qiao Tingzheng laughed. "Seems like I was overthinking." He had been worried that Fang Zhao would be deceived by Lu Aotian's innocent appearance. He had never expected Fang Zhao to have seen through it all along.

After a bit, Qiao Tingzheng suddenly asked, "I heard that many actors from Yanzhou have sought you out to discuss their roles? I also heard from my friend that you are a member of Yanzhou's historical consultant team and have a profound understanding of Yanzhou's history."

"I do know a little, but I don't think it can be considered that profound." Fang Zhao waited for what was to follow.

"Then, what sort of person do you think Zong Qian was?" Qiao Tingzheng asked.

Zong Qian had risen to prominence before fading during the Period of Destruction. For an ordinary person, he had become resplendent before perishing. In the long history, he had blossomed for a short period yet brought about countless shocks.

Zong Qian had once had the conviction of the people of Yanzhou, had numerous fanatical followers, and been in a position of power. During that period of despair, he had led survivors from that corner of the continent out of hell, yet because of his stubbornness, he'd led his people into another abyss.

There were no people from that period that had been soft. Leaders had had even more methods at their disposal, but Fang Zhao had never been as extreme as Zong Qian.

"Zong Qian was..." Fang Zhao was staring out into nothing in particular, yet he seemed like he was focusing on something in the nothingness. "He was a savior who walked the wrong path."

Qiao Tingzhen heard what Fang Zhao said and appeared astonished before looking down and falling into a short silence. Following that, he laughed heartily, a bright blaze in his eyes. "Exactly!"

The character's personality was made up. Outside of filming, a person would naturally be willing to put himself in the shoes of the character he played so as to reflect on it.

Qiao Tingzheng was the same.

A person immersed deeply in their character would have a sort of sentiment that nobody else could understand. Although Zong Qian was definitely a villain in Yanzhou historical books and received a lot of hate, when Qiao Tingzhen was playing the role and was immersed in the character, he seemed to have experienced the glories and downfalls of Zong Qian's life.

Qiao Tingzhen sighed softly. "A savior, ah..."

He had asked many people about their views on the historical character Zong Qian. However, either the villain label was slapped on right away or people spoke nonsense on account of his seniority in the showbiz circles. Zong Qian had never been allowed into the Cemetery of Martyrs and was criticized by future generations. In the eyes of people now, he was indeed a failure.

Fang Zhao's evaluation was the first time Qiao Tingzhen had heard someone speak of Zong Qian this way, and they were also the most satisfying words he had heard.

He had never expected this line to come from Fang Zhao. In the series, the two characters they portrayed were two opposing factions from the start till end.

Afterward, Qiao Tingzhen did not make any sounds. The performance was about to start, and the voices of people in the venue gradually faded away.

The opening performance was a globally renowned female singer, Wensha. The song

she would be performing was the closing theme of season six of the Yanzhou chapter. Season six was also close to broadcasting, and the theme that had been recently decided on was the one Wensha would be singing.

Undertones of a symphony epic were blended with a popular music style. Singing it well was a tough ask, but Wensha was a senior in the music circles and could sing many styles, such as classical, pop, rock 'n' roll, and opera, and she sang them very well indeed. From this song performance, one could recognize Wensha's skillful singing abilities.

Music was something mystical. People could find peace through music, and they gain strength through it too.

The music had some strange charm and sorrow to it, yet it did not lack depth and was quite vast.

Even though there were no corpses and there was no smoke, one could seemingly smell blood in the wind.

It was as if with the gathering of night, evil bloomed like flowers, brilliant and beautiful, numerous and vigorous, before ultimately withering away.

This song suited the darker theme of season six rather well. As Fang Zhao listened to it, he felt as if this song had been written for Zong Qian.

The moment the song ended, the venue erupted into applause.

Qiao Tingzhen, who was seated beside Fang Zhao, was especially excited and sprang up from his seat. Any coldness or sinister traits from his villainous aura vanished completely. It was as if his IQ had plummeted to zero as he giggled like a kid, slapping his palms together as if he wasn't afraid of pain. He appeared very pleased, and he tilted his head toward Fang Zhao and exclaimed loudly, "The one who just sang the song, Wensha! A singing goddess! My wife!"

Fang Zhao: "..."

"Did you know, the closing theme for season six of the 'Founding Era' Yanzhou chapter was written by my wife herself? Impressive, right?"

Fang Zhao: "..."

Qian Tingzhen continued to clap vigorously. "My wife specifically composed it for the role I played. It is also a commemoration for my curtain call!"

Fang Zhao: "..."

As if he had suddenly remembered something, Qiao Tingzheng said, "I nearly forgot, you don't have a wife, so you wouldn't understand how I feel!"

Fang Zhao: "..."

That pricked his heart.

Qiao Tingzheng continued, "Oh, right, the one you are portraying also seemed to be all alone till he perished in battle."

Fang Zhao: "..."

That pricked his heart really ruthlessly.

Chapter 315

You Are?

This time, Fang Zhao saw another side of Qiao Tingzhen.

At today's performance, Wensha had sung three songs. Every time a song ended, Qiao Tingzhen was especially excited, but whenever it was another's turn to sing, he returned to his cool demeanor.

That afternoon, the performers were veterans of the music circles, and they each had their own style. Fang Zhao noticed someone else, not one of the performers on stage but a member of the audience seated right at the edge of the front row. If not for the fact that after every singer completed their song, they faced this person and bowed lightly, it would have been rather difficult to notice this person.

Mo Lang, a composing and arrangement great master, was 150-plus years old and an old senior. In the music industry, he was known as "Divine Hand Mo Lang" and was a genius from the same period as Xu Jong. He had even achieved the Galaxy World Award that Xue Jong had yet to achieve. In terms of artistic accomplishments, works, and contributions, he was a person standing at the apex, someone few people could compare to.

At the same time, Mo Lang was the chief appraiser of the music team and had significant authority.

Mo Lang wasn't as amiable as Xue Jing; he seemed sterner. He did not speak or laugh much. There was only the arts in the eyes of this old man. When this old mister was looking at people, it seemed like his mind was full of musical notes.

After the performance ended in the afternoon, people in the venue started to leave in succession. Venerable Mo did stay behind, instead making his way to the exit. Naturally, everyone made a path for him. The old mister was advanced in age, so bumping into him would not be good. Furthermore, because of Venerable Mo's superior status, actors that frequently came here to watch performances recognized him and treated him with respect.

In the entire cast and crew, there were not many people over a hundred years of age. Those over 150 could be counted with the fingers on one hand. Fortunately, he could still be considered rather healthy for his age. Venerable Mo spent all his time in the music center and did not have to bother about anything but composing. This was the special privilege he had.

As Fang Zhao headed to the exit, a few actors from other continents called out greetings. Now that filming was at season seven, some of the characters in different chapters had seen the paths gradually intertwine.

Sometimes characters from other continents appeared in the Yanzhou chapter, and sometimes Yanzhou characters appeared in the chapters of other continent's. As the series progressed, there would also be the plotline where the various leaders of all the continents convened.

Fang Zhao returned the greetings. When he saw Mo Lang approaching, Fang Zhao stepped aside. Qiao Tingzheng did the same as well, letting Mr. Mo pass.

"That is Great Master Mo Lang, you should probably know him too. From time to time, the old mister visits each music hall and listens to performances, but he rarely smiles. Recently, it is even rarer to see him smile. I have seen him thrice, and he was frowning all three times and did not acknowledge anyone. I have no idea what is going through his mind, but I have heard others say that the old mister is plotting a big move." After watching the performances, Qiao Tingzhen was much more energetic, and he was speaking a lot more.

Fang Zhao knew what Qiao Tingzheng was talking about. He had heard that Venerable Mo had received an important task to compose a tune that was over 10 minutes long. This tune was supposed to be the ending theme of the "Founding Era" series.

Creating a tune over 10 minutes was not hard, but to compose an exceptional piece was no easy task. The tune had to ensure that listeners did not find it tiring or lengthy. It was no wonder the production team had passed this task to this renowned music master.

Looking at Venerable Mo's demeanor, he was most likely mulling over this piece.

"In the short space of 10 days, I have appeared in front of the old master three times, but believe me, even if I'm standing right in front of him, he still doesn't recognize me."

In front of Venerable Mo, that villainous face of Qiao Tingzheng's had no effect.

Fang Zhao nodded. "I heard that there are no people in the old mister's eyes, only musical notes."

The two spoke softly and decided to wait for Mo Lang to pass before heading out. Unexpectedly, Mo Lang abruptly stopped as he was passing them.

Mo Lang looked over, his gaze scanning from top to bottom as he asked Fang Zhao skeptically, "You are?"

"Hello, Venerable Mo, I am Fang Zhao, a graduate of the Yanzhou Academy of Music. I am also part of the music team," Fang Zhao replied.

Mo Lang's two eyebrows rose up. "The little fella that composed the four-movement '100-Year Period of Destruction' series?"

"Little fella..." Fang Zhao paused, then nodded. "That's me."

"I remember you! I listened to the '100-Year Period of Destruction' series and have seen your information. I just didn't get the chance to meet you here before. "

At the side, Qiao Tingzhen stared in disbelief at Mo Lang, then glanced at Fang Zhao. He knew that Fang Zhao had had more success in the music circles than the showbiz circles, but he had never expected Venerable Mo, a person who did not remember faces or care about worldly affairs, to actually know Fang Zhao. He had never heard of the old man following the serial.

Qiao Tingzheng did not understand the Yanzhou music circles and wasn't sure what Venerable Mo meant by the "100-Year Period of Destruction" series. He only had a faint recollection that he had heard that name somewhere before.

Mo Lang did not continue asking why Fang Zhao rarely appeared at the music center. He instead asked, "The four movements of the '100-Year Period of Destruction' series are really decent. Those are some mature techniques. Do you have any works this time around?"

"Yes, I am preparing a piece for one episode in season nine," Fang Zhao replied.

Mo Lang frowned. Just one episode?

However, when he remembered Fang Zhao's age and experience, the frown vanished. "Send it directly to me when it is complete."

When he finished, Mo Lang's gaze turned to Qiao Tingzheng at Fang Zhao's side and asked, "And who are you?"

"Venerable Mo, I am Qiao Tingzheng. My wife is Wensha," Qiao Tingzheng answered respectfully.

"Mhmm." Mo Lang nodded his head solemnly and turned to leave.

Qiao Tingzhen shed a tear in his heart. It wasn't easy, but at least Venerable Mo had remembered him because of his wife and had even added a half-hearted "Mmhm."

Mo Lang did not talk to anyone else, nor did he even give anyone else a look. As he left, he once again immersed himself in his own world.

Regarding this, everyone was already used to it. When one achieved the status that Mo Lang had, there was no need to bother about anything else.

However, the many people in the venue gave Fang Zhao curious looks.

"Fang Zhao, what relationship do you have with Venerable Mo?" someone asked.

"No relationship whatsoever. This is my first time speaking to him," Fang Zhao replied.

However, many people did not believe him.

Who was he trying to kid? If they had no relationship, why had Mo Lang asked Fang Zhao to send his completed piece straight to the old master?

There were some people who inwardly decided to speak about this matter to their friends in the music circles to see if they were able to get any information. After all, it was too difficult to get Mo Lang to remember a person. Without sufficient artistic accomplishments, there was simply no way to leave a lasting impression on Mo Lang.

After exiting the music hall, Fang Zhao parted ways with Qiao Tingzhen. Fang Zhao was going to call on a few seniors, and Qiao Tingzheng was headed to look for his wife.

By the time Fang Zhao left the music center, it was already night. He had his dinner in

the small dining hall in the music hall and returned back to continue working on his piece.

Afterward, during his free time in between filming, Fang Zhao spent the majority of it composing.

Actually, Fang Zhao did not know why Mo Lang wanted him to send his work straight to the old master after their first encounter either. According to normal procedures, it would probably go through one or two audits before the piece would appear on Mo Lang's desk.

But hearing Mo Lang mention the four movements of "100-Year Period of Destruction," Fang Zhao guessed that Mo Lang had probably given him a shortcut on account of the series. Perhaps he thought highly of Fang Zhao's composing abilities, or maybe he wanted to seek inspiration from Fang Zhao's piece.

However, all that was secondary. Mo Lang would not accommodate someone's work just because of a good relationship. Furthermore, he had no relationship whatsoever with Fang Zhao and had only asked Fang Zhao to send his completed work straight to him. He had never promised to select Fang Zhao's piece. What Fang Zhao needed to do now was compose.

As the days passed, season five was completed and season six started to air.

In the series, the dark days had still not passed. On the contrary, because of the infighting between humans, the show had taken on a darker turn, and the list of names of those that perished in battle was increasing.

During the closing theme, audiences were used to seeing the rolling words and the list of the names of fallen martyrs and said martyrs' grave numbers. After that, they would notice the composer and performer of the closing theme.

A distant sounding voice combined seamlessly with stunning and aesthetic electronic tones. An epic symphony laid the foundation alongside a harmonic background choir. Some skillful singing reaching high notes brought about an intense sentiment.

A certain film forum in Yanzhou.

"That voice sounds a little familiar."

"I don't even need to look at the words. I can tell right away that it is Wensha just from listening to it!"

"If I had such a voice, I wouldn't even need to go to school! There wouldn't be any need for exams! Or homework!"

"Students nowadays might not know Wensha well. Let me tell everyone more..."

The topics on the forum went from discussing season six's plotline to focusing on Qiao Tingzhen, who played the big baddie Zong Qian, his wife, the singing goddess Wensha, and their gossip.

"I just went to check out Qiao Tingzhen's social platform. Indeed, out of nine photographs he posted, eight of them are photographs of Wensha, and the remaining one is a shot of the two together."

"Qiao Tingzhen? Hahaha, that crazy wife flaunter has started to flaunt his wife again? Season six's ending theme was sung by Wensha, so he will surely boast a bunch."

"According to the course of history, season six is where Zong Qian gets crushed by Fang Zhao and his part in history ends. Surely Qiao Tingzhen has finished filming all his scenes in the series already. That guy has been very active recently. He updates quite a few statuses every time he has internet access."

A certain adorer of Zong Qian's said, "What? Wait a minute! Zong Qian gets crushed by Fang Zhao? He receives a bento box this season? How can that be! He is such an awesome person! I really love this character!"

"One look at the person above me and I know right away that he isn't from Yanzhou."

Zong Qian's adorer justified himself. "Zong Qian had so much strength. If he had been given another five years—no, three years would have been enough. By that time if he had come up against Fang Zhao, it's uncertain who the victor would have been."

"That was why Old Fang crushed him in advance and did not give him the opportunity to continue developing!" This was a die-hard Fang Zhao fan.

"Objectively speaking, if it had been Zong Qian that had crushed Fang Zhao all those years ago, he might really have become Yanzhou's savior. During that time, Wu Yan had still not been capable of standing up to him. If he had really won, he would have

probably reclaimed the entirety of Yanzhou. However, Yanzhou would not be named Yanzhou but, rather, Qianzhou, and the entire continent's style would be different. Probably colder and merciless, and more likely to find problems. And there would have been many more sacrifices. Under those tough, bloody, and cold methods, survivors would have been just like slaves, becoming the unfeeling knives in his hands, or they could only stand up and revolt."

"Whoa, history is just so complicated."

"Qiao Tingzhen just updated a new status. He actually said that Zong Qian was a savior!"

This bunch that were currently stirred up all rushed over to check it out.

——

Actor Qiao Tingzheng: "Zong Qian, a savior that took the wrong path [Image]."

——

The accompanying image was a still taken from the series. In the distance, Zong Qian's could be seen from behind, and behind Zong Qian's back, one side was filled with corpses of all sorts of mutated beasts and the other was packed with countless human bodies.

Anyone that had watched the Yanzhou chapter of "Founding Era" knew that in Zong Qian's eyes, anyone that went against him was no different from those mutated beasts, that he would kill all enemies indiscriminately.

"There is such a saying?"

"Zong Qian was an extreme and unfeeling lunatic."

"Savior? Zong Qian? Far from it!"

"Actually it isn't far. Only Fang Zhao stood between the two."

"So the question returns, or maybe just a hypothesis. If there was no Fang Zhao, Zong Qian might really have become the overlord of Yanzhou. No, I should say the overlord of Qianzhou!"

"Still impossible. The leaders of the other 10 continents would not have let such a dangerous person like Zong Qian exist."

"How is it impossible? Wasn't Great General Lu Xi of Xizhou renowned for being cold and strict? Perhaps he and Zong Qian could understand each other and join hands to take on the others."

"Hahaha! Make sure you study your history well before coming over to discuss historical questions! You people should go read up on which of the historical leaders during that time had the best relationship with Xizhou's big boss!"

"Cough, butting in, I'm from Xizhou and my specialty is history. Us people that studied the Period of Destruction history all know that Great General Lu Xi and Yanzhou's Fang Zhao shared a secret."

Thus, the direction of the forum changed once more, and discussions began on the exact nature of the unspeakable secret the big boss of Xizhou and Old Fang of Yanzhou had shared.

Elsewhere, a battle was also raging on Qiao Tingzheng's social platform profile.

Many people were displeased with the "savior" used in Qiao Tingzheng's status and felt that Qiao Tingzheng was trying to make enemies with the people of Yanzhou.

"Perhaps you are so addicted to portraying villains that you have started being a traitor to society and humankind?"

"I just knew it. One look and I could tell he wasn't a good person!"

"If Zong Qian is a savior, then what is Fang Zhao? And what sort of status would Wu Yan have had!?"

"We don't have to waste our breath, Qiao Tingzheng stopped being a Yanzhou citizen a long time ago."

"Teacher Qiao, have you asked Fang Zhao about this?!"

...

Far away in one of planet Wai's music hall, Qiao Tingzheng received an urgent long-

distance call from his manager.

"Brother Qiao, have you seen the opinions online?" his manager asked.

"I have seen them, but my words aren't wrong. If Zong Qian had not walked the wrong path, he would have had much greater achievements. Furthermore, over 10 city districts in Yanzhou's west region were reclaimed by Zong Qian. Without Zong Qian, during the Period of Destruction, the survivors of those 10-some districts in western Yanzhou would have suffered at least 60% losses! All of this is according to history! Since we are talking about actual history, Zong Qian did play a part and his accomplishments cannot go unnoticed. Besides, these words were said by Fang Zhao himself!"

"Don't get emotional! Calm down, I didn't say that you are wrong, I'm just saying that the timing of your status was inappropriate. It just so happens that your old rivals have hired people to flame you. The matter will be settled, don't worry. I just want to remind you that you have not completely shed the character. Before you head online to update a status, remember to stay calm. Weren't you rather refined in the past? Those entertainment media outlets were just lying in wait to cause trouble."

"All right. I didn't consider it thoroughly beforehand. Let me post another status to explain.

After the call, Qiao Tingzhen prepared to justify himself and keyed in "I asked, these words were said by Fang Zhao himself!"

When he had typed it in, he clicked post... Posting failed.

Looking at the time, the two hours of internet access were up and the entire area lost its internet connection.

Qiao Tingzheng: "..."

Luckily, he had already explained to his manager. His manager would surely settle it. Qiao Tingzheng relaxed and tossed his communications device aside and went to accompany his wife for a meal.

Indeed, everything went according to what Qiao Tingzheng had expected. His manager guessed that the internet connection had been cut off for the cast and crew, so he logged into Qiao Tingzheng's account and composed a similar status and sent it,

telling everyone that those words had been said by Fang Zhao himself. He also got some stuff to search for some historical records, proving that Zong Qian had indeed saved many people in the past, just that his merits had been overshadowed by his much greater misdeeds.

Battlefields were everywhere. There were just too many in the entertainment circles. Many people loved to stir things up out of nothing. Those in this industry were already used to it. Besides, after this matter was settled, it would benefit Qiao Tingzheng more. As long as historical evidence was laid out to direct the audience's thoughts, that would be enough. This could still be used as a pretext to let Qiao Tingzheng leave a deeper impression and make a little counter attack.

Qiao Tingzheng's manager rolled up his sleeves to do battle. Leading the staff of the studio, he got them to strike back at those making shady moves on the sly.

However, very quickly, a new problem arose.

"Fang Zhao really said those words?" a netizen asked.

"When I see them talking about it, why do I get even more muddled? Exactly which Fang Zhao are you people talking about? Which Fang Zhao is Qiao Tingzheng talking about? Which Fang Zhao actually said this?"

"Yeah, which Fang Zhao? I wanted to ask the same question. Is it the Fang Zhao in the show or the Fang Zhao outside the show?"

Which Fang Zhao?

Qiao Tingzheng's manager's face was blank.

How would I know which Fang Zhao said it!

The cast and crew on planet Wai had no internet access, so he had no way of asking.

Oh my, how problematic! Being a manager is really not easy!

Chapter 316

He Really Composed This Himself?

No matter how the online controversy unfolded or what kind of stories the entertainment journalists who couldn't stay idle made up, Fang Zhao had no time to pay heed. As shooting progressed and the number of scenes involving Wu Yan increased, Fang Zhao's screen time decreased, which gave him more time to compose.

The cast and crew also noticed that Fang Zhao was spending less time on set. With the passage of time, people missed the good ol' days. In the absence of the voracious eater Fang Zhao, everyone began to eat more slowly, at the pace of taking medication. Everyone's rice intake declined.

So whenever he could, the director kept Fang Zhao on set to eat with the rest of the cast.

Today, Fang Zhao had been asked by Director Bai of the Yanzhou chapter to stay for takeout.

Fang Zhao had raced through two boxed meals and started his third by the time most of the others were halfway through their first.

When Fang Zhao finished his third box, a smiling Director Bai handed him another. "We've got plenty. Another one?"

The canteen always sent over extra boxed meals. The untouched ones were returned.

Director Bai was actually kidding. Lo and behold, Fang Zhao gauged the fourth box and nodded. "Thanks!"

Director Bai and the other actors glared at Fang Zhao as he accepted the fourth boxed meal and attacked it with a vengeance.

Fang Zhao raced through the fourth box. Director Bai scanned the pile of fresh boxed meals, grabbed another, and handed it to Fang Zhao. "Another?"

Fang Zhao hesitated. "Thanks, but I'm good."

The rest of the cast: "... Uh, why did you hesitate?"

Director Bai returned the box, his eyes oozing curiosity. "Uhm, how come your appetite has increased even though you have significantly fewer scenes?"

Another actor said, "It's good to be young. I bet he expended the energy from his first boxed meal before he finished the second. You get hungry easily at his age."

The other folks secretly disagreed. Fang Zhao had casually downed four boxes and looked like he could wolf down a fifth. This was a bit scary. There were other young actors in the cast. They could eat at most two or three boxes. The stunt doubles, for example.

A thought popped into Director Bai's head and he asked Fang Zhao earnestly, "Are you under a lot of pressure?"

Fang Zhao paused before nodding. "A little bit."

The acting part was OK, but composing was a bit stressful. Being able to submit his piece directly to Mo Lang was both a great opportunity and a test at the same time. If he followed normal protocol, he would be subject to at least two rounds of prescreening, but going straight to Venerable Mo, given his personality, meant either being accepted or rejected in one go. There was no room for condolences.

Fang Zhao would be lying if he said he didn't feel any pressure, although he wasn't as mindful of the final outcome as others. Fang Zhao had already decided that if his new piece was turned down by Mo Lang, he would announce it to the world by playing it at his next concert. Now his focus was on doing the best job he could on the piece.

But others interpreted Fang Zhao's response as a tacit admission that he was under a huge amount of pressure.

Director Bai was worried, but excessive pressure was common on set. Only the odd one out didn't feel any pressure. He tapped Fang Zhao on the shoulder and sighed. "It hasn't been easy for you."

It wasn't easy at all for a young actor to carry such a substantial role. The good thing was that Fang Zhao had done a good job. The online reviews were overwhelmingly

positive. With shooting on season nine due to start soon, Fang Zhao was bound to be feeling the pressure. It was the same for all the cast members. They felt increasingly restless as their death scenes approached.

Director Bai also knew that Fang Zhao frequented the concert hall. He didn't think much of it. He figured that Fang Zhao attended the shows as relaxation. The directors were busy shooting every day. They didn't have time to concern themselves with other matters, so naturally they didn't know that Fang Zhao spent most of his time away from the set, composing.

That evening.

Fang Zhao was holed up in his dorm room, completing the final revisions to his new piece. The only sound in the room was the rustle of pencil on paper.

After penning the final note, he was thoroughly exhausted.

Extremely.

Exhausted.

More tired than he had been after days of nonstop shooting.

Fang Zhao gazed blankly at the paper notebook in his hands for some time, then smiled. "This is it."

The piece was bound to be questioned if it was released. This was not the kind of work that a composer in his 20s typically wrote, but Fang Zhao had geared himself up for the possible criticism at the outset.

He turned off the air conditioning in his room, walked toward his window, and opened it. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath of the cold, dry, dust-infested air.

The dusty air penetrated his nasal cavity and entered his lungs.

The crappy weather conditions on set, regardless of time of day, bothered most people, but at this moment, Fang Zhao felt completely at peace.

As if the wind had cured his exhaustion.

He felt relaxed, free of yet another incredible burden.

After enjoying the dusty breeze briefly, Fang Zhao returned to his desk and pulled out a fresh music sheet and a pen from the drawer. He copied his new piece onto the fresh sheet.

The music sheet, the pen, and the envelope for submissions were all custom-made for the music team of "Founding Era." They were water- and fireproof.

The team accepted only handwritten submissions. They didn't take electronic files.

After Fang Zhao was done, he placed the music sheet in the envelope and sealed it with a paper strip that came with the package.

The seal was electronically coded. Once it was affixed, only the members of the music team who judged submissions could break it. The strip logged the identity of the person who broke the seal and when it was broken.

Fang Zhao didn't have any scenes scheduled for the next day.

He went for a jog in the morning, showered, changed, and jumped on a bus bound for the concert hall, carrying a backpack containing his submission.

Some of the musicians on the bus were surprised to see Fang Zhao. They had never seen him this early. Typically, at this time of the day, he was on a bus destined for his set.

Some of them asked Fang Zhao about Mo Lang. Word that Fang Zhao had been stopped by Mo Lang and asked to submit directly to him had spread quickly within the music team. Many members of the team didn't make much of it. Even though few were extended this privilege, there were still some 20-odd musicians who had received the invitation. Fang Zhao was not alone, so most folks treated the news as gossip, figuring that Mo Lang probably admired Fang Zhao's talent or had known him for some time.

No one dared press Mo Lang for details. As for Fang Zhao, he didn't volunteer much despite repeated questioning. Seeing Fang Zhao heading for the concert hall first thing in the morning rekindled curiosity about the incident.

A few folks who couldn't contain their curiosity started following Fang Zhao in what they thought to be a stealthy manner after the bus arrived at the concert hall. They

posted live updates:

"Judging from his route, Fang Zhao is off to see Venerable Mo!"

"He is! He's headed in that direction!"

"He's removed an envelope from his backpack, the kind of envelope used for submissions, the kind that's sealed. He's really here to submit his piece!"

Word spread quickly within the music center that Fang Zhao was turning in his submission to Mo Lang.

"Folks who can leave an impression on Venerable Mo, who can submit directly to him, should be quite talented. I really want to see his score."

"I've listened to Fang Zhao's pieces. They're quite infectious. The few songs set against the Period of Destruction have a strong narrative."

"Now I remember. That's Fang Zhao, the genius who sold the rights to all the songs in his concert program for great prices before the concert had even ended. If I recall correctly, he's in his early 20s. A very young fella. For quite some time, I used him as an example to encourage several students who lacked ambition."

"How come newcomers are so competent these days? As a veteran musician, I'm feeling the heat."

Fang Zhao was oblivious to the online chatter, but he did know that he was being followed. He knew his stalkers didn't mean any harm—they were just curious if he was headed to Venerable Mo's quarters. He felt no need to hide his destination, so he pretended he wasn't aware of the tail.

Elderly musicians with tremendous stature like Mo Lang lived and took meals at the music center. It was where they lived and worked. When Fang Zhao arrived at Mo Lang's quarters, he didn't see the man himself but was received by one of Venerable Mo's assistants instead.

Artists treated like national treasures like Mo Lang were equipped with a full staff—bodyguards, assistants, doctors, and so on. While other high-profile artists working on "Founding Era" could bring one assistant at most, Mo Long was entitled to four. These were the perks someone of his status enjoyed.

The assistant who received Fang Zhao was in charge of submissions for the "Founding Era" soundtrack.

The assistant took the envelope from Fang Zhao and inspected the seal. He said with a smile, "Why don't you head back first. I'll hand your submission personally to Venerable Mo."

He pointed to a surveillance camera. "Don't worry. We're under surveillance. I won't leak your piece of claim it as my own."

"Thank you. Then I won't impose any further." Fang Zhao headed for the door.

But he didn't leave the concert hall. Instead, he headed to a recording studio where veteran musicians were working.

The world's top five orchestras were on site. Many of the symphonic scores featured in the TV series were performed by them.

One couldn't immediately hire one of the orchestras to record a new piece after it was finished. It was impossible.

There were only so many orchestras. If one wasn't of a certain level or hadn't garnered sufficient recognition, they weren't even qualified to ask. Even if they put in a request, it would go nowhere. The major orchestras were quite arrogant.

Unspoken rules of selection had formed in the concert hall as well. There was competition everywhere. Talent was the only currency.

If a piece didn't pass the first round of prescreening, the composer had better realize his limitations and get lost. The five orchestras wouldn't bother touching his work.

If someone was rejected in the second round of screening, it was a good learning experience. The composer at least would have some solid footing. They had passed the first round of screening, after all. Composers that fell into this category had a better chance of securing slots at better recording studios and rehearsal rooms than folks who stumbled at the first block.

If someone's piece was shortlisted by the screeners, then they could walk with a swagger. They didn't even have to bother applying for studio space. They would automatically be allocated the necessary resources.

Like other aspiring composers, Fang Zhao sat down in the section cordoned off for outside observers.

Sophisticated digital sound systems did a good job of simulating a live experience, but it wasn't the real thing, after all. Only the human ear was all-knowing.

While the live experience simulated by top-of-the-line digital stereo systems could fool the layman, music professionals, with their keen sensitivity to sound, could still tell the difference. That was also why many folks still enjoyed attending live shows in the technologically advanced New Era. Some of these folks were posers. Others genuinely enjoyed the feeling of a live performance.

Attending a live recording session, Fang Zhao could pick up the redundant sounds that sound engineers would clean up. He could detect the diminishing reverberations of each instrument that eluded the untrained ear.

While Fang Zhao was observing the recording session, Mo Lang finally emerged from his study. He didn't like to be bothered when he was composing. No matter who showed up, they would be blocked by his assistants.

Once Mo Lang stepped out of his study, his four assistants got busy, serving him tea and massaging him. They were a well-coordinated unit.

"Venerable Mo, this is the envelope that Fang Zhao delivered this morning," the assistant who had received Fang Zhao said.

"Who?" Mo Lang asked.

"Fang Zhao," the assistant repeated.

Mo Lang had a blank look on his face. Who is Fang Zhao?

Mo Lang's assistants were used to seeing him like this. He was prone to forget what he said and who he had met the day before when he got busy. The assistants reminded him, "You know, Fang Zhao, from Yanzhou, the really young fella. He's best known for the four-movement series '100-Year Period of Destruction.' You told him he could submit his piece directly to you."

The assistants didn't have to say much. There was no need to mention what role Fang Zhao played in the TV series. Venerable Mo didn't care and wouldn't remember. All

they had to do was mention Fang Zhao's best work.

Lo and behold, mentioning the "Period of Destruction" series did the trick.

"Oh, him. Yes, I told him to submit directly to me. Has he dropped off his piece already?"

The reason Mo Lang remembered Fang Zhao was because he had gone out of his way to listen to exemplary pieces about the Period of Destruction to prepare for his momentous task on hand.

Only a few pieces had made a deep impression on Mo Lang. One of them was Fang Zhao's series. Mo Lang had even done some research on Fang Zhao, looking up his personal information and other works. He thought they were all quite outstanding. The only thing was that Mo Lang only listened to pieces set against the Period of Destruction these days. Fang Zhao's series was the most stimulating.

Mo Lang had gone through the submissions he had already received as the senior adjudicator and hadn't found anything from Fang Zhao. By coincidence, he had run into Fang Zhao in the concert hall the next day. Mo Lang had thought he looked familiar, so Venerable Mo had stopped him for questioning.

Now that Fang Zhao's submission had finally arrived, Mo Lang set aside his cup of tea, took the envelope, broke the seal, and removed the document inside.

A star musician of his level could get a sense of the melody from reading the score alone. He didn't need any assistance.

Just a few lines in, Mo Lang started frowning and fidgeting the fingers of his right hand on his right thigh, like a conductor conducting an orchestra, except his strokes were much more abbreviated.

Noticing Mo Lang's deep frown, the four assistants started wondering if their boss didn't approve of Fang Zhao's submission. But when they studied Mo Lang's expression some more, they realized he wasn't upset. If he were, he would have tossed the score to the ground already. Drawing from their vast experience serving at Mo Lang's side, they could tell that he was quite engrossed.

But did he like the piece or not?

The four assistants started tip-toeing lest they interrupt Venerable Mo's concentration.

Mo Lang sat there, leafing through the entire score a page at a time.

Then he went through it again.

And again.

...

After five reads, Mo Lang's frown hadn't relaxed. It had gotten worse.

Breaking his concentration briefly, Mo Lang studied the name on the score and asked, "Did Fang Zhao drop this off in person? Was there anyone with him?"

"No, it was just him," the assistant who had received Fang Zhao said.

Mo Lang took a deep breath and said, sounding like he was either posing a question or asking himself, "He really composed this himself?"

Mo Lang jogged his memory. He only had a vague recollection of Fang Zhao's face, but this much he was certain—Fang Zhao was a young man.

He's able to compose something like this at his age?

Chapter 317

How Do You Wish to Die?

Mo Lang did not dare believe it, but he didn't wish to think about someone negatively. Fang Zhao's compositions for the "100-Year Period of Destruction" had been really good.

"This Fang Zhao person, what sort of background does he have? Did he go through any extraordinary experiences?" Mo Lang asked one of his assistants.

That assistant was normally in charge of helping Mo Lang source and tidy up all sorts of information.

Hearing Mo Long's question, that assistant immediately replied, "This Fang Zhao might be young, but he has much more extraordinary experiences than an ordinary person."

"Eh?" This time, Mo Lang was really curious.

Normally, he would not concern himself with things outside of the artistic circles. Previously, when he had looked up Fang Zhao's information, he had only read up on the composing aspects and had not even glanced at anything else. But now, there were too many doubts surrounding Fang Zhao.

This assistant had previously helped Mo Lang compile information concerning Fang Zhao, thus his reply being quick. He briefly spoke about Fang Zhao's life after graduating, starting his career with the "100-Year Period of Destruction" series, amazing the world through gaming, and his rendering of meritorious deeds during his military service. These were all matters that had been reported by the media.

Mo Lang's expression kept changing. Amazed, rueful, then displeased. "He still went to acting?!"

"Right. According to the resources, he is a member of the consultant team for the Yanzhou chapter of 'Founding Era' and received an invite to the music team. Afterward, he vied for and won the role of Fang Zhao, an important role in the series.

Now, he is still frequently filming on set."

"No wonder he only submitted one manuscript!" Mo Lang disapproved of composers acting in films and series. Wouldn't it be better to put all their effort into composing?

However, Fang Zhao's actions were pardonable.

Even though Mo Lang was not an actor and didn't watch shows, he knew how difficult it was for a youngster to act as an older person! And it just so happened that Fang Zhao had beaten so many other strong and veteran actors for that role and had not been replaced yet. From that, Mo Lang knew that there were no issues with Fang Zhao's acting chops.

"So..." Mo Lang stared at the draft in his hands and muttered incomprehensibly to himself, "If this youngster was too immersed in his character, he wouldn't necessarily have been able to produce such a piece... If that is the case... he really has astounding talent!"

Hearing about all these experiences of Fang Zhao's, Mo Lang slightly believed that Fang Zhao had composed this piece all by himself.

As if remembering something, Mo Lang suddenly got up and returned to his study, opened the file for the script, and scrolled to the part of the story indicated on Fang Zhao's draft.

"Yanzhou chapter... season nine... Ah, here! Why does it fit here?"

The tune wasn't intense, nor was it sorrowful. It had a different style from others, yet it had something extra...

Mo Lang's lips trembled a few times before he excitedly slapped the table. "Yes! Just like this!"

The four assistants standing outside were nearly frightened and wanted to say, Take it easy, old man! Stay calm, don't get too worked up!

After all, he was already advanced in age and had been recently vexed. The four assistants were all especially worried about Old Mr. Mo's physical condition. Whenever he was engrossed in something, he didn't care about anything else, especially after he had retired, when skipping meals and neglecting sleep had become

a common occurrence. In the past, he had fainted from fatigue and hunger numerous times while composing. Over here, nowadays, the four assistants took turns watching over him, worried that if this old man was careless, he might faint.

Mo Lang was still inside mumbling something incomprehensible to himself. The four assistants could not hear what he was saying, but they saw that Mo Lang was so excited his hands were trembling, and his aged face had an enlightened glow.

Having been with Old Mr. Mo for so long, they couldn't remember previous time he had gotten so worked up. Now, though, he had gotten so worked up over a musical draft that Fang Zhao had sent over.

Mo Lang took a deep breath and told his assistant. "Tell Fang Zhao to pay me a visit!"

After that, Mo Lang scrolled through his address book and made a call to Lead Director Roman.

In the last two days, Roman had been hard pressed. As filming progressed further, not only were the actors under a lot of pressure, he himself was so busy that he was like a spinning top. He wished he could split himself into two. His eye circles were much darker, and his temper was even more fiery than before. His face was dark all the time.

At this moment, Roman was admonishing someone. A certain director had drunk a little too much the previous night and been given an additional, last-minute filming assignment. His mental state had not been able to keep up and he had kept making mistakes and been caught redhanded by Roman.

As he was flipping out, Roman heard the phone he carried on him ring. This was a phone issued to the internal members of the film district. It meant that the caller was someone he should answer.

When he fished his phone out of his pocket and saw who it was, the raging expression on Roman's face gradually withdrew as he stepped over to a refreshment lounge at the side to answer the call. He respectfully answered, "Venerable Mo? What is it? You are asking about Fang Zhao?"

Roman had originally thought that Venerable Mo had called to speak about a certain scene's accompaniment music. He had not expected Old Mr. Mo to ask about Fang Zhao.

"Yeah, that fella is still filming... Recently? He has had much fewer scenes recently, but I heard that he is still under a lot of pressure, since he was deeply immersed in his character. You might not know, but all the actors in the cast are like this. Nobody is able to fully relax in their free time... However, his physical condition is still all right. He can eat eight portions for a meal and then go running and punch sandbags... Right, right, his scenes last till season nine... Right, right, right! That youngster is indeed a genius! Not just any ordinary genius! And I was the one who unearthed him!"

Others in the cast and crew could only see Roman's actions and expressions through the glass window. They could not hear what he was saying. Many people also saw a faint smile appear on Roman's face.

"That's strange. Today, Roman's devilish face seems rather pleasant. He is even laughing so happily. Who is he talking to?" someone whispered to the person beside him.

The director that had been receiving a lecture let out a sigh of relief. He had at least gotten through today. When Roman was in a good mood, he wouldn't continue admonishing others.

Inside the refreshment lounge, Roman answered Mo Lang's queries. Although Mo Lang did not speak of the reason he was asking about Fang Zhao, from his tone, Roman could hear that Mo Lang thought highly of Fang Zhao.

Being immersed deeply in character and having eight portions of food, Fang Zhao was under a lot of pressure was what Roman had heard the people in the cast and crew saying. As for whether it was true or not, he had not verified it—he simply hadn't had the time. Now that Mo Lang asked, he had just randomly talked about all this.

Mo Lang did not ask too much and ended the call after a few sentences.

Recalling Mo Lang's tone during the call, Roman could not help but give a mischievous laugh. Fang Zhao was really capable to have been able to gain the recognition of Mo Lang, an artist right at the apex!

"I wonder how I got this pair of all-seeing eyes. I'm really too awesome!"

At the other side, after Fang Zhao received the notification from Mo Lang's assistant, he quickly made his way up. This time, he wasn't stopped outside and was brought in right away.

"Venerable Mo, you were looking for me?" Fang Zhao noticed Mo Lang holding on to that musical score draft. Further, observing his facial expressions, Fang Zhao had some idea of what was up.

Following the sound, Mo Lang shifted his attention away from the draft in his hands. He had just been going through the score mentally, and he guessed that Fang Zhao had created this piece because he was too into his character. But to be able to compose something like this was just too difficult! This wasn't something an ordinary genius could describe!

"Fang Zhao!" Mo Lang raised his hand and waved the score sheet, his gaze become really acute. He spoke with a pause after every word. "Did you compose it yourself? Without any help?"

Fang Zhao did not shrink away from Mo Lang's piercing gaze. "Yes, I did it all on my own."

"Very, very well done!" The way Mo Lang was staring at Fang Zhao was as if he was staring at a rare treasure. "Come over here and take a seat. I have some questions I wish to ask you."

Mo Lang asked about everything from the composing concept to precise techniques and the sentiments and subject of the composition. The more he listened to Fang Zhao, the more he believed that this was a piece Fang Zhao had created himself. He could tell whether or not it was an original composition just from these questions.

And what pleasantly surprised Mo Lang was Fang Zhao's composing concept. On a fixed level, it was identical to the concept he had when he was composing background music for the series.

It was rare to meet someone with an identical concept, and Mo Lang was delighted. Previously, when he had hit a bottleneck while composing, he had sought out a few old friends for some discussion. Unfortunately, everyone's concepts differed, and the more they discussed, the more hot-tempered they got, and the discussion turned into arguments and debates.

Mo Lang had worried about the important 10-minute ending theme of the series so much that he had nearly yanked all the hairs from his beard clean. Today, he had received some enlightenment from Fang Zhao's score sheet and gained quite a bit of

inspiration from his discussion with Fang Zhao.

This feeling of being enlightened suddenly was something other people had no way of understanding.

In the words of Mo Lang, this sort of enlightenment had a value that could not be measured, and as an elder, Mo Lang felt that he should show his thanks. The submission was the submission, and enlightenment was enlightenment. Fang Zhao had helped him, so he would return the favor.

For official matters, Mo Lang had no way of offering a shortcut. This was a matter of principles. But for private matters, he didn't care anymore.

After they finished their discussion, Mo Lang dragged Fang Zhao out.

The four assistant's realized that Mo Lang's gloomy expression that had lasted many days had been replaced by a smile, as if he had seen his own grandson... No, Even when Old Mr. Mo met his own grandson, his smile was not even as warm as this.

The four assistant's scanned Fang Zhao curiously, pondering in their hearts. How had Fang Zhao been able to make Old Mr. Mo this happy?

Mo Lang took no notice of his assistant's expressions and dragged Fang Zhao over to a cabinet. Turning to an assistant, he said, "Open it. I remember that there is still quite a bit that was delivered."

The assistant in charge of the "store" paused for a second and answered, "Oh, right, there is still a lot of stuff." As he spoke, he went to open the cabinet door.

This cabinet was filled with specialty goods, tea leaves, alcohol, and some high-grade foodstuffs with high medicinal value. These had been delivered by government departments and a few large investors in the series. This was preferential treatment an artist of Mo Lang's status received. In other words, these were all specifically meant for Mo Lang.

Mo Lang picked up three boxes from inside and pushed them toward Fang Zhao.

Fang Zhao didn't accept them and was thinking of what to say. Mo Lang pulled a long face. "Take it!"

It wouldn't be good for Fang Zhao to reject this, so he reached out to take one of the boxes. "Thank you, Venerable Mo. This box is enough."

"Just that small box of biscuits? How can that be enough! Take them all, take these too! Leaving them here is a waste; nobody eats them. You are still growing. I heard that you can eat eight boxed meals and not be full? Hey, just eating all those won't do. You still have to compose after filming too, right? Take this box of tea leaves. It alleviates overheating, aids digestion, and perks you up."

Fang Zhao: "... Since when did I eat eight portions of boxed meals? Where did you hear that from?"

Mo Lang fished out yet another box and pushed it toward Fang Zhao. "Have this wine. Who knows, you might be able to gather more inspiration. I normally drink this too."

Fang Zhao hurriedly said, "There is a rule for the cast and crew. Consuming alcohol is prohibited during the filming period."

"It's nothing, the alcohol content is low. It is just like medicinal wine. In any case, drinking a little is fine. It is good for the body."

As he spoke, Mo Lang pushed yet another box of energy supplements toward Fang Zhao.

"Eat, bring these all back and finish them fast. All of these strengthen the body and have no side effects! People have limited energy. You are still young, so you have to eat more while your body is still growing. The next time you come over, you will definitely be full of energy! I already asked the lead director, you don't have much screen time nowadays, but you are under a lot of pressure. Make sure you don't collapse. When you have the time, make sure to come over so we can discuss more." Mo Lang didn't wish to talk about music with a listless person.

As the assistant in charge of the "store" saw box after box being handed over, his heart ached, but he also had no means of stopping it. All these things belonged to Mo Lang. Obviously, he was free to give them out as he wished.

When Fang Zhao came out, he was carrying many bags both big and small.

The assistant sending him out had a smile on his face. This time around, it was sincere. "Keep the stuff Old Mr. Mo has given you. Don't worry about it and don't bother

sending a gift in return. Venerable Mo doesn't accept gifts. If you wish to repay him, then compose more. Venerable Mo only has an interest in musical works. He doesn't really value physical items."

Fang Zhao was actually deeply moved. He could also tell the value of these specialty items. Mo Lang was a person who only looked at artistic value. Now, Fang Zhao had been given so many items because Mo Lang had gained some enlightenment from the draft he had submitted and had found some inspiration while chatting with Fang Zhao.

From Mo Lang's point of view, the enlightenment and inspiration he had gained from Fang Zhao had a much higher value than the items he had given away.

Actually, when Fang Zhao had been answering questions about his composing, he had not spoken the entire truth. There were some things that could not be said, so he had only selected a portion that was fine. Coincidentally, these viewpoints had matched the concept Mo Lang had for composing the ending theme for the series.

At the same time, through his exchange with Mo Lang, Fang Zhao had also found out a lot about the 10-minute accompaniment piece for the series ending.

As he was thinking about the direction of the 10-minute accompaniment piece, the elevator had already reached the ground floor. Fang Zhao walked out and across the large hall as he headed to the main entrance. It was already late and the sky was dark. He could still catch the last few buses back to the living quarters.

Since it was already late, the ground floor of the music center was very empty and no one was around.

As Fang Zhao headed to the main entrance, a bunch of people came out of the elevator on the other side. These people were orchestra members that had just completed a rehearsal.

When they saw Fang Zhao toting bags of all sizes, the group that was chatting happily fell silent in a flash.

Many pairs of searchlight-like eyes scanned the stuff Fang Zhao was holding as if they had seen something unfathomable.

Fang Zhao gave a slight nod to them, and under the weird silence, exited the main doors of the music center.

After Fang Zhao exited, the silent group roared to life and began discussing.

"Were those... specialty products?"

"Looking at the packaging, those were definitely specialty products, and high-grade ones at that! Our orchestra head was also given some by his teacher."

"From what I know, only people of Venerable Mo's status can enjoy these specialty products."

"I heard that Fang Zhao went over to Venerable Mo's to submit his draft."

The group once again fell silent.

By that night, many people from the music team knew about this incident, and even more people were curious about the draft Fang Zhao had submitted. Exactly what kind of piece was it that could have allowed Fang Zhao to receive this sort of treatment from Mo Lang?

In the following few days, Fang Zhao had filming assignments too. He had already submitted his draft, so his focus now returned to filming. From time to time, the director would discuss the script with Fang Zhao, and in between, Mo Lang also called him over twice to talk.

The level of complexity of the actual history was much higher than the series. There were also many darker details that could not be revealed. The light was magnified, but the darkness was confined to an acceptable range.

As for pacifying the political aspect, when it came to handling the scenes of historical figure Fang Zhao, some adjustments had to be made.

Fang Zhao was a historical figure. No one could deny his feats and achievements, but ultimately, he never lasted till the end.

Furthermore, it was already over 500 years into the New Era. History was just affairs that had already passed. What mattered were the people that were living now.

If Fang Zhao was magnified too much, the embellishing was too intense, and he left too deep an impression on audiences, the Wu family might find themselves in an awkward situation.

Today, during lunch, Fang Zhao was asked by Director Bai to have lunch with everyone.

Nowadays, everyone in the large cast and crew of "Founding Era" knew that besides fighting very well, this young actor Fang Zhao could also eat a lot.

It was rumored that the more this youngster was under pressure, and the deeper he was immersed in his character, the more he ate!

At the start, people had said that he ate four boxed meals, and some had said that Fang Zhao had had five portions for a meal. Later on, it had been said that he'd had eight portions, and more people were circulating this.

Eight portions of boxed meals. How much pressure was he under to be able to eat all of them!?

Many actors were jealous. They would simply have no appetite when they were under a lot of pressure or immersed too deeply in a character. It was no wonder that many people loved to eat together with Fang Zhao. With such a voracious eater beside them, they would also be able to eat more.

What made people even more depressed was that despite eating so much, Fang Zhao's size did not change much. It was said that he still continued running and training with sandbags. People at the gym frequently saw newly changed large sandbags lying there like corpses.

After lunch, Fang Zhao was dragged out by Director Bai to discuss some minor details in the script.

An old actor saw Fang Zhao being called over and said to the person beside him, "Fang Zhao's body seems like it is made of iron. If the Fang Zhao back then had this sort of body, there wouldn't be a Wu family in Yanzhou."

"I have always felt that Fang Zhao and the one he acts as are very similar, but looking at it now, they aren't alike at all, at least not in terms of their physicality."

"Sigh, that individual's body was too weak, so he wasn't able to endure till the end of that period."

At the same time, Director Bai had called Fang Zhao to one side and asked a few questions about some details in the script that needed alterations.

The start of the filming of season nine was approaching. The script had gone through numerous rounds of adjustments and was closed to being finalized.

"How do you wish to die?" Director Bai suddenly asked.

Fang Zhao was dazed for a moment, following which he found the question funny.

How many years had it been!

It had been a long time since anyone had dared to say these words straight to his face!

However, Fang Zhao also know what Director Bai meant.

When it came to the point in time where a character died in battle, how the character died was already written in the script, but the directors would inquire with the actors on their point of view. If an actor's form was good, filming might go along with the actor's own notion and allow them to improvise. This might possibly be better than following the script.

But it couldn't be too excessive either, which was why Director Bai had asked.

"Die standing up? Die while kneeling? Lying down and dying? Lying down face-first and dying?" Director Bai asked.

"Lying on my back and dying," Fang Zhao replied.

"Oh right, the whole face can't be seen if you lie face down. Dying while standing and dying while kneeling have been done many times in filming by others already."

Fang Zhao: "..."

He had really died while lying on his back.

Chapter 318

Super-Huge Bento Box

Fang Zhao still remembered staring at the gloomy sky just before he died.

Actually, before that battle, Fang Zhao had already made preparations. He had arranged everything properly so that the moment he could not go on, Yanzhou would not descend into chaos.

He knew his body best, and he had already been at his limit just enduring till that point in time. It was because of those preparations that his sentiments just before he died had been very serene. Although he had not been able to endure to see the Founding Era and he had not been able to accomplish his dream from when he was younger, if he was able to trade that life of his for a new Yanzhou and a new world, he considered it worthwhile.

When season nine was about to begin filming, the atmosphere within the cast and crew was much more tensed than in previous seasons. This was because when touching upon the various historical events, the filming teams of each continent had much more interaction.

Many actors would be receiving bento boxes in season nine. Among them, the character with the highest importance was Fang Zhao, but Fang Zhao wasn't as restless as the others. However, he was occasionally in a daze while sitting beside the set.

When others in the cast and crew saw Fang Zhao being this way..."Hey, your team's Fang Zhao is in a daze again. How is his condition while filming?" an actor from another continent asked Wu Yun.

The youthful Wu Yan was played by Wu Yun. Although his scenes were done, he hadn't left the crew yet and frequently sat to the side, watching others filming and learning some techniques.

Hearing his friend's question, Wu Yun's attention was directed to the side of the set, and he saw Fang Zhao resting at the side. Wu Yun replied, "All along Fang Zhao has

maintained his form very well. Normally, it is other actors making mistakes. He rarely makes any during filming."

When Fang Zhao was mentioned, Wu Yun had a strange expression in his eyes. Fang Zhao was younger than him. When filming had first started, like others, he had also doubted Fang Zhao's acting chops. But after season after season had passed, he had been able to see everything clearly.

Especially when shooting the previous day's scenes, Fang Zhao had been sitting on a sand dune gazing out into the distance. The expression Fang Zhao had given was as if he had lived through great changes and looked like he had been through hundreds of years. Wu Yun would not be able to act in such a way.

This was the gap between them! And it was also the reason why Wu Yun could only play Wu Yan for just that short period and could not portray a character all by himself like Fang Zhao was doing.

Having arrived at this point, nobody in the cast and crew, including those seniors and elders, could go against their own conscience and say that Fang Zhao could not act well.

Not only did he have the ability, he gave his all, too. There was nothing to be ashamed of when being outdone by such a person.

Hearing Wu Yan's words, that actor from another continent thought about it and laughed. "There is something else I want to say, but promise me you won't get angry."

"What?" Wu Yun asked.

"Have you ever realized that the way Fang Zhao looks at you is odd? It gives me the feeling of someone looking at his own grandson. Hahahaha!"

The side of Wu Yun's lip curled. He wanted to laugh, yet he felt helpless. "You only just realized?"

"Sigh, it's like this when one is too immersed in their character. Over at our filming team, there is an actor around the same age as me who portrays my character's father. I still call him dad outside of filming. When you are too immersed in the character and reach the deepest depths, you don't think about anything else."

Fang Zhao paid no attention to how others discussed him in private. He was currently thinking of something. He had already seen the script for season nine many times and had memorized all the lines. Maintaining his current form would not be too difficult.

Fang Zhao had already submitted his musical score, and it had received its final ruling. During the break after season eight's filming concluded, Fang Zhao had already found an orchestra to record it.

There was no need to worry about this anymore.

What Fang Zhao was thinking about was a segment of a song score that Mo Lang had shown him yesterday. It was a small portion of the ending theme for the "Founding Era" series. Yesterday, he had discussed the question of which accompanying instruments to use with Mo Lang, and now he was playing all sorts of musical instruments over and over in his head.

And every time Fang Zhao was concentrating and pondering, other people in the cast and crew assumed he was trying to build up his mood and avoided disturbing him.

Of course, during filming, Fang Zhao was still very immersed in his character and would not be distracted or let his mind wander.

Finally, after he was done filming his last scene, Fang Zhao got up from the ground and wiped the dust and "blood" off his face and took a deep breath and exhaled, as if a heavy burden had been lifted.

In the surroundings, the other actors had not yet stepped out of character from filming that scene, and their faces still had mournful and solemn expressions.

One of the older actors came over, gave Fang Zhao a warm hug, and rather forcefully patted Fang Zhao's shoulders. "You acted well."

All the other nearby actors came over to hug Fang Zhao as well. This could be considered a sort of parting ceremony.

After the actors dispersed, Director Bai came over and asked Fang Zhao, "How are you feeling? Do you feel very..."

Fang Zhao laughed. "Relaxed."

Director Bai, who had been just about to say "heavy-hearted," swallowed his words. Scanning Fang Zhao carefully, he realized that the extremely repressed manner that Fang Zhao had been in, as if he had witnessed great changes, had vanished in an instant. Now, even though the person standing in front of him had not removed his makeup, he gave off a completely different vibe. The hunchback due to him being ill and aged in the show was now straight, and his eyes were full of vigor.

Director Bai felt relieved to see Fang Zhao having seemingly shed his character. However, according to the usual practice, Director Bai still had to exhort, "Remember to visit the psychologists. Even if you feel fine, you still have to get them to verify it."

"Got it. Thank you, Director Bai."

Fang Zhao removed his makeup, changed out of his costume, took a bath, and put on a fresh pair of clothes before heading over to the psychologist.

At the moment, psychologist Dai Yu was in his own office cracking melon seeds.

Actors might feel a lot of pressure, but as psychologists in charge of adjusting the mental states of these actors, they were under a lot of stress too. Cracking melon seeds was also a method for relieving stress.

Hearing that someone would be coming, Dai Yu quickly put away his box of melon seeds. He stared at the mirror and wiped his mouth, spraying some breath freshener and arranging his appearance and facial expressions till they were at a suitable level.

In front of these actors, psychologists needed to maintain a capable image. It wasn't right letting actors know that they normally cracked melon seeds when they had nothing to do. That would destroy their image! Perhaps the actors might even doubt the professional standards of these psychologists if they saw it.

After he was done tidying himself up, Dai Yu put on a deadpan expression and sat there and let the actor waiting outside come in.

Seeing that the one coming in was Fang Zhao, Dai Yu changed modes and became more casual. "Oh, it's you."

As he spoke, he looked at Fang Zhao bewilderedly. "There seems to be something different with you today... Is it time for you to collect your bento box?"

Fang Zhao closed the door and sat on the chair on the opposite side of the desk. "Mhmm, filming just concluded."

To ensure privacy for actors, the psychologists here would not necessarily make video recordings. The psychologists would comply with the actor's wishes. If an actor was willing to have the conversation recorded, then the camera would be turned on.

The majority of actors were not willing to be recorded. Fang Zhao had not wanted his sessions to be recorded either, and Dai Yu approved of his choice. Fang Zhao could feel more at ease when there weren't any recordings.

From when filming for "Founding Era" had begun until now, everyone had already gotten familiar with each other. Now, Dai Yu had no need for keeping up impressions in front of Fang Zhao. Opening his drawer, he took out the box of melon seeds and started cracking them once again.

Noticing Fang Zhao staring at him, Dai Yu explained, "It's for relieving stress. Doctors are only human, not gods. We have stress too. Don't go around telling others about this."

"Mmhm."

Dai Yu pushed the box of melon seeds to the middle. "Want some?"

"No thanks, I'm good."

"You seem to be in a much better state now. Previously, you gave off a dangerous vibe, and I nearly put you in the high-risk category, but now..." Dai Yu swept his gaze over Fang Zhao a few times. "You are all right. You seem much less threatening now."

"Could I trouble you to verify that I'm fine?"

"Sure."

Dai Yu quickly issued Fang Zhao a proof certificate, verifying that this actor had shed his character and was in a fine mental state and could leave the cast and crew at any time.

Having received his proof, Fang Zhao did not stick around to crack melon seeds.

Dai Yu watched as Fang Zhao, and he thought to himself, This person is rather interesting. Other people find it hard to shed their characters, yet he can do it really quickly and isn't affected at all. He really doesn't seem as dangerous as when he first came.

Just that..."I just feel that there is still something strange." But Dai Yu was unable to determine which part of it was strange. "Who cares!" Dai Yu continued cracking melon seeds. Fang Zhao's job might be done, but Dai Yu still needed to work.

At the other side, after leaving Dai Yu's office, Fang Zhao headed to the large dining hall. He still had to collect the bento box that belonged to him.

However, when he saw his bento box, Fang Zhao fell silent.

Placed in front of him was a huge 10-layer bento set that resembled a steamer basket.

"This is..." Fang Zhao asked the shifu in charge of issuing bento boxes.

The shifu wore an exceptionally kind smile and there was a hint of tenderness. "For your last meal, every portion is extra large, to make sure you eat till you are full!"

"...Has there been a misunderstanding?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Oh, haha, there is no need to feel embarrassed. Look, this was specially prepared for you by us at the dining hall. Uncle just loves all of you with good appetites. Eating is a blessing! This is a little heavy and isn't easy to carry; do you want to eat it over here?"

"I'll bring it back to eat. Can I have a bag, please?" Fang Zhao did not wish to be surrounded and watched as he ate the bento set. There were already dining hall staff at the sides looking over. Many actors that had come to the dining hall for a meal were already making preparations and were just waiting to take a snapshot of him eating such a large meal.

After the shifu had made this super-huge bento set into a takeaway, he added, "Let me get someone to help you bring it back."

"No need. I can carry it myself."

Seeing Fang Zhao effortlessly lift up the super-huge bento set and walk rather steady, that shifu even lamented, "Hey, this little fella is full of vigor! As expected of someone

who eats eight portions!"

Fang Zhao felt that he would never ever be able to explain the matter of "eight portions a meal."

On his way back, the scene of Fang Zhao carrying such a large object was noticed by a lot of people.

"Fang Zhao, what is this?" an actor asked.

"Bento box."

"Bento... box!? Cough, what, you better hurry up and eat it. If the food is left for too long, it won't taste good."

Watching Fang Zhao carry that super-huge bento set as he left, that actor could not help but feel a tinge of respect for Fang Zhao. As Fang Zhao turned away, the actor secretly snapped a shot. He might not have internet access now, but they still had the local intranet and their own internal chat groups. He would be able to share this news with his good friends.

Fang Zhao can eat eight portions of a meal?

That is already past tense!

Have you seen this! Extra large, 10 layers!

On his way back, Fang Zhao was stopped by many people with questions. When he finally returned to his quarters, he remembered how Great-Grandfather Fang had specifically exhorted him to take more photos of his last bento box, so Fang Zhao took a few photographs of it.

Facing this large bento box, Fang Zhao did not feel very rueful, and he dug in after he had taken a few photographs.

As he was eating, Fang Zhao received a call from Zaro.

"Fang Zhao, I heard that you received your bento box today?" From Zaro's tone, it seemed like he was in high spirits.

"Mmhm. What's up?"

"Come out and have some fun! How about letting me host a banquet to celebrate you finally receiving your bento box!" Beside Zaro, his manager could only sigh when hearing Zaro speak. Isn't he afraid of offending people with his words? Can't he be a little more tactful? If narrow-minded people heard these words, they would reckon that Zaro was taking delight in their misfortune.

"There's no rush. Everyone is still busy filming. You don't have to purposely free up time," Fang Zhao replied.

"Busy, my *ss. Everyone knows each other, and it's not as if they are acting out some important roles. Everyone has a bunch of time!"

Actually, Zaro wasn't anxious to hold a celebration for Fang Zhao. He was just worried that he might not get the chance to host a banquet and show off once Fang Zhao left the cast and crew! Previously, he had hyped up garlic and earned a lot of money. Now he was a successful figure! He even remembered that he owed a meal.

After ending the call with Fang Zhao, Zaro scrolled through his contact list to confirm the banquet's attendance list.

"We cannot forget these important characters, and Woo Tianhao, and Barbara... Forget it, let's not invite Barbara."

Two days ago, Zaro and Barbara had had a disagreement, and now he found her an eyesore.

Zaro called each of them in turn to set the date. He was pleased, and he pondered what he should do to make himself even more pretentious during the banquet. Suddenly, as if he had remembered something, he asked his manager beside him. "I heard that Woo Tianhao is collaborating with others to promote something. Hey, what did you say I should promote next? We have to make sure we don't lose to him."

Zaro's agent calmly replied, "No worries. What they are endorsing is ginger. Right now, there are many people following the tide, and the profits won't be much. Let's take a different road from them."

"Then what shall we endorse?"

"Ginger's cousin, mountain ginger."

"Why is ginger's cousin mountain ginger?"

"That isn't the main point. The main point is that the plan has already been set. Now you must make sure not to reveal it first."

"Don't worry, I'm not stupid. I definitely won't leak it!" Zoro promised.

Chapter 319

I'm Not Talking about You

Since Zaro wanted to host a banquet, there was no need for Woo Tianhao to show any formalities. Everyone knew that Zaro had earned a lot endorsing garlic. Thus, Woo Tianhao brought along a few more people to enjoy the feast.

Although Zaro said it was to celebrate Fang Zhao receiving his bento box, who didn't know Zaro's character? Wasn't he just using it as a pretext to flaunt?

Because Zaro had said they could bring more people, Fang Zhao brought along Ji Polun and a few other young actors from the company. Now, Ji Polun and this bunch were done playing their minor roles. Before leaving the cast and crew, they would start all sorts of publicity stunts to raise their profile. Fang Zhao had taken this opportunity to bring them along, using the banquet as a pretext to let them get to know actors from other continents.

As for Zaro's side, he had only brought along his agent. Zaro had originally wanted to bring along a few Leizhou actresses, but his agent had advised against it.

Of course, whether it was those that Woo Tianhao brought along or the bunch who tagged along with Fang Zhao, they all understood that were only here to serve as foils. All they needed to do was sit down and listen to the two young masters, Woo Tianhao and Zaro, brag. When one of them said something interesting, they just needed to laugh and lift the mood.

This time, Zaro had hosted the banquet at a restaurant in the gourmet food city. Stepping into the private room, the eyes of Ji Polun and the young actors nearly popped out.

Upon entering, stepping on the soft Old Era-style rug was like treading on clouds high in the sky. There were also huge chandeliers like those in ancient palaces, brightly colored classical paintings and all sorts of artistic displays. Also, there was the shiny silverware on the table...

"I don't remember this restaurant's decorations having this sort of style before," Ji

Polun whispered.

"It was newly renovated," someone else muttered as he twitched his nose.

"The heck!" Woo Tianhao, who had just arrived, scanned the place disdainfully. "I heard that all these upstarts love to style their place like this. Seems like Zaro is ready for a round of excessive bragging."

Indeed, when everyone was gathered, Zaro was pleased as punch and laughed heartily before he had even entered the place.

It couldn't be helped. Now, when Zaro thought about his cash reserves, his feeling of accomplishment was bursting out of his chest. There was no way he could calm down unless he flaunted a bunch. Zaro had specifically contacted the boss of this restaurant and rented an entire private room. The rent was considerable, but who had asked him to be flushed with cash right now!?

After two rounds of alcohol, the table's vibe became even more casual. Zaro kept bragging and Woo Tianhao kept chiming in, both unwilling to lose out to the other.

Ji Polun and the bunch who had been brought along as foils had only one thought, which was to exchange contact details with the other actors. More friends meant more options. Furthermore, in the future, Ji Polun wouldn't just be restricted to Yanzhou and would develop on a global scale. Having been brought along by Fang Zhao this time, he would take the opportunity to expand his network.

Fang Zhao had a talk with Zaro's agent. They had collaborated in the past and might collaborate in the future, too. Actually, Zaro's agent was still very grateful toward Fang Zhao. A number of Zaro's opportunities had been because of Fang Zhao pulling strings. Just the matter of endorsing garlic had been indirectly caused by Fang Zhao.

It was because Fang Zhao had suggested Zaro stimulate his taste buds in order to aid his acting. Zaro's taste buds had been so stimulated that every time he saw that segment of Founding Era's Leizhou chapter, he smelled that odor.

Remembering that despair-inducing odor, Zaro's agent couldn't help but shudder. However, as before, he would not let up on film and television investments. He wished to sway Fang Zhao into acting in a period drama that they would be investing in.

Following the birth of "Founding Era," the regulations regarding film projects based

on the Period of Destruction history were going to be relaxed. In the future, there would surely be more and more movies and drama series based on the Period of Destruction. Even in the two years after "Founding Era" finished airing, the popularity of this genre wouldn't drop.

Fang Zhao rejected the idea.

Zaro's agent did not give up and continued to persuade Fang Zhao. "You can always reconsider. There is no need to reply right away. Compensation can always be negotiated." As Zaro's agent was speaking, he heard a shout.

"Fang Zhao!" Woo Tianhao came over with a bottle of wine and poured Fang Zhao a full cup. "Come. Let us brothers have a round! That trash Zaro can't take it anymore!"

To the side, Zaro was already a little dazed from all the alcohol and had taken a break from bragging. Zaro's liquor capacity could not be compared to Woo Tianhao's.

Woo Tianhao had also drunk a lot and wasn't his usual composed self. "Fang Zhao, you have it easy. We still have to continue being in background scenes. Sigh, when I have earned enough money, I will invest in a series and play the lead! Once the prohibition on Period of Destruction history films is fully lifted, I'm going to film many series about our Tongzhou Wu family's important great general!"

As he spoke, Woo Tianhao turned to Fang Zhao and, with sympathy in his eyes, said, "The one from Yanzhou named Fang is pitiful. Given my experience in the industry, either nobody will create films about him or they will blindly and randomly create films! After all, Fang Zhao died early and left no descendants, so there will not be many disputes."

Fang Zhao used his fingers to swivel the wine cup but did not say anything.

"Believe me!" Woo Tianhao hiccuped. He was especially talkative after getting high on alcohol and had no qualms. "This Fang Zhao person, what a pity! My view is that he wasn't ruthless enough! Say, if there was no 'Founding Era,' who would remember the person named Fang Zhao? Of course, I'm not talking about you." Woo Tianhao patted Fang Zhao's shoulder. "I am not a Yanzhou person, but I know that the name 'Fang Zhao' still had significant influence in the first 100 years of the New Era. However, afterward, it was probably only limited to examinations. In the future, when everyone emigrates to foreign planets, I reckon new editions of history textbooks might not even

have a place for him. Perhaps the only people who will remember him then will be the cemetery guards. Isn't this leader a failure!? Don't you think so?"

Fang Zhao smiled faintly. "That does sound quite like a failure."

"That's right! Such a disappointment!" Woo Tianhao energetically slammed the table a few times. "Our family clan sends people to each continent's Cemetery every year. The graves of Fang Zhao and Wu Yan are the focus, but it is a political mission! Do you know why it is called a political mission? Because it is a form of diplomacy. It's done just for others to see."

Fang Zhao got the waiter to deliver some hangover soup and poured a cup for both Woo Tianhao and Zaro.

Woo Tianhao, who was absorbed in talking, did not notice the cup had been swapped and gulped the drink down before scoffing. "This wine tastes weird. Zaro wouldn't have bought fake alcohol, right...? Let's go on talking about Fang Zhao."

Fang Zhao: "..."

"For my university political module thesis, I wrote about Fang Zhao and why he has received such treatment among other historical characters of similar statuses. Let's not forget that he died earlier than the rest, and he did not leave behind any descendants. However, when it comes to leading subordinates, he really has no way of comparing with Xizhou's great general. Xizhou has the largest prison cluster in the entire world and has a reputation for being a tough-as-nails land, but just take a look, no matter who assumes the role of Xizhou's governor, whenever Great General Lu Xi is mentioned, all everyone has is the utmost admiration. He simply has divine status!"

Woo Tianhao stood on the chair and rolled up his sleeves. "If I was Fang Zhao, I would brainwash them! Resolutely brainwash all the subordinates under him! Afterward, get them to continue brainwashing their children and great-grandchildren! Endless brainwashing for one's descendants! Even if I'm long gone, I still would need to have offerings and respects paid every year, not a single bit less! I have to let them know that the land they are stepping on is my territory. All these little brats! Who dares to f*cking forget me!"

Fang Zhao said, "...Sit down. Isn't standing and talking tiring?"

"I'm not tired. Don't interrupt. I have only talked about half of my thesis. Let me talk

about the Wu family. If I was Wu Yan, I would climb out of my coffin in a fit of rage! How great was the Wu family during the time when Wu Yan was alive? Compared to the families of the great generals of other continents, they were not in any way inferior! But once Wu Yan wasn't there anymore, generation after generation of Wus were weaker than before. They even lost their core position! But to be honest, they aren't entirely at fault. Our Woo family was nearly overthrown some 200 years ago. Fortunately, we were united. Whatever fighting goes on outside, whenever it is at a crux, we will be united! Holding on to a core position is really too difficult!"

Zaro had just finished drinking the hangover soup. When he heard what Woo Tianhao said, he opened his loose lips. "Right! Absolutely right! I agree with what you said! Don't a few of these continents have an old saying: it is easy to conquer Shan Jiang but hard to defend Shan Jiang 1 ! That is totally apt!"

The room suddenly fell silent.

"Jiang Shan, it is easy to conquer Jiang Shan but hard to defend Jiang Shan," an actor at the side whispered.

The others in the room stared at Zaro curiously, as well as his manager beside him. Was this fella going to be promoting wild ginger next?

Zaro's agent heaved a heavy sigh and turned to look out the window: F*cking retard!

Those with a much lesser presence might have seemed to be obediently sitting there, but deep down, they were itching and trying to make all sorts of sense of what Zaro had said.

Zaro's agent thought to himself, Fortunately, I still have Plan B.

Since Zaro had already said it, then Zaro's manager would just rope someone in to collaborate. Zaro's manager looked at Woo Tianhao, who was still ridiculing the Wu family.

Zaro and Woo Tianhao. If these two joined hands to endorse something, the result of one plus one would definitely be greater than two.

Previously, when Zaro had been endorsing garlic, there were people that had cursed Zaro for relying on his status to mess up the market. Now they would rope in an additional great general's descendant to share the burden. Zaro's manager still had to

make sure Zaro did not go overboard trying to earn money. The label of being a great general's descendant was a protective talisman but also a constraint. As long as one didn't go overboard and had a good grasp of the angles, everything would be fine.

Zaro's agent lowered his head and pondered how to get the best rates for Zaro and Woo Tianhao. He did not notice Fang Zhao glancing at him.

Just a meal with Zaro's bragging and Woo Tianhao's ridiculing. Everyone got to make a few new friends. With food, drinks, and laughs, the dinner seemed really joyous.

After they'd had their fill, it was time to go back.

As they got up to leave, Fang Zhao suddenly asked, "Woo Tianhao, what was the evaluation you got for your university politics module thesis?"

"I had to retake it!" Woo Tianhao was pissed off just mentioning it. "The politics teacher even complained to my old man! My old man even gave me a spanking and warned me not to judge those leaders, so..." The sentence ended with a grunting sound. Woo Tianhao appeared to have been petrified, and his legs went soft as he leaned on the person beside him. His face was blank as he mumbled, "Who am I, where am I, what did I just say? I think I just dreamed of my politics teacher... Arghh, my head hurts. Someone, help support me, I drank too much and need to return and rest. I will be leaving first, bye!"

After everyone had left the private room, Fang Zhao turned around to take a look.

The large meal table was full of plates. It was a little messy, and there were still some remains of food on the table. Large and small patches of soup and broth had stained the white tablecloth. Light from the setting sun shone through the windows and passed through the wine bottles, creating bewitching light rays.

The door was closed, covering up the whole room full of ostentatiousness.

After return to his living quarters, Fang Zhao contacted Zuo Yu and Yan Biao.

"Boss, I heard that you attended a banquet tonight? How did it feel?" Yan Biao asked.

Fang Zhao recalled the meal and sighed. "The generation gap is really huge."

Yan Biao: "..."

Yan Biao was prepared to share some words of advice to Fang Zhao about being reluctant to leave and so on, but he had not expected Fang Zhao to say such a line. He reckoned that his boss had met a few elders from the entertainment industry. Those old fogeys definitely couldn't get along with youngsters! Yan Biao could totally understand where his boss was coming from.

Having assumed he understood what his boss was talking about, Yan Biao would not further mention this matter. "We will head over to the filming area to pick you up tomorrow. Afterward, will we be heading to the film entertainment complex or the base?"

"To the base, to fetch Curly Hair."

"All right, we will definitely be on time tomorrow."

After arranging the details with Yan Biao and Zuo Yu, Fang Zhao then contacted Wai base.

Today, a transport ship had arrived and was still unloading its cargo, so Curly Hair had to work overtime. Fang Zhao did not even get to see a glimpse of the little thing in the video call and only informed the other side that he would be going over tomorrow.

Wai base.

After Curly Hair returned from his overtime patrol and heard that Fang Zhao had already finished filming his scenes and would be coming over tomorrow, he got excited and tore the sofa in the office of Wai base's commanding officer, Huo Yi.

Chapter 320

You Can't Bring the Dog Away

On the second day, when Fang Zhao arrived at the base, Curly Hair was led out from the aircraft tarmac and was wearing a custom-made military uniform.

As a temporary service dog, there were also requirements for clothing, but they weren't strict. Getting Curly Hair to wear this uniform was more for protection purposes.

The one leading Curly Hair was a military officer with the rank of lieutenant colonel. During this period, he was the one who had frequently brought Curly Hair onto transport ships for inspections, and he could be considered to be on friendly terms with Fang Zhao.

When he saw Fang Zhao, that lieutenant colonel untied the rope, and Curly Hair ran like the wind toward Fang Zhao, wagging his tail vigorously.

Fang Zhao rubbed Curly Hair's head and asked the lieutenant colonel, "Didn't you say there was overtime? He seems very energetic."

Noticing some residue between Curly Hair's teeth, Fang Zhao asked, "What did he eat before?"

The lieutenant colonel replied, "He ate a lot. Dog food, bones... and the commander's sofa."

Fang Zhao's hand that was rubbing Curly Hair's forehead paused. "Sofa?"

"Cough, he doesn't normally do it, but he likes biting stuff when he gets excited."

"How many has he ruined?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Three... Hey, it's all right, our commander didn't get angry." The lieutenant colonel laughed when he brought it up. He wasn't asking for compensation and was just joking about it.

"Oh, right, our commander got someone to specially prepare lunch for you! Such a huge pot! Let me bring you there." The lieutenant colonel led the way.

The news of Fang Zhao being especially able to eat had spread from the cast and crew over to the surrounding garrisons. Along the way, the lieutenant colonel even said to Fang Zhao, "Now, Curly Hair's appetite has increased. While other dogs have two meals per day when off duty and three to four meals when they have training, Curly Hair has to eat six or seven meals a day or he will rebel." As if he had remembered something, the lieutenant colonel smiled. "At the start, the veterinarian also advised against feeding him so many times, so Curly Hair destroyed the vet's chair and went on strike. Left with no other choice, we tried feeding him extra meals for a few days, and when the vet's checkup found no problems, Curly Hair got his own way."

Fang Zhao had heard about this from an animal specialist before, but he only now found out that Curly Hair would destroy chairs and sofas when angry.

The lieutenant colonel thought that Fang Zhao was displeased when he didn't reply, so he hurriedly said, "Don't worry, Curly Hair is brought for a checkup every 10 days. If there were any issues, they would surely have been detected. Every dog has a medical record with the veterinarians and a record is made of everything when there is a checkup. You should have seen them already. As for Curly Hair destroying chairs and sofas, those are nothing but a trifling matter!"

Actually, the lieutenant colonel was thinking to himself about the saying that a dog had the same characteristics as its owner. Since his owner could eat so much, this dog having a huge appetite wasn't strange at all. He had already decided to let Curly Hair have eight to ten portions a day in the future.

Knowing that Fang Zhao would be coming over today, Wai base's commanding officer, Huo Yi, had freed up some time to have a talk with Fang Zhao.

In Huo Yi's office, only Huo Yi, Fang Zhao, and Curly Hair were in the room. The sofa that had been damaged yesterday had already been removed, and the new sofa still had the scent of fresh leather.

"You still can't bring Curly Hair away yet," Huo Yi said.

Fang Zhao's gaze was slightly restrained. "Hmm?"

Huo Yi let out a faint sigh. "Don't misunderstand, I'm not trying to steal your dog." The

wrinkles on his forehead accumulated as he tapped his fingers on the tabletop before laughing bitterly. "There is some stuff that isn't convenient to share with outsiders, but since this involves your dog, there isn't any need to keep it from you."

Huo Yi opened up an electronic file and showed it to Fang Zhao.

This was a list of items intercepted during security checks. Although it was only a portion, the more Fang Zhao read through the list, the more apprehensive he felt.

Explosive materials, drugs, controlled weapons, and materials that seemed harmless yet when combined could cause a threat. There were also attempts to smuggle out Wai native plants and animals.

Commanding Officer Huo Yi was even angrier. Their situation here was different from planet Baiji's. Planet Baiji would be a future planet for immigration, and their military might would be formidable after some expansions. Planet Baiji had better construction times, comprehensive supervision, large stockpiles of high-grade power ore, and a vast amount of capital.

But planet Wai had no way of competing with them. First, they did not have sufficient capability, and they had to contend with the moods of the bunch of big bosses. Planet Wai touched upon the entertainment circles and planned its development along the lines of entertainment and tourism. Previously, they had released large batches of land and relaxed the requirements for firms entering the planet for the sake of increasing planet Wai's popularity, attracting more investment firms, and raising taxes, but now...

"There are more and more people coming over to planet Wai, and it has gotten even more chaotic. Our military might is limited, and we are unable to supervise every single place. It is because of this that there are holes that can be exploited. We are already trying our best to prevent dangerous materials from being smuggled in. A while back, there were even people entering restricted zones to poach! D*mn them! One was caught and thrown in jail for a long time!"

Every place had its own rules. Planet Wai might not be as strict as planet Baiji, but they were still the local bosses here. Huo Yi wasn't willing to let people trample all over his face right from the start. If there was no stricter control, no rules and regulations, these people would climb all over their heads.

Fang Zhao had already thought about the problems that planet Wai would encounter

as it developed this way.

By tightening up control, Huo Yi was doing the right thing. Otherwise, planet Wai would surely get thrown into turmoil in the future.

In the future, planet Wai would be a getaway spot for entertainment and leisure, but it would not be a place where one could do whatever one pleased.

Fang Zhao pointed to the list on the electronic file and asked, "Were these all discovered from Curly Hair's inspections?"

Huo Yi shook his head. "More than 60% of the items there were discovered by Curly Hair. As for the remainder, the scanning equipment caught about 30%, and less than 10% were discovered by the other dogs." Huo Yi heaved a heavy sigh as he spoke about this. "Our latest security apparatuses have no way of detecting everything. Many smugglers have shielding devices that counter the frequency of our scanning equipment. They even have measures that work against a dog's sense of smell. Luckily, Curly Hair was still able to detect all of these."

This was also something that Huo Yi was very pleased with. Even if his favorite sofa had been ruined by Curly Hair, he still could not bring himself to get mad.

"We have already reported the matter of the scanning machines to the top, but it will take some time before the latest equipment can be delivered here. The other dogs at the base have already grown up and can take up posts. Now, they are undergoing extra training, and the results are pleasing, but they still cannot replace Curly Hair. Besides, you have said that you won't be leaving planet Wai for the time being, which means you can only stay at the film entertainment complex. Currently, that area is a little chaotic. It isn't safe to bring Curly Hair over there. He might even be targeted. Have you heard about the news of a meritorious dog being murdered in the past? You have to be wary! Nothing will happen to Curly Hair if you leave him at the base. As long as he works overtime, I will always keep him in my office."

"I heard that Curly Hair has ruined three of your sofas, and one of them was your favorite? Are you really comfortable leaving him in your office?" Fang Zhao laughed.

Huo Yi brandished his hands and waved them vigorously. "No problem! He can bite them as entertainment! Working overtime can be stressful. Dogs have to relieve stress too!"

"I can pay for the damaged sofas," Fang Zhao said.

Huo Yi made himself appear magnanimous. "No need. This sofa isn't expensive!"

Actually, according to market prices, the three sofas were quite expensive, but no matter how expensive they were, when compared to the service Curly Hair had rendered, it could not be considered much.

"I will be taking him today and will bring him back tomorrow," Fang Zhao said.

Huo Yi seemed a little unwilling, as if he wanted to say something, but he acquiesced in the end. He could not be too controlling. After all, Fang Zhao was the dog's owner.

After leaving Huo Yi's office, Fang Zhao did not head straight to the Wai film entertainment complex. Instead, he visited the nearby kennel. The batch of dogs brought over from Muzhou had already grown big. When Fang Zhao went over, the dogs were still undergoing training.

They'd had overtime patrolling and inspections last night and had training today, but these dogs were still very energetic. They weren't elite Muzhou dogs for nothing. In terms of IQ, physical capability, and other aspects, they were top tier.

Every once in awhile, Huo Yi would lecture his subordinates: Take a look at the kennel next door. Even dogs are so hardworking. How do you guys have the cheek to slack off!?

The instructor at the kennel was also delighted every time this was mentioned. He even told Fang Zhao, "Because Curly Hair was here and served as a model, these dogs also learned much quicker."

Fang Zhao's previous few visits had been rushed. This time, because he had time, the instructor dispatched over from Muzhou displayed some training results these dogs had received since entering the military and proving that they were indeed the cream of the crop from the Muzhou Police Dog Academy.

The instructor had originally wanted Curly Hair to join in with the other dogs and listen to his commands and participate in the training drills, but because Fang Zhao was here, Curly Hair would only listen to Fang Zhao, not the instructor.

After Fang Zhao left the kennel, the instructor recounted the matter to Huo Yi.

Huo Yi summoned the lieutenant colonel that handled Curly Hair.

"Didn't you say that all dogs love you? Yet you can't even dupe a small dog!"

That lieutenant colonel hurriedly defended himself. "Commander, you don't understand. Dogs are loyal creatures, and dogs with high IQ are even more difficult to dupe. Those dogs that come from the Muzhou Police Dog Academy, regardless of whether they are military dogs or other service dogs, require time before they will acknowledge someone. If you want them to be loyal to you, nobody knows how long it will take."

"That little Curly Hair isn't from the Muzhou Police Dog Academy."

"But he is even more impressive than dogs from the Muzhou Police Dog Academy! It is even more difficult to dupe him!"

Huo Yi nodded. "...That makes sense."

"Furthermore, it is said that Curly Hair was a stray. It was Fang Zhao that picked him up and changed his fate. Under these circumstances, Curly Hair will surely be much more loyal to Fang Zhao. Back when Fang Zhao was away for a year during military service, Curly Hair did not switch loyalties at all. Now, it is impossible. Commander, you might not believe this, but if Fang Zhao asks Curly Hair to eat a bomb right now, Curly Hair would do so."

Huo Yi clicked his tongue in disgust. "Which idiot abandoned this dog back then? Fang Zhao lucked out!"

Elsewhere, Fang Zhao had taken advantage of nightfall to keep a low profile and return to the film entertainment complex. Only after Yan Biao had driven the car into the residence did Fang Zhao bring Curly Hair out.

Curly Hair wagged his tail as he followed Fang Zhao and entered the room. After the door was shut and no sounds could be heard outside, Curly Hair started whimpering.

Fang Zhao understood that this little thing was suffering withdrawal from a lack of gaming.

When Yan Biao noticed Fang Zhao bringing the gaming helmet into the room, he reminded Fang Zhao, "The internet connection is quite unstable, so only some solo

games can be played."

"Got it."

After Fang Zhao entered the room, Yan Biao even lamented to Zuo Yu, "I never expected boss's addiction to gaming to be so severe."

Zuo Yu did not find it strange. "Before his military service, our boss was a dark horse in the gaming circles. At that time, he was famous worldwide and placed first on the global individual leaderboards. Many people hoped that he would return to gaming after his military service, but in the end, after he held his first concert, he went on to acting. He took a really bewildering path."

"Oh, right, we can never guess what the boss is thinking."

Yet another day and it was time for the "Founding Era" cast and crew's internet access.

Fang Zhao had not borrowed internet access to release his news immediately after he had left the cast. One reason was that the internet at the film entertainment complex wasn't particularly stable and communicating wasn't convenient. The second reason was to coordinate with the timing arrangements the company had made.

Yanzhou Qi'an City. Silver Wing gaming department.

"Captain, is it their internet access time yet?" someone asked Jinro.

"Almost time. Two more minutes. Later, everyone should go and light a [candle]. Our Zhao god is receiving his bento box this time."

During last week's internet access time, Jinro had received news from Fang Zhao about the filming developments. If filming went smoothly, during this week's internet access time, they would get to see a photograph of Fang Zhao's bento box. As members "directly under Fang Zhao," they should occupy the most conspicuous and popular position on the comments sections of Fang Zhao's post.

Jinro had also informed the company's operations department beforehand, and they were to pin it to the hot topics and not let anybody else snatch it first.

Everyone counted down the seconds till it would be refreshed. Indeed, Fang Zhao had already edited the post beforehand and had set it to post automatically.

Fang Zhao: "Received my bento box. [image]"

Jinro, who had been had already been waiting originally, wanted to light a [candle], but when he saw the image of that super-huge bento set, his hands trembled and he clicked on [like].

Jinro: "..."

Just as he was about to inform the people in the team to ignore his [like], he saw that the comment with the huge [like] had been already pinned the top of the comments section.

Jinro: "..."

Brothers in the operations department, why were you so quick this time!

Using all his strength to wipe his face, Jinro hurriedly sent a message to Fang Zhao, "Boss, let me explain! I didn't do it on purpose, my hand trembled!"

The other members of the gaming team stood around foolishly and stared at that image of the bento set before turning to Jinro. "Captain, so should we light a [candle] or should we follow you and [like]?"

"Light a [candle]!" Jinro roared.

At the same time, a bunch of netizens that were keeping watching to light [candles] for actors that had just received their bento boxes heard the news of Fang Zhao receiving his bento box. Originally feeling a little heavy-hearted from lighting all those candles, they gloomily came over to Fang Zhao's social platform to add on to the line of [candles], but in the end...

"Hahahaha, the cast's largest bento box has been born! [Like][Like][Like]..."

"My Zhao god is worthy of acting as a great person! Even his bento box is a heavyweight!"

"When I heard that he received his bento box, I was feeling a little sorrowful, but seeing this bento box, I suddenly feel like laughing. Still going to light a routine candle, though [candle]."

"My Zhao god is impressive. Even his bento box has to stand out from the masses [like]."

"What, filming for season nine has already been completed over there? [candle]."

"Very much unwilling to see this, but I still came over. Sigh, what a pity for that great person of that generation [candle]..."

"Don't worry, it's still early. The cast might have filmed till season nine, but online broadcasts are still only at season seven [like]."

"We already learned about Fang Zhao's ending during secondary school history examinations. Those watching the Yanzhou chapter should long have made mental preparations. [Like]."

From the start of filming till now, among the actors from "Founding Era" that had received bento boxes, Fang Zhao was one of the few that received [candles] and [likes] in the comments section.

Yanbei Retirement facility.

Great-Grandfather Fang and Great-Grandmother Fang were waiting there.

During internet access time, Fang Zhao directly make a long-distance call, telling them his scenes were completed.

Great-Grandfather Fang was delighted. "Finished filming already? That means you can return? Good, good, we can all watch season nine together! Hahahaha!"

Great-Grandfather Fang had only let out a few hahas when his laughter was cut short by a sentence from Fang Zhao.

"I still can't return yet. The director told me to not leave planet Wai for the time being in case there are scenes that need to be reshot."

They could randomly find people to substitute for minor roles, but for these important

characters, the director wanted the original actor for reshoots. Of course, they might not be any reshoots, but this was just a precautionary measure, so they wanted Fang Zhao to remain on planet Wai and wait.

Actually, the directorial team had not expected Fang Zhao to immediately receive the all-clear from the psychologist. They had all been prepared for Fang Zhao to remain with the cast and crew for a period of time and leave only after season 10's filming had been completed. They had not expected this sort of situation, so before Fang Zhao could leave the cast and crew, they had informed him that it was all right, but he could not leave planet Wai since filming for the entire project was close to being wrapped up.

Mo Lang also hoped that Fang Zhao would not be in a rush to leave. He did not know when he might require Fang Zhao to exchange some tips. Fang Zhao did not mention this reason to Great-Grandfather Fang.

Although the two old Fangs were a little disappointed that they would not be able to watch season nine together with Fang Zhao, they could also understand, and they reminded Fang Zhao to stay safe and look after himself well.

After the call, Great-Grandfather Fang grumbled, "Our little Fang experiences hardship over there! Say, can such a huge company like Silver Wing even be considered one of Yanzhou's top three? They can't even assign him an assistant!"

Great-Grandmother Fang reasoned, "What you just said are groundless accusations. Didn't little Fang also say that he didn't want an assistant with him? Besides, doesn't he still have his two bodyguards over there?"

"What can a bodyguard do when it comes to work-related matters? They can't act as a nanny too! Let's advise him to look for an assistant next time. Other third-rate celebrities also bring along an entourage of assistants! Given Fang Zhao's reputation in Yanzhou, he isn't shabbier than a third-rate celebrity, right?"

Great-Grandmother Fang agreed with the matter of finding an assistant.

Knowing that Fang Zhao had no way of rushing back to watch season nine with them, Great-Grandfather Fang heaved a heavy sigh. But when he browsed through the comments online, his spirit immediately returned.

When they saw the super-huge bento box, the two Old Fangs beamed with delight.

"Our worthy grandson indeed. Even his bento box is larger than others'!"

Great-Grandfather Fang saved Fang Zhao's image and status as well as other photographs from different angles of the bento box that Fang Zhao had sent. Then, he sent them to other chat groups, sharing them with even more friends and family. He also sent a flurry of images to the retirement facility's internal chat group.

"Across the entire showbiz circles, besides my Xiao Zhao, who else has received such a huge bento box!?"

The one and only!

Great-Grandfather Fang chuckled as he told his wife beside him, "How great having a good appetite is! He is like me. Back then, when I was young and I first embarked on the Sirius for military service, how many people had no appetites because of the poor conditions and were unable to adapt well? Only I was able to eat a lot and adapt fast! My strength was really great too... Hey, now that I mention it, Fang Zhao is really like me!" Great-Grandfather Fang got more excited as he spoke, and he patted his old wife. "Do you still remember? Right at the beginning of military service, because I was able to eat a lot, was full of vigor, and adapted well, the captain even praised me for being a role model!"

Great-Grandmother Fang's lips curled upward at these past memories. "Yes, during those times, many people could not adapt well and fell sick easily. The captain even personally made a visit to the sick bay and ran into you, wearing a sleeveless shirt and underpants, rushing in with your sick roommate."

Great-Grandfather Fang's entire face was beaming. "Ah ha! I just knew that you fell in love with me at that moment. Otherwise, how were you able to remember it so clearly! Heh, and this old lady is still unwilling to admit it!"

Great-Grandmother Fang: "..."

"How many people took a fancy for me all those years ago! This bit of Xiao Zhao is just like me, he is surely especially charming, just that he seems a little boring sometimes. This part of him isn't so good. He is just like you in this aspect."

Great-Grandmother Fang: "..."

Chapter 321

Wrap Banquet

Fang Zhao returned Curly Hair to the base as promised. He could tell that Curly Hair enjoyed his work. After getting his gaming fix, Curly Hair happily followed Fang Zhao back to the base.

Curly Hair was still the same dog when he was with Fang Zhao, quiet and obedient, but once he set foot on the base, his tiny eyes started to get cocky.

The soldiers on base were glad to put him on a pedestal. He had made a major contribution, after all.

Curly Hair was sad when Fang Zhao had to leave the base, darting toward him to whine and cuddle.

Fang Zhao thought that the little fella had been spoiled by the folks on base. Curly Hair had grown a temper. That was why he had trashed the sofa without much prompting.

"I'll come see you again in two days." Fang Zhao pet Curly Hair on the head. Now that he was done shooting, his schedule was much more flexible. He could stay longer on base each visit.

The soldier in charge of Curly Hair was still the lieutenant colonel Fang Zhao had met last time.

After Fang Zhao left, the lieutenant colonel sat on the ground next to Curly Hair, oblivious to the dirty surface. "Curly Hair, remember what I told you last time? Guarding the spaceport is the same as protecting your master."

Curly Hair immediately shook off his languor and stood at attention.

The lieutenant colonel continued, "The next spaceship is about to arrive. We have to be on full alert. We can't let any contraband in. You must stay on guard!"

"Woof!" Curly Hair strutted confidently toward the spaceport.

The lieutenant colonel followed, secretly breathing a sigh of relief. Thank God I've tamed him for now.

Meanwhile, free of his acting duties, Fang Zhao took a stroll through the film studio complex. Just as Huo Yi had said, the compound's fast expansion brought a greater number of risk factors. He had no control over other peoples' territory, but on his own turf, there were some issues he had to weigh in on.

After supervising work and straightening things out at the film studio complex for two days, Fang Zhao could finally shift his attention elsewhere.

Over at the experimental plots, operations had already been partly commercialized. When investors wanted to revive certain Old Era plant species, the research center would get on the case right away as long as there were sufficient funds. Only a handful of species had been revived in the past because of limited funding, but now that Planet Wai had developed a thriving entertainment and tourist economy, even researchers were receiving payment a few tiers higher.

Fang Zhao had heard that Zaro and Woo Tianhao had joined hands to invest in the revival of wild ginger, a plant that looked pretty and had medicinal value. Once the wild ginger could be harvested and they had accumulated enough stock, the two would engage in a major round of speculation.

The several new botanical gardens that had sprung up on Wai held plant shows periodically. Most of them were flower shows. Interested buyers could purchase flowers on site. The fair organizers would take care of export permits, ship to Earth in bulk, and arrange for home delivery.

Fang Zhao bought some flower and plants that were easy to care for for Great-Grandfather Fang and Great-Grandmother Fang. He remembered that his great-grandmother liked flowers. She had just complained to him yesterday that a few of her potted plants had died after being overwatered by Great-Grandfather.

He also bought plants for his former colleagues at Silver Wing, for Xue Jing, and for close friends and family. He figured he would order everything in one go.

Fang Zhao had stayed on set and filmed for nine seasons, about a year in total, and that was with adequate preparation and with the stars aligned—the right technology, the actors performing well, and an experienced crew. If the shoot had taken place in the

Old Era, completing a season in a year would have been rough.

A whole bunch of tourist sites, both big and small, had popped up on Wai in the past two years. Fang Zhao took advantage of his break to check them out.

When he felt inspired, he put his new melodies to paper. They varied in length and might not amount to a full song or ever be played in public. They might remain in Fang Zhao's pocket notebook forever, but jotting things down in his notebook had become a habit.

He had been so tightly wound in his previous life. Only now did he have the leisure, time, and circumstances to compose freely.

Fang Zhao was called back to the set by the director twice to shoot additional scenes and once by Mo Lang to discuss ideas for the arrangement of part of the score.

When he finally got word that it was a wrap, he could literally hear the sense of relief the directors felt through his bracelet.

Even though shooting had been completed, there was still postproduction, but that didn't put a damper on everyone's festive mood.

"Fang Zhao, remember to head back to set tomorrow for the wrap banquet," a production liaison said in a note sent to the actor.

"Can I bring my bodyguards?" Fang Zhao asked.

"I think restrictions are laxer now. You can bring your bodyguards, manager, or assistants, but you are only allowed a quota of two people. You have to get special approval if you want to bring more than two people."

Meanwhile, Roman had transformed from Scarface to Mr. Smiley, chuckling wherever he went. After finishing shooting, he splurged on the wrap banquet. We're definitely having one! We're going all out! The investors will pay for it anyway. No need to pinch pennies on their account!

After the entire cast and crew having endured such an extended shoot and depressing mood on set, Roman wanted to throw a proper banquet to cheer folks up. The festive mood would also help draw actors out of their characters.

The cast and crew also did a 180. They had no qualms about speaking up anymore.

Actors who had been dissed by Roman with no mercy now behaved like he was a blood brother, chatting and joking around with the director.

The day of the wrap banquet, Fang Zhao ended up going with Zuo Yu and Yan Biao. He didn't have any assistants or a manager, so he used his quota on his bodyguards.

The duo were happy about the prospect of hanging out with the cast and crew and enjoying a sumptuous meal.

At the beginning of the banquet, the directors took turns making speeches.

Roman had been in a very good mood the past two days, flashing an exceptionally wide smile and revealing his humorous side. After finishing his speech, he added with a laugh, "I ordered a custom-made 10-layer cake shaped like a bento box for tonight."

When the cast and crew saw the big cake, they started throwing glances at Fang Zhao.

Roman sauntered toward the cake, wine glass in hand. "Does everyone recognize it? I had it modeled after Fang Zhao's giant bento box. It's big enough, isn't it?"

The dinner guests broke into guffaws.

"Don't hold back. The more you eat, the thicker the red packet you will get!"

This comment lit a fire in the audience. They might not have been necessarily keen on a thick red packet, but leaving a good impression on Director Roman was a smart move. It would improve their chances of working with him when he directed a major production in the future. Does Roman like actors who have voracious appetites? We're big eaters too!

But soon, all eyes were on Fang Zhao again.

"You better sit out this one, Fang Zhao," Roman said with a smile.

Fang Zhao laughed. "Sure." He had never intended to participate, and he had a good idea what the others were thinking. He would never live down his reputation as a big eater, no matter how much he explained.

An actor sitting next to him was delighted. "I'm relieved."

While the others were enjoying the meal and drinking merrily, Roman approached Fang Zhao. "Have you thought about your next step? I'm shooting a lighter TV series next year. There are a few characters that suit you well. Interested?"

With a smile, Fang Zhao politely declined. After downing a few drinks with Roman, Fang Zhao explained himself. "You know that I auditioned for the role of Fang Zhao because I like the role and the character shares my personality. This is a role I can handle, but if it's another character, I won't fare well against other actors."

Roman wasn't upset. He was actually glad to hear Fang Zhao's answer. It meant that Fang Zhao hadn't let his recent fame get to his head. Being sober-minded was a good thing. He had seen too many young actors vanish after achieving overnight renown.

"No problem. We'll find another opportunity to work together." Roman slapped Fang Zhao on the shoulder and flashed a wide grin. "One of the things I'm proudest of in this production is having suggested you for the role of Fang Zhao. You made me proud, ha!"

Soon, Roman was summoned by others as a drinking companion. The alcoholics could go all out tonight.

Fang Zhao also had a few more drinks with a few actors he knew well.

Out of the actors who remained on Wai, few were close to Fang Zhao. Ji Polun and company had left after Fang Zhao had completed his scenes. B- and C-list actors like them had to take advantage of the fact that the big stars were still on Wai to start publicizing their recent works. Otherwise, by the time the stars got around to promoting the TV series, they would be crowded out completely. They would be on no one's radar.

Fang Zhao was different. He wasn't a professional actor. But for Ji Polun and friends, acting was their primary profession. They had to line up their next project and related activities in advance.

A few of the stunt doubles approached Fang Zhao's table to say hello.

"Now, Fang Zhao, don't bail on us. Once we wind things down, let's race here on Wai!"

Most of the difficult stunt-driving scenes in the series had been completed by doubles. The only actor who had never used a stunt double in the entire cast from all 11 chapters was Fang Zhao.

The stunt team took no issue with this. Whenever they watched Fang Zhao complete his own stunts, they were impressed too. They even agreed to race after filming wrapped.

There was tons of space on Wai and it was sparsely populated. It was perfect for racing.

Before filming wrapped, everything revolved around the shoot. No one could enjoy their pastimes properly lest a freak accident affect their work, but now they could let loose.

After the stunt doubles left, a fight-scene stunt double approached with his drink.

Most of the more challenging or physically demanding fight scenes had been left to doubles. Martial arts doubles and stunt doubles might be lumped together on other productions, but on the set of "Founding Era," there was a refined division of labor.

As the martial arts double approached, he announced, "Don't get me wrong. I don't want to spar with you. I know I am no match. If we fought for real, I know I'd collapse before I knew what was going on."

Fang Zhao had never used fight scene doubles either, although his opponents in the scenes all did.

Roman's high standards required fight sequences to look authentic. Their moves couldn't seem too fake, so they had to fight for real to a certain extent. Most actors, even if they had a foundation in martial arts and had undergone training, couldn't pass muster.

While they wouldn't go so far as to say that they had a precise understanding of Fang Zhao's skill level, the doubles who had fought Fang Zhao on set many times had a general sense. Even though Fang Zhao had held back, they had still felt sore after filming. They certainly didn't want to spar with Fang Zhao.

After a brief pause, the martial arts doubles said, "I was just wondering if you needed any more bodyguards?"

Zuo Yu and Yan Biao, who were engrossed in their meal, took notice immediately. They cast a wary glance at the intruder.

Are you looking to replace us?

The bodyguard team is fully staffed!

Sensing Yan Biao and Zuo Yu's hostile glare, the double scrambled to explain himself. "Not the traveling kind. I know what I'm capable of. What I mean is are you hiring a guard of the security variety?"

The traveling bodyguards the big stars hired were quite elite. Former doubles like himself were rarely considered. Working for a minor celebrity didn't lead to rosy career prospects, so he decided to work for Fang Zhao. He would chart a different course by not working as a traveling bodyguard and serving in a different capacity.

Martial arts doubles like himself had a keen understanding of the entertainment industry. They were especially sensitive to developments in filmed entertainment. The film studio complex on Wai would undoubtedly expand and thrive in the next 10 years. Fang Zhao wasn't just a rising star—he was also an investor, and he had connections to the Wai military base. The martial arts double couldn't find work with any of the investors, but Fang Zhao was a sitting duck. If now wasn't the time to kiss up, then when?

He couldn't work as a martial arts double forever. They peaked only for a brief period and they had to take time to nurse the injuries they accumulated over the years. If they overworked and developed a major chronic injury, their lives would be even more miserable in retirement, so they had to look out for themselves too.

Fang Zhao gave the matter some thought. He did indeed need to beef up the manpower at the film studio complex. Yan Biao and Zuo Yu had brought a whole bunch of their retired comrades on board. The film studio compound was expanding rapidly, so he had to keep a closer eye on his property. Hiring more help was a certain thing.

The martial arts double before him was a smooth talker, but from Fang Zhao's observations during filming, he wasn't a bad person. Folks who were hired as martial arts doubles typically were of decent character. Skill-wise, even if they weren't as competent as Yan Biao and Zuo Yu, they were still far superior to the average hire.

Someone else was calling for Fang Zhao. Fang Zhao told the double, "Why don't you

have a chat with these two?"

The man glowed. Fang Zhao hadn't rejected him off-the-bat. "Sure, no problem!" he responded with gusto.

It wasn't the first time their boss had put Yan Biao and Zuo Yu in the same situation. They put down their plates and got business-like. "We have our own set of rules. Let me give you the low-down. If you think they are acceptable, let's set up a proper meeting," Yan Biao said.

"Sounds good!"

The trio chatted briefly. After taking care of business, they started letting their guard down.

"It must be a tough gig guarding Fang Zhao, right?" the martial arts double asked.

Yan Biao rubbed his chin. "It's hard to explain."

The double had a knowing look on his face. He said with a chuckle, "Got it. I know how it works. I won't ask any questions I shouldn't ask and I won't eavesdrop when I shouldn't. A professional bodyguard, even a marginal one, knows the importance of confidentiality. Let's drink. No, bodyguards can't get drunk. Let's stick to eating. Let's have a proper bite!"

Celebrities always had some sort of dirty laundry and a side of them that even their parents and spouses were unaware of. Bodyguards and drivers were perhaps the people who knew them the best, but a professional bodyguard knew that mum was the word when it came to the boss's personal affairs. He had heard plenty of stories during his years as a martial arts double.

If Yan Biao and Zuo Yu knew what the double had been insinuating, they would have loudly announced, "No, that's not the case. We so-called traveling bodyguards can't keep up with our boss. We feel like we're mere window dressing!"

Fang Zhao was constantly summoned as a drinking buddy and to pose for pictures. As long as the other dinner guests weren't out of line, Fang Zhao played along. He ended up drinking quite a bit, but he didn't feel drunk.

By the end of the banquet Fang Zhao reeked of alcohol, but he was still quite sober. He

even helped the sober guests guide the wasted ones onto the bus service headed back to the dorm compound. He himself waited for the last bus.

Even though Fang Zhao's acting duties had concluded, he was allowed to keep his dorm room. That was because he had responsibilities other than acting. It was late and he'd had quite a bit to drink, so he wanted to rest in his dorm room.

After the shuttle bus made several rounds, the venue for the banquet had died down. Fang Zhao made a quick run to the men's room while he was waiting for the final shuttle.

When he emerged from the toilet, a tall, slim woman in formal wear left the ladies' room next door.

After toiling away for seasons on the set, many of the actresses and female crew members had cleaned up for the wrap banquet, so that type of wardrobe didn't stand out today.

As the sound of high heels clicked by, the woman noticed Fang Zhao staring at her and arched her brows. "What are you looking at? Pervert!"

Fang Zhao broke out laughing. "You really have to go all out in your line of work, Wang..."

"Big God, I was wrong!"

The "woman" who had just confidently given Fang Zhao an earful now sounded defeated.

Indeed, the "woman" was actually Yanzhou's top entertainment journalist, the self-proclaimed "King of Paparazzi," Wang Tie. He didn't dare venture into the film studio complex during filming, but now that shooting was finished, the soldiers manning the compound had let their guard down. It had been easy to sneak in. Other entertainment journalists had also infiltrated the complex. They were all out and about looking for scoops.

In fact, many of the actors had suspected there were entertainment journalists in their midst at the wrap banquet, but they had played dumb. They had dressed up for the banquet and ate with superb table manners. The presence of undercover journalists had obviously been lost on the actors who had gotten wasted.

Wang Tie had actually gathered quite a bit of information at tonight's banquet. He had just been texting his disciples from the ladies' room, telling them to call it a night and retreat, yet when he left the bathroom after tidying up, lo and behold, he ran into Fang Zhao. He secretly cursed to himself. F*ck! Such bad luck!

But he was also delighted to smell the alcohol in Fang Zhao's breath. Fang Zhao was drunk. He could definitely fumble through this time.

Wang Tie couldn't help chewing out Fang Zhao, because Fang Zhao was staring at him. He had wanted to tell Fang Zhao off for some time, but he'd never had the guts to do so to Fang Zhao's face. He figured Fang Zhao wouldn't catch on this time because he was in disguise.

Yet reality set in quickly.

"Big God, how about this? The wrap banquet is over. Just pretend that you didn't see me and I didn't see you. We can both call it a night, OK?" Wang Tie probed.

Fang Zhao didn't respond.

Totally unrecognizable in disguise, Wang Tie paused briefly, then flashed an evil smile. "What if I tore my outfit, clung to you, and yelled for help? What kind of stories do you think the entertainment journalists who haven't left will write?"

Was it an outrageously contrived plan?

Absolutely.

But did the truth matter?

No!

As far as many entertainment journalists were concerned, the truth wasn't a major concern, even if they knew the facts. All they did was write the most sensational account possible. As for the truth, it was none of their bloody business. In the worst-case scenario, they would apologize after the fact. By then, they would have gained the necessary hits.

Fang Zhao flexed his fingers.

Wang Tie retreated abruptly and raised his hands. He blurted in a whisper, "OK, I know where that will land me. Bottom line is it won't be a happy ending. I misspoke. Big God, there's no need to quibble with me. Just think of it as a fart. Let it go!"

Fang Zhao: "..."

Wang Tie was saved by the sound of approaching footsteps. He clasped his hands in prayer as he genuflected toward Fang Zhao, then trotted away in his high heels.

Fang Zhao smiled and shook his head. Being an entertainment journalist was a tough gig. Wang Tie had to go all out to maintain his reputation as Yanzhou's top paparazzo.

The next day, all sorts of selfies and paparazzi shots from the wrap banquet began to surface. All sorts of alleged affairs made their rounds on the internet. There was truth to some of them, while others were fabricated on the basis of suggestive photos.

Wang Tie broke news about the latest romantic entanglements of a few stars. As a bonus, he also broke stories about some less famous actors, but there was nothing about Fang Zhao, not even a photo. The name "Fang Zhao" did not make an appearance at all.

When Fang Zhao went online, all he did was scan the headlines before focusing his attention on one particular item.

A fan of "Founding Era" posted, "I hear that many period dramas auction their costumes after they finish shooting. Is this true?"

"Director Roman, is there going to be an auction? I have my piggy bank ready!"

"I can't get enough of the costumes and accessories that my idol wore. It'd be even better if they're autographed!"

"Set up an auction page!"

Soon enough, Roman responded, "No."

Most of the costumes and props would be preserved, though. The set would be rebuilt as a theme park. The most important props and costumes would be autographed and put on display.

The theme park would also be equipped with Period of Destruction clothing for tourists to rent and buy.

Two days later, Fang Zhao and a select few other actors were summoned by Roman to sign their laundered costumes.

There were holes in many of the costumes, and there was wear and tear to varying degrees, but that was the effect the theme park was looking for.

Fang Zhao signed his name properly on his own costume.

Chapter 322

The Disappearing Bullet

After filming wrapped up, actors left in batches according to their own work arrangements.

Staff members handling postproduction still had to remain on planet Wai for an extended period of time. For actors, most were in a rush to return, as they had busy schedules. Only a small portion of actors were not in a rush. Besides staff members in charge of postproduction, there were also a few actors that decided to stay on planet Wai for a bit to have a vacation and tour the place before they returned.

During this time, Fang Zhao and the stuntmen street raced twice.

The roaring of engines and billowing of dust made the blood within one's body seem like it was boiling.

Zaro watched enviously and wished to join them for a round.

But with Zaro's driving skills, where he even needed to turn on the autopilot when driving a flying car, if he were to operate one of those two-wheeled motorcycles from the Period of Destruction, he would probably flip over immediately.

For the sake of Zaro's safety—and taking into consideration his own occupational future—Zaro's agent had stopped him. Although Zaro's agent wouldn't be able to avoid a scolding from Zaro, he had long gotten used to it, and he was at peace with himself.

As a last resort, Zaro had sat on the motorcycle and struck a cool pose for a photograph. Fortunately, he could still flaunt and act pretentious online, conning all those netizens that did not know the truth.

Perhaps these stuntmen got some inspiration from street racing. These stuntmen decided that when they returned, they would propose a few of those super motorcycle companies in MaErsizhou set up a large-scale cross-country race here.

"The competition venues at MaErsizhou are too congested. In recent years, it feels as if the competition venues are being more restricted, and racing doesn't seem as refreshing as before," one of the stuntmen said as he removed his helmet. Although he had lost to Fang Zhao in a race, this reckless speeding made him extremely excited.

The majority of these stuntmen were from MaErsizhou, and people from this continent seemed to carry a fanatical competitive gene. Even if they fell down and were in pain during an event, they would still be captivated by the spirit of competition.

Advances in technology had given rise to a lot of new sporting events, and now, people of Mazhou were once again starting ancient sporting events from the Old Era. The few of them had been riding imitation cross-country mountain bikes from the Old Era and racing around the sandy dunes outside the film sets.

Those stuntmen had fanatical glints in their eyes. "Under the wind and rain, when lightning flashes and thunder rolls, when the engine roars and dirt splatters while climbing a steep dirt hill, at the moment when the wheels of the bike leave the ground, that sort of feeling is just like an ancient knight of old, how glorious! Fang Zhao, I can see that you also really love these sorts of sports and you can understand how we feel. You have an extremely high amount of talent in this aspect! Visit Mazhou! Duke it out on the racetrack! Experience the charm of ancient sporting events! That is a totally different experience from e-sports competitions!"

Fang Zhao: "Not interested."

He'd had his fill of racing in his previous life.

Under the disappointed gazes of the stuntmen, Fang Zhao rode the motorcycle back and returned it. After paying for the rent and maintenance, Fang Zhao headed for the music center.

There were always many people in the music center. Actors and crew members waiting for the next trip back would watch performances at the music center if they did not wish to head out.

Nowadays, every time Fang Zhao went over, it was to see Mo Lang.

Mo Lang had sent Fang Zhao a message yesterday asking him to drop by in the following few days if he had the time. It wasn't an urgent matter; Mo Lang just wished

to exchange some composing insights with him.

Mo Lang's 10-minute ending tune was already 90% completed. There were only some tiny areas left that he wasn't satisfied with and wanted to amend. Once he was satisfied with the final product, recording could begin.

As Fang Zhao had contributed significantly during this period where the ending tune was being composed, Mo Lang had let Fang Zhao sign a confidentiality agreement. When the time came, he would place Fang Zhao's name in the credits for this composition, second only to Mo Lang.

After signing this agreement, Mo Lang let Fang Zhao see the completed score sheet. This way, it would be easier for them to discuss composition-related problems.

Today, after discussing with Mo Lang for half an hour, Fang Zhao's communications device produced a hurried noise.

If it wasn't an urgent matter, it wouldn't be this sort of tone. Looking at the caller, Fang Zhao's eyelids twitched. "Sorry, I have to take a call."

The caller was Huo Yi. As Wai base's commanding officer, he wouldn't personally contact Fang Zhao unless it was an urgent matter. And for stuff on Wai base that concerned Fang Zhao, there was only Curly Hair.

Fang Zhao walked over to an empty room to the side and answered the call.

Huo Yi's heavy tone appeared to have some restrained fury. "There is a problem at the kennel. You have to come over now. Turn on your GPS and I will get the nearest base personnel to pick you up."

"Is Curly Hair all right?" Fang Zhao asked.

"He is healthy and active, but he is a little excessively stirred up. Now, nobody is able to go near him. Come out now. We will brief you on the way." Huo Yi did not elaborate further and ended the call.

Fang Zhao informed Mo Lang and left quickly.

As Fang Zhao exited the large main doors of the music center, others entering and leaving the music center saw Fang Zhao's hurried footsteps and were about to inquire

with him when they heard surprised exclamations from people around them.

Raising their heads to look over, a huge and menacing flying transport was descending. When Fang Zhao boarded, the transport left immediately.

"Was that a... military flying transport?" someone wondered aloud.

"I think it belongs to Wai base's internal department. It is equipped with the latest propulsion and weapons system, and generally, people on the outside can't use it," said an actor who had acted in many military serials. He understood these sorts of things a little better and frequently paid attention to these aspects.

"So the rumors that Fang Zhao has a formidable military background are true? Otherwise, why would Wai base let Fang Zhao use such a destructive flying machine?"

"This, I have no idea. But I see that Fang Zhao has special qualities that military talents possess. If I were him, I would surely stay on with the military to develop. With such a background, I would be even better off and would be able to climb much higher. Why does he want to muddle along in the entertainment circles? That really puzzles me."

The people of the entertainment industry had all sorts of guesses from watching Fang Zhao hurriedly board Wai base's flying transport in that manner, but the main point that made even more people curious was this: did Fang Zhao really have a formidable military background?

On the flying transport heading for Wai base, Fang Zhao wasn't in the mood to bother about what those people at the music center were thinking. On the journey there, Fang Zhao contacted the base to better understand the matter.

Previously, when Huo Yi had said that Curly Hair might be targeted, that hadn't just been chatter. Having intercepted so many goods, he had damaged quite a few people's interests. Even if the base was able to keep it confidential, over time, there might be times when they overlooked stuff. Furthermore, Wai base's internal teams were not a singular organism. After the expansion, it had gotten more complicated.

Today, there hadn't been any transport ships arriving, and there were few security check assignments at the airfield. In the morning, the person in charge had brought Curly Hair out for a round and then returned him to the kennel to rest. Today, the dogs in the kennel were all resting, and they did not have training either. The people guarding the kennels had never expected that someone would dare try to assassinate

a dog in broad daylight!

Although the other party had not succeeded, the soldiers stationed at the kennels had not caught the perpetrator. Afterward, in the blink of an eye, Curly Hair had run out from the kennels!

After that, the staff there locked the other dogs inside and got a team to guard the kennels. They then dispatched another team to chase Curly Hair.

That team caught up to Curly Hair very quickly, but his manner had changed. From his originally gentle and friendly nature, he was now especially fierce and kept barking.

When Fang Zhao entered the base, he heard a dog barking.

A stockman at the kennel explained to Fang Zhao, "Since we found and brought him back, he hasn't allowed anyone to get near him. He starts barking frantically, bares his teeth, and his body goes completely taut whenever someone gets close. I have never seen him so ferocious before. The vet has come over and observed, but he didn't discover any injuries. After using an apparatus to do a rough scan, the vet said Curly Hair's internal organs and bones are fine too, but he has no way of getting close to do a proper check, so we still can't be certain Curly Hair is completely fine. The commander said to wait for you to come over. If you too have no way of making him calm down, then we will have to adopt other methods."

The stockman and instructor, as well as the lieutenant colonel normally in charge of handling Curly Hair, had all received the same treatment. They were unable to get close and couldn't do anything but wait for Fang Zhao to come over.

When he saw Fang Zhao, Curly Hair speedily ran over to Fang Zhao's side and whimpered as if he'd been wronged. Although he was no longer barking, he still wasn't friendly to others, baring his teeth and growling to anyone else who got too close.

Fang Zhao put out his hand to stroke Curly Hair's fur, firstly to pacify Curly Hair and secondly to check whether he was hurt in any way.

"He's all right," Fang Zhao said.

Huo Yi heaved a sigh of relief. "That's good. Let the vet give him a checkup, do some blood tests, and so on, to ensure that he hasn't received any harmful drugs or the like."

However, the moment the vet moved a step closer, Curly Hair once again started barking. This time, he only barked twice before stopping, but as before, he stared at the vet, low warning growls originating from his throat as he revealed his sharp canines.

Fang Zhao patted him lightly before the growling stopped.

"Tell me what happened. Just that which can be said will do." Fang Zhao glanced at Huo Yi. "Previously, when I brought Curly Hair over, we agreed that I would have the right to know anything that happened."

Huo Yi took a deep breath, his brows constricting, and he raised his hand, indicating the lieutenant colonel that normally handled Curly Hair should explain to Fang Zhao.

The lieutenant colonel gave a brief recount, which was similar to what Fang Zhao had found out on the way here.

"The perpetrator still hasn't been caught?" Fang Zhao asked.

When this was mentioned, Huo Yi's face became even darker and he fell silent. Evidently, he also felt ashamed.

The lieutenant colonel frowned helplessly. "The perpetrator is probably an old hand. We have yet to find him. We even brought out two dogs that are good at tracking, but they lost the scent. Our surrounding monitoring system did not catch anyone on film, and our sentinel system didn't release any warnings. From the leads we have now, there was only one person that opened fire." That lieutenant colonel handed over a set of analytical results. "Although we were unable to catch the perpetrator's figure, the sentinel system recorded a sound. After filtering it out, the system's analysis results indicate that the perpetrator opened fire thrice. Luckily, none of them hit the mark."

Fang Zhao's hand that was patting Curly Hair halted. He knew that what had happened here at the base was not just limited to this, but he would not chase further answers. The base would have stuff that they weren't liable to reveal too.

Thinking about it, Fang Zhao asked, "The perpetrator fired three times. Where did they hit? Can I see the bullets? I remember that over here, you all are still equipped with live ammunition, not with energy firearms."

A flash of embarrassment lit up across the lieutenant colonel's face as he looked

towards Huo Yi.

Huo Yi nodded his head.

That lieutenant colonel said, "Three shots, but we only found two bullets. One was on the ground in the dog shed, and the other was near the entrance of the kennel. As for the remaining one... we have yet to find it. We have already widened our search radius, and I believe we will find it very soon."

"Could I trouble you to arrange a guest room? I want to bring Curly Hair over for a little rest. He has just experienced quite a scare, and his mood isn't all that well. Right now, he is very guarded against outsiders. Perhaps he needs some time alone. I'll bring him out again when he is feeling better," Fang Zhao said.

This time, Huo Yi gave an instant reply. "All right."

"Can I have a copy of the monitoring footage from the kennels as well as the sound recordings from the surrounding sentinel system? For the sound recordings, can I have the original source, not ones that have been filtered?" asked Fang Zhao.

There was bewilderment on the lieutenant colonel's face. "You can't really hear anything from the original source. The perpetrator had a silencer on his gun, and because it was broad daylight, there were many random noises nearby. Without processing them, you won't be able to hear the sound of gunfire."

Fang Zhao nodded. "That's the sort I want."

"No problem." Huo Yi's face was a little gloomy. However, it wasn't directed at Fang Zhao but at the day's happenings.

Fang Zhao brought Curly Hair to the room the base assigned them. This was a guest house in the base, for treating guests when they came over.

Curly Hair followed closely beside Fang Zhao. Only after there was nobody else inside the room did Curly Hair's tense body relax slightly, and he wagged his tail.

Fang Zhao paced the guest room, then fished out an object around the size of a palm from his pocket. This was an instrument for taking readings. After checking for surveillance equipment in the room and not finding any, Fang Zhao waved to Curly Hair, who was scratching his back with his hind legs. "Come over."

The people from the base viewed Curly Hair and those elite dogs from Muzhou Police Dog Academy the same way. They felt that these dogs had IQs much higher than other dogs. Just from some little drills and instructions, they could understand a lot and were similar to 10-year-old kids. But in the end, they were only dogs, and no matter how high their IQs were, they still could not compare to an adult.

In Muzhou's history, there were many dogs with especially high IQs. During those extraordinary circumstances of the Period of Destruction, many outstanding combat dogs had come about. There were many graves for meritorious service dogs in the Muzhou Cemetery of Martyrs alone.

But 500 years later, in the New Era, there was still a disparity for Muzhou dogs even if they inherited their forefathers IQ. In all that time, the number of dogs with really high IQs could be counted with the fingers on a person's hands, and every one of those dogs was considered a Muzhou treasure.

As for Curly Hair, Fang Zhao did not think that he was in any way inferior to those Muzhou treasures recorded down in history.

Because Curly Hair stood out from the masses, Fang Zhao had taught him a long time ago to pretend to be clumsier than he seemed and to be wary of outsiders. Today, in front of Huo Yi and the others, Curly Hair's barking might not have been because he'd received a shock but for other reasons.

Fang Zhao crouched down and stroked Curly Hair's head. "There are no outsiders here. What do you wish to tell me?"

Curly Hair whimpered, groaned, and growled, as if trying to tell Fang Zhao something, but the language was different.

Fang Zhao watched as Curly Hair whimpered then growled. He knew Curly Hair was trying to tell him something, but... the language was different, so he really had no way of completely understanding what Curly Hair wanted to say.

Curly Hair's scratched his paws twice on the ground, as if he was trying to write something, but he gave it up quickly. Following that, he paced up and down on his spot and twirled around a few times.

Fang Zhao watched Curly Hair twirling around, his paws moving up and down. If this were a grass patch outside, this sort of action would generally be done to flatten the

grass to prevent the grass from poking his butt. Then, Curly Hair... took a crap.

In front of Fang Zhao, Curly Hair took a long crap.

Fang Zhao: "..."

After Curly Hair was done, he leaned in to take a sniff, then abruptly withdrew his neck, took two steps back, and cried out softly. Curly Hair looked at Fang Zhao, then turned to look at that fresh poop and continued to bark.

Fang Zhao remained quiet for a few seconds, then got up to get a pair of tweezers.

Thirty seconds later, Fang Zhao stared at the deformed bullet shell he had picked up with the tweezers from inside the dog poo, and he continued to remain silent.

Chapter 323

The Dog That Eats Anything

"So this is the bullet that vanished?" Fang Zhao asked Curly Hair.

"Woof!" Curly Hair barked as he sat while wagging his tail violently.

Fang Zhao pressed on. "So the sniper did actually hit you?"

"Woof!" The tail-wagging picked up in tempo, as if Curly Hair was indicating his pride in stopping a bullet.

Fang Zhao inspected Curly Hair's body. "Where did you get hit?" He didn't detect any traces of blood. The prior inspection did not yield any obvious wounds either. If Curly Hair had any wounds, Huo Yi and company would have noticed.

Curly Hair used one of his hind legs to scratch his back. He scratched some more, like he usually did when scratching an itch.

Fang Zhao parted the fur at the spot Curly Hair was scratching and found a light scar about the size of a fingernail.

Fang Zhao pointed at the scar. "Here?"

"Woof!"

Curly Hair's military fatigues had been removed after he'd returned to base after his mission ended. He had not been wearing any bullet-proof clothing at the time of the attack.

Fang Zhao examined the heavily deformed bullet that he'd pulled out, then checked the light scar on Curly Hair's back again.

This couldn't be explained by a plain old mutation. Even the strongest service dogs in Muzhou during the Period of Destruction hadn't been invincible. How many dogs had been shot dead?

Fang Zhao had a good idea how deadly the arms used by soldiers at Wai base were. If it had been any other dog, there would have been an exit wound, yet in this case, the bullet had barely scratched Curly Hair's skin. Then...

"You ate it?"

"Woof!" Curly Hair started wagging his tail vigorously again, as if anticipating Fang Zhao's praise.

"You even knew to hide the evidence. You've gotten smart." Fang Zhao fondled Curly Hair's back. "Don't you remember how I instructed you to react when you come across danger? And you decided to pursue the enemy? If you didn't have the ability to stop bullets, you'd be dead, you know?"

Curly Hair stopped wagging his tail and started whining. His tiny eyes looked sad.

Fang Zhao sighed and examined the debris on Curly Hair's coat. "We're going to have a proper chat when this dies down."

Fang Zhao cleaned up the dog shit on the ground and flushed it away in the toilet. He picked up the mangled bullet, washed it, and put it in his pocket.

When he was washing the bullet, Fang Zhao noticed that, in addition to being deformed, it had signs of corrosion.

He sunk into deep thought.

If the bullet hadn't been shot out, would it have eventually been completely digested?

Was Curly Hair actually an alien dog?

But when he thought back to the results of his investigation when he'd lived on a black street, Fang Zhao wanted to attribute the miracle to other factors he didn't know about.

The moment when all the surveillance cameras on the black street had malfunctioned, the moment of his rebirth.

Everything had changed at that moment.

Before that, Curly Hair had been a sickly stray roaming the black street.

But after Fang Zhao's rebirth, Curly Hair had grown stronger by the day. He never got sick and could eat anything. On the ranch in Muzhou, other dogs had gotten upset stomachs from eating hamsters, but not Curly Hair.

Who knew how many hamsters Curly Hair had downed at the Muzhou ranch? Had he eaten any other animals?

Fang Zhao's body had clearly gotten stronger after his rebirth too, but he was nowhere near the level of digesting bullets.

Suddenly, Fang Zhao thought back to the results of Curly Hair's physicals over time.

All along, Curly Hair's checkups had never yielded any obvious abnormalities, including the physical conducted by the vet on the base. Apart from slightly higher-than-normal levels of metal in his blood, he didn't have any other problems. He was perfectly healthy.

The reason the vets gave for Curly Hair's high metal levels was the massive changes to the ecosystem during the 100-year Period of Destruction. Some species went extinct and new species emerged. Dogs underwent mutations. At first glance, the vet's explanation seemed to make sense.

But Fang Zhao knew this wasn't the case.

His own hearing had improved from his previous life. Curly Hair's sense of smell had far surpassed the sniffing capabilities of other dogs. No, perhaps Curly Hair's hearing, sense of smell, and other senses had been very strong to begin with and were improving over time.

When the world's leading pet magazine, PET, had tested Curly Hair's jaw strength, his numbers had already been quite scary, but Fang Zhao knew that Curly Hair hadn't gone all out.

Fang Zhao lifted Curly Hair and glared at him. "Did you eat something that you shouldn't have?"

Curly Hair gently swayed his drooping tail and averted Fang Zhao's gaze.

Right then and there, Fang Zhao knew the little fella had been secretly eating something out of the ordinary.

Who would know that this tiny dog, no different from your average pet dog, actually harbored powers that shook the world?

Fang Zhao's bracelet rang. It was Huo Yi.

"Fang Zhao, how's Curly Hair?" Huo Yi asked with genuine concern.

"He's calmed down," Fang Zhao responded.

"That's great. Why don't you come over. I can't send you the footage from the outpost surveillance system, but you can look at it over here."

"No problem. I'll come over now."

Fang Zhao sent Yan Biao and Zuo Yu a message instructing them to head for the Wai military base, and then he set off with Curly Hair.

Curly Hair stayed close to Fang Zhao and ignored everyone else.

Huo Yi flashed a rare smile when he saw Curly Hair. "He seems to be in better spirits."

"The little fella tends to shit when he gets nervous. He just shat in the guest room. I've cleaned it up already," Fang Zhao said. The floor in the guest room had signs of recent cleaning. Given Huo Yi's personality, he was bound to investigate, so Fang Zhao figured he might as well be forthcoming now and clear the mystery.

The vet who had been observing Curly Hair laughed. "That's normal. It's a reflex. We humans are the same. When we get nervous, we tend to want to shit. When people panic, some pee, others barf."

Curly Hair let out a whimper, but Fang Zhao pressed his head down.

Huo Yi and company had a eureka expression on their faces when they heard the vet's spiel.

"No wonder he looks like he's in better spirits. He must feel relaxed after taking a shit. Good, good. Should you give him a checkup?" Huo Yi was quite concerned about this

dog that had made major contributions to the base's security.

The vet approached and Curly Hair growled. Even though he wasn't as mean as he had been before, he was still resistant.

Fang Zhao explained, "He just calmed down. He's still in shock, so he doesn't want to deal with strangers for the time being."

"That's understandable." Huo Yi expressed sympathy, but a look of disappointment flashed across his face. He knew that after what went down, Curly Hair might not be able to continue his service, not to mention the fact that he was so standoffish now.

After asking the vet to leave, Huo Yi instructed his deputy to play Fang Zhao the surveillance footage and audio. As a commander, he had many affairs to attend to. He couldn't stay forever, and he was even busier than usual after the dog sniper incident. His deputy could stick around.

Fang Zhao studied the footage carefully and listened to the audio.

Huo Yi's deputy observed Fang Zhao curiously, especially when Fang Zhao was listening to the audio. The audio track had not been cleaned up, and the volume had not been turned up. All he could hear was static. What could Fang Zhao hear?

By the time Fang Zhao finished listening to the audio, Yan Biao and Zuo Yu had arrived.

"Did you bring what I asked for?"

"Yes, the liquid soap that Curly Hair uses at home, his mattress, and dog food."

As Huo Yi's deputy watched the two bodyguards remove the items from their bag, he wondered to himself, Are they bodyguards or babysitters?

Fang Zhao told Huo Yi's deputy, "I'm going to take them to the guest room for a rest and give Curly Hair a bath."

When they arrived at the guest room, Fang Zhao bathed Curly Hair and briefed Zuo Yu and Yan Biao about the dog sniper. He didn't say anything about the bullet.

As he gave Curly Hair a bath, Fang Zhao wondered if he should apply some medicinal cream to the scar on Curly Hair's back, but when he parted the fur near the wound, he

realized that the scar had nearly healed. One wouldn't be able to tell it was there unless they looked carefully.

Looks like the wound doesn't need to be treated.

After bathing and blow-drying Curly Hair, Fang Zhao checked the floor. He couldn't find a single strand of dog hair.

Whether he was being bathed or combed, Curly Hair never shed any fur. This trait remained.

Fang Zhao pointed to the dog mattress and ordered, "Go to bed." He turned his head to face Zuo Yu and Yan Biao. "He's in shock. Let him have a good rest. Don't let anyone bother him."

"OK, Boss," the two bodyguards responded.

"I'm going out. You two stay here."

"OK, Boss."

They had a good idea what Fang Zhao was up to, but what could they do? They could only play dumb and obey orders.

After Fang Zhao left, Yan Biao threw a glance at Curly Hair, who was sound asleep and snoring, before telling Zuo Yu, "He doesn't look like he's in shock at all."

Zuo Yu glanced at Curly Hair as well and whispered, "This seems to have been a professional hit."

"Someone actually traveled all the way to Wai base to whack a dog?" Yan Biao was baffled as to why an assassin skilled enough to infiltrate the military base would bother with a dog.

Zuo Yu let out a cold laugh. "Our Curly Hair is no ordinary dog. He has been awarded military merits. Do you know how many people he's kept from getting rich by guarding the cargo shipped to the spaceport? There's a memorial hall at the police dog academy in Muzhou where the pictures of outstanding service dogs are displayed. The dogs there were at least awarded second-class merits. Half of the dogs have been murdered. It's normal to be hated when you stop too many people from getting rich,

when you hurt people's interests."

The thought of Curly Hair being targeted made Zuo Yu furious. He got up and said, "I should head out with Boss."

"What for? To hold him back? Or are you saying you can keep up?" Yan Biao said. It's not that he wanted to rain on Zuo Yu's parade, but the same scenario happened over and over again. He wanted to seek revenge for Curly Hair, but he couldn't keep up with his boss.

Zuo Yu wore a blank expression on his face.

Yan Biao thought of something and smiled. "Actually, if we can't keep up with Fang Zhao and protect him, we can protect Curly Hair, this meritorious service dog. Now that he has made a few major contributions in terms of port security, he has won praise and become a target at the same time. He will face graver risks from now on. If we can't protect Fang Zhao, then we should protect Curly Hair. We are still protecting a hero, no? We have to earn our salary."

Zuo Yu nodded. "You've got a point!"

Elsewhere.

After getting off the phone with Fang Zhao, Huo Yi's deputy reported to his boss, "Fang Zhao said he wants to go out."

Huo Yi frowned. "How many people did he bring?"

"Just himself. He wants to borrow a flying transport and a base vehicle."

"Just himself? What is he up to?" Huo Yi was baffled. "Doesn't he know that the situation outside is uncertain, that it's dangerous?"

Standing next to Huo Yi, the lieutenant colonel in charge of Curly Hair whispered, "Fang Zhao was awarded a merit for killing a terrorist while serving on Baiji. One of my friends from the Baiji base says that Fang Zhao is a strong solo operative." The lieutenant colonel continued, "Commander, you should remember that Fang Zhao is nicknamed 'Diting.' He came to Wai to detect power ore through his hearing while he was serving on Baiji. He must have asked for the audio surveillance from the dog pound to listen for clues. Folks like him have special ears. They're like bats equipped

with sonic radar. He must have found a clue, given he's asking for permission to go out."

Huo Yi figured as much.

After pondering the matter briefly, Huo Yi instructed, "Put together a team and follow Fang Zhao. See if he can actually locate the sniper. No worries if he can't. As long as he can find some useful clues. If something goes down, you can be his backup. Remember to protect Fang Zhao. Don't let things get out of hand."

Fang Zhao was now a celebrity. If something happened to him on Huo Yi's turf, it would spell trouble for the commander.

The lieutenant colonel saluted. "Yes, sir! I won't let you down!"

After the lieutenant colonel left, Huo Yi was the picture of exhaustion. "We won't be able to keep the dog. We'll have to prepare in advance."

Even if the attack didn't happen, Curly Hair couldn't have stayed on forever. A single dog shouldn't shoulder the burden of the entire base. If that was the case, he would be looked down on by other base commanders when they gathered for meetings.

There was no way of forcing Curly Hair to stay either. Fang Zhao would be hard to persuade, not to mention that other base commanders like Shanta of Baiji would rub it in.

Huo Yi got a headache from contemplating the repercussions.

Huo Yi's deputy consoled him. "Even if contraband is sneaked in, stepping up inspections and checks will make a difference."

Huo Yi didn't respond.

Huo Yi knew that he had upset many folks by cracking down and upgrading security measures recently. He lamented the fact that he had been too eager to put Wai on the development fast track. He had sold off too many plots of land and approved too many projects. The number of visitors had jumped, and they were a mixed bunch. It was harder to tighten controls now.

Also, the sniper who had attacked the dog pound had used a standard-issue rifle from

the base, which had prompted Huo Yi to go through the missing firearms logs. If he hadn't checked, he wouldn't have realized that quite a few soldiers had lost their weapons. Huo Yi was so pissed he chewed out the relevant officials in charge and fired two people.

Huo Yi started brainstorming how to implement internal reforms. After a while, someone walked in.

The lieutenant colonel Huo Yi had dispatched had returned. He was beet red and avoided making eye contact. "I lost him."

Huo Yi stared him down.

A storm was brewing.

The lieutenant colonel and Huo Yi's deputy were so nervous they held their breaths. Their foreheads started sweating profusely.

Huo Yi eked out the following words: "What do I need you for, then?"

Chapter 324

Really Divine Ears

Fang Zhao first went over to the kennels.

The base had provided the unprocessed and comprehensive sound recording. Regardless of what a normal person was able to hear or not hear, in Fang Zhao's mind, all the sounds created a comprehensive scene.

Every person, every dog, and all their activities and paths formed a clear picture in his mind.

The spot where the sniper had concealed himself had been planned meticulously. Perhaps he had already been observing for many days.

The first shot had been taken when the dogs had finished their meal in the kennel, when they'd been looking for a spot to rest.

Curly Hair's alertness was very high. He had evaded before the assassin had fired. Following that, he had taken to his heels and chased the perpetrator while dodging the second shot.

Fang Zhao left the kennels, walked over to a large tree, and examined the traces beneath it.

This was where the third shot had struck Curly Hair's backside, but Curly Hair had only slightly pause for a bit before continuing to give chase. Surveillance footage here had been obstructed by the rapidly growing branches and twigs from the trees.

And the base soldiers that had rushed over behind Curly Hair had not been able to discover any bullet traces here, nor had they been able to determine precisely where the assassin had been.

Moving further forward, this was the area where Curly Hair had been restrained by the soldiers from the flying transport.

The sounds in the recording and the traces on the ground all showed that Curly Hair had been very irritable. Curly Hair had been barking away, starting from when he was restrained continuing even after he was brought back to base. Huo Yi and the others felt that Curly Hair had been like this because he had experienced a shock, but looking at it now...

Curly Hair had probably been scolding them.

After all, he had been so close to apprehending the assassin. It was unfortunate that he had been restrained by the base's personnel. He couldn't be blamed for being irritable.

All the way from the kennel to this spot, the men that Huo Yi had dispatched had followed Fang Zhao, but shortly after, they lost Fang Zhao. The lieutenant colonel only knew this much.

In the base, when Huo Yi listened to the lieutenant colonel's report, he wore an amazed look.

"At first, the path he took was the same path that Curly Hair took back then." Although Huo Yi had already made mental preparations, when he heard this, he could not help but feel that it was miraculous. "Those ears of Fang Zhao's are really even more impressive than a dog's!"

"That is why he is called Divine Ears," lamented an aide standing beside Huo Yi.

"Indeed, a dog is like his master. Curly Hair was able to find so many sealed prohibited items, and Fang Zhao can hear sounds that other people are unable to hear. Curly Hair's nose and Fang Zhao's ears, I wish I could keep both of them here." Huo Yi did not hide his own opinions. If it was anybody else, they would surely also feel the same.

"Actually, Commander, if you really wish to keep the dog, you can try. My grandfather once said that something that can be loaned out isn't really important, and a really important object would never be loaned out. Since Fang Zhao previously lent us the dog, as long as we are able to show enough sincerity and offer sufficient trading terms, Fang Zhao will surely lend us the dog once again. Commander, if you are able to give him more benefits and sacrifice more, perhaps Fang Zhao might even sell the dog to us!" the aide said.

Huo Yi sighed deeply and shook his head in silence.

If it was anybody else, Huo Yi might still have considered discussing it, but Fang Zhao was just too difficult to deal with. Fang Zhao did not lack money, and he wasn't obsessed with power or privilege. If Fang Zhao had really wished to develop further in the military, he would have stayed on planet Baiji. Baiji military district even treated Fang Zhao as a mascot and a treasure. Planet Baiji had much better development prospects than planet Wai.

At this moment, his internal comms device starting ringing.

Huo Yi was flabbergasted. "Southeast garrison region?"

"Commander, Fang Zhao has requested Southeast Garrison Region Three's original sound recordings and surveillance footage," stated the other side.

Huo Yi was astonished. He has already arrived there? How is his speed so fast? "Give it to him!" Huo Yi exclaimed. As long as Fang Zhao was able to find the target, any assistance to Fang Zhao was fine. Today, the base's southeast direction did not have any training activities, so there was no need to maintain secrecy.

Five minutes later.

"Commander! According to the leads that Fang Zhao has provided, we have found a suspicious target. We aren't able to see his face and he is wearing our base's uniform. We have already confirmed that it is stolen. The person probably isn't from our base... Twenty minutes ago, the party entered the primeval forest in front of the southeast garrison region. According to ecology and environmental protection regulations, besides the sentry towers, we don't have any monitoring equipment inside. It will be quite difficult to track the target."

The person on the other end in charge of giving the report had actually wanted to say that they were poor and had limited funding. In these non-open places, there were only a few old facilities, and the machines there might even be defective, as nobody had maintained them in a long while. However, to save face, he could not speak too directly, just enough that the commander could understand.

Huo Yi could naturally understand what the other party was trying to say. "Where is Fang Zhao?" Huo Yi asked.

"Fang Zhao... Fang Zhao said he would be heading into the primeval forest to search for the target."

Huo Yi became even more alert. "Let him in! You people follow him! Follow him tightly!"

"Yes!"

Two minutes later.

"Commander, reporting... We lost him."

Huo Yi sat in front of his desk, his face as black as when he received rejections to his requests for additional expenditures.

The lieutenant colonel beside him heaved a sigh of relief. Luckily, I wasn't the only one that lost him. Everyone is useless too. Brothers in the southeast garrison region, you guys are comrades who have gone through the same trials and tribulations as I!

The reporting personnel from Southeast garrison region asked cautiously, "Commander, what do we do now?"

Huo Yi really wanted to wave his hand and shout "Find him," but thinking rationally, now was not a good time to send people in. The primeval forest was an original forest on planet Wai. Although there weren't fierce and savage creatures like on planet Baiji, there were still dangers. Now, it was already getting dark, and the amount of people that could be transferred over to the southeast garrison region was limited. They would also be practically useless if they went. It would still be all right if they had been following Fang Zhao. At least they would still have had someone to follow, but if they were unable to keep track of him, then forget about it.

"Remain on standby where you are!" Huo Yi said through clenched teeth.

—————

In the primeval forest southeast of the base, a black figure was moving.

Bang!

A snake darted out from the underbrush, but its head exploded. Snake blood splattered on the underbrush and tree trunks.

The sound of gunfire suppressed by a silencer wasn't very loud, and it was very quickly

muffled by the sounds of the snake's head exploding and blood splattering.

In the gradually darkening forest, these sounds were clear yet not very abrupt...

Nightfall descended and the figure finally stopped.

This was a person that did not seem to have any distinguishing characteristics. He might even be wearing a mask. With his appearance now, even if he was captured by surveillance cameras, it would be difficult for someone to remember his face with just a glance.

After this person stopped, he leaned against the trunk of a tree and closed his eyelids slightly. He maintained a specific breathing rhythm and was so quiet that he appeared to blend into the surrounding forest. Not moving for some time, it appeared like he was already sound asleep.

"Tsk!"

The person who seemed like he was sleeping soundly suddenly sneered. Raising his eyebrows, he looked in the direction of Wai base, his expression full of disdain.

Weren't the troops garrisoned on planet Wai supposed to be more impressive than the troops on military districts back on earth? Looking at things now, it seems like this wasn't the case!

It made sense. Before planet Wai had made a name for itself, it had just been a small and barren place. Species here were ordinary and did not pose much threat. Over time, the basic quality of the military here might even be weaker than the military districts of the various continents.

Relaxing his frayed nerves, he fished out a palm-sized communications device. Then he attached an additional device. This was to camouflage the signal to prevent the military team at the sentry tower in the primeval forest from intercepting his communications signal.

He was contacting someone who was waiting in the film entertainment complex.

"Have you succeeded?" The other party's voice was rough. It wasn't his real voice.

"Failed. That tiny thing is rather difficult to deal with. The price has to be increased.

Three times the previous price and I will not let it board the transport. Otherwise, you better find someone else." While he conversed softly, he remained vigilant of his surroundings.

The person on the other end reacted as if he had heard something unfathomable. His rough voice became shrill and ear piercing. "What did you say? Failed? Aren't you the 'Dog Butcher' known as the number one at slaughtering dogs? With such a high reward, you actually failed? Now we are really doubting your professional ability."

A hint of fury flashed across the face of the person with the nickname of "Dog Butcher," but he calmed down quickly. "Since you don't believe me, go find someone else. But I advise you all to hurry. I reckon that dog will be taken away by Fang Zhao shortly and won't remain on Wai base."

The other party's voice sounded very calm. "If the dog is taken away, then we don't have any need to fork out a large sum to kill it. Without the dog around, a lot of our goods will not be detected."

"Heh!" Dog Butcher laughed sarcastically. "In no rush, really? Your boss's business is really big. All along, he liked to strangle potential threats in their cradle. Now that he has got his sights on earning a fortune on planet Wai, shouldn't he be willing to spend a little more to clear up the path ahead of him?"

The other party revealed a hint of alarm. "You know who my boss is?"

Dog Butcher grinned as his eyes twinkled with greed. "More or less guessed it. Seven years ago, when I was employed to kill Tobey, the 'divine dog' of spaceports, I had already guessed it. But rest assured, I don't just serve only one client, and I have never ever revealed who my employers are."

"Then you better pray that the military doesn't catch you first. Nowadays, interrogation techniques are becoming even more innovative."

"Ha, catch me? Are you talking about that bunch of trash? That bunch of trash isn't even able to catch my tail!"

Dog Butcher's self-confident tone somewhat pacified the other side. Thinking about it, Dog Butcher was reliable indeed. People in Muzhou really hated Dog Butcher, yet even after so many years, he had never been caught.

Dog Butcher also had the ability to back up his confidence. Even when he failed an assignment, he rarely left traces for people to find. The only time he had ever suffered defeat was probably 30 years ago, when he had been dealing with what Muzhou people called a king of dogs that only appeared once every 100 years. Although he had ultimately shot dead that king of dogs, he was also bitten by it. Even now, the scar on his arm had not faded, and the police had a record of his DNA. Dog Butcher had not gone for an operation to remove the scar and instead kept it as a reminder.

"Match the price and I will act when I have the opportunity. If you choose not to, I will leave immediately. Staying here isn't safe. There are people from the base looking for me right now. That little thing runs really fast and is rather vigilant. This sort of unexpected speed and vigilance might not even lose out to Muzhou's dog kings. We can't determine the price according to previous calculations."

When he mentioned this, Dog Butcher felt a little depressed deep down. He had fired three shots. The first two shots had missed because his estimations had been wrong, but for the third shot, he had already adjusted. He did not understand. According to reason, that shot should have hit, but seeing the dog full of energy and continuing to chase and seeing that dog's speed, it seemed like that shot had missed too.

Had his marksmanship deteriorated?

Dog Butcher was very displeased.

He had clearly already spent sufficient time adapting to the geography and climate here. Today, his operation might have failed because he hadn't completely adapted to the conditions on planet Wai. On top of that, that dog's reactions had far exceeded his expectations, causing him to have errors in judgment.

Next time... Next time, when he fired, he would surely not miss.

As he set his resolve, Dog Butcher's tone became cold. "What's your decision? I'm only waiting 10 seconds!" He didn't wait for the other party to reply and started counting down. "10! 9! 8..."

When the countdown reached two seconds, the other party finally agreed. "You said it. Don't let the dog board a transport and leave!" the other side exhorted.

"Don't worry. You people have to believe in my professional ability. When it comes to slaughtering dogs, I'm a professional. I have even slain Muzhou's king of dogs." Dog

Butcher laughed. In the short term, Wai base would not be able to sort out all their chinks. He would still be able to find opportunities to act in this period.

Having negotiated the deal, Dog Butcher told the other side to wait for good news.

After ending the call, Dog Butcher's lips had barely curled upward, thinking about the large potential payout he would get, when he suddenly froze as he felt a shiver throughout his body.

Having spent many years on this path dithering between life and death while tangling with the police and military countless times, Dog Butcher had trained a sharp sixth sense. In that instant, he felt as if he'd been locked onto by an ice-cold gun barrel laced full of killing intent. He suddenly felt an immense pressure, making Dog Butcher's entire body shudder.

Who is there!

Since when has there something here?

Man?

Or beast?

...

Wai base.

Huo Yi had just shut his eyes and prepared to sleep when he received an urgent call from the southeast garrison region.

"Commander. Report! Fang Zhao dragged someone out from the primeval forest!"

Huo Yi's eyebrows arched upward.

The word dragged was subtle.

"Alive or dead?" Huo Yi asked. If the person was dead, Fang Zhao might be in a little trouble.

"The target is still breathing."

"That is good. Don't let him die. You, personally escort him back here! Now!"

"Yes!"

After ending the call, Huo Yi received a photograph and image of the assassin.

Ah, one look and it could be seen that someone had used the method of dragging him like a sack of rice across the forest floor full of rocks and dirt. His body was full of wounds and bruises and his face was bloodied.

When Huo Yi got to see the Southeast garrison troops and Fang Zhao who entered the base together, Huo Yi jokingly said to Fang Zhao, "Impressive! That 'Divine Ears' nickname is not in vain! However, I never expected that you would bring him in alive."

Fang Zhao raised an eyebrow. "I'm a law-abiding citizen."

Huo Yi: "...Hehe."

Fang Zhao wasn't bothered whether Huo Yi believed him or not. He continued, "This person is called Dog Butcher, and he is an experienced hand. I reckon he has business dealings with some people in the film entertainment complex. I suggest handing him over to Muzhou's side. This person was involved in the murder of Muzhou meritorious service dogs, at least two of them."

Handing him over to Muzhou would let Fang Zhao feel more reassured than leaving him to Wai base.

Huo Yi stroked his stubbled chin, and his eyes were full of admiration. Nodding, he said, "All right, I also had this in mind."

Following normal procedure, this Dog Butcher person might not necessarily die. Perhaps he might be rescued during the process of transporting him from place to place. There was a higher possibility he would be silenced.

But if he was handed over to Muzhou authorities, his fate would probably be, firstly, a life where it would be better to die. Then, a death where he wouldn't even leave behind a corpse to be buried.

From Huo Yi's point of view, he could use this opportunity to do a favor to Muzhou and perhaps get another batch of dogs. This would be a rather worthwhile transaction.

Meanwhile, Dog Butcher's outcome would also satisfy Fang Zhao. Beneficial three ways!

Having gotten Huo Yi's promise, Fang Zhao did not stick around. He left Huo Yi's office, returning to check on Curly Hair's condition.

Now, only Huo Yi and his aide were left in his office.

"Commander, Fang Zhao looks just like an artistic person, but I can't help feel that he is rather dangerous. I have a conjecture, if... I'm just saying if the person caught was not Dog Butcher, would Fang Zhao have dragged him in alive?" The aide had some doubts in his voice when he said this. In any case, the aide did not believe Fang Zhao's claim that he was "a law-abiding citizen."

Huo Yi replied meaningfully, "Sometimes, we shouldn't chase too much for answers or think too much. If you overthink, it is easy to become aged. Take a look at this old face of mine. It is because I think too much!"

How could Huo Yi not know what his aide was talking about?

Thinking about it, since Fang Zhao had this sort of frightening tracking ability and the ability to capture Dog Butcher, a wanted criminal that Muzhou had been after for so many years, why hadn't Fang Zhao pursued him right from the start? Maybe he'd been worried about the dog, but from a different angle, had Fang Zhao had... a motive in giving the assassin some time to leave the base? In the area nearby, the best place to avoid inspection from the internal military departments was the primeval forest.

Inside the primeval forest, what happened was not restricted. Even if Fang Zhao had pursued the target and even killed Dog Butcher inside the primeval forest, as long as he denied it, who could determine what he had done?

Making someone disappear in the primeval forest near Wai base was really too simple.

Having seen Fang Zhao's military service records on planet Baiji and having seen some confidential files, Huo Yi was just like his aide. He didn't believe the b*llshit Fang Zhao had spouted about being "a law-abiding citizen"!

An artistic person?

Cough!

A g*ddamn f*cking artistic person!

What sort of artistic person would fight monsters as if he were chopping up vegetables?

What sort of artistic person would head to a completely unfamiliar primeval forest at night to apprehend a suspect and drag him out like a gunny sack?

Do you think that just by draping on the skin of an artistic person, I will not know how dangerous this little fella is?

However, there were times when it was good to act ignorant. After all, the circumstances weren't bad.

Huo Yi's lips curled into a grin. He indicated for his aide to leave the room and stretched, moving some of his stiff bones and picking up his communications device to contact an old friend at Muzhou's Police Dog Academy.

Perhaps he might not be able to retain Curly Hair, but he could use this as an opportunity to get even more dogs.

Chapter 325

Death Penalty!

When the senior official at the police dog academy in Muzhou saw the call from Huo Yi, his heart leaped. He was worried that something was wrong with one of the dogs they'd sent or that Huo Yi was thick skinned enough to ask him for more dogs.

"Hello, old classmate!" Huo Yi's pitch was rising; he seemed to be in a good mood.

The senior official was already on guard. "What's the matter? Strictly speaking, we weren't classmates."

"Comrades, then? Anyway, let's not belabor the point. I have some news for you."

"Good or bad?"

"Good, I suppose."

"Keep going. In any case, don't think about asking for more dogs. You've maxed out with the last few dogs. So many folks objected to the loan and I still talked them down."

"Look at how petty you sound. Why don't you listen to what I have to say and decide."

"So you're saying you are eyeing one of our dogs again?"

"We arrested Dog Butcher."

The senior official was about to b*tch some more, but when he heard the name "Dog Butcher," he turned serious and his fists tightened. "Is this a joke?"

The name "Dog Butcher" had left an indelible scar on them, especially the few trainers who had witnessed the slaughter of their beloved dogs. It had been years, but they still hadn't healed.

"I've sent you a copy of the DNA match results. If you still don't believe me, you can send someone to verify his identity. If it really is Dog Butcher, I'll leave him at your

disposal after I'm done interrogating him. How about that?" At a measured pace, Huo Yi continued, "As a token of thanks, you can send me 10 more pups from the top class."

"That's impossible! We're running out of Class A pups. We just gave out another round. At most, I can give you two. But let's hold our horses. Did you folks really catch Dog Butcher yourself?"

"Of course!" Huo Yi kept his composure. "You should decide soon. Dog Butcher has close ties to certain industries. After I'm done with my interrogation, I'm going to have to make some major moves that are bound to draw a lot of attention. If someone comes asking for him then, I'm not sure I'll be able to stop them."

"I don't care what you need to do. You must hold Dog Butcher for me!"

In the end, Huo Yi's request for dogs was set aside until Dog Butcher's identity was confirmed. The senior official at the police dog school didn't totally buy Huo Yi's story. He had no idea what condition the first batch of dogs he'd sent to Wai was in. He would wait for the person he'd dispatched to the Wai base to report back. If the base wasn't secure enough, he wouldn't send any more of his elite pups over. Those pups were their babies!

After pondering the matter further, the official made a few calls.

The head trainer at the police dog academy.

A chief of staff at Muzhou military headquarters.

The local branch of the global anti-smuggling bureau.

By the time Huo Yi heard back, Muzhou had put together an inspection team that was ready to set off for the Wai base.

Now that the Wai base and officials in Muzhou had joined hands, it would be hard for others to butt in. When they were ready to intervene, Dog Butcher might already have been executed in Muzhou.

But before the folks from Muzhou arrived, Huo Yi had to take precautions against certain restless individuals on his own turf.

Fang Zhao, with Curly Hair in tow, and Zuo Yu and Yan Biao returned to their

apartment in the film studio complex. They traveled at night again in a jeep borrowed from the Wai base to keep Curly Hair under wraps.

Back on their own turf, Zuo Yu and Yan Biao felt more relaxed. They hadn't been in a position to ask questions on the base, but now that they were back, they fired away.

"Boss, how come you didn't kill Dog Butcher? He almost shot Curly Hair!" Zuo Yu asked.

Yan Biao nodded in agreement. "Wouldn't it have been easier to make him disappear in the forest? If he has powerful connections, he might be kidnapped while being transported. The folks at the base are prone to surrender when they meet their match. We can't count on them to exact revenge."

"Dog Butcher is allegedly involved in the killing of several decorated service dogs in Muzhou. I asked that he be handed over to authorities in Muzhou," Fang Zhao responded.

Zuo Yu understood Fang Zhao's thinking immediately. He chuckled. "That's true. There's no better move than handing him over to the folks in Muzhou. They're dying to get their hands on him."

The folks in Muzhou had a fiery temper. When it came to matters like this, whoever pissed them off—they were bound to make those people's lives miserable. When folks in Muzhou got stubborn, they resembled hunting dogs. They would do whatever it took to get a bite.

"Internet access has been cut," Yan Biao suddenly declared. "It's the entire film studio complex, dozens of new entertainment districts, and the districts under construction."

Zuo Yu glanced outside. "Boss, the base must be launching an operation. Their vehicles have started moving in."

The interrogation of Dog Butcher must have yielded something, and now it was time to act. Huo Yi had quite the temper too. He had been looking for an excuse to crack down for some time. This was the perfect pretext.

The arrival of military vehicles put an instant damper on the lively mood in the entertainment districts. The sight of armed soldiers seemed to augur an imminent tempest.

"What's going on?"

"Has there been a riot?"

"It's the military, from Wai base."

"Why the commotion? Who the f*ck's been killed? This is quite the rollout!"

Armed drones hovered above while armored vehicles rolled in and several platoons stormed into buildings. There were also service dogs wearing bullet-proof uniforms emblazoned with the Wai base logo sniffing around.

In the areas where internet access was cut off, residents got a message from the Wai military base. The gist was that the base was conducting unscheduled searches in the neighborhood. Residents should follow instructions and not panic or attempt to flee; otherwise, they might be treated as a suspect. In the worst-case scenario, they might be mistakenly shot, so people who were drinking had better keep an eye on friends and colleagues who were prone to starting trouble when they were drunk, the message said.

Soon, gunshots, screams, and explosions were heard in one of the new entertainment districts.

This was bound to be a sleepless night for opportunists who had traveled to Wai to make a quick buck.

Huo Yi moved decisively this time. He wanted to let those gold diggers know that on Wai, he was the big boss. No one dares stir trouble on my turf!

"Let's cooperate. There's no need to be nervous. These searches are bound to increase in frequency. We might as well get used to them now," Fang Zhao told Zuo Yu and Yan Biao.

"Got it, Boss."

After Zuo Yu and Yan Biao left, Fang Zhao entered a room whose door was shut. Lo and behold, Curly Hair was already gaming.

Fang Zhao removed a syringe from his medical kit.

"Curly Hair, time for a blood draw."

Curly Hair, who was engrossed in his game, managed a whimper of acknowledgment.

Fang Zhao poked Curly Hair with the syringe.

The needle went bent.

Fang Zhao swapped in a new needle and tugged at the tip of one of Curly Hair's ears, which were partially covered by his gaming helmet. "Blood draw!"

This time, Curly Hair finally shifted his gaze away from the screen to Fang Zhao. He wagged his tail and whined appeasingly.

Fang Zhao let go of Curly Hair's ear. This time, the needle went through.

After drawing the blood, Fang Zhao examined the bent needle and gave Curly Hair a gentle pat. "OK, go back to your game."

Fang Zhao dropped a trickle of the blood he'd drawn from Curly Hair onto a small testing device he removed from the medical kit. The device indicated the metal levels in Curly Hair's blood. It had gone up a bit, but his other readings were normal. The only thing was that Fang Zhao didn't know if the high metal levels were temporary or permanent.

Only time would tell.

Fang Zhao memorized the data, discarded the syringe and needle, and cleared the testing device of its data. Then he took a look at the message on his bracelet.

He couldn't contact people outside of planet Wai, but he could still get in touch with locals within a certain distance.

The searches were nearing their conclusion. The military arrested about 20 people and shut down two nightclubs that had been especially high profile.

Internet access resumed only when the military vehicles had retreated from the film studio complex, but there was no online news coverage of the operation.

Fang Zhao was puzzled.

Wasn't it Huo Yi's intention to make a statement and send a message to folks who were too high profile? It was a totally justified and decisive operation. There was no need to keep it under wraps. How come no one leaked word of the operation?

Fang Zhao browsed some more.

All he could find were some vague statements from a few B-list celebrities about being in minor shock. There was no mention of the military. When they'd been pressed for details, they had explained away their posts as a reaction to a nightmare or some other event.

They didn't dare mention the military.

The entertainment press corps, who typically published the most trivial items about the celebrities at the film studio complex, was also silent.

They also didn't want to mess with the military.

The entertainment journalists were still spooked by the time their colleagues were disappeared in the middle of the night. They all knew that reporting on celebrities was OK, but news about the military was completely off-limits. They didn't have a death wish.

So no one had the guts to report on tonight's operation.

At a hotel room in one of the entertainment districts.

A few entertainment journalists who had scrambled back to their hotel met to confer.

"The searches have come to a conclusion. I've shot some stills and footage. The internet is back up. Should I file?"

"Are you able to file?"

"Forget about it. There is no way the Wai military base will let us file stories that cast a negative light on the military."

"Hells no! If you're adamant about filing, please switch rooms first. Don't drag us down with you. I have no intention of being arrested by the military in the middle of the night."

"Our bosses have sent word that we should steer clear of matters involving the military."

Another group of entertainment journalists was having the same conversation in a different room at the same hotel.

They were part of the gold rush at the Wai film studio complex in light of the "Founding Era" phenomenon. They'd set up an office less than two years ago.

"So, what should we do? Should we file or not? I feel like we got some good material tonight. Among the people arrested by the military were a few B-list actors."

"Fortune favors the bold!"

"Let's file! Let's roll the dice!"

This group of journalists had never landed a major scoop before. Now that they had the unusual luck of stumbling onto a big story, they weren't going to give up that easily. For them to pass on such a rare scoop—no way!

"Let's give it a shot, then. Ideally, we'll be able to file. If we can't, worst-case scenario we're locked up by the military for a few days. It can't be that bad." The journalist who made the prediction didn't sound convinced himself.

"OK, I... f-f-filed."

"What?"

"You were able to file?"

The others in the room hovered over him, glaring at his computer screen.

"Were... were you really able to file?"

"Does that mean your story wasn't censored by the military? Did they miss it?"

There was no way they could bypass the Wai military if Wai was intent on censoring certain stories, given how tech-savvy they were.

"Why don't we try another story?"

The journalists acted quickly. They filed some footage they'd just shot along with a short piece of text.

They were so nervous their fingers were glued together and their teeth clattered.

They hit the "send" button.

Ding! Successful file upload.

"..."

A brief moment of silence.

"Did anyone knock?"

"There's no sign of any takeout delivery people, is there?"

Another two minutes.

As they watched the news items they'd just filed rack up reposts rapidly, the journalists felt overwhelmed and hot blooded, as if they had literally grown in stature.

We're the f*cking bomb!

"Hurry, hurry, hurry. Let's edit the good footage we got. You, write it up! You don't need me to show you how to appeal to a mass audience, right? And you, don't forget to buy likes and ranking placements!"

The other entertainment journalists soon took notice.

"This... actually wasn't censored?"

"Is the military not disappearing folks this time around?"

"F*ck, we've got scoops too!"

"Hurry up and file away!"

Now that they realized they weren't at risk of being arrested, the entertainment journalists grew bold. They went all out and reverted to their usual selves, using the

type of headlines that were bound to stir controversy and writing their stories in a way that were prone to provoke discussion. They had a field day taking events out of context. For now, they avoided sheer fabrication, but whether the masses would extrapolate from the pictures and footage they filed—that was beyond their control.

The online discussion evolved in exactly the way the entertainment journalists had predicted.

"So horrible. Judging from the footage, you would think that riots broke out on Wai."

"So it turns out Wai is such a mess. The Wai base is out of control!"

"Who gave them the right?"

"Are these underhanded tactics by the Wai military? So corrupt!"

The online controversy persisted for a few days, yet there was no word that the commander of the Wai military base had been fired. The military also refrained from commenting. Eventually, given the deluge of information surfacing on the internet every day, people's attention shifted elsewhere.

Until one day when the global antismuggling bureau put out a statement thanking the Wai base for capturing the killer of multiple decorated service dogs.

The statement included profiles of several of the more representative service dogs that had been killed, listing their main accomplishments and the date and location of their deaths. The suspect in all the murders was the same person—Dog Butcher.

The Muzhou military district put out a statement: "In Muzhou, the murder of decorated service dogs carries the maximum penalty of death."

The Wai base quickly followed suit: "On Wai, the murder of decorated service dogs likewise carries the maximum sentence of death."

The statement also included a link to a video featuring Wai commander Huo Yi.

Huo Yi was in full military dress and spoke in a somber and firm tone, signaling his determination to maintain order on Wai and expel any evil influences. "Wai is a beautiful planet. It's a cultured place where the arts flourish, not a land of outlaws. We here at the Wai military base..."

Most mainstream news outlets reported the statements and provided details on the Wai operation. There had been no riot. The soldiers had raided several illegal establishments. The two nightclubs shut down that night had had contraband on the premises and had been the sites of illegal business dealings.

The careers of the celebrities implicated were in tatters.

When the people of Muzhou heard the name "Dog Butcher," they went nuts.

"Death penalty! It's gotta be the death penalty! Even better if the execution is broadcast live!"

"A live broadcast doesn't seem likely, but a death sentence is a must. It must be carried out in Muzhou!"

"Dog Butcher? A death sentence is going easy on that piece of trash!"

"F*ck, this asshole killed so many decorated service dogs. What's he got against dogs?"

"Non-Muzhou residents may not know much about Dog Butcher. Come, let me give you the full lowdown on this guy's relationship with dogs..."

A new round of discussion broke out online.

But what the public didn't know was that at the center of Dog Butcher's capture was a tiny dog who had just finished serving on Wai base and a composer who had just finished filming "Founding Era."

Now, Fang Zhao was getting ready to head home.

Curly Hair had to stay out of the limelight. Not even the cast and crew of "Founding Era" knew that Fang Zhao had brought his dog to Wai, so the Wai base had Curly Hair secretly shipped from the film studio complex to the Wai spaceport. Fang Zhao instructed Zuo Yu and Yan Biao to guard Curly Hair while he traveled with the rest of the "Founding Era" cast and crew.

At the spaceport, the cast and crew scrambled to board their vessel. The latecomers witnessed an odd scene.

Not far away, a squadron of soldiers stared at Fang Zhao. Among them was a colonel

who was gazing at Fang Zhao sadly, his eyes full of emotion.

The soldiers were throwing fierce stares at the cast and crew, which intimidated them, but when they shifted their gazes to Fang Zhao, their faces softened.

The cast and crew who witnessed this scene shivered and got goose bumps. They quickly boarded the spaceship so they could share the scene with others.

"Fang Zhao must be mad connected! The soldiers from the Wai base stared at us so coldly, and yet when they looked at Fang Zhao, it was if they'd been reunited with their long-lost father! Flat-out discrimination!"

"That can't be." The cast and crew members who boarded earlier were incredulous. "We all know that Fang Zhao knows people from the Wai base, but he's not that connected."

"Yes he is! You gotta believe me! I swear I saw tears in the eyes of the soldiers!"

Not far from the boarding gate.

The colonel was all over Fang Zhao, his tone melancholic. "Fang Zhao, do visit again soon. You are always welcome. Oh, that's right, you have a stake in the film studio complex. You'll definitely be back. Remember to bring Curly Hair. Us folks at the spaceport love him!" The colonel continued, "I know Curly Hair has a temper and likes to tear up sofas and chew on shoes, but he's a good dog! If you ever get sick of him, don't sell him. Just send him to Wai and let us adopt him."

Fang Zhao: "You're overthinking things."

Curly Hair never tore up sofa chairs or chewed on shoes when he was at home.

The colonel was adamant. "I just mean if. Remember, if you don't want him anymore, be sure to remember us first! The Wai military base will only get richer and richer. We can definitely afford him." The colonel was still waving vigorously when Fang Zhao entered the cabin. "Don't forget, Fang Zhao!"

Fellow passengers who were curious onlookers told Fang Zhao when he boarded, "Fang Zhao, it seems like the folks from the Wai military base are really going to miss you."

Fang Zhao: "Yeah, a bit."

No, my dog is who they will miss.

Chapter 326

It's Over!

Fang Zhao belonged to batch of cast and crew that would be leaving slightly later. Mo Lang hoped that Fang Zhao could stay on a little longer to discuss questions regarding composing, so as a result, Fang Zhao would be leaving later.

But when Fang Zhao was leaving planet Wai, there were still some crew members handling postproduction and others who wanted to tour around planet Wai that would still be staying on.

Mo Lang had already completed the series's 10-minute ending theme, and he had decided to call his family over to visit the scenic areas on planet Wai and maybe search for more inspiration for composing. Thus, he did not return with Fang Zhao.

Because he left later, when Fang Zhao returned to Earth, all the various entertainment headlines in each continent had already been occupied by those that returned earlier. Even though season nine of "Founding Era" had yet to finish broadcasting, the Fang Zhao in the series had not received his bento meal yet and Fang Zhao was rarely mentioned in news notifications.

When actors from the cast of "Founding Era" returned and took part in various activities and accepted interviews, they rarely mentioned Fang Zhao. Unless reporters or certain program hosts asked, they would say one or two brief sentences but nothing more. What was the point in talking about Fang Zhao? To compete with themselves to occupy news? These people weren't foolish either.

The attention of the masses was attracted by news that was even more meaningful. As for Fang Zhao who hadn't been mentioned in a long time, he slowly faded from people's sight.

Now, Fang Zhao had returned, and as before, he didn't choose a high-profile appearance.

Having rejected the company's suggestions for hyping up news of his return, Fang Zhao first returned to Qi'an City to sort out some matters.

He returned to his residence in Qi'an City. An intelligent robot had been in charge of cleaning his apartment. Even the feeding of his hybrid sea slug "Spiky Hare" had been done by the robot.

After being away for so long, the apartment was still as clean as before, and the air smelled fresh. The intelligent robot facilitated a lot. Sweeping, mopping, watering plants, applying fertilizer, regulating air quality, etc. Everything was in order.

Pots of lush green bonsai in the apartment had grown especially well. Two pots were currently experiencing their flower season, and the flower petals were tender and beautiful...

Not right!

Fang Zhao swept his gaze across and did not see any of the other bonsais in the apartment flowering.

These bonsai had been left behind by Xue Jing when he'd handed the apartment over to Fang Zhao. Fang Zhao remembered that there had been five of these pots. If two of them were flowering, what about the other three?

Fang Zhao wasn't too familiar with these floras that were cultivated in the New Era, but he could compare their leaves. After searching meticulously, three pots with the exact same leaves were found in his study.

But none of these three pots were flowering. Although they weren't dead, these three bonsai appeared much shorter than the other two in the living room.

Having arrived back to patrol his territory, Curly Hair ran into the study and saw Fang Zhao staring at a pot of bonsai on his table. Curious, he also got up, twitched his nose, and sniffed it. He paused awhile, then turned his neck to look at the water tank by the side.

"Woof, woof, woof, woof!" After a few barks, he turned to look at Fang Zhao, then returned his attention to the water tank and began to bark even more violently.

Fang Zhao turned to look at the water tank.

With the intelligent robot feeding it at designated times, this hybrid sea slug did not look much different from how Fang Zhao had left it. As before, it was lumped into a

ball and floating lazily in the water tank. Those fine and soft spikes covering it's entire body moved with the ripples in the water. Looking like a soft and squishy ball, it seemed totally harmless.

Seeing Fang Zhao staring at the water tank but not saying anything, Curly Hair's barking became even louder.

"All right, I know it has a problem." Fang Zhao patted Curly Hair and went to his study to view the security footage.

A monitoring system was installed in every room in the apartment. Normally, when Fang Zhao was at home, he would leave it off, but when he wasn't, the system would be turned on.

Fang Zhao had been away for "Founding Era" for too long, and the monitoring system had been turned on. Fang Zhao had been too busy during the filming period, so he hadn't examined the monitoring system carefully and had only glanced through the data the intelligent robot transmitted to him. Knowing that everything in the house was normal—sweeping, mopping, watering plants, adding fertilizer, feeding the "rabbit" at the designated timings, all of these set tasks had been completed on time, and the vital signs of the "rabbit" in the water tank had been maintained in the normal range, so Fang Zhao had not needed to view more details.

Now, Fang Zhao brought out the surveillance footage from inside his study and filtered any activity over at the water tank. In no time, over 40 video clips appeared.

Opening the first video, Fang Zhao right away saw the rabbit in the water tank begin to change its body, sticking itself to the wall of the water tank. After that, it pushed open the lid at the top of the water tank, which wasn't too tightly sealed. One end of the "rabbit" remained sticking to the wall of the water tank, while its other end explored the potted plant that was nearest to the tank.

Each leaf of that plant was about the size of a duck egg. After rapidly eating one leaf, the "rabbit" retraced its path back into the water tank. Its entire body also slowly turned green, until it was the same color as the leaf it had just eaten!

From a white "rabbit," it became a green "rabbit".

Through the study's windows, sunlight shined on the water tank on the desk. The "rabbit" that had once again curled up into a lump swayed its two ears in a larger

oscillation. It seemed even more lively than before, as if it was in a good mood.

Fang Zhao remembered that the breeder of this hybridized species had said before that this sea slug could photosynthesize like a plant.

Furthermore, it was omnivorous.

Back then, on planet Baiji, it ate a chili that Zaro tossed in. Now, having eaten a leaf, it would naturally still be fine. Fang Zhao had received the vital signs of the "rabbit" and they had been in the normal range.

What amazed Fang Zhao was that the sea slug had actually been able to push open the lid of the water tank. Although the lid wasn't locked, pushing it open required some strength. Not only that, the sea slug could lengthen its body and accurately find the plants outside the water tank...

Because it had extraterrestrial genes, Fang Zhao could not compare it to native sea slugs.

Shaking his head, Fang Zhao checked the later videos.

After its first leaf-nibbling operation, the "rabbit" apparently knew that there were no dangers or threats in its surroundings, so its courage increased. After a while, when its body turned back to white from green, it once again explored the outside and nibble on leaves.

After it had nibbled on the desk's potted plant till it was shorter, it set its sights on the other bonsais in the study.

Besides the three pots that had not flowered, there were other bonsais that were nibbled on. Two pots were a little further away and were on the floor, so the sea slug had probably left the water tank for a short period of time.

Watching the sea slug proficiently open and close the lid, Fang Zhao squinted. It seemed like he would have to lock the lid of the water tank in the future.

After shifting out the few potted plants in the study that had been trimmed shorter and exchanging them with other plants that were growing well, Fang Zhao sent a message to the hybrid sea slug's breeder and arranged to leave it with him temporarily.

After getting up to date with work-related matters from Silver Wing's side, Fang Zhao let Yan Biao and Zuo Yu have a break and return to their families. After all, they had been away for so long.

When most matters were handled, Fang Zhao brought Curly Hair and quietly headed to Yanbei City to visit Great-Grandfather Fang and Great-Grandmother Fang.

At Yanbei Retirement Facility.

Great-Grandfather Fang had a visitor today, a junior he had guided before he'd retired.

This junior was doing rather well now. After being transferred out for five or six years, this person had been promoted and now held a position as an assistant bureau chief in a certain region of the continent. This time, he had returned to Yanbei City to visit relatives and had specifically come over to visit his old leader, Great-Grandfather Fang.

Subordinates that had worked under Great-Grandfather Fang all knew that this old man really loved to guide his juniors and younger generations. It was a pity that none of his children and grandchildren had become very capable figures. On the contrary, those subordinates of his had all ascended with great momentum and had ranks that were at least similar to Great-Grandfather Fang's before his retirement.

"Xiao Wei, watching each of you rise up so fast and high, I am also very happy. All of you are very good!" Great-Grandfather Fang was in the retirement facility's garden. He was leaning on a walking stick as he unhurriedly walked on the small stone path step by step.

There was a slight uphill slope in front of them. This assistant bureau chief that was called Xiao Wei hurried forward and supported Great-Grandfather Fang. "If you had not pulled me up all those years back, I would never have climbed to my current height."

Assistant Bureau Chief Wei lamented in his heart. He had been transferred away and had not returned for five to six years. Now that he'd had time to return and saw his old leader who had guided him in the past, he felt a little sad.

Before he was transferred out, the old man might have been of advanced age and had a full head of silver hair, but his body had still been rather healthy, but just five or six years, he was now using a walking stick and walking slowly. His legs didn't seem like they had much strength.

The old leader has really aged!

As the two were chatting, Great-Grandfather Fang's footsteps abruptly stopped.

Beside him, Assistant Bureau Chief Wai followed the old man's line of sight.

Not too far ahead was another retired veteran. At his side was a youngster. This youngster also seemed familiar. Apparently, he was a rising political star in Yanbei City. Two days ago, he had even given an important speech.

At that side, the old man and the youngster were having a light-hearted chat. At a certain point, that old veteran let out a hearty laugh.

Assistant Bureau Chief Wei looked at Great-Grandfather Fang beside him. This old master's eyes clearly carried a tinge of envy.

"How envious," Great-Grandfather Fang muttered.

Assistant Bureau Chief Wei let out a sigh in his heart. The old leader was still unresigned that there weren't any outstanding descendants in the Fang family. He was regretting that he did not have a suitable successor. In the past, there had even been people who joked that Great-Grandfather Fang had guided and mentored so many people but, at the end of the day, all of those that were promoted were not from the Fang family.

The last time Assistant Bureau Chief Wei had visited the old leader, Great-Grandfather Fang's tone had sounded slightly depressed and unresigned, but now, after five or six years had passed, the old leader seemed to have accepted and moved on. He no longer had those unresigned feelings and even had the mood to do some farming with his old wife.

Thinking about all this in his heart, Assistant Bureau Chief Wei consoled the old man. "Your family has a few that aren't too bad. Compared to the majority, they are already doing quite well."

Hearing what was said, Great-Grandfather Fang chuckled. "Stop trying to flatter them. Compared to normal people, of course they are doing rather well, but when compared to others in the same system, they can only be considered to have reached the minimum criteria. The support I have provided them is not any less than what I have given you all. If they are unable to rise, it's because they lack the ability or do not have

the ambition."

There were members of the Fang family in the military and in the government, but they weren't considered outstanding. At the start, Great-Grandfather Fang had helped them a little, but how far they went depended on themselves.

"I cannot support them all the way, One's own path, one's own future still has to be fought for with one's own hands." Great-Grandfather Fang sighed. "Now that I have retired, I am all the more unable to accompany them on their paths. The younger generations will do right on their own. I am already old and don't wish to worry so much. Why not own a plot of land behind the retirement facility and grow crops with my old wife for fun?"

Mentioning the land behind the retirement facility, Great-Grandfather Fang became spirited again. There was a limit to the land that could be drawn out, and it wasn't comparable to the farmlands of Muzhou. The area was entirely for the old veterans of the retirement facility to grow their own crops for fun and while away their time.

Hearing the old leader's tone not sounding gloomy, Assistant Bureau Chief Wei chuckled along. "That's great. When your children and grandchildren visit, you can even pick some of the vegetables to cook for them."

How would he have known that upon hearing this, Great-Grandfather Fang exclaimed, "No way! The land I rent is just a small piece. Everything is grown for ourselves. No way am I letting them have any! None of them will have any!"

As he was speaking, an old and young pair walked by from the front.

That old veteran stared at Great-Grandfather Fang in astonishment. "Hey Old Fang, I just saw your family's Little Zhao. He seems to be heading over to your place and he appears to be carrying a basket full of things. I thought that you had returned home; I didn't know you were still outside walking about."

Great-Grandfather Fang paused for a second. "What? My Little Zhao has returned? The old woman surely knew beforehand and she actually didn't tell me!" Following that he was ecstatic. "My Little Zhao has returned!"

Knowing that Fang Zhao had already arrived, Great-Grandfather Fang could not stay here and so turned around to walk back. He even told the assistant bureau chief, "Xiao Wei, let's continue chatting when we return! If you are busy, go on ahead. I have

received your kind intentions and I'm very thankful you still remember this old geezer. I wish you success in everything you do. May more major undertakings come your way and may you continue to have a meteoric rise in your career! My Little Zhao has come to see me, so I will return home first... Oh, right, do you know my family's Little Zhao? Have you watched 'Founding Era'? The role he plays in that show is Fang Zhao!"

The assistant bureau chief: "... " This turn had been too rapid. He suddenly felt a little stupid.

Watching the old leader head back, there was a flight of steps in front of him. He was about to head forward to lend an arm for support when he saw the old leader lift his legs up and leap. Following that, he broke into a slow jog.

The assistant bureau chief of a certain region: "... "

But Great-Grandfather Fang had not run far before he ran into Fang Zhao.

"Haha, Little Zhao is back! Good, good, good! You look like you have lost weight. Filming is tough... Not tough? How can it not be tough! Don't lie to me. I know all about it, I check the news every day!"

The assistant bureau chief that had been left in his original spot saw the always stern Great-Grandfather Fang chuckling as if there were flowers blooming on his face. His voice had also gone several pitches higher, and he appeared full of energy.

"Little Zhao, you came back at the right time. I've rented a plot of land on the hill behind this place. It's all homegrown. In a bit, I will go and pick some ripe vegetables and cook them for you. If you can't finish them, we can pack them for you to bring back... This walking stick? It's an online fad. Everyone in the retirement facility wants to buy them, so I followed everyone when they made a bulk purchase. It is rather meaningful and can even be used as a weapon. Whoever tries to mess with me can have a taste of my stick!" Great-Grandfather Fang enthused, one arm holding onto Fang Zhao as they returned, the other arm twirling the walking stick around for fun.

"You can stay here for a few days... A break? Good, good, good! Then you should just stay here. I haven't touched the room you slept in last time. Let's watch 'Founding Era' together! Now, season nine is almost done airing, but we haven't watched you die... Pooh! Pooh! Pooh! We haven't watched the part where the character you act as perishes in battle. You are just in time to watch it together with us!"

The surrounding old folks in the retirement facility who heard Great-Grandfather Fang's words: "..."

What? That young fella Fang Zhao is going to stay here for a few days?

It's over!

There won't be any more peaceful days!

Old geezer Fang's head is surely going to swell like no tomorrow!

Great-Grandfather Fang's loud voice gradually faded into the distance.

The assistant bureau chief was still standing in his original spot, staring absent-mindedly.

It is as if I just visited a false leader.

Chapter 327

This Life of Mine

Fang Zhao stayed at the retirement facility and accompanied the two elder Fangs as they watched the series. He shared with them some interesting anecdotes that had happened while filming. He also helped take care of the little cultivation plot that they had rented.

After meals, Fang Zhao would be dragged along by Great-Grandfather Fang to go for a walk. They would walk through the garden. Whenever any of the other old veterans of the retirement facility saw Great-Grandfather Fang approaching from far, they avoided him.

Today, after a meal, the two old Fangs were keeping watch in front of the screen. It was finally the episode where Fang Zhao received his bento box. The two old folks staring at the screen seemed to be in an extremely grave mood.

Fang Zhao also maintained his silence.

In this episode, Fang Zhao perished following the chaotic aftermath of an earthquake that caught everyone off guard.

Actually, at that time, given his status, he could have protected himself and safely left the war zone. But he had chosen not to do so.

At that time, he had known that he didn't have long left, and he had also been tired.

Mutual suspicions and deception, bloodied storms, and the cumulative injuries and pains after every battle—every day, his mental state had been strained to the point that it had been as tight as a steel wire. After arranging things, he had chosen to stay behind and meet the enemy head-on. He'd had some regrets about not ever getting to see the beginning of the Founding Era. He had lost to his injuries and lost to time, but a loss was a loss. After thinking and getting over it, he no longer had many complaints.

He had only been able to bring everyone to this point, but he had believed that his successor would lead everyone to their destination. Before he'd died, he had been in a

peaceful state of mind. In the series, he had also acted this way.

Many people in the cast and crew felt that he'd been worried about the Wu family and had followed the directorial team and scriptwriter's suggestions and acted this way, but that wasn't the case.

The accompaniment music where he perished in battle had been composed by someone else. It was a mournful tune full of choking sorrow. Although it had a heroic meaning, it was still thick with emotions. Just the tune alone was very good; otherwise, it wouldn't have been selected.

However, from the audience's point of view, the sorrow wasn't that intense. It wasn't that the acting was substandard or that the accompaniment piece wasn't good but rather that everyone had already been prepared. It was all laid out in history. Before filming even started, everyone knew the ending.

From the start of "Founding Era" till now, many important characters had already received their bento boxes. Many accompaniment pieces that were offered as scriptures had appeared. The audience had already seen a lot and listened to a lot. At most, they would only feel emotional for the great people that perished in battle and feel these people's regret.

On a certain film-discussion forum.

"Oh dear, even if I'm unwilling to see it, we have reached this episode."

"Old Commander Fang, you have worked hard!"

"It feels like I have lost an old friend that has accompanied me for so long. Even though I knew what the ending would be, I thought it would be all right as long as we recall him fondly, but now, at this time, I still feel very sad."

"Did Old Fang die with regrets? A pity, what a pity! If he had been able to endure for another year, even if he couldn't have been the governor, the number one spot in Yanzhou's cemetery would not have run away."

Watching the ending of this great person in Yanzhou history, many people called into question his cause of death in historical records.

He had already had such a high rank as being commander of the corps. Not mentioning

his individual importance, why hadn't even more people stayed at his side and protected him? Was reality really like what the series portrayed? Had Fang Zhao given the order himself not to let anyone protect him? Had he really made the decision to stay behind and fight to the death?

"Old Fang's ending is really the same as what is recorded in history books, but is the stuff recorded in them really true? Or were there unspeakable things that were deliberately concealed?"

"Does the brother on top mean that Old Fang was actually killed? But because it involves certain secrets, it cannot be revealed in public?"

"A power struggle, aren't all people like this? When hope cannot be seen, anyone would want someone at the front to shield them. When finally people get out of their predicament and see the benefits not too far ahead, their thoughts will no longer be the same."

"I don't think that's the case. Old Fang had already arranged his successor. He knew early on that he would not be able to last till the end, and he did not want many others to trade his life for him. Why not die in battle instead?"

On many film forums discussing topics related to "Founding Era," more and more people were using "Old Fang" for Founding Era's Fang Zhao.

Many people did not believe Fang Zhao's cause of death and did not believe the "ordinary" death he'd had. Thus, they were inclined to make guesses as to whether there had been any hidden conspiracies or assassinations.

Regardless of whether the audiences acknowledged Fang Zhao's cause of death, the "Founding Era" series had been filmed like this, and Fang Zhao himself had willingly acted this way. Although reality hadn't been entirely like what was shown in the show, the two were largely the same. The heroic and profound way he'd died a martyr was a little exaggerated. Compared to others, his death couldn't be considered bitter. At least he still had an entire corpse.

History had drowned out a lot of truths. The truth might be much more complex than everyone thought, or it could be much simpler.

Actually, the truth was just as the historical records said. But it had been simplified to just a few sentences.

Just like other, more important characters that perished, at the end of the episode, a grave number was shown followed by a flashback reel showing images of this character as he journeyed through different times.

However, Fang Zhao's focus wasn't on this. All those before had been acting according to other people's requirements in the script. The three-minute accompaniment piece at the end of this episode was what he really wanted to tell everyone.

Gentle orchestra music carrying a sense of thickset mood, apparently like a gale of wind originating from a high mountain. Flitting across the cold snowlands and desolate wilderness, passing through serene forests, through the quiet, long night, and pushing past the patter of spring rain and penetrating the thorny and rugged undergrowth of life.

The sound of a trumpet was like a fierce breeze streaking across the ears. Within the wind, it seemed like there was someone unhurriedly trying to say something.

Along the gradually forceful bugle cries and layered notes of a zither, that gale of wind seemed to climb hills full of green, break through the murky daybreak, fly past the clouds, and then slowly meet light...

In front of the screen, Fang Zhao had a relieved smile in his eyes.

In "Founding Era," all other music concerning this Fang Zhao had been expressed by other composer's sentiments. What Fang Zhao himself wished to tell everyone was in these last three and a half minutes.

A long, long time ago, when the world was still peaceful, I once thought that when I grew old, with white and grey on my temples, I would be watching flowers bloom in front of my lawn or I would have friends and family by my side making light chat over creative works and watching time pass by.

Unfortunately, what came were hails of bullets, smoke and explosions, and danger and difficulties. What we faced were destruction and ruins, broken limbs, seas of blood, and mountains of corpses.

During that time period, the gods that people believed in never showed mercy. Fate was already fixed, so how could we struggle?

I wasn't born brave.

In this life of mine, I was once bewildered and lost. I once abandoned myself to despair. But finally, in this bloody purgatory, I woke up.

Under the apocalypse, defying the natural order and fighting. Puerile people would ultimately end up as cannon fodder. The world was a battlefield. The battlefield was how us people who existed during the Period of Destruction saw and experienced the world.

Anguished wailing, rallying cries. Exhausted till we became numb, in our eyes, innocence completely faded away. There was no path of retreat, only advancing forward. Attack, counterattack, again and again.

People who existed during the Period of Destruction would always be pushed along by fate.

In our darkness and despair, we found a path. We hoped that the end point we pursued would be bright and warm, hoped that we could endure till the day we could see sunlight break through the clouds and shine down.

Fortunately, the path we walked was the right one.

In this life of mine, I was once ordinary, and I was also once splendid.

I have walked through ruins, grasslands, snow-capped mountains, and forests. My footprints can be found throughout Yanzhou.

I have gone through the cruelest times and experienced the difficulty of fighting against fate. I have gone through the uninhibited ups and downs of life, experienced great joy and sorrow, and arrived at the pinnacle of life.

Ultimately, everything returns to silence.

All the unyielding sorrow, all the extraordinary iron blood has passed. All hardships and difficulty and joy and happiness have been diluted by time. In the end, the complete chaos was dissolved inside history.

All the grand thrills and dangers I have experienced, all these great changes, only I would know about them myself.

However, that is enough.

I never dreamed of striving for merit, and I have never felt unwilling.

The fight has already ended. Souls have already found peace. Soil dyed with blood has already putrefied and sunk into the underground. New life absorbs this nutrition and grows on this land.

I have seen the rising sun, it's expansive rays lighting up the earth!

I have seen countless people in front of graves, swearing oaths and saluting!

I have seen the Founding Era. I have seen sunlight illuminating the new starting point. I have seen the brilliant world outside the battlefields!

Now, I have returned to this place and let go of the heart that is finally tranquil. Together with the old friends I once had, my heart will be content with the setting sun and the afterglow following that, to be within the dust of the graves.

No regrets for this life!

The music wasn't what everyone had imagined. It wasn't bleak sorrow or regretful bemoaning for the martyr not being able to achieve his great goal in his declining years.

The tranquil music notes carried a truly magnificent momentum formed over time and experience!

A legendary sound, calming and extensive!

For this episode, at the end of the end was a segment of a real historical scene.

Inside the newly constructed Cemetery of Martyrs, two rows of people adorned with star epaulets on their shoulders were bearing a coffin.

An already aged Wu Yan solemnly draped three flags over the coffin: the flag of the 5th Corps, the continent flag of the newly established Yanzhou, and the new alliance flag.

"Fang Zhao (???–Period of Destruction year 99), first commanding officer of the 5th Corps..."

The words on the grave gradually grew fainter.

In the main hall at the cemetery's public worship area, a tall and looming ash-colored sculptured stood under the setting sun, staring fixedly at a faraway place.

This episode was also the last episode in season nine of the Yanzhou chapter of "Founding Era."

Fang Zhao soundlessly exhaled.

He had written this tune to tell everyone three things: I have seen it all, I don't regret this life, and I'm still here.

What he had let go of was the heart of Fang Zhao that had belonged to the Period of Destruction. The heart that belonged to the Fang Zhao of the New Era was still beating as per usual.

In the musical score, what the latter part expressed was veiled and ambiguous, so much so that when Mo Lang had been examining the scoresheet, even if he had heard a clear sentiment of remembrance, he would only have thought that the music was specifically planned to highlight it.

"Sigh!"

Sitting beside Fang Zhao, Great-Grandfather Fang sighed heavily. He pulled out a piece of tissue paper, wiped his nose, dabbed at his tears, and sighed once more. The old fella did not now what he was feeling now. In the past, he had always felt that this commander that had perished right before the dawn of the Founding Era had been unlucky and pitiful, but knowing his great-grandson had taken on this role, Great-Grandfather Fang had had even more sentiments about this role, this historical character, and had felt that this person was really pitiful. But right now, he had no idea why his past feelings of pity and regret seemed watered down.

Two minutes later.

Great-Grandfather Fang finally returned to his senses and started to browse the internet for comments. This was something he had to do every time he watched the latest episode.

On the official social platform for the Yanzhou chapter of "Founding Era," the comments section below the latest update was extremely lively.

"A legendary founder, a poetic saga of a person!"

"Everyone dies someday, but not everyone can leave behind a legacy. Every person that can start a blaze in the long rivers of time burns their mark in history."

"Originally, I was feeling rather downcast and felt even more gloomy after watching it, but when listening to the blare of the trumpet, I suddenly felt a strength like I just wanted to start running."

"At the scene right at the end at the graves, the accompaniment's snare drums sounded as if they were in sync with the scene's march."

"This accompaniment music is too awesome. Although it was moderate, it was also majestic. I felt incomparable melancholy listening to it, yet I also felt all sorts of weird sentiments."

"It was like watching an old man recalling his entire life's experiences."

"There are also different standards when it comes to epics. The accompaniment piece at the end of this episode will surely be ranked highly even if it is placed in a 'Founding Era' music compilation. It's just too bad that the end credits don't show any information about the composer of this tune."

"I didn't pay attention to the music, I was just feeling deeply rueful. The stormy life of Old Fang came to an end as he left accompanying his comrades. Sigh, the cost of peace is so high!"

"I'm bawling my eyes out. How could he have perished in battle! He even didn't get to see the Founding Era!"

"He was great, and he wouldn't have had any regrets. I'm guessing Old Fang's sentiments were probably like this: What Founding Era, what great generals? Whatever happens, it is just my fate."

"This was a really great person who gave his all to humanity! A hero everyone has to respect!"

"Old Fang might have lost his life, but it was full of glory!"

"I beg to differ. Old Fang's life might be full of glory, but he still died too early!"

"Old Fang really never looked for a wife? And he didn't leave behind any children?"

"Cough, Old Fang looked up, sighed, and said, 'In my life, the more beautiful something is, the more it shouldn't be touched'."

"As the apocalypse descended, Old Fang stared up at the sky and hissed, 'I will not take a wife, have offspring, fight for authority, or become a great general. I will fight whoever there is to fight and will only rest when I die!'"

"Old Fang said, 'Everyone dies in the end. I fight for the common people! Even when my light has dimmed and my gas is running low, even when I have one foot in the coffin, I will offer my blood!'"

"Lying alone in his coffin, Old Fang calmly said, 'Someone asked me what my feelings were, being the only one among the twelve leaders to take my leave. However, what I see is not loneliness or misery but rather the surging momentum of the vast ocean and the glittering sky full of stars!'"

"Old Fang said..."

The hotly discussed comments section was swept with a wave of "Old Fang said."

Fang Zhao, as he saw this bunch of online drama queens: "..."

I never said all this! Stop talking nonsense!

Chapter 328

Where Did You Get This Self-Confidence

Music is something magical. It can resonate without the use of language.

Whether people paid attention to this ending accompaniment tune or not, at the end of this episode, they might have been thinking about many different things, but the original feelings they'd had toward this historical figure Fang Zhao—of sympathy, regret, and the like—and had been reduced by a lot.

With this, inevitably, there would be people continuing to discuss conspiracy theories and feeling that because of the interference of certain parties with power, this Fang Zhao had met with this sort of ending. Although the character's portrayal was profound, it did not have that tragic hero sentiment that everyone had come to expect. There is surely some conspiracy here! All this political whatnot is just shady!

Of course, they were even more people that were only chasing the series. Regardless of how the series was shot, they just lapped it up, and at the same time, it changed their view toward the historical figure Fang Zhao.

Shortly after the airing of "Founding Era" season nine, season 10 would be broadcast. Up till now, all nine seasons that had been broadcast had been very high quality.

Even if there were disputes in the plot, it could not be denied that "Founding Era" was a series with awesome film and soundtrack.

Forgetting about other stuff, just this lineup, this amount of resources, this historical significance... Even if it was remade in the future, could it replace the current one?

Many reviewers and critics had already said that in the coming 50 or even 100 years, there was no way of surpassing it!

Actors that had been unable to get into the cast were regretting immeasurably and could only console themselves by saying that there would be opportunities in future. But rationally, they also knew that even if there were any future historical dramas set during this period, it would be far from ever competing with the impact of "Founding

Era."

With the ending of season nine and the death of this important character Fang Zhao, Fang Zhao once again became a highly searched topic.

When everyone discussed Fang Zhao, they inevitably mentioned the Fang Zhao that portrayed this role.

"It is really pleasant to watch these strong actors perform and portray that thick historical feel. This sort of epic series is really testing their acting skills. I heard that many actors were unable to get out of character for a duration after their scenes were finished. I wonder if Fang Zhao was able to shed his character after portraying all of Old Fang's scenes. Recently, we haven't heard any news of him."

"Enthusiastic fans from Yanbei have revealed that Fang Zhao was spotted at the retirement facility."

"He probably hasn't shed his character."

"It seems that you all have forgotten that this Fang Zhao is only 20-something! Even younger than me! Generally, for these sorts of young actors, the better they act, the harder it is for them to shed their character, so much so that it might possibly leave behind a mental shadow. There are many actors that were impacted by films for the rest of their lives. It's really tough for this little fella!"

"Yeah, Fang Zhao isn't even 30 yet! And he is a complete newcomer! Still, remember that it was Roman's recommendations when they were selecting the actors? Roman's foresight is really good."

"It was Roman's recommendation and ultimately the voting of the Committee of 100. However, Roman was the chief driving force."

It was inevitable that there were people who were sour.

"Fang Zhao was just lucky, that's all."

"I have analyzed it. Fang Zhao was actually just displaying his inherent qualities. If he was changed for anyone who had the same characteristics, that person would have been able to produce the same result."

Fans weren't happy.

"There was something I didn't know whether or not to say, so I went to check the verification information of the two above me, and it turns out they are also actors? That's great, then; I have to say it now: if you can do it, go ahead, but if you can't, stop complaining, pussies!"

"I always used to think that the person portraying Fang Zhao was a veteran actor, but now it seems like even if he acts out his inherent qualities, even though they do have some advantages, looking at Fang Zhao's age and his performance, it really isn't something that just anybody could do. Roman, those world-renowned directors, and the old artists from the Committee of 100 aren't blind either!"

"In the series, I can't find any faults with the speech, actions, or expressions! You have done amazing, my Zhao god!"

As this bunch was chatting, the official account of the "Founding Era" Yanzhou chapter posted a new status on their social platform: "Season nine end-season credits accompaniment piece 'This Life Of Mine.' Composer: Fang Zhao. Arranger: Fang Zhao... [Link]."

During postproduction for season nine, due to the effect of them sharing the same name, Fang Zhao's composer information had not been displayed in the end credits of that episode. However, the official site had very quickly released the composer, arranger, recorder, orchestra, and other information as well as a link with a sample of the piece.

"F*cking awesome! This is self-composed, self-arranged, and self-acted!"

"I nearly would have forgotten if this was not said. He is a graduate of a music academy. What more can I f*cking say? He doesn't want to be a film emperor or an e-sports god because he is a great composer?"

"I just want to ask, are all people with this name really impressive? I have been pondering what to name my newborn kid."

"Cough, I have the exact same name as Old Fang and Zhao god. I just failed my recent month-end tests."

...

Netizens had their own fun, but when it came to people in the music circles, their impression was different.

"The standard of this piece is really high, and it blends well with the scenes being shown, there is a possibility of it achieving an award. Are youngsters nowadays so impressive? Which school did he graduate from?"

"He probably had a teacher to guide him. I can't deny that the standard of this piece is rather high, but this isn't something a youngster like Fang Zhao could have composed!"

"That is what I think too. Fang Zhao definitely has talent in this area, but the possibility of him composing it on his own isn't high. Let's not talk about how difficult it is to master this sort of unhurried and slow piece that carries a thick epic character; without sufficient experience and sufficient realization, without sufficient accumulated wisdom, how could a mere youngster with a few decades of experience compose this!?"

"Perhaps he was too immersed in his character? Wasn't it said that Fang Zhao acted very well? However, if he really composed this tune on his own, then all I can say is that Fang Zhao is just a genius among geniuses."

"Acting and composing are different. It isn't something that can be explained with talent. I am still inclined to believe that he had some help behind the scenes."

"If it is not Xue Jing, then it is Mo Lang. The probability of Mo Lang is even higher. After all, Xue Jing did not go to planet Wai. Furthermore, many people know that Fang Zhao grew close to Mo Lang during their time on planet Wai. Old Master Mo even frequently gave stuff to Fang Zhao. It seems like they have a good relationship."

"Didn't Venerable Mo say he wasn't accepting students? The old master's last disciple is already over 50 now."

Doubts were just doubts, but who dared to actually ask Mo Lang? However, in everyone's hearts, they believed that it was Mo Lang that had given Fang Zhao guidance.

There were many works from youngsters that were said to be self-compositions but that had actually had the assistance of a team or an impressive guiding teacher.

"Fang Zhao only submitted one song in 'Founding Era'?"

"With his status as a composer, only one tune. However, I heard my teacher say that Fang Zhao helped in the arrangement of the penultimate tune for season 10."

"Season 10's penultimate tune? That project that's more than 10 minutes long? The tune that Old Master Mo personally crafted?"

"Yes. According to inside information, under the arrangement section, Old Master Mo personally added Fang Zhao's name."

"All right, say no more. He surely had Old Master Mo's help."

That was the verdict a bunch of composing masters came to.

Regardless of what these academic masters guessed, Great-Grandfather Fang firmly believed that Fang Zhao had composed it all by himself. From what he saw, there was nothing his own little grandson could not do.

Great-Grandfather Fang smiled till his eyes could not be seen. "My family's little Zhao is just a genius!"

The next morning.

Great-Grandfather Fang and Great-Grandmother Fang prepared breakfast early in the morning.

When it was only the two of them, they normally had the retirement facility's dining hall send over some porridge or prepare a simple breakfast for themselves. However, as Fang Zhao had come over, the two old Fangs personally cooked; Fang Zhao could not stop them.

Early in the morning, they made a huge pot of rice and five to six dishes.

The dishes were all vegetables the two old Fangs had grown on their land and some other vegetables and meat that Fang Zhao had gotten his farm in Muzhou to send over.

One bowl, two bowls... Fang Zhao had five huge bowls of rice in succession. The huge pot of rice and dishes on the table were basically finished.

Great-Grandmother Fang smiled kindly, not finding anything wrong with this scene.

On the other hand, Great-Grandfather Fang's heart seemed to ache. He thought to himself, My child Fang Zhao has indeed suffered. Filming and composing, physical and mental effort, how could he not be exhausted! Fang Zhao probably often went hungry and didn't even have proper meals. Mhm, add in an extra scoop of rice for today's lunch.

Actually, Fang Zhao had not intended to eat so much here. Indeed, he was able to eat a lot here, but the two older Fang were advanced in aged and preparing food wasn't an easy task. Preparing such a large table full of dishes was even more difficult. Even if most of the kitchen tools were automated, Fang Zhao didn't want to tire out the two elders. However, he was unable to stop them. The two old Fangs were full of vigor, so Fang Zhao could only stand to the side and help out a little. If he ate less, the two elders might feel that their cooking skill had dropped, which might hurt them.

Although Fang Zhao ate a lot, he ate quickly. When the two elders had finished their meal, Fang Zhao had also finished his fifth bowl. He stopped Great-Grandmother Fang from filling his sixth bowl and helped tidy up the table.

Great-Grandfather Fang patted his sleeves and stood up. "Cough, Little Zhao, let's go for a stroll. We have to digest our food after having breakfast."

Fang Zhao was just about to reply when he was interrupted by his communications device. It was a call from his company.

Great-Grandmother Fang let Fang Zhao head into the room to answer the call, then waved her old husband off. "You go alone, Little Zhao is busy."

"All right." Great-Grandfather Fang sounded reluctant, but he didn't want to interfere with Fang Zhao's official matters.

Great-Grandfather Fang pulled a long face as he walked out, but in no time, his face glowed again as he hastened his steps to catch up with a few other old folks who were out strolling too.

"Hey, Old Lin, did you watch 'Founding Era' yesterday? My Little Zhao acted really well! How many people online are praising my family's little Zhao for being a genius? Seeing them mentioning the old commander and calling him 'Old Fang' makes me feel warm, but it feels a little embarrassing. I think you guys should stop calling me Old Fang in the future. How about we change the way of addressing me?"

The face of the old veteran that had been called became rigid. "Where did you get all this drama from?"

"My family's Little Zhao acted in this series! It's a pity he only acted till season nine... Oh right, the final ending theme for season nine is different from the other episodes. The accompaniment was composed by my family's Little Zhao all by himself! What is this called again, self-composed, self-arranged, and self-acted! It's not that I'm bragging, but not many people in the entire world can do it, and those that can do it cannot compare with the standard of my family's Little Zhao!"

The other few old veterans: "...". How are we going to continue living!?

After his routine bragging, Great-Grandfather Fang returned in high spirits and was even humming a tune. When he stepped inside, he saw his old wife packing up some stuff.

"What's going on?" Great-Grandfather Fang asked.

"Little Zhao says his company has some matters. He has to return to Qi'an City tomorrow. I'm helping him pack up these things."

A bolt from the blue!

Great-Grandfather Fang's fluttering mood came crashing down.

Great-Grandfather Fang immediately asked, "What? Wasn't he going to stay for a period of time? Why is there such a rush to return?"

At this moment, Fang Zhao stepped into the room and explained, "The company has arranged for me to have an interview. It was a sudden decision."

"Live or recorded?" Great-Grandfather Fang asked.

"Live."

"Then that's fine. Which program is it? I want to set a notification first."

After clarifying all this, Great-Grandfather Fang proficiently set up three important reminders, then continued to ask, "Little Zhao, are you going to continue acting after you return this time? I see many reports online that there are lots of people who want

to approach you to act, and these are absolutely lead roles."

"No, I intend to further my studies," Fang Zhao replied.

"Advanced studies? Where will you go to do that?"

"Huangzhou Institute of Art or Huangzhou Music Academy to undertake advanced courses. However, I still have to take an exam."

According to Silver Wing's intentions, now Fang Zhao had works that he could bring out as well as a certain influence. With a little support from the company behind him, as long as his exam results weren't too shabby, entering the advanced courses for these two institutions would be no issue. The only problem was that the examinations for both institutions were on the same day, so there was no way he could attend both at the same time. The company would like Fang Zhao to consider first and quickly make a decision so that the company could make preparations beforehand.

Great-Grandfather Fang did not understand much about this. After reading up, he found out that in terms of music, Huangzhou Institute of Art and Huangzhou Music Academy were the two top-rated institutions in the world and had much higher rankings than the Qi'an Academy of Music that Fang Zhao had graduated from. These two were really the best schools.

Great-Grandfather Fang had confidence in Fang Zhao. "You can surely do it!"

Fang Zhao had yet another call, so Great-Grandfather Fang did not disturb him. Going one round, he realized there was nothing much left to pack up, so he ran to the vegetable field.

There were professionals in charge of the vegetable fields and they would help out with the manual labor. Great-Grandfather Fang got them to pick all that could be eaten and got them to seal and pack the vegetables.

When others saw this, they asked, "Old Man Fang, you already picked quite a lot yesterday, so what are you picking so much today for? You aren't having them anymore?"

"Not having anymore! I'm sending everything with my family's Little Zhao!"

The few old veterans nearby that were taking care of their crops under the guidance

of the agriculture specialists immediately looked up and asked, "Your family's Little Zhao is leaving?" There seemed to be some ecstasy in their expressions that could not be covered up fast enough.

"That's right." Great-Grandfather Fang's attention was on these vegetables, so he didn't notice the other's reactions.

"Then what about the vegetables you picked yesterday?" someone asked.

"They have all been eaten! He's a youngster. Being able to eat is a blessing."

"Doesn't your family's Little Zhao have a farm in Muzhou? He doesn't lack these things. Vegetables produced on Muzhou farms taste much better than the vegetables you grow here!" someone added.

"How is that the same?" In any case, Great-Grandfather Fang felt that the vegetables he had grown himself were the best. "My family's Little Zhao still wants to go to Huangzhou to pursue his studies. Composing is also very tough, so I have to send him more of these."

The others were curious. "Eh? Isn't your family's Little Zhao an actor?"

Great-Grandfather Fang looked somewhat pleased. "That was him moonlighting. Do you know what moonlighting is? His original occupation is composing. After that, he still wants to moonlight and further his studies."

"Further studies? This I know. My son is in the Ministry of Education, so I have heard about this before. Has your family's Little Zhao found a school yet? In recent years, music and art institutions have been very stringent when it comes to this. The higher the ranking, the more difficult it is to get into advanced courses. Especially the top two ranked ones in the world."

Great-Grandfather Fang had a solemn expression on his face. "He hasn't decided yet and is still considering his specialization. Let me say, Huangzhou Music Academy is okay. Huangzhou Institute of Art is all right too."

The others: "... Where did you get this self-confidence to say this?"

Chapter 329

God-Level Advanced Course

Great-Grandfather Fang placed the sealed vegetables into the preservation warehouse and wrote down the address in Qi'an City. They would be sent over tomorrow.

Knowing that Fang Zhao would be heading to Huangzhou to further his studies, Great-Grandfather Fang was extremely reluctant. He had waited so long for Fang Zhao to finish filming, but now Fang Zhao would be going to Huangzhou to study. Great-Grandfather Fang had heard that a normal course normally took about one year and that some were even longer.

He did not know when he would next get to see Fang Zhao. Even though modern communications were very convenient, it still could not be compared to the real person standing right there. Great-Grandfather Fang's recently fluttery mood once again became downcast.

After dinner, Great-Grandfather Fang had Fang Zhao accompany him on a stroll.

Great-Grandmother Fang brought Curly Hair out for a walk and did some aerobic exercises with a few of the other old ladies.

On the second day, Fang Zhao, together with Curly Hair, left Yanbei City's retirement facility quietly and returned to Qi'an City.

The "rabbit" was quietly nested inside the apartment's water tank. The water tank's lid still appeared as before, and the surrounding pots of plants did not appear to have any traces that they had been nibbled. Fang Zhao brought up the surveillance footage for a look and saw that this "rabbit" had not lifted the lid.

Fang Zhao had received a reply from the time he had left a message with this hybrid sea slug's breeder, Denzel. Denzel's replies were in the form of short videos. It seemed like Denzel was also very busy on his end, given his hurried and short replies.

"That 'rabbit' is really good to rear. You have also seen it for yourself. Even if you don't give it anything to eat, it can still photosynthesize like a plant. You don't have to worry

about it starving to death. Your five million will not turn out to be a bad investment," Denzel had explained, as if he was afraid Fang Zhao was regretting the purchase. "Perhaps it doesn't like the feed. If it is nibbling on leaves, let it be. I have checked and those potted plants of yours aren't too expensive. By eating those leaves and basking in the sun to photosynthesize, it can sustain itself for quite a while. This is even more cost-effective than giving it feed...

"You can also try occasionally changing things up and feeding it some fresh food. Meat and vegetables are fine. It is different from other sea slugs. If it likes leaves, you can throw more in. Don't put in too much. If the leaves are fresh, it might not like them. Oh, right, it also loves to eat jellyfish. The more poisonous, the more it likes them. However, for the sake of your own life and well-being, my personal recommendation is that you don't feed it those, especially those really poisonous ones like sea wasps and Portuguese man o' wars. Prepare some comprehensive antidotes at home so even if you do get stung, they can at least be a buffer to ensure that you survive until you can get treatment at a hospital...

"As for what you said about its IQ, its learning ability is much higher native sea slugs'. However you don't have to worry. Compared to people, it is still rather stupid. It has already been identified as a nonthreatening invasive species. The probability of it becoming an invasive species is extremely low. It exists apart from native species, so it won't reproduce. Even if the relevant authorities come and investigate, you don't have to worry. All credentials are in order...

"It's a pet, after all. It's fine as long as it looks good. If you don't think it looks good, then you can just treat it as an emergency light. If you really don't wish to raise it, you can sell it. Eighty million!" When he mentioned this, Denzel felt a little sour. When he'd sold it to Fang Zhao for five million, he had felt that he'd gotten a good deal at Fang Zhao's expense. When he had turned around, though, he'd realized the authoritative pet magazine had given it a valuation of 80 million!

Fortunately, Denzel was also earning quite a lot cultivating krill. Otherwise, he would feel like puking blood every time this was mentioned.

After watching Denzel's replies, Fang Zhao looked at the seemingly very content "rabbit" in the water tank. Then he trimmed some leaves off a potted plant and tossed them in.

Occasionally giving it some stuff to change up its diet was fine, just not jellyfish and

the like. Those were too dangerous.

As for antidotes, Fang Zhao decided to install a few more. He didn't need to worry about himself, but should anyone visit him and have itchy hands, at least the antidotes might be able to save a life.

As he watched the "rabbit" within the water tank start to nibble on the leaves happily, Fang Zhao thought about Denzel's replies. Fang Zhao laughed as he tapped his fingers on the walls of the glass tank. "If you end up going out of control, I won't sell you; I'll just cook you and be done with it."

Shelving the matter with the "rabbit" for now, Fang Zhao went through the contents of the interview that the company had collated and sent him. This sort of interview had high entertainment value. The questions and answers seemed impromptu, but there would be a script and a sequence.

As he looked through these, the Silver Wing gaming department manager, Wayne, called.

"Fang Zhao, today, the two 10th-generation machines that the company bought have arrived. Although they are only the standard versions and cannot be compared to the luxury version you own, the price is still acceptable. The youngsters in the team say that it is much better to use compared to the 9th gen. When will you be coming over to give them a try?"

Fiery Bird had finally mass-produced and released the 10th-generation standard version. Fang Zhao was the worldwide ambassador for the 10th-generation console.

Back when Fang Zhao had endorsed high-end earpieces, many people had started making guesses and wondering what luxury item Fang Zhao would endorse next. Now they had their answer.

Following the endorsement of the magical object of earpieces, the Diting Z Series, Fang Zhao once again had the status of a global ambassador and endorsed the current magical object of gaming consoles, the 10th-generation "Rhapsody."

Although the 10th generation had entered mass production, its price was still not something that normal people could accept, and it was considered a luxury item.

"I will be busy these few days, so I won't be going over," Fang Zhao replied.

"I know, Prairie Fire's interview, huh. Don't take it too seriously. That is something Prairie Fire and our company has planned out. Just memorize the replies the company prepared for you and everything will be fine. I heard that the company originally wanted to promote you full force, but unfortunately, you are planning to further your studies, so the company had to temporarily change their plans. They want you to bring along two acting newcomers to the interview?"

"Yes. I know those two, so it's all right to bring them along."

A business-oriented company would still like to do that which brought about the most benefits. Since Fang Zhao had other plans for himself, they would get Fang Zhao to bring along newcomers. On the company's end, they were worried that this method of making use of Fang Zhao's popularity would give rise to a negative reaction from Fang Zhao, so they had specifically explained it and asked about Fang Zhao's views on the matter.

Fang Zhao also knew those two newcomers. Back when they'd had minor roles in the cast of "Founding Era," they had tagged along with Ji Polun and had meals together. These two newcomers had ability and could take hardship. All they lacked was opportunity, so Fang Zhao was willing to lend them a hand.

Seeing that Fang Zhao did not have any negative reactions, Wayne cleared his throat and said, "I know that your ambitions lie elsewhere. All right, I'm not going to beat around the bush. The reason I called you today is because of those newly signed youngsters."

Silver Wing's own e-sports team had already developed. Team members were offered competitive wages, so naturally, they were able to attract some capable fresh talent. This year, Wayne had signed a few promising ones, but Wayne realized that these youngsters in the team had started to have inflated egos.

They might be a little more well behaved in front of their department manager, but the moment Wayne turned his back, these youngsters loved to put on airs online. Every time they won a match, they itched to let the entire world know. Wayne had told them many times before, but it had fallen on deaf ears and Captain Jinro had even needed to make an appearance.

Wayne was worried that if this sort of attitude continued to swell, even the veterans would inevitably start to get complacent.

Put in simple words, they deserved a spanking.

Without a rude awakening, there was no way they would calm down.

Therefore, Wayne had once again sought out Fang Zhao.

"Teach this bunch of brats a lesson and, at the same time, give Jinro and the other first-string members some training. I know you have said before that you don't wish to meddle too much in e-sports and want to leave the scene to them, which is why I insist that you take part in the newly released missions. I also know that you are preparing to further your studies, but are you able to spare some time to help put these kids in order?"

Fang Zhao considered his schedule over the next few days and replied, "All right."

In the Silver Wing gaming department, the bunch of people who were getting swollen heads from the newly arrived 10th-generation consoles suddenly felt chills throughout their bodies.

After Fang Zhao ended the call with Wayne, he received a call from the person in charge of Silver Wing's talent development and studies.

The person in charge did not dare to be negligent and so contacted him frequently. The matter of Fang Zhao wanting to head to Huangzhou to further his studies was approved by the big boss of the company, and she had personally asked about it. Naturally, the person in charge had to be more proactive.

"Fang Zhao, I have understood a little about the schools over at Huangzhou and have had detailed talks with people at Huangzhou Music Academic and Huangzhou Institute of Art. There are no big problems with this situation, so you don't have to worry."

The person in charge seemed to have some slight intention to take credit. Not only because he thought highly of Fang Zhao's potential but, more importantly, after the person in charge finished handling this matter, he could also get some benefits from the boss. It was about time he received a promotion.

As he thought about a promotion and a pay raise, that person's tone unconsciously rose a little.

"Young man, being willing to study and improve is a good thing. Regardless of what path you take, the company will support you vigorously. For music institutes, I can give you a guarantee, take your pick of any of the top 10 schools in the world!

"Let's not talk about our own Yanzhou's QiMu. Your alma mater has teachers and lecturers that all recognize you. Even if we don't do anything, they will be more than willing to accept you. As for the two right at the top of the rankings, HuangMu and HuangArt, if you want to get into their advanced courses, we can help arrange that. Although there might be some slight resistance, don't worry, problems can be solved. Previously, our company has sent a few of our contracted composers over for advanced studies.

"Resources and strength are still very important. Furthermore, the momentum of Silver Wing's development in Yanzhou has already pushed down our two old rivals. The company is more than willing to spend even more resources to develop the potential of our talents. We must always look long term."

This wasn't just limited to Silver Wing. Many large entertainment companies worldwide worked this way too, but they never revealed it publicly. Entertainment news might frequently show news of a certain film star enrolling in a certain prestigious university, institute, or research facility for advanced studies, but most of the time, it was the influence of the teams and families behind them.

"Huangzhou Music Academy is slightly more specialized, and they groom musical talents in specialization and techniques. However, Huangzhou Institute of Art has more genres of art. Many of the current big shots in the entertainment circles originated from there. These two each have their own advantages, so it depends on which one you think suits you best. Have you made a choice yet?" asked the person in charge.

"I have chosen," Fang Zhao replied.

"Which?"

"Huangzhou Institute of Art, 'Twelve Tones' advanced class."

The other side suddenly went silent.

After a while.

"Erm... This... HuangArt's Twelve Tones is not within our operable range," stammered the person in charge.

Huangzhou Institute of Art's "Twelve Tones" advanced class might not have been known by many people, but it was rather well known in the music circles.

"Twelve Tones" got its name from the " five pitches, seven notes, twelve tones 1 " recorded in ancient books. After the Founding Era, the New Era was divided into twelve continents. Huangzhou Institute of Art's founder had chosen the name "Twelve Tones" and set up an advanced course only for the best of the best.

Generally speaking, for the majority of most schools, the credentials of advanced courses did not have the value and acknowledgment of normal graduate credentials. "Twelve Tones" was an exception. Its credentials were the gold standard anywhere one went.

In this advanced course, from the teachers to the advanced course students, every single one was a somebody.

There would be one round of recruitment for the "Twelve Tones" advanced course every year, and only twelve people were recruited each round. Whether it was composing, singing, dancing, or another specialty, each batch recruited exactly twelve.

Every year, many characters praised as geniuses attempted the enrollment examination. The intense competition and frightening elimination rate made many people shrink back.

"Twelve Tones" had another name: god-level advanced course.

Therefore, when he heard Fang Zhao announce that name, the Silver Wing staffer's forehead started to sweat. How am I able to do anything?!

"It's all right, I can take the examination myself," Fang Zhao replied.

Chapter 330

Doubting One's Own Existence

The person in charge from Silver Wing advised Fang Zhao, helping him analyze past and present circumstances and previous examples. If he just wanted some gilding or a springboard, then he should forget about such an extremely difficult advanced course like Twelve Tones. From what the person in charge saw, Fang Zhao was just like the other celebrities that the company had groomed in the past. They just went out to slightly improve their credentials and did not need to enroll in this difficult advanced course.

Furthermore, Twelve Tones was known for being difficult to get into and out of.

To say the least, even if one was able to pass the exams and enroll, he might not be able to graduate. There were instances of students being unable to graduate and thus asked to leave.

It wasn't that the person in charge did not think Fang Zhao was up to scratch but that Fang Zhao was too young. He was only in his 20s, whereas others who enrolled in this course were no younger than 40. Looking further back into the past, even if there were younger ones, they had been geniuses among geniuses.

Age signified qualifications, experience, and understanding of the fundamentals. Without sufficient accumulated experience, it was very difficult to compete against others.

From a commercial point of view, the person in charge did not wish for Fang Zhao to take the exam. Fang Zhao's popularity was flourishing right now. He appeared both on film and in endorsements and was very well known throughout Yanzhou, but if he took the examination and was unable to get in, people would inevitably seize the opportunity and say that Fang Zhao had overestimated his capabilities and bitten off more than he could chew.

The company's reply wasn't unexpected for Fang Zhao. After he had made his choice, he had not intended to use his company's connections. He also knew that this extraordinary advanced course was extremely difficult, but he had to take the exams

once to know whether he could get in or not. If he could not get in, where was the disparity and how large was it?

Fang Zhao needed to learn more new knowledge. As for the majority of advanced courses, they were actually meant to make the ordinary seem special. The quality of the curriculum was much worse than Twelve Tones. This was the decision Fang Zhao had come to after comparing the curriculum of different advanced courses.

If he could not get in, then he would take on a postgraduate course in HuangArt or HuangMu.

The person in charge from Silver Wing saw that he had no way of getting Fang Zhao to change his mind. After the call, he immediately reported to his superiors about the direction Fang Zhao would be taking for further studies. Now, it would be best to keep it suppressed and not publicize this news. When the time came and Fang Zhao could not get in, at least he wouldn't lose face.

After ending the call with the Silver Wing staffer, Fang Zhao memorized all the interview questions, took a look at his schedule, and contacted Wayne, setting a time to give the company's e-sports team a training session.

After lunch, in the Silver Wing e-sports team's internal group chat, team captain Jinro summoned all team members and released a piece of news: "Just received a notice. Manager Wayne got Zhao god to give us a training session tomorrow morning at 9 a.m. Coordinates for the training venue will be given later. All team members are to gather at the company on time tomorrow."

Within the team, the new team members and the old team members had different reactions upon seeing the message.

The newcomer's faces were flushed with excitement. "W-w-w-we can also take part?"

A veteran team member's lips curled upwards. "Didn't you hear clearly? Captain said 'All team members'! You guys can't run away now."

The ignorant newcomers were thinking, Super excited! Can't wait!

The old team members threw pitying glances at the younger members. Following that, they started to ponder how long they would be able to survive tomorrow.

A newcomer asked, "Captain said that we will be going to a training venue? Which map? Are we familiar with it? Which team will we be facing off against this time? Is it a practice match or some other mode? What's the difficulty?"

A certain veteran team member replied, "It isn't a practice match, just internal training. Opponent... just one. Difficulty... S rank."

"S rank? Doesn't that mean that it is extremely difficult?"

The newcomers were astonished and rubbed their palms with glee. They were itching to head online and announce this on their social platform accounts, letting everyone know that they would be getting the chance to go head to head against the legendary big god Fang Zhao!

Unfortunately, this line of thought was stopped by the captain and vice-captain, the reason being that it was internal training and thus could not be publicly announced. If they were really itching to say it, at best they could tell a few close friends or relatives.

Seeing these newcomers that were riled up, the senior members lamented inwardly, Ignorance is bliss.

The next morning.

Fang Zhao used his apartment's gaming helmet and headed online. Normally, the helmet console was for Curly Hair to play with. His 10th-generation console was left at Silver Wing for Jinro and the other professional e-sport athletes to use. There was no need to get it back for this training session.

Over at Silver Wing's gaming department, everyone had arrived early at the company and started making preparations.

Wayne, the gaming department manager, only stepped in unhurriedly with a cup of tea at 8.55 a.m.

"Oh, everyone's here." Greeting the members of the coaching team, Wayne pulled out a recliner chair and sat down. To develop the team even better, he had applied for lots of funding in the last two years and had signed a few reputable coaches to establish a coaching team.

In front of him was a large screen that would display the scene in-game.

The training venue's coordinates had been decided earlier in the morning. Team Captain Jinro had chosen a new map that neither side was familiar with.

Wayne lifted the lid of his teacup and took a sip as his face broke into a smile of fond remembrance. No one knew whether it was the rich and mellow aftertaste of the tea or a flashback to the past.

At the appointed time, the game formally started. Wayne wasn't in a hurry and glanced at the timer before telling those in the coaching team, "Fang Zhao will give them 30 seconds to think of a battle strategy and one extra minute to put their plan into action."

"Isn't this time a little too short for a new map?" one of the coaches said.

"Later on, you will realize that their time online will be even shorter. Don't bother following Fang Zhao; you guys won't be able to catch up. It would be better to watch those members, especially the new ones signed this year, and see where they are lacking."

For the coaches that did not understand Fang Zhao's style, Wayne's words seemed really cryptic.

A minute and a half later.

Du.

A disconnection notification sounded.

A new member had a dazed expression as he raised his hand to touch his forehead and muttered, "It was as if... my head exploded."

"There was no as if," one of the coaches blurted out.

Was this kid so shocked that he'd become stupid?

That new member was still full of disbelief. "That shouldn't be, I hid myself so well."

Du.

Yet another disconnection notification.

A new member at the side stared blankly at nothing in particular, as if he was completely unable to comprehend what just happened.

Three minutes after the preparation time, the members of the coaching time finally understood the meaning of what Wayne had said.

The sounds of disconnection notifications made them panic-stricken. They could see the look of shock in each other's eyes.

"What frightening decision-making," one of the coaches said as he saw Fang Zhao's figure flash across on the screen. Even before he had finished his sentence, yet another disconnection notification had rung out.

The highly skilled talent that the company had signed this year had not even had any time to react before being sent offline.

More experienced senior members were more prudent, but they weren't able to hold out for long either.

Following the sounds of disconnection notifications, the team members that were sent offline had looks of annoyance and defeat. There were also some that just sighed calmly.

"He really doesn't show mercy," Jinro said helplessly. He had been the last to disconnect.

Taking a look at the time, from start to end, with the one and a half minutes of preparation time and the three minutes following that, this match had not even lasted five minutes.

"This..."

The coaching team was also dumbstruck. Suddenly, they felt that their own team members' standards had declined.

Actually, the coaches also understood. It wasn't that the team members' standard had declined but that the opponent had been too strong.

In the match that had just ended, the team members didn't seem to have acted incorrectly, but they'd just been beaten offline in succession. Any carelessness or

opening had been seized by Fang Zhao.

In the past, what they'd understood about Fang Zhao was only what had been through circulated videos, news, and analyses online. Now they truly recognized the disparity. Back then, Fang Zhao had not been called a point-sweeping machine right at the top of the individual leaderboards without reason.

Wayne no longer had a pleased expression on his face. "I already told all of you, when facing Fang Zhao, you cannot take any chances!"

The members on his team had been beaten like crap, and Wayne wasn't too pleased. He had expected this match to last at least 10 minutes, so he had told Fang Zhao not to go easy in the morning. How could he have known that it would turn out this way!?

Thirty members completely wiped out in three minutes! This sort of result was simply appalling!

"Do you need a break?" Jinro asked the other members.

"No need."

"We aren't tired either."

"Let's continue."

The team members got into position quickly.

The first match had not even lasted for five minutes; how could they need a break?

While making preparations for the second match, captain Jinro set himself a target: to last six minutes for the next round!

However, the second match only lasted 4 minutes and 19 seconds, even quicker than the previous round by 10 seconds.

The third match lasted 4 minutes and 11 seconds.

The fourth match...

The coaching team was as silent as the dead.

Wayne's calm and collected face from the morning had turned stiff, and he could not even bring himself to sip his tea. In his heart, he decided that the next time he got Fang Zhao to teach these youngsters a lesson, he would definitely need to get Fang Zhao to go easy!

When the team members stepped out from the gaming studio, it was already afternoon. Every one of them looked extremely haggard.

In the morning, they had played a total of 10 matches, all of them 30 to 1. They had lost 10 matches in succession and had been beaten so badly that they'd doubted their own existence.

The time they'd spent online plus the intervals between each round had added up to only an hour!

The rest of the time in the morning had been spent reflecting!

When the team members received the analysis summary from Fang Zhao, they suffered an even bigger blow. It was like someone thinking that they had done decently for an examination but, when the exam scripts were returned, all that person saw was a paper full of red marks.

"How did Zhao god know that it was me?" one newcomer asked as he held a copy of his own evaluation. After speaking, he felt someone awkward and added, "In such a short time, how was he able to identify each member? Even if there was a notification in-game every time he killed someone, with so many people and so many rounds, how was he able to recognize everyone? And remember them all?"

"That is why he is a 'god' and you are just a nobody!" Wayne had walked over after hearing this and gave a clap. "All right, take your own evaluations and go reflect! Don't get so satisfied with just some achievements! Don't rest on your laurels! Take a look at today's battle situation; you guys still have a long way to go!"

This blow had been too big. The members did not have any appetite for lunch as they kept pondering every scene in the 10 matches and tried to make a frame-by-frame replay in their heads.

"Manager, when will we have our next training session?" someone asked.

"With this sort of horrible standard, you are still dreaming of next time?" Wayne

snorted. "Wait till I feel that you guys have improved. Besides, Fang Zhao is very busy. This morning's session was because I requested it. Otherwise, do you think he would even waste any time with you guys? He still has to prepare for his examinations."

All the team members: "...” Manager, these words are too prickly!

Elsewhere, after Fang Zhao had sent out today's analysis summary, he started to prepare for war, browsing through practice questions and making preliminary preparations for enrolling in the advanced course. There were three preliminary examinations, and the majority were on theoretical knowledge. He had to read more books and do more questions.

Chapter 331

Balance between Work and Rest

In his previous life, Fang Zhao's memory had been very good; in this life, it was even better.

This was Fang Zhao's advantage.

For the same content, he needed to spend less time to memorize it, but with this superiority, he needed to work harder. Otherwise, he would be wasting his advantage.

Behind every successful genius was hard work that normal people were unable to understand.

Fang Zhao had never felt that he would be better than others despite living an extra life. The world was constantly changing, especially when it came to music. Many things from the Old Era were different. There were now even more genres and even more outstanding works.

Although Fang Zhao had been continuously learning such things over the past few years and had more or less grasped this knowledge, regarding the contents of the examination, he still needed quite a bit of guidance.

Fang Zhao consulted a few people who had once enrolled in HuangArt's Twelve Tones advanced course, such as Xue Jing.

Now, Xue Jing's focus was on compiling teaching materials, but he once went through HuangArt's Twelve Tones advanced course. Even though he graduated many years ago, he had still helped come up with questions more than twenty times. Even when he was older and didn't have enough energy to participate, he frequently paid attention to it. In his spare time, he sometimes collated some focus examination questions and posted them online. He didn't count on selling them, he just hoped to give people who wanted to apply for HuangArt's Twelve Tones a choice.

Knowing that Fang Zhao wanted to take the examinations, Xue Jing picked out 10 sets of exam papers from the question stash and even recommended a few books for Fang

Zhao to read.

Following Xue Jing's plan, there were 10 sets of questions, one per day. After 10 days and intensive learning, it would probably be time for the preliminaries. There wasn't much time left for Fang Zhao to prepare.

Xue Jing sighed in private many times. If Fang Zhao had not gone to acting, he could have spent this year undergoing special practice. With Xue Jing's own personal tutelage, Fang Zhao's chances of getting into HuangArt's Twelve Tones might be slightly higher.

But now was fine too. For youngsters, there was no harm in trying. If he failed once, there would still be opportunities in the future. Failing to get in could also suppress any impatient inclinations.

Other than Xue Jing, another person Fang Zhao was familiar with who had undergone the Twelve Tones advanced course was Yanzhou Music Association's vice president and the former headmaster of the Qi'an Academy of Music, Ming Cang.

In recent years, Ming Cang's efforts had all been placed on the medical condition of his son Ming Ye. He had even resigned as headmaster and naturally didn't care too much about other things. Hearing Fang Zhao mention his desire to apply for HuangArt's Twelve Tones, Ming Cang specifically took out a notebook that he'd kept locked up in his cupboard. These were all his collated notes from back when he'd been preparing to take the examination for HuangArt's Twelve Tones. He had once thought about tidying these up and writing a book when he had the time, but unfortunately, he had shelved it time and again.

"You can do it!"

Ming Cang had not regarded Fang Zhao as a normal person since the release of the four movements of Fang Zhao's "100-Year Period of Destruction"—a turning point for his own son's condition.

From what Ming Cang saw, Fang Zhao was in no way inferior to anyone that graduated from HuangArt's Twelve Tones. Even if he could not pass the entrance examinations, that didn't prove that Fang Zhao had no ability.

But this was how the circle worked. One would always need to show one's credentials. If Fang Zhao wanted to go even further in this industry, if he wanted the recognition

of more academic authorities, a degree from QiMu wasn't enough.

Ming Cang sincerely hoped for Fang Zhao's success. How great it will be if Fang Zhao can get HuangArt's Twelve Tone's graduate cert.

Fang Zhao had a strong memory and his own accumulated knowledge and experiences, so he read and went through the notes very quickly. His fundamentals were good and his comprehension was rapid. After reading through them, Fang Zhao started doing the 10 sets of exam questions that Xue Jing had given him.

Indeed, Xue Jing had a specialty for compiling teaching materials. The sets he gave were very focused, and every set of questions was serialized. The key points covered in these 10 sets followed a pattern, and it was a gradual process.

On the second day after Fang Zhao had received the 10 sets of questions from Xue Jing, he once again contacted Xue Jing asking him whether he had even more questions.

Xue Jing was utterly flabbergasted.

"Those 10 sets aren't enough? You do them first. Let me see them when you are done and I will select questions for you based on your condition."

"I did five sets today. I have the interview tomorrow morning but should still be able to do another three sets in the afternoon." What Fang Zhao meant was very simple: the questions weren't enough.

"Oh, all right, send me the five sets you have completed and I'll help you mark them. You can do the remaining ones first; I'll help you pick more from my stash."

After ending the call, Xue Jing blankly sat at his study desk. He didn't suspect that Fang Zhao had gotten someone else to do them or was just talking big. From what he understood about Fang Zhao, he believed that Fang Zhao would not falsify this sort of thing.

When he finished marking the five sets of practice questions that Fang Zhao had sent over, Xue Jing had an idea.

It seemed like new arrangements were needed. The amount of knowledge that Fang Zhao grasped exceeded his expectations by far.

After deciding on this, Xue Jing picked exam questions from his practice-questions file that were focused on HuangArt's Twelve Tone's course, compiled them into a set of practice questions, and sent it to Fang Zhao.

"Do them according to the numbering. After you have completed a set, send it to me, I'll help you mark it."

"Sorry for troubling you."

"Don't try and apologize for this trivial matter. I might lack other things, but I don't lack questions! If you pass the preliminaries, I will also bask in the light."

Since Fang Zhao wanted to take the entrance examinations for HuangArt's Twelve Tones, Xue Jing was delighted and more than happy to help out.

Xue Jing was a little worried that this youngster was too impatient and anxious for results. He even exhorted, "After you have finished the questions, remember to go through the key points that you don't understand and consolidate them. Not just for the later rounds of examinations but also for your professional future as well. Even after saying that, Xue Jing still wasn't reassured and added, "Of course I'm not saying you must spend the entire day doing this. You still have to relax a little in between doing questions. Strike a balance between work and rest. Only with both tension and relaxation can efficiency be maximized. Us in the music industry should take note more. You also know that if you are fixated on a single thing, your lines of thought become stiff and you will not necessarily be able to compose good pieces."

"Thank you, I understand."

Ending the call, Fang Zhao took a look at the time. It was only 9 p.m. He could do one more set of questions.

The next morning, according to the company's arrangements, when Fang Zhao attended the interview, he was accompanied by two newcomer actors that the company was focusing on. Because of the preparations beforehand and the company having good relations and collaborating numerous times with the media outlet "Prairie Fire," the interview went very smoothly.

However, during the process of the interview, according to the company's opinion, Fang Zhao's future arrangements were not divulged. All Fang Zhao said was that his focus would not be on filming.

Every professional e-sports team that was watching this live broadcast felt their hearts tighten.

Was Fang Zhao going to come out of retirement?

In a certain high-end professional e-sports chat group. The members of this chat group were individuals from high-ranking teams from every continent.

Someone asked Jinro, "Captain Jin, I heard you guys had training with Fang Zhao?"

Jinro cursed in his heart, Which idiot in the team leaked this information!

But on the surface, Jinro was still very coolheaded. "That's right, our skills aren't up to scratch, so Zhao good gave us some training. When are you free to set a time and venue for a practice match? There are many newly released maps. Let's pick a map everyone isn't familiar with to be fair."

"Not free, we are waiting for the game to release the new phase of missions. This round's monetary awards are high, but more importantly, there are also game packs. Oh right, will your team's Fang Zhao be taking part in the new phase of missions that are about to be released?"

This was the question that all the e-sports teams from other continents wanted to know. Right now, there wasn't too much difference between everyone and there was an equilibrium. Silver Wing's side could be said to be slightly disadvantaged, but if Fang Zhao participated, he would destroy the original equilibrium.

Jinro replied, "Our Zhao god won't be taking part in this."

Upon hearing this, the others felt slight pity in their hearts, but they were also rejoicing. It was best if Fang Zhao did not return to upset the apple cart. But regardless of what they were thinking in their hearts, the side of their lips inadvertently curled upward.

"That is really regrettable. When I was watching the live broadcast, I was even anticipating his return."

"Yeah, I still thought we would be able to exchange pointers."

"Continuous anticipation, once again disappointment. What a pity."

"Does your team's Zhao god accept challenges?"

"Fang Zhao was doing rather well in the showbiz circles, but I heard some insider news saying that Fang Zhao is going to further his studies in the music field. Not sure whether it is true, but if it is, that is really a pity."

Seeing this bunch of people pretending, Jinro had another idea and replied, "Seeing that you all are so looking forward to it, I'll help you guys ask. He might not be taking part in the new phase of missions, but he can do private sparring. Also, who posted on the public platform saying they wished to fight Zhao god? You guys decide first, I'll ask Zhao god to see when he is free to let you guys have some close-up interaction with him."

Elsewhere, after the interview ended, Fang Zhao left Prairie Fire's office tower.

Although Fang Zhao and the two newcomer actors that had gotten to show themselves during this interview were similar in age, they treated him with the respect of a senior. Furthermore, they were very grateful that Fang Zhao had been willing to bring them along this time.

Those two actors extended a sincere invitation. "Brother Zhao, want to eat together? We know of a newly opened restaurant with great dishes. The food and ambiance are great and there aren't any unwanted disturbances."

"Maybe next time. I still have matters to attend to," Fang Zhao replied.

Although the two newcomers felt a little regretful, when they recalled the company's internal rumor that Fang Zhao would be furthering his studies, they didn't urge him to stay.

Returning home, Fang Zhao took an afternoon nap. After he woke up, he went to the study and did another three sets of questions.

After he was done with the questions and finished tidying up his notes, Fang Zhao saw a message that Jinro had sent him.

Jinro would not go so far as to disturb Fang Zhao over something so trivial and only mentioned it as a joke to Fang Zhao. He hadn't expected that Fang Zhao would really find time to accept the challenge.

Fang Zhao scanned through some questions in his hands and replied, "All right. Who will these people be? Which practice maps?"

Jinro was currently in the company's computer room training the newcomers. His hand trembled when he saw Fang Zhao's reply, and he could no longer be bothered with training these newcomers. He hurriedly replied, "Zhao god, you don't have to take this too seriously. They were just shooting their mouths off and actually did not have such intentions. You should attend to your own matters. I heard you still have to take an examination? Don't let this interfere with your matters."

"It's all right. Old Mr. Xue said that we have to strike a balance between work and rest. With tension there must be relaxation."

Jinro: "... Do "rest" and "relaxation" mean what I think they do?

After this conversation, Jinro was still somewhat distracted, but he was stirred up very quickly and went to contact those who had previously talked about wanting to challenge Fang Zhao.

This time around, there were eight people. Actually, these eight had not really had the intention of fighting Fang Zhao, but since the words had already been said, their face was at stake, so they could not back down. When they thought about it more, Fang Zhao had already been away from the gaming scene for so long and they did not know what his standard was now. If he had maintained his high standards... Having an exchange with an expert was also beneficial.

After contacting all of them, deciding on the practice maps, and confirming the other's free periods, Jinro sent Fang Zhao a message. If a matter wasn't especially important, he would only send a message and would not call and disturb Fang Zhao.

Fang Zhao only replied half an hour after this message had been sent.

"All right, then let's have it now."

Jinro was still worried. "You just finished your questions? Do you want to rest for a bit?"

"No need, I just finished a revised set on the many forms and variations of marches, so my condition is pretty good."

Jinro: "...” I understand now. He got too stimulated doing questions and had no way of venting.

With Fang Zhao's reply of confirmation, Jinro immediately contacted the other eight. "My kid is being naughty, so I won't be forming a team with you guys today. I have given you the time and coordinates; you eight go ahead."

Little Jinfei, who was currently at home doing his homework, looked up silently at his father. Why are you pushing the blame to me again? I'm clearly very obedient.

Chapter 332

Preliminary Exam

When the news of others taking the initiative to challenge Fang Zhao and then Fang Zhao accepting that challenge spread, the previously quiet SilverLight internal chat burst to life.

"Ahahahaha! We can't only be the ones getting oppressed! Well done, Captain!"

"Captain, can we go spectate?!"

"Now that we are severely doubting our own standards, only spectating this match can remove our doubts."

"Let's make it clear first. I'm not delighting in others' misfortune. There's an old saying: 'If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.' I just want to observe how others fight when faced with Zhao god... and how they respond."

"If it was me, I would rather die than actively challenge Zhao god."

Seeing this bunch start to get excited, Jinro also felt that they should take some notes. There was no need to compare themselves with Fang Zhao's individual god-like combat ability, but they could compare with their normal old rivals, see where the disparity was, and observe how long the opponents could survive in Fang Zhao's hands. Perhaps they could even learn a few moves.

But seeing the delighted attitudes the members within the chat had, Jinro felt that as the captain, he still needed to say some things. "Your attitudes aren't right. As professional e-sports athletes, we ought to have a more positive outlook. We should be thinking about how to improve ourselves. Going up against experts is necessary, and we cannot cower just because the opponent is too powerful..." Jinro droned on and on, but he never mentioned that he himself had used an excuse to avoid taking part in this match.

There wasn't a choice. Originally, Jinro had really wanted to form a team with the other

eight to challenge Fang Zhao, but when he'd learned that Fang Zhao had gotten all stimulated from doing questions, Jinro had become terrified.

However, observing would probably be out of the question. The other eight weren't fools either. For the first challenge, the outcome wasn't certain and neither side knew how big disparity between them was. They wouldn't let others spectate.

The eight people who were preparing for the match were also discussing.

"Why do I feel that Jinro has dug a pit for us?"

"Whether it is a pit or not, it is too late to back out now."

The matter had been brought up by themselves, and the declaration of war had already been written. So many people inside the elite group knew about this. Most people who were at a certain level in the gaming circles had also heard about this. If the eight wanted to back out now, how would they have the face to show themselves in the gaming circles in the future?

"I never thought of backing out; I just feel a little restless. Why is Jinro letting the eight of us face off against Fang Zhao alone? Is Fang Zhao really that strong?"

"From watching past videos, Fang Zhao's individual point-sweeping ability was indeed impressive, but I don't know about the rest. A video is, after all, just a video. We have never fought against him in the game before, so we won't know anything till we experience it."

"An eight-man team against one person. It feels like we are bullies. Even if we win, I won't feel good letting others know."

"Let's not think about this first. Since Jinro has arranged it this way and Fang Zhao has also agreed, let's fight first. Don't get careless either. If we eight lose to one, we won't have any face left.

"Right. Fight first, talk later."

The eight of them privately discussed battle strategies and their equipment. Although they were from different continents and different teams, they were professionals, after all. They had taken part in many similar competitions and knew how to coordinate.

"Any other questions?"

"No more."

"Okay, move out!"

And they were oppressed so tyrannically.

...

Inside the global elite e-sports chat group, there were also people paying attention to this.

"Has it started?"

"Will they be challenging in succession or will it be a team battle? If it is a team battle, how will they be split? If it's the eight plus Fang Zhao, doesn't that add up to nine? A 5v5 can't even be held unless somebody new participates, and we don't know about it?"

"Hey, Jinro, you don't have to say anything else, but you can at least divulge the coordinates and practice venue, right?"

Jinro replied, "No can do. I can't even spectate myself. The match just started. As for the rest, you will know in a bit."

These words made many people perk up. The two phrases "just started" and "know in a bit" combined together made the others feel restless. How fast was a bit? 10 minutes?

Jinro looked at the time. If Fang Zhao went with his old method, he would let the other side have a minute and a half of preparation time. He had no idea how long these eight would last after that minute and a half were up; the only thing he was certain of was that it wouldn't take too long.

Not being able to spectate the game, Jinro could only watch the match's duration timer, which was displayed up top.

According to the time, it wasn't even two and a half minutes from the start of the match when the display indicated that the match had ended.

Jinro's eyebrows trembled. He decided that he wouldn't stick out in the global elite chat for the time being.

Inside the chat group, the eight people from the finished match bombarded the chat with messages.

"Come out, Jinro!"

"You cheap person! How treacherous! You chose to run away first!"

"Pisses me off!"

"Our friendship is over! All f*cking over!"

"It was just like returning to our noob days."

"Why did it feel like my signature technique became so weak?"

Those in the group who did not know the truth were all very curious. Why were these eight scolding Jinro when it was Fang Zhao that they had challenged?"

Reading further, they felt that these messages contained quite a lot.

Put together, it probably said that Jinro had tricked the rest and that Fang Zhao was very strong.

As for the challenge result? That went without saying. From their tone, they had surely lost.

Those eight wouldn't reveal too much in the chat group, so those that were closer would have to inquire in private.

Many people threw questions toward Jinro, but Jinro played dead.

These eight weren't stupid either. Now that they had finished the match, they realized that Jinro had previously found an excuse to back out, leaving the eight of them to face the stimulated Fang Zhao. Thus, for the time being, Jinro didn't want to appear and be the target of their hatred.

However, given Jinro's understanding of Fang Zhao's ability, two and a half minutes

might have been Fang Zhao going easy. Otherwise, the match would probably have ended in two minutes.

Of course, Jinro also felt rather pleased inwardly. Previously, when Fang Zhao had announced that he would no longer be participating in formal competitions, many people had doubted Fang Zhao's ability. Some had said that the "Zhao god" term was overexaggerated and it was the adulation of fans and the company's manipulations. This had also resulted in many people growing used to shooting their mouths off and issuing public challenges online.

After this, there would surely still be challengers, but the number of people shooting their mouths off would drop by a substantial margin.

That was fine. At least this bunch would think carefully in the future before saying anything foolish.

Regardless of how this seemingly ordinary match was discussed by everyone, Fang Zhao's god-like status was cemented.

On the other end, when Fang Zhao saw that the other side was done after that match, he didn't say much. He logged off to let Curly Hair use the console and returned to his study to continue doing practice questions.

In the period after that, Fang Zhao rarely ever went out, instead staying cooped up at home doing practice questions or having video conferences with Xue Jing and Ming Cang to understand more about the examinations process and issues he needed to take note of.

Of the entertainment circles, only in the e-sports circles did people frequently mention Fang Zhao. Elsewhere, news of Fang Zhao was rarely seen.

Following the broadcast of "Founding Era" season 10, the discussion topics were continuously changing. There were still people that mentioned Fang Zhao, but Fang Zhao's online popularity was a far cry from what it had been in season nine.

Finally, the day of the first preliminary examination came.

Worldwide, more than 100,000 people applied to take the entrance exams for the top-notch HuangArt's Twelve Tones advanced course. HuangArt had designated exam venues in every continent, generally at reputed universities. As this concert touched

upon artistic aspects, art institutions were avoided as the designated exam venues.

Only after the preliminaries would aspiring students be able to visit Huangzhou to take part in the second round of examinations. However, there was a limit to the number of people that would be able to visit HuangArt. The three preliminary examinations alone would be able to shave off at least 99% of entrants.

Fang Zhao had been allocated to an examination venue at a reputable university in Qi'an City. On the day of the examination, he kept a low profile and headed to the examination venue.

Zuo Yu and Yan Biao, who had returned from their vacations, resumed their duties as drivers.

There was a mandatory security check at the entrance to the examination venue to prevent any cheating devices from passing through and to perform identity checks. Following that, there would be another round of checks by the exam supervisors.

The majority of people who applied to take the examinations were 40 years or older, but a small portion of the entrants were in their twenties and thirties. Fang Zhao looked much younger than the other entrants in the area, so the supervisor at the security entrance noticed him and proceeded to take a look at his face.

Whoa! Fang Zhao!

Take a look at his examination admission proof. Indeed, it is Fang Zhao!

Although there had been very little online news of Fang Zhao recently, he had been too popular in the period before that. With the hype from "Founding Era" and the advertising blitz from Fiery Bird, even people who did not pay attention to the entertainment circles would find Fang Zhao somewhat familiar. Furthermore, there were some supervisors here that were fans of Fang Zhao.

After the security check and identity verification, Fang Zhao followed the directions on his examination admission proof and found his own examination room.

Each examination room was a small room on its own. Every room would only have one student inside. The exam script was an electronic one displayed on a screen. After writing, it would be input into the database.

Windows in the examination rooms were one way. The entrants inside could not look outside, but the exam supervisors outside could observe everything inside.

During the examination, outside Fang Zhao's examination room, four to five exam supervisors gathered outside and observed him.

"Right, no doubt about it. That's Fang Zhao!"

"Who is Fang Zhao? He sounds kinda familiar."

"The one who played the role of Fang Zhao in 'Founding Era'."

"Oh, it's him. I didn't expect him to be so young! He actually wants to take the entrance exams for HuangArt Twelve Tones? This is a globally renowned top-notch advanced course that cannot be entered by just throwing cash around! Isn't it a little early for Fang Zhao to take the examinations for this course?"

"It doesn't matter if he fails to make it. He is still young and will have many more opportunities in the future. Right now, he can just treat it as a learning experience and familiarize himself with the process."

"Makes sense."

Due to regulations, exam supervisors were not able to loiter outside a certain examination room for too long, but every time they passed Fang Zhao's room, the exam supervisors stopped for a slightly longer time. Sometimes there would even be a few of them gathered around watching.

Exam supervisors could not take photographs during the examination, and anything that was sent out needed to go through an audit. However this wasn't an unspeakable secret, so there was no need to be secretive.

Thus, the exam supervisors at these examination rooms shared the news with their colleagues, and soon, more teachers in the school knew that Fang Zhao was taking an examination here.

Following that, the news spread even more.

This resulted in Yan Biao informing Fang Zhao after he was done with the examinations that there were entertainment reporters lying in wait outside the

school.

Zuo Yu looked up a more covert road and had Fang Zhao leave through it.

Entertainment reporters weren't able to snap any photographs of Fang Zhao, but they were able to learn from a few of the exam teachers that Fang Zhao had indeed applied to take the entrance examinations for HuangArt's Twelve Tones and had just gone through a preliminary examination here.

HuangArt's Twelve Tones entrance examinations would not cause much of a ripple in the huge entertainment examinations, because most of the people that passed the examinations and enrolled were more academically inclined artists with different styles and than the entertainment circles. Nobody really understood it well and they never really paid attention to it. Many people had never even heard of the name HuangArt Twelve Tones before.

However, Fang Zhao's matter didn't just cause a ripple but a huge wave. Furthermore, there were others blowing up the matter. Silver Wing was unable to suppress it and could only direct public opinion and ensure it didn't blow up into a storm.

Chapter 333

Good-Luck Charm

News that Fang Zhao was taking HuangArt's Twelve Tones exam spread online quickly.

The name "HuangArt's Twelve Tones" was a novelty to many folks hearing it for the first time.

"What the heck is HuangArt's Twelve Tones? Sounds like our school, Qi'an No. 12 Secondary School."

"Hahaha! There's a No. 12 Primary School by my house."

Every city had primary and secondary schools that had numbers in their names. Names like XX City No. XX Primary School or Secondary School were too common, so the name "HuangArt's Twelve Tones" didn't stand out initially. But what did "Tones" refer to? Why 12 tones?

After a quick internet search, folks had the utmost respect for Fang Zhao.

"On my knees! Too high class. All I can do is admire from a distance."

"Folks who can simply graduate from this course have major bragging rights, huh?"

"My adviser's adviser graduated from that program. A real badass! Word has it that all the graduates become industry giants!"

"Outsiders might not know much about this program. HuangArt's Twelve Tones is somewhat independent from the school itself. The instructors for the program are far, far superior to the other teachers at HuangArt and their colleagues at HuangMu!"

"Right! Most of the Twelve Tones instructors have won Galaxy World Medals. Folks who don't care for academic types can look up the actors and singers who have won Galaxy medals."

The Galaxy World Medal was the highest honor in the arts world. The actors or singers

who won the prize were true superstars with global renown, not local celebrities with self-proclaimed stature.

"Oi, our teacher sat for the admission exam for 10 straight years to no avail. Eventually, he just applied to a regular graduate school. He said that it's too hard to aim for the stars. Only the cream of the crop can complete the program."

"You need to prepare for at least two years before sitting for the admission exam. The preparation time is too long and the exam is too difficult. Only about a dozen students are admitted. Only a handful of students take the exam, maybe some 100,000 each year. How long has Fang Zhao been preparing? He's been filming for the past year or so."

"Some 100,000 people sit for the exam? Why the 'only'? That's way more than a handful of folks!"

"Friend from upstairs, isn't the point that Fang Zhao hasn't had enough prep time?"

"I'm aware that Fang Zhao is very talented, but to try for HuangArt's Twelve Tones program now is making an outrageous claim. Fans have to calm down sometimes. You have to have rational expectations and not blindly follow your idol. There's something called setting someone up to fail. Don't kill your own idol."

"It's not that I have no respect for Fang Zhao's abilities but that you can't wing it for programs on the level of HuangArt's Twelve Tones by composing a few songs, starring in a TV series, or cramming for the exam. Experience and talent are equally important."

The topic quickly trended online. Some folks even started a bet to see how far Fang Zhao could advance in the exam.

Something like this hadn't been that big of a deal to begin with, but certain folks were fanning the flames. All Silver Wing could do was contain the situation as best they could.

Fang Zhao had gotten in the way of too many people. There were always folks who wanted to take him down when the opportunity presented itself.

The internet chatter would undoubtedly influence Fang Zhao. All the attention meant more pressure. If someone was overly sensitive, this kind of pressure could be deadly.

Passing the first hurdle would give Fang Zhao some breathing room. If he didn't, then he would have to face more ridicule and naysayers. Even though he had some outstanding pieces of work under his belt, this was how the industry operated. When someone was doing well no one would bother them, but once they screwed up, everyone would show up to tear them down.

The first round of the preliminary exams had been held. Countless candidates were eagerly waiting for the results so they could plan their next moves.

Fang Zhao was aware of the online discussion. He could handle this much pressure. If he broke under such little pressure, how could he have survived the Period of Destruction?

As soon as he got home, Fang Zhao got a call from Xue Jing.

Xue Jing was mighty worried.

"Ignore all the outside comments—just focus on your prep. The results for the first round should be out at 8 p.m. tonight. Considering your level, I don't think the first round will be a problem. If you advance to the next round, you'll receive a pass for round two. Regardless of whether you pass, just take it easy."

"Thank you. I know."

After hanging up on Xue Jing, Fang Zhao responded to messages from concerned friends and family, then starting prepping for the second-round exam.

In stark contrast to Fang Zhao's calm, Xue Jing was restless. Even though Xue Jing had consoled Fang Zhao, in reality, he was so nervous that he couldn't eat his dinner. He just sat there waiting for the results.

At the retirement home for former government officials in Yanbei.

Great-Grandfather Fang was so furious he trashed his own walking stick.

"I can't rest easy! Can't rest easy at all!"

On one hand, Great-Grandfather Fang wanted to call Fang Zhao, but he was also worried he might say the wrong thing and put even more pressure on Fang Zhao. All he could do was quietly fume at home.

Great-Grandmother Fang sighed and tried to comfort her spouse. "Silver Wing will handle things," she said.

"My ass! How can we count on self-interested corporations like that? Hell will freeze over before they lift a finger."

"They have still made a difference." Great-Grandmother Fang browsed the online chatter and took screenshots of some of the comments for Great-Grandfather Fang. "You can tell that Silver Wing has intervened to steer the conversation in a positive direction."

"What good does that do? The situation has still blown out of control. Can you imagine how much pressure Xiao Zhao is under? Why is it so hard for Xiao Zhao to sit for the exams peacefully?" Great-Grandfather Fang was feeling Fang Zhao's pain.

"Being a celebrity means that whatever you do, you have to cope with more pressure than the average Joe," Great-Grandmother Fang said.

After pondering the matter some more, Great-Grandfather Fang still couldn't let go. He called Fang Zhao via videoconference.

When the call went through, Fang Zhao was in his study. Books were scattered on his desk. He was also reading a document on his tablet.

Great-Grandfather Fang stuttered, "You're st-studying?"

"Yeah, I'm preparing for the second-round. Regardless of whether or not I pass the first round, it's good to be ready."

"That's the spirit! Maintain your composure. Ignore what other people have to say. Just try your best. Also, make sure you get plenty of rest, and don't forget to eat."

After he was done nagging, Great-Grandfather Fang didn't want to intrude anymore. He hung up and resumed fuming on his own. He hadn't taken a close look during the video call, but from what Great-Grandfather Fang could remember, he thought Fang Zhao had lost weight. "Xiao Zhao seemed skinnier! He's under so much pressure. Who knows if he's eating regularly?"

Great-Grandfather Fang sat restlessly until 8 p.m., nervously fidgeting with his truncated walking stick.

At 8 p.m., Fang Zhao received an email notifying him he had passed the first-round exam. The email also included his exam pass for the second round.

Just as Xue Jing had predicted, the first round hadn't posed a major challenge. As long as he'd been careful and had nailed the questions he was supposed to, clearing the first round of screening wasn't an issue.

After notifying Xue Jing, his great-grandparents in Yanbei, and Silver Wing, Fang Zhao went back to his prep.

As far as the rest of the world was concerned, Fang Zhao didn't have enough prep time, but from the moment of his rebirth, Fang Zhao had never stopped absorbing information and knowledge about the New Era, even when he'd been filming. The reason he could race through Ming Cang's notes and Xue Jing's mock exam wasn't just because he was cramming.

Xue Jing had described to Fang Zhao the types of questions that appeared in the second-round exam and other things to pay attention to. Fang Zhao didn't leave his apartment the next two days, nor did he go online.

He would leave the public relations battle to the professionals at Silver Wing. All he had to do was focus on his exam prep.

The second round took place just two days after the first round. A new venue was assigned—a different university.

Fang Zhao kept a low profile as usual when he arrived at the exam venue. The university was in a secluded location. By the time Fang Zhao finished his exam, word that he was there had already leaked. There were quite a few entertainment journalists staking him out. Fang Zhao was determined to avoid them. None of the entertainment journalists managed to snap a picture of him. All they could do was buy some of the surveillance footage from the university.

Access to the surveillance footage was heavily restricted. There was only so much footage one could buy, but it was better than nothing. For entertainment journalists, a single frame was enough fodder for several stories.

Only some 20,000 candidates passed the first-round exam. After the second round, only 5,000 were left.

So many folks were hoping that Fang Zhao would fumble during his exams, cave under the pressure, or underperform due to jitters, yet against all the expectations, well-intentioned or not, Fang Zhao passed the second-round exam with a solid showing.

After clearing the second round, Silver Wing felt it could speak with more confidence. They didn't have high hopes for Fang Zhao. Clearing the second round was enough. Passing the third exam was even better, but it was no big deal if he didn't. For someone Fang Zhao's age, passing the first two rounds was a terrific result already.

Only 1,000 candidates would remain after the third exam. Among the people sitting for the third exam were some of Yanzhou's more famous artists. They were mostly in their 60s and 70s. The number of artists who were 30 or younger could be counted on one hand.

The day before the third exam, Great-Grandfather Fang sent Fang Zhao a package. He said he and Great-Grandmother Fang had gotten it at the Cemetery for Martyrs.

The two elders had made a quiet trip to Qi'an, but they hadn't bothered Fang Zhao. They'd just visited the Cemetery for Martyrs, gotten what they needed, and left. They had sent the gift to Fang Zhao by courier before they'd left.

"Your great-grandmother and I said a sincere prayer for this. Word is that it's quite effective. Remember to wear it during your third exam. I've already checked—they're allowed at the exam venue. Remember to wear it!" Great-Grandfather Fang said in the voicemail he sent Fang Zhao.

Fang Zhao opened the package. It was a necklace similar to the good-luck charms of the Old Era.

Out of curiosity, Fang Zhao removed the slip of paper inside the pouch attached to the necklace. It had been folded multiple times.

After carefully unfolding the piece of paper, a portrait emerged—Fang Zhao, the inaugural leader of the resistance's Fifth Battalion during the Period of Destruction.

Fang Zhao: "..."

Chapter 334

Finishing Early

After the Period of Destruction, people had started treating the heroes from the era as saviors as a form of religion. Festivals of worship and prayer from the Old Era were moved to martyrs' cemeteries. Every city had its own martyrs' cemetery.

Folks had stopped believing in the legends of the past and started projecting their emotions onto the martyrs' cemeteries, which became the sites where people prayed for good fortune.

Outside of Memorial Day, the martyrs' cemeteries typically didn't draw many visitors, but there were exceptions. For example, Great-Grandfather Fang and Great-Grandmother Fang had visited the martyrs' cemetery in Qi'an to pray for good luck for Fang Zhao's exam.

The idea hadn't occurred to Great-Grandfather Fang initially. When he'd been taking a walk in the garden of the retirement facility one day, he had overheard a fellow resident saying that he had obtained a good-luck charm at a martyrs' cemetery for his great-grandson, who had been about to perform his military service.

Great-Grandfather Fang had a eureka moment.

Ah... that's something I could do!

Great-Grandfather Fang hadn't known if good-luck charms were allowed at the exam venue, so he had checked with his connections at the education ministry. When he'd confirmed that they were kosher, he and Great-Grandmother Fang had quietly set off for Qi'an.

There was a martyrs' cemetery in Yanbei, but Great-Grandfather Fang didn't think it was big enough. It wasn't that he didn't respect the martyrs who were buried there but that when it came to Fang Zhao's exam, Great-Grandfather Fang wanted to pray at the biggest martyrs' cemetery in Yanzhou. If one was going to worship, it made sense to worship the greatest martyrs. People had their own agendas.

So who was the greatest martyr at the martyrs' cemetery in Yanzhou?

This was a subject of debate.

Some said Fang Zhao, others Wu Yan. There were also other answers, but when it came to praying for good health and good luck, very few people worshipped Fang Zhao.

The reason was Fang Zhao's personal history. Many historians lamented Fang Zhao's fate and considered him a tragic figure. He had survived 99 years in the Period of Destruction but had failed to take that last step and make it into the Founding Era. His tomb was ranked second. His influence had also waned. In terms of stature, in the minds of Yanzhou residents in the New Era, Fang Zhao was even lower than the martyrs buried in tombs no. 3, no. 4, and no. 5.

Even though it was unfair to evaluate the martyrs from that era according to their tomb placement, people from the New Era made that subconscious judgment. Not everyone studied history. As time passed, few folks took the time to study the Period of Destruction. If not for the airing of "Founding Era," most born-and-bred Yanzhou natives probably couldn't have remembered who was buried in the top 10 tombs at the martyrs' cemetery.

The bottom line was that folks who prayed for good luck and health usually avoided Fang Zhao. People mainly worshipped him to ward off bad luck.

But Great-Grandfather Fang knew what he wanted. When he arrived at the martyrs' cemetery, he headed straight for Fang Zhao's plot and got a good-luck charm.

Having performed his worship rituals and mailed the good-luck charm, Great-Grandfather Fang felt much more relaxed. When he returned to the retirement home in Yanbei and was asked about his whereabouts, he didn't feel the need to lie.

The fellow resident who had suggested Great-Grandfather Fang get a good-luck charm asked, "Who did you worship?"

"Of course it was Battalion Leader Fang," responded Great-Grandfather Fang.

"All I did was suggest you get a good-luck charm. I didn't suggest you worship him!"

"I thought about it and decided that worshipping him was the best bet. We share the same surname. Who knows, maybe we are related if I go back far enough. He also

shares a name with our Xiao Zhao. Xiao Zhao even played him in a TV series. It's destiny!"

"But that fella didn't have very good luck. Uhm... it's not me, it's what the experts say."

"I know." However, Great-Grandfather Fang had his own reasoning. "Back then, it was a major challenge to just get through the day. I think he had pretty decent luck to have survived 99 years during the Period of Destruction. Also, he mentored our old governor Wu Yan. Don't you think he's quite something?"

Great-Grandfather Fang felt he had made the right call, but little did he know the mixed emotions Fang Zhao felt when he received the good-luck charm.

What a magical experience.

After folding the piece of paper printed with the portrait and inserting it into the pouch attached to the necklace again, Fang Zhao chuckled. "At the end of the day, I have to rely on myself."

Even though it felt weird, Fang Zhao still followed Great-Grandfather Fang's instructions and kept the good-luck charm on him. It was a thoughtful gesture by the two elders, after all.

The day of the exam, Great-Grandfather Fang got up early. When he figured it was about time for Fang Zhao to get up and have breakfast, he sent his great-grandson a text message asking him what he was eating.

Great-Grandfather Fang was relieved to find out that Fang Zhao had a voracious appetite as usual.

Having an appetite was a good thing. It proved that Fang Zhao was in good physical shape, unlike some exam takers who couldn't eat when they got nervous.

Great-Grandfather Fang reminded Fang Zhao to bring his good-luck charm again before ending the exchange.

Great-Grandfather Fang started fretting again. "I hear the exam will take the entire day."

"There's a time limit of eight hours." Great-Grandmother Fang had done her

homework too. She was familiar with the exam rules.

Great-Grandfather Fang started panicking. "Eight hours? What about lunch? Given Xiao Zhao's appetite, will a regular boxed meal suffice?"

"Don't worry. I've asked Xiao Zhao. He said you can order your meals online from approved vendors at the exam site. You can order as many meals as you like."

"Is that so? How come you never mentioned this before?"

"I did. You were wearing your headset at the time."

"You did that on purpose! You decided to tell me when I had my headset on!"

Picking a fight with Great-Grandmother Fang was Great-Grandfather Fang's way of easing his stress. If he weren't so advanced in age and physically frail and worried that he would pose a burden, Great-Grandfather Fang would have preferred keeping vigil in Qi'an instead of restlessly waiting at home for the results to be announced online.

For an exam of this magnitude, other kids typically had their parents with them. If not their parents, then other elders. It pained him to see Fang Zhao soldier on alone.

Seeing as Great-Grandfather Fang was trying to start a fight and was overthinking things, Great-Grandmother Fang shook her head. She picked up her kettle and started watering the plants.

If someone wanted to make something of themselves, be it in the military or the arts, there were no shortcuts!

Great-Grandmother Fang was also delighted to see Fang Zhao blossom—she just wasn't a braggart like her husband. She was also nervous for Fang Zhao on the occasion of such an important exam.

The more Fang Zhao progressed in his career, the less the two elders would be able to help him. At the end of the day, all Fang Zhao could count on was his own talent.

At one of the exam venues, a university in Qi'an.

During the second round of security screening, one of the exam monitors asked Fang Zhao to remove his necklace for a scan to make sure it wasn't being used for cheating.

The scanner picked up the folded fragments of the Fang Zhao portrait and reassembled it on screen.

The exam monitor was baffled when he identified the portrait.

After Fang Zhao entered the exam room, the exam monitor whispered to his colleagues, "Someone actually brought a good-luck charm with old battalion leader Fang's picture."

"What? Very few exam takers picked him in the past. Isn't it still under debate whether he brings good luck or bad luck?"

"It was Fang Zhao who brought the good-luck charm. You know, the popular actor who was assigned to our venue?"

"Interesting. Perhaps he is someone who likes to defy convention and picked a martyr that other folks avoid?"

Soon, many of the monitors knew that Fang Zhao had brought a good-luck charm with his namesake's picture on it.

The third exam didn't just cover theory. Examinees had to compose a song on the spot and analyze different pieces of music. All of this took time, so even though there were fewer questions, the exam lasted longer.

None of these questions took Fang Zhao by surprise. Xue Jing had told him that the third exam also tested analytical skills and versatility on top of theory.

These types of questions didn't pose a major challenge for Fang Zhao.

Hours passed by. When one of the exam monitors approached Fang Zhao to ask him about his lunch plans, Fang Zhao was getting ready to leave his seat.

The monitor looked at the time. It was 1 p.m. The exam started at 9 a.m. It had only been four hours.

"You're..." The surprised monitor checked Fang Zhao's exam status on his tablet. The column indicated Fang Zhao had already submitted his answers.

"I'm done. Can I leave now?" Fang Zhao asked. He was a bit hungry.

"Y-yes."

After Fang Zhao left, the monitor conferred with his colleagues.

"What do you think? Did he actually finish?"

"Probably not. I hear the third exam is the toughest. Four hours is too short."

"But he looked like he was in a good mood. He didn't seem like someone who didn't finish the exam."

"Have you forgotten that he's an actor? How can you tell what an actor is really thinking?"

"That's true. Who cares? We'll find out when the results come out. It's a shame that the results for the preliminary exams aren't ranked. Otherwise, we could find out his placement."

Having left the exam venue, Fang Zhao was oblivious to the speculation. He went home to have lunch, then briefed Xue Jing on his performance.

The entertainment journalists staking out Fang Zhao missed him again, but they managed to land two major scoops.

First, Fang Zhao had turned in his exam after only four hours.

Second, Fang Zhao had brought a good-luck charm with Fang Zhao's picture on it.

Each of these pieces of information was sufficient fodder for multiple stories!

The entertainment journalists stayed true to character, crafting their pieces in a way that catered to the curiosity and venting tendencies of the masses.

The results for the third exam took longer to process than previous exams. Candidates had to wait five days.

Candidates who sat for the HuangArt Twelve Tones exam came from all over the world, so news of Fang Zhao's candidacy soon caught notice in other continents.

The Yanzhou chapter of "Founding Era" and endorsement deals for Fiery Bird's 10th-

generation consoles and headsets had boosted Fang Zhao's visibility in other continents. Readers from other continents also became fixated on the exam.

The entrance exam for a music program that had barely caused a ripple in the glamorous and messy entertainment industry in the past now became the focus of many journalists.

Fang Zhao ignored the online chatter, be it mockery or praise. He stayed home and read several books that Xue Jing had recommended. When he got tired, he taught Curly Hair new video games or fed his "rabbit" some leaves.

Five days later.

The official website of the HuangArt Twelve Tones program published the list of candidates that had passed the three exams in the preliminary round.

The results weren't ranked. The names of the successful candidates were listed alphabetically by surname.

Fang Zhao's name was on the list, as was his six-digit candidate ID number to avoid confusion.

Soon, Fang Zhao also received an email from HuangArt about the next round of exams.

Great-Grandfather Fang was ecstatic that Fang Zhao had passed the three preliminary exams. Despite having been hobbling from the discomfort in his legs the past few days, the old fella couldn't help leaping in joy a few times.

"Be careful! You're not young anymore!" warned Great-Grandmother Fang.

The leg problems were genuine, tracing back to Great-Grandfather Fang's time in the military. Their condition had improved with treatment, but they still hurt from time to time because he was old.

Great-Grandfather Fang couldn't stay put even while sitting down. He clicked on a few chat groups and started sending digital red packets in celebration of Fang Zhao's results.

"Hahahaha! Our Xiao Zhao passed all of the preliminary exams! [Red packet]!"

"Did you see the news? Our Xiao Zhao was the only candidate under 30 to pass all three preliminary exams! [Red packet]."

The retired officials in the chat groups were used to Great-Grandfather Fang bragging about his great-grandsons, usually Fang Zhao. Whenever he sent red packets in his chat groups, nine out of 10 times, it had to do with Fang Zhao.

Everyone knew that Fang Zhao was Great-Grandfather Fang's clear favorite. He viewed his other descendants with one lens and Fang Zhao another. How biased he was. With the passage of time, the prejudice got worse. Whenever he mentioned "our Xiao Zhao," it was a sign that reason had gone out the window. At times like that, there was no point in arguing with the old man. It was all in vain. All they could do was accept the red packets and congratulate him.

"Congrats!"

"He passed the preliminary round? Passing all three exams is no small feat! They're quite tough. Congrats!"

"Look forward to the time when your Xiao Zhao passes the second round of exams. Remember to send red packets then!"

"Yes! Who knows, he may be on a roll. What if he passes the second set of exams too?"

Great-Grandfather Fang responded, "I'm pleased that he's gotten this far. Even the experts are saying that for someone of Xiao Zhao's age, passing the preliminary round is a great accomplishment, enough to prove his talent. There's no shame even if he stumbles in the second round. We'll treat it as a rehearsal and a learning experience. Xiao Zhao is still young. There will be plenty of other opportunities down the road." Great-Grandfather Fang paused before adding, "But if he really passes the second round, I'll send out some major red packets to the group!"

Meanwhile, on the internet, attention was focused elsewhere.

"Did Fang Zhao really bring a good-luck charm with Fang Zhao's picture to the exam?"

"Is that why he finished in four hours and passed?"

"I think so. Didn't you read what the experts said? It's very rare for someone Fang Zhao's age to pass all three preliminary exams. Exams require luck too."

"One of my relatives told me that Fang Zhao's grandfather got the good-luck charm from a martyrs' cemetery."

This comment irked Great-Grandfather Fang.

"It was his great-grandfather, not grandfather! His grandfather is an idiot who doesn't know jack sh*t!"

Chapter 335

You Absolutely Musn't Misunderstand

Great-Grandfather Fang Fang felt that among all his descendants, the one most like him was Fang Zhao. As for the others, who were they like? Great-Grandfather Fang Fang glanced at his old wife.

"In any case, they aren't like me," Great-Grandfather Fang Fang muttered to himself.

Online, even more people participated in the discussion about good luck charms. Some people felt that Fang Zhao's good luck charm had brought him good fortune, and these people wanted a similar model, but at the same time, they were also worried. What if they became unlucky afterward?

"I think it's better to wait first. Let's wait and see how Fang Zhao does later before buying. It's not like we need it immediately."

"Then let's wait first? In any case, the second round of examinations is approaching. We can decide again after the results are out."

"My demands aren't high. Furthermore, I have an examination coming up. I'll buy it first."

At Qi'an City's Cemetery of Martyrs, there were suddenly a lot of people buying protective amulets, and the protective amulets they wanted to but were the ones Fang Zhao had used. However, it just so happen that this version was out of stock. Previously, as there had been few people buying this, those in charge of the Cemetery had not kept much stock.

The rarer something was, the more valuable it tended to be. As stock was low and not many people managed to buy it, this protective amulet's price was jacked up in a short time. As quantity was low while demand and prices were high, there were inevitably people blinded by greed that took an alternative path: counterfeiting.

In the eyes of those who made counterfeits, the paper quality was just slightly inferior and the painting looked exactly the same. How could they count as counterfeits?

But buyers did not approve of it.

In the Old Era, there was a word: "consecrate"!

An amulet that hadn't gone through a consecration ritual or been created in the Cemetery was a fake! No matter how good quality of the materials used, it was still a fake!

Thus, relevant departments started combating counterfeits. The Cemetery also had their own countermeasures, so genuine and fake goods could still be differentiated.

As for Fang Zhao, who had given rise to this series of counterfeiting and anti-counterfeiting, he had no time to be bothered about all this. After receiving the notification for the second stage of examinations, he was called over by Xue Jing to undergo a week of training. Afterward, he would head to Huangzhou to participate in the second round of exams.

More than 100,000 people had applied to take the examinations, and after going through three rounds of preliminary exams, the number of people with the qualifications to sit for the second stage was only 1000. Of the 90-plus from Yanzhou that had passed the preliminaries, Fang Zhao was the youngest.

This time, Fang Zhao did not let the company arrange any other assistants and, as before, brought along Zuo Yu and Yan Biao. These two took turns being a driver and an assistant.

"Boss, are we really not bringing Curly Hair along? Won't he feel lonely if he is left alone at home?" Zuo Yu asked.

"He won't," Fang Zhao answered firmly. With the gaming console around, Curly Hair would not find it boring.

Furthermore, if there was any danger, it would be more convenient for Curly Hair to handle it himself. If someone was dispatched to stay home and watch him, Curly Hair's actions might be restricted.

After arriving in Huangzhou, Fang Zhao's presence declined drastically. His influence here was a far cry from his influence in Yanzhou. However, since he had frequently been appearing online recently, Fang Zhao still wore a cap.

During this season, Huangzhou's weather was slightly hotter. Inside Huangzhou Institute of Art, many students walking on campus were sporting hats too. Furthermore, Fang Zhao kept a low profile so he appeared less conspicuous.

"Hey, Boss, make the most of your time to study. Leave any errands to us," said Yan Biao.

This time, Yan Biao and Zuo Yu both had assignments. Silver Wing, Great-Grandfather Fang, Xue Jing, and others had all privately sought the two out to have them run more errands. This way, Fang Zhao would have time to adjust to the time difference and prepare for his examinations.

So after arriving at Huangzhou Institute of Art, Zuo Yu ran off to inquire about the necessary procedures for exam candidates and to learn how the school arranged its exam candidates room and board. Yan Biao followed by Fang Zhao's side and towed the luggage and bags.

Fang Zhao had wanted to carry his own bags, but Yan Biao hadn't let him.

Let boss carry a bag? How could a salted fish fetching such a high salary have the cheek to allow that? This was such a rare opportunity to display his usefulness, so naturally, he couldn't let it slip by.

The sun was extremely glaring. Fang Zhao pointed at a building with walls that seemed to be entirely made of transparent glass not too far away. "Let's sit over there and wait."

The building that Fang Zhao had pointed out was a library mainly for guests. The first floor was primarily a rest area and was slightly more lively. The people seated on this floor were mostly people who had stopped on the way for a rest.

After finding a spot to sit down, Yan Biao put down all the bags and luggage. When he saw that Fang Zhao wanted to go buy a drink, he hurriedly exclaimed, "Let me, let me!"

Yan Biao ran to buy a drink while Fang Zhao sat on the chair and gazed out of the transparent glass at students that were walking by outside.

HuangArt students all had a sort of haughtiness. Even though they maintained their fundamental etiquette and did not spare any honorifics, one could sense haughtiness from their expressions and speech.

That was understandable. As top-notch institute seeped in artistic influences with many specially privileged people, this was very normal. Fortunately, they wouldn't look down on people without any reason. This was also part of their upbringing.

Taking a further look at the interior, there were many green plant ornaments and wood-colored furniture all around. Even if that furniture wasn't really manufactured out of wood and those lush green plants were merely man-made air purifiers, when put together, they gave off a very peaceful vibe. Upstairs was a small library collection open to the public. Paperback books could be borrowed here as well, but at a fee.

While Fang Zhao was taking the measure of his surroundings, Yan Biao returned from purchasing drinks. There were too many people today and he had even needed to queue up.

After drinking some water, Fang Zhao said, "I'll be heading up to take a look."

"All right, I will just sit here. If you want to buy anything, you can send me a message straight away." Yan Biao indicated that he would not wander off and would be on standby at all times.

When Fang Zhao went up, Yan Biao sorted out some of the luggage and wiped the sweat off his forehead. While drinking some water, he thought about his performance in the morning. Seems all right, mhm. I can feel at ease and rest for a bit.

A person at the side watched him for a bit and then came over. "Hey, brother, you brought your son to enroll too?"

The mineral water in Yan Biao's mouth all spurted out. "PFFFF!" Yan Biao was sweating all over from that scare and hurriedly explained, "No, no, no, no, that's not it! You absolutely mustn't misunderstand! That is my boss!"

As he said that, Yan Biao had some self-doubt. He was clearly still young and wasn't much older than Fang Zhao. What had caused this person to have such a misunderstanding?

Where could Yan Biao find the gall to be his boss's father?

Stroking his beard, Yan Biao found the reason that had caused this misunderstanding. He had originally thought that it would make him look more dignified and imposing, but he had never imagined that it would cause this sort of misunderstanding. Luckily,

this hadn't been heard by his boss. If his boss was annoyed in his heart... What would Yan Biao do if he got fired?

Stroking the beard he had grown, Yan Biao decided that he would shave it when they returned to the hotel later!

During this period, HuangArt's other, more ordinary advanced courses were also enrolling, so it was a common sight to see other parents sending off their children for enrollment. Afterward, there were quite a few others who came over to talk to Yan Biao. Yan Biao had to explain clearly to them that he was just accompanying his boss. He really didn't want any misunderstandings to arise.

There were also others that accompanied their family elders and came over. Yan Biao even met a person who was accompanying his father who would be taking the second round of examinations for HuangArt's Twelve Tones. Hearing the other party bragging and flaunting, Yan Biao especially wanted to say, "My boss is also here to take the second round of examinations," but he chose to hold it in.

As a qualified bodyguard, it would be best if he didn't randomly reveal information about his boss.

When Zuo Yu was done handling all the procedures, Fang Zhao checked into his dormitory.

Zuo Yu and Yan Biao wouldn't need much afterward, so Fang Zhao let them return to the hotel and wait. The school had only prepared temporary dormitories for exam candidates; other people were not able to stay.

HuangArt's Twelve Tones's second round of examinations was even longer and required three continuous days of exams.

The examination venue was a building next to HuangArt Library. The examination venue was linked to the library by a passageway. The second round of examinations was open book, so materials could be referenced, be they physical copies of books or computer files. Other than being unable to communicate with the outside world, everything in the library could be used.

For the next three days, candidates would be confined to these two buildings. But candidates apparently didn't seem indisposed, especially candidates with creative backgrounds. For them, shutting themselves in their own work studios for one or two

months was common. There was no need to worry about food, water, or toilets; all they needed to do was concentrate on answering the questions.

On the first day, after Fang Zhao saw the questions, he left the exam venue and went over to the neighboring library to look through resources.

This library was different from the small library that catered to guests. It was truly a treasure trove of knowledge. Some resources that were reportedly not permitted to be converted to electronic files and disseminated could be found here.

There were monitoring systems for the exams. Monitoring teachers would observe the candidates' actions through the monitoring system and would not appear and in front of candidates or disturb them.

As for meals, Fang Zhao did not let down his stomach. Solving questions and composing consumed mental strength. He had consumed quite a bit and needed to replenish his energy now so that he could move forward even better later on. While others ordered only one box lunch, Fang Zhao could order four! If the boxed meals had less inside, he might order five or six.

During these three days, Fang Zhao spent the first day visiting the library and researching resources, and he rested at night in his own examination room. There was a bed within the wall, and when it was brought down, it was sufficient for a single person.

The second day was spent solving questions, and Fang Zhao rested early after completing them.

On the third day, he once again went to the library to look through the resources in the morning, and he returned to his room in the afternoon to make amendments to his script. When time was almost up and other people in the examination venue started submitting their scripts and leaving, Fang Zhao submitted his as well.

Leaving the examination venue, Fang Zhao saw a group of students distributing HuangArt cultural commemorative gift boxes.

For people that could participate in the second round of examinations, the majority all had some reputation in their own domains. Thus, even though HuangArt students had their own air of arrogance, in front of candidates who took part in the second round of Twelve Tones's examinations, they were even more courteous and had fitting

smiles when they handed over the gift boxes.

When they saw Fang Zhao, some students' eyes shone brighter, and they rushed over to hand over the gift box. "You have worked hard!"

Fang Zhao smiled as he accepted the gift box. "Thank you. It wasn't that arduous."

Fang Zhao really had not found it that difficult. He had not needed to worry during the examinations. Food and drinks were provided and there were specially designated activity areas. Candidates could also roam freely in 60% of the levels of the library. Other than solving questions being somewhat mentally straining, the rest hadn't been too tiring.

"Can we take a photo together? I'm a fan of yours!" a student asked.

"Me too, I really loved your acting in 'Founding Era'! Recently, I have been watching the early seasons of the Yanzhou chapter!"

"I'm a gaming fan!"

Students of a top-notch art institution would not get too excited when seeing celebrities and reputable artists and were just slightly more curious.

After Fang Zhao agreed, these few HuangArt students took a few group photos with Fang Zhao. After chatting with Fang Zhao for a bit, they went to post the photos up on their social platforms.

Following that, various people from entertainment media once again started to excessively interpret Fang Zhao's expression in the photographs.

"Fang Zhao is smiling so happily. He probably did quite well for the examinations."

"I feel that Fang Zhao is actually forcing himself to smile. If you've seen the expressions of others that took the second round of examinations, it is quite safe to say that the difficulty was rather high."

"Three continuous days of examinations, but why does Fang Zhao seem to be in high spirits in the photo?"

"Perhaps he is pretending?"

"I wonder if he wore his good luck charm this time."

"Who has bought information from HuangArt's side? Hurry up and speak."

"HuangArt rarely leaks information to the outside. Purchasing the monitoring system's videos is even more difficult."

There were also some people who made inquiries with HuangArt monitoring teachers that they were close to. While concrete information about the situation at the examination venue could not be divulged, when asked about their impression of Fang Zhao, these monitors said: "He is very young and he can eat very well."

Chapter 336

All the Rage

After taking the examinations, Fang Zhao waited in Huangzhou until the results of the second round were released. He called on a few industry precursors, all of whom had been recommended by Ming Cang and Xue Jing. These people had even gone to Fang Zhao's concert back then.

There were also a few other senior QiMu graduates that Fang Zhao got to know in the group chat. These people had helped him by sharing resources in some form or another before he'd sat for the second round of examinations. Even if Fang Zhao had not used those resources in the end, he still had to thank them.

Huangzhou Institute of Art, inside a certain office.

The second stage examination's grading teachers from the music team were discussing Fang Zhao's examination script.

"Not only does this young fella have a good grasp of the fundamentals, he also has high comprehension and intelligence. He is indeed really capable and has the qualifications to get into Twelve Tones. A rare talent."

There were some experiences that teachers couldn't teach and that students would have to rely on themselves to comprehend. Students with high levels of comprehension were much easier to groom.

Some other teachers expressed a different view. "Solely based on the questions, I would give him high marks too, but we still have to take into account his character for this evaluation."

"What? Remember that accompaniment piece for the finale of season nine of 'Founding Era' Yanzhou chapter?"

"The officially released information is that Fang Zhao completed it all by himself, but as before, I still have my doubts. That isn't something a person his age can produce. Even if he has been able to compose a few outstanding works before, that tune in

'Founding Era' was different."

"You guys have also agreed that he has high levels of comprehension and intelligence. What makes you so sure that he wasn't able to produce it? There are always geniuses in this world."

"This isn't something that being a genius can explain! Hey, I don't know how to explain that feeling either, nor do you guys."

The grading teachers were split into two factions. One faction felt that this youngster Fang Zhao had talent and ability. His questions had been answered very well, and giving him high grades for the second round of examinations was not an issue.

But the other faction firmly believed this: "In any case, I don't believe it! Regardless of how Fang Zhao did on his exams, he surely got others to write those previous works of his on his behalf! Toward these sorts of people that get others to substitute for them and never admit it, the overall marks for the second round examinations have to be pressed down!"

The head of the music team grading the papers watched both sides continue to disagree, and his brows scrunched up. After more disagreements and no solution, he interjected, "All right, everyone stop arguing. Since you all can't decide on an outcome, let's call and ask."

"Ask who?"

"I have already asked Xue Jing's side. He denies participating in any of Fang Zhao's composition. I believe that he would not lie about these matters, and furthermore, the style of Xue Jing's pieces are different, so it wasn't him."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Go ask Teacher Mo Lang."

On hearing Mo Lang's name, both factions fell silent.

The group head saw everyone looking terrified, and he pointed at the grading teacher that had argued the loudest. "You, make the call and ask."

That teacher stuttered, "M-me?"

"Weren't you very loud just now? Go and ask."

"You can't blame that on me. It's because I have a singing background and my singing techniques affected me; I'm not used to speaking softly. Besides, I do not know Teacher Mo's contact number."

"I know. I have already helped you dial the number." As he said that, the grading group head forced a communications device into that teacher's hands and raised his chin, indicating that teacher should hurry up and ask.

Mo Lang had just returned from planet Wai. He had recently been on vacation and had nothing to do at home, so he answered rather quickly.

The teacher nervously introduced himself first and then stated that his purpose was to find out if Mo Lang had guided Fang Zhao when Fang Zhao had been composing.

This was a rather tactful way of asking, but Mo Lang had been part of the music circles for so many years that even if he didn't like to bother with other stuff, he could still tell the other party's intention. The other party's question was just indirectly asking him, " Did Teacher Mo ghostwrite for Fang Zhao?"

Mo Lang went silent.

This sort of silence wasn't tacit agreement, but rather, it was like the gathering of black clouds. The atmosphere was both stifling and suffocating.

The other teacher's also held their breath and tried to lower any presence of their existence. The entire room was so quiet one could hear a pin drop.

Beads of sweat appeared on the forehead of the teacher that was holding the communications device. "Teacher... Teacher Mo, we aren't doubting your character, we are just asking that's all."

Mo Lang became even more taciturn.

The silence made all the grading teachers feel their skin tighten. A few of them also subconsciously shifted further away. They all knew that this was the calm before the storm.

"Venerable Mo?" the teacher holding on to the communications device probed. His

voice seemed to be wavering.

Old Mo Lang appeared to be breathing heavily on the video call, but when he spoke, his tone was almost flat. "I remember telling others in the industry about the matters with Fang Zhao. Listening to your words, are you implying that I'm lying?"

"No, no, no! Venerable Mo, we are just routinely asking. It's merely a formality. Please, don't get worked up! You absolutely mustn't get worked up!" That teacher was so worried his face was turning red.

Mo Lang suddenly raised his voice and furiously roared, "Absolutely preposterous!"

"You mustn't think too much! We really did not have that intention! Really!" That teacher was so worried he shot up from his chair. Old Master Mo was a treasure of an artist. If anything bad occurred to Old Mo because he had become angry, this bunch would be done for.

"Should I swear it on my Galaxy World Medal!? Ah? How do you all wish for me to prove it? I will come over to HuangArt to show you your proof! An old fellow like me can still walk! You doubt me? That's simply vilifying all the honor I have achieved in my life! Trampling all over it!"

"No, no, no, you have really misunderstood. Without a doubt, we believe your morals. It is really just a formality! Really!"

Furious berating still continued from the other end. The grading teacher holding the communications device had sweat trickling down his forehead.

Mo Lang's words were like large bricks aimed at his head, each one heavier than the last, smacking his head till he was dizzy.

A single person would not be able to handle Venerable Mo's fury. He thought about looking for the other grading teachers to share the responsibility. "You guys hurry up and help explain..."

However, when he looked behind him, he realized that all the other grading teachers that had originally been sitting there had run off.

The teacher facing the full wrath on his own: "..."

At that moment, the amount of cursing in his head was enough to fill up the entire continent of Huangzhou.

Mo Lang spent more than 10 minutes admonishing that teacher through the call. However, Mo Lang was still very advanced in age, so his assistants were worried about Mo Lang's health and advised him to calm down.

After the call ended, the grading teachers that had left returned one by one. One of them even exclaimed, "See, I already said we should seek truth from facts. If it's good, that means it's good. If it's no good, then that means it's no good. How things are is how they should be! We are but grading teachers, not the teachers that will be guiding them. If this person really has problems, then those teachers should be the ones fretting over it. Anyway, let's not be unreasonable. Since he has already explained it well and you people haven't been able to find evidence that someone ghostwrote, we should just evaluate him according to the exam script."

With a rigid face, the teacher holding the communications device stared accusingly at the speaker. Why didn't you say all these before we made the call?

"According to the exam script?" The grading teacher that had sat down again looked over at the group head.

"Then let's evaluate according to the script," the group head said.

On the day results were released, many media outlets were watching HuangArt's official homepage.

With only 12 selected from 1000, the elimination rate was rather high.

At the appointed time, HuangArt's Twelve Tones's advance course page refreshed. The 12 accepted applicants were displayed.

This list was arranged according to the results of the second round examination from highest to lowest. Fang Zhao took third place.

Of the two before him, the first was a talented 40-plus-year-old Huangzhou dance artist. He had made a name for himself for many years already and had been coined the dance god's successor.

The second was a 50-plus-year-old painter. He was still considered young in New Era

terms. He came from a family with a background in painting and calligraphy and was also a genius. Not mentioning how many awards he had received, what people remembered most about him were the two paintings he had sold a while back. The selling prices of these paintings were in the tens of millions.

In the musical field, there were four entrants this year. Fang Zhao was the highest ranked from the music field.

Actually, when the music team's grading teachers saw the final standings, they felt a little regret. If they had known it was going to turn out this way, they would have given Fang Zhao's exam script a few more marks. This way, they would not have lagged behind dance and painting.

However, the media outlets that had their attention on the enrollment of this advanced course did not spend too much time bothering about the classifications of the standings. Their focus was on Fang Zhao.

Many entertainment media members had been putting all their effort into throwing shade on Fang Zhao, but today, they changed their tune and lauded his accomplishments.

"HuangArt's Twelve Tones advanced course's youngest entrant in close to 50 years! Yet another Mo Lang! The Galaxy World Medal isn't a dream!"

"Ability? Or was it luck? The most effective good-luck charm in history!"

Entertainment news media outlets made full use of their ability to blindly create stories without logic. They inflated Fang Zhao so much that he didn't even recognize himself.

Certain reviewers were also unwilling to keep silent on this. Some reputable reviewers even posted short evaluations on their social platform accounts: "Really unexpected. Fang Zhao has huge potential. Nobody knows how high he can climb, but there is one thing that is certain: Silver Wing Media must fear being unable to control Fang Zhao in the future."

When Silver Wing's people saw this status, they didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Since when have we controlled him?

Right from the start, Fang Zhao had always done things beyond what the company had

anticipated.

He simply had never been controlled!

In Yanzhou. On the second day after the second round's examination results were released, Yanzhou's Cemetery of Martyrs's administration department held a ceremony.

On this day, the Cemetery of Martyrs' were full of people who had come to attend the ritual. There were people from Yanzhou as well as people from other continents.

A foreign tourist saw the ceremonial guards and band walking at the front, turned to look at the dense mass of people behind him, and then lamented to his companion, "Tsk, looking at this situation, later on, by the time the ceremony is over, those amulets will surely be sold out."

His companion shot him a look of "how ignorant" and replied, "All of the amulets at this ceremony were sold out in advance! If you wished to purchase one, you would have queue up!"

That's right, the model of amulet that Fang Zhao had used had become all the rage online. This also became a must-see location for tourists from other continents.

Some people asked them, "There are Cemeteries in every continent, so why have they all come here?"

Tourists: "This is just coincidentally joining in all the fun!"

"Why don't you just purchase it online instead of traveling a long distance and coming all the way to Yanzhou?"

Tourist: "Sales of this model was selling too quickly, and the Cemetery's stock cannot hold up. Online sales have closed, so one can only take a queue number for a booking. Queueing up here is still better than trying to get the goods online."

Actually, there weren't that many people that really believed in these superstitions. They were just following the trend to join in on the excitement. They felt that after purchasing the amulet, they could treat it as a way of being pretentious. People were also willing to spend money to get the amulets as gifts for others.

Fang Zhao when he saw all this news: "..."

His feelings were once again complicated.

At the Yanbei retirement facility for veterans. In the past two days, the smile on Great-Grandfather Fang's face had not faded. That smile of his annoyed others when they saw it.

"My family's Little Zhao, I'm not bragging, he is just so capable! How many analysts said that he would go no further than the second round? But take a look now!" Great-Grandfather Fang showed off this year's HuangArt's Twelve Tones entrants to others for the umpteenth time.

"Despite competing with so many outstanding artists, he achieved third place. In ancient times, wouldn't he be called a tan hua 1?"

An old veteran replied, "I heard that tan hua langs all look very good. Your great-grandson doesn't look good."

Hearing this, Great-Grandfather Fang's eyebrows shot up.

That old veteran hurriedly explained, "No, what I mean to say is that your great-grandson isn't good-looking enough."

The others were all speechless. You might as well not explain.

Great-Grandfather Fang blew his top. "You are just jealous and envious and saying this because you are sour!"

Someone came forward to calm the situation down. "Old Man Fang, aren't you supposed to be thinking about your family's Little Fang? What are his tuition fees are going to be like? Do you need to get anything in order? I heard that the tuition for HuangArt's Twelve Tones is especially expensive."

Great-Grandfather Fang went blank for a bit before returning to his senses. "Right, right, right, I still have responsibilities. I can't stick around and waste time chatting with you guys!"

Great-Grandfather Fang returned to check his own little treasury and went to research Huangzhou's Twelve Tones's tuition fees. He also went to contact some old friends of

his from the education system to ask whether there were any procedures needed or if they could pull any strings.

Very quickly, he received replies. "Tuition fees? The tuitions fees for that advanced course are really expensive. One person will have to spend a few hundred thousand a year, and that isn't counting in lifestyle expenditure. Spending money is a must when building interpersonal relationships with others over there, and it doesn't cost any less than the tuition fees. But you also need not worry. For an advanced course like Twelve Tones, as long as someone manages to enroll, they will be taking a straight path for grooming talents in our continent. The Ministry of Education is in charge, so there isn't any need to pull strings. Any procedures will be handled right at the start, and the scholarships given out can offset the tuition fees. All you all need to do is handle daily living expenses. However, your family's Xiao Zhao earns quite a lot; what are you so worried for?

"What he earns is his own money. What I'm giving him is just my kind intentions as an elder! Do you understand what 'kind intentions' means?"

Great-Grandfather Fang had his own tiny inclinations. He wanted to show that he could still be of use. Otherwise, he wouldn't have peace of mind. If he could not even do anything to help, wouldn't he be just like this bunch of old fogeys who spent all day in the garden chatting and gossiping idly?

After learning about the matters before entering school, Great-Grandfather Fang started dreaming about the future again, and a crazed smile appeared on his face.

HuangArt was good, a top-notch advanced course in a top-notch school. It would be best if Fang Zhao found an equally capable and like-minded girlfriend, just like that recent teenage-idol serial with classmates from the same class being lovey-dovey and so on.

But then, Great-Grandfather Fang thought about the ages of Fang Zhao's coursemates...

His smile gradually vanished

Chapter 337

You Are Going to Keep a Dog?

The news of Fang Zhao passing the second round of examinations and enrolling in HuangArt's Twelve Tones created much discussion, but outside of Yanzhou, those topics only lasted temporarily. After all, those areas weren't Fang Zhao's home ground and Silver Wing teams had difficulty getting involved. They couldn't increase publicity further even though they wanted to. However, back in Yanzhou, it seemed like this fervor would continue on for a few more days.

Yanzhou people felt that with such a good example like Fang Zhao, they could be proud. Look at our Yanzhou's genius!

People who weren't from professional art industries and didn't pay much attention to this sort of news only found out through the news that people able to enroll in HuangArt's Twelve Tones were very impressive. However, nobody could clearly determine exactly how impressive those enrollees were until they downloaded a copy of this year's HuangArt's Twelve Tones examination scripts.

Every year, after the entrance examinations for HuangArt's Twelve Tones concluded, HuangArt would officially release the examination questions for the three preliminary exams and the second round exam.

In the past, the only people that had downloaded these exam questions were those related to the arts. In general, the amount was low, but this year, because of the discussion that came about as a result of Fang Zhao, many people who weren't from the art industries also joined in the excitement and downloaded the questions. After all, the fee for downloading these questions wasn't much; it could be considered gaining knowledge and they could see for themselves the fabled super-hard questions for the entrance examinations of this top-notch advanced course.

Afterward, they realized that the preliminary exams were okay. Ignoring those subjective questions, although the objective questions might seem difficult, by spending the time to research some materials, it was still possible to pass the exams. The second stage was where the questions got really difficult to answer.

"I recognize every single word, but when put together, I actually can't understand it."

"Questions from the first preliminary already left me on the verge of tears. My head was already dizzy just checking through materials for an hour, and I was only able to make some slight progress. I totally can't even do anything from the second stage examination."

"My mom graduated from a music academy and she also says that these questions are extremely difficult. She says that there are a few composing questions that she is completely unable to answer. It's like having her favorite food, watermelons, and most hated, coriander, placed in front of her and being asked to create a dish that smells and tastes good with the two. Forget about having three days, even if she was given three years, she still wouldn't be able to do it."

"Indeed those that are able to pass the examinations are just sick!"

"Us normal people have no way of understanding how the mind of a genius works. From this, it can be seen that Fang Zhao really has the ability. It isn't something that can just be explained by being lucky. If it were other people, even if they brought a whole trunk of good-luck charms to the examination venue, it wouldn't be of any use."

But words were just words. Fang Zhao-style good-luck charms still maintained their high desirability. As before, there was no stock available online, so everyone that wished to purchase them had to queue up at Yanzhou's Qi'an City's Cemetery for Martyrs.

The matter of Fang Zhao enrolling in HuangArt's Twelve Tones and his good-luck charms once again created a wave of news. In the entertainment circles, those big names that stood firm were not really worried. It was the people in the circles that weren't really moving along that were not at ease.

Every time they persisted long enough to make some news, it ended up being battered by Fang Zhao's news. Now that Fang Zhao was temporarily going to be leaving the entertainment circle to further his studies, they could only heave half a sigh of relief.

Why only half a sigh?

This was not the product of groundless fears and alarmist talk. This Fang Zhao person really played his cards too unconventionally! There was no way they could completely relax!

Back when everyone had been guarded against him producing virtual idols, he'd run off to play games! And he'd been on fire!

When people had been prepared to guard against him entering the e-sports competition scene, he had actually gone to complete his military service! And he had been so d*mn popular again!

And when everyone had thought he was doing very well and would stay in the military, he had returned and held his concert! And he had made a ton!

And when everyone's attention had been on music, he had snagged an important role and gone to act in the large-scale revolutionary film project! Eyeballs all around the world had popped out!

Now, Fang Zhao had passed the examinations and gotten into what was said to be a god-tier advanced course. Even the good-luck charm he had worn had become an online trend!

Counting all this one by one...

It was horrible just thinking about it!

Only God knew what he would do next!

Back when Fang Zhao had gone to serve in the military, everyone had thought that he would cool down. However, everyone had ultimately found out that Fang Zhao was still able to make waves from far away.

It would be good if Fang Zhao quieted down while furthering his studies. These people would be able to make use of that year to boost their fame, and once they were standing firm, they wouldn't be afraid of getting battered.

After Fang Zhao received his admission notice, he returned to Qi'an City to handle a few matters, then went to Yanbei City to visit the two old Fangs. He didn't stay long, though, before once more heading to Huangzhou to handle his admission procedures.

Great-Grandfather Fang gave Fang Zhao a red packet. "After you have settled down there, send us some photographs and videos of Huangzhou Institute of Art so your great-grandmother and I can see what your life is like over there so we can also experience the atmosphere of an art institute.

The truth was that Great-Grandfather Fang had not gloated enough. He still wanted to flaunt a bunch in the group chat with his old comrades and prove he hadn't been bragging blindly.

"If you two are free, you can come over for a holiday. The dormitories allocated there are bigger than most other students'," Fang Zhao replied.

Great-Grandfather Fang smiled and waved his hands. "Oh, let's see how it goes. The two of us are old. We won't be able to help you much if we go over. Furthermore, you will surely be very busy when you start school. We don't want to go over and disturb you."

However, once Fang Zhao left, Great-Grandfather Fang started browsing through his calendar and set up reminders for large-scale holidays. After that, he placed an order for a new walking stick and pondered whether or not to purchase two sets of artsy clothes so that they wouldn't make Fang Zhao lose face when they went over to visit him in Huangzhou.

This time, when Fang Zhao traveled from Yanzhou to Huangzhou, he brought Curly Hair with him. He would be studying at HuangArt for a somewhat lengthy period of time, and he couldn't just leave Curly Hair in Yanzhou. Fang Zhao wouldn't feel assured leaving him at Muzhou either. The secrets that Curly Hair's body contained could not be made known to others, so staying beside him was the most appropriate.

After some consideration, Fang Zhao had also brought the "rabbit" along. He wasn't certain whether this "rabbit" might do anything shocking while he was furthering his studies, so he'd be better off keeping an eye on it.

Fang Zhao had gone through the school and dormitory's rules and regulations and had not seen any restrictions regarding pets, but people that were going to keep pets needed to produce all sorts of identification and sign an indemnity. He wouldn't be the only person in the building. Keeping pets was fine as long as it did not affect the other students.

Unlike those during the second round of examinations, the dormitories allocated to students that had been admitted were of high quality, around 100 square meters with two rooms, two halls, and two washrooms. One was a bedroom, while the other was a work studio. The studio alone took up close to half of the area.

For many people here, the work studio was even more important than the bedroom, so much so that eating, drinking, and toilet breaks could be all settled in the studio. The people here could decide on how to furnish the place themselves.

Artists had their ateliers and dancers had their practice rooms. Fang Zhao's own furnishings here were very simple for the time being. Besides the basics—a desk and a bookshelf—there was a music keyboard he had received as a reward when he had been in Qi'an Academy of Music, a commemorative helmet-style gaming console that Fiery Bird had sent over, and the water tank with the "rabbit."

Curly Hair ran all over the house happily as he patrolled his new territory. Fang Zhao had arranged a place for Zuo Yu and Yan Biao outside the school.

Fang Zhao had just replied to a message from Great-Grandfather Fang when he heard the doorbell ring.

His new neighbors from the dormitory next door were dropping in.

A man and a lady. They seemed to be much older than Fang Zhao.

The man was Will Branch, the genius painter whose results for the examinations were ranked second among students admitted in this year's intake of Twelve Tones students.

Unlike Will, Will's wife was much more cheerful and had even brought over some freshly baked cookies. It wasn't that she couldn't bear to part with some money to buy a more valuable gift but that the majority of people who enrolled in this advanced course weren't lacking in money. They wouldn't lack these sort of things. Since Will and Fang Zhao were both enrolled in this course and they would be neighbors, she had brought along a little token of sincerity. Even if Fang Zhao didn't eat it, he could also pass it on to his friends.

Printed on the lid of the cookie box was a painting done by Will in the past. It appeared really abstract. People who were not familiar with paintings might just think that it was blind and random strokes. However, back then, someone had offered to buy it for 6 million, but Will had not sold it.

At the corner of the painting, there was an imprint that looked like a "V"—this was Will's personal symbol.

Will's wife was a lecturer at some other school in Huangzhou and would not be staying here all the time. In addition, when Will started painting, he would not bother about anything else and would get annoyed if he was disturbed by others. Will's servants just delivered meals at set times while maintaining cleanliness and hygiene. They wouldn't dare say anything more. Most of the time, it was Will alone staying in his dormitory.

That was why Will's wife had come over to build up a relationship with his neighbors; she hoped that Fang Zhao would look out for Will sometimes.

Originally, Will's wife had not had any hope that Fang Zhao would be able to help out much. A young artistic genius would surely be different from ordinary people in some aspects. Perhaps he might be even less reliable than Will. But looking at things now, Fang Zhao did not seem to have the fickleness of a young person. He didn't appear to be ill at ease when facing them and instead gave off a steady and reliable vibe. With such a neighbor, she could rest easy.

Will frowned as he gazed at Curly Hair quietly sitting beside Fang Zhao's feet. "You are going to keep a dog here?"

"Mmhm, he is really quiet normally and is very obedient. He won't disturb the neighbors, and all the paperwork has already been done," replied Fang Zhao.

Previously, when he'd been setting up his living arrangements, Fang Zhao had filled in the column indicating that he kept pets. Whenever the dormitory admins allocated rooms, they took into account the requests of the students admitted to the advanced courses. If there were people who didn't like pets or had problems with pets, these people wouldn't be allocated next door to someone keeping pets. Of course, perhaps the other students might have forgotten to leave a remark.

Will's wife was worried that Fang Zhao would misunderstand, so she explained, "We don't have any issues with this. It will be all fine as long as he doesn't bark inconsiderately. Although the dormitory block has very good soundproofing, many people here like to open their windows rather than rely on the system's completely sealed environment."

"You don't have to worry about this. Curly Hair won't run around wildly and bark uncontrollably," Fang Zhao reassured them.

"That's good, then. However, a pet dog still needs accompaniment and exercise. When you are busy with your studies and composing, you will still have to bring him out to walk often. Don't spend all your time cooped up in the dormitory. If you don't like heading out, you can buy a treadmill and train him to run." Will's wife even recommended a few versions of treadmills that young people liked to use.

Will didn't say anything else on this matter, but his tightly constricted brows didn't loosen.

After sitting and chatting for a bit, Will and his wife took their leave. Just before they left, Fang Zhao asked them to wait. Some specialty products had been just sent over from planet Wai, so Fang Zhao gave Will and his wife some.

When Fang Zhao went over to the storeroom to take the stuff, Will, who was still frowning stared, at Curly Hair and walked over.

Curly Hair raised his head to look at the stranger. A pair of dog eyes, innocent and harmless in appearance.

Will stared at Curly Hair, then extended a hand to stroke him.

Chapter 338

Can't Even Afford a Dog

Will's wife had originally wanted to take a look at the furnishings in Fang Zhao's room and speculate whether Fang Zhao had had any special characteristics. When she turned around, she saw Will stroking the dog and immediately broke into a cold sweat. Her face was completely pale and she pulled Will back immediately.

"Do you not want your hand any longer?!"

A painter's hands were very precious. If his hands were bitten, even though medical technology was very advanced now, but what if? What if he was unable to fully restore his former skill? What if he was unable to paint out everything he pictured in his mind?

This was a rare occasion where Will's wife got angry. But since they were in someone else's home, it wouldn't be good to say too much. After she pulled Will away, he was met with a barrage of words. Only when she saw Fang Zhao bringing a bag of things over did she force a smile, but it seemed stiffer than before.

After Will and his wife left, Fang Zhao looked at Curly Hair. "Will might look unsociable, but he has no ill intentions."

Curly Hair wagged his tail and came over and whined.

Fang Zhao also knew what Curly Hair meant. "All right, your performance today wasn't bad. Go play."

Even before Fang Zhao finished the sentence, the little thing had dashed across the room, proficiently put on the gaming helmet, and started playing his games.

This dog's gaming addiction was getting stronger and stronger.

Next door, after Will and his wife returned to their own dormitory, his wife started reprimanding him for his inappropriate actions.

"You still dare to touch an unfamiliar dog! Have you forgotten what happened in the

past?"

When Will had been younger, he had been bitten by a dog as a result of a prank by some peers. The injuries had been a little serious, but he had recovered well. He had protected his arms especially well that time, so after healing, his painting skills hadn't been affected, but his legs had taken a while to fully recover. Also, New Era medical techniques were quite advanced, and the dog that had bitten him had been small. If it had been a large dog like those seen in Muzhou that had bitten Will, it would have been hard for him to even survive.

Thus, normally, when Will saw a dog, he kept his distance, and he was especially vigilant against unfamiliar dogs. Compared to his past behavior, his actions today were really unexpected.

Will seemed to be puzzled himself. "I just felt that dog was really extraordinary. It gave me an intense feeling."

"What sort of feeling?" his wife asked, suspicious.

Will's forehead creased tightly. "I felt like touching."

Will's wife: "..."

Seeing Will's perplexed manner, his wife probed, "You want to get a dog?"

Will didn't hesitate and replied, "I don't want to. Pets are too much trouble."

If he couldn't take care of himself normally, would he even keep a dog? Besides, this wasn't his own home, so he could not just leave these matter to servants or a housekeeper.

"Regardless of whether you wish to get one or not, just don't have any designs on the dog next door. Let's not talk about whether Fang Zhao is willing to sell or not. Even if he is willing to sell it, you won't be able to afford it." Will's wife continued to berate her husband, "I have checked, and the value of that ordinary-looking dog of Fang Zhao's was estimated at more than 200 million by an authoritative pet magazine! The money you earned from those paintings was spent a few days back purchasing antiques because you said you wanted to study ancient people's painting styles."

Faced with this pragmatic issue, Will paused for a bit and then said, "Old master's

words really make sense."

"What did your dad say?" Will's wife asked curiously.

"Not to me—he said it to my older cousin. He said that painting requires one to put in continuous effort to improve oneself. One must continuously try to surpass oneself. If not, the art that one produces can't even be worth as much as a dog."

That cousin of Will's had loved to look at the value of a painting in monetary terms. When Will's cousin was young, he had learned painting for the sake of earning money. He'd had talent but hadn't been hardworking enough, so the old master had said such words to incite him.

Although Will's paintings currently sold in the tens of millions range, and other than a few reputed great masters with many years of experience, it was really difficult to find someone comparable, it still wasn't enough to purchase Curly Hair.

"Indeed, if I don't continue to work hard, I won't even be able to afford a dog!" Will lamented while staring at his own hands.

Will's wife: "... No! Old master's context definitely didn't mean the sort of dog that is worth over 200 million!

Will's wife could not help but ask him, "Did you have any special feelings when you touched a dog worth over 200 million?"

"I felt like painting." Will also seemed to come to his senses when he spoke as he reminded himself before heading over to his atelier.

However, when Will sat in front of his canvas and picked up his brush, he found himself unable to move.

He couldn't paint anything.

He couldn't put his brush to the canvas!

Clearly, he'd just had an intense desire to paint, but upon sitting down, he realized that his mind was suddenly muddled. It was as if he had lost control of whatever inspiration he'd had, and he had no way of sorting it out!

Why was it like this?

Will was at a loss.

Whether it was a person or some objects, Will had his own methods of presenting them, but when he had decided to paint an object, even if the image in his mind wasn't clear, he would still have some lively outlines and colors. But now it was totally different. The outlines and colors he had in his head were just a dense fog! It was as if everything was hidden behind this fog and nothing could be seen clearly!

Will put his brush down, closed his eyes, and meditated.

Two hours later.

Meditation hadn't borne fruit.

When Will's wife came over, she saw Will facing his blank canvas and looking miserable. He wore a look of being unable to paint and feeling grievance.

According to past experiences, this meant that Will had encountered a difficult problem. If he could not find a way to solve it, he probably would not have any appetite.

Will's wife quietly knocked on the door. When Will looked over, she asked, "What's wrong?"

"I can't paint that dog."

"Can't paint it?" Will's wife looked at the blank canvas. She didn't understand too well, but she knew Will's way of thinking when he painted, so she suggested. "You can paint Fang Zhao first, the way he was next door, him sitting on the sofa and Curly Hair lying beside his feet. If you start with Fang Zhao, that might aid you in painting Curly Hair."

Will felt that this was feasible. It wasn't that he was unable to paint a dog, just that he wasn't able to create a painting of that dog next door. Since that was the case, he could try it out and start with painting the owner. Perhaps while painting, he would get clearer inspiration.

With this in mind, Will picked up his brush and starting working on the canvas.

However, after a few strokes, he stopped.

He couldn't continue painting.

Unable to continue.

So much so that the more he painted, the more his mind became muddled.

That shouldn't be the case.

Will appeared even more perplexed than before. Not only was he not able to paint a dog, he couldn't even paint a person, something he was very adept at!

Finally, Will decided to shelve this assignment. Following that, he altered the study plans he'd created when entering this advanced course. He once again submitted a new study-plan form to the guidance teachers.

The teaching methods of teachers in this advanced course were different from normal schooling. Teachers here did not get the students to do whatever they said. Rather, whatever the students wanted to do, the teachers would be there to help them realize their goals.

Thus, there were study-plan forms to let the teachers understand the advanced student's objectives and orientation. This way, they would be able to give focused guidance and have the best people in each specialized field impart their skills and knowledge.

Will's new study plan form did not see any huge changes, but he made changes to the two most important projects.

—————

During the period of advanced studies, my short-term objective: to paint Fang Zhao.

My final objective: to paint Fang Zhao's dog.

—————

Upon seeing the newly amended study plan, the guidance teachers for painting and calligraphy: "???"

Fang Zhao didn't know that Will was at a loss. He had just received his course schedule

for the first week and was preparing to welcome his advanced-studies curriculum.

Course schedules would vary, and only the nearest week's arrangements could be set. The lecturers weren't set either. If a certain great master was free this week, he might have a few sessions. In the following week, another great master might take over. Whoever had time would give lessons.

Every advanced student would receive a different course schedule. As their specialties, genres, and styles were different, there would also be differences in the teachers for each student.

The schedules weren't too tightly packed. Much of the time would be for advanced students to make their own choices. They could seek out a certain great master after lessons to discuss issues, or they could self-study and visit the library or some other location to polish their skills. Alternatively, they could seal themselves up and create their works, but they would need to give a heads up beforehand.

Fang Zhao's first lesson in the Twelve Tones advanced course was a collective class. Students with painting, calligraphy, dance, and music, as well as other specialties, would attend a class together. Besides the current batch, there were also other advanced students from past batches that had not left yet. With this, there were close to 30 people.

It wasn't that those advanced students from past batches had not met the graduating criteria for the course but rather that they still had some collaboration projects with the teachers that were not yet complete. Once these were complete, they would naturally leave.

For the new student's first lesson, it wasn't the lecturers speaking but those seniors from the previous batch speaking about study issues during the course, giving those without a clear niche some form of reference and making them think, What do you want to do in the future? What sort of heights can you reach?

For everyone else, seeing the 20-something Fang Zhao call a 100-plus-year-old person senior was extremely strange. But in Twelve Tones, these sorts of scenes were seen often. When the next batch of advanced students enrolled, regardless of how old they were, they would still have to call Fang Zhao "senior."

Regarding Fang Zhao, who was the youngest advanced student, at the start, others had

surely felt a little uncomfortable, but after all, everyone here had some status and was accomplished within their own domain.

The path of art was like a sort of religious practice, a form of cultivation. Their thoughts should be placed on upgrading themselves instead of spending time being jealous and so on. That sort of cultivation was no good.

The reason why academically inclined great masters did not really like people with an overly commercialized vibe was because they did not like placing too much of their thoughts on things that were not art. As for the private lives of these advanced students, the requirements weren't high.

Thus, once everyone had adjusted their mentalities, during the first lesson, Fang Zhao received care and concern from his seniors as well as fellow students from the same batch.

Outside the classroom, a few great masters who would be teaching were observing four of the new students this year. Of the four, Fang Zhao was the one they knew the least about, and he wasn't from a familiar family known for their art.

An elderly man looked at Fang Zhao in the classroom as he asked the person beside him, "This is the kid?"

In the eyes of these people who, on average, were 120 years old, at 20-plus years of age, Fang Zhao was just a little kid.

"Yes. Back then, Xue Jing brought this kid along on his global lecture tour. Mo Lang also thinks very highly of him," a different teacher voiced out.

"No wonder Mo Lang says that he wants to come to Twelve Tones to give a few lectures after his vacation ends."

"We will see whether he really has the ability when the course starts. From what we can see now, Fang Zhao does indeed have innate skill and talent. He doesn't seem to have that cupidity or fickleness. For him to have done so well at his age is already very difficult."

These people were really not focusing on and talking about Fang Zhao on purpose. If it was anybody not from the industry seated there, they would also be staring at Fang Zhao.

Because when looking inside the classroom, Fang Zhao was too conspicuous. He was like the only grandson sitting among a group of people who were like his grandparents or parents.

Chapter 339

New Assistant

Compared to the first test's graders, the instructors at HuangArt had a better impression of Fang Zhao. They had graded fairly in the second round of the admission exam. They hadn't known Fang Zhao, but they'd trusted Xue Jing and Mo Lang.

One's final ranking in the admission exam depended on their overall score. There were no interviews, because they weren't necessary. The candidates who were singled out by the initial graders were all known quantities. Even if someone used a pseudonym, the instructors could figure out whose disciple that person was with a quick read of their exam.

There wasn't much of a point to the interviews, so they had eventually been phased out.

The first class was the first time these music masters were able to observe Fang Zhao up close.

"He has great promise. He has his own style."

"The kid was nominated for a Galaxy Supernova Award this year."

"Oh? He was the one who received a nomination by special mention?"

"Come to think of it, now I remember. There was indeed a Fang Zhao on the list of special mentions."

"Did Xue Jing tell him about this?"

"Old Xue must have his reasons for not telling him. Let's not butt in. We should hold off on telling him for now as well."

Fang Zhao, who was sitting in the audience:... I heard everything you said.

The Galaxy Awards was the most prestigious prize in the arts world, second to none.

Supernova was a subcategory of the Galaxy Awards that honored young artists who had made a substantial contribution. It was awarded not just to musicians but also to up-and-coming painters, dancers, and actors.

Most winners were artists in their 40s or 50s, which was considered a young age in the New Era.

To be nominated in one's 20s was already a tremendous honor.

But Fang Zhao didn't understand what "special mention" meant.

Setting aside commercial value and considering only artistic achievement, Fang Zhao naturally paled in comparison to those artists in their 40s and 50s who had enjoyed fame for many years. He could not prove himself by passing the Twelve Tones exam alone.

The Galaxy Supernova "special mention" nomination was the equivalent of using VIP access, of cutting in line, but this alone did not turn off the masters at the academy. The nomination had to be irrefutably justified.

The Galaxy Awards put a premium on contribution, not commercial viability. Even if someone produced an outstanding piece, if they hadn't accumulated a critical mass of work or reached a certain level of artistic sophistication, they wouldn't be nominated.

Contribution, special mention...

A light bulb flashed in Fang Zhao's head.

The four-part "100-Year Period of Destruction" series, the Hull virus!

The "Period of Destruction" series had created a window for curing the Hull virus. Some five years had passed since then. With more systematic treatment protocols and better results, Ming Ye's condition had improved significantly. Even though he didn't speak much and his range of emotions was limited, at first glance, he didn't differ from the average person in a major way.

If that was the reason Fang Zhao had been nominated for a Galaxy Supernova Award, that meant a total cure for the Hull virus wasn't far off, if it hadn't been cured already.

Only that would prove the value of the four movements of the "Period of Destruction"

series and assuage these masters into allowing this shortcut, a nomination by special mention, with no qualms.

It had been five years. The organizers of the Galaxy Awards had kept quiet all along. It turned out they had been gearing up for a big move.

All things considered, the "Period of Destruction" series did constitute a major artistic contribution, and its influence spanned different fields, enough for the jurors to make an exception.

Fang Zhao was delighted when he figured out the reasoning, not because of the Supernova nomination but because his work paved the way for a cure to this disease that had originated during the Period of Destruction. He had never thought that his series might have such an impact when he'd composed it.

In any case, this was a good thing.

Since the masters had no intention of breaking the news to Fang Zhao just yet, he pretended he hadn't heard anything.

After his first day his classes, Fang Zhao returned to his dorm room, where he found Yan Biao and Zuo Yu waiting.

Fang Zhao had signed them up for a celebrity bodyguard course so they would have a better understanding of the kinds of situations bodyguards who worked in the entertainment industry faced and how to respond in a professional manner. They would learn how other bodyguards practiced their trade.

Yan Biao and Zuo Yu took no issue with the assignment. In fact, they were delighted. The fact that Fang Zhao was willing to sign them up for further studies meant he wanted to keep them around long-term.

So exciting! Not being fired is terrific news!

The two men were extremely enthusiastic. They promised Fang Zhao that they would brief him on their progress every few days. That was the purpose of their visit today.

Zuo Yu and Yan Biao had too much free time. Apart from the fact that Fang Zhao could handle himself very well, the two bodyguards were also inexperienced. On many occasions, Fang Zhao could deal with matters by himself more efficiently than if he

delegated the matter to them. Just a few days into the course and it had already made a difference. The two men realized many of their shortcomings. It was easier than learning on the job. This professional bodyguard course in Huangzhou lived up to its high price tag.

To prove they were serious about their studies, the two men took notes and let Fang Zhao examine them.

When Fang Zhao arrived, his neighbor Will also returned. He stared at Fang Zhao briefly before entering his own room, frowning.

After entering Fang Zhao's room, Yan Biao couldn't help but blurt out, "Boss, is your neighbor..." a nutcase ?

Yan Biao didn't finish his sentence. He felt the guy next door had looked at Fang Zhao weirdly, like a voyeur. But passing judgment based on a mere look didn't seem appropriate, so he'd held back.

"I've asked him about it. He wants to paint a portrait of me, but he's stuck. He needs to observe me some more." Fang Zhao had figured out the reason behind the odd behavior, but he still wasn't entirely clear on why Will was stuck. Painters had their own way of doing things. Fang Zhao wasn't about to quibble with him over the occasional stare.

After briefing Fang Zhao on their progress and letting him inspect their notes, Yan Biao blurted out, "Boss, do you need an assistant? I have a former comrade who has been working in Huangzhou since he retired from the military. He knows the entertainment industry well, has a lively personality, and is meticulous and smooth."

Fang Zhao nodded. "Go on."

Yan Biao was delighted and gave the lowdown on his former teammate.

"His name is Nanfeng, as in southern wind. He used to be a member of Outpost No. 23 too. He was a sniper. Unfortunately, he injured his left eye during an operation. Back then, Baiji had still been poor, and the medical infrastructure had been primitive, so his treatment was delayed. Eventually, he retired and returned to Earth, where he had a prosthetic eye implanted at a military hospital. Then, armed with his pension and discharge payment, he moved to Huangzhou."

Because he hadn't notched any major merits and his length of service had been short, Nanfeng's discharge payment had been meager. He worked as a bodyguard and an extra. Even though he was skinny and short, he was quick with his hands and got along well with his colleagues. He was also quick on his feet and diplomatic. He had fared well compared to most other folks.

Last month, Nanfeng had used his hard-earned savings to upgrade to an artificially intelligent left eye. Now that he was strapped for cash again, he was looking for new work. Lo and behold, he'd run into Yan Biao one day.

Fang Zhao got a decent grasp of Nanfeng's situation from Yan Biao's briefing. "I don't have class tomorrow afternoon. See if he has time for a meeting."

"Of course! Of course! He has all the time in the world," Yan Biao blurted out.

"Then let's meet tomorrow at 3 p.m. in your apartment."

"Oh?" Yan Biao froze. "There's no need for Boss to make the trip personally. I can bring him here."

"It's OK. I'll come over."

Since Fang Zhao had made up his mind, Yan Biao didn't press the matter. After leaving Fang Zhao's apartment, he gave Nanfeng a call.

Nanfeng was quite emotional. "Thank you, Captain!"

He had actually been quite sad when he'd run into his former captain and learned that Yan Biao had been forced into retirement after losing his legs in a terrorist attack. Baiji's fortunes had improved vastly, so it was a shame that Yan Biao had had to quit the military so early due to an injury. But after learning about Yan Biao's current line of work, Nanfeng had almost lost it.

He wanted a piece of that easy money!

But he also understood that if he didn't show initiative and complacently twiddled his thumbs, he wouldn't survive for long.

Nanfeng was confident that he was quite the well-rounded employee—he was a good waiter, he could drive, cook, walk the dog, and feed the rabbit, he knew how to handle

interpersonal relationships, and he was willing to put himself at his boss's beck and call.

Besides, based on what Yan Biao had said, he figured Fang Zhao would be easy to get along with. As long as he did his job, Fang Zhao wouldn't give him a hard time.

"Don't thank me now. Thank me after you've impressed our boss. Remember to show up early tomorrow. Don't make boss wait," Yan Biao said.

"No, I'm going to head over now." Nanfeng was ecstatic. "I have quite a few questions for Captain. I need to learn about boss's preferences so I can do a good job. Captain, my future is in your hands!"

"Sure, why not?"

Nanfeng brought appetizers, barbecued meat, and a few cans of beer.

"Let's skip the alcohol," Yan Biao said.

Zuo Yu agreed, "It wouldn't be a good idea to reek of alcohol when Boss shows up tomorrow." Zuo Yu gave this prospective colleague a few pointers. He also asked, "So how's your tolerance?"

"Oh, don't you worry about that! Don't be fooled by my stature. I actually have decent tolerance. I can drink on boss's behalf in the future!" Nanfeng said with a chuckle.

Zuo examined Nanfeng's new left eye curiously. "Your new eye is really high-quality. It looks no different from the real thing." He could tell the difference up close, but from a distance, it looked like a real eye.

"Of course." Nanfeng was quite happy with his new eye. "It cost more than 10 million dollars. It took me seven years to save up."

Technological advancements in the New Era brought conveniences to the handicapped. Take Yan Biao's prosthetic legs and Nanfeng's eye, for example.

"Do you have X-ray vision? Can you see through walls?" Zuo Yu asked.

"Of course not! Civilian models are all heavily restricted. I didn't want that many new functions either. I was happy as long as it could restore my vision."

"Why is it so expensive if it has so few functions?" Zuo Yu wondered.

"There's no way around it. Quality costs. Inferior models will hurt me here." Nanfeng pointed at his head. "There's the risk of dementia."

"So your new eye has no additional functions?" Yan Biao asked.

"Of course it does!" Nanfeng crept closer. "Look at my left eye."

The color of Nanfeng's left iris turned from white to red, then yellow, green, jade, blue, purple, and finally black.

"Look, the full range of color variation!"

Yan Biao: "..."

Zuo Yu opened his mouth but decided it was better to stay mum. This team member of Yan Biao's is indeed quite the character!

Nanfeng adjusted his eye color back to normal. He noticed that Yan Biao's face had gone black. He slapped himself on the chest and proclaimed, "Don't worry, Captain. I know more than you do about how to be a good celebrity assistant!"

"No, it's not that. I just want to remind you that our boss is a bit different. He's not the average celebrity," Yan Biao said.

"How different?" Nanfeng asked.

Yan Biao didn't respond directly, instead asking, "Have you watched the Yanzhou chapter of 'Founding Era'?"

"I started watching yesterday. I'm on season five now." Nanfeng wasn't from Yanzhou and had never watched the Yanzhou chapter before. He had crammed them only because he was applying to become Fang Zhao's assistant. And he'd fast-forwarded through the show, playing only the segments where Fang Zhao appeared. It might come in handy for brownnosing.

"Our boss's solo fighting ability is no different than in the show," Yan Biao said.

Nanfeng wore an expression that said "You're f*cking kidding me." He glanced at Zuo

Yu for confirmation.

A serious-looking Zuo Yu nodded, then pointed to himself, Yan Biao, and Nanfeng before saying, "Believe it or not, with his bare hands, Boss could beat the three of us into pulp."

Nanfeng started to tremble.

Chapter 340

Boss, Rest Easy and Allow Me!

Nanfeng, who felt he had quite a bit of work experience, started to get nervous.

He did more research on Fang Zhao, but the information he gathered was all superficial, stuff that he had already known. As for insider information, Yan Biao wouldn't reveal too much about Fang Zhao before Nanfeng was officially hired as an assistant.

He could ask friends to uncover unreported tidbits through other means, but if he did that, he could kiss his job goodbye.

For now, all Nanfeng could do was extrapolate from the info he gathered online.

When Yan Biao and Zuo Yu got up the next morning, they saw Nanfeng using a device they had never seen before to conceal his puffy eyes.

"Captain, the more I think about the gig, the more nervous I get," Nanfeng said.

"You're not mentally tough enough. You're regressing." Yan Biao started to wonder whether Nanfeng would be able to grip his gun properly during an emergency.

"Oi, I was affected by what you said. You said that the boss is different from other celebrities, so my prior experience is irrelevant. Now I feel like I don't even know what to say. Captain, what do you suggest? What should I say when I see the boss this afternoon?" Nanfeng asked.

"Just call it as it is. Don't embellish and don't be too humble. Boss doesn't buy that crap," Yan Biao said.

"Understood!"

"In any case, behave yourself!"

Nanfeng nodded vigorously. "Rest assured, Captain! I will be on my best behavior.

After all, I have plenty of experience working in Huangzhou. I want to let the boss know that I know the rules of the entertainment industry, that I can start the job right away and deal with any challenges that come my way!"

Fang Zhao arrived at 3 p.m. on the dot. When he entered, he noticed the floor was sparkling clean and the apartment was very tidy. There was not a speck to be found on the windows.

In anticipation of their boss's scrutiny, Zuo Yu and Yan Biao had cleaned their apartment meticulously, personally attending to nooks and crannies that might otherwise have been easily missed.

"How do you do? I'm Nanfeng, as in southern wind." Nanfeng tried hard to smile naturally, but he was so nervous that it came off as awkward.

Fang Zhao gestured to a neighboring chair. "Don't be nervous."

Nanfeng's teeth were clattering as he said, "I'm n-not nervous!"

Yan Biao resisted the temptation to slap Nanfeng in the face. He briefed Fang Zhao on Nanfeng's personal history. When he got to the part about Nanfeng's new prosthetic eye, he glared at his former teammate.

At this point, Nanfeng recovered his senses. His quick thinking was back and his attention sharp. He explained to Fang Zhao how he had earned the money for his new eye.

Ten million was not a small sum for the average Joe. Most people couldn't earn that amount in a lifetime. Fang Zhao had to be wondering how someone with as little job stability as Nanfeng had been able to get his hands on so much cash. And why did this guy want to become his assistant? Would he be a dedicated employee?

Take Yan Biao and Zuo Yu, for example. They might not be able to earn 10 million after 10 years in the bodyguard business unless some major events happened and they were awarded bonuses.

So on this matter, Nanfeng had to thoroughly explain himself to Fang Zhao.

Nanfeng took a few sips of water, paused, and said, "I didn't make a lot of money my first two years in Huangzhou, just enough to cover my expenses. During my military

service, I had been quite out of touch. I hadn't had much work experience before joining the military. When I left the military, it took me some time to adjust, to learn how to handle my affairs and personal relationships. Things started improving after I got to know my surroundings and built up a personal network. I invested in a low-budget TV series made by a few university students. The year before last, the returns were quite good. I earned nearly 5 million that year between my dividends and the return on the investment."

When he had seen his income statement, Nanfeng had felt like he was on Cloud Nine, but soon, he'd realized that Huangzhou was home to many high-income individuals. Small potatoes like him barely caused a ripple.

Now, Nanfeng had stopped investing in TV productions for a couple of reasons: firstly, he had run out of cash, and secondly, his previous collaborators had made it to the big leagues and were now backed by major corporations. He was fortunate enough to have come across that one investment opportunity. He wouldn't always be so lucky. There were plenty of smart investors in Huangzhou. He was a nobody.

"So you don't have to worry about the source of the cash. I didn't earn money through illegal means."

Huangzhou was full of opportunities, but one would have to work hard. Whether or not someone could strike it rich depended on their talent. It hadn't been easy for Nanfeng these past few years. He had been so busy that he'd felt like a constantly spinning top. He'd wished he had multiple brains that could function concurrently. There were no free lunches. Life was a constant learning experience.

But now Nanfeng had his future mapped out.

Many folks said that if you were to identify the entertainment industry with a color, it would be gold mixed with black. Money came quickly, but it was also easy to make enemies. But Nanfeng liked the industry. He could get used to things.

felt that being Fang Zhao's assistant was a decent position. Fang Zhao wasn't short on cash, so he didn't have to venture into illegal dealings. Also, word was that Fang Zhao was connected in the military. Connections were a good thing, a form of protection. Not to mention that one of Fang Zhao's bodyguards was Nanfeng's former captain, an old friend. The salary that Fang Zhao could offer certainly would pale in comparison to his investment returns, but it would be high by industry standards.

The bottom line was that this was Nanfeng's best job prospect right now.

After he had accumulated enough experience as an assistant, Nanfeng was confident that he could become a talent agent, build his own team, and produce a few superstars. It would be the pinnacle of his life!

The only thing that worried Nanfeng was Fang Zhao's positioning in the industry. From what he could see, Fang Zhao was more of the artsy variety. This was an area that Nanfeng was less familiar with.

Nonetheless...

Nanfeng went for the hard sell. "I will do my best as an assistant so you can focus on your studies and composition and have time to rest, Boss. I will take care of Boss's daily chores, walk the dog, and feed the 'rabbit.' I will plan your trips in advance and even double as a bodyguard."

Zuo Yu and Yan Biao stared him down immediately.

Double as a bodyguard? What do you think we are, window dressing? Why would we need an assistant to double as a bodyguard?

What a f*cking calculating fella this Nanfeng is! Zuo Yu thought to himself.

After Nanfeng finished his spiel, he looked at Fang Zhao expectantly. "Why don't I start on a probationary basis? You can decide whether or not to keep me after my probation."

Fang Zhao stared at Nanfeng for a few seconds and nodded. "One month's probation. I'll send you a contract when I get home."

"Wow! Yes, Boss!" Nanfeng worked hard to contain his emotions. He wanted to show that he was a steady hand.

"Is there anything Boss wants to eat? I'll order the ingredients." Nanfeng wanted to show off his cooking skills to his new boss and two colleagues and make a good impression. He wanted to prove he wasn't lying.

"That won't be necessary. I'm heading back to campus. Yan Biao is a former comrade. Why don't you stay and catch up with him? You can come by campus tomorrow to sign

your contract," Fang Zhao said as he got up.

"No, no, no. Boss, let me head back to campus with you so I can familiarize myself with the route," Nanfeng said while getting up himself.

Are you kidding me? He could catch up with his comrade later. He had just been hired as an assistant, on a probationary basis no less. He had to seize the chance to impress his boss.

"Boss, where's your car? I'll pick it up," Nanfeng asked.

"I didn't drive. I walked from HuangArt," Fang Zhao said.

"Then should I call a car?" Nanfeng asked.

"I'm going to walk back."

"Great idea! It's good exercise. Boss, let me walk back with you."

Zuo Yu and Yan Biao silently observed Nanfeng's shameless sycophancy, which got them thinking that they weren't doing their best.

The two bodyguards also wanted to walk Fang Zhao back to HuangArt, but Fang Zhao told them to stay put.

After leaving the apartment, Fang Zhao took the elevator to the first floor instead of using the bridges that connected the apartment blocks.

He was wearing a hoodie, which was common apparel in this neighborhood. Add to that a baseball cap and unless someone stood right in front of Fang Zhao and stared, they wouldn't be able to recognize him. Plus, Fang Zhao wasn't as popular in Huangzhou as he was in Yanzhou. Fewer people would go out of their way to identify him.

Huangzhou also had its share of high rises. The apartment block where Zuo Yu and Yan Biao lived was home to a lot of students and workers from other continents, but the rent varied significantly within the same building. The lower the floor, the cheaper the rent. The brighter the unit, the more expensive the rent became.

Huangcheng, the capital of Huangzhou, was also known as Phoenix. This had been a

forgotten wasteland during the Old Era. It had also been an important battlefield during the Period of Destruction, but in the New Era, it was the world's leading metropolis, far more prosperous than Qi'an.

The buildings were towering and the streets separating them weren't that wide, but it wasn't dark at street level because the streets were properly lit.

The gaps between the skyscrapers were lit up in an artistic fashion. Even the lighting layout in the lower floors was aesthetically pleasing.

Nanfeng noticed that Fang Zhao was quite interested in the lighting, so he shared some stories he had heard.

"This is probably a typical black street in Huangcheng, but unlike black streets in other cities, they aren't poorly lit and are much safer. Strictly speaking, there are no black streets in Huangcheng. The lighting here was designed by a world-famous artist. Quite a few artists who studied in Huangzhou rented places in this neighborhood. Do you see the trash can over there? The painting on it was done by an artist before he became famous. Eventually, it was preserved and locked up."

While Nanfeng was telling Fang Zhao stories, a nondescript TV broadcast van was parked the next block over.

Inside, a middle-aged man was pointing at an online map and whispering.

"The office workers haven't left work yet and the homebodies aren't out either. The streets are quite empty. The timing is perfect, just the right number of people. There are two young men the next block over. Walk past them, make this turn, and you'll see someone smoking by a garbage can. Then head this way and you'll see a couple in the corner, then..."

There were two people next to the man barking instructions. One was a pretty, sweet-looking young blonde in a red dress, and the other a big chiseled fella whose arms and neck were covered with menacing tattoos. He had "Don't mess with me" written all over him. The duo paid close attention to the instructions.

"Remember your route. This time, you'll be passing nine people. See if any of the nine are willing to intervene."

The trio was working for a live TV show that exposed shortcomings in human nature.

Today they wanted to show online audiences how few people were willing to stick their necks out when they ran into other folks in distress in daily life.

The middle-aged man was the host. He relied on his quick wit rather than good looks. He knew how to come up with gimmicks that attracted viewers.

The two folks standing in front of the host were both acting graduates from HuangArt. They weren't well known, but both were competent actors. HuangArt graduates were all works of art, as they say. The two were solid actors. The host had paid them handsomely to be part of his show.

"Got it?" the host asked.

"Got it!" the duo responded.

The host took one final look at the two actors and wasn't satisfied. He summoned his makeup artist. "Add some finishing touches! Prop master, where's our knife? Is the knife ready?"

"Yes, yes!" The prop master dashed over to hand a "bloodied" knife to the big fella.

The makeup artist added a few fake wounds to the blonde in red and drew a few fierce-looking wrinkles on the big fella's face.

"Are our cameras ready?"

The cinematographer signaled OK. He had deployed a fleet of miniature drones.

After making sure that everyone was ready, the host went live. He kicked off with a sensational introduction before cueing the action.

"We're all set. Let's see whether folks stay put or intervene when they run into a robbery."

"We have no idea who we'll run into or what their backgrounds will be. This is reality TV. Out of respect for the pedestrians, their faces will be obscured."

"OK, our actors can start!"

The host gestured to the two actors, who instantly shifted into character.

The blonde in red roughed up her hair and her sweet smile was replaced with one of anger, sadness, and desperation.

The big fella lost his kindly face and replaced it with a vicious look. Coupled with his giant build, tattoos, and thug haircut, no one would mistake him for the good guy.

Carrying the "bloodied" knife, the big fella got off to a head start while the lady in red, who was trailing behind, screamed at the top of her lungs, "Robbery!"

The cameras clearly captured the surroundings of the two actors. The audience was clueless as to where the location was. There were also many viewers tuning in from outside of Huangzhou. Curious viewers from around the world were turning to their screens in earnest while munching on snacks.

Two silhouettes could be spotted on the route the big fella and the blonde in red were taking. Even from a distance, they seemed young.

The first person, who was wearing a cap, appeared calm when he saw the two actors pass by, while the other, a shorter man, looked on earnestly, eyes sparkling.

This doesn't smell right! The tattooed big fella and the blonde in red hesitated briefly, but they kept running.

Meanwhile, Nanfeng was ecstatic.

The cry of "robbery" had jolted him to his senses. Now that he saw two people run by, he started flexing his limbs.

Here it was! The opportunity to prove his worth!

Nanfeng took a giant step in front of Fang Zhao and said, "Boss, rest easy and allow me!"

The way Nanfeng saw it, anyone who served at the side of a strong fighter like Fang Zhao, even if they were a lowly assistant, had to be able to fight!

Chapter 341

Can I Touch?

With close to 10 million viewers worldwide spectating, Nanfeng proceeded to beat the guy up.

The other party was caught off guard and was entirely stupefied.

Nanfeng knew how to use his own advantages and the most effective ways to bring someone down. In any case, he had once served the military on the rough and remote planet Baiji. He was someone that had wielded guns and fought beasts. He had a wealth of actual combat experience. However, his experience running minor roles and being a stuntman in Huangcheng had led to him learning how to dazzle with fancy moves.

Thus, although Nanfeng's actions seemed garish and a tad superfluous, but they were nice to watch and could shock industry outsiders, such as those online audiences.

Although though Fang Zhao could see that those attacks of Nanfeng's were slightly superfluous, to others, Nanfeng's movements were too quick. They simply wouldn't be able to react. The burly fella had already been pinned to the ground and his dagger forcibly seized.

The pretty blonde in red behind ran up anxiously and tugged at Nanfeng.

"Stop beating him, stop beating him! Misunderstanding! It's really a misunderstanding! We are just doing a program! Look, there are drones following us."

The blonde in red pointed at a few miniature drones that looked like houseflies following them in the air.

Following that, other crew from the livestream team hurried over. They hadn't expected the first pair of pedestrians on the planned route to take action either.

When the program host had seen the other party's skill through the video feed, he knew that this wasn't someone to trifle with. Thus, he had immediately left the TV

broadcast van and run over, worried that something might go wrong if they were a step too late. It was best to clear up this sort of misunderstanding as soon as possible.

Unlike the program crew's panic, online audiences were overjoyed. The comments section was filled with strings of "Hahahaha."

"See, haven't they encountered a strong person?"

"I know where it is just from the backdrop. Only Huangcheng's black streets have these sorts of lights. I just don't know which street it is."

"People from the black streets are more unreasonable, and there are quite a lot of experts. Indeed Huangcheng deserves its reputation. Even an unremarkable person can settle this so cleanly."

"They should have prepared to get beaten when producing this week's episode. There are still people that will uphold justice and aid others. See, didn't they just get beaten by a pedestrian?"

The host rushed to the scene and saw the blond in red supporting the burly fella. They seemed to be all right, so he heaved a sigh of relief before intending to explain what was going on to these two pedestrians. But when he saw that person in the hoodie and baseball cap, he stood there blankly and even forgot what he had wanted to say.

The host could suppress his astonishment, but the other crew members of the program weren't able to hold their words.

"Fang Zhao?!" someone exclaimed in astonishment.

This place wasn't too far away from HuangArt. Because there were crewmembers that were HuangArt graduates, they paid attention to news about their alma mater. They had previously seen quite a bit of news about Fang Zhao being admitted to Twelve Tones and had privately discussed this person. The host had even had plans to invite Fang Zhao to show his face on an episode of this program. However, since people that entered Twelve Tones rarely had any interaction with outside entertainment programs, the host had given up the idea. He had not expected to run into Fang Zhao here.

Other crew members that hadn't noticed looked over when they heard "Fang Zhao."

Nanfeng immediately stood in front of Fang Zhao. However, he was much shorter than Fang Zhao and couldn't even obstruct Fang Zhao's chin.

Netizens watching the livestream who had just been commenting "Hahahaha" suddenly heard "Fang Zhao," and many of them were astonished as well.

"Fang Zhao?"

"Did I hear wrongly? Quick, tell me! Did I actually hear that person say 'Fang Zhao'?"

"Remove the censor! Why is there mosaic at this crucial point!"

"Even though we can't see that person's face, from their reactions as well as that person's figure, there is a possibility that it is Fang Zhao."

"Shouldn't the focus be on why Fang Zhao, who is furthering his studies at HuangArt, has actually appeared in Huangcheng's black streets?"

"Nonsense. Huangcheng doesn't have black streets."

"Why aren't there any? Just because lights are installed doesn't mean that you can stop calling it a black street. The characteristics are the same!"

"Previously, we heard that Fang Zhao came from a black street. Perhaps he knows some people there."

"Was the one who stepped up to help Fang Zhao's bodyguard?"

"Shouldn't it be 'younger brother' in the black streets? That's how it is on TV shows."

"Hurry, hurry, hurry! Huangzhou entertainment reporters, get to work!"

The camera view changed. It was no longer looking at Fang Zhao but at his surroundings.

This made the audience dissatisfied. In the comments section of the live broadcast, the audience urged the host to switch the camera back and remove the mosaic.

The host shot a meaningful glance to that tattooed fella. The burly bloke the size of a bear nodded his head faintly, and when the camera faced him, he shrunk back and his

vicious face became somewhat wacky. What they were trying to tell audiences was that their team had principles and would not film others against their will or generate discussion just to attract everyone's attention.

After Fang Zhao saw the camera moving away, he apologized to the host that came walking over. "Sorry, my assistant was a little rough."

Nanfeng stood obediently at the side looking apologetic. "I'm really sorry, I didn't know you all were acting. When I saw that aggressive man with a knife running over, I was worried that he would hurt my boss, so I acted. But I didn't go all out, so he is fine."

The host hurriedly said, "It's all right, I can understand your reactions. Our program is a test of human nature, we wanted to see how people would react to this sort of situation. Lending a helping hand is actually a good thing, and it shows everyone a good example."

After introducing the main intention of the program, the host looked toward Fang Zhao with gratification and zeal. "I didn't expect to see you here."

The hidden meaning behind this was thus: Aren't you undergoing further studies at HuangArt? Aren't Twelve Tones advanced course students a bunch of study freaks? How do you still have time to visit Huangcheng's black streets? Hurry up and explain yourself, you can't deceive me!

"I'm here to visit a friend," Fang Zhao answered briefly.

The host didn't believe these words. However, he put on an expression that said "Oh, so that's the case" and asked for an interview, but Fang Zhao declined.

The host didn't insist after seeing Fang Zhao's expression, but he wasn't resigned to giving up such a good opportunity to take advantage of Fang Zhao's popularity. In Huangzhou, Fang Zhao's popularity might be limited, but this live broadcast was to a global audience, people from all twelve continents.

As the subject changed, the anchor had some anticipation as he asked Fang Zhao, "Our staff accidentally shouted out your name just now, but during the process of our live broadcast, all pedestrians' faces are covered by mosaics, so the audience didn't see your face clearly. Now, there are over 10 million viewers—"

"30 million," a crew member quietly interjected. "About to reach 40 million... It has reached 40 million."

The host's heart was beating like mad. While not doing anything special, the online viewers had already reached 40 million. In the past, the highest viewership count had been only 20 million. This figure now simply made him want to shout out in joy. However, he was an experienced host and knew how to keep his appearance in check.

The host warmly tried to earn a few more brownie points with Fang Zhao and eagerly asked, "Zhao god, how about saying hello to everyone. Just a few minutes will do. We won't take up any of your time."

Fang Zhao nodded. "All right."

The host suppressed his ecstasy, which was threatening to overflow, and signaled to bring the camera over quickly as he took the brief gap to peek at the online viewership. It had already crossed the 50 million mark and was rising to the 60 million mark without any signs of slowing. Perhaps with some operations to stir up discussion, the figure might even hit 100 million!

One hundred million, that was the goal set this year. As long as they were able to achieve it just once, it would be satisfactory. Now, just half a year in, there was actually a chance!

Before the camera, Fang Zhao's expression was much gentler as he smiled and greeted the online audiences. "Good afternoon, everyone. I am Fang Zhao."

Online audiences weren't satisfied, especially those that had switched over from other channels upon hearing the news.

"Of course we know you are Fang Zhao!"

"Can't you say more?"

The live broadcast's comment section got noisy once more when they heard Fang Zhao saying, "I'm here to visit a friend as well as to appreciate the art and culture of Huangcheng's streets. I hope to benefit from this city that indeed has a strong artistic flavor. I can't stay any longer, as I still have something to do. Everyone, please continue."

Fang Zhao raised his hand to make a "bye" gesture, but new audience members that had just joined the live broadcast weren't satisfied.

"Leaving just like that?"

"Won't even say just one more line?"

"Yeah, saying one more line is fine! I haven't even taken a screenshot yet."

The host, standing to Fang Zhao's side, also urged, "Zhao god, do say a little more. Consider it ending on a good note."

To the side, Nanfeng frowned and took a step forward, intending to help Fang Zhao settle the problem at hand. He understood too well about how these hosts tried to take advantage of others' popularity. All they were concerned about was the traffic of their own program and the viewership count. As long as Fang Zhao continued to talk, they would come out with more and more excuses to get Fang Zhao to speak. They wouldn't let him leave easily. If he gave them an inch, they'd take a mile. These people were best at taking advantage of others.

If Fang Zhao didn't want to speak, he would be labeled a diva, as having an inflated ego, or other such terms regardless of whether it was true or not.

Fans of Fang Zhao were not the main focus of this live broadcast. If the commentary developed in an unfavorable direction, once it started, it would be even more troublesome.

It wasn't that Nanfeng always considered the worst but that he had seen these things happen frequently in the entertainment industry. It was best to guard against them from the beginning.

But before Nanfeng was able to act, Fang Zhao spoke. As before Fang Zhao, had a faint smile, but people who saw his smile felt a little uneasy, as though they were facing "affection" from their own grandparents. "Have you done your homework? Have you prepared for your final exams? Have you completed your month-end work summary?"

Online audiences: "..."

This person was simply venomous!

"I skipped class to watch the live broadcast. Suddenly, I feel as if I have been stabbed through my chest."

"Ah ah ah, why must you remind me that I still have to fight the god-tier boss known as the 'final exams'!"

"The image of my superior's devilish face just appeared in my head. That scared me and made me tremble even on a hot day like this."

"I quit being a fan! I want to report Fang Zhao for a personal attack. My mind and body took a beating!"

"I'm going to become an antifan! Only if he sends me one of those protective charms will I return!"

"One isn't enough! I want 10 protective charms to alleviate this stab that has pricked my heart!"

"Disperse, everyone, disperse. Do your homework, and hurry and review your exam materials. Those that have reports to write, think about your own salary."

Thus, the host watched as the livestream's viewership count, which had soared to 70 million, experienced a sharp decline thanks to that line from Fang Zhao.

The previous shining live broadcast viewership count was like a wild mare that had thrown off its rider and run off into the distance, never to return.

All the crew members of the program: "..."

Their wish for 100 million viewers, which they'd made as part of their new year plans, was no longer achievable.

A chilly feeling swept through their hearts.

The host really wanted to give his mouth a tight slap.

You and your cheap mouth!

Why did you ask Fang Zhao to add another line!

The host seemed to suck in his bitter tears as he watched Fang Zhao leave.

Nanfeng tried to stifle his laughs and only manage to gradually become serious when they reached HuangArt's campus.

"Boss, I have a confession to make"

Fang Zhao eyed him. "Speak."

Saying Fang Zhao's apparently all-knowing look, Nanfeng felt frightened deep down. Luckily he had remembered Yan Biao's repeated exhortations. Don't try to be too smart with the boss or play tricks. If you make any mistakes, admit them as soon as possible.

"Actually, I could tell that they were acting, but I don't really like these sort of programs. Boss, maybe you do not know, but in the past, there were instances were distasteful incidents that happened on these sort of programs, so I dislike them."

Nanfeng told Fang Zhao about some of the negative influence brought about by reality TV shows that he had seen.

There were some things that shouldn't be tested.

Human nature by itself was already very complex. The majority of people producing these sorts of programs thought that they would be able to grasp the overall situation while just observing from the side. They assumed an attitude of superiority to denounce others' actions for not being appropriate and led audiences to pass judgment.

Actually, Nanfeng had found these sort of programs rather meaningful at the start, but later on, when he'd experienced more, Nanfeng had become unsure whether these programs were good or bad, but he didn't like the program deliberately testing human nature and found it irksome.

After explaining his thoughts, Nanfeng scratched his head. "Actually, I only used it as a pretext to teach them a lesson and perform a little in front of you, Boss. But Boss, I'm sure you could also tell they were acting, right?"

"I knew about it before they appeared." Actually, Fang Zhao didn't like these sorts of programs either. Human nature was complex and he had seen too much of it during

the Period of Destruction. Being able to see through this and control the situation to a certain extent, it seemed like Nanfeng had experienced quite a lot.

"Boss, you are really impressive! How did you know..." Nanfeng was halfway through his sentence when he remembered reading up on Fang Zhao's past deeds and the nicknames "Diting" and "Divine Ears."

"I heard it," replied Fang Zhao.

Indeed. Now Nanfeng was rejoicing for being honest.

"Boss, you are really impressive! Previously, I thought that all the talk online about your 'Divine Ears' were just adulation, but now it seems like they really are divine!"

Noticing that Fang Zhao wasn't angry, Nanfeng relaxed and continued to be a toady right up until he stepped into Fang Zhao's quarters and saw Curly Hair.

"This, this, this... Isn't this the Curly Hair with a valuation of 200 million?"

A living \$200 million dog! Right in front of his eyes!

Nanfeng was so excited that he bit his knuckles to stop himself from shouting out.

Nanfeng's voice trembled slightly as he said, "Boss, can I touch him?"

Fang Zhao eyed Curly Hair and replied, "Sure. You will have to bring him out for walks in the future. You can get familiar with him first."

Nanfeng struggled to control his overflowing excitement and became nervous. "It's my first time touching a dog of this level. Should I touch him directly or do I wear a glove?"

Fang Zhao: "...Touch him directly."

Then, Fang Zhao watched as Nanfeng ran to the washroom and washed his hands three times with soap and dried them before proceeding to touch the dog. He was treating the dog like precious and fragile chinaware.

Luckily, Nanfeng remembered his responsibilities, and after touching the dog, he followed beside Fang Zhao to learn the scope of his job.

When he saw the "rabbit" in the water tank, Nanfeng's eyes lit up.

But when Nanfeng opened his mouth, Fang Zhao spoke first. "You can't touch this."

"Oh, got it! I won't touch it if Boss doesn't give approval!" Nanfeng expressed immediately.

"It is poisonous."

"Got it, Boss! I absolutely wouldn't touch it!" Nanfeng answered even more firmly.

Actually, there really wasn't a lot of things Nanfeng needed to do on normal days, so Fang Zhao didn't talk about it for too long. He drafted out a probationary contract and discussed wages and benefits, and Nanfeng signed it immediately.

"Then, Boss, I will head back today to prepare first. I'll come over tomorrow."

Having received Fang Zhao's approval, Nanfeng left. However, he didn't return home. Instead, he went over to Yan Biao's.

"Hahaha, Captain, I have seen that dog already! That is a \$200 million dog. This is my first time seeing one! I even touched it! With two hands too! That fur is so soft. It's worthy of being a \$200 million dog! Its canines are so white, even whiter than my own, which I tend to so carefully. As expected from a dog with a value of 200 million..."

At the side, Zuo Yu's mouth twitched. This schemer had even started kissing the dog's *ss!

Seeing Nanfeng mentioning "200 million" in every sentence, Yan Biao couldn't help but interrupt him. "Curly Hair's value cannot be measured easily by monetary value alone."

Right now, Yan Biao couldn't tell Nanfeng about Curly Hair's service and security checks in Wai military base. All he could do was remind Nanfeng that this dog's value couldn't be measured by money. There was only one dog alive in the entire world that was even more effective than the security screening machines at spaceports. Over at Muzhou, many people had ideas of poaching him, while Wai base kept having evil intentions of keeping Curly Hair for themselves. How could he be worth just 200 million? Those parties might even be willing to spend a few times that amount.

Nanfeng went blank for a second, and the excitement on his face subsided. Looking slightly ashamed, he said solemnly, "I understand now. Captain, your reprimand was correct!"

Yan Biao was even more at a loss. What do you understand? Which part of my sentence was reprimanding you? I was just stating a fact!

Nanfeng was minding his own business and reflecting. "I know that I have become snobbish already. Even when it comes to aesthetics, I can only view them from a monetary point of view. Those experiences of mine in the past few years have already become habit, but Captain, don't worry. I will take note when I'm outside and won't be a disgrace to the boss. What you said is right. Our boss is an artist, not an ordinary star in the entertainment circles. Our outlook cannot be shallow. We cannot only think about money. We need to maintain standards and be classy!"

Yan Biao: "..."

Yan Biao stared at Nanfeng in silence for a bit before nodding. "It's good that you know!"

After Nanfeng left, Yan Biao lamented that he really couldn't keep up with the thoughts of people who had left the military and spent a long time in society.

Chapter 342

High-Pressure Assistantship

Nanfeng returned to his apartment and shared the good news with several of his closest friends in Huangzhou.

Even though he was envious of Fang Zhao's high income, Nanfeng didn't feel jealous. He figured that Fang Zhao had leveraged his talent into a comfortable living. He couldn't argue with that, and he had his own talents. He was confident that a brighter future was in store.

Yet Nanfeng's good mood was soon shattered. He came across a headline, "Fang Zhao's Assistant in Assault during Live Broadcast."

Nanfeng's heart leaped immediately.

A further search yielded similar headlines. The headlines were written in the most sensationalist way possible. They all included key phrases like "Fang Zhao's assistant," "Huangcheng black street" and "assault during live broadcast." They all but screamed, "Come check out the commotion! Fang Zhao's assistant attacked someone in front of an audience in the tens of millions!"

The news reports about Fang Zhao's encounter with the live broadcast crew mostly focused on the matter of his assistant launching an attack. Many readers blurted obscenities as soon as they saw the headlines, but when they clicked the links and read more carefully, they reacted differently. F*ck, we were conned again!

Still, after reading the full story, these internet readers who loved a spectacle kept following the aftermath.

"Serves them right! You have to prepare for the possibility of getting beaten up if you make these kinds of shows. Who knows if you're acting?"

"If I ran into the same situation, I'd throw a punch first too. If it were a genuine assault, then I would be in the right. If it was just acting, I'd be innocent by virtue of not having prior knowledge. I wouldn't be liable for any compensation."

"Fang Zhao's assistant held back. If I were him, I would have beaten the assailant to a pulp."

"Oi, cut the bullshit! Not everyone has the courage to step up. Many folks like to mind their own business on black streets."

"I'm curious if Fang Zhao actually has mob connections."

"Isn't the main attraction the assistant's eye? After the blurring effect was removed, you could see that one of the assistant's eyes was red! Is he of mixed heritage?"

"What type of mixed race would that be? Even someone of mixed race wouldn't have eyes of a different color. He must have some type of eye disease."

"A bunch of country bumpkins! Haven't you heard of colored contact lenses? For a while, it was quite the fad to wear just one colored lens. It was a form of street culture."

"Apart from colored contact lenses, there are also prosthetic eyes that vary in color."

"It's a shame that the eye only showed up in the footage briefly."

After reading the comments in several of the more popular discussion forums, Nanfeng felt his career was over. During the time of the attack, Nanfeng had neglected to disable the color variation function of his prosthetic eye, so the color of the eye had adjusted according to his mood and become red.

News of the assault had spread so quickly and on such a large scale. Nanfeng was convinced this wasn't just regular word of mouth. He was positive the TV crew was working behind the scenes.

What could he do about snatching the spotlight away from his boss? What would happen if the story tarnished his boss's reputation?

He had just landed this job and was at risk of losing it before he had warmed his chair.

At a loss, Nanfeng asked Yan Biao for advice.

After getting the full lowdown, Yan Biao was quite calm. "Based on my understanding of Boss from these past two or three years, he's not going to quibble with you over having the limelight stolen, but you did act improperly on this matter. Why don't you

apologize to Boss first? He's not that petty."

One had to give credit where credit was due. Yan Biao had been an attentive employee these past two or three years. He was spot on—Fang Zhao was not about to throw a fit over a drop in publicity.

Fang Zhao knew what was being said online. Silver Wing had also contacted him to get a full briefing. There was no shady business involved and the incident wasn't a big deal in the first place. Silver Wing also knew that the TV crew was trying to generate publicity. The company knew how to respond.

As for his assistant Nanfeng, the way Fang Zhao saw it was that even though Nanfeng was a bit impatient, he had a lively personality and was quite energetic. In key moments, he showed the right balance of intelligence and emotional intelligence. Even though he had his own agenda, Nanfeng had an upright character. If he didn't cause any major problems during his probation, Fang Zhao was going to keep him on as a permanent employee.

He knew that serving as his assistant was only a stepping stone for Nanfeng. Nanfeng was ambitious and had set his sights higher. That was perfectly understandable. Everyone wanted to progress. When the time came for Nanfeng to move on to greener pastures, Fang Zhao wasn't going to get in his way. In fact, if Nanfeng did a good job, Fang Zhao was going to help him along.

So when Nanfeng called to apologize, to admit his mistake and reflect, Fang Zhao didn't say much in the way of a reprimand.

When he realized that Fang Zhao wasn't going to fire him, Nanfeng's mood improved. His boss wasn't a petty person, which meant Nanfeng would have a much easier time serving as an assistant.

The next day, when Nanfeng arrived at Fang Zhao's dorm room, Fang Zhao had just returned from the gym.

"Good morning, Boss!"

Nanfeng had bought breakfast and some ingredients, which he placed in the kitchen. Thus started his first day as an assistant. He had already taken notes on the tasks Fang Zhao had assigned to him.

He had to inspect the "rabbit" in the tank and check how much feed was left in its feeding tube. He also had to check the readings on various indicators and throw in two freshly snapped leaves.

He didn't dare touch the slug. Fang Zhao had cautioned that the "rabbit" was poisonous and wasn't to be touched.

Nanfeng didn't question Fang Zhao's claim. He had a friend who kept a poisonous sea slug at home that couldn't be handled with bare hands. Special gloves were required.

"Boss, I'll walk Curly Hair, then?"

"Go ahead! Did you memorize the route?"

"Yes, yes!" Nanfeng showed Fang Zhao the route he had marked on a map.

"The leash is in the cupboard by the entryway. Curly Hair will fetch it himself."

Just as Fang Zhao finished his sentence, Nanfeng saw Curly Hair open one of the doors to the cupboard next to the entryway and drag out his leash with his mouth. He closed the door, then trotted toward Fang Zhao.

"What a smart dog! You even know how to open the cupboard yourself and fetch your leash. Boss, you did a great job training him!" Nanfeng wanted to add "This \$200 million dog is truly worth its value," but he remembered Yan Biao's advice and held back.

After attaching the leash to Curly Hair, Fang Zhao let Nanfeng take Curly Hair on his regular walk on campus. Even though HuangArt's campus security wasn't top-notch, it was better than taking a walk off campus.

Fang Zhao didn't intend to let Curly Hair hole up in his dorm room for the entire length of his program. The student gym was off-limits to dogs, so Fang Zhao walked Curly Hair within the HuangArt campus, tracing several regular routes and frequenting one of the on-campus parks. Even dogs weren't suited to gaming all day. It was good for them to get a breath of fresh air and experience nature and the local community.

When Nanfeng returned from walking the dog at a lightning pace and extracted himself from thoughts that he had just taken a dog worth 200 million dollars for a stroll, he noticed Fang Zhao signing for a delivery.

Ten gigantic boxes of fresh fruit from Muzhou.

Nanfeng remembered Yan Biao mentioning that Fang Zhao had a stake in a Muzhou farm, guaranteeing him a steady supply of fresh produce. Fresh fruit from Muzhou fetched a handsome price locally. Nanfeng rarely sampled this Muzhou specialty. The sight of the crates made him hungry.

After observing Fang Zhao carry two crates into the storage room of his dorm room, Nanfeng figured the boxes weren't heavy. After detaching Curly Hair from his leash, he scrambled over to help out.

Nanfeng flexed his limbs, walked over, and grasped the first crate.

Deep breath, and go!

No luck.

Nanfeng tried another box.

Still no luck.

After trying to lift the remaining boxes one by one to no avail, Nanfeng watched Fang Zhao carry another two crates into his storage. He was blown away.

On only his first day on the job, Nanfeng had already experienced the sense of powerlessness and resignation that Yan Biao had described.

When Fang Zhao noticed Nanfeng just standing there dejectedly, Fang Zhao instructed him, "The two boxes on the side contain melons. Why don't you unpack them, give the melons a wipe, and bring two of them next door? Will should be up by now."

"OK, Boss!"

Assigned a fresh errand, Nanfeng felt he had value again. Maybe he couldn't handle heavy physical labor, but he did a decent job of delivering gifts and cultivating relationships. On previous assistant gigs, he had delivered gifts to fellow actors on the same shoot on behalf of minor celebrities. It was the kind of work he knew well.

After unpacking the crates, Nanfeng picked one melon of each kind, placed them in a clean basket, and went next door. Flashing a friendly smile, he pressed the doorbell.

The door opened soon to reveal a pale, serious-looking young man.

Nanfeng maintained his smile. "Good morning, Mr. Will. My name is Nanfeng. I'm Fang Zhao's assistant."

Will said nothing, his expression stone cold.

"These are fresh fruits from a farm in Muzhou. My boss asked me to bring them over. My boss has a stake in the farm, so these are technically home grown."

Will stood by the door, frowning. His gaze shifted from Nanfeng to the melons in the basket.

Nanfeng kept up his friendly smile, but Will's serious expression remained.

Seconds later, Will extended his hands but gave no indication of welcoming Nanfeng into his room.

Keeping his composure, Nanfeng handed over the basket. "The melons are quite heavy."

After accepting the basket, Will seemed to be getting ready to close his door, so Nanfeng left. But after taking a few steps, he still hadn't heard the sound of the door closing. Will's gaze lingered.

Nanfeng turned around to find Will staring at him through a small gap next to the ajar door. Will's room was dimly lit. His face was blurry, giving off weird vibes.

Will remained silent and kept observing Nanfeng.

Nanfeng froze and returned Will's gaze with a smile.

Two seconds later, Will closed his door and returned to his studio.

So it's decided. Fang Zhao's assistant is too easy to draw. I'm going to pass. But Will still felt the itch to draw. He scanned his room, and his gaze landed on the basket of melons that had just been delivered. I'll draw a melon, then.

Next door, back in Fang Zhao's room, Nanfeng was oblivious to Will's thought process. He did, however, feel he had been scrutinized.

Fang Zhao's circle of friends was different from the people Nanfeng was used to dealing with. Accustomed to folks who hid their true feelings behind a mask, Nanfeng was at a loss as to how to deal with temperamental artists like Will.

Just like Yan Biao had predicted, this was a tough job.

Nonetheless, Nanfeng was confident he could do well. Today he was going to show Fang Zhao his cooking skills. He had trained with a master chef. Nanfeng was going to let Fang Zhao know that he was a versatile assistant.

As he kept busy in the kitchen, a thought popped into his head. The series finale of "Founding Era" was airing over the next two days.

But was "Founding Era" going to fall off the radar after the series finale?

No such chance!

Setting aside the issue of online reruns, it was awards season on all continents.

Regardless of the continent, the blockbuster project "Founding Era" was bound to mount a clean sweep at all the major awards ceremonies. For the sake of their own careers, the actors featured in the TV series weren't going to let the buzz die down just yet.

Fang Zhao had taken on such a key character in the Yanzhou chapter. His performance spoke for itself. He was bound to pick up a newcomer or supporting actor award of some sort.

And as Fang Zhao's assistant, Nanfeng was likely to attend these prize ceremonies.

Previously, he had worked as an assistant for two-bit stars. The most prestigious awards ceremonies had been out of their league. They would have become a laughing stock if they had shown up on the red carpet uninvited, but things were different now with Fang Zhao as his boss.

All sorts of awards ceremonies, all sorts of red carpets covered in flashing lights.

Just the thought of them got him excited.

Nanfeng rubbed his hands.

He had to do a good job so Fang Zhao would bring him along to these prize ceremonies.

While Nanfeng was busy in the kitchen proving his versatility to his new boss, proving his worth, Fang Zhao got a video conference call from Xue Jing in Yanzhou.

Xue Jing had been in Yanzhou for some time working on a new textbook with a few old friends. He never made it to Huangzhou.

Xue Jing asked Fang Zhao about his studies and his transition to campus life.

Fang Zhao answered Xue Jing's questions in detail.

Xue Jing was pleased with Fang Zhao's answers. After pausing briefly, he said with a chuckle, "Fang Zhao, I'm calling with some good news."

"What good news?" Fang Zhao played along. He had already guessed the reason for Xue Jing's call.

"You've been nominated for a Galaxy Supernova Award!"

Fang Zhao had been busy with exams for the Twelve Tones program and the nomination list hadn't been finalized, so Xue Jing had held back the news.

By the time the nominations had been confirmed and Fang Zhao gained admission to the Twelve Tones program, the internet had been filled with praise for "Founding Era." Worried that Fang Zhao had been too giddy, Xue Jing had held off on sharing the news for another few days.

Xue Jing had expected ecstasy and irrepressible joy from Fang Zhao, but none was forthcoming, even after an extended wait. "You're not excited? Even though a nomination doesn't guarantee an award, a nomination for someone your age is already quite rare. This is the Galaxy Supernova Award we're talking about! It's the highest honor a young artist can receive. Not everyone can receive a nomination. Worldwide, only some 70 artists were nominated this year. It's quite a feat considering your present circumstances."

"It's not that I'm not happy," Fang Zhao explained. "I'm just confused as to why I was nominated. After all, my artistic accomplishments and contributions haven't amounted to much. Even if I passed the initial screening, it doesn't seem likely for me to end up on the final list of nominees."

Xue Jing roared in laughter. "It's great that you've remained sober and level headed. This time, you were a special nominee jointly recommended by two jurors from the Huangcheng School of Medicine and the Galaxy Awards panel respectively. The '100-Year Period of Destruction' series you composed played a major role in the curing of the Hull virus."

Most folks were only shortlisted as prospective nominees after surviving nearly half a year of debate and discussion. In Fang Zhao's case, strictly speaking, he had taken a shortcut by bypassing the discussion phase. To be nominated in the end was in itself a form of recognition and honor.

The reason for his nomination was more or less what Fang Zhao had expected, but he kept playing along, feigning some surprise and delight. Otherwise, Xue Jing would think he didn't care about the Supernova Award and get upset.

"Keep a close eye on the email inbox on your bracelet. Set up an alert. The 10 winners will be selected soon. Each winner will be contacted individually," Xue Jing said.

Every year, 10 Supernova Awards were handed out.

Was 10 a large number?

Not at all!

That was barely one per continent.

Within a 10-year span, most continents didn't produce as many as 10 Supernova winners. Musicians, painters, dancers, sculptors—how many people were eyeing the prize? Young actors were also in the running.

Xue Jing didn't know who the ultimate winners would be, and he had no way of finding out ahead of time. Due to his own circumstances, he wasn't part of the selection panel this year, but based on his own calculations, considering the weight of Fang Zhao's contribution, Fang Zhao had a 60 percent chance of winning an award. But that was his own thinking, which he did not share with Fang Zhao.

While Fang Zhao and Xue Jing were chatting via videoconference, the activity in the kitchen had died down.

Nanfeng was eavesdropping, ears pricked.

He knew he was wrong to eavesdrop. He had planned on shutting the kitchen door when Fang Zhao got on the call, but when he heard the words "Galaxy Supernova nomination," he hadn't been able to bear closing the door.

This was the Galaxy Awards. Even if it was the Supernova prize for up-and-coming artists, it was still a prestigious award. Even though Nanfeng hadn't paid attention to the award before, he knew the weight it carried.

One could put it this way: if Fang Zhao won the award on account of his music, even if he was a terrible actor and mediocre gamer, he would still return to Yanzhou to a hero's welcome.

If Fang Zhao were to seek employment at an institution for higher learning, winning the Supernova Award would significantly help cut through the red tape and bureaucracy at the top schools.

As an artist, his pay would double or even triple without a doubt.

The mental reminders flashed in Nanfeng's head. You're a high-quality assistant! You can't eavesdrop on your boss's videoconference! You have to respect his privacy!

But he couldn't control himself, especially when he heard Xue Jing say with joy that the four chapters of the "100-Year Period of Destruction" series had helped cure the Hull virus. He nearly chopped off part of his fingers.

A gamer-slash-actor-slash-composer had actually helped overcome a virus!

At that point, Nanfeng wanted to call his mother, who often mocked the entertainment industry.

Mom, my boss is a god!

Chapter 343

Compulsory Exam Question

Nanfeng felt immense pressure on his first day as Fang Zhao's assistant.

The next day, Fang Zhao had class. After Nanfeng completed his own tasks, he didn't head home immediately. Instead, he sought shelter in a pavilion that was part of an on-campus park. He opened a plastic container to reveal slices of iced watermelon. Nanfeng wanted to take in the artsy vibe of the HuangArt campus.

Someone was practicing the piano nearby. Legs crossed, Nanfeng shook along with the beat. He felt he had gotten a taste of the artistic life.

Soon, a parent and her child joined Nanfeng in the pavilion. The child looked like he was a secondary school student. Judging from their conversation, they were at HuangArt to sit for an exam. The parent was consoling her son, who was complaining about how hard the HuangArt exam was.

"HuangArt's admission exams are tough. Even prospective students with connections need to sit for them. But do you know why HuangArt has these exams? It's for your own good. The administration doesn't want any of their students to be in the awkward position of cluelessly munching away at a melon because they can't follow an academic discussion."

Nanfeng, who was eating watermelon 10 meters away: "..."

He felt like he had been punched in the gut.

It was quite the demoralizing comment.

But Nanfeng quickly regained his composure.

The sky was the limit for Fang Zhao's career. As Fang Zhao's assistant, he had to be presentable too!

Should he sign up for a short-term course?

After consulting with a few friends who also worked in the same industry, Nanfeng signed up for an online course. After filing his application, he didn't immediately head back to his own flat, instead making his way to Yan Biao's place. He watched the season finale of "Founding Era" with Yan Biao and Zuo Yu. Nanfeng had already watched the episodes from the Yanzhou chapter that featured Fang Zhao, but the entire series was too long. He couldn't possibly catch up in a day or two.

He would watch the remaining episodes when he had time, not just those of the Yanzhou chapter but the other chapters as well. He wasn't interested in the series per se; he wanted to get to know the actors cast in the series better.

After finishing class, Fang Zhao returned to his dorm room and organized his notes for the day. When it was time, he turned on his TV to a preset channel.

As long as he didn't have class, Fang Zhao would tune into the 10th season of "Founding Era." Today was the season finale.

Unlike the previous seasons, the 10th season of "Founding Era" had a brighter visual tone.

Downcast from a grim and grey color palette since the first season, audiences were finally rewarded with a change in the 10th season.

The overall epic storyline was quite stifling, but the 10th season was much more upbeat even though quite a few main characters died.

From the full recovery of territory to cleaning house in Huangzhou, to the Founding Era and the naming of the 12 continents, to a new regime, a new order, and a world—after enduring 100 years of suffering, the human race was finally marching toward a brighter future.

A short film concluded the series.

It featured the final victory, the triumphant homecoming of the heroes, and the changes to the world in the 500 years after the Founding Era.

The score to the short film kicked off with a Chinese flute and violin solo that resembled a lone voice beckoning from the vast landscape.

A powerful force was gradually forming and gathering pace steadily.

Darkness always preceded the dawn, but darkness also became the dawn.

Bellows from the brass section resembled deafening cries that pierced the dawn, charging toward the sky and beckoning the future.

The world was rebuilt on this wasteland under a warm, nourishing light. A series of pale headstones told the stories of countless legends.

Every note that traveled to the ear evoked a fragmented memory, and every melody formed coherent scenes in the mind.

Like a preacher relaying an epic narrative.

The TV series was a lesson in history and time that told of grand, epic battles and legendary figures who were also regular folks.

Blurry shadows appeared in the film. These were the characters that survived or perished during the 10 seasons.

During the 100-year Period of Destruction, it was the work of these titans that had led to them escaping the darkness and forging a new world.

Now, five hundred years later, they were long gone. What history remembered was their determination and glory as well as tragedy and sorrow. But what took their place was something brighter, a sense of purpose powerful enough to motivate people to strive their entire lifetimes.

In later years, people called it faith. Others called it the grand cause.

It was this force that had underpinned 100 years of struggle and gave rise to countless miracles.

The short film was accompanied by an uninterrupted 10-minute score.

Ten minutes, far longer than the average song, was sufficient to convey a mind-blowing range of color.

Ten minutes, 12 melodies, 28 sections, more than 100 lines of music. They encompassed the cultural elements of all 12 continents. A large and complex ensemble of instruments. The rich range of emotion and the exquisite melodies that

varied in pace but came off as seamlessly edited, coupled with the repeated variations, did not result in an overwhelming or protracted effect. The piece did not feel long at all, with surprises popping up at every corner, giving little in the way of respite. It had both the weight of an epic and the sheer beauty of a romantic score. A stunning and grand construction filled with twists and turns that put the listener in the moment and stirred their emotions.

When Mo Lang had composed the piece, he had been inspired by Fang Zhao's "This Life of Mine."

What Mo Long had wanted to create was not just a perfunctory account of these historical figures or collection of memories. What he had wanted to do was recreate the ethos of the era.

As if these giants had never left and the hope and faith that had propelled them into battle had lived on.

The human body might decompose, but the human spirit lived forever!

The blood of the martyrs painted the skies red as the heroes made a triumphant return!

Remembering these forgotten souls and etching their stories into stone.

Forgetfulness was the ultimate killer.

The short film ended with a monologue from the character playing General Lu Xi from Xizhou while resting on his deathbed.

"I will have experienced three deaths in my life. The first time was when the Period of Destruction began. I bid farewell to my past and took on a new identity. The second time will be my imminent death, when my heart stops and my coffin is buried. I will be declared dead by a doctor, by friends and family, and by society. As for my third death, it will occur when the last person in this vast universe who remembered me forgets me. At that point, I will have nothing to do with the world. That is when I will truly disappear. I lived through my first death, and I'm about to welcome my second, but as long as you remember me..." The hoarse yet firm voice summoned all the remaining strength of his lungs, transcending time and space. "I. Shall. Live. On. Forever!"

Fade to black, followed by the text: "Please remember them."

Commemoration and the passing of the torch could withstand the test of time.

Audiences from around the world only shifted their attention away from the screen when the end credits rolled. They felt a sense of loss and were reinvigorated at the same time.

The 10 seasons of "Founding Era" had finally concluded.

A visual and auditory feast, without a doubt.

When these stories of the past were transformed into images and the effect was enhanced by a haunting score, 10 seasons later, audiences acutely felt the power of fate and faith.

"Unsurpassable god-level work!"

"We probably won't see another piece of filmed entertainment that can rival 'Founding Era' for another 100 years."

"They weren't kidding about the series being a milestone. Even if there's a remake featuring a bunch of big stars, it can't beat the original. It's just not the same."

"I'm outta here. Gotta go pay my respects at the martyrs' cemetery."

"I've decided. My plan for the second half of the year is to hit all the martyrs' cemeteries on all 12 continents!"

"Who's going to the martyrs' cemetery in Qi'an? Can I trouble you to bring back a good-luck charm from Old Fang's grave?"

"They're in high demand these days and will be difficult to come by. I think there's a quota of one per person."

"I love the soundtrack! The score to the short film at the end is jaw-dropping!"

"The piece was written by Master Mo Lang. It's a complex, meandering piece that incorporates elements from all 12 continents. It's grand and meticulous at the same time. This is a true master at his finest. No wonder he's a national treasure, someone

who's won the Galaxy World Medal, the highest honor in the arts world!"

"Factoring in all 10 seasons, the score for 'Founding Era' is so strong. The songs keep getting better and better. The final piece that ran with the short film at the end was the grandest of them all."

"Did anyone notice the credits at the end of the film? Two people were credited with the arrangement of the final song. One was Mo Lang, and the other Fang Zhao!"

"What? Fang Zhao was involved?"

Curious viewers rewound the episode. Low and behold, there was Fang Zhao's name.

Concluding score "Legend"

Composer: Mo Lang

Arrangement: Mo Lang, Fang Zhao

"..."

"This was a tough song to compose—and arrange as well. Fang Zhao was actually one of the arrangers?"

"As far as us academics are concerned, arrangement is a form of composition. In other words, Fang Zhao took part in the writing of the song."

"No wonder he's a genius who got into the Twelve Tones program. He's on a completely different level."

The more people discussed Fang Zhao, the more folks studied the end credits. Some of them scrutinized the list word by word. Thus, their attention was drawn to the list of musicians who had taken part in the recording of the final song.

"The world's top three orchestras, Huangzhou Nightfall, Hongmenlan, and Saint Byron were all involved!"

"I knew it! Sheng Yong from Saint Byron nailed his solo!"

"My absolute favorite TLB also took part! No wonder the performance in the middle

of the song sounded familiar."

"I took a close look at the list of parties who participated in the recording. Besides the world's top three orchestras, the others are all masters or critically acclaimed ensembles. They represent a wide range of styles. It's hard to believe that someone was actually able to incorporate them all into one song."

In that context, lined up alongside a host of world-class masters, Fang Zhao paled in comparison. But the criticism was muted by the fact that Fang Zhao had been admitted to the Twelve Tones program.

Yet while professionals and non-professionals alike touted their beloved orchestras, bands, and masters that had taken part in the recording, a lone comment quickly became the focus of attention over a short period of time.

"Such a show-off, Granddaddy Mo! I can't handle such a sophisticated piece! This is the kind of material that will become my dissertation topic or appear in my final exam! I wanna cry my eyes out!"

After worshipping this magnificent piece, breaking down how technically difficult it was and admiring the all-star lineup that recorded the song, students from various music academies became paralyzed with fear.

A single thought lingered in their heads after reading the comment: Sh*t. This is definitely going to show up on an exam!

Chapter 344

Prize Notification

Indeed, Mo Lang's 10-minute piece was eyed by teachers in every major music academy as a potential exam question as soon as it debuted. It was exam time, after all; the teachers had to get creative.

Every year, outstanding pieces were used as exam questions, and Mo Lang's was a shoo-in. He was a master to begin with, and the song was top-notch. The piece was impossible to pass on.

Ever since he had advanced in age, Mo Lang only released a song every two or three years, and every release was a curveball. Teachers immediately saw potential in "Legend" as a possible critical analysis or rearrangement question or essay topic.

Just as music students from different departments had suspected, the complexity of the piece was Mo Lang's way of showing off. The questions asked by Mo Lang's piece were all tough ones. The average student struggled to answer one of them, let alone every single question.

Many students started brainstorming. Since they knew that Master Mo Lang's piece was a likely exam question, they had to prepare in advance.

Should they seek outside help?

Yet folks who had made their presence known on similar occasions in the past—tutors from music cram schools and the authors of prominent textbooks—kept a much lower profile this time around.

The leading cram school tutors were at a loss too. There didn't seem to be an easy solution.

They didn't dare comment on the piece. We barely understand it. Who are we to counsel others? What if we're wrong? That'd be career suicide.

The composer was Mo Lang, after all. What a legendary figure. His technique was

beyond the grasp of the average musician.

Should they ask Mo Lang himself, then?

Stop bullsh*tting!

Was it so easy to gain access to a master musician who was a national treasure? Not to mention that Mo Lang was quite old. He had limited energy and his body couldn't keep up. There was only so much he could do.

After pondering the matter repeatedly, the students realized that approaching Fang Zhao was the easiest move.

Fang Zhao was young, so there wasn't a generation gap to consider. Plus, Fang Zhao had been involved in the composing of the song. He was somewhat of an authority too.

The students of Qi'an Academy of Music were the first to reach out to Fang Zhao. They were all "senior alum" this and "senior alum" that, fully taking advantage of the old-boy connection.

It wasn't only the students. The teachers who planned on using "Legend" as an exam question also consulted Fang Zhao.

As for Fang Zhao, he didn't mind offering his thoughts. It was easy for him. When he had been working on the song with Mo Lang, they had had wide-ranging discussions. He knew Mo Lang's creative philosophy well. The only thing was that Mo Lang was still the author of the song. Whether or not he should speak up, how much he should reveal—these were matters he still had to consult Venerable Mo on.

Mo Lang was actually quite delighted when Fang Zhao reached out.

"This is a good thing!"

From Mo Lang's perspective, his body couldn't cope, so it was impossible for him to lecture at length. But if it were up to him to choose someone to speak on the topic, his first choice would be Fang Zhao.

He didn't think that Fang Zhao's young age reflected a lack of ability. The old man had gotten a good sense of how much Fang Zhao knew when the young composer had still been on Planet Wai. As far as he was concerned, Fang Zhao would do just fine as a

lecturer.

Mo Lang already enjoyed considerable stature and prestige. He had no intention of holding back his talent and knowledge at this stage. He was more than willing to share his wisdom and insight with the next generation.

It wasn't that Mo Lang ever withheld in his teaching, but now that he was so advanced in age, and he had gained new insight during the creative process for "Legend." Why leave any stone unturned at this stage?

Passing the torch, a key theme in his work, was very important to him.

As a teacher, he had the responsibility to spread his knowledge, train disciples, and dispel confusion. The future of the industry depended on the next generation. Mo Lang hoped to see innovation and breakthroughs in all musical genres.

"Fang Zhao, do speak up!" Mo Lang was very supportive. "If I weren't encumbered by my poor health, I'd go on a global lecture tour!"

After receiving Mo Lang's go-ahead, Fang Zhao approached HuangArt for a venue where he could broadcast his lecture live.

Yes, he could have lectured from his dorm room, but HuangArt had professional lecture halls for live broadcasts. The rent wasn't that expensive. As long as one could secure a room, the rest was easy. The only requirement for booking a lecture hall was that one had to broadcast through HuangArt's own website.

The leadership at HuangArt wasn't about to stall Fang Zhao on this matter, not to mention that he had Mo Lang's backing. His request was approved immediately and he was allocated a prime lecture hall that had recently been upgraded with live broadcast equipment.

Once he got approval, Fang Zhao studied his own class schedule and decided on a timetable for his lectures.

Tentatively, there were three lectures scheduled, each lasting an hour. They were free to watch.

This was what the HuangArt officials in charge of the school's online curriculum had suggested.

Given Fang Zhao's current seniority, he wouldn't be able to command a very high viewing fee. Mo Lang also had to be taken into consideration. The fee couldn't be too low, out of respect for Mo Lang's stature. Still, Fang Zhao wasn't short of cash, so they decided to keep things simple and make the lectures free. Master-level teachers had done the same in the past. It was a form of pro bono work, a token of encouragement and support for young musicians.

The news of Fang Zhao's upcoming online lectures on "Legend" was first spread by the students of QiMu and HuangArt. Students from the leading music academies in other continents soon caught wind from chat groups and online forums.

Many folks tuned in to partake in the spectacle. The lectures were free, after all. Giving them a listen didn't cost a cent. But there were also folks that felt that there was no such thing as a free lunch. Fang Zhao was bound to withhold the good stuff, so the lectures were a waste of time.

It was up to the masses to decide whether or not to tune in. Fang Zhao couldn't force the issue.

The three lectures were scheduled for three separate days, but cumulatively, they would not last more than three hours. Fang Zhao showed Mo Lang his lecture outline.

"You've done a decent job. Just stick to this outline. Knock 'em dead! I will tune in."

While Mo Lang was only listening in on the lectures, he occasionally posted a thought or two. He couldn't physically deliver a full lecture now, but he was still fully capable of offering a thought or two every lecture.

But that got some of Mo Lang's disciples jealous. "Teacher is playing favorites!"

Mo Lang had so many students. In terms of seniority, stature, and academic achievement, any one of them was far superior to Fang Zhao.

But Mo Lang had no patience for the jealousy. "What can I do? On the matter of this piece alone, Fang Zhao knows me the best. He also has enough professional knowledge to lecture on the topic. You guys don't know me well enough. You can't capture what I want to convey."

Several of Mo Lang's disciples were incredulous. They also tuned in to Fang Zhao's lectures.

During the first lecture, Fang Zhao focused on the background of the song and its artistic merits.

"Is that the case? Is that what Teacher Mo meant?" asked one of Mo Lang's former students.

But every time a disciple posed such a challenge, they were inevitably shot down by Mo Lang. "Indeed. That's exactly what I meant!"

So much so that the more they listened to Fang Zhao's lectures, the less they questioned. Or maybe they simply kept their thoughts to themselves. So that's what Venerable Mo was thinking. I could never tell. Has age changed his perspective?

It wasn't just Mo Lang's former students. Many folks tuned in to Fang Zhao's lectures to enjoy a good show or with skepticism, but gradually, they realized that this Fang Zhao fella's lectures were very high quality. They were all gems.

Fang Zhao's gaming and acting fans got word of the lectures and started tuning in too.

"Even though I couldn't understand a single sentence, I still felt that it was kick-ass."

"So Zhao God is truly a music professional! I thought it was a joke."

Out of the online audience of some 20 million for Fang Zhao's first lecture, only one-tenth were music students. The remaining viewers were either fans or random spectators.

On day two, Fang Zhao moved on to composition technique. The number of music professionals tuning in jumped by 1 million. Students who had skipped yesterday's lecture showed up today. They realized that Fang Zhao's every utterance might be considered a model answer on their upcoming exams. It was better to hit record first and decipher his words later. Students who were lacking in analytical skills committed the lecture to memory. At least they wouldn't turn in a blank exam.

The number of music professionals tuning in on day two had increased, but the overall viewership actually increased by 20 million! In contrast, 1 million more music professionals wasn't much to write home about.

"The music professionals are a minority here. Most of the viewers are fans of Fang Zhao, no?"

"No wonder producers like to invite top celebrities to join live broadcasts. They have a built-in audience," another view lamented.

"What a smart PR move by HuangArt!"

Because the second lecture touched on some key points and important techniques, the music professionals tuning in paid close attention. Those who couldn't keep up with the lecture rewatched the archived video after class.

Fang Zhao was also very focused.

The vocal reminder on Fang Zhao's bracelet sounded before the online audience of some 40 million. "Ding! You have received an important email. Please take a look."

Fang Zhao paused briefly before resuming, but he ignored his bracelet as if he hadn't been interrupted.

But some of the folks watching the lecture took issue.

"It's best that you turn off your notifications while lecturing. It's a form of professional courtesy."

"That's right. We turn off our notifications when we lecture too. Otherwise, your flow and rhythm will be interrupted. We're also concerned about affecting our students."

"Aiya, Fang Zhao is still young, after all. He's inexperienced. He just has to pay attention next time. My fellow professionals tuning in, there's no need to be too harsh."

Fang Zhao's fans:

"So it turns out the vocal reminder on Zhao God's bracelet is the default one."

"I remember when this voice first came out. Everyone complained it was 'as stiff and emotionless as a stone'."

"I haven't heard the default voice in a long time. So they haven't changed the voice, have they?"

"Hahahaha... My granddad uses the same voice!"

The chitchat continued until the following comment: "Do you guys know what the email he just received is about? If not, check out the press release the Galaxy Awards organizing committee just put out! The winners of the Galaxy Supernova Prize have been announced! Fang Zhao is among the 10 winners!"

"So it's possible that Fang Zhao had set his notifications to mute, but the email from the Galaxy Awards organizers was categorized as extra important? And that's why his vocal reminder was triggered?"

"That can't be it. If it was a message from the Galaxy Awards organizers, why didn't he read the email?"

Mo Lang, who was listening in on the lecture, also noticed the announcement from the Galaxy organizers. He made the connection to the vocal reminder he had just heard during Fang Zhao's lecture. "Ha! This fella is quite something," he blurted with a chuckle.

This was probably the first time in history someone had been able to ignore a prize-notification email from the Galaxy Awards organizers and keep lecturing calmly.

More and more folks searched the internet to verify the news. When they managed to do so, they scrambled back to the online lecture to post comments.

"Zhao God! You've won!"

"You've won a major prize! Aren't you going to take a look?"

"Hurry, check out the email you just received!"

"If it were me, I'd screw the lecture and read the email first!"

"Now this is a masterful display of god-level composure!"

"So the award citation refers to his 'special contribution in curing the Hull virus.' What the heck? Isn't the Galaxy Award an arts prize? They don't have a medical category, do they?"

"New fan? It's a long story. Please conduct a search for news items related to the four chapters of the '100-Year Period of Destruction' series."

More and more folks found out about Fang Zhao's Supernova win, but Fang Zhao continued his lecture at his usual tempo even though the comments section for the online lecture had already been flooded with messages urging him to read his email.

At the retirement home for former government officials in Yanbei.

Great-Grandfather Fang was watching the live broadcast. He learned of Fang Zhao's win through the comments section and confirmed the news on the Galaxy Awards' official website. He was in tears, his voice hoarse from screaming in celebration.

Great-Grandfather Fang felt that this went beyond a family honor. As the only Yanzhou native to win a Supernova Award this year, Fang Zhao was the pride of the continent no doubt, but as one of the major players behind the curing of the Hull virus, he was a credit to all mankind!

"Our Xiao Zhao... How come he's so competent?"

Great-Grandfather Fang's emotions began spiraling out of control. He was so moved that he was covered in tears and snot. He turned his head to discover Great-Grandmother Fang had been filming him all along.

Great-Grandfather Fang: "Burp!"

Chapter 345

It's Watching Me

Great-Grandfather Fang was so caught off-guard by his wife's paparazzi-style filming that he burped.

The burp instantly erased all the simmering emotions that had built up inside him.

But he was done crying, which had taken a toll on him. Devoid of emotion, Great-Grandfather Fang felt refreshed. He sent out eight generous virtual red packets in his various chat groups and bragged away.

"In celebration of our Xiao Zhao winning the Galaxy Supernova Award! [red packet]"

Every time the former officials in the retirement home heard Great-Grandfather Fang tout Fang Zhao's latest song or acting role, they adopted the mindset of watching someone make a fool of himself. Even though they ostensibly congratulated Great-Grandfather Fang, in their hearts they were contemptuous.

The retirement home was quite big. Besides Great-Grandfather Fang, there were bound to be other retired officials whose descendants were doing well, especially those who were part of the establishment. But these fellow residents were much more low-key about their descendants' accomplishments. There was no way they would put these milestones front and center and brag about them like Great-Grandfather Fang.

But this time around, when they found out that Fang Zhao had won the Galaxy Supernova Award, Great-Grandfather Fang's fellow retirees offered their heartfelt congratulations.

Firstly, it was because the Galaxy Supernova Award was the real deal. Fang Zhao was the only person from Yanzhou among the winners—and he was only in his 20s. He had tremendous potential. The prize cemented Fang Zhao's transition from an entertainment celebrity to a genuine artist.

The second reason Great-Grandfather Fang's fellow retirees changed their minds about Fang Zhao was his role in the curing of the Hull virus. Regardless of whether or

not it was serendipitous, Fang Zhao's contribution couldn't be disputed. It was worthy of respect.

"Congrats, Old Fang! Your family has produced another stalwart!"

"Your Xiao Zhao is only in his 20s. The sky's the limit for him!"

"This kid Fang Zhao is quite something."

Great-Grandfather Fang couldn't contain his delight. "Yes, yes, yes. Xiao Zhao takes after me the most!"

Great-Grandfather Fang wanted to speak to Fang Zhao via videoconference, but he decided to wait another two days because he figured his great-grandson was very busy. After sending a text message offering his congratulations and urging Fang Zhao to pay attention to his health and eat well, Great-Grandfather Fang, donning his new artsy outfit and with his immaculately polished walking stick in hand, went out for a chat with his friends. He wanted to see if his friends thought his new outfit was artistic enough. Should he get a new hairdo too?

In Huangzhou, after completing his second lecture, Fang Zhao had a huge backlog of messages to go through.

First, Fang Zhao read the email from the Galaxy Awards organizing committee and confirmed that it was a notification of his win. The email also asked Fang Zhao to respond with his address. The invitation to the prize ceremony would be delivered within 12 hours of organizers receiving his address.

After responding with the address of his dorm room at HuangArt, Fang Zhao responded to some of the other messages. While he was doing so, he got a call from Huangcheng TV's Channel Nine.

Huangcheng TV's programming wasn't heavy on commercial and entertainment content, and its Channel Nine specialized in high-brow documentaries. A small portion of its best work ended up in government archives and labeled with a golden sticker.

Channel Nine was making a documentary about the curing of the Hull virus. It was a gold-sticker production.

As the composer of the music that paved the way for a cure to the Hull virus, Fang Zhao was naturally one of the key interviewees.

"We've already dispatched a team to shoot in Yanzhou. We're wondering when would be a good time for Mr. Fang? It's just going to be a straightforward interview and some additional filming. Half an hour will suffice. We'll also film you going about your day, but our cameraman won't be intrusive," the producer from Channel Nine said.

Crews had already been dispatched to all 12 continents. There were people involved in the project to cure the Hull virus on every single continent who needed to be filmed, but the team sent to Yanzhou had a heavier workload. When Fang Zhao had composed the "100-Year Period of Destruction" series, he had been working for an entertainment company in Yanzhou. The Yanzhou crew also had to film Fang Zhao's fellow team members who had helped create the virtual idol Polar Light.

"No problem," Fang Zhao said.

"Then when might you be free, Mr. Fang? Let's set up a time. We can conduct the interview at HuangArt. We'll send our team over."

"How about tomorrow at 4 p.m.? I have class in the morning and a one-hour lecture in the afternoon that's being broadcast live. The lecture ends at 3:30. I can start filming at 4."

"Great, let's make it tomorrow at 4 p.m., then."

After making the appointment with Channel Nine, Fang Zhao called Nanfeng to brief him so he could start getting ready.

Already ecstatic about Fang Zhao's Supernova win, when Nanfeng learned about the Channel Nine interview, he profusely promised his boss that he would be on his best behavior and not reflect poorly on Fang Zhao.

After hanging up, Nanfeng also secretly commended himself, See, what a great eye for employers I have!

He also reminded himself to perform on the job so he could keep it for as long as he could. He was going to attend the Galaxy Awards presentation ceremony with his boss! How many award-winning actors and actresses coveted an invitation? The entertainment industry figures who could attend were a minority who had

accumulated a critical mass of works and gained sufficient status.

As a newly hired assistant, Nanfeng was already feeling the trickle-down effect of his boss's success.

The day after Fang Zhao was awarded the Supernova, he had class in the morning and gave his third live lecture in the afternoon. As soon as the lecture started, the viewership skyrocketed to 100 million people and kept growing rapidly.

Yanzhou's entertainment media put its ability to judge where the winds were blowing and to bullsh*t accordingly on full display. Once word that Fang Zhao had won a Galaxy Supernova award got out, they started putting him on a pedestal. Most of the viewers for the final lecture were from Yanzhou, folks who were curious and eager to witness the spectacle.

The 10 winners of the Supernova prize hailed from nine of the world's 12 continents. There were two winners from Huangzhou.

Media outlets from those nine continents went all out in their self-promotion, eager not to be outdone by their competitors.

The comments section for Fang Zhao's live webcast was flooded with congratulatory messages, but Fang Zhao didn't study them carefully. Instead, he completed his lecture series according to his lesson plan before smiling at the camera and thanking viewers for their good wishes.

After going offline, Fang Zhao got a video call from Xue Jing.

"Fang Zhao, have you received your invitation to the awards ceremony?" asked Xue Jing.

"I have. It was delivered to my dorm room last night," said Fang Zhao.

"Good. Remember to be humble when you attend the presentation ceremony. You carried yourself well during today's lecture. Keep it up."

Xue Jing was worried, having read all the inflated coverage by the shameless media. He was concerned that Fang Zhao might be swayed and get a swollen head. He figured if he had won the Supernova at such a young age, he would have felt like he was God. Many senior artists who had won Galaxy awards in the past would be attending the

presentation ceremony, and Xue Jing didn't want Fang Zhao to leave a bad impression.

Fang Zhao knew what Xue Jing was thinking. He was about to respond when an alert popped up on his bracelet and caught his attention.

"Teacher Xue..." Fang Zhao said.

"Listen to me, don't dress like a rock star at the awards ceremony. Just pick something simple and elegant."

"I understand. Teacher Xue, I wanted to..."

"I'm not done yet. Listen, kid. The venue will be filled with senior artists. Regardless of whether they are award winners, their presence means they have made significant contributions and racked up accomplishments in their respective fields. Watch your behavior before them," Xue Jing continued.

"I understand, Teacher Xue..."

"Let me finish first!" Xue Jing scolded before realizing he might have been too harsh. He paused and asked, "What was it you wanted to say?"

"Teacher Xue, you've won the Galaxy World Medal. It was announced two minutes ago," Fang Zhao said.

The Galaxy World Medal wasn't awarded every year. It wasn't uncommon for there to be a three- to five-year gap between winners.

The reason that Xue Jing worked so hard at his age to accumulate even more accomplishments and make greater contributions to his field was to win a Galaxy World Medal, which was the pinnacle of any artist's career.

Judging simply from how many outstanding pieces he had and his influence as a composer, Xue Jing paled in comparison to musicians like Mo Lang. In contrast, his range was also limited. There were other competent composers who specialized in the same genre. He fell just short in terms of artistic achievement. But all these years, he had kept toiling away.

Xue Jing applied for a Galaxy World Medal every three years. He had applied this year as well. That was why he wasn't a member of the organizing committee for this year's

Galaxy Awards and hadn't joined the selection panel for the Supernova award.

News had not been forthcoming, so Xue Jing figured he had been passed on again. Little did he know...

Xue Jing froze when he heard what Fang Zhao had said.

Xue Jing's assistant looked on with concern. He had just received official word of the prize, but Xue Jing was on the phone with Fang Zhao, so he hadn't interrupted.

The assistant handed him a glass of warm water. "Venerable Xue, calm down! Have a sip of water first!"

Xue Jing's eye gradually focused on the glass. He accepted it, but his hands kept shivering. The glass was only half full. By the time it had reached his mouth, another half had been lost to the trembling.

He also accidentally hung up on Fang Zhao at some point.

When Fang Zhao called back, it was Xue Jing's assistant who answered.

"Venerable Xue is just in shock. He needs some time to recover," the assistant said as he cast a glance at his boss, still paralyzed in his chair.

"Good to know." Fang Zhao had been worried that Xue Jing was so emotional he had collapsed or something.

Nanfeng was already waiting when Fang Zhao emerged from the classroom.

"Boss, the folks from Channel Nine are here."

The crew from Channel Nine was standing by. The venue for the interview was a quiet park within the HuangArt campus. The questions posed to Fang Zhao weren't as pointed as the ones he had learned to expect from entertainment journalists; they mainly revolved around his creative process and the Hull virus.

Fang Zhao answered in detail.

A giddy Nanfeng delivered tea to his boss and the interviewer.

After the interview, most of the crew left. "If we need additional footage, we'll reach out ahead of time. Does that work for you, Mr. Fang?" the producer asked.

"No problem." Fang Zhao was willing to work with the crew on minor details like that.

One cameraman remained to tail Fang Zhao and shoot him as he went about his daily routine.

"Fang Zhao, just go about your business as usual. Pretend that I don't exist. If you think something is off-limits, just let me know."

The cameraman followed Fang Zhao back to his dorm room. The first thing he noticed was the Fiery Bird gaming helmet.

To prepare for the Channel Nine shoot, Nanfeng had wiped many of Fang Zhao's personal items repeatedly, especially the gaming helmet.

"Wow! Fiery Bird's limited-edition souped-up eighth-gen gaming helmet! It's no longer available for sale!" The cameraman was a Fiery Bird fan as well. His gaze became fixated on the helmet.

"Nowadays, only celebrities like you who work with Fiery Bird can get one. Can I take a look?" the cameraman asked, looking at Fang Zhao expectantly.

"Of course," Fang Zhao said, nodding.

"Can I take a picture of it?"

"Sure."

"Thanks so much! Oh, Mr. Fang, just do your own thing. I've set up the camera already. It will follow you automatically. I'm just going to sit here and not interrupt your work."

The cameraman cradled the gaming helmet like a baby. He was giddily taking a selfie with it when he felt something was off. He scanned the room and his gaze met that of the curly-haired dog lying next to Fang Zhao's feet.

"That dog is looking at me. I feel like it wants to bite me," the cameraman whispered to Nanfeng.

Nanfeng, who had been pondering what to wear to the Galaxy Awards presentation ceremony, glanced at Curly Hair and said, "Little Curly Hair is such a good boy. Why would you think that?"

"No, I really think it has something against me. Look, it's still staring at me."

"Why don't you switch places?" Nanfeng suggested.

The cameraman broke his promise of sitting still and moved to another chair, still cradling the gaming helmet. Yet Curly Hair's gaze lingered.

The cameraman poked Nanfeng and whispered, "It's staring at me again."

Curly Hair kept on staring, snorting every few minutes or so.

The cameraman panicked. What did I do wrong? Why do you keep staring at me?

Chapter 346

Gift from a Kid

During the entire shoot, the cameraman was holed up in his corner, cradling the gaming helmet. He used his bracelet to adjust the angle of the camera.

Fang Zhao just sat there writing. Initially, the cameraman had thought that Fang Zhao was posing. No wonder he starred in "Founding Era." That's some serious acting chops.

But eventually, the cameraman realized that Fang Zhao was actually writing. He was curious what Fang Zhao was writing, but he was hesitant to zoom in. Most artists didn't like voyeurs when they were immersed in the creative process.

The curly-haired dog stuck out its neck and glanced over at its owner.

The notebook spread open on Fang Zhao's desk was filled with words and all sorts of symbols and lines, but the cameraman couldn't understand a thing.

Not a single word.

After a few embarrassed chuckles, the cameraman reluctantly parted with the gaming helmet and packed his gear.

On the way back to the TV station, the cameraman shared his thoughts about the shoot with his colleagues.

"Fang Zhao's dog is vicious!"

"Doesn't he have a small dog?" one of his colleagues asked.

"It is a small dog, but now I know—the smaller the dog, the meaner it is!"

"Maybe it's leery of outsiders. Did it bite you?"

"No, but there's a saying from the Old Era that makes a lot of sense: 'Biting dogs don't

bark.' It didn't bark, so it's definitely the biting kind. It kept staring at me. What a scary gaze. I'm thinking if Fang Zhao hadn't been around, it would have attacked me."

"Hahaha, so were you scared shitless during the entire shoot?"

"Yeah, but thank God there was a limited-edition gaming helmet to keep me company, hehehe."

While the cameraman was discussing the limited-edition gaming helmet with his colleagues, Curly Hair was already dragging the helmet back into the cabinet.

A puzzled Nanfeng looked on and asked Fang Zhao, "Boss, so Curly Hair likes gaming helmets?"

"Yep." Fang Zhao slammed his notebook shut, but he didn't put it away. It remained on his desk so he could edit his score in the evening. He had been inspired by the footage the documentary crew had shown him today.

Seeing as Fang Zhao had no intention of elaborating, Nanfeng moved on, asking about preparations for the awards ceremony.

"Boss, are you really going to wear that outfit on the red carpet?"

As far as Nanfeng was concerned, the outfit Fang Zhao had picked was too plain. It didn't stand out. Nanfeng had attended many awards ceremonies. Some celebrities were dressed unremarkably at first glance, but on closer scrutiny, there was a certain extravagance to their outfits. It was stealth posturing, to put it bluntly.

The celebrities attending the presentation ceremony weren't going to dress plainly. What a great opportunity for exposure it was. There would be so many people attending. How would they boost their popularity if they didn't wear something special that became a topic of discussion?

But the presentation ceremony Fang Zhao was going to attend this time wasn't of the pure entertainment variety. It was very high class. Nanfeng didn't have much in the way of precedents to work with. He didn't feel confident about this judgment and wanted to confer with Fang Zhao.

"There is no red carpet at the presentation ceremony for the Galaxy Awards," Fang Zhao responded.

As an elder in the arts world once put it: "They didn't need a red carpet to shine."

Serious artists didn't care about things like that. They also weren't into ostentatious displays, which they considered too crass.

"No... no red carpet?" Nanfeng was disappointed, but he quickly found his composure. His job posed many new challenges, and he intended to take them seriously.

Yan Biao and Zuo Yu were still taking their bodyguard classes. Nanfeng hadn't signed up. He had rented a room on campus close to his boss's room so he could be at Fang Zhao's beck and call. That way he could do his job efficiently and minimize intrusions to his boss's personal life.

After dinner, Fang Zhao started editing the song he had composed in the afternoon.

There had been a large element of luck in the four chapters of the "100-Year Period of Destruction" series becoming the key to curing the Hull virus, but there had been a certain inevitability to that luck too.

Fate worked in magical ways. Even Fang Zhao, who had endured the 100-year Period of Destruction, hadn't expected this added bonus.

The reason the Galaxy Awards selection panel had decided to make an exception and name Fang Zhao a Supernova winner was to send the message that music wasn't just a form of recreation or entertainment. It could also save lives.

At 11 p.m., Fang Zhao sent the edited piece to the director of the documentary about the Hull virus.

After the interview, the director had a brief chat with Fang Zhao. It was also the director who had showed him the footage of the Hull virus patients his team had compiled.

On the spur of the moment, the director had jokingly asked Fang Zhao, "Wanna compose a new piece? I'll stick it in the documentary."

"Sure," Fang Zhao had responded.

While Fang Zhao was sending the director his score, the director was on a videoconference call with an old collaborator.

"What the station chief means is that they want to promote this documentary heavily. Curing the Hull virus is something beneficial to all of mankind. It's a rare topic to come by, so of course we need to make the most out of it. The production values must be meticulous. As for the score, we're counting on you, Old Jo."

Anyone in the business knew that an excellent score that meshed well with the film had a big impact on viewers. It would enhance the appeal of the documentary significantly.

The Old Jo the director had referred to was a famed musician and composer of film scores. He was in his 80s. In the New Era, when life expectancies had doubled, these were prime years, the pinnacle of one's career.

Old Jo had a special knack for interpreting images. He also knew how to help the director advance his or her story. He had his own team and took on projects independently.

Old Jo had been hired to write the score for the Hull virus documentary. He had a sufficient body of work and a team with a proven track record that justified the appointment.

The director's email notification went off during the chat.

The director had dispatched teams to all continents, which were in different time zones. It was early in the morning where he was, but it might be noontime on another continent, so he was keeping his eye on the ball, scrutinizing every single email he received.

When he got word of the encrypted email, the director clicked on it immediately.

"Huh?" The director was surprised when he read the name of the sender.

"What's wrong?" Old Jo asked.

"It's a scan of a handwritten score." The director didn't identify the sender. "But the score is a bit complex, unlike the ones I received earlier. It's incredibly detailed."

Old Jo's curiosity was piqued. "A score? Send me a copy."

Old Jo was an old collaborator, and the director knew he was trustworthy. He wouldn't

sabotage another person's work. The director forwarded the score quickly after obscuring the name of the composer.

"There are quite a few symbols I don't understand. I'm not a music professional. Why don't you take a look and share your thoughts," the director said while secretly passing judgment. He's a young man, after all. Once he heard I could stick his song in the documentary, he got to work right away. A bit of a career climber.

Old Jo often vetted pieces for the director to prevent his team from being conned. Nowadays, many submissions were touted as the work of masters to fetch a high price, but in reality, they were often composed by those masters' students and then polished by the masters themselves. But veteran musicians could see through the act easily.

When he got the score, the first thing he looked for was the name of the composer, but it was blurred. He chuckled. "Why bother redacting the name of the composer? Not to brag, but at our level, we can identify the composer with one glance. Even if I can't give you a name, I can tell you who the composer trained under. That's why they don't demand confidentiality for music academy exams anymore."

The director served himself a slice of watermelon. He chewed away while Old Jo kept yapping away. But after a while, when he had nearly finished the slice, he realized Old Jo had stopped speaking. He lifted his head and his heart leaped.

Old Jo's smile was gone.

"Old Jo?" the director asked.

On the other end of the call, Old Jo arched his eyebrows and glared, his voice filled with anger. "We've been collaborators for 20-plus years, if not 30, no?"

The director was confused. "What's up?"

"You promised me this project and now you look for outside help?"

"I didn't!" The director was at a loss.

Old Jo's frown deepened. "Then what's this score all about? Don't tell me it isn't for the documentary!"

"You could tell from the score?" The director was blown away. He raised his arms in

surrender. "OK, I confess, this is a piece a young kid composed for our documentary. It was a nice gesture. He doesn't count as outside help."

Old Jo wasn't appeased. He was still trembling in fury. Raising his voice, he demanded, "You're still lying! A kid? This type of quality and competence, this level of emotional impact... a kid? Go find me a kid who can produce something like this!"

As far as Old Jo was concerned, it would take a composer with at least decades of experience to produce the score before him. And that would be someone quite talented.

The director froze. He immediately clicked on the email from Fang Zhao and showed Old Jo the name of the sender and the original scan. He circled Fang Zhao's name on the score. "See, there it is. The composer is Fang Zhao, the guy I interviewed today. You must have heard of him."

Old Jo stared at the name on the score in silence.

If it were anyone else, Old Jo would have suspected a ghostwriter, but Fang Zhao?

Mo Lang, a national treasure, had personally invited Fang Zhao to collaborate on a piece. He had gotten into HuangArt's prestigious Twelve Tones programs before turning 30. And the four chapters of his "100-Year Period of Destruction" series had impressed the Galaxy Awards jury so much that they had made an exception and awarded him a Supernova Award this year. Did he need a ghostwriter?

Old Jo was still feeling embarrassed when the director asked, "Fang Zhao is only in his 20s. Compared to us, he's a young kid, no?"

Old Jo's cheeks were burning. "Fang Zhao... Fang Zhao is an exception. His talent has transcended his age."

It finally dawned on the director what Old Jo was getting at. "So you're saying this piece is quite exceptional?"

"Indeed! It's so good that it should cost you a hefty sum."

The director was delighted. "It's free. Fang Zhao said it's a gift. His only condition is that we don't change his score and that we record the song based on his score."

"You wanna change the score?" Old Jo glared into the camera. "Don't sabotage a good piece!"

"We won't, then! Not a single note. We'll stick to his handwritten score." The director realized he had lucked out big time. He had saved some major bucks. He couldn't afford to splurge on someone of Fang Zhao's market value. He had never thought that Fang Zhao had taken his joking comment seriously.

Let's give Fang Zhao more prominent play in the documentary, then.

Then it struck the director that he could publicize Fang Zhao's gift. Who knows, maybe other master composers would donate their work!

The director couldn't contain his joy. He was smiling like a fox that had just nicked a juicy chicken leg.

"This kid Fang Zhao, he's quite willing to lend a helping hand. He's a good kid."

Chapter 347

A Kindly Smile

The curing of the Hull virus was big news. When medical experts announced the news, it dominated headlines on all continents for some time. This time, Fang Zhao also became known to many more people.

As far as the masses were concerned, the Hull virus was a distant topic. If news of its curing hadn't broken, they probably would have never heard of the virus, let alone its symptoms or how hard it was to cure. And they responded to the news with mild surprise—that was it.

But Fang Zhao's role in the cure blew many folks away. Even though many people didn't watch TV series and didn't follow the news, the blanket coverage of Fang Zhao's feat made him a household name. Many were incredulous when they heard the story for the first time.

"How far-fetched is that—a musician can actually cure diseases!"

The four chapters of Fang Zhao's "100-Year Period of Destruction" series served merely as a stepping stone, providing the research team studying the Hull virus with a clear roadmap and direction. The actual treatment plan and follow-up research hadn't had anything to do with Fang Zhao, but for folks who didn't care about the details, what was more interesting was how a musician had helped cure an illness.

How fascinating did that sound!

For most folks, that was all there was to it: a fascinating story, a topic for post-meal chitchat.

But regardless of people's motivations, the Fang Zhao's name got major global exposure yet again. And the engine behind the latest round of publicity was not the entertainment press corps but serious magazines and news outlets. The full range of news publications in Yanzhou also covered the story thoroughly.

Many members of the entertainment industry also discussed the story in private.

"What a freak this Fang Zhao is."

"Indeed. I reviewed his career over the past few years again. These are accomplishments beyond the reach of the average person."

"If you take a look at other celebrities, none of them have followed the same path."

"No tabloid stories, he doesn't hit the red carpet, and there's little in the way of self-promotion. Yet every time he does something, it's a big deal. This Hull virus business has shaken the medical world to its core. I wonder what Fang Zhao will do next."

Fang Zhao was oblivious to all this discussion. He was busy preparing for the Galaxy Awards presentation ceremony. In addition, he had received a few new invitations to other prize ceremonies and activities that carried weight. He had to prepare for those as well.

On the day of the Galaxy Awards prize ceremony, Fang Zhao brought Nanfeng, Zuo Yu, and Yan Biao.

It was common for artists who attended prize ceremonies to bring their assistants and drivers, but bodyguards were rarer. Zuo Yu and Yan Biao would be attending as driver and bodyguard respectively, but only assistants were allowed in the main venue. Drivers and bodyguards were banned.

Nanfeng was glowing. Even though he was assigned a seat in the back where assistants were relegated, he was glad that he had access to the main venue in the first place. He took a selfie and posted it to his social media account, drawing quite a few jealous comments.

As for Fang Zhao himself, he tried to act humbly as Xue Jing had instructed. While most of the attendees couldn't rival Fang Zhao in terms of market value, they were far superior when considering artistic achievement.

But the awards ceremony posed a dilemma for Fang Zhao. The other artists who won Supernova Awards this year were all quite emotional, teary-eyed and all. In contrast, this young artist was too calm.

So Fang Zhao felt compelled to act "younger" to blend in. His usual calm came off as maturity, but being indifferent at the arts world's most prestigious prize ceremony was a different story. That would be considered posturing.

Of course, there were artists who didn't like to smile or who got more wound-up the more nervous they were, but clearly, Fang Zhao didn't fall in either category.

I better show some emotion. Otherwise, the veteran artists will think I'm a snob.

When it was time for Fang Zhao to accept his award.

Nanfeng, who was in the audience, as well as Zuo Yu and Lan Biao, who were outside, all noticed their boss was near tears and that his eyes were glowing. "..."

"What do you think? Do you think Boss is really that emotional?" Zuo Yu whispered in a voice message he sent his two colleagues.

"Of course! This is the Galaxy Awards we're talking about. Even though boss only won a Supernova, which belongs to the lowest category and pales in comparison to a Nebula or Galaxy World Medal, it still beats all the other awards. Boss was the only winner from Yanzhou. But... something isn't right," Nanfeng said.

"What do you think?" Zuo Yu asked Yan Biao.

Yan Biao pondered the matter briefly and shook his head. "Hard to say."

If he hadn't known Fang Zhao for so long, perhaps Yan Biao would have taken the show of emotion at face value.

Nanfeng hadn't spent that much time with Fang Zhao and didn't know him well, but Yan Biao, on the other hand, knew Fang Zhao quite well. During his military service, Fang Zhao was someone who killed calmly when he was under siege and facing off against terrorists and beasts.

Besides, Fang Zhao hadn't been all that emotional when he got word of the Supernova, and it had been several days since then, enough time for him to calm down. Even if he got caught up in the emotion of the moment, this was too obvious a display.

Yan Biao suspected it was an act.

The presenter of Fang Zhao's award was Mo Lang.

Clinging to a silver-white round box emblazoned with the Supernova logo, Mo Lang flashed a proud smile. "You've done well!"

Even though the old man was retired, he was still well connected. He had already found out about the new piece Fang Zhao had composed for the Hull virus documentary. Adding to that Fang Zhao's other accomplishments of late, Mo Lang fancied great things for the young artist.

Quite a few members of the audience were intrigued by Mo Lang's reaction.

"Venerable Mo is in a good mood today."

"Venerable Mo doesn't accept disciples anymore, but judging from his demeanor today, he might as well have taken on a new student."

People who knew Mo Lang knew that this was a rare display of emotion for him. Mo Lang rarely smiled or joked around. Even as a presenter, he was mostly solemn and decorous, but now he was all smiles on stage. Clearly, he was pleased with Fang Zhao, this junior artist. On account of Mo Lang's status, the veteran artists in the audience secretly vowed to treat Fang Zhao well from now on if they could help it.

Mo Lang personally draped the Supernova medal over Fang Zhao's neck.

Fang Zhao clutched a certificate that went along with his medal. In all honesty, he was happy and overcome with emotion. Whether it was the curing of the Hull virus or a nod to his musical talent, the prize was worth celebrating. It was something worth getting excited about.

His unfulfilled wishes from his previous life were being realized now.

The white metallic medal he had just donned and the certificate in his hands were confirmation of his hard work the past few years.

He had shouldered a heavy burden during the Period of Destruction and faced different circumstances, so he'd had to conceal his emotions, keep his cards close to his vest. Now he was wearing his heart on his sleeve. It was a minor adjustment more in keeping with the young body he inhabited.

After wearing the medal, Fang Zhao had to remain on stage with Mo Lang for a photo. The photo would be filed in the Galaxy Awards' archives.

Meanwhile, the live broadcast of the prize ceremony on a certain website...

The host was also overcome with emotion, and he pronounced, "At this moment, the Venerable Mr. Mo Lang, a master who is a national treasure, and Fang Zhao, the youngest Supernova winner this year, are facing the camera and flashing kindly smiles simultaneously."

Realizing his mistake 1, the host caught himself. But it was a live broadcast, after all. What he had just said couldn't be undone.

Laughter engulfed the control room of the live broadcast.

"Hahaha, the host misspoke, huh?"

"Kindly my ass! It's a fitting adjective for Mo Lang, but Fang Zhao is only in his 20s!"

"Snicker. Kindly? What the hell? Compared to these old geezers, Fang Zhao is just a kid! Why don't you stick to the facts, host?"

Even though the host eventually corrected himself, his comment had already aired. Some folks with too much time on their hands took a screenshot of Fang Zhao's smile while wearing his medal and holding his certificate and made it into an emoticon called "Kindly Smile."

Ignorant of the fact that he had been made into an emoticon, Fang Zhao acknowledged the master artists in the audience before returning to his seat.

After the Supernovas were presented, it was time for the Nebula prize. The Nebula was a lifetime achievement award of sorts. One winner was chosen each year, honoring an individual or organization that had made long-term and significant contributions to the arts.

As for the Galaxy World Medal, the most coveted prize among the Galaxy Awards, career achievement, talent, and competence were equally weighed. If there were no suitable candidates, the prize was not awarded. It was common for the award to not be handed out several years in a row. But this year, Xue Jing had finally been selected.

Many folks were worried when Xue Jing went on stage, afraid that the elderly man in his 160s would be so overcome by emotion that he would pass out.

Xue Jing had long been a fixture in the arts community. He had many friends in the audience. It seemed like these friends could feel the heavy heart and ecstasy that were

colliding inside Xue Jing.

Xue Jing had waited for some 160 years. He had been oh-so-close to winning this award on many occasions but had always missed out. Now, the most prestigious medal and highest honor in the arts world was in his hands. It was affirmation of his talent, contributions, and his artistic career.

The mood in the room was much more boisterous compared to when the Supernovas were being awarded.

Xue Jing was allocated more time to share his thoughts compared to the other prize winners. He was all choked up and the applause was never-ending.

Fang Zhao clapped along too. He was happy for Xue Jing while pondering his career at the same time.

The Supernova was only the first step in Fang Zhao's artistic career. The Nebula Award and Galaxy World Medal were his next goals. Maybe, when he was at the twilight of his life, he would be awarded the most prestigious medal of the premier prize in the arts world, just like Xue Jing and Mo Lang.

Photos and footage of Fang Zhao accepting his award surfaced online before the Galaxy Award ceremony had ended. Screen captures of the live broadcast and highlights appeared on a variety of media outlets. The news item showed up among entertainment, local, and even military headlines.

As the youngest winner of the Supernova this year and with the link to the curing of the Hull virus, Fang Zhao was prime fodder for journalists. He simply dominated the headlines.

At their retirement home in Yanbei, Great-Grandfather Fang and Great-Grandmother Fang were glued to the telecast. Great-Grandfather Fang tearfully handed out generous red packets in his chat groups.

"Our Xiao Zhao won the Supernova Award! [red packet] [red packet] [red packet]"

The gaming department at Silver Wing didn't stay idle either. The team posted profusely.

Jinro's latest status update:

"Our boss! [Kindly Smile]"

It was fair to say most of the people who knew Fang Zhao well were quite emotional while watching the live broadcast, but there was also a minority that reacted differently. The painting prodigy and Fang Zhao's HuangArt classmate, Will Branch, for example.

Will was extremely calm and wore a very serious expression when he watched the live telecast. His eyes were glued to Fang Zhao as he carefully observed his classmate's every move and expression. He felt that he was close to attaining the short-term goal he had set for himself while studying at HuangArt.

Chapter 348

Realizing a Short-Term Goal

After the Galaxy Awards prize ceremony, Fang Zhao's name recognition was boosted yet again. Both journalists who were part of and outside the establishment showered praise on him.

If any big star in the entertainment industry was made the topic of the day, these media types would typically feud to no end, yet this time, they all stuck to the same script.

Why was that?

The circumstances were different. One had to pick one's battles. The pundits weren't stupid enough to bicker over this one. Regardless of whether or not Fang Zhao had simply been lucky in providing the breakthrough to curing the Hull virus, the results were what they were. He had received an official commendation. He had picked up his prize. Even if they wanted to take issue with Fang Zhao, now was not the time. They could only hold back for now. There would be plenty of other opportunities down the road. Who knows, they might have something on Fang Zhao next time.

The director of the Hull virus documentary intended to capitalize on Fang Zhao's popularity. Government-owned media outlets on every continent were already pushing the documentary, generating plenty of headlines, but the director's fear was that few readers would actually go to see the documentary.

The name "Fang Zhao" guaranteed traffic, which meant more potential viewers.

To give the documentary broader exposure, the director shot a short film that used Fang Zhao's new song as the score. Fang Zhao's authorship of the song was highlighted.

Nanfeng was peeved when he found out.

Nanfeng voiced his concerns to Fang Zhao directly. "So it turns out that high-class shows like this will hitch a ride on someone's popularity too. Isn't it a bit

underhanded?"

But as far as Fang Zhao was concerned, as long as they meant well, he wasn't going to quibble with the director or the team over their calculated moves.

Fang Zhao was happy to see more people learn of the Hull virus and the stories of the strong family members who supported the patients.

The first trailer that the production team for the documentary released was about three minutes long.

A mournful piano solo conveyed sadness and a heavy heart.

A stifling mood permeated the darkness, as if the world were deep in slumber.

Hull-virus patients experienced an out-of-body experience of sorts. They couldn't express themselves. They couldn't experience the world, so they didn't feel sadness and pain. Those who suffered the most were their immediate family.

As far as the immediate family members of Hull-virus patients were concerned, the world was a mean place, but they had no choice but to confront it head-on.

They were forced to abandon their own life plans, like the power couple of Ming Cang and wife, for example. They gave up their promotions and bright futures so they could track down a cure and diligently keep vigil, hoping that Lady Luck would pay them a visit.

But when would that day arrive?

Nobody knew.

Maybe their children would recover tomorrow—or never.

Human beings weren't afraid of hardship. What they feared the most was the lack of courage and determination.

A man squatted in a corner smoking a cigarette and taking in the picture of his 5-year-old daughter, who wore a blank expression. He tugged his collar over his lips, which were frozen pale, got up, and shivered in the relentless winter breeze. He had to get back to his life.

After a long night of entertaining, a middle-aged man reeking of alcohol and vomit returned home to his stone-like, expressionless child. His shoulders collapsed and he stormed into the bathroom. He washed his face with cold water and stared into the mirror with his bloodshot eyes. How much longer can you keep your sh*t together?

A mother sat on the seat of a swing, watching squealing children scamper in the park. Her eyes turned tearful. She dusted off her dress, left, and leaned on a railing, her eyes filled with fear.

A gray-haired couple steered a wheelchair-bound young man out of the hospital and into the quiet streets as they slowly made their way home.

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Not everyone was as well-off as Ming Cang and his wife. There were so, so many folks who had already been suffocated by the cruelties and hardships of life. For them, the world was a brutal place. Fate was a form of torture, a multitude of setbacks, painful and full of desperation. In one fleeting moment, they had contemplated giving up. They had wanted an end to it all.

"Life is an extended wait. Everyone is waiting for something important or meaningful. It could be a certain person, a single utterance, a belief, or an opportunity."

"We're prepared to wait for our whole lives."

"Thankfully, Lady Luck shined on us this time. Our break has finally arrived!"

A letter arrived informing them that there had been a breakthrough in the battle against the Hull virus and that their loved ones qualified for an upcoming clinical trial.

Three years ago, the release of the four movements of the "100-Year Period of Destruction" series had provided the missing link in the race to cure the Hull virus.

At that time a sea of changes had occurred in many corners of the world. But the world was a vast place, and the breakthrough had been kept under wraps and news reports censored. People had stopped paying attention and the news had soon been forgotten.

But unbeknownst to the world, the ripple that Fang Zhao had caused had been changing the lives of many families, of whole communities.

So much had changed over the span of three years.

The man who used to cower in a corner nursing a cigarette now raced to the mountaintop in anticipation of the imminent daybreak. He admired the sunrise and basked in the sunlight enveloping the landscape, gearing himself up for a hopeful day.

The gray-haired old man removed his hands from his worn pockets and broke into a brisk walk, beaming. Tomorrow will be a better day.

It was their dogged determination, strength, and sense of responsibility that got them through the dark days.

The seemingly simple melody that played in the background had a glowing effect, splashing vibrant colors onto what had been a dull canvas, creating a rich, layered, and sharp image.

After countless sleepless nights, the family members of the Hull-virus patients could finally see the light of day and kick back a bit.

For those Hull-virus patients who had been fortunate enough to stick around for a cure, regardless of their age, they were experiencing their senses and expressing their emotions for the first time. It was like being a newborn. They were clueless about life, not having enjoyed bliss or endured suffering yet.

Their experiences from now on would enable their growth and make them strong and patient. Perhaps they might choose a less-traveled, more painful path at some point, but this much was sure: their lives would be rich and colorful.

The cheerful melody soared high, a glimmer of light in the dark seas breaking through the surface of the water and rising alongside the sun.

Fang Zhao hoped the Hull-virus patients who had received a second lease on life were filled with gratitude, remembered their purpose in life, and never strayed from the righteous path.

Fish swarmed through the waters while eagles scaled the skies. Fang Zhao hoped the recovered patients would face their uncertain futures bravely.

There were also researchers and medical personnel to thank. There was too much to say. Fang Zhao had packed his message in a song.

Musicians of a certain aptitude could quickly decode the theme of a piece even if they couldn't figure out the composer's exact message. That was why Old Jo had been able to instantly tell that Fang Zhao's score had been written specifically for the documentary.

But the message was most likely lost on the masses, who weren't interested in analyzing the piece. The name Fang Zhao alone was enough to pique their curiosity.

That was why the director of the documentary had listed Fang Zhao among the credits at the end of the trailer. This move had done the trick.

Meanwhile, Fang Zhao's next door neighbor Will applied for a leave of absence from his classes. He was going to hole up for a week to paint. He intended to skip the next week of classes.

His instructors were happy to accommodate him.

To have enough inspiration and ideas to paint behind closed doors was a good thing. It proved that the artist had made progress during his studies at HuangArt.

The instructors at HuangArt were all giants in the industry. At their level, besides their own accomplishments, bragging rights also hung on the quality of their students.

If their students produced outstanding pieces during their programs, it reflected well on them too.

One of Will's instructors, a highly respected senior professor at HuangArt, called immediately after receiving Will's application for leave.

"Will, you're going into hiding?"

"Yes, so I can achieve my short-term goal."

The old professor paused briefly. Who was Will painting again? I think he mentioned it in his study plan. But the professor interrupted his train of thought, instead asking, "Is this going to be a tough assignment? If you're stuck, you mustn't keep things to yourself, Will. We can talk it over and figure out a solution."

"I've gotten over my hump," Will responded.

"Good, good."

After hanging up, the old professor rummaged through Will's lesson plan. He was getting old and becoming absent minded. The old man struggled to keep track of anything other than his own work.

Still, when he noticed Will's short-term goal was a portrait of Fang Zhao, he cringed.

He was sick of the name. The old geezers in the music department had been flaunting it to him constantly.

"There are so many talented students at HuangArt who span disciplines. Why Fang Zhao?"

Because he was a celebrity? Because he had high market value?

No, Will wasn't that shallow.

"Ah, probably because he lives close by."

Chapter 349

"My Neighbor"

The documentary was still being made, but its marketing campaign had already kicked off. The first step in the campaign, a three-minute trailer, drew quite a bit of attention because of the Fang Zhao effect.

"So I hear that Fang Zhao wrote the score for the trailer? That's awesome. Are there any music professionals out there? How is the score? Let's hear some professional analysis."

"I'm not a professional and I can't offer professional comment, but I think the score sounds good. Coupled with the trailer, it's quite a moving combination. Sigh, it's not easy being a Hull-virus patient or the family member of one."

"Are there any Hull-virus-related charity events going on? I want to donate to the researchers, but I can't find anything online. I wonder if they have enough funding? I hear the treatments they offer are all free."

"There's no need for donations. The major research institutes behind the cure are all backed by major investment funds. Such an important project like curing the Hull virus isn't short on funding. What they lack is the right talent."

"It's time to study medicine. No, I mean to study music, so we can save lives like Fang Zhao."

"Let's be down-to-earth and stick to medicine. After all, only one Fang Zhao has surfaced in the 500-odd years of the New Era."

Other folks had other concerns.

"The director of the documentary said that the score was an in-kind donation from Fang Zhao. Does that mean Fang Zhao composed a song for the documentary without charging a single cent?"

"Something like that. After all, documentary filmmakers need to hire folks to compose

their scores. Master-level musicians don't come cheap at all."

"Fang Zhao's market value is something to be reckoned with, no? A commissioned piece from him should cost at least 10 million dollars, no? I remember he sold a piece for 10 million at one point. That's 10 million we're talking about! And he made the offer without a thought."

"Ten million is low. How long ago was that? His fee will definitely go up now that he's won the Supernova Award. Plus he is immensely popular now. The filmmakers behind the documentary clearly wanted to use Fang Zhao to draw attention. I don't know what level of artistic mastery Fang Zhao has reached right now, but in terms of market value, he must command a lot more than 10 million, at least twice as much. The director of the documentary was smart. Think about how much of his marketing budget he saved with Fang Zhao's gift."

"Fang Zhao is like a god. One moment he's taking the gaming world by storm, the other he's mining and battling beasts on a foreign planet. Before you know it, he's starring in a blockbuster TV series—and his songs can cure diseases? I haven't rested my knees since the day I started following this star."

"I wonder what Fang Zhao will endorse next."

For most people, the curing of the Hull virus was just a casual topic of conversation. They quickly moved onto something else, even though it was widely covered by major news outlets and there was the Fang Zhao factor. Anything that didn't concern their immediate interests was trivial. They would move on after dwelling on it briefly.

Meanwhile, the Hull-virus patients and their immediate families treated Fang Zhao as a savior. Ming Cang had said in public on many occasions that he would lend Fang Zhao his unconditional support on many matters. Their gratitude was not something outsiders could comprehend.

Due to the latest round of saturated news coverage, the four movements of the "100-Year Period of Destruction" series, which folks dubbed the key to curing the Hull virus, rose in value.

Silver Wing Media, Fang Zhao's management company, took advantage as well. Polar Light, the first-generation Silver Wing virtual idol that was already somewhat passe, started trending within Yanzhou again.

Online discussion picked up as well.

"Does Fang Zhao own the rights to the four movements of his '100-Year Period of Destruction' series or does Silver Wing? Has he sold the rights to any of the movements?"

"If not, I'm thinking their market value has just doubled."

"Bullsh*t! I think it at least tripled."

"Speaking of which, I remember that idiot from Leizhou, Mr. Z, bought the rights to the third movement for a movie of his."

"Are you talking about Zaro, that generator of trashy movies? A crappy film paired with a godly score. What an insult!"

"We Leizhou natives are used to it."

"I just searched for that Zaro movie and watched it. To be perfectly honest, the part of the film that used the third movement of the '100-Year Period of Destruction' score kind of stood out. It was quite good. The scenes were especially epic and mindblowing. Those armored vehicles were the real thing!"

"Really? Let me search for it too. What's the name of the movie?"

"It's called 'God of War'."

So viewers dug out and watched a film that even Zaro himself had forgotten about. Within a short time frame, the film racked up enough fresh views to push it into the top 10 on Leizhou's biggest video-streaming website.

When Zaro saw the data his agent showed him, he was blown away.

"This hardcore? That can't be the case. In terms of driving traffic, I can certainly rival Fang Zhao!" Zaro was convinced there was something wrong with the data.

Zaro's agent stared at his client with a blank expression. "Why don't you read the news more often? You've barely been skimming the entertainment headlines recently," he said as he brought up stories from major news outlets about the Hull virus and Fang Zhao's Supernova win on his tablet.

Zaro scanned the stories quickly. He looked like he had just witnessed a 10-ton elephant take off in flight.

Lately, Zaro had been busy reading several novels and scripts that Woo Tianhao had passed to him. The duo had had a good time dabbling in garlic speculation and now were planning on investing in a movie project together.

The past two days, Zaro had been mulling over how to use garlic to improve his acting. Then he'd heard about the spike in the views of "God of War."

Zaro also read some of the online comments, which left him fuming.

"What do they mean that donating to charity is better than splurging on a crappy movie? I spend my money how I like. How am I getting in their way by having a good time? Did I dip into their savings? I've never been late on a single tax payment. These folks have nothing better to fidget over."

"It's 'fuss over'."

"Huh?"

"Forget it, fidget it is, then." Zaro's agent tried to calm his client, who had rolled up his sleeves and was gearing up for a war of words. "Cool down, Senior Master! You know, no amount of words is a substitute for action. You have to let everyone know that you have ambition too."

Zaro interrupted his agent immediately. "I'm well-off and hail from a powerful family. What's wrong with talking about scoring chicks, reading novels, and speculating on garlic? Why are you talking to me about ambition?"

Zaro's agent: "... Are you trying to piss me to death so you can go shopping for a new agent?"

Oblivious to the terrified look on his agent's face, Zaro felt he had been maligned. He felt that he had been on good behavior, keeping a low profile. Who could have known that he'd get attacked for holing up at home reading novels?

"It's all Fang Zhao's fault!" Still, Zaro was full of confidence. "Just wait until this business about the Hull virus dies down. Fang Zhao won't be trending again. Without government media taking the lead—and given how quickly entertainment headlines

change—who's gonna remember him in a few days?"

The agent had no qualms about taking Zaro down a notch. "Festival and awards season is about to begin. Fang Zhao did a good job in 'Founding Era.' It's very likely he'll pick up an award."

"Film festivals? Let me be clear: I'm not going to attend any that aren't high class enough."

The agent: "... Who the f*ck cares whether you attend or not? None of the prestigious festivals sent you invites on their own initiative. I had to use my connections to get them.

But all Zaro's agent did was keep these thoughts to himself. If he actually voiced them, Zaro would be royally pissed off. Zaro's agent never bothered volunteering information that upset his boss.

But just as Zaro's agent had pointed out, Fang Zhao was flooded with invites from film festivals big and small from all around the world. He had only been in a TV series and had yet to appear in a movie, but he still got invitations from film festivals. Some of the organizers were hoping to work with him on projects, while others wanted to hitch a ride on his recent star power. But Fang Zhao turned down most of the invites. He was busy.

The Twelve Tones program was not a walk in the park. The course load wasn't heavy, but there were a ton of assignments. After penning the song for the Hull-virus documentary, he had to write a lengthy paper. The paper accounted for a big chunk of his grade. If he didn't achieve a certain GPA, he wouldn't be able to graduate.

Nanfeng had briefed him on the online commentary, but Fang Zhao hadn't paid much attention. Even though there were plenty of news stories about him, this much he and Zaro agreed on: it would die down in a few days.

Even though all these TV and film festivals were coming up, some of which Fang Zhao would attend, by that time, every celebrity would be angling for a piece of the action. The publicity teams for many top stars had been gearing up already, but who knew this Hull virus business would land Fang Zhao in the entertainment headlines again. But that was a fluke. These crack teams were going to go all out in the days that followed. Let's see who shines the brightest on the red carpet eventually. After such

an extended shoot on Planet Wai, many members of the "Founding Era" cast felt it was their turn in the limelight.

Yet no one, including Fang Zhao, would have guessed that the name that was slowly being crowded out would dominate entertainment headlines once again a week later.

A week later, Fang Zhao's neighbor Will finally emerged from hiding.

He had been holed up in his dorm room for seven straight days. Apart from attending to his bodily functions, all Will had done was paint. By the time he left his room, he was a shade of his previous self, barely able to stand on all fours. He had lost a ton of weight, as if he had just survived a major illness, yet he was in great spirits and looked relaxed.

Will showed his painting to his adviser after emerging from hiding.

The first time the old professor laid eyes on the painting, he was so shocked that he struggled to find words.

The crooked outline looked quite over-the-top, but somehow, it came together nicely. The extensive use of black, in contrast to the white canvas, lent passion and mystique to the piece, which was so dynamic and full of tension. If someone stared at the painting, they would feel as if they had just succumbed to a bewildering blow; they'd have no idea what had just hit them.

The old professor glared at the painting for some time before taking a deep breath. He asked Will, "Can I keep the original for a few days? I want to take a good look at it."

Will nodded decisively. "Sure."

After getting Will's permission, the old professor took the painting home. Wanting to brag and to get a second opinion, he invited an old friend over to have a look.

"My Neighbor'? Who's Will's neighbor?" the friend asked.

"Fang Zhao. You know, the guy who was all over the place a while back. He's in Will's class. He's the youngest student in the program this year," the old professor explained.

"What's so interesting about Fang Zhao? But is he really like that in real life? The portrait gives off a weird vibe. It's kind of spooky too."

"I confirmed with Will. It's Fang Zhao all right."

"Wow. I never would have guessed that Will would take this approach. This is a significant improvement. The sketching is superb—and he has gone beyond putting idea to paper. It's so rare to have this level of enlightenment at this age. This should be put on display so that the other art academies can see what our Twelve Tones students are made of!"

"Well, that's up to Will. Once it's on display on campus, buyers will soon beckon."

"Then let's put it up for auction. The painting will definitely fetch a good price. That is, if Will is willing to sell."

So, painting in hand, the old professor personally paid Will a visit to see if would be willing to put the piece up for auction on HuangArt's auction website.

HuangArt selected outstanding student works every week to put on display. If the artists agreed, the pieces would be put up for auction as well.

"Go ahead and put it on display and up for auction," said an emotionless Will.

The old professor was quite baffled by Will's casual attitude. "You're willing to part with it now? You don't want to keep it for a few years?"

"No," Will responded firmly.

The old professor wanted to confirm Will's intentions. "It took a great deal of effort and reflection to produce this painting. Are you sure you want to sell it right after you've finished it?"

Will seemed confused. "This was only my short-term goal. Painting Fang Zhao is only the first step. My ultimate goal is actually to draw his dog."

As far as Will was concerned, painting Fang Zhao was only a transition. Been there, done that. Why keep the painting around?

Speaking of which, it dawned on Will that it was time to ask Fang Zhao if he could borrow that dog.

Chapter 350

Alien

Will had indeed struggled to read Fang Zhao, but he had been able to capture the complexity of his inner turmoil—not entirely, but at least a part of it. That was already a big success. To capture the full extent of Fang Zhao's complexity would require further refinement of his painting skills.

So for Will, the painting was a form of incremental progress, the equivalent of a draft. He hadn't taken it too seriously.

Will had attained his short-term goal of tackling a portrait of Fang Zhao. At least Fang Zhao was within his grasp. He could produce some semblance of a portrait of Fang Zhao. But Curly Hair fell outside his comfort zone.

Others might not be able to detect that complexity. More often than not, Will only sensed that the dog was a bit special, but when he picked up his paintbrush, he realized that he had no idea where to start. The more he pondered the matter, the more confused he got. This was a challenge unlike any other he had faced before. No one had taught him how to handle a problem like this; it was something he had never thought about. After considering the matter some more, he had decided to start with the dog's owner.

And this was an idea that had come from his cousin, a dog owner himself. Will remembered that his cousin had once said that a dog's personality, to some extent, came from its master. That was why Will had painted Fang Zhao. Now it was time to study the dog again.

Yet he was still clueless as to where to begin.

After another round of brainstorming, Will decided to borrow Curly Hair for a brief time. He might get more insight after a period of close contact with the dog.

But Will knew he wasn't a dog lover. He had never wanted a dog before. He thought they were too much trouble. He had even been bitten by a dog once. He had not harbored any affection for a dog since he'd been a kid. Now that he decided to have a

dog, he made a rare call home.

The person who answered was Will's father, Will Sr.

Will's new piece had caught the attention of masters in the art world, and word had traveled to Will Sr. He was quite proud and had just bragged about the news to a few old friends. He was still wearing a broad smile when he got the call from his son.

"What is it? Have you run into a problem?" said Will Sr. in an unusually pleasant tone.

"There is indeed a problem," Will said.

Will Sr. was intrigued. "Tell me."

"I want to have a dog."

Will's comment caught his father completely off guard. Will Sr. nearly dropped the teacup he was holding. Incredulous, he was scared more than surprised.

"You're going to scoop dog poop with your drawing hand?"

Will kept his cool. "I won't have to clean up myself. I did some research. Now, there are AI robots that can do the job and other related equipment that can ease the owner's burden. I won't have to do stuff like clean up poop myself."

"Don't you remember that you were bitten by a dog?" Will Sr. said.

"I don't have amnesia." Will maintained his composure, speaking as if he were bringing up a mundane matter. "There's no law that says you can't have a dog after you've been bitten by one."

"Tell me the truth. Why exactly do you want to have a dog?" Will Sr. asked.

"For inspiration. I can't draw a dog, so I want to try close contact with one."

"You've been enrolled in the Twelve Tones program for some time now and you can't even draw a dog?" Will Sr. scolded.

Even though he struck a hostile tone, Will Sr. knew his son well. He knew that Will had to have his reasons. Maybe he did genuinely need to borrow a dog to find inspiration

and resolve his impasse.

"How long are you going to keep your dog for?" Will Sr. asked.

"I don't know. Probably until I can paint the dog." Will sounded unusually troubled. It felt horrible being stuck. Why would he bother taking care of a dog if he could already draw one? It was too much hassle. But Will wasn't sure when he would be able to produce a painting.

Will Sr. dropped his objections but voiced other concerns. "What kind of dog do you want to have? Don't pick a big dog. When big dogs bite, they kill."

"A small dog."

"That's good." Will Sr. breathed a sigh of relief. "Bring it over some time."

"I haven't gotten the dog yet."

"Who are you borrowing it from?"

"Fang Zhao."

When the latest class of the Twelve Tones program had been announced, Will Sr. had looked into Fang Zhao, who struck him as being exceptionally young. Plus, Fang Zhao and Will were neighbors. Will Sr. had done some research online, and he knew that Fang Zhao had a very expensive dog.

Will Sr. pondered for another few seconds. "I'm going to send over another servant. You also need a nutritionist."

"For the dog?"

"For you!" Will Sr. wanted to hang up on his son.

Will was mentally exhausted from holing up all this time for his Fang Zhao portrait. He struck everyone as being in poor health. He needed someone to look after him, and he needed to rest.

Father and son discussed the matter of the dog some more. Will accepted his father's suggestion to call one of their relatives to ask for advice on having a dog. The relative

recommended a popular web channel dedicated to dog rearing. The host broadcast his dog training sessions live and offered tips to novice dog owners.

When Will clicked on the link, the host was disciplining a dog and launching into a spiel at the same time:

"I like smart dogs but not cunning dogs. What's the difference? Smart dogs do what you ask. Cunning dogs ignore your instructions. Smart dogs are of the cuddly and adorable variety, while cunning dogs are little demons."

Will thought about the dog next door. Based on his current understanding, Curly Hair belonged to the cuddly and adorable category.

To prepare for his upcoming dog ownership, Will pulled out a notebook and started taking notes.

[Curly Hair type: cuddly and adorable]

The host continued in his live webcast: "Most dogs are afraid of heights."

Will jotted a reminder in his notebook not to walk Curly Hair on high ground.

"Dogs like to be fondled, but don't fondle the butt or tail of a dog whose personality you don't know well."

No touching! Definitely not! Will jotted down this point with force. He was still haunted by the memory of being bitten by a dog as a child.

"Dogs like to chew and bite."

Gotta hide all my pens.

And they like to tear stuff?

Gotta hide my most important documents, especially my paintings. As for the rest, so be it.

"There's a saying from the Old Era that dogs can't help eating shit..."

Gotta lock my bathroom door too!

...

While Will was preparing for dog ownership, an online news item sparked heated discussion.

Will's HuangArt professor posted Will's painting on the school's website and made it available for auction.

After the portrait was posted online, it began drawing the attention of fellow artists. The number of bids rose quickly. Within a day, the portrait was going for 30 million dollars.

Paintings that were posted by HuangArt as one of its featured pieces were the works of either masters or very talented students. It was not unheard of for a painting to go for as much as 30 million, but when pieces attracted such bids in the past, it was typically from other artists, collectors, or investors. Other folks wouldn't pay attention, nor would they express interest.

There were two reasons this particular painting was able to draw attention from every continent in a short period: the style was unusual and, more importantly, the subject was Fang Zhao.

"'My Neighbor'? Whose neighbor looks like that? His facial features are leaping from the canvas! It's gonna scare children."

"Hahahaha, who is Will's neighbor? Poor thing being depicted this way."

"According to my auntie who works at HuangArt, Will's neighbor is Fang Zhao."

"That's impossible!"

"According to credible sources, the neighbor is indeed Fang Zhao."

"F*ck! That looks nothing like Fang Zhao!"

"This is worth 30 million? My niece in primary school can paint like that."

"Not to brag, but I could produce 10 paintings like this in a day!"

"Then why don't you paint one?"

"So this is what they call an abstract painting?"

"Isn't Will Sr. a surrealist painter? I remember him saying that he wanted Will to take after him. Even if Will doesn't become a surrealist, he's not an abstract painter. This is a major detour."

"Nowadays, painters just follow the money. What you hate, others like. Surrealism was indeed popular in Will Sr.'s time, but now the elite prefer abstract paintings. That's why Will switched gears. Look, the bids for his portrait broke 30 million in a day. The bids are going to keep going up."

"I don't really get the aesthetic standards of you artists."

"A regular Joe like me can't understand abstract paintings. They're no fun. I prefer surreal paintings. Who was it that painted a portrait of Fang Zhao last time? I thought he did a good job."

"A year-one student at my art academy just drew a sketch of Fang Zhao. [picture]"

"That sketch wouldn't pass muster in our class. It's so superficial and empty. Other than the fact that it looks like Fang Zhao, there's nothing there."

Some of the onlookers were confused. "So... apart from resemblance, what other elements are we looking for?"

"Of course something deeper, something philosophical. There's a reason why Will's painting got so expensive. The more I study it, the more of a heart-thumping, dazzling effect it has."

"I'm bedazzled too. Even a painting like this is worth 30 million? I feel dizzy, my eyes are blurry, and my heart is racing. I want to have a painting auctioned too!"

"Even if it's a decent painting, the pricing is a bit high."

"Hype! It's definitely hype!"

There were the naysayers—and defenders as well.

"That's actually not the case. My uncle put in a bid too. He's not a painter and he doesn't really understand the painting, but he's a businessman. He is quite rosy about

the painting's commercial prospects."

"True. The painter is a rising star and the subject is likewise a genius artist. Fang Zhao is a trending topic."

"But the way Will portrays Fang Zhao is really spooky. He looks like an alien."

"Hahahaha, there you go. My question has been answered—the reason why Fang Zhao kicks ass at everything is because he's an alien!"

"Will, does Fang Zhao know you painted him like this?"

"Paging 'Alien' Fang Zhao!"

The focus of the discussion shifted again, this time from the pricing of the painting to Fang Zhao's new nickname. But amid all the playful banter, no one took things seriously. This was simply a form of entertainment.

In addition, the matter died down quickly, replaced by the latest headlines from the entertainment industry and news about new celebrity ventures and projects.

Oblivious of the online chatter, Will pressed the doorbell to Fang Zhao's dorm room after taking dozens of pages of notes on dog rearing.



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