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THE FIVE BROTHERS' DREAM

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Book Two

Isherpath

A JOURNEY OF BROTHERHOOD, DESTINY, AND THE WAY OF DAO.

A Novel

**THE FIVE
BROTHERS'
DREAM**

BOOK 2

BY ISHERPATH

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The Five Brothers' Dream

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*To the colleagues and friends who became the inspirations for
the characters in this novel.*

PROLOGUE

There are families that inherit wealth, and there are families that inherit dreams.

The Ma family inherited something more difficult: resilience.

Across half a century of profound change, through prosperity and hardship, love and loss, faith and ambition, five brothers walked five very different paths. One became a physician who healed broken bodies; another built businesses amid shifting tides; one carried the burden of public service; one crossed the Pacific to help shape the future through technology; and the youngest turned away from worldly

success in search of spiritual awakening among the mountains.

Their journeys carried them from quiet villages to great cities, from the mist-covered Qinling Mountains to the skyline of New York, from family courtyards illuminated by lanterns to the silent halls of ancient temples. Yet wherever life led them, an invisible thread continued to bind them together—the enduring love of family, the search for meaning, and the hope that one generation might leave the next a better world.

The Five Brothers' Dream is not merely the story of one family. It is the story of a nation in transformation, of ordinary people facing extraordinary times, and of the timeless questions that every generation must answer: What is worth protecting? What is success? What is home? And when history changes around us, what remains unchanged within the human heart?

This is the beginning of their journey.



Continued from Book One...



CHAPTER 50

A YOUNG MAN TAKES OFF HIS POLICE UNIFORM TO DO BUSINESS



“If wearing this skin means becoming no different from a gangster, then I would rather be nothing.”



Once you understand the basics of narrative, you don't have to follow all of the rules. In fact, some of your favorite books that you enjoy as a reader might break away from typical narrative structure. As the writer, you have the freedom to structure your book in whatever way feels most powerful and effective, even if that means breaking some of the rules.

As for Ma Chengzhi, after serving two years as an armed policeman in Aritai Town along the Old Silk Road on the outskirts of Urumqi in the autonomous region of Xinjiang, he was promoted to deputy chief of the town police station. He was brave, hard-fighting, unafraid of danger, and when an arrest had to be made, he was always the one who rushed forward first.

Aritai stood at the edge of the Gobi. In spring, wind and sand filled the sky; in summer, the sun cut down like a blade.

Along the main street were restaurants, inns, and repair shops run by Han Chinese, as well as naan stalls, mutton stands, and small groceries run by Uyghurs. By day, people of different backgrounds bought and sold, haggled, and passed one another in the dust; children chased one another through the alleys. But when night fell, the vapors of liquor, gambling, resentment, poverty, and old injury began to rise out of every dark corner. By daylight the town was a market; by night, it was a den of beasts.

The police station stood behind the town government compound, a two-story gray building. On the wall were painted eight bright red characters: Loyalty to the People, Justice and Integrity. The words were vivid; the wall beneath them was blackened with age.

The first time Chengzhi entered Chief Han's office, Han offered him a cigarette and smiled.

"I hear you can fight."

Chengzhi answered, "A soldier obeys orders."

Han narrowed his eyes. "Here, obeying orders isn't enough. You have to understand the rules."

"What rules?"

Han smiled, but did not answer at once. He pushed open the window and pointed toward the street outside.

"Do you see that? Dance halls, inns, black-market taxis, gambling tables, drug dealers, thieves, thugs, traffickers, smugglers. Which one of them doesn't know the police station? Which one of them isn't afraid of the police station? And yet, which one of them can survive without the police station?"

Chengzhi frowned.

Han blew out a mouthful of smoke. "This isn't the army. In the army, friend and enemy are clear. You charge, and that's

that. Here it's different. The bad ones can't all be beaten to death. If they're all gone, who will bring money? The petty cases can't all be closed. If everything is settled, who will still listen when you call? Lock them up, let them out; let them out, lock them up again. That is called control. If you control them to death, the money dries up. If you keep them alive, everyone eats."

Chengzhi felt his heart sink.

It did not take him long to see how the station worked.

There were already three deputy chiefs, each with his own territory. One handled dance halls, prostitutes, and prostitution cases; at night, bosses often brought him cigarettes, liquor, and sometimes envelopes thicker than either. Another handled road bandits, hooligans, thieves, and burglars; when he arrested people he shouted with authority, and when he released them he exchanged knowing glances. The third oversaw drug dealers, addicts, and human trafficking; he spoke little, but his eyes were the most venomous, and he had the most informants.

The criminals were not called criminals in their mouths. They were "old acquaintances," "resources," "connections." Chengzhi understood then: on duty, they were gangsters in police uniforms; off duty, they were gangsters who had taken the uniforms off. The only difference was that, once clothed in police blue, they carried the sheen of the state.

New to the station, Chengzhi did not know how to flatter, nor would he take money of his own accord. So Chief Han threw him the hardest bone.

"You'll handle ethnic disputes."

Chengzhi paused. "Han-Uyghur conflicts?"

Han nodded. "Yes. Small ones are quarrels and fights. Big ones become mass brawls. Handle them too lightly, and the

Han say you favor the Uyghurs. Handle them too harshly, and the Uyghurs say you are oppressing them. Each side has channels above. If either side makes a big enough noise, it becomes a political problem. You're young. You can fight. You can hold the scene down."

Chengzhi knew this was not trust. It was a test, and it was a burden no one else wanted.

His first call came over a dispute between a Han restaurant and a Uyghur mutton stall over a stretch of pavement. Both sides had shoved and cursed half the day before finally reaching for sticks and knives. When Chengzhi arrived with his men, several dozen people had already gathered in the street. The Han restaurant owner had blood on his face and was pointing furiously at the other side.

"They're bullying people! This road belongs to everyone!"

The Uyghur stall owner's eyes were red. In rough Mandarin, he shouted back, "You smashed my stove first! You cursed my mother!"

The crowd grew thicker around them.

Chengzhi stepped into the middle and shouted, "Put everything down! Whoever moves again gets handcuffed first!"

Someone cursed, "You police only know how to scare common people!"

Another voice cried, "You're taking their side!"

Anger rose in Chengzhi's chest, but he forced it down. He knew this fire could not be allowed to burn wild. In a small town like this, many hatreds had not been born today. Rent, stalls, language, religion, poverty, wealth, outsiders, locals—old grievances lay like dry brush. A single spark could set the whole place aflame.

He sent the injured to the hospital first, then brought the leaders from both sides back to the station. All the way there, they continued cursing through the windows of the vehicle. Chengzhi sat in the front seat and looked out at the yellow sand blowing across the road. Suddenly he felt that he was not handling a case at all. He was carrying a basin of fire through a field of dry grass.

Such calls came again and again, each more difficult than the last.

The third time, it was late autumn.

At dusk, a north wind drove sand through the air. A brawl had broken out at the old market on the western side of town. It had begun with a three-wheeled cart brushing against someone in the lane, but old grudges were soon dragged up, and young men from both sides had summoned friends. When Chengzhi arrived with four officers, stalls had been overturned, fruit rolled across the ground, a mutton rack lay toppled in bloody water, and a dozen men stood facing one another with sticks, chains, and short knives. Women screamed. Children cried. Shops slammed down their shutters one after another.

Chengzhi drew his baton and charged forward.

“Stop!”

No one listened.

A brick flew out of the crowd and smashed into the windshield of the police car. Glass shattered with a crash. A young officer retreated in fear. Chengzhi, however, rushed straight to the front. He kicked down a young man swinging a knife, then turned and blocked an iron rod with his arm. The blow landed hard; half his body went numb. He gritted his teeth, seized the attacker by the collar, and threw him to the ground.

“One more knife, and I fire!”

His shout pressed the chaos down for a single moment.

But only for a moment.

From the rear of the crowd someone yelled, “The police are beating people!”

From the other side came another cry: “They have knives! Why aren’t you arresting them?”

The scene broke open again. Chengzhi saw two young men roll behind a stall, locked together in a struggle. In one man’s hand, something flashed coldly. Chengzhi lunged forward by instinct and grabbed the wrist of the one holding the knife. The man’s eyes were bloodshot, beastlike. He struggled fiercely, shouting words Chengzhi could not understand. Chengzhi pressed him down with his knee and was just about to wrench the knife away when he felt a sudden chill at his waist, followed by pain that pierced to the bone.

He looked down and saw the blade being pulled out from the edge of his coat.

Blood surged out.

“Chief Ma!” someone shouted.

For a moment, darkness swam before Chengzhi’s eyes. Yet he still held fast to the knife-wielder’s wrist. With all his strength, he pinned the man down and growled, “Don’t mind me first! Get the knives! Don’t let them charge again!”

Only then did the other officers rush forward. Warning shots were fired. Reinforcements and an ambulance arrived one after another. The chaos in the market was finally suppressed.

When Chengzhi was lifted into the ambulance, wind and sand blew so hard he could scarcely open his eyes. He saw the sky, gray and yellow; the crowd, blurred and shifting;

some people crying, some still cursing, some standing at a distance and watching coldly.

At that moment he suddenly felt how thin his police uniform was. It could not stop a knife. It could not stop the hatred in men's hearts.

At the hospital, the doctor said the blade had missed a vital point by half an inch. He was lucky to be alive.

Chengzhi lay in bed, thick gauze wrapped around his waist. Late at night, when the anesthetic wore off, pain rose in waves. He closed his eyes, but the cries from the market kept sounding in his ears. The Han shouting of injustice, the Uyghurs shouting of grievance, the police shouting for order, the women shouting for help—all the voices tangled together like a broken bell, ringing through him without rest.

Chief Han came to visit, carrying two boxes of supplements.

"Hard life," Han said, sitting at the bedside with a smile. "That knife was worth it. The higher-ups heard about it. They said you acted decisively and helped maintain stability."

Chengzhi looked at him. "What will happen to the two who used knives?"

"They'll be locked up if they need locking up, sentenced if they need sentencing. But with this kind of thing, you can't go too far. Both sides need to be soothed."

"Soothed?" Chengzhi said coldly. "One dead today, two dead tomorrow—that's what you call soothing?"

Han looked at him. "You're still young, Little Ma. This water cannot be cleared with one strike of a baton."

"Then we just let it stay muddy?"

Han lit a cigarette and said mildly, "Muddy water raises fish. If the water gets too clear, no one has anything to eat."

Chengzhi suddenly felt sick.

After Han left, Chengzhi stared for a long time out the hospital window. There was a thin poplar tree outside, its branches whipped about by the wind. Moonlight lay on the windowsill, white as a blade.

He remembered how, when he had transferred from the armed police to the police station, he had still carried a young man's fire in his chest. He had thought that with fists, courage, and a uniform, he could press down the evil of one place.

Only now did he understand: the greatest evil was not on the street, not in the thieves and thugs, not in the knives held by young men in a brawl. The greatest evil lay in a system of rules that treated crime as revenue, conflict as political achievement, and ordinary people as pawns.

If he stayed, what would become of him?

Either he would learn to take money, learn to close one eye, learn to arrest and release, release and arrest, until he became another Chief Han; or he would keep resisting, and sooner or later die in some alley, some market, some riot officially called a "dispute."

Worse still, after enough calls, he might stop seeing people as people. He might begin to see only "Han," "Uyghur," "suspect," "key target," "stability risk." Once a man saw the world that way, his heart would already be dead.

A few days later, Chengzhi could get out of bed.

Dressed in hospital clothes, he walked slowly down the corridor. A Han youth whose face had been cut by a blade sat on a bench in a daze. At the other end, an old Uyghur man supported his wounded son and spoke to him in a low voice. The two sides were separated by half a corridor, and neither looked at the other.

Chengzhi stood between them and felt a sudden sorrow. So much hatred, he realized, was not born in men by nature. Everyone wanted to live. Everyone feared death. Everyone had parents, wives, children. But poverty, prejudice, power, darkness, and profit pushed them layer by layer to opposite sides, until at last they took knives against one another.

On the day he was discharged, Chengzhi returned to the station to submit his report.

Chief Han thought he had come to claim credit. Smiling, he said, "Little Ma, rest well. Once your wound heals, this file is still yours. The higher-ups have a good impression of you. You have a future."

Chengzhi placed a resignation letter on the desk.

Han froze. "What is this supposed to mean?"

"I'm quitting."

Han frowned. "One stab wound and you're scared?"

Chengzhi was silent for a moment. Then he said, "I'm scared. But not of the knife. I'm scared that one day I won't be afraid of knives anymore—and won't be afraid of human life either."

Han stared at him. "Think carefully. Without this uniform, you're nothing."

Chengzhi lowered his eyes to the uniform on his own body. Slowly, he took off his police cap and placed it on the desk.

"If wearing this skin means becoming no different from a gangster, then I would rather be nothing."

Han's face darkened. "You'll regret this."

"Perhaps," Chengzhi said. "But if I stay, I will certainly regret it."

With that, he turned and walked out of the police station.

The wind outside was fierce, carrying sand that stung the eyes. On the street, the naan oven still burned; the Han restaurant still smelled of stir-fried vegetables; children still chased one another through the mouth of the alley. The world had not changed because of his resignation. But Chengzhi knew that, at least, he had stepped back from a darker road.

At the edge of town, he turned and looked once more at the gray building.

On the wall, the eight red characters—Loyalty to the People, Justice and Integrity—looked garish and absurd in the blowing sand. Chengzhi touched the wound at his waist, still not fully healed. The pain reminded him that in this life, a man must one day know what places he can no longer remain in, what meals he can no longer eat, and what power he can no longer touch.

In the distance, yellow sand rolled across the horizon.

He faced the wind and walked on. That knife had not taken his life. But it had cut open a wound in his heart, allowing him finally to see that the most dangerous thing in the world was not the edge of a blade, but the moment when people grow accustomed to darkness and mistake it for the rules of life.



CHAPTER 51

THE NEW SILK ROAD REACHES THE WESTERN REGIONS

The first time Ma Yide received Chengzhi's call from the ancient Western Regions, rain was falling in Shanghai.

At that time, the online business platform he had founded, Silk Road, had only just put up its sign. The office was in a new building; the walls still carried the smell of freshly brushed lime. Rows of computers had been set out, and network cables wound beneath the desks like rivers not yet fully formed. The technical classmates from Tsinghua were bent before their screens writing code. Old classmates from the University of International Business and Economics were organizing English pages. Several young people gathered around a modem, listening to its thin sound of connection, as though hearing the future knocking outside the door.

When the telephone rang, Yide was discussing the homepage columns with someone.

"Hello, Yide? It's Chengzhi."

The voice on the other end was open and resonant, carrying the broad flavor of the wind from the ancient Western Regions. Ma Yide immediately laughed. "Second Brother! Aren't you in Urumqi? How did you think of calling me?"

Chengzhi laughed loudly. "I resigned."

"Resigned from what?"

"My public post in the Armed Police."

Ma Yide froze, holding the telephone for a long time without speaking.

On the other end, Chengzhi seemed able to imagine his expression and laughed. "Don't feel sorry for my iron rice bowl. Reform and opening has gone on for so many years; we cannot let you alone go down to the sea. You sold melons; I will sell jade. We Ma family men must have someone sell the things of the Western Regions out into the world."

"Sell jade?"

"Hetian jade." Chengzhi's voice suddenly became serious. "I went back to Hetian for a while. Now I've opened a storefront in a tourist area in Urumqi, doing both retail and wholesale. Tourists buy, and jade merchants also take goods. But I keep feeling it is not enough. Aren't you in Shanghai doing some online business platform called Silk Road? I wanted to ask: can this jade also go online?"

Ma Yide's heart suddenly lit up.

He stood and walked to the window. Shanghai rain slanted against the glass. In the distance, tall buildings were hidden in gray-white daylight. At the other end of the telephone was Urumqi, the foot of the Tianshan Mountains, the west wind of ancient roads, jade stones, grapes, Hami melons, camel bells, and the windblown sands of the Western Regions. A name suddenly came truly alive in his heart—Silk Road.

He said in a low voice, "Second Brother, this call of yours has come at exactly the right time."

Chengzhi laughed. "How so?"

Ma Yide looked out the window. "When I first named the platform Silk Road, I only felt it was classical, grand, and like trade. But now that your jade has arrived, I understand: this name is not decoration. It is fate."

The ancient Silk Road had originally been the road from the Central Plains to the Western Regions, and from there to the farther world.

A thousand years and more ago, outside Chang'an, carts and horses rolled endlessly. Merchants took leave of the city gates and traveled west along the Hexi Corridor, passing Dunhuang, going out through the Jade Gate Pass and Yangguan Pass, and entering the great desert and Gobi. Wind and sand filled the sky, camel bells rang long, and camel caravans followed one hump after another, carrying silk, tea, porcelain, lacquerware, and also the craftsmanship of the Central Plains and the light of Eastern civilization. They crossed the territory of today's ancient Western Regions, passed the Flaming Mountains of Turpan, passed Kuqa, Kashgar, and Hetian, crossed the Pamirs, and continued toward Central Asia, Western Asia, and even farther Europe.

On that road there was not only silk.

There were blood-sweating horses, grapes, sesame, spices, jade, glass, music, Buddhist scriptures, and people of different faces, different languages, and different faiths. Merchants carried goods, and also news. Monks carried sutras, and also culture. Envoys carried state letters, and also the imagination of distant places. The Silk Road was not a simple commercial route. It was a road where civilizations met, a human river trampled into the yellow sand by countless footprints, horse hooves, and camel bells.

And today, was not what Ma Yide wanted to build another Silk Road?

Only the ancients relied on camels, while people today relied on networks; the ancients watched the stars to determine direction, while people today watched screens to connect the world; the ancients carried goods across the

desert, while people today sent information onto lines. A thousand years ago, Hetian jade had to follow camel caravans out of the Kunlun Mountains, across the Gobi, and into the Central Plains. A thousand years later, perhaps the photograph, origin, price, certificate, and story of one piece of jade could travel from a computer in Urumqi to Shanghai, Hong Kong, New York, and Paris.

The more Ma Yide thought about it, the more excited he became.

He immediately said to Chengzhi, “Second Brother, do not hurry to sell only goods. Hetian jade cannot be sold like ordinary stones. It must become a brand; it must tell a story. We will begin with your storefront and make it Silk Road platform’s first Western Regions model.”

Chengzhi was silent for a moment on the other end. “You make it sound good, but I do not understand computers. In our shop, we only know how to look at jade, negotiate prices, and greet tourists. Selling online to the whole world sounds like *The Arabian Nights*.”

“The *Arabian Nights* also came from the Western Regions,” Ma Yide laughed. “What are you afraid of? The ancients dared to lead camels into the great desert. Are we afraid of one network cable?”

Chengzhi laughed at his words. “All right, then come to the ancient Western Regions and take a look. When you come, I will show you the best jade, and I will also treat you to grapes, Hami melons, and roast lamb, so you will know what the real Western Regions are.”

Before long, Ma Yide once again set out on the road to the ancient Western Regions.

This time was completely different from the year when he had traded Hami melons. Back then, his heart had contained

only the difference between two mao and two yuan, and he had been as anxious as a flame. Now, sitting on the plane and watching, beneath the clouds beyond the window, the Gobi, snow mountains, and oases gradually reveal themselves, he already carried a larger map in his heart. He no longer wanted merely to sell one batch of goods. He wanted to reconnect a place, a product, and an ancient trade route to the internet.

The wind of Urumqi was still dry and strong.

Chengzhi came to pick him up, wearing a dark jacket. He stood tall, and between his brows and eyes there remained the heroic air of his Armed Police background, only his face had been darkened by the sun, and his smile was more like a merchant's now. When the two brothers met, they first embraced heavily. Chengzhi patted his back and said, "Yide, you never expected this, did you? Back then I stood guard with a gun; now I greet customers with jade stones."

Ma Yide looked at him. "A gun guards the borderland; jade connects the world. Second Brother, this does not count as changing professions. It is another way of keeping the law."

Chengzhi paused, then burst out laughing. "You really know how to speak now. You sound like a boss."

Chengzhi's storefront was in a tourist area of Urumqi. Shops lined the street: carpets, Yengisar knives, dried fruits, ethnic flowered caps, jade wares, one after another. In the air were the wheaten fragrance of baked naan, the oily aroma of lamb skewers, and the sweetness of raisins and almonds. Uyghur girls in bright skirts passed before the shop, silver ornaments tinkling. Old men sat at the doorway drinking tea, their beards snow-white, their eyes quiet. Tourists carried cameras and looked east and west, as though one foot had stepped into an exotic painting.

The shop was called Kunlun Jade Pavilion.

The storefront was not large. In the glass cases were white-jade pendants, green-jade bracelets, raw pebble stones, jade plaques, jade Buddhas, jade Guanyins, and small pieces carved into camels, grapes, lotuses, and pomegranate patterns. Under the light, the color of the jade was warm and moist. Some pieces were white as fat, some gray within green, and some had skin colors like the sunset glow over a riverbank in autumn.

Chengzhi took a pebble stone from the cabinet and handed it to Yide.

“Look.”

Ma Yide received it. It was faintly cool in the hand, fine, steady, and dense. The jade did not show off, yet it seemed to have a layer of inner light slowly透出 from deep within the stone.

Chengzhi said, “This came from the Hetian River. Jade from the Kunlun Mountains, washed by river water for decades, for centuries, becomes like this. Good jade is not bright for others to look at. It is kept in the hand and in the heart, and slowly understood.”

Ma Yide listened with rapt attention. “That sentence must be written on the webpage.”

“Webpage?” Chengzhi laughed. “You truly plan to put these things inside a computer?”

“Not merely put them there,” Ma Yide said. “We must explain clearly what Hetian jade is, what mountain material is, what river-polished pebble material is, what skin color is, and why Chinese people love jade. A gentleman compares his virtue to jade: warm, moist, and lustrous. This is culture. Foreigners may not understand at first, but they understand stories, quality, and rarity.”

Chengzhi rubbed his chin. "Then how do we speak of price? With jade, every piece has its own price. It is not like raisins, so much per kilogram."

Ma Yide nodded. "So it must be layered. Low-priced standard items can be clearly priced, such as small pendants and small ornaments. Mid- to high-end jade materials and carved pieces can be made into catalogues for customers to inquire. Wholesale to overseas Chinese gift shops; retail to collectors. Do not seek to make it explode at once. First, test the road."

Chengzhi frowned. "What about photographs? If the photographs are bad, the jade dies."

"Find a professional photographer," Yide said. "White background, natural light, detail pictures, size, weight, origin description. Then make Chinese and English pages."

"And payment? How do foreigners pay?"

"We can study wire transfers and credit cards later. In the beginning, we can use bank transfers, overseas agents, or first do inquiries. At the early stage, the platform is not afraid of being slow. What it fears is being false."

At the word false, Chengzhi's expression immediately became serious.

"That is what worries me too. The jade trade has deep waters. Some people pass off Russian material or Qinghai material as Hetian material; some dye the skin; some make things look old. If jade is sold online, and customers cannot see the actual item, trust is even harder."

Looking at him, Ma Yide slowly said, "That is precisely the opportunity. Selling jade online—the first thing is not selling cheaply, but selling trust. Second Brother, you come from the Armed Police, and from the Ma family. We can make 'trust' into our signboard. Every piece of jade will be numbered,

photographed, and registered with its source. If a certificate can be issued, issue it. What cannot be exaggerated must absolutely not be exaggerated. Better to earn less than sell a fake.”

Chengzhi was silent for a long while, then nodded. “I like those words. If Hetian jade has its reputation ruined by fakes, that would be spoiling something left by the ancestors.”

Ma Yide smiled. “What did the ancient Silk Road rely upon to travel far? Not only the endurance of camels, but also the trust kept by caravans. If a merchant cheated someone in Dunhuang, and word reached Kashgar, who would dare travel with him again? Today the network is even faster. Cheat once, and the whole world knows.”

Chengzhi slapped the counter. “Good! We will do it as you say.”

In the following days, Ma Yide went with Chengzhi to Hetian.

That was the journey on which he truly felt the four words Silk Road gain flesh and blood. When the plane landed, the Kunlun Mountains lay quietly across the horizon, snow peaks silver-white, the Gobi vast, and the oasis like a green jade pendant set among yellow sands. The Hetian River flowed slowly past. On the riverbank, people bent to search for jade, and sunlight made the stones shine. In the bazaar, human voices surged; jade stalls, naan ovens, shops selling raisins and walnuts were crowded together. Uyghur old men greeted them in not entirely fluent Mandarin. Children ran through the dust. The colorful skirts of young women were like flowers in the wind.

Chengzhi took him to see jade farmers and small workshops he knew.

A Uyghur master sat by the window carving jade. His fingers were rough, yet his movements were as fine as embroidery. He was carving a grape pattern. The jade was bluish white, and the grapes were round and full. The master smiled and said, “The grapes of the ancient Western Regions are sweet; jade grapes must also be sweet.”

Ma Yide’s eyes lit up.

“Second Brother, look—this is our story. Hetian jade can carve grapes, camels, snow lotuses, Hami melons, Silk Road caravans. This is not only jade ware. It is the calling card of the ancient Western Regions.”

Chengzhi nodded. “Then what about grapes, Hami melons, almonds, walnuts, and dried figs? Can these also go online?”

“Of course,” Ma Yide said. “First use jade as the brand opening, because jade has culture, value, and story. Once the platform runs through, dried fruits can have standard packaging; raisins can be graded; Hami melons can explore origin preorders and cold-chain logistics. In the past, when I sold Hami melons, I failed on transportation. Now, if we use the network for advance orders, ship in batches, and find professional logistics, it will not be the foolish method of back then.”

Speaking of Hami melons, Chengzhi laughed. “You still dare touch melons?”

Ma Yide also laughed. “I dare, but no longer the way I did before.”

The two brothers stood in the evening wind of Hetian. In the distance, yellow sand had been dyed gold by the setting sun. Beneath grape trellises came the laughter of children, and the roof of a mosque reflected the sky’s light. Ma Yide suddenly had a strange feeling: ancient caravans perhaps

once rested in such evening wind, merchants lighting fires, checking goods, and speaking of tomorrow's road. Today they no longer led camels, yet they wanted to send these jade stones, melons, dried fruits, and the local customs of an entire place onto another invisible road.

After they returned to Urumqi, trial and error began very quickly.

The first batch of photographs was bad. Under the lights, the jade turned green; white jade looked like plastic; the skin color was distorted. Chengzhi grew so anxious that he cursed the photographer. "Where is this Hetian jade? This looks like glass!"

The second batch of descriptions was too long. The technical classmates said the pages opened too slowly and the pictures could not upload. Calls from Shanghai came again and again. "President Ma, the server cannot support it. The images must be compressed."

There were jokes in the English translation too. Someone translated "jade's raw material" so awkwardly that foreign customers could not understand. Yide had no choice but to have someone who understood the trade rewrite it as: river-polished nephrite jade from Hetian. Chengzhi looked at that string of English and scratched his head. "That is far too long."

"It does not matter if it is a little long. First, we must make it clear."

They also worried about logistics. If jade was sent out and broke, what then? If it was lost, what then? If the customer said the item received was not the original, what then? In the end, Yide set the rules: high-priced jade pieces would not be directly mailed for the time being; first, inquiries had to be confirmed. Ordinary small pieces would use wooden boxes,

shock-absorbing cotton, and registered parcels. Before every item was shipped, photographs would be kept on file. All customer letters would be registered uniformly through the Shanghai platform.

On the day the platform went online, Chengzhi specially remained in the Urumqi shop.

On the computer screen, the words Silk Road · Ancient Western Regions Hetian Jade Column slowly opened. At the top of the page was a large image: beneath the snowy Kunlun Mountains, a caravan of camels, like silhouettes, walked across golden dunes; beside it lay a warm and lustrous piece of Hetian jade, its surface carved with grapes and auspicious clouds. The title read:

From the Kunlun Mountains to the World—Hetian Jade Steps onto Today's Silk Road.

Chengzhi stared at the screen for a long time without speaking.

On the other end of the telephone in Shanghai, Ma Yide asked, "Second Brother, do you see it?"

Chengzhi's voice was a little hoarse. "I see it."

"How does it feel?"

Chengzhi laughed once. "It is as if my little shop has suddenly been moved beneath the whole sky."

A few days later, the first overseas inquiry arrived.

It was from a Chinese customer in Canada, asking about the size and price of a white-jade peace buckle and whether it could be sent to Toronto. Chengzhi printed out the email and held it in his hands, looking at it again and again, as though looking at a document from an ancient caravan.

He immediately called Yide. "Someone really asked! Canada! Do you think this means it has succeeded?"

Ma Yide was excited too, but pressed it down. “Do not rush. The first order must be handled steadily. Photographs, size, price, shipping fee, packaging—confirm everything clearly. Better to be slow by one day than wrong by one step.”

Chengzhi laughed on the other end. “I know, I know. Before ancient caravans left Jade Gate Pass, they also had to check the camel saddles.”

Hearing this, Ma Yide laughed too.

At that moment, two young men of the Ma family, one beside Shanghai’s Huangpu River and the other beneath Urumqi’s Tianshan Mountains, seemed to hear at the same time the ancient camel bells and the sound of modern network dialing woven together.

The Silk Road was finally no longer merely a term in history books.

It came from the dust of Chang’an, from the murals of Dunhuang, from beneath the grape trellises of Turpan, from the jade stones of the Hetian River. It passed again through the commercial tides after reform and opening, through computer screens, English webpages, international emails, and the ambitions of young people, and once more spread toward the world.

Ma Yide understood that Chengzhi’s Hetian jade was only an opening.

In the future, the ancient Western Regions’ raisins, Hami melons, almonds, walnuts, carpets, ethnic musical instruments, and handicrafts might all go out through the network. Uyghur old artisans could go online. Jade farmers by the Hetian River could go online. Fruit farmers in the Grape Valley of Turpan could also go online. Places once separated by mountains, rivers, and deserts were being connected by an invisible road of information.

This was not simple buying and selling.

It was making the faraway no longer far, making the borderlands no longer silent, making the ancient Western Regions speak again in the new age.

Deep at night, Ma Yide stood in the Shanghai office and looked at the map of China on the wall. Shanghai was in the east, the ancient Western Regions in the west, and between them lay ten thousand li of mountains and rivers. He slowly traced his finger from Shanghai to Urumqi, then to Hetian, as though walking along an invisible trade road.

He said softly:

“The ancients used camels to carry silk toward the world; we use the network to send China’s mountains, rivers, and products toward the world.”

Outside the window, Shanghai’s lights were like a sea.

And in the distant ancient Western Regions, the moon over the Tianshan Mountains was bright, snow lay upon the Kunlun Mountains, evening wind gently stirred beneath the grape trellises, and Hetian jade shone quietly beneath the lamp. The ancient road had not died; it had only changed direction. The camel bells had not ceased; they had only become the sound of keyboards.

Today’s sea of commerce was waiting for a new Silk Road.



CHAPTER 52

TRADE OF TEN THOUSAND AGES ENTERS TEN THOUSAND HOMES

During those days when he discussed putting Hetian jade online with Chengzhi, there was in fact another, heavier stone pressing all the while upon Ma Yide's heart.

Goods could be photographed, stories could be written, webpages could be designed, and customers could send inquiries from Canada, America, Hong Kong, and Singapore. But when matters truly reached the step of completing a transaction, the problem stood coldly before them like an iron gate: how was the money to be paid?

On the ancient Silk Road, caravans could carry gold and silver, could barter goods for goods, could obtain credit at relay stations through the trust of acquaintances. But in the modern world of the internet, before buyer and seller had ever met, separated by thousands of mountains and rivers, who would pay first, who would ship first, and who would bear the risk? Overseas customers asked directly: "Can I pay online?" Domestic buyers were even more practical: "Whom do I send the money to? What if the goods do not arrive? What if the money is taken and disappears?"

Each time Ma Yide saw these questions, his heart tightened.

America already had PayPal. That kind of third-party payment method was like setting up a temporary bridge between buyer and seller: the buyer first placed the money on the platform, the seller shipped the goods, and after the

buyer confirmed receipt, the money was released. It sounded simple, but once it landed in China, it was not simple at all. China's banking system was dominated by state-owned banks. Fund settlement, foreign exchange, account management, clearing channels—each step had rules. If a private internet company said that it too wanted to “manage money,” even if only temporarily holding it in custody, it would make people's hearts jump.

Ma Yide once slapped the table in the Shanghai office and said, “Without payment, Silk Road is only a shop window. No matter how beautiful the window is, it is only for people to look at, not for people to buy.”

At that time, Zhide had only recently returned from Stanford in America, carrying with him the sunlight of Silicon Valley and the sober clarity of Tsinghua. Unlike Yide, he did not strike the table with force. He merely pushed his glasses upward and drew a process on the whiteboard: buyer, seller, platform, bank, confirmation of receipt, dispute handling, refund mechanism, risk reserve.

“Second Brother, technically it can be done,” Zhide said. “The difficulty is the system.”

“The system also needs someone to break through it.”

“Breaking through is possible, but one must not crash to death.” Zhide said calmly, “We are not trying to go around the banks. We need to invite the banks in. We are not playing hide-and-seek with regulators. We must let the regulators understand what we are doing.”

This sentence made Ma Yide remain silent for a long time.

His original merchant's instinct had been to run first and speak later. But Zhide's technical instinct was that once the underlying architecture was wrong, the higher the building rose, the worse its collapse would be. The two brothers

argued several times. Yide was anxious, saying the market would not wait, and the Americans had already gone ahead. Zhide was cool-headed, saying finance was not selling Hami melons: if one cart of melons went bad, at most one lost money; if an entire payment system went bad, credit would collapse, affecting thousands upon thousands of households.

In the end, they tentatively named this payment platform suited to the Chinese market “Bebebo.”

The name had been proposed by a young female employee in the office. She said, “When people hand money over to us, they should feel as though they are entrusting a child to someone reliable. Bebebo is intimate, easy to remember, and also carries the meaning of a precious thing being safe.” At first, Ma Yide felt the name was too soft and not grand enough. But Zhide said, “What payment fears most is coldness. Trust sometimes begins with a gentle name.”

And so Bebebo remained.

But the name was easy to decide; the road was difficult to walk.

They first went to speak with banks. After the branch president of the first bank listened, he smiled politely, yet slowly closed the lid of his teacup. “President Ma, your idea is very good, but our bank cannot casually open this kind of settlement channel for a private website. Money comes in and goes out—who is responsible? Who recognizes customer disputes? Who bears it if fraud occurs?”

The second bank was even more direct. “Are you trying to run a bank?”

Ma Yide grew anxious. “We are not trying to run a bank. We are helping banks expand online transactions.”

The other party shook his head. “You can say that to us, but if you say it to those above, they may not necessarily feel at ease.”

When they came out of the bank, Shanghai was in a winter night. The wind on the Bund was cold, and the Huangpu River flowed dark and heavy. Lights reflected upon the river surface like gold foil shattered by wind. Ma Yide wrapped his coat tighter around himself, his heart both anxious and bitter. When he had done housing renovation and subleasing in urban villages, landlords had been hard to negotiate with and tenants hard to manage, but those had all been difficulties within the smoke and fire of ordinary life. This barrier now was like facing an invisible high wall. Written upon the wall were two words: credit.

Zhide, however, was steadier than he was.

He led the team in revising the proposal again and again, writing Bebebo as a pilot internet transaction guarantee tool rather than a financial institution. He designed the flow of funds into bank-supervised accounts, with the platform not directly misappropriating or using the money. Every transaction would have a number, a trace, and could be followed. Risk-control clauses, customer real names, merchant qualification review, abnormal transaction freezing mechanisms—each item was added one by one. The whiteboard was erased and rewritten, written and erased again. Late at night, the office lights were often still on; instant noodle boxes and coffee cups piled in the corners of desks; programmers, exhausted, fell asleep on keyboards while the screens still flashed blue.

Looking at his younger brother, Ma Yide suddenly felt that Tsinghua and Stanford had not been studied in vain.

It was not that Zhide did not know how to take risks. He simply wanted to take risk apart, number it, model it, and then lock it in a cage.

The true turning point came from the Shanghai municipal government.

At that time, Shanghai was eager to build itself into an international metropolis, and was also searching for breakthroughs in the new economy, new technology, and new trade. Though the Silk Road platform was still not large, it had an imagination powerful enough to move people: allowing small and medium-sized enterprises across China to connect their products directly to the world market; allowing Hetian jade from the ancient Western Regions, small commodities from Jiangsu and Zhejiang, light industrial goods from Guangdong, and Jiangnan silk to be displayed, inquired about, and traded online. Without payment, all this was only half a bridge. If payment could pass through, it might become a new commercial road.

At one briefing, Ma Yide did not speak too many technical terms.

He only placed two pictures before the leaders.

One was a map of the ancient Silk Road, from Chang'an to Dunhuang, from the ancient Western Regions to Central Asia, caravans crossing the desert.

The other was a network diagram of the Silk Road platform, with Shanghai connected to Urumqi, Hetian, Hangzhou, Canton, and also overseas buyers.

He said, "What ancient trade routes feared most were two things: the road being broken, and trust being broken. Today, the road of the internet already exists, but credit has not yet been repaired. Bebebo is not trying to seize the banks' rice

bowl. It is trying to build a credit relay station for Chinese e-commerce.”

The meeting room was quiet for a moment.

A city leader looked at the picture and slowly said, “This metaphor is good. A relay station is not a kingdom outside the court. It is an institutional arrangement for merchants and travelers to pass safely.”

This sentence was remembered by Ma Yide for many years afterward.

The Shanghai side began coordinating banks, information-industry departments, and financial regulatory positions, reporting upward layer by layer. Materials were submitted and then returned; expert demonstrations, risk assessments, pilot scope, fund supervision, protection of customer rights—each item had to be revised. Central approval was slow in coming, and the air inside the office grew tighter day by day. Some worried that policy might suddenly tighten; some advised Ma Yide not to touch payment for now, but only do an information platform. Others said privately, “This matter is too big. A private company like yours cannot shoulder it.”

Ma Yide also wavered.

Late at night, he often stood alone before the window, looking at the lights of Shanghai. The buildings along the Huangpu River stood lit one after another, like the masts of a new age. He thought of the rotten melon water at Canton North Station, of the first rent he had collected in an urban village, and of his father saying that beyond money accounts there were also heart accounts. If the payment platform succeeded, a great door would open. If it failed, they would not merely lose money; they might lose the credit of Silk Road as well.

Once, he asked Zhide, “Fourth Brother, are you afraid?”

Zhide stared at the screen and only after a long while said, "Yes."

Ma Yide laughed. "You can be afraid too?"

"I am afraid we are too early, and also afraid we are too late," Zhide said. "Too early, and the system cannot receive us. Too late, and others will have built the road first. But Second Brother, someone has to lay the first plank between system and market."

Hearing this, heat rose in Ma Yide's chest.

Several months later, the approval finally had a result.

The central authorities agreed, with the support of Shanghai, to conduct a limited pilot: funds would enter designated bank-supervised accounts; the platform would only bear the functions of transaction guarantee and information matching, and could not arbitrarily retain or misappropriate customer funds; transaction data would be reported regularly; the dispute-handling mechanism would be filed in advance; cross-border payments would require separate approval.

When the news arrived, the office first fell into silence, then erupted in cheers. Some slapped tables; some wiped their eyes; some rushed into the corridor and shouted, "Approved! Approved!" Zhide alone remained seated before the computer, lowering his head to submit the final line of code. Then he let out a long breath.

Ma Yide walked over and patted his younger brother's shoulder.

"Bebebo has come alive."

Zhide lifted his head, and there was light in his eyes too. "It has only just been born."

Ma Yide smiled. "Birth is enough. The child will grow."

The first transaction completed through Bebebo was not large. It was only a Canton buyer purchasing a small Hetian jade pendant from the ancient Western Regions, for several hundred yuan. The buyer's payment entered the bank-supervised account, Chengzhi shipped the item, the buyer confirmed receipt, and the system released the money. At the moment the whole process was completed, Ma Yide stared at the backend page and did not speak for a long time.

Those several hundred yuan were insignificant on the books.

But he knew that this was not several hundred yuan.

It was the first stone of a bridge, the first camel bell before an ancient caravan went out through Jade Gate Pass, the first thread of morning light in Chinese online transactions moving from "visible" to "purchasable."

Outside the window, Shanghai's spring rain had just stopped.

Looking at the four characters on the screen—Transaction Completed—Ma Yide suddenly thought of his father's old abacus. Abacus beads could calculate the price of goods, could calculate rent, could calculate profit, but they could not fully calculate the hardship of an age coming into being from nothing.

He said softly to Zhide, "Fourth Brother, today we did not earn a sum of money."

Zhide asked, "Then what was it?"

Looking at the sky outside the window as it slowly brightened, Ma Yide said, word by word:

"Today, for the Silk Road in the sea of commerce, we lit a lamp of credit."



CHAPTER 53

THE MORE PEOPLE YOU SERVE, THE MORE MONEY YOU CAN MAKE

After the Bebebo pilot was approved, the Silk Road platform was like a well long dry that suddenly heard the sound of underground water.

Before this, what gave Ma Yide the greatest headache was not the lack of merchants, nor the lack of products, but that everyone was peering in from the doorway, unwilling to truly step inside. Small and medium-sized enterprises around Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shanghai were quick-minded, nimble-handed, daring in making goods, and daring in taking orders. Yet as soon as they heard that the platform would charge an annual fee, they immediately frowned.

“President Ma, twenty thousand a year? How much profit does our factory make in a year?”

“If the webpage is put up, who guarantees there will be customers?”

“If an advertisement board is hung by the roadside, at least someone can see it. If it is hung online, what if the money is thrown into the water?”

Later, Yide lowered the annual fee to five thousand, then three thousand, yet many bosses still shook their heads. A lighter-factory boss from Wenzhou spoke most plainly:

“President Ma, it is not that I am stingy. This web of yours

looks advanced, but right now I cannot receive money, cannot ship goods, and customers are not at ease. Without transactions, a webpage is only a picture.”

The words were unpleasant to hear, but they were true.

At that time, Silk Road was like a road built only halfway. The road surface was broad, the banners beautiful, and the signs written with grandeur, but when it reached the riverbank, there was no bridge. Buyers looked at goods from this side, sellers waved from the other, and between them lay a stretch of water named “trust.” No one dared jump first.

Once Bebebo went through, a bridge finally rose over that water.

The first group of merchants did not rush in all at once, but tested carefully. A Yiwu accessories factory first listed several hair clips, brooches, and keychains. The prices were low, and the photographs rough, yet because Bebebo-guaranteed transactions were supported, it quickly received several small orders from overseas Chinese customers. The Wenzhou lighter-factory boss, who had originally believed the least, heard that a peer had received orders and called Yide the very next day: “President Ma, is my page still there? I will pay the annual fee. Help me add the payment button.”

Ma Yide laughed for a long while on his end of the telephone.

From then on, the numbers in the platform backend began jumping upward day by day.

First came the small commodities of Jiangsu and Zhejiang: Yiwu accessories, Wenzhou lighters, Ningbo stationery, Yongkang hardware, Shaoxing textile fabrics, Huzhou bamboo products, Haining leather goods, Hangzhou silk scarves. Those small factories that in the past had relied on wholesale markets, trade fairs, introductions through

acquaintances, and layer upon layer of foreign trade companies suddenly discovered that they too could set up a small stall online. The stall was not large, but it opened toward the whole world.

Then came the products of Southern Yue pouring in.

Small home appliances from Focheng, lighting fixtures from Zhongshan, ceramics from Ruizhou, electronic components from Dongguan, telephones, radios, and calculators from Shenzhen, garments and leather goods from Canton—batch after batch were listed on the platform. The photographs grew clearer and clearer, the English descriptions more and more presentable, and the quotation sheets more and more detailed. Goods that in the past had been hidden inside factories, market stalls, and wholesale markets seemed overnight to have been moved into bright display windows.

Later still, products from all across the country arrived.

Chengzhi's Hetian jade, raisins, and almonds from the ancient Western Regions; tea and handicrafts from Fujian; agricultural machinery parts from Shandong; towels and glass products from Hebei; condiments from Sichuan; wooden products from the Northeast; porcelain from Jiangxi; dried and fresh flowers and ethnic silver ornaments from Yunnan. Every place entered the platform carrying the scent of its own mountains and rivers, and its own craftsmanship. The map of China on the office wall was filled densely with little red flags by the young employees, like a spring field beginning to sprout.

What stirred Ma Yide most was that even those bosses who had once understood the internet least began learning to say “go online.”

The Wenzhou boss called and began by asking, “How many inquiries today?”

The Yiwu lady boss personally sent over a box of new samples and said, “That photograph on the webpage does not look good. My daughter says it should be changed to a prettier one.”

The factory director of the Focheng home-appliance plant was even more anxious. “Can Bebebo handle batch payments? Customers on our side place orders for dozens of units at a time.”

Chengzhi in the ancient Western Regions was the most excited, calling almost every few days. “Yide, that customer in Canada bought two more jade pieces. There is also a Frenchman asking whether raisins can be sold wholesale. Tell me, is that not strange—a Frenchman asking me online about raisins from the ancient Western Regions!”

Ma Yide laughed. “It is not strange. On the ancient Silk Road, grapes originally traveled from the Western Regions toward farther places. Today the road has simply changed.”

The office too was utterly transformed.

Before, there were few people, the telephone sometimes did not ring several times in a day, and young employees sat before computers feeling empty inside. Now, the fax machine spat paper all day; telephone bells rose one after another; emails surged in like tides. The technical group added servers, the customer-service group worked in shifts to answer messages, the business group reviewed merchant qualifications, the editorial group revised English descriptions, and the Bebebo risk-control group watched for abnormal transactions. At eleven o’clock at night, the office was still brightly lit, boxed meals piled at the corners of desks, and the whiteboard filled with issues: refund rules,

logistics delays, counterfeit complaints, merchant ratings, cross-border inquiries, wholesale zones.

Ma Yide often walked past these desks deep at night, and waves of heat rose in his heart.

He knew that what had truly come alive was not merely a website.

It was credit that had come alive.

In the past, merchants were unwilling to pay twenty thousand yuan in annual fees because they could not see the return; buyers did not dare place orders because they could not see the protection. Bebebo broke each transaction into steps that could be trusted: buyer payment, bank supervision, seller shipment, buyer confirmation, platform release of funds. The system was like an invisible hand, supporting the most fragile worry on both sides. Once people dared to trust, goods dared to flow; once goods dared to flow, money dared to move; once money moved, the market awakened.

This was the most joyful breakthrough.

It was not merely the addition of a button, nor simply one more technical function, but a new road ground out by force between China's financial rules, the supervision of state-owned banks, the innovation of private internet enterprises, and the support of local government. That road was not wide; at first it even shook a little, but it was enough for the first merchants to push their carts across.

Ma Yide once told the team, "What we are doing is not a business of collecting annual fees. If we think only of annual fees, merchants will always find us expensive. We must let them earn money here. As long as they earn money, the platform will naturally have rice to eat."

And so the fee model also changed.

Annual fees were no longer the only threshold. Small merchants could enter at low cost, even try it first; the platform took service fees from transactions, advertising fees from promotion, and built merchant levels through credit guarantees. This change allowed more small and medium-sized enterprises to dare come in. Bosses who had once refused annual fees of three thousand or five thousand later were willing to pay more for a good position, a good recommendation, or an overseas special feature. Because at last they could see that their money was not being handed to an empty webpage, but being poured into a river with flowing water.

One evening, the platform backend showed that the day's transaction volume had for the first time broken through a number that made the whole office cheer.

The young people gathered around the screen and applauded. Someone shook open soda as though it were champagne, spraying foam all over the floor. Zhide stood nearby, rarely showing a smile. Ma Yide, however, suddenly grew quiet. He thought of the cart of rotten melons he had opened at Canton North Rail Station, the hot stench that had rushed into his face; he thought of the monthly salary of less than five hundred yuan in the Provincial Chemical Construction office; he thought of the first whitewashed rental room in an urban village; he thought of his father's words: "Beyond money accounts, there are heart accounts."

Now, standing before a computer screen in Shanghai, he watched goods from all across the country gather online, then scatter outward toward the world. At that moment, he suddenly understood that all his early stumbles seemed to have been pushing him toward this place.

The ancient Silk Road had relied on camel caravans to send silk, jade, grapes, and spices beyond the frontier passes. Today's Silk Road relied on credit, networks, and institutional innovation to send the goods of countless Chinese small and medium-sized enterprises toward the world. When one button lit up, behind it were bank accounts, regulatory approvals, program code, the sweat of merchants, and the courage of an age finally daring to trial and make errors.

Ma Yide looked at the orders constantly jumping on the screen and said softly:

“The road is open.”

Zhide asked, “Which road?”

Ma Yide smiled, light in his eyes.

“The road from Chinese factories to the world market. The road from not daring to trust, to daring to complete a transaction.”

Outside the window, Shanghai's night was prosperous, and the waters of the Huangpu River flowed eastward. Inside the office, telephones were still ringing, keyboards were still sounding, and the laughter of young people was still rising. These sounds gathered together like the first true tide on the commercial sea of a new age.

And Silk Road, within that tide, finally came alive.

Now, as for Ma Chengye, the eldest son of Ma Zhihui, the eldest uncle in the ancient Western Regions: after graduating from the police academy, he remained there to teach. After several years, he was already a division-level instructor.

He had a well-proportioned bearing, and his speech was disciplined and precise. When lecturing, he was neither hurried nor slow, yet he naturally carried an authority that could hold the room. Seated below were not only young cadets, but also police-station chiefs, grassroots public

security cadres, and public-order backbone personnel transferred from various counties, cities, districts, and towns of the autonomous region for training. Some of these people had been darkened by the sun, some carried wind and sand on their faces, and some, after wearing uniforms for many years, already had between their brows the hard spirit particular to local cadres. Chengye lectured on public-order management, border stability, grassroots handling, and mass work in ethnic regions. On the blackboard were written institutional clauses; from his mouth came discipline and measure. Yet in his heart, he understood that this land of the ancient Western Regions had never been something a few teaching plans could explain clearly.

His wife worked in the Urumqi Public Security Department and handled matters efficiently. His father-in-law was also the Party secretary of Aksu. At the family dinner table, when Southern Xinjiang affairs were occasionally mentioned, voices would naturally lower a little. Once those place names were spoken, they seemed to carry the sand of the Gobi, the dust of oases, the wind of the border, and also much heaviness that could not be clearly explained.

In those years, a special kind of place began appearing one after another across the autonomous region. Outwardly, they were often spoken of as training, management, employment transformation, stability projects; in documents, the wording was neat, and in reports, the language grand. But from some students, Chengye had also heard details from another side: high walls, iron gates, numbers, centralized lodging, unified schedules, repeated study, restricted family visits. In some places, workshops had even been set up inside—sewing, gloves, textiles, shoes and hats, simple electronic components. Once the assembly lines began, the machines

sounded all day without pause. Goods came out from there, traveled through foreign trade channels, were shipped box by box to inland ports, and then exported to places around the world.

At first, these things had no direct relationship with the Silk Road platform.

The platform listed more Hetian jade, raisins, almonds, carpets, ethnic crafts, and small light-industrial goods. But once business came alive, sources of goods flowed like water toward lower places. Certain merchants began uploading gloves, garments, fabrics, shoes, and cotton textiles produced in the ancient Western Regions, with prices astonishingly low and supply volumes astonishingly large. The young people in the business group saw only “cheap, stable, exportable,” and excitedly reported to Yide, “President Ma, this type of product is very suitable for the wholesale section.”

Ma Yide looked at the quotation sheets, yet frowned.

“With prices this low, how are wages calculated?”

The other person could not answer, only saying that the supplier said there was local policy support and the advantage of centralized production.

Yide did not immediately reject it, but pressed the materials down on the desk and said nothing for a long time. He had done foreign trade and knew there must be reasons behind low prices. He had also done housing renovation and subleasing in urban villages, and knew that once people were calculated as costs, dignity would be pressed very thin.

Later, Chengzhi called him from Urumqi, and there was also some hesitation in his words. “Yide, some goods had better be checked clearly before going online. The situation here in the ancient Western Regions is complicated. Not every cheap good can be touched.”

“What have you heard?” Yide asked.

Chengzhi was silent for a moment. “It is not good to say over the phone. In short, some factories have guards standing at the gate, and they do not look like ordinary factories. The workers going in and out do not look like ordinary workers either.”

Yide held the telephone, and his heart sank.

Before long, emails from overseas customers also arrived. First, a small European trading company asked for proof of origin. Then came a letter from a North American Chinese buyer, polite in tone yet sharp: “May I ask whether the textiles from the ancient Western Regions on your platform involve forced-labor controversies? Can you provide independent audits?”

The office fell quiet for a moment.

The words “forced labor” landed upon everyone’s heart like a piece of cold iron. Some said foreigners did not understand China’s national conditions. Some said the platform merely matched buyers and sellers and need not manage so much. Others said quietly that if international human-rights organizations began watching, the trouble would become great.

Listening to everyone argue, Ma Yide suddenly remembered what his father Ma Cunhui had once said on that hot-spring night in Qianzhou: however beautiful the accounts, one must not calculate people out of existence.

He did not give a passionate speech. He made only one decision: for all bulk textiles, garments, gloves, shoes, hats, and similar products involving special channels in the ancient Western Regions, homepage recommendations would be temporarily suspended; suppliers would have to submit production sources, employment documentation, factory-area

photographs, and third-party inspection materials. Those that could not explain clearly would not be given key promotion.

Someone grew anxious. "President Ma, this will lose orders."

Yide raised his head and looked at him. "Losing orders is lighter than losing credit."

When Chengye learned of this matter, during a family dinner back in Urumqi, he once looked across half the table at Yide, his gaze very deep. He was within the system; there were many things he could not say, and should not say. After dinner, the two men smoked in the courtyard. The night in the direction of the Tianshan Mountains was heavy.

Chengye said only one sentence: "Yide, matters in the ancient Western Regions have deep waters. You are doing a platform; do not stretch your hands too quickly."

Looking at the single red glow of his cigarette tip, Yide said in a low voice, "Brother, I only want to know whether behind the goods stands a person who can freely go home."

Chengye was silent for a long time and did not answer.

Far away, the city lights were bright. The night wind of Urumqi carried dry cold and the faint sense of sand. The ancient Silk Road had once sent jade, grapes, carpets, and songs toward the world; but if the new commercial road cared only for speed and profit, it might also package certain silent cries into cargo boxes along the way.

That night, Yide suddenly understood: the larger the platform became, the less its eyes could stare only at orders.

Because some business, even when completed, is still a loss; some money, even when received, burns the hand; some roads, though they seem to lead to the world, must first pass through conscience.



CHAPTER 54

A CONFUCIAN MERCHANT'S DUTY IS TO ENSURE THAT EVERYONE BENEFITS

As the Silk Road platform grew larger and larger, Ma Yide increasingly felt that what he faced was no longer merely business.

In the past, when he looked at a product, he looked only at supply, price, transportation, and profit. Only later did he understand that behind a single order there was often the industry of an entire region, the fate of a factory, the rice bowls of a group of workers, and even the shadow of a national policy. The platform was like a net growing wider and wider, revealing the three most important forces in China's development: investment, foreign trade, and domestic demand.

Investment appeared first.

Everywhere, roads were being built, bridges erected, development zones established, factory buildings raised, and power grids laid. State-owned assets were poured in by the great sum, like an enormous hand slowly pushing awake land that had slept for many years. In the backend, Yide saw that wherever transportation was connected, wherever an industrial park was established, wherever bank credit loosened, the number of merchants there would grow rapidly.

Small factories from Zhejiang, home appliances from Southern Yue, machinery from Shandong, tea from Fujian, textiles from Jiangsu—one by one they went online, and item by item they went overseas. When local governments came to inspect, the sentence they loved most to ask was: “President Ma, can our industrial belt be made into an online special zone?” In that voice there was urgency, and also hope. For everyone knew that building factories was easy; selling goods was difficult. Extending a road to the county seat was easy; connecting the market to the world was difficult.

Foreign trade was like a surging river.

Chinese goods were inexpensive, diligent, capable of being made, altered, and rushed to deadline. Overseas buyers saw on the platform an enormous China: Wenzhou lighters, Yiwu trinkets, Focheng small home appliances, Ruizhou ceramics, Shaoxing cloth, Ningbo stationery, Shenzhen electronic components. They were not necessarily noble, but they were practical, cheap, and supplied quickly, like countless tiny screws fastening China into the machinery of the world market. Ma Yide often said to his employees, “Foreign trade is not simply selling goods out. Foreign trade is letting the world know that Chinese factories have awakened.”

Yet what awakened was not only factories, but human desire, and also human pain.

Beneath the prosperity of foreign trade were factories running day and night, migrant workers traveling a thousand li into cities, and urban villages lit all night long. Guangdong, Jiangsu and Zhejiang, and the areas around Shanghai drew in countless young people with one factory building after another. By day, they produced goods for export; by night, they too began buying clothes, electric fans, and schoolbags for their children. China was selling goods to the world, and

at the same time, within itself, it was growing an immense consumer market. Ma Yide had done housing renovation and subleasing in urban villages, and understood this best. Those people who entered Canton carrying rolled bedding at first only wanted one bed; after several years, they wanted a room, a television, a household registration that could let their children study, even a chance to remain in the city.

Contradictions also rose from this.

The household-registration system was like an invisible door, shutting many people outside urban welfare. They built buildings, repaired roads, and made goods for the city, yet their children might not be able to enter school smoothly. They created foreign exchange for factories, yet might not have stable social insurance. They lived in the crowded buildings of urban villages, both supporting the city's operation and becoming the first people squeezed when the city was redeveloped. When real estate heated up, local finances received living water, and the city's appearance was transformed; yet as housing prices rose, the hearts of ordinary people were also suspended. The government needed development, stability, employment, tax revenue, investment attraction, and also control over risk. Ordinary people needed to earn money, settle down, receive fairness, send their children to school, and afford medical treatment when ill. Neither side was easy, and thus everywhere there was pulling and tearing.

The sharpest example was the city's former custody-and-repatriation system.

Cities needed migrant workers, yet also feared that migrant populations might get out of control. If a young person had no temporary residence permit, if he could not clearly state where he lived or where he worked, he might be

taken away as one of the “three withouts.” The market needed people to move freely, yet the old system wanted to press people back to their place of origin. Later, the death of a young man from Hubei in Canton shook the whole country. Public opinion, the legal community, and ordinary people all asked: how could a person who labored for the city lose dignity, even life, simply because his documents were incomplete? The custody-and-repatriation system was finally abolished, which proved that the central authorities had no choice but to acknowledge that China after reform and opening could not, on the one hand, require hundreds of millions of people to move, while on the other still using old methods to manage those moving people roughly.

This was not merely the retention or abolition of one regulation, but a turning of a nation’s concept of governance.

The central leadership naturally had its own considerations. For a country of more than a billion people, what it fears most is disorder. Investment cannot stop, foreign trade cannot be broken, employment cannot collapse, local finances cannot suddenly lose blood, the borderlands cannot become turbulent, and finance cannot fall out of control. Many decisions, viewed from below, seem like commands issued from high above; viewed from the center, they are like finding a narrow road among several giant stones. If development is too slow, the people have no work. If development is too fast, resources, housing prices, environmental protection, and the wealth gap all erupt together. If things are opened too much, there is fear that order will fall out of control. If they are managed too tightly, market vitality and human dignity are suppressed.

Ethnic regions were even more so.

The state spoke of stability and unity, of borderland construction, common development, anti-separatism, and anti-extremism. What the central authorities worried about was not only local economic numbers, but also history, religion, ethnic groups, borders, international opinion, and national unity. Yet once policy reached the grassroots, it often changed shape. Above, they spoke of governance; below, it might become crude control. Above, they spoke of training; below, it might become high walls and iron gates. Above, they spoke of employment; below, there might appear labor issues difficult to explain clearly. When Ma Yide saw on the platform that certain goods were priced abnormally low and supplied in astonishing volume, he would think of his father's words: however beautiful the accounts, one must not calculate people out of existence.

The state wants order; the individual wants dignity.

The state wants efficiency; the people want justice.

The state wants speed of development; ordinary people want not to be crushed so heavily in living.

The contradiction is sharp precisely here.

Ma Yide increasingly understood that the platform was not a river without eyes. It could not only manage the flow of goods and refuse to ask where the goods came from. It could not only care that prices were cheap and refuse to ask who paid the price for that cheapness. It could not only care about overseas orders and refuse to ask whether domestic workers had wages, contracts, rest, and safety. When doing small business, morality is like a slogan. When running a large platform, morality becomes systems, costs, audits, choices, and even the courage to offend people.

He also understood that the central authorities were not blind to these contradictions.

It was simply that the transformation of a great country had never been something completed with a wave of the hand. Urbanization required money. Welfare required money. Education and healthcare required money. Borderland governance required money. Industrial upgrading also required money. Where did money come from? It came from land, taxes, exports, investment, and corporate profits. But once money came in this way, it necessarily carried contradictions: land finance pushed up housing prices, export competition pressed down costs, investment impulses accumulated debt, the household-registration system delayed welfare pressure, and local governments had to develop while also maintaining stability.

Leaders saw statistical tables, employment rates, foreign-exchange reserves, fiscal revenue, and risk reports. Ordinary people saw rent, medical expenses, school places, wages, household registration, and a temporary residence permit. Both perspectives were real, yet they were often separated by a vast distance.

Ma Yide once asked Zhide, “Is a country like a company?”

Zhide shook his head. “If a company loses money, it can go bankrupt. A country cannot. A company is responsible only to its shareholders, but a country must be responsible to everyone. The hardest part is that not everyone’s interests are the same.”

This sentence left Yide speechless for a long time.

He suddenly understood that the difficulty of China’s development was not merely the difficulty of going from poor to rich, but the difficulty of not letting too many people be thrown aside on the road to wealth, not letting too many places be sacrificed, and not mistaking too much silence for consent.

The more prosperous the Silk Road platform became, the clearer this pressure grew. It connected investment, foreign trade, and domestic demand; it also connected factories, peasants, merchants, government, banks, overseas customers, and ordinary consumers. It made goods flow, and it also made contradictions visible. Every transaction was asking: where does the price come from? Who receives the profit? Who bears the risk? Who guards dignity? For whom is development?

That night, Yide sat alone in the Shanghai office, watching backend orders jump like tides. Outside the window, the lights of the Huangpu River blazed, as though a nation were proving its prosperity to the world. Yet the cold light of the screen shone on his face, and in his heart he no longer had the simple ecstasy of the early years.

He knew the road had opened.

But after the road opened, the true questions had only just begun.

Far away in Canton, the hospital where Rende worked was also being pushed forward by the same great tide: equipment was being renewed, drug prices were rising, patients were increasing, medical insurance was being laid out with difficulty, and the poor still had to grit their teeth to see a doctor. That would be another battlefield.

Only in this chapter, let it remain unspoken for now.

The wheels of the age rumbled forward, and the three carriages of investment, foreign trade, and domestic demand pulled China onward at a gallop. On the carriage, some cheered, some grew dizzy, some seized the opportunity and leapt aboard; others were left far behind in the dust. Looking

at that online commercial road named “Silk Road”, Ma Yide suddenly felt a heavy clarity:

The greatness of a nation lies not only in how fast it runs, but also in whether, when it turns back, it can still see those who could not keep up with the carriage.



CHAPTER 55

WHAT IS FATED MUST IN THE END BE HAD

In the blink of an eye, Ma Rende had worked at the Provincial People’s Hospital for ten years.

In those ten years, the hospital buildings had grown taller, the equipment newer, the corridors brighter, and the patients more numerous. Batch after batch of young doctors came in. Some could write papers, some could pursue projects, some knew how to appear before hospital leaders at the proper moment, and some very early learned how to speak at meetings, report achievements, and fight for research topics. Only Ma Rende remained much as he had been when he first entered the burn department, spending his days guarding the wards, case records, operating tables, and dressing rooms.

He was already a department supervisor, an attending physician, equivalent to section level. In professional skill, no one dared look down on him. Severe burns, infection control,

skin-grafting plans, shock rescue—he was steady in all of them, steady like the lamp at the far end of the ward at night. But in terms of official advancement, he was like a piece of wood that refused to be enlightened. Several times, when the hospital organized cadre talks, he always said, “There are many patients in the department. I should first do the clinical work well.” When someone reminded him that he should compete for deputy director, write materials, and draw closer to the organization, he merely smiled. “I am not made for that.”

Guo Jiawen grew increasingly dissatisfied with her husband.

She was no longer the young reporter of years past, carrying a reporting bag and running to fire scenes beneath the blazing sun. Ten years of wind and rain in journalism had sharpened her, and also steadied her. She was now deputy director of the television station’s news department, equivalent to deputy division level. In the office, she had her own nameplate; in editorial meetings, she could make decisions; in major reports, she could dispatch reporters; station leaders often asked her to participate in planning. She was no longer merely someone chasing news, but someone who could decide how news was to be seen and how it was to be expressed.

Precisely because of this, she understood better than Rende that position was not an empty title. Position was a stage, resources, and the right to speak. Where a person sat determined the weight of his words. In the past, when she ran her beat, she had seen so many good people and good deeds buried, and so many mediocre people, because they knew how to report upward, how to take the right stance, and how to place themselves in the correct position, walk

step by step to the front of the stage. She knew Rende was good. But she also knew that goodness, if it could not be seen, was often taken by others and consumed.

At night, Rende dragged his exhausted body home. The cuffs of his shirt still carried the smell of disinfectant. The food had gone cold, and their daughter Niannian was already asleep. Jiawen sat beneath the lamp, revising a feature report on medical reform, internal documents from the station placed beside her draft. She lifted her head and looked at him, her heart aching and angry at the same time.

“Rende, how long do you plan to keep doing this?”

Rende washed his hands and asked softly, “Keep doing what?”

“Remain an attending physician forever? Forever carry patients for others, clean up the department’s messes for others? When there is achievement, it belongs to the director; when there is trouble, you bear it on the front line?”

Rende was silent.

Jiawen lowered her voice, but it became sharper. “It is not that you cannot do it. It is that you do not want to. But if you do not want to, others will do your thinking for you. The hospital is also society. It is not pure land. Only after I reached the position of deputy director of the news department did I understand one thing: if you want to speak for others, you must first have a microphone yourself. You talk every day about patients, patients—but if you cannot even hold your own position higher, what will you use in the future to speak for patients?”

This sentence was heavier than blame.

Rende raised his head and looked at her. “If I sit in a leadership office, will I necessarily be better able to speak for patients?”

Jiawen was stopped by his question, then gave a cold laugh. "At least you would have the qualifications to speak. What about now? You cannot decide drug prices, beds, fees, or the distribution of department bonuses. You can only save patients a little money and fight for a little time inside boxes others have already drawn for you. Rende, this is not benevolence. It is passivity."

These words were true.

In those years, medical reform was slowly advancing, but like a heavy cart whose wheels were sunk in mud. Hospitals needed to develop, buy equipment, build buildings, and retain doctors. The national medical-insurance system had not yet truly covered urban and rural residents, employees, and migrant workers securely. Fiscal subsidies were limited, and hospitals increasingly relied on examinations, drugs, projects, and revenue. Patients scolded hospitals for being expensive; hospitals said they too had to survive. Doctors were caught in the middle, needing both to save people and to face the itemized bills.

In the outpatient hall, the suffering of ordinary people was most direct.

Some queued at four in the morning for registration and were still standing in the corridor by late morning. Some held payment slips and repeatedly asked nurses, "Can this medicine be used a little less?" Some came from the countryside with several thousand yuan tucked against their chest, thinking it would be enough to treat illness, only to find it exhausted three days after being admitted. Some things medical insurance could reimburse, some it could not; urban employees differed from rural peasants, formal work units differed from migrant workers, cadres differed again from ordinary people. Illness had already divided people into

the strong and the weak, and the system, before the hospital bed, divided them again into ranks and grades.

What Rende feared most was seeing patients' families calculate money.

The burn department was especially cruel. Once fire burned, the flesh and skin of a person were gone, and money also flowed away like water. Anti-infection drugs were expensive, dressings expensive, operations expensive, nutritional support expensive, and later rehabilitation even more expensive. Some patients had just been pulled back from the line of death, but their families had already been forced into a corner by the costs. Rende often heard suppressed crying outside the ward: if they saved the person, the family would collapse; if they did not save him, the heart could not bear it.

Once, a young construction worker suffered burns over a large area. His mother came from Hunan, still wearing cloth shoes stained with mud. She opened a bundle of money, all wrinkled bills, and asked tremblingly, "Doctor Ma, is this enough for today's medicine?"

Rende glanced at it and did not immediately answer.

Enough for today, not enough for tomorrow.

He could only take the prescription list and consider each item one by one. Imported drugs worked well, but were expensive; domestic drugs were somewhat cheaper, yet he feared they might not be stable enough. Examinations ought to be done, but each one cost money. As a doctor, he knew the best plan; as a person who had seen poverty and hardship, he also knew that so-called best was sometimes a luxury the patient's family could not bear.

Western medicine was not well loved here.

It spoke of evidence, indicators, equipment, drug concentrations, and surgical plans. It could save lives, and it was also best at spending money. Patients relied on it, yet blamed it for being cold. Once machines started, the bill followed; once antibiotics went in, the costs climbed line by line. Family members could not understand laboratory reports; they could only understand numbers, and so they felt the hospital was like a bottomless pocket.

Chinese medicine was not well loved either.

Poor people loved it for being cheap, and the elderly trusted it for recuperation, but when it came to emergencies, serious illness, burn infections, no one dared rely only on a few packets of herbs. Some people cursed Western medicine for knowing only how to order examinations, and then cursed Chinese medicine for acting slowly and speaking unclearly. Some disliked the bitterness of Chinese herbs, and also disliked the expense of Western drugs. Zhao Youlan knew some herbal medicine and often said, "Medicine has its nature, and people have their fate." But Rende knew most clearly that once inside the ward, fate was not something that could be held up by a line of Chan talk. Chinese medicine spoke of the whole; Western medicine spoke of the part. Chinese medicine feared being called unscientific; Western medicine was often scolded for lacking human feeling. Both sides carried burdens of blame, and both sides had saved lives.

The hardest thing was that patients did not ask about theory. They only asked one sentence: Can I get well? How much will it cost?

Because of this, Rende was even more unwilling to leave the clinical front.

It was not that he did not know position was important, nor that he did not understand his wife's anxiety. Guo Xiaoquan was no longer the deputy mayor of years past, but a member of the provincial Party standing committee, in charge of culture and education. His position was higher, his field of vision broader, and his speech heavier than before. But the more he reached such a level, the more he understood that a person's rise could not rely only on a father-in-law extending a hand; he also had to show a posture of wanting to move upward.

Once, Guo Xiaoquan spoke with Rende in the study at home. The study still hung that calligraphy, "Knowing Where to Stop Brings Stability," but the shelves now held many more materials on education reform, medical and health affairs, and cadre management. Guo Xiaoquan looked at his son-in-law. His tone was not heavy, yet it carried the weight of someone long seated in high position.

"Rende, your professional skill is good, and your reputation is also good. By rights, these years you should have taken another step forward."

Rende said in a low voice, "Dad, I still want to do the clinical work well."

Guo Xiaoquan looked at him and was silent for a long while. In the end, he only sighed.

"Of course clinical work must be done well. But a hospital is not only hospital beds. There are departments, resources, policies, projects, and personnel matters. You always say you are not made for it. But people are not born made for one thing or another; they are pushed by events and grow into it. If you do not stand forward, then even if I want to help, I cannot."

Rende said nothing.

Guo Xiaoquan continued, “I am not asking you to scheme. People who scheme—I have seen too many of them, and there is no shortage of you among them. I simply cannot see where you want to advance. For the organization to promote a person, it must have something to grasp: scientific research achievements, management ability, mass foundation, cadre willingness. You fight for nothing, you express no attitude toward anything. How are others to know you can bear greater matters?”

These words made Rende feel worse than reproach.

Guo Xiaoquan was not snobbish, nor was he despising him for being poor and plain. He was looking at Rende with the eyes of a provincial Party standing committee member and seeing in him a kind of almost stubborn stagnation. A person merely keeping himself clean did not mean he could accomplish things; merely standing by the bedside did not mean he could change the system outside the ward.

When Jiawen later heard her father mention it, he gave only one sigh: “Rende is a good person, and also a good doctor. Unfortunately, he has no heart for moving upward.”

Hearing this, Jiawen felt a fierce sourness in her heart.

The six words “no heart for moving upward” pierced her heart like a fine needle. She knew her father had not spoken harshly, but she also knew that if Rende heard it, he would hurt. She loved Rende’s clarity, yet she increasingly feared that this clarity would one day be treated by reality as weakness. Having risen from beat reporter to deputy director of the news department herself, she understood one thing most deeply: many times, power is not for putting on airs, but so that at a critical moment you can approve one news topic, block one false draft, protect one reporter, or let one concealed truth appear on the screen.

She did not understand why Rende was unwilling to pick up the “microphone” that belonged to him.

That night, after returning home, she argued with Rende again.

“My father said that even if he wanted to help, he could not. Do you know what that means? It is not that no one sees you. It is that you yourself do not reach out.”

Rende sat beneath the lamp, holding a case record in his hand, and for a long time said nothing. Outside the window, rain was falling. The glass of the hospital dormitory building was blurred by rainwater. Niannian slept in the inner room, occasionally turning over.

Jiawen’s voice trembled somewhat. “Do you think not fighting is noble? Sometimes not fighting means handing responsibility over to worse people.”

Rende raised his head.

“It is not that I do not want to change things,” he said. “I am only afraid that once I put my mind on position, I will slowly forget the people lying in the beds.”

Jiawen’s eyes reddened. “But now that you remember them, do they suffer any less? Medical insurance is slow, drug prices are expensive, hospitals survive on revenue, and patients hold on by borrowing money. As one attending physician, how much can you change?”

This sentence struck Rende.

Yes—how much could he change?

He could change medicine for one patient, save one family several hundred yuan; he could make one more ward round at night, explain a few more sentences when family members were in despair; he could fight with the head nurse for a bed and ask the director for a little relief funding. But the weight of the system pressed down like a mountain. He alone was

merely helping people move a few stones at the mountain's foot.

Yet if everyone disliked the smallness of the stones and refused to move them, then those at the foot of the mountain would have even less road.

He said in a low voice, "I know I cannot change the great system. But tomorrow, when that burned child has his dressing changed, if I am not there, he will be even more afraid of the pain. When that Hunan worker's mother asks me whether the money is enough, if I only tell her to go pay the fee, she will feel there is no one in this world who cares whether she lives or dies. What I can do is not large, but it is what I can do now."

Jiawen looked at him and suddenly had no words.

What she loved in him was precisely this; what she hated in him was also precisely this.

This age needed people like Rende, yet it often treated people like Rende unfairly. It made those most willing to guard the wards rise the slowest, and those most skilled at running relationships move more smoothly. It made doctors bear patients' resentment, yet did not give doctors sufficient institutional support. It required hospitals to resemble public welfare, yet made hospitals keep accounts like enterprises. It hoped ordinary people would be satisfied, yet pressed drug fees, examination fees, and bed fees one by one upon ordinary families.

Rende still entered the ward on time every day.

At seven thirty in the morning, he put on his white coat, buttoned it carefully, and first went to see the most critical patients. The smell of disinfectant rushed toward him in the corridor. Patients' family members dozed against the walls. Nurses pushed treatment carts past, the wheels sounding

softly. Outside the window, the city was becoming rich; buildings were growing taller, cars more numerous, shopping malls brighter. Inside the wards, however, there were still people whose eyes were red from enduring over one bottle of medicine, one operation, one payment slip.

Ma Rende stood before the bed and lowered his head to examine a wound.

His official path had stopped at section level, his professional title at attending physician. Politically, he could not be called progressive; in officialdom, still less could he be called clever. His wife had gained a larger stage in the television station's news department, and his father-in-law, a member of the provincial Party standing committee, could only look at him and sigh helplessly.

But his hands were still steady, his voice still gentle, and his eyes could still see the patient's pain.

Perhaps in the eyes of some people, this was indeed useless and meek.

But to those lying in hospital beds, a doctor who did not treat them as numbers was already a rare piece of driftwood in a bitter sea.



CHAPTER 56

SOME HOUSEHOLDS REJOICE, SOME HOUSEHOLDS GRIEVE

In the late winter and early spring of that year, the air in Canton suddenly became wrong.

At first, there were only a few strange cases of pneumonia in the hospital. Fever, a high fever that would not subside, coughing, shortness of breath, and shadows across the chest X-rays. The doctors treated them as ordinary pneumonia, but the results were poor. Some patients could still speak when they were admitted, yet after several days they were gasping badly, oxygen masks fastened to their faces, their eyes filled with terror. What made people even more uneasy was that the doctors and nurses caring for the patients also began, one after another, to develop fevers. In the hospital corridors, the smell of disinfectant grew heavier by the day. Nurses hurried past wearing masks, their eyes exposed above the white cloth, exhausted and alert.

At that time, people still did not know that this illness would later be called “atypical pneumonia.” Among ordinary people, it was called more directly: “SARS.”

Once the two words “SARS” spread, the city of Canton seemed suddenly covered by an invisible layer of ash.

There were fewer people in teahouses, the entrances of cinemas grew deserted, schools began taking temperatures, and long lines formed outside pharmacies. Banlangen, white vinegar, and masks were at one time all frantically bought up. Some burned vinegar at home; some said herbal tea could

prevent it; some said it had come from a seafood wholesale market; some said it was civet cats; some said it was wild game; and still others said the illness had come from Hong Kong and gone to Canton, that the whole Canton-Hong Kong-Macau line was no longer peaceful. All kinds of rumors were like mildew stains in damp weather, spreading overnight through every street and alley.

The television station's news department was busier than usual.

Guo Jiawen was already deputy director of the news department. When the station held meetings, everyone's expression was grave. Those above required that public opinion be stabilized, and that panic not be exaggerated. Yet the people urgently wanted to know the truth. Every day, calls came in asking where there were cases, whether schools would close, whether hospitals could still be visited, what to do if a child had a fever. Jiawen was caught in the middle, knowing deeply that news was not a simple matter of broadcasting. If it was spoken too lightly, it was whitewashing; if spoken too heavily, it added to disorder. At the editorial meeting, she tapped the table and said, "We cannot manufacture panic, but neither can we treat panic as though it does not exist. Ordinary people are not fools. Whether there are people with fevers in hospitals, whether there are masks in pharmacies—they can see these things themselves."

The Provincial People's Hospital where Rende worked had smelled the wind even earlier.

Though the burn department was not the infectious-disease department, it could not remain outside the matter. The hospital transferred backbone staff to support the fever clinic, and every department began strengthening protection.

Notices were posted at ward entrances, visits were restricted, and medical workers had their temperature taken every day. Rende had never liked speaking much, and during those days he became even more silent. Before going home each evening, he changed out of his outer clothing at the hospital and washed his hands until the backs of them reddened. When he reached his doorway at home, he did not immediately pick up his daughter. He first stood outside the door, removed his mask, wiped his hands again with alcohol, and only then gently pushed the door open.

His daughter Shiya was still small then, at the age when she loved most to throw herself into her father's arms.

When she saw Rende enter, she opened her little hands and cried, "Daddy!"

Rende's heart softened, yet instinctively he stepped back. "Shiya, wait until Daddy washes his hands."

Shiya's little mouth drooped, and she was so wronged she nearly cried. Jiawen came out from the kitchen and saw this scene, and her heart also ached. She understood that it was not that her husband did not love the child; it was that he understood too well how germs climbed silently onto a person's collar, fingers, and breath.

Yet what was most frightening still came.

That night, Shiya first developed a low fever.

Jiawen thought it was only an ordinary cold. She gave her water and touched her forehead. By the second half of the night, the child's temperature suddenly rose. Her little face burned red, and her breathing was quicker than usual. Rende startled awake from sleep, placed a hand on her forehead, and his face changed.

"How high?"

With trembling hands, Jiawen looked at the thermometer.
“Thirty-nine point two.”

Rende said nothing. He immediately rose and dressed.

Outside the window, Canton’s night was very quiet, unnaturally quiet. At this hour on ordinary nights, one could still hear the sound of spatulas from late-night food stalls downstairs, the sound of motorcycles, young people laughing and talking. But that night the streets were empty, and only from far away came the occasional short wail of an ambulance. Jiawen held Shiya in the back seat of the car. The child burned in a daze, her little hand weakly clutching her mother’s collar.

“Mommy, I’m cold.”

Jiawen held her even tighter, and tears rushed up at once.

Rende’s hands on the steering wheel were steady, but they gripped it very tightly. As a doctor, he had seen too many patients. Yet when it was his own child lying feverish in his arms, all professional calm was like thin paper, pierced at the slightest touch by a father’s fear.

A fever triage station had already been set up at the emergency entrance.

Nurses in protective clothing stood at the doorway, taking temperatures from a distance and asking about symptoms. The light was ghastly white, voices were lowered, and the air was filled with disinfectant and tension. Several fever patients sat in a temporarily separated area, masks covering half their faces, leaving only pairs of frightened eyes exposed. One mother held a child and wept softly. An old person beside her murmured the Buddha’s name. Another young man kept making phone calls, saying he only had a cold, it could not possibly be that disease.

Rende gave his name. The emergency doctor recognized him, but did not relax the procedure because of this.

“Doctor Ma, the child has a fever. We have to follow the process.”

Rende nodded. “Follow the process.”

Those three words were difficult to say, but they had to be said.

Shiya was placed in the observation area. Blood was drawn, X-rays taken, oxygen given, contact history asked. Jiawen stood outside the glass door, watching the nurse carry the child in, and nearly could not remain standing. No matter how sharp she was on ordinary days, no matter how capable she was at making decisions in the news department, at this moment she was only a mother. She wanted to rush in, but was stopped by a nurse. “Family members should not enter for now.”

Jiawen turned to look at Rende, her voice shaking. “Could she...”

Rende did not let her finish.

“Do not frighten yourself first,” he said.

But his own eyes were red too.

When the test results came out, the situation was not optimistic. There were shadows on the chest X-ray, and the changes in white blood cells were also alarming. The receiving doctor said quietly to Rende, “We cannot rule it out.”

Cannot rule it out.

These were four words doctors knew best, and also four words that frightened people most. They did not say yes, and did not say no, yet they were like a door bolt, shutting a person into waiting.

Shiya was admitted to the isolation ward.

That night, Rende stood outside the isolation area and looked at his daughter through the glass. The small child lay on the white hospital bed, an oxygen tube on her face, a needle in the back of her hand, her eyes that normally loved to laugh and make trouble half closed. A nurse bent over to tuck the quilt around her, moving so gently as though afraid of breaking a lamp.

Jiawen stood beside him and suddenly said in a low voice, “You have saved so many people’s children. Why does our child have to be like this too?”

Rende did not answer.

He could not answer.

Medicine never avoids a person’s door because he is kind; a virus does not tread more lightly because someone is the daughter of a doctor. For the first time, Rende truly felt that the families of patients he faced every day had originally stood just like this at the doorway of fate—angry and helpless, wanting to question heaven, yet knowing there was no one to question.

Very soon, the news of Shiya’s illness reached the Guo family.

Guo Xiaoquan was by now a member of the provincial Party standing committee, in charge of culture and education. The epidemic involved schools, hospitals, publicity, and social stability, and he had already been in meetings for days. Hearing that his granddaughter had been admitted to an isolation ward, he was silent for a long time on the telephone and only said, “Treat her according to the highest standard. Do not make her special, but do not delay anything.”

This sentence sounded like a cadre, and also like a grandfather.

After hanging up, Guo Xiaoquan sat alone in his office, looking at the epidemic briefing on his desk. The briefing listed case numbers, suspected cases, hospital prevention and control, school emergency measures, and public sentiment. He had seen numbers all his life, but at this moment, one number suddenly had a little name: Shiya.

Only then did he truly understand that an epidemic was not a curve on a document, but each family suddenly pushed to the edge of a cliff.

Panic in Canton was still spreading.

There were more and more people wearing masks in the streets. Schools began to close or half close. On television, protective knowledge was broadcast again and again. The central health authorities paid close attention, expert teams came south, case-reporting systems were repeatedly emphasized, and hospitals continuously adjusted isolation procedures. As for the cause of the illness, society was still full of different opinions. Some said it had to do with seafood markets; some said it had to do with the trade in wild animals; the words “civet cats” also appeared frequently between rumors and reports. But for ordinary people, where the disease had truly come from was far less urgent than the questions immediately before them: how not to be infected? If someone in the family developed a fever, could they be saved?

Shiya's condition fluctuated for several days.

Sometimes her temperature fell, and Jiawen felt as though she had seen daylight. A few hours later, the fever rose again, and her heart sank into a deep well. Rende could not remain outside his daughter's ward all the time. There were still patients in the department, and the hospital was still short of people. By day he wore his white coat and made ward

rounds; by night he hurried again to the isolation area to see his daughter. After several days, he had grown thinner, his eye sockets sunken. Nurses advised him to rest, but he only shook his head.

One night, Shiya saw her father through the glass and lifted her little hand, gently pressing it against the pane.

Rende also raised his hand, facing hers through the glass.

Between father and daughter there was a transparent wall, and also the fear of an entire age suddenly descending. Shiya's lips moved, but no sound came through. Rende understood all the same.

She was calling Daddy.

His tears finally fell.

Jiawen stood behind him. For the first time, she did not urge him to advance, did not resent him for not competing, did not say anything about position, stage, or the right to speak. She simply stepped forward and gently held his hand. The two of them stood together outside the glass, looking at their daughter on the hospital bed. At that moment, they were not the daughter and son-in-law of a provincial Party standing committee member, not a deputy director of the news department and an attending physician at the provincial hospital, but only a pair of parents afraid of losing their child.

A few days later, Shiya finally turned the dangerous corner.

On the day her fever broke, rain fell in Canton. Rainwater washed the leaves in the hospital courtyard and thinned the dust that had long accumulated in the air. When Rende heard the doctor say "the condition is stable," he only nodded, as calmly as though listening to any ordinary report of illness.

But when he walked to the stairwell, he held the wall and slowly squatted down, not rising for a long time.

When Jiawen found him, his face was buried in his palms.

She did not speak. She only crouched beside him and leaned her head against his shoulder.

This SARS storm was still far from over. Canton, Hong Kong, Macau, and cities farther away still had people developing fevers, entering isolation, and being rescued. Doctors and nurses were still rushing to the front. Families were still being tormented in waiting. Social panic would not disappear because one child had improved, and the virus would not immediately withdraw because of a spring rain.

But for the Ma family, Shiya's fever breaking was like a small lamp lit again in the black night.

Later, Rende often thought that in that year, as a doctor, he had seen the ferocity of disease; as a father, he had seen the ruthlessness of fate; and as an ordinary person, he had seen the fragility exposed by society in panic. If information was not transparent, rumors would grow wildly. If institutions reacted slowly, fear would arrive in people's hearts first. If medicine faced the unknown, it could only explore while also bearing the cost.

He no longer easily blamed patients for their panic.

Because he too had once stood outside a glass wall, like all fathers, suspending his entire heart between his child's breaths.

That year, the kapok flowers of Canton still bloomed.

Red flowers fell beside the wet streets, like clusters of fire not yet extinguished. The city wore masks and softened its footsteps, yet did not stop. The hospital lights burned all night, the voice of news anchors sounded again and again,

people still lined up outside pharmacies, and mothers held their children even tighter.

And Ma Rende stood in the ward corridor, looking at Canton after rain beyond the window, and suddenly understood: true peace in the human world has never meant the absence of disaster, but that when disaster comes, there are still people willing to remain beneath the lamp, not retreating even one step.



CHAPTER 57

LIFE IS IMPERMANENT, AND LIFE AND DEATH ARE GOVERNED BY FATE

Shiya's condition had, for several days, once seemed to improve.

During those days, everyone felt as though they had raised their heads above deep water and taken one greedy breath of air. Her fever had gone down, her breathing was steadier, and the shadows on the chest X-ray seemed not to be spreading further. The nurse nodded to Jiawen through the glass, and Rende finally dared let his eyes linger a little longer on the medical chart, as though afraid of startling a small bird that had just settled back onto a branch.

In those few days, Guo Jiawen even began to believe in spring again.

She prepared a little cloth rabbit for Shiya, the one the child had most loved to hold while sleeping before she was admitted to the hospital. The nurses would not allow it into the isolation ward, so she placed the rabbit outside the glass window, directly facing Shiya's bed. When Shiya woke and saw the rabbit, her eyes curved slightly, and her little hand lifted, as though she wanted to reach for it.

Jiawen smiled through the glass, and as she smiled, she began to cry.

Rende stood beside her and said softly, "She will get better."

Those three words were what a doctor said to a patient's family, and also what a father said to himself.

But the illness did not retreat.

A few days later, Shiya's fever rose again.

At first it was only low-grade, then the high fever came back in waves. Her breathing became urgent again, and her blood oxygen fell. The numbers on the monitor were like fine needles, stabbing into everyone's eyes. The doctors held consultation after consultation: antivirals, anti-infection treatment, hormones, oxygen therapy—every method that could be used had to be weighed. Rende was himself a doctor, but at his own daughter's bedside, he suddenly became the most useless of men. He understood every indicator, yet not one indicator would obey his words; he knew every possibility, yet could not remove the worst possibility from fate.

Jiawen began to stop speaking.

In the past, she had been deputy director of the news department, skilled above all at organizing language, judging

weight and urgency, and seizing the core sentence from chaos. But during these days, she could not say one complete sentence. She only sat on the long bench outside the isolation area, clutching Shiya's little hair clip in her hand. It was a pink butterfly hair clip, its plastic wings already worn. Shiya had often worn it when she went to kindergarten. When she ran, the butterfly trembled in her hair, as though it truly meant to fly away.

Now the butterfly lay in her mother's palm, and would never move again.

Guo Xiaoquan also came.

He was already a member of the provincial Party standing committee, in charge of culture and education. During the epidemic, he had spent days in meetings, approving documents and listening to reports. What came from his mouth was prevention and control, schools, hospitals, public sentiment, stability. But when he walked to the outside of the isolation ward and saw his granddaughter's small body lying on the hospital bed, all the words in official documents suddenly lost their weight.

He did not go in. He only stood outside the glass.

His secretary reminded him softly from behind, "Committee Member Guo, there is still a meeting this afternoon."

Guo Xiaoquan did not turn his head. He only said, "Postpone it."

Those two words were spoken very lightly, yet they were like the last small willfulness of an old man.

Shiya's condition suddenly worsened on a rainy night.

The rain of Canton struck the hospital windows, fine and urgent, like countless fingers tapping at the glass. Inside the isolation ward, the light was stark white. Doctors and nurses

were fully protected, their footsteps hurried yet restrained. Rende was allowed to enter the ward briefly. He put on protective clothing, mask, face shield, and gloves, wrapping himself layer upon layer. At that moment, he suddenly felt that he was not like a father, not even like a doctor, but like a stranger whom fate had permitted to approach for only a moment.

Shiya was already very weak.

She opened her eyes and saw her father. She seemed to want to smile, but had no strength. The oxygen mask covered her little face, mist rising and falling inside it layer by layer. Rende sat beside the bed and gently held her hand. That hand was too small, soft, and warm, yet its warmth was no longer as vivid as before.

“Daddy is here,” he said.

Shiya’s lips moved.

Rende bent down, unable to hear clearly. He only saw her eyes turn toward the glass window. There, Jiawen stood with both hands pressed against the glass, tears falling line after line down her face.

“Mommy is here too,” Rende said in a low voice. “Shiya, Mommy is here too.”

A small tear slipped from the corner of the child’s eye.

Perhaps she understood. Perhaps she did not. A five-year-old child should not yet understand life and death. What she should understand were candies, crayons, little cloth rabbits, the slide at the kindergarten gate, her father’s embrace when he came home from work, and the softness of her mother’s voice when telling stories. She should not understand isolation wards, should not understand difficulty breathing, should not understand the fear in adults’ eyes.

Yet fate never hesitates because a child is young.

The monitor suddenly began to sound sharply.

Doctors gathered around. A nurse gently drew Rende aside. He stood in a corner of the ward and watched his colleagues resuscitate his daughter. It was the longest and cruelest stretch of time in his life. He was familiar with every movement, understood every instruction, could recite every dosage of every drug. Yet precisely because he understood, he knew even more clearly that hope was thinning little by little.

Outside the glass, Jiawen could not hear the sounds within. She only saw figures moving, saw doctors bending over, saw nurses handing over medicines, saw Rende standing in the corner like a tree struck by lightning.

Suddenly, she understood.

She did not cry out, nor did she beat on the glass. Her whole body merely slid down slowly, until she knelt on the cold floor. Guo Xiaoquan reached out to support her, but could not hold her up. The hand of a provincial Party standing committee member, at that moment, was only the aging hand of a grandfather.

At dawn, the rain stopped.

Shiya's life was fixed forever at five years old.

When the doctor announced the time, Rende stood beside the bed without moving. He did not cry, nor did he collapse. He only lowered his head and looked at his daughter. Shiya's small face had finally become peaceful, as though she were asleep. After the oxygen mask was removed, her lips were somewhat pale. A nurse arranged her hair, and Jiawen's pink butterfly hair clip was finally fastened gently among her strands.

That butterfly seemed to have landed upon a dream from which there could be no waking.

When Jiawen was allowed to enter, she almost threw herself to the bedside. She held her daughter, her voice hoarse beyond recognition.

“Shiya, Mommy is here.”

There was no answer.

“Mommy will take you home, all right?”

Still there was no answer.

Rende stood behind her and reached out his hand, but did not dare touch his wife, nor dare touch his child. In this life, he had saved burn patients, saved firefighters pulled from fire scenes, saved many people who had been dragged to the door of death. But his daughter—his daughter whom he had held in his arms as she grew, whom he had taught to recognize characters, whom he had heard calling him Daddy, whom he had promised to take to see the kapok flowers—he had not, in the end, been able to save.

Jiawen suddenly turned back to look at him.

There was no blame in that gaze, yet it was heavier than blame. It seemed to ask: Are you not a doctor? Are you not someone who saves people? Why, of all people, could you not save her?

Rende’s lips moved, but no sound came.

Because this question was one he was asking himself too.

In the hospital corridor, the sky gradually brightened. The morning of Canton during the epidemic was especially desolate. From far away came the sound of an ambulance. The outpatient hall had not yet fully opened, yet fever patients wearing masks were already waiting outside. The city was still breathing; only its breathing had become careful and heavy.

After Shiya left, both the Ma family and the Guo family seemed to have had one of their beams removed.

When Zhao Youlan hurried to Canton, she almost could not stand. Holding Shiya's little clothes, she repeated the Buddha's name over and over, until in the end one could no longer tell whether it was sutra sound or weeping. Ma Cunhui did not say much. He only sat on a long bench outside the hospital, both hands pressed upon that old abacus. The abacus beads did not move. For the first time in the world, there was an account for which he could not make even one bead sound.

Guo Xiaoquan returned to his office, where the epidemic briefing still lay on the desk. It listed new cases, suspected cases, isolation numbers, prevention and control measures. He stared at those numbers for a very long time, then suddenly removed his glasses and pressed his brow. In the past, he had thought he understood governance, understood public opinion, understood culture, education, and health, understood how a great province maintained order in wind and waves. But after Shiya left, he knew that behind every number there might be a small bed, a pink hair clip, and the shattered hearts of two parents.

Jiawen did not return to the television station for a long time.

She had once trusted language most of all, but afterward she found language hateful. News scripts said "the situation is severe but controllable," said "medical workers are making every effort to treat patients," said "the public need not panic." Every sentence was correct, and every sentence was also as light as paper. She had seen with her own eyes the child outside that "controllable," had seen the failure that remained after every possible effort had still been unable to reverse heaven's will. She knew society needed these words

to steady people's hearts, but as a mother, she could no longer easily trust any neatly arranged slogan.

Rende returned to the hospital as usual on the seventh day after Shiya left.

Watching him put on his white coat, Jiawen suddenly asked, "You are still going?"

Rende's hand stopped on the buttons.

After a long time, he said, "The department is short of people."

Jiawen looked at him. There were no tears in her eyes, only fatigue so deep it had no bottom. "Your daughter died in the hospital, and you are still going to save other people's children?"

Rende lowered his head.

"Precisely because she is gone," he said, "I cannot let other people's children have no one guarding them."

Jiawen closed her eyes. Her whole body seemed cut by that sentence.

She hated those words, and she understood them.

That day, when Rende walked into the hospital, the corridor still smelled of disinfectant. There were still patients with fevers, still nurses running, still family members anxiously pursuing doctors with questions. The world did not stop because Shiya had left. The cruelest part of disaster is that it allows one family's heaven and earth to collapse, while letting the next day's sun rise as usual.

Rende stood outside the fever clinic and from afar saw a mother holding a feverish child, her eyes frightened as she looked all around.

He walked over, his voice very gentle.

"Do not be afraid. Let us take the temperature first."

After saying this, he suddenly felt his chest hurt so badly he could hardly breathe.

Yet he still stood there.

The kapok flowers of Canton bloomed very red that year. Flowers fell on the wet ground before the hospital gate, like clusters of fire that had burned through. Shiya did not wait until summer. Her life stopped at five years old, stopped in the white light of the isolation ward, stopped upon the pink butterfly hair clip in her mother's palm.

From then on, whenever Ma Rende looked at every child patient, his eyes were deeper than before.

He was no longer only a doctor.

He was also a father who had lost his daughter.

And some compassion in this human world grows precisely from pain that can never be redeemed, inch by inch.



CHAPTER 58

WHEN THE CHILD BECAME THE BOND
THAT KEPT THE MARRIAGE

After Shiya left, that home suddenly became empty.

It was not as simple as the absence of one child. It was as though a lamp had been taken down from the beam of the house. The rooms were still there, the tables and chairs still there, the bowls and chopsticks still there, the curtains still there, even the family photograph on the wall still there—but the light was gone. By day, sunlight still came in and fell upon the living-room floor, bright as before; by night, when the table lamp was turned on, there was still a circle of warm yellow. Yet that light could no longer illuminate the life of former days. It could only illuminate emptiness, place after place.

Shiya's little bed still stood beside the bedroom.

At the head of the bed was a little cloth rabbit, its ears somewhat worn from her biting them. Beside the pillow lay a thin book of fairy tales, half-read, one page folded into a shallow corner by her small hand. On the lowest shelf of the wardrobe were her dresses, socks, hair clips, and little leather shoes. At first, Guo Jiawen would not allow anyone to touch them. Even when Zhao Youlan wanted to help her put things away, Jiawen stopped her.

"Don't touch them," she said. "When she comes back, she won't be able to find them."

Hearing this, Zhao Youlan turned away and wiped her tears.

But everyone knew that Shiya would not come back.

Sometimes, when Ma Rende woke in the night, he seemed to hear the sound of little feet running in the corridor. Da-da, da-da, like Shiya in the past waking at midnight, holding her little rabbit and running to their bedside, saying in her milky voice, "Daddy, I had a dream." He would sit up abruptly, only to see the half-open door in the darkness. Wind entered

through the crack of the window and gently stirred the curtain, as though a small shadow had just flashed past.

He did not dare call her name.

Shiya.

That name had once been the tenderness of which he was most proud.

That Rende liked girls was something everyone in the Ma family knew. Others often said that men all hoped for sons to continue the family line, but he would smile and say, “Daughters are good. A daughter is like a flower, and also like a book. When there is a daughter in the house, even one’s speech must become softer.” If family planning had not allowed only one child, he had long wanted to have four daughters, naming them according to poetry, books, rites, and music. He had already repeated the names many times in his heart.

The eldest daughter would be called Ma Shiya.

The second, he wanted to call Ma Shuya. The clear fragrance of books, gentle brows and eyes; if she grew up not loving speech, she could still have her own world inside books.

The third would be Ma Liya. Rites, not in the sense of stiffness, but measure, respect, knowing how to advance and retreat in the world, and also how to keep the heart clean.

The fourth would be Ma Yueya. Music, not as noise, but as a sound within the heart; not withering in hardship, still able to sing in the wind.

Poetry, books, rites, music.

That was the home Rende had once imagined for himself: four daughters running back and forth through the rooms, one playing the piano, one reading books, one combing her younger sister’s hair, one hiding candy in the pocket of her

father's white coat. Guo Jiawen would sit beneath the lamp revising manuscripts, complaining that they were too noisy, saying, "All of you, be quiet," while her eyes were full of laughter. Rende would come home from work, and as soon as the door opened, four little girls would rush toward him, calling Daddy again and again. Such days he had once imagined after night shifts at dawn, on rainy roads home, and also when buying hair clips for Shiya.

But now, he had not even been able to keep one Shiya.

Ma Shuya, Ma Liya, Ma Yueya—these names had not had time to be written into a household register, had not had time to be spoken aloud by grandfather and grandmother, had not had time to possess a pair of little shoes, a bowl, a bed. They had only lived inside Rende's heart, and in the early dawn when Shiya left, they too scattered into ashes and smoke.

Occasionally, on the back of a case-record sheet, he would unconsciously write those names.

Ma Shuya.

Ma Liya.

Ma Yueya.

After writing them, he would immediately cross them out. Black lines crisscrossed the paper, like several little roads cut off. When others saw it, they only thought he was too tired and had written the wrong words. Only he himself knew that what had been crossed out were not words, but his daughters who had never been born.

Guo Jiawen also changed.

When Shiya was alive, no matter how busy Jiawen was, there had been a soft thread in the home pulling her back. However many meetings there were in the news department, however many demands from the provincial publicity authorities, however many topics at the station, by night she

would always wash her daughter's face, tell her stories, and put that pink butterfly hair clip into its little box. After Shiya left, that thread snapped. She came home later and later. Sometimes, even when she had no night shift, she would sit in the office until deep into the night. She said the station was busy, and Rende did not ask. Rende said the department was busy, and she did not ask either.

Both of them were busy.

Busyness became the most respectable form of escape.

The home feared dinnertime most.

In the past, Shiya had sat in her little chair, tapping her spoon against the bowl, shouting that she wanted the meat from the belly of the fish. Rende would pick out the bones cleanly and place the meat in her bowl. Jiawen's mouth would complain that he spoiled the child, yet her hand would blow the soup cool and pass it over. Now at the table there remained only two bowls, two pairs of chopsticks. The dishes often went cold, and no one spoke. Occasionally a chopstick struck the rim of a bowl with a crisp sound, and instead it startled the heart.

Once, Jiawen suddenly said, "If we had taken her to the hospital earlier that day, would things have been different?"

Rende's hand, holding food with his chopsticks, stopped in midair.

He knew she did not mean to pierce him. Yet this sentence was like a barbed needle: once it fell lightly, it tore open again the place in his heart that had not yet scabbed over.

"The night she had the fever, we already went," he said.

Jiawen lowered her head. "I mean, earlier. Maybe when the low fever first started..."

Rende did not answer.

As a doctor, he knew that many illnesses had no if. As a father, he had replayed that night in his heart countless times: if he had not been on duty that day; if he had been more careful before holding her when he came home; if they had gone to the hospital as soon as her low fever began; if a certain medicine had been used a few hours earlier; if a certain specialist had arrived half a day sooner; if fate had been willing to give them a little more time...

But the “ifs” of this world have never been willing to return the dead.

Seeing him silent, Jiawen’s tears suddenly fell. “You are always like this. You have patience for patients, but not one word for me.”

Rende raised his head and looked at her, his voice hoarse. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t know?” Jiawen laughed once, and in that laugh there was broken coldness. “You are a doctor. Do you not even have one sentence that can let me go on living?”

Rende’s face turned pale.

That night, for the first time, they truly quarreled.

It was not loud shouting, but voices held down, each sentence more painful than the last. Jiawen said he had given himself to the wards, yet had not guarded his own home. Rende said he had already done all he could, yet could not bargain with fate. Jiawen said he only knew how to remain silent, silent like a wall. Rende said every sentence of hers was like a judgment. By the end, both were exhausted, and only the rain outside the window remained in the room.

Shiya’s little cloth rabbit still sat in the corner of the sofa, its black glass eyes quietly watching them.

As though the child were still listening.

From then on, the crack deepened day by day.

Jiawen moved to the study to sleep, saying she was afraid of disturbing Rende's rest. Rende did not stop her. He only moved his own pillow a little farther inward on the bed. At night, separated by a wall, both of them lay with eyes open. Jiawen remembered the way Shiya had last called Mommy, and her heart was cut like a knife. Rende remembered his daughter's small hand pressed against the glass, and could almost not breathe. Yet neither of them went over. Neither of them spoke.

Grief should originally make people lean upon one another, but grief too deep sometimes pushes people apart.

Because drawing close to the other means seeing the same failure.

When Rende saw Jiawen, he thought of how he had been unable to save his daughter. When Jiawen saw Rende, she thought that she had entrusted her child to a doctor father, and still lost her. Love had once been the roof they shared; now beneath that roof there was only rain, dripping one drop at a time upon each heart.

At first, neither of them spoke the thought of divorce aloud.

It merely flashed through the depths of the heart late at night, like cold wind lifting window paper. Later, it appeared more and more often. Sitting alone in her television-station office, Jiawen would think: if I do not go back to that home, will I no longer have to face that empty bed every day? On night duty at the hospital, Rende would also think: if I let her go, will she hate me a little less?

Yet neither of them could bear it.

Because Shiya was their shared daughter, and also their last thread. Though she was no longer there, she was like a tiny nail, still fastening this tottering home in its original

place. In the photograph on the wall, Shiya stood between her parents, wearing a white dress, a pink butterfly hair clip on her head, smiling innocently. The three people in the photograph had once been so complete.

Now the two people outside the photograph seemed lit by that smile until there was nowhere to hide.

One deep night, Rende sat alone in the living room, opened a drawer, and took out the hospital wristband from Shiya's birth. A tiny circle, with the words written on it: Female, Ma Shiya. The writing had already faded somewhat. Holding the wristband in his palm, he suddenly thought of the other three names that had never been born.

Ma Shuya.

Ma Liya.

Ma Yueya.

He murmured them once, his voice so soft it could hardly be heard.

The book was never bound; the rites never formed; the music never sounded.

Only poetry broke at the age of five.

At that moment, Ma Rende finally bent over the table like a man who could no longer hold himself up, and, with his voice pressed low, began to weep.

Outside the house, Canton's night was deep. The kapok tree swayed faintly in the wind. There were no flowers on its branches, only a few remnant leaves. A home had once had spring; now spring had been taken away by illness, leaving only two living people looking at one another among ruins, not knowing whether they could ever draw close again.

After Shiya left, for a long time Ma Rende did not dare read medical books.

He still wore the white coat, still made ward rounds, still wrote medical orders, still performed operations. But at night, when he sat at his desk and saw those familiar pathological atlases, pharmacology texts, surgery books, and infection-control guidelines, his heart felt as though a piece of cold iron were pressing upon it. He had once believed in these books, believed in knowledge, instruments, medicines, and surgery, believed that modern medicine could at least fight fate for a few more steps. But his daughter's illness shook all his beliefs.

One night, he accidentally came across an article by a Taiwanese Chinese medicine expert surnamed Peng.

The writing was fierce, even extreme, yet like a rusty blade—its edge not refined, but cutting at once into the place in Rende's heart he least wished to touch. The general meaning of the article was this:

Modern medicine often prides itself on “scientific progress,” yet it may not truly have brought the masses far from suffering. People hear that deaths from infectious diseases have decreased and therefore believe that medicine has won a great victory. But among children, youth, and the elderly, cancer, chronic disease, immune disorders, and drug-induced harm arise one after another. Has humanity merely exchanged one way of dying for another? In the past, epidemics took lives; now tumors, surgery, long-term medication, and organ failure consume people bit by bit. The names have changed, but suffering has not necessarily diminished.

The article further said that today, in major hospitals, it was hard to obtain a bed, wards were full, and operating-room lights burned brightly. Patients lined up for treatment, families exhausted their wealth, and opening skulls, cutting

abdomens, intubation, chemotherapy, excision, and transplantation were performed daily in hospitals. If so-called progress in medical science ultimately only allowed patients to endure illness in ways more expensive, more complicated, and more frightening, then what exactly was this “high-quality medicine”—a gospel, or another kind of human hell?

The author especially questioned the worship of surgery and instruments. When many patients heard a doctor say “surgery is necessary,” it was as though they had heard an oracle, and they did not dare ask further. But did patients truly understand the surgical risks, postoperative quality of life, drug side effects, and alternative options? Sometimes, only if a relative or friend happened to be a doctor in the hospital would someone privately remind them: if you want to live a few more years, you may not necessarily need to rush into this knife. Why is one thing said in public, and another privately? Does the authority of medicine often obscure the patient’s own judgment?

The sharpest part of the article was its criticism of “scientizing Chinese medicine” and “modernizing Chinese herbs.” It said that if so-called science merely meant forcing Chinese medicine into the indicators, instruments, and pharmacological framework of Western medicine, it might instead distort the original meaning of Chinese medicine. Western medicine itself had not fully solved the problems of illness and health, yet often judged everything in the name of science. Many patients also blindly worshiped precise instruments, expensive equipment, and imported drugs, believing that the more machines there were, the finer the examinations, and the stronger the treatment, the closer they were to recovery. In the end, they lost both money and body,

still not knowing that sometimes they had simply been dazzled by the light of technology.

The author also fiercely denounced the abuse of medication. Medicines often marked indications, usage, and dosage, yet rarely allowed ordinary people truly to understand side effects, contraindications, and long-term harm. The abuse of antibiotics, hormones, and intravenous infusions had almost become normal in many places. As soon as a child caught a cold, he was given an infusion; as soon as he had a fever, he was put on a drip. Parents thought this was nourishment, a miraculous fever-reducing method, proof that the hospital valued their child; they did not know that the body had its own mechanisms of self-regulation. If one blindly used cold-natured medicines, antibiotics, and hormones to suppress symptoms, perhaps the fever would go down for the moment, but a deeper root of illness might be planted for the future.

The article also discussed organ transplantation. It questioned whether many transplants truly restored health, or merely exchanged enormous costs, powerful drugs, and prolonged rejection reactions for limited survival time. Patients spent their family fortunes and heard only the cold numbers of “survival rates,” but few people told them: how would this year be lived? If one did not transplant, might there be other possibilities? What the patient finally obtained—was it life, or the pain of lingering breath?

Finally, the article wrote of common childhood illnesses: runny noses, inflamed throats, sneezing, coughing, fever, itchy eyes. Parents carried children back and forth repeatedly. Western doctors spoke of allergies, rhinitis, infection; Chinese medicine doctors spoke of cold and heat, deficiency and excess, insufficient lung and spleen. Each held to his own

words. But why did these illnesses remain uncured for so long, even becoming worse the more they were treated? Young parents ran themselves ragged. Whenever a child became ill, there were infusions, drugs, examinations. In the end, was the illness in the child's body, or had the entire concept of medicine lost its root?

Reading to this point, Rende's fingers stopped on the page, and for a long time he did not turn it.

If it had been before, he would probably have frowned.

This essay was too absolute, too fierce, and in many places even hard for someone trained strictly in Western medicine to accept. Western medicine had saved countless lives; antibiotics had rescued infections; surgery had removed necrotic tissue; intravenous fluids had maintained the lives of patients in shock; organ transplantation had indeed won time for some on the edge of death. To deny modern medicine entirely would be another kind of extremism.

But after Shiya left, Rende could no longer, as easily as before, dismiss these criticisms as "fanatical."

He thought of hospital corridors where beds were hard to obtain, of operating rooms still lit deep into the night, of payment slips bending the backs of family members, of patients driven to desperation by imported drugs, examination fees, and consumable-material fees. Modern medicine was indeed powerful, but its power depended more and more on machines, drugs, consumables, capital, and systems. After a person was pushed into a hospital, he first became a patient number, then a case, then indicators, images, data, and costs. What doctors faced was no longer simply a living person, but a set of blood tests, CT films, drug-sensitivity results, treatment pathways, and charge items.

Suddenly he became afraid.

In these years, had he too, without realizing it, begun to see patients as “illnesses”?

What percentage of the body was burned, how deep the wound was, how much fluid should be replenished, what the infection markers showed, what the graft survival rate was. Each item was important; each item could not be wrong. But was the patient frightened at night? Did his family still have money? Why had his body come to be burned to this point? His diet, labor, emotions, cold and heat, constitution, old illnesses, fatigue—had they, long before the fire occurred, slowly pushed him toward vulnerability?

Western medicine was too skilled at emergency rescue, but often not skilled at asking “why a person came to this point.”

Chinese medicine might not be correct in everything; it even had many ancient, ambiguous, difficult-to-verify aspects. Yet Chinese medicine at least still had an old gaze, willing to see a person as a whole woven together by heaven, earth, climate, diet, labor, emotional rises and falls, and the flourishing and decline of the organs. It did not ask only where the lesion was, but also how this person lived, how he was depleted, and how he had lost balance.

Rende thought of his mother, Zhao Youlan.

When he was young, Zhao Youlan could gather herbs, boil tangerine-peel water, chrysanthemum and goji tea, distinguish wind-cold from wind-heat, and say, “Medicine has its nature, and people have their fate.” At the time, Rende had thought these were only old folk experiences. Later, after studying Western medicine, entering the Provincial People’s Hospital, and putting on a white coat, he naturally placed

those things far away. Yet now, the things he had placed far away returned before his eyes one by one.

If Shiya had not from the beginning fallen into that entire emergency-rescue process of the modern hospital, but earlier had had someone look at her constitution, cold and heat, diet, upright qi and pathogenic qi—would things have been different?

As soon as this thought appeared, Rende immediately felt pain.

He knew that perhaps this was only the questioning of a father unable to accept the agony of losing his daughter. Medicine could not be turned backward; life could not begin again. Yet as a doctor, he could not help asking: had modern medicine become more and more skilled at handling results, while more and more neglecting causes? Had it become more and more precise, yet more and more cold? Had it become increasingly able to prolong life, yet not necessarily able to make people truly healthy? Had it increasingly worn the outer garment of science, yet amid commerce, institutions, fear, and authority, lost certain compassion that should have belonged to medicine?

That night, Rende took several old books from the lowest shelf of the bookcase.

The Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon, the Treatise on Cold Damage, the Essential Prescriptions from the Golden Cabinet, and a notebook of herbs his mother had copied for him in earlier years. The pages had yellowed somewhat, but the handwriting was still clear. Rende placed them on the desk side by side with the thick Western medical textbooks. One world spoke of bacteria, viruses, inflammatory mediators, and immune reactions. The other world spoke of yin and

yang, cold and heat, deficiency and excess, defense and construction, qi and blood.

The two languages were far apart, like two rivers.

But the human being had only one body.

Rende suddenly gave birth to a thought: perhaps he should not choose sides between the two, but should learn again how to look at a person. Western medicine gave him knives, drugs, instruments, and methods of emergency rescue. Chinese medicine might give him wholeness, restraint, nourishment, and reverence for the slow changes of life.

He was not trying to betray Western medicine.

He simply suddenly felt that if he continued to use only the same pair of eyes as before to look at patients, he would be unworthy of Shiya, and unworthy of those people in the wards who had placed all their hope in his hands.

Outside the window, the night was deep.

Rende opened the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon. Seeing those ancient opening words, he felt in his heart a solemnity he had not known for a long time. It was as though he had returned again to the small courtyard in Qianzhou, hearing his mother boiling medicine before the stove, hearing the distant bell of Heavenly Temple, hearing Perfected Master Zitian say, "A person with good fate does not necessarily have a smooth life, and a person with bitter fate is not necessarily without blessing."

He murmured to himself:

"Learn from the beginning."

Those three words were very light, yet like a lamp, in the long darkness after he lost his daughter, they gave off a faint glow.



CHAPTER 59

WHEN THE STORM COMES, BIRDS FLY APART

Divorce, in the end, still came down onto paper.

At first, neither of them was willing to speak of it. The word "divorce" was too cold, cold as water left unboiled on a winter night; the word "marriage" was too heavy, heavy as a stone that had pressed upon both their chests for years. After Shiya left, they guarded the same wound, yet were less and less able to warm one another. Grief should have drawn people closer, but some grief is too deep; so deep that when two people come near, they both see the same grave.

When Jiawen first raised it, her voice was very calm.

That evening, a fine rain was falling in Canton. Outside the window, the kapok leaves shone under the rain. Inside, the main lights were not turned on; only a small lamp beside the dining table was lit. Shiya's little cloth rabbit still sat in the corner of the sofa, like a witness that would never grow up. Jiawen placed a document on the table. She did not immediately push it toward him, but said in a low voice, "Rende, if we go on like this, we are only tormenting each other."

Rende looked at those pages and for a long time said nothing.

He had long known this day would come. On many nights, he heard Jiawen's suppressed sobbing from the study, yet did

not walk over; on many mornings, he saw her going to the television station with swollen red eyes, yet only said, "Be careful on the road." It was not that they no longer loved each other, but that their love had been buried beneath the pain of losing a daughter. Whoever dug at it would come away with hands covered in blood.

"All right," Rende finally said.

Just that one word seemed to set down years of husband-and-wife affection lightly, and also seemed to snap a bone in the heart by force.

Jiawen lifted her head and looked at him, and tears rushed out at once.

She had thought he would ask her to stay, would explain, would say to wait a little longer. But Rende did not. It was not that he did not hurt; it was that the pain had gone so deep that even asking her to stay seemed pale. He understood that as Jiawen stood in this home, every object was a knife: Shiya's little shoes, Shiya's hair clips, the half-finished drawing Shiya had made, even Rende's own face—all would remind her of that night outside the isolation ward.

Letting her go was perhaps the last tenderness he could give her.

When Guo Xiaoquan learned of it, he did not object.

He was already a member of the provincial Party standing committee, in charge of culture and education. He had seen too many families gather and scatter in the wind and waves of the age, and had seen too many seemingly respectable marriages rot in silence. He loved his daughter, and he also felt sorry for Rende. This son-in-law was not good at scheming, did not know how to manage an official career, and after ten years still remained an attending physician in the department. But in his heart Guo Xiaoquan knew clearly

that Rende was not a bad man, still less a heartless one. He was only too heavy, too bitter, too unable to pull himself from the mud.

In the study, Guo Xiaoquan had one last long talk with Rende.

That night, the rows of books on the shelves—Zizhi Tongjian, Selected Works of Mao, Urban Planning, Collected Materials on Medical and Health System Reform—all sat in silence. The calligraphy on the wall, “Knowing Where to Stop Brings Stability,” still hung there, its ink calm and steady. Guo Xiaoquan poured Rende a cup of tea. The tea was clear, its steam rising faintly.

“I will not stop you and Jiawen,” Guo Xiaoquan said. “Some wounds cannot be passed through simply by enduring. Neither of you is bad. It is only that the pass of Shiya was too cruel.”

Rende lowered his head. “Dad, I failed to keep this family.”

Guo Xiaoquan waved his hand. “Do not take everything onto yourself. If a person could truly hold on to everything, he would not be a person. He would be a god.”

Rende’s throat tightened.

Guo Xiaoquan looked at him, fatigue in his eyes, and also a rare gentleness. “Rende, I used to think you lacked ambition. Your professional skill was good, your reputation was good, you had opportunities, and you also had my connection. But you did not fight, did not compete, only guarded the ward. When I sighed, it was not because I disliked that you had no official title. It was because I felt you had ability, yet refused to stand in a larger place. But after Shiya left, I finally thought it through. A person’s advancement does not necessarily mean advancing upward in rank. Some people go upward by becoming hospital

directors, department directors, ministers. Some people go deeper, by thinking one thing through and walking one road to the end.”

Rende lifted his head.

Guo Xiaoquan slowly said, “If you still want to be a doctor, then do not only suffer in the old place. Since you have begun to think about Chinese medicine, go study it. Go to Beijing. Study in a real institute. Do not take Chinese medicine as a refuge after losing your daughter, and do not take it as a banner against Western medicine. If you truly study, then study it into a real skill, a skill for saving people.”

These words were like a lamp shining into Rende’s heart.

In truth, this thought had been circling in his chest for a long time.

After Shiya left, he reread the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon, the Treatise on Cold Damage, and the Essential Prescriptions from the Golden Cabinet. He read the herb notes Zhao Youlan had left from earlier years, and also those fierce essays criticizing modern medicine. At first, he was only in pain, only doubtful, only unwilling to accept it. He asked himself: if Western medicine could not save Shiya, was there another road? In modern hospitals, with so many machines, drugs, operations, and indicators, why did so many people still die in pain? Why did patients spend all their money, yet their bodies did not necessarily truly get well? Why did children repeatedly suffer fevers, coughs, allergies, rhinitis, while parents ran themselves ragged and doctors also ran themselves ragged, as though circling inside a ring that grew larger and larger?

But slowly, his doubt was no longer merely resentment.

He began to understand that true medicine should not be built upon hatred. If, because Western medicine had limits,

one denied Western medicine completely, that was not seeking the Way; that was extremism. If, because Chinese medicine was ancient, one blindly worshiped it as divine, that was not wisdom either; it was another kind of superstition. Shiya's death could not become his reason for hating Western medicine, but it could become the beginning of his questioning medicine anew.

Western medicine saved in emergencies. It was clear, sharp, like a knife, like light, like a command on the battlefield. Massive bleeding, infection, shock, burns, trauma—Western medicine had its irreplaceable strength. Rende could not possibly deny this. With his own hands, he had used Western medical techniques to pull many patients back from the hands of death. He knew modern medicine was no fraud.

But Chinese medicine looked at the person, at the whole, at qi and blood, yin and yang, cold and heat, deficiency and excess, at the ties between a person and heaven and earth, diet, emotion, labor, and the four seasons. It was slow, subtle, often misunderstood by modern indicators, and often had its reputation ruined by mediocre doctors. Yet deep within it, that gaze of “preventing illness before it arises,” “supporting the upright and expelling the pathogenic,” and “treatment based on pattern differentiation” was like an ancient river buried under dust, still carrying the sound of water.

What Rende wanted to find was not victory or defeat.

Not Western medicine winning, nor Chinese medicine winning.

He wanted to find a road that would let patients suffer less, let doctors be less blind, and let medicine see the human being again.



CHAPTER 60

ALL THINGS ARE RULED BY FATE; LITTLE LIES IN HUMAN HANDS

After deciding to go to Beijing University of Chinese Medicine, Rende first returned to Qianzhou.

When Zhao Youlan heard that he was going to Beijing to study Chinese medicine, she was first startled, then her eyes reddened. From an old trunk, she took out a handwritten notebook of prescriptions. The pages had yellowed, their corners curling. It was something she had written down when, as a young woman, she had learned herbs from her mother-in-law. Inside were small formulas for coughs, reducing fever, strengthening the spleen, calming the spirit, and also many local names for the grasses and trees of Qianzhou's mountains and fields.

"These may not all be accurate," Zhao Youlan said. "But they are a little old thing from the family. Take it with you—not so you can follow the formulas blindly, but so you remember that the medical Way is not only in great hospitals. It is also by the stove, on mountain roads, in the palm of a mother's hand."

Rende received it, his fingers trembling slightly.

Ma Cunhui did not say much. He only pushed that old abacus before him.

Rende smiled bitterly. "Father, I am going to study medicine. Why should I take an abacus?"

Ma Cunhui looked at him and slowly said, "This journey of yours is not about calculating money accounts. It is about calculating fate accounts and heart accounts. One account for Western medicine, one for Chinese medicine, one for the patient, one for yourself. The accounts that cannot make the abacus sound are the hardest to calculate."

Rende lowered his head, heat rising in his eyes.

Before leaving, he went once more to Heavenly Temple.

It was a place he had often come with his mother when he was young. The mountain road was still there, Immortal Turtle Mountain was still there, and pine wind still blew through the woods. Yet when he truly reached the gate, he was stunned. Beside the once-pure stone steps were now stalls selling incense and candles, protective talismans, blessed bead bracelets, vegetarian pastries, and tea. Outside the mountain gate, a new ticket booth had been built; tourists lined up to buy tickets, and a loudspeaker repeatedly called, "Please enter the temple with tickets." Not far away, there was even a restaurant, its sign bright and fresh, reading "Heavenly Vegetarian Feast" and "Mountain-Spring Free-Range Chicken." Oil smoke mixed with incense smoke, making it hard to tell whether this was the smoke and fire of ordinary life or the clamor of the dust-red world.

The old couplet on the mountain gate was still there—

If you listen with the ear, you will never understand;

Only where the eye hears sound will you begin to know.

Only the stone carving had been newly painted in gold, too bright, so bright it had lost some of its former depth and quiet.

Master Jichan had passed away into immortality many years earlier, and Perfected Master Zitian of Muyang Monastery had also long returned west. The one now in charge of the temple was Master Huiyi, the second disciple. Huiyi had grown somewhat heavier than before; his robe was neat, his expression steady, and in his speech there was the completeness of a temple abbot. Seeing Rende, he still joined his palms and called him “Doctor Ma,” then invited him to the guest hall for tea. The tea was still plain tea, but on the wall of the guest hall hung a donor merit list, and beside it lay a tourism-development plan.

Rende asked about old acquaintances.

“Is Little Master Miaoyin still here?”

Huiyi was silent for a moment, then said, “She left long ago.”

“Where did she go?”

Huiyi shook his head. “I do not know. She left very quietly and did not leave a word.”

The teacup in Rende’s hand paused slightly.

Miaoyin. That little Daoist girl who had grown up in Muyang Monastery, the girl who had once boiled pine resin with Xinde in the pine woods, who had once said, “If it benefits sentient beings, then it is a good aspiration”—she too was gone. Jichan was gone, Perfected Master Zitian was gone, and Miaoyin was also gone. The temple remained, the bell remained, the incense burner remained, yet the cool clarity of former days seemed to have been silently moved away.

Rende did not ask more.

He knew that if there were affinity next time, perhaps he would again seek this scattered old story. For now, he only offered one stick of incense before the great hall. As the incense smoke rose, tourists clamored outside, vendors called out, yet the bell sound still came slowly from the depths. Rende suddenly understood that there was no pure land in this world that remained unchanged forever. Temples change, hearts change, medicine changes, marriage changes, even a beloved child can vanish from one's arms. But if even a little vow-power remains unextinguished, a person cannot easily fall.

On the day he left Qianzhou, there was fog in the morning.

Qianzhou had no railway station. Those traveling far still had to first take a long-distance bus to Canton, then head north from there. Zhao Youlan and Ma Cunhui saw him off at the county bus station. The station was not large. The concrete ground had been dampened by morning fog. Several long-distance buses stood beside the platform, their bodies spattered with mud. Vendors carried shoulder-poles selling tea eggs, sticky-rice chicken, and hot soy milk. Drivers smoked at the front of the buses. Passengers carrying snakeskin bags, suitcases, and cardboard boxes crowded beneath the waiting shed, waiting for ticket inspection.

Immortal Turtle Mountain in the distance looked like a pale ink painting, and the Jinjiang River flowed quietly. Standing before the bus door, Rende suddenly thought of Shiya. If she were still here, she would already be old enough to begin primary school. Would she have stood in the station with a little schoolbag on her back and two small braids, asking, "Daddy, is Beijing far?"

He closed his eyes.

“Far,” he answered in his heart. “But Daddy must go.”

When the bus pulled out of Qianzhou, his mother Zhao Youlan was still standing by the roadside. One hand covered her mouth, the other gently waved toward the window. Ma Cunhui stood beside her, his back slightly bent, not much expression visible on his face. Only the hand gripping the old cloth bundle was clenched very tightly.

Rende looked out the window at his hometown slowly retreating behind him. The pain that had knotted in his chest for years still had not dispersed. The pain of losing his daughter would not lessen because he was going to study, nor would the wound of divorce heal because he was traveling far. Jiawen, in the end, did not come to see him off. She only asked someone to bring him one sentence: “Take care.” Two words, light as wind, yet heavy as a farewell that a lifetime could not finish speaking.

Rende placed that note inside the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon.

He did not blame her.

Some people can only accompany you for one stretch of road. Even if the love was once very deep, they may still part before the broken bridge of fate. Jiawen would return to her news stage and continue moving between language and power; he would go to Beijing, to stand again as a student before the gate of ancient medicine. Both of them had lost Shiya, and both of them, after loss, had to find a reason to keep living.

The bus went all the way toward Canton.

Outside the window, there were first the mountains, waters, and hot-spring town of Qianzhou; later, denser and denser factory buildings, billboards, toll stations, and streams of highway traffic. By the time they reached the West River, a

great bridge already flew across it. There was no longer a ferry. The mist over the river had not yet dispersed. Trucks, coaches, and small cars no longer lined up in long queues, while cargo ships still sounded low whistles. River wind, carrying the smell of diesel and water vapor, rushed through the window. Rende thought of many years ago, when he had brought Jiawen back to Qianzhou to hold their wedding banquet, and they had also traveled this road. At that time, they still had Shiya; the home was still whole. Though the road ahead was busy, it had light.

Now the same river, the same crossing, seemed separated by an entire lifetime.

When he arrived in Canton, the sky was already dark. Rende did not return to the old home, but found a small inn near the railway station. Early the next morning, he dragged his luggage to Canton Railway Station. The square before the station was crowded with people. Those coming from the south and going north carried large and small bags. The loudspeaker repeatedly announced train numbers. In the distance, a green train slowly entered the station, and the end of the tracks seemed to stretch toward a long and unknown north.

He checked his ticket, boarded the train, found his sleeper berth, and placed his luggage.

When the train started, the shadows of Canton's buildings, the platform, and the billboards retreated little by little. Rende sat by the window with the Treatise on Cold Damage open on his knees. He read very slowly, looking at one character after another. Those ancient clauses were not gentle; some were even hard as stone. Yet as he read, a strange calm unexpectedly arose in his heart.

When life has reached its extremity, if one can still learn again, then one has not been utterly defeated by fate.

He thought of the past ten years in the hospital, how he had not fought or competed, had been blamed by his wife, sighed over by his father-in-law, and spoken of by colleagues as politically unprogressive. Now he suddenly understood that perhaps he truly was not good at climbing official ranks, but he did not lack the heart to advance. His advancement was not in an office, not in a duty column, not in the titles on a name card, but before the patient's bed, in the depths of the medical Way, in his determination not to let Shiya's death become only a meaningless tragedy.

Fate had taken his daughter.

Taken his marriage.

Taken his simple faith in modern medicine.

But fate could not take away his heart that still wished to seek.

The train traveled north.

Outside the window, the moist green of Lingnan gradually became the vastness of the Jianghuai Plain. Farther north, the wind grew harder, and the sky higher. Rende read, pondered, and occasionally closed his eyes in the swaying carriage. At night, the sound of the rails struck the darkness again and again, like an ancient wooden fish, and also like fate reminding him: the road is still long; you cannot stop.

When he arrived in Beijing, it was already evening.

The early-winter wind of the north rushed against his face, dry and cold, clear and bracing, like a hand slapping his cheek. Rende dragged his luggage out of the station. In the distance, city lights joined into a single expanse. Suddenly he felt like a new student approaching middle age, carrying a body full of wounds to the gate of an unfamiliar academy.

There were no flowers, no applause, no family waiting to greet him.

Only wind, lights, and a road that had just begun.

Standing in the night, he said softly, “Shiya, Daddy will not fall.”

After saying this, he lifted his luggage and walked forward.

The gate of Beijing University of Chinese Medicine waited quietly for him in the cold wind. It was not a shelter, but another mountain. The mountain was high and the road far; the classics were difficult, and the medical Way long. But in Ma Rende’s heart there was already a resolute conviction:

He would refine the pain of loss into a fire for saving people.

He would open another eye beyond Western medicine, seek again a living pulse within Chinese medicine, and in the coldest place of fate, for himself and also for those still struggling on hospital beds, light a lamp once more.



CHAPTER 61

IN THE WEST THERE ARE ROADS TO WALK THE WORLD

Now, after Master Jichan of Heavenly Temple entered nirvana, the atmosphere in the mountain changed day by day.

When Jichan was alive, the temple was poor, poor in a clean and honest way. The mountain gate was old, moss grew on the stone steps, the tile bowls in the refectory had chipped rims, the paper windows of the monks' quarters let in winter wind, and when pilgrims came, there was no more than one stick of incense and one cup of plain tea. Yet in those days, as soon as a person stepped through the mountain gate, the heart naturally lowered itself. Pine wind passed through the halls, bell sounds entered the clouds, and the old monk, in a worn robe, sat on his meditation cushion with thin, clear brows and few words; yet he made people feel that their dusty minds had paused a little. The couplet on the mountain gate—

If you listen with the ear, you will never understand;

Only where the eye hears sound will you begin to know

—had been carved in stone for many years. Wind and rain had worn it down, and the characters were somewhat dim, yet because of that they seemed even more profound and secluded.

Once Jichan was gone, the temple seemed to have lost its central beam.

By rights, the eldest disciple, Master Huikong, should have taken charge of the monastery. Huikong was sparing of speech, upright by nature, and well rooted in scripture recitation and the keeping of precepts. He was not good at currying favor, did not know how to write attractive reports, and did not know how to move among the various county departments. When people asked him how the temple should prosper in the future, he only said, "A place of practice must first have the Way. Incense offerings will have their own incense offerings." Under Jichan, such words sounded proper and fundamental; in the new times, they sounded like failure to appreciate favor.

The second disciple, Huiyi, was different.

Master Huiyi had a round face, a pleasant voice, and when he met people he smiled first, joining his palms at just the right moment. He knew how to speak with local cadres, and also how to speak with merchants. In recent years, as tourism had gradually flourished after reform and opening, Immortal Turtle Mountain had been included in the county's scenic development plan, hot-spring hotels had risen at the foot of the mountain, and visitors had increased. Some people came to persuade the temple: the monastery too must develop, must repair halls, pave roads, receive pilgrims, and build tourism-related facilities. When Huikong heard this, he only frowned. "Repairing halls is acceptable, and paving roads is acceptable. Incense offerings should follow conditions. But how can one sell tickets for entry into a temple?"

Huiyi smiled and said, "Elder Brother, the times are different now. Without money, how are the Buddha images to be repaired? How are leaking roofs to be fixed? How are the monks to be supported? You are not wrong to keep the pure rules, but pure rules cannot be eaten as rice."

Huikong said, "A monastery of the ten directions is supported by the ten directions. If the mountain gate becomes a ticket booth and the Buddha hall becomes a marketplace, then after some time it will no longer be a temple, but a shopfront."

When these words reached certain ears, they became "not supporting development" and "not cooperating with work." Small meetings were held in the temple one after another, and people from the county's religious, tourism, and cultural departments also came up the mountain. Huiyi always greeted them with a smiling face, pouring tea and offering water, and his words were rounded: "Elder Brother's cultivation is good; it is only that his temperament is too straight. For the temple to develop, it must also obey the overall situation." Gradually, the keys to the mountain gate, the account books, the incense-offering records, and the contacts with construction teams all fell into Huiyi's hands.

In the end, Huikong was forced to leave.

That morning, there was fog in the mountain. Huikong carried only one old bag, inside it two gray cloth monk robes, a copy of the Diamond Sutra, and a string of prayer beads he had used for many years. He did not argue with anyone, nor did he file a complaint with the county. He only made three prostrations before the Mahavira Hall, then knelt for a long time before the pagoda of Master Jichan. Pine needles fell upon his shoulders, and he did not brush them away. When he left, a young novice ran after him crying, "Great Uncle-Master, where are you going?"

Huikong touched his head. "To a place where there is bell sound."

Only later did everyone learn that he had gone to Zhengyang Temple in Shaoguan and stayed there alone.

Zhengyang Temple was a Chan monastery, ancient cypresses rising thickly, the waters of Caoxi river flowing long. There, Huikong was only an ordinary monk, living with the assembly through morning bells and evening drums, eating with the others in the refectory, fighting for neither name nor position. Some said he had been defeated; others said he had been liberated. But from that day onward, Heavenly Temple lost a current of cold, upright clarity, like a well covered with wooden planks, from which no one could again hear the sound of water in the depths.

After Huiyi became abbot, the temple did indeed “prosper.”

First, a ticket booth was erected outside the mountain gate, red background and white characters reading: Heavenly Temple Scenic Area Tickets. The ticket sellers wore matching uniforms, ticket holders hanging from their waists, and whenever they saw pilgrims, they asked, “How many?” Along the stone steps, stalls appeared, selling incense and candles, protective talismans, blessed bead bracelets, Guanyin pendants, God of Wealth statues, safety locks, and lotus lamps. Later still, the open ground outside the temple was rented to merchants. Some opened vegetarian restaurants, some sold mountain products, and some sold tea and pastries said to have been “offered before the Buddha.” Most glaring of all were the small shops whose shelves were lined with plastic Buddha statues, gilded Tathagatas, laughing Maitreyas, child-bestowing Guanyins, prices clearly pasted on their bases. The Buddha became merchandise, Bodhisattvas became merchandise, and the fears, illnesses, desire for wealth, and longing for children of sentient beings were all wrapped into red paper bags and sold item by item.

Some frowned, some sighed, and some said, “Only like this is it lively.”

Huiyi was very pleased to hear such words.

He began going down the mountain frequently for meetings, attending religious activities at the county and municipal level, wearing new robes, sitting on rostrums, and in his speeches saying “love the country and love the religion,” “serve society,” and “promote the integration of tourism and culture.” After several years, he not only sat firmly in the position of abbot of Heavenly Temple, but also became chairman of the local Buddhist Association. His name card now held more titles, and cars often stopped before the mountain gate. The simple guest hall of Master Jichan’s day now had a donor merit list hanging on the wall, a development planning map beside it, and a telephone and thick account books on the table. When the monks saw Huiyi, most called him “Chairman,” and fewer simply called him “Elder Brother.”

The temple seemed richer.

The halls were repainted in gold, the Buddha images regilded, the bell tower roofed with glazed tiles, and the mountain path paved with stone slabs. Yet when old pilgrims returned, they often felt that something was wrong. The incense was more flourishing, yet the heart was no longer still; the Buddha images were brighter, yet the light was shallower; the bell still rang, but after it sounded, its echo was scattered and broken by vendors’ cries, tourists’ laughter, and the clatter of restaurant stir-frying.

On the side of Muiyang Monastery, things also gradually grew cold.

After Perfected Master Zitian became advanced in age, her body declined day by day. She had always been

compassionate and serene. In her youth, she had guarded that small Daoist monastery, taken in the lonely and helpless Daoyin, and raised her from an orphaned girl into a delicate, steady little Daoist nun. When Perfected Master Zitian was alive, though Muyang Monastery was poor, it had someone to rely on. Mountain tea, blue lamps, scripture sound, the clear qi of grasses and trees—everything still resembled the old days. Daoyin swept, chanted, decocted medicine, and planted flowers every day. As she grew older, between her brows and eyes there was a clear beauty untouched by dust.

But Perfected Master Zitian also eventually departed.

On the day she entered stillness, the camellias outside Muyang Monastery were in full bloom, white flowers against green leaves, like little lamps. Daoyin knelt before the couch, holding the Perfected Master's withered hand, tears falling onto her robe. Perfected Master Zitian looked at her one last time, her voice weak yet still kind. "Child, the world is impermanent. If this place can no longer shelter you, then go where there is the Way. Do not resent, and do not be afraid. If there is fragrance in your heart, then wherever you go, you are before the Buddha."

After saying this, she closed her eyes and was gone.

From then on, Daoyin lost her protection.

Huiyi's attitude toward Muyang Monastery was cold. On the surface, he said that since they belonged to the same mountain, management should be unified. In truth, he wanted to incorporate the Daoist monastery into the Heavenly Temple tourist route. Someone proposed opening a "women's blessing-prayer area" beside Muyang Monastery, specializing in marriage talismans, child-seeking plaques, and peace sachets. When Daoyin heard this, her heart chilled. She said, "Muyang Monastery is a place of pure cultivation. It is

not suitable for this.” When this reached Huiyi’s ears, Huiyi only smiled faintly. “Little Junior Sister, when Perfected Master Zitian was alive, I respected her somewhat. But now you are only a young female practitioner. You should understand the larger situation. The development of a place of practice cannot be blocked by one sentence from you about pure cultivation.”

Daoyin lowered her head and said nothing.

She understood that she no longer had a root to lean upon. Jichan was gone, Perfected Master Zitian was gone, Huikong had gone far away, and Muyang Monastery was like a small lamp in wind and rain, liable to be blown out at any moment. She did not argue with Huiyi, nor did she wish to watch the place the Perfected Master had guarded all her life become a lively shopfront for seeking children and wealth. One night, she sat before the Buddha until the third watch, hearing drunk guests laughing in the restaurant outside the mountain, hearing the iron door of the incense shop clatter as it closed for the night, hearing the distant bell of Heavenly Temple wrapped in commercial clamor. Suddenly, in her heart, she made a decision.

She would leave.

Before she left, she quietly changed her Dharma name from “Daoyin” to “Daoxiang.” She still kept her original names “Miaoyin” and “Miaoxiang”, though. Heavenly Mountain had always been both Buddhist and Daoist; in times of turmoil and hardship, Daoist robes and monk robes were sometimes worn mixed together, and changing a name was not such a great matter.

Yin meant sound. The sound on this mountain had already been drowned by worldly clamor. Xiang meant fragrance: hidden, dispersing, not contending. From now on, she wished

not to be heard by others, but only that one strand of pure fragrance might remain in her heart.

She packed very simply. A few Daoist robes, a copy of the True Storehouse Scripture left by Perfected Master Zitian, an old wooden fish, a small packet of camellia seeds, and the little cloth pouch she had once kept hidden at the bottom of a box when she was young. The pouch had grown old, its stitches fine and close. It was the one she had used long ago when she and Ma Xinde boiled pine resin in the pine woods. There was no pine resin inside anymore, only a faint scent of tree gum, like a childhood very, very far away.

She thought of the Ma brothers.

The first she thought of was Rende. Back then, Rende had still been a youth, coming to Heavenly Temple with Zhao Youlan. His brows and eyes had been upright and clear, his words few, always standing quietly beside his mother. Later he became a doctor, and she heard that he had saved countless people in the provincial capital. Daoyin did not know how he had lived these years, but remembered that autumn when, in the courtyard of Muyang Monastery, he had bound the injured finger of a little novice who had fallen. His movements had been gentle and steady. Even then she felt that this boy would surely one day have affinity with suffering beings.

Then she thought of Xinde.

Little Xinde, with bright eyes and many words, who liked asking questions about everything, who said that when he grew up he wanted to build airplanes and go to Taiwan to bring relatives home. She and he had gathered pine resin in the old pine grove and simmered it slowly over a small fire in an earthen pot. When the rosin condensed, it was clear as amber, and Xinde was as happy as though he had obtained a

treasure. Later she gave him a small pouch of rosin, and he gave her hawthorn candy. Young people did not understand love; they only felt that the mountain wind was sweet and clear, that the pine woods were bright, and that there were many roads in the world not yet covered by dust.

Now everything had scattered.

Rende was in the provincial capital, and Xinde had long gone far away. The five Ma brothers had each run toward their own future; who would still remember the little Daoist nun in Muyang Monastery? Yet before leaving, as Daoxiang stood beneath the camellia tree, she could not help feeling a quiet sorrow. It was not the heat of unresolved worldly attachment, nor the clinging of romantic feeling. It was only an old shadow of human life suddenly rising in the wind of impermanence, leaving the heart faintly sour.

She made three prostrations before the small deity image of Muyang Monastery.

The first bow was to thank Perfected Master Zitian for the grace of raising her.

The second bow was to thank Master Jichan for his protection in former days.

The third bow was to thank the grasses and trees of this mountain, the pine wind, the camellias, and the old acquaintances of childhood, for having once given her a stretch of pure years.

Before dawn, Daoxiang descended the mountain.

She did not leave through the main gate, but went around the ticket booth and departed by the old herb-gathering path. The path was deep with grass, and dew soaked her monastic shoes. The shops below the mountain had not yet opened. The incense stalls were covered in oilcloth, the restaurant chimneys were cold, and the ticket-booth window was a dark

hole. She turned back and looked once at Heavenly Temple. She saw its halls and golden tiles faintly shining in the morning mist, but it was no longer the temple in her heart.

From far away came the first birdsong.

Daoxiang carried her small bundle and headed toward Shaoguan.

She believed that Buddhism and Daoism were connected. She wanted to go to Zhengyang Temple and find Elder Brother Huikong. She did not know whether Huikong would be willing to take her in, nor whether a helpless female practitioner could find a place to stand beside such a great monastery. But in her heart she knew that if she stayed at Muyang Monastery, she would only watch day after day as purity was sold, as the Dao and the Dharma were wrapped in price tags, and as she herself became an incense symbol for others to view.

Rather than that, it was better to travel far.

The mountain road gradually stretched behind her, and the morning fog slowly opened. Daoxiang walked on, the old cloth pouch in her sleeve lightly touching her wrist, as though it still carried the fragrance of pine resin from her youth. She softly recited the name of Great Compassion, tears in her eyes, yet she did not turn back.

From then on, Muyang Monastery had one less Daoyin.

And in the world, there was one more wandering Daoxiang.



CHAPTER 62

IN THE EAST THERE IS FEELING KEPT WITHIN THE HEART

Zhengyang Temple, too, was not the pure place she had imagined.

When Daoxiang first arrived at the sacred birthplace of Zen, it was late spring in Lingnan. Ancient trees rose dense and dark, the stream flowed over stones, incense smoke curled before the Sixth Patriarch Hall, and the distant mountains were blue-black like ink. She had once believed that upon reaching the ancestral court, her heart would be able to settle. When Elder Brother Huikong saw her come from so far away, his eyes first showed surprise, then he gave a long sigh. "You too have left the mountain."

Daoxiang lowered her head and joined her palms. "Heavenly Temple is no longer the Heavenly Temple of old, and Muiyang Monastery can no longer contain me."

Huikong did not ask more. He only invited her to stay temporarily, and entrusted the women practitioners on the Daoist side to look after her.

But after less than a month, she understood that though the ancestral court was large, it too could not block the wind of the commodity economy.

Outside the mountain gate, incense shops stood one after another. Tour groups came by the busload. Guides held little flags and spoke of the Sixth Patriarch Huineng; tourists raised cameras and photographed halls and Buddha images. Some burned great incense sticks, some prayed for wealth, and

some treated the Dharma as a piece of local color at a tourist site. Inside the temple, there were still true practitioners, still morning bells and evening drums, still communal meals and chanting. But human affairs were complicated, rules severe, and incense offerings, relationships, management, reputation, and money could not be avoided. Though Huikong had taken lodging there, he was merely residing in one corner and could not truly help her settle.

One evening, Daoxiang and Huikong spoke beside Caoxi Stream near the temple.

The stream was clear and bright, reflecting the sunset glow, and bamboo shadows swayed upon the water.

Huikong said, “Daoxiang, there is still a road in your heart.”

Daoxiang was slightly startled. “How does Elder Brother know?”

Huikong looked at the water. “A person who truly wishes to stay will let her eyes fall on what is before her. Your eyes often look toward the distance.”

Daoxiang was silent for a long time before she said, “I want to go to Mount Tiantai. I have heard that there is a platform there for bowing to the Śūraṅgama Sūtra. Since childhood I have read the Śūraṅgama, and I have always felt that within that scripture there is a sword, able to illuminate demons, and also to illuminate oneself. In today’s world, the Buddhist gate is stained, and human hearts are stained too. I want to go there and bow.”

Huikong nodded. “Go. If the heart is not at peace, wherever one stays, one is still a guest.”

And so Daoxiang set out again.

She went north from Southern Yue, turning and transferring until she reached Mount Tiantai in Zhejiang. The

wind of Mount Tiantai was different from Lingnan. Lingnan was damp and soft, the mountains thickly green; Mount Tiantai was clear and steep, clouds and mist wrapped around the peaks, the sound of streams was cold, and pine branches were like brushes. She paid respects around Guoqing Temple and then found the scripture-bowing platform said to be connected with the Śūraṅgama. That day there was light rain in the mountain. The stone steps were slippery, and moss grew in the cracks. Daoxiang knelt before the stone, her forehead touching the ground, and felt that years of wandering, the dispersal of teachers, the corruption of temples, and the distant fading of old acquaintances all surged into her heart at once.

She murmured, "May I not be turned by worldly dust. May I not be taken by suffering."

But Tiantai was not a place where she could remain long either.

There was a small temple nearby willing to let her stay for a time, and at first it was peaceful enough. Each day she swept the courtyard, cooked porridge, chanted scripture, and poured tea for pilgrims. But after several months, human affairs arose there too. Some disliked that her origins were unclear; some said it was inconvenient for a female practitioner to stay too long; some hinted that she should help the temple receive pilgrims, persuade people to add merit offerings, and sell some blessed objects. Daoxiang was unwilling, and so she was gradually treated coldly. There was less rice, lamp oil was not given, and at night someone would deliberately cough and walk outside her room. In the end, the person in charge spoke plainly: "You had better seek another place. Our temple is small; Buddhism and Daoism

are not in accord, and we cannot house such a Bodhisattva as you.”

Hearing this, Daoxiang only packed her small bundle and joined her palms in thanks.

She did not cry.

Over these years, she had already understood that many places in the world are not without eaves; it is only that beneath the eaves there is no heart willing to shelter a person.

After leaving Tiantai, a farther thought arose in her heart: to go to Tibet.

That thought was like light emitted from distant snow mountains—cold, yet bright. She wanted to see the true Buddhist land in the heights, wanted to go to Lhasa, wanted to go to the Jokhang Temple, wanted to pour out the suffering of this life before Guanyin Bodhisattva. She knew the road was far, and she also knew that for a solitary Daoist nun to travel the world was full of danger. But she had nowhere to return to. Since there was nowhere to return, and since Buddhism and Daoism were connected, then she would go in the direction of the Buddha and Guanyin. She could no longer say clearly whether she was seeking Buddha or seeking the Dao.

At first, she could still ride buses.

The little money on her had come from what remained of old offerings Zhao Youlan had once given to Muyang Monastery, along with the meager offerings she had received for copying scriptures and performing small Buddhist services for others. She spent it sparingly, eating steamed buns and pickled vegetables, staying in the cheapest hostels, and more often sitting through the night in corners of bus stations. Along the way, the mountains and rivers grew more and

more open. The water fields of Jiangnan receded, hills rose and fell, and when she reached the southwest, the mountains suddenly became magnificent. Roads wound around gorges, and rivers roared in the depths. Clouds drifted at mid-mountain, and the rooftops of villages emerged from the mist, as though floating at the edge of the sky.

She often joined her palms by the bus window.

When she first saw the snow line appear, she thought: perhaps the Buddhist land is just beyond the clouds.

But the money was soon exhausted.

For one stretch of road, she could only get down and walk. Her cloth shoes wore through; blisters rose on the soles of her feet, then burst and hardened into calluses. By day she walked mountain roads; by night she borrowed shelter in ruined temples at village entrances, abandoned schools, and roadside tea sheds. Some gave her a bowl of hot water, some half a piece of steamed bread, and some stared at her face with eyes that made her shiver. She pressed her Daoist kerchief low, held her gray cloth bundle against her chest, and even when she slept at night, she did not dare sleep deeply. The sacred name of Guanyin became the only lamp in her heart.

“Namo Greatly Compassionate Guanyin Bodhisattva.”

Sound after sound, with each footstep westward.

That day, she was walking along a great road toward the west.

On both sides were high mountains. On the slopes were fields that looked like barley, and in the distance cloud shadows pressed against the peaks. The sky was very blue, so blue it was almost without mercy. There were not many vehicles on the road. Occasionally a freight truck roared past, raising a cloud of dust. Daoxiang had already walked for

most of the day, her throat dry and painful. She stood by the roadside for a long while and finally gathered her courage, raising her hand to an old van slowly approaching.

The van stopped.

Inside were a middle-aged man and woman. The man was in his forties, dark-faced, revealing yellowed teeth when he smiled. The woman was also around forty, wearing an old floral shirt, her hair tied tightly, her face piled with warmth.

"Master, where are you going?" the woman leaned out and asked.

Daoxiang joined her palms. "Westward. If you can take me any distance, that is enough."

The man laughed. "Perfect. We're also going to the town ahead. Get in. A renunciant's life is not easy. We won't take money from you."

Warmth rose in Daoxiang's heart, but also some caution. She first looked into the vehicle. The back seat was piled with sacks and old bedding, and there was no one else. The woman hurriedly got out and opened the door for her. "Ah, Master, look, your feet are worn raw from walking. Our family believes in Buddha too. Giving you a ride counts as forming good affinity."

"Many thanks," Daoxiang said softly.

The van began moving, and the woman spoke with her all along the way.

"Where is Master from?"

"The Southern Mountains."

"Traveling alone?"

"Yes."

"Going to Tibet?"

Daoxiang paused, then nodded.

The woman clicked her tongue and sighed. "You have resolve. These days, there are few true cultivators like you. In our village ahead, there is also a little temple, empty and with no one living there. If Master does not dislike it, you can rest there for a night and continue tomorrow. We will cook you a hot meal."

These words were warm, yet Daoxiang's heart suddenly stirred.

She noticed that the van was no longer following the main road, but had turned at a fork onto a smaller road. The road became narrower and narrower; the shadows of trees on both sides grew dense, yet there was no lively village to be seen. She asked, "Are we not going to the town?"

The man glanced at her in the rearview mirror and smiled. "Shortcut. We'll go back to the village first to get something, then send you out."

The woman also added, "Master, don't worry. We are not going to eat you."

Daoxiang lowered her eyes, her fingers quietly gripping her prayer beads.

The van finally stopped at the edge of an old village. The village was dilapidated, earthen walls mottled, several houses half collapsed, a thin dog tied at the door. The sky had already grown dark, and wind passing through the empty alley carried a damp, moldy smell. The man pulled open the van door. "We're here. Come down and drink some water."

Daoxiang did not immediately get out.

The smile on the woman's face faded a little. "Master, what's wrong? Are you afraid of us?"

Daoxiang joined her palms. "The sky is almost dark. I still wish to reach the town and find lodging."

The man snorted. "The town is far away. Since you're already here, what is there to fear about staying one night? You are a renunciant—are you still afraid of people?"

He reached out to pull her bundle.

Daoxiang's heart tightened. She turned aside and avoided him, her voice still steady. "Inside are scriptures. There is no need to trouble you, layman."

The man's face darkened.

But the woman changed back into a smile. "Master, don't overthink. I see you are a young woman, and it is not easy for you to travel. We are only kind-hearted. Look at how young you are. Why be a Daoist nun? There are families willing to pay money to marry a daughter-in-law. Wouldn't life be better than sleeping in wind and eating in dew?"

This sentence crawled up Daoxiang's back like a cold snake.

At last she understood that she had not met kind people.

In that instant, she did not cry, nor did she shout. She knew that in a deserted village, with night falling, one man and one woman before her, panic would make her still more vulnerable. She lowered her head and recited the Buddha's name once, as though suddenly yielding. "What you say is also true, laywoman. I have walked all day and would indeed like to relieve myself and wash my face. May I use the privy behind the house?"

The woman looked at the man.

The man frowned. "Don't play tricks."

Daoxiang took a scripture from her bundle and placed it on the van seat, then pressed the little cloth pouch on top of it, deliberately showing reluctance. "The scripture is here. I will not leave."

Seeing that her bundle was still there, the woman relaxed somewhat and pointed behind the house. "Be quick."

When Daoxiang got out of the van, her legs were a little weak, but she forced herself not to reveal panic. She went around to the back of the house. There indeed was a broken privy. Once inside, she immediately crawled out through a half-collapsed earthen wall at the rear. Beyond the wall was a wasteland of tall grass, half the height of a person. She lowered her body and crawled through the grass. Thorns cut the backs of her hands, muddy water covered her Daoist robe, and she did not even dare feel the pain.

Before long, the woman's call came from the front of the house. "Master? Master!"

Then came the man's curses. "Damn it, she ran!"

The dog suddenly began barking.

Daoxiang ran with all her strength. The sky had gone completely dark, and at the end of the wasteland there was a dry ditch. She jumped down. A sharp pain shot through her ankle, and she nearly fell, but she did not dare stop. Behind her, flashlight beams shook wildly, with the man's heavy breathing and curses. She crawled into a patch of corn beside the ditch and lay flat on the ground, motionless. The mud touched her face, cold. She heard her own heartbeat thudding beside her ear like a drum.

A flashlight beam swept past not far away.

The man cursed. "How far can a Daoist nun run? Search!"

The woman's voice was shrill. "Her bundle is still in the van. Catch her!"

Daoxiang squeezed her eyes shut, her lips moving without sound.

"Guanyin Bodhisattva, savior from suffering and calamity."

Night wind passed through the corn leaves with a rustling sound. Perhaps because the night was dark, perhaps because the terrain was complicated, perhaps because the Bodhisattva protected her, the two searched for a long time, then finally went off cursing. Daoxiang remained lying there for a long while, until only the sound of insects remained around her, and only then slowly climbed up.

She did not go back for her bundle.

Scriptures, clothing, camellia seeds, the old cloth pouch—all were lost.

She had only the Daoist robe on her body, a string of prayer beads, and a heart still beating.

That night, she walked a long way along the ditch. Her ankle swelled, and each step hurt. The moon emerged from behind the clouds, shining upon the distant ridge, silver-white and cold. The earth was so beautiful, the mountains and rivers so vast, the stars in the sky like countless lamps, yet hidden in the human world were such black traps. Daoxiang suddenly wanted to cry, but could not. If tears came, she feared she would collapse.

She walked until the sky was nearly bright, then sat beneath a small bridge by the roadside.

Under the bridge was a stream, cold and clear. She cupped water in her hands and washed her face. When the water touched the cuts on the backs of her hands, pain stung through them. She lowered her head and saw her reflection in the stream: mud on her face, her Daoist robe torn, a few strands of hair loosened, yet her eyes were still bright. This was not the little Daoist nun of Muyang Monastery, white as a lotus; nor was it Daoyin, quietly sorrowing beneath the camellia tree at Heavenly Temple. This was a hard-fated woman who had escaped the mouth of a tiger, a person who,

amid the dangers and evils of the world, still refused to hand over her heart.

She joined her palms and bowed toward the eastern sky that was slowly brightening.

“Laojun, Buddha, Guanyin Bodhisattva—I am still alive.”

After saying this, she finally wept.

Her tears fell onto the stones by the stream and were soon dried by the morning wind.

After daybreak, a truck hauling timber passed by. The driver was a silent Tibetan man. Seeing her battered condition, he stopped the vehicle and asked, “Master, can you no longer walk?”

Daoxiang lifted her head and looked at him, fear still in her eyes.

The driver did not come close. He only placed a steamed bun and a bottle of water on the roadside from a distance. “No money. Take them slowly.”

After saying this, he stepped back a few paces and pointed at the truck bed. “I am going to the county ahead. If you are willing to ride, sit in the back. If you are not willing, I will not force you.”

This carefulness instead made Daoxiang’s heart ache.

She joined her palms. “Many thanks, layman.”

The truck bed was piled with timber, and the ride was violently bumpy, yet sitting there, she felt more secure than in any guest room. Mountain wind scraped past her ears, and in the distance the snow peaks gradually revealed white tips. Sunlight shone upon the snow, like a great bright lamp before the Buddha.

Daoxiang hugged her knees, the prayer beads wrapped around her wrist.

Her bundle was lost, the old cloth pouch was lost, the scent of pine resin was also lost. The name Daoyin seemed to have completely receded in that wasteland of grass the previous night. But the Buddha's name in her heart was not lost. Guanyin was not lost. That one strand of pure fragrance that refused to bow its head to evil people, refused to surrender to fate, was not lost either.

The road was still long.

Tibet remained far away.

And she, a solitary wandering Daoist nun, carrying a body full of wounds, still went west. The mountains and rivers were magnificent; human hearts were perilous. The Buddhist land was distant; the mud beneath her feet was real. But as long as there remained one sound of the Buddha's name in her heart, she believed that no matter how long the night, it would in the end be pierced by the first ray of light upon the snow mountains.



CHAPTER 63

THE PILGRIM'S ROAD TO TIBET

When Daoxiang arrived in Tibet, she no longer resembled the little Daoist nun of Muyang Monastery, once pure and white as a lotus.

She had grown much thinner. Her face had been darkened slightly by the wind of the plateau, her lips were often cracked, and her Daoist robe was old and torn, the cuffs worn into fuzz. Yet her eyes had become stiller, still as the morning light not yet risen behind snow mountains. The wind and frost along the road, the deception, danger, hunger, cold, and long trudging had not crushed her. Instead, they had worn away layer after layer of those soft and delicate things about her, leaving only a bone that refused to break.

The first person to notice her hands was an elderly Tibetan monastic.

It was in a temple halfway up a mountain. The temple was not large: white walls, red windows, prayer flags snapping fiercely on the roof. In the morning, the distant snow peaks shone golden beneath the sunlight; nearby, yaks moved slowly across the hillside. The air was cold and thin, so that even breathing seemed like the recitation of a soundless mantra. Daoxiang entered the hall with the others to bow before the Buddha. When she joined her palms, her sleeves slipped slightly, revealing old marks on the backs of her hands and wrists.

They were not ordinary scars.

On each hand there were twenty-four clear round marks, scattered yet orderly, like a string of silent flames long extinguished, leaving only ashes in the skin. They were marks she had left in her early years when she made vows at Heavenly Temple. At that time, she was still young, her heart entirely sincere. Seeing the temple atmosphere gradually grow turbid, her teachers aging, and the world overturning, she secretly made vows before the Buddha, using the suffering of burning incense to warn and discipline herself. In those days, her hands first burned with pain, then became red and swollen, and later pustules formed. At night, the pain made sleep difficult. She did not dare worry Perfected Master Zitian, and only washed them with clear water, silently enduring. Only after more than half a year did the pain and itching slowly subside, but the scars remained forever.

When the old monastic saw them, his gaze changed slightly.

He neither praised nor reproached her. He only asked gently, "They must have hurt for a long time?"

Daoxiang lowered her head. "They hurt. Later, they stopped hurting."

The elder looked at her. "Pain on the body will pass. If the vow in the heart is real, it will not pass."

These words made Daoxiang's eyes grow hot.

She thought again of the Lotus Sutra she had written in blood.

That was an even earlier matter. When she was at Muyang Monastery, her teacher had spoken of the Lotus that leads to Buddhahood and the Śūraṅgama that opens wisdom. The Śūraṅgama Sutra was like a sword, like a lamp, like a demon-revealing mirror, and also like armor for protection. But she felt that attaining Buddhahood and the Way was still more

important, and so, with utmost sincerity, she pricked her finger, mixed blood with ink, and copied the Lotus Sutra stroke by stroke. The scripture was long, with many characters. Each day after morning practice she copied; in the afternoon she copied; beneath the night lamp she copied. At first her finger hurt, later it grew numb. Sometimes, when the blood color became pale and the writing faint, she would stop, join her palms, recite the Buddha's name, and wait for her mind and breath to steady before continuing. After several months, the entire scroll was finally completed. The writing could not be called that of a master, yet it was upright and pure, line after line, like a road laid out from within her heart.

Those sufferings had not been for others to see.

Yet after she reached Tibet, it was precisely these traces that allowed pure monastics to see that she was not an ordinary wanderer.

A Han Chinese nun, entering Tibet alone, ragged in clothing and difficult to identify in origin, could easily have been refused at the door. But the elders in the temple saw the vow scars on her hands, saw that when she spoke of the Lotus Sutra her gaze was not floating, saw that when she bowed to the Buddha her forehead touched the ground and she rose without sound. They knew that although this woman's fate was bitter, her heart was true. She had not come seeking strange encounters, nor to freeload meals, nor to take the Buddhist gate as a shelter. She was someone whom the world had forced to the end of the road, yet who still walked step by step in the direction of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

And so she was able to stay temporarily at several temples to study and practice.

During those days, the mountains and rivers of Tibet were like an open scripture. The sky was extremely high, the clouds extremely low, and the snow mountains stood silently in the distance, as though the Buddhas had lowered their eyes. In the morning, juniper smoke rose from the temple roofs, the fragrance of cypress branches scattering on the wind, while Tibetans turned prayer wheels and circled the temple again and again. Old women touched their foreheads to the ground in long prostrations, their rough palms polished bright; children followed behind their mothers, little faces reddened by the wind, also learning to join their palms. Yak bells came from the hillside, eagles circled in the blue sky, and prayer flags sent five-colored vow-power toward the distance.

Daoxiang often stood at the temple gate and watched them.

She had seen the incense offerings of Lingnan, and she had also seen the lively temples after commercialization. There, people prayed for wealth, children, and official luck; price tags were pasted beneath Buddha images, and donation boxes were set before Bodhisattvas. But on the plateau, she saw another kind of faith. Tibetans might not necessarily know characters, nor understand many scriptural meanings, yet when they made long prostrations, their whole bodies lowered toward the earth with a devotion so simple it startled the heart. It was as though all the bitterness, illness, poverty, wind, snow, and death of a lifetime could, through bow after bow, be handed over to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Daoxiang learned Tibetan chants at the monastery and listened to old lamas speak of impermanence, compassion, and emptiness. The language did not fully pass through to

her, and others slowly explained for her. She listened with great attention. Sometimes, when she heard that “life is like dream, illusion, bubble, and shadow,” she would think of the old mountain gate of Heavenly Temple, Perfected Master Zitian, Huikong going far away, and the scriptures and old cloth pouch she had lost in that deserted village. Everything in the past truly seemed like a dream, yet the pain inside the dream had been so real.

Once, an old lama asked her, “You have suffered much. Is there hatred in your heart?”

Daoxiang was silent for a long time, then said, “There was. Later I felt that hatred too is a rope. It binds oneself.”

“Then what do you seek now?”

Daoxiang looked toward the distant snow mountains and said softly, “I seek that my heart not retreat. I seek that in the future, if I meet suffering people, I can still give rise to compassion, not bitterness.”

The old lama nodded and did not speak for a long while.

More than two months of study and practice was not long, but it was like a baptism upon the plateau. She recited scriptures in the thin, cold air, sat in meditation beneath butter lamps, swept the courtyard on mornings after snow, and listened at night to wind blowing through prayer flags. The old scars on her hands were no longer merely traces of pain, but reminders: if vow-power is only spoken aloud, it will eventually be scattered by the wind; if vow-power has once passed through flesh and blood, then in the coldest and darkest places to come, it will help a person hold on to one breath.

When she left the last temple, the elder gave her an old khata.

It was not new. Its corners were somewhat worn, yet it was white and clean. The elder said, "You came from the south, and you are going south again. Remember: the Buddha is not only in the snow mountains. He is also on the road by which you return to the human world."

Daoxiang received it with both hands and bowed down in full prostration.

Standing at the mountain pass, she looked back. The white walls of the temple were quiet as lotuses in the sunlight; the snow peaks were wordless at the edge of the sky; wind blew the prayer flags, their five colors like waves. She suddenly felt that although she had no home, no temple, and no teacher to shelter her, she was not without possessions.

She had old scars covering both hands.

She had once written a Lotus Sutra in blood.

She had the Buddha and Guanyin in her heart.

And after walking through the dangers of the human world, she still had one strand of pure fragrance that had not gone out.

Daoxiang did not turn back.

The snow mountains of Tibet sent her farther west. Following the direction that led toward the Buddha's native land, she transferred and wandered along the way, and finally arrived in Nepal. That day, she stood at a mountain pass and looked back. Behind her were the wind and snow of the plateau; before her was the warm, humid air of South Asia. The Himalayas were like an enormous white screen separating two worlds. On that side of the mountains were the cold, desolation, long roads, and prayer flags she had passed through. On this side was another Buddhist land:

ancient, crowded, disorderly, yet everywhere with the eyes of deities.

The sky of Nepal was very low, and cloud shadows often pressed over the towns. In the Kathmandu Valley, stupas, palaces, red-brick houses, carved wooden windows, and narrow lanes were woven together. On the streets, cows walked slowly, dogs lay before temples basking in the sun, children ran barefoot, and women held trays of flowers to offer to the Buddha. The air mingled the smells of sandalwood, dust, curry, oil lamps, cow dung, and mud after rain. In the distance, the golden tops of stupas flashed beneath the sunlight; prayer wheels were pushed by hand after hand; flocks of pigeons suddenly rose from the square, the sound of their wings like scripture pages softly turning.

She first went to the Boudha Stupa.

That enormous white stupa stood quietly at the center of the square, Buddha eyes looking down in all directions, as though they had seen through poverty and wealth, samsara, sorrow and joy, and all lost roads in the human world. Tibetans, Nepalese, European and American travelers, Indian merchants, Han Chinese pilgrims—everyone circled the stupa again and again. Some held prayer beads and murmured mantras; some pushed elderly relatives slowly forward; some lit butter lamps one by one; some pressed their foreheads to the ground in long bows. Standing among the crowd, Daoxiang suddenly felt that the wounds, hunger, fear, and cold of her journey had all been seen by those Buddha eyes.

She joined her palms, lowered her head, and walked around the stupa.

In the first circle, she thought of Perfected Master Zitian.

In the second circle, she thought of Master Jichan.

In the third circle, she thought of Heavenly Temple's mountain gate, the camellias of Muyang Monastery, the little cloth pouch in the pine woods, and all those old acquaintances already scattered throughout the human world.

When she reached the seventh circle, she suddenly saw a Chinese woman standing beside the stupa, holding offering lamps in her hands. The woman seemed to be in her forties and spoke Mandarin with a Guangdong accent. She stared at Daoxiang for quite a while, then finally came closer and asked, "Master, are you from China?"

Daoxiang joined her palms. "From Lingnan."

The woman's eyes lit up. "Ah, then you are truly one of our own. Are you alone?"

"Alone."

"Where are you staying?"

Daoxiang lowered her head slightly. "Where conditions allow."

As soon as those words came out, the woman understood most of it. She sighed. "When one is traveling outside, relying on conditions still needs some roof. We run a small guesthouse near the stupa. Most of our guests are Chinese pilgrims and backpackers. If you do not mind that it is simple, come rest at my place tonight. I won't charge you."

Daoxiang had wanted to decline, but the woman had already reached out to take her small bundle. "Do not be afraid. My surname is Liang. I am from Panyu in Canton. A young female master like you, walking all the way here—it is not easy. Before the Buddha, could I still deceive you?"

When Daoxiang heard the word "Canton," her heart stirred.

Canton was the city of Rende and Jiawen, the city of hospitals, kapok flowers, rainy nights, pain, and rupture. She did not ask more, only thanked her softly.

Sister Liang's little guesthouse was in a narrow lane outside the stupa. A Chinese sign hung at the entrance: Peace Guesthouse. Downstairs, they sold tea, instant noodles, incense, candles, and postcards. On the walls were photographs of Lhasa, Mount Wutai, Mount Emei, and Mount Putuo. Several Chinese guests sat together drinking tea. Seeing Sister Liang bring back a young nun, they all raised their heads.

"This is a Master from China," Sister Liang said. "She will stay with us tonight."

A middle-aged man with a Sichuan accent immediately stood and joined his palms. "Greetings, Master."

Daoxiang returned the gesture.

Someone poured her hot tea, someone took out biscuits, and someone asked where she had come from and which temples she had visited. Daoxiang only said simply that she had come from Lingnan, passed through Tibet, and had come to pay respects at the sacred places of the Buddha. She did not speak of being deceived and nearly harmed, nor of the suffering behind the old scars on her hands. But when she sat down to drink tea, her sleeve opened slightly, and someone saw the incense scars on her hands and could not help drawing in a breath.

"Master, this is..."

Daoxiang gently pulled her sleeve down. "Only an old vow."

The tea table suddenly grew quiet.

Sister Liang's gaze toward her also changed. Before, it had been the pity of someone meeting a fellow townsman; now

there was an added measure of respect. She said softly, "These days, there are not many people truly willing to cultivate like this."

Daoxiang lowered her eyes. "I have not cultivated well. I am only a hard-fated person asking the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to look after me."

That night, she slept in a small room on the top floor of the guesthouse. Outside the window, she could see the golden top of the stupa. At night, rings of butter lamps shone, and in the distance someone chanted scripture, the voice deep, as though coming from within the earth. She lay on the plank bed; the bedding beneath her was thin, yet it was more secure than many nights spent sleeping in wind and dew. Waking in the middle of the night, she saw moonlight fall upon the wall and suddenly felt like a leaf blown ten thousand li by the wind, finally resting for a while in the palm of a Buddha.

After that, she traveled among the Buddhist sites of Nepal.

She went to Patan and saw the carved wooden deities and golden temples in the ancient square. She went to Swayambhu, climbed the long stone steps, watched monkeys leap beside the stupa, and saw the city of Kathmandu spread out in the mist. Later, she followed a group of Chinese pilgrims toward Lumbini. That was the place where the Buddha was said to have been born. The plains were open, tree shadows gentle, and the wind was unlike the sharp wind of the plateau; it carried the humidity of tropical grasses and trees. Beside Queen Maya's pool, lotus flowers bloomed quietly. Monastics from many countries wore robes of different colors and chanted scriptures in different languages, yet all lowered their heads beneath the same sky.

Daoxiang knelt for a long time in Lumbini Garden.

She thought: the Buddha too had once come into the human world as an infant. He too had a mother; he too experienced birth, old age, sickness, and death, and only then finally saw through the suffering of sentient beings. The Buddha was not a deity far away in the clouds. The Buddha too came from the human world. If a person who has walked out of suffering can illuminate suffering, then that is cultivation.

She lodged in guesthouses run by local Chinese. Some were Fujianese, some from Yunnan, some Guangdong people who had come to Nepal long ago to do tourism business. They sold tea, opened restaurants, worked as guides, and ran handicraft shops and inns. Many did not necessarily understand the Dharma deeply, yet toward a young nun who had come alone from far away, they naturally gave rise to respect. Someone offered her a bowl of vegetarian noodles, someone gave her an old blanket, someone asked her to recite a scripture for a sick mother, and someone quietly slipped her a little travel money.

Once, the Yunnan proprietress of a small restaurant brought her a bowl of hot porridge and said, “Master, please do not look down on it. We do business outside too, and it is bitter. Seeing you is like seeing the incense from the temple back home.”

Daoxiang joined her palms. “Laywoman, to have such a heart is already an offering.”

The proprietress sat down and sighed. “Offerings or not, I don’t understand. It is only that my son is studying in Kunming and is often ill. You look like someone who truly cultivates. Please recite one sentence of peace for him.”

Daoxiang then softly recited the sacred name of Guanyin. As the proprietress listened, her eyes reddened.

Another time, a young Chinese backpacker saw her circling the stupa day after day and could not help asking, “Master, you have walked so far. Do you really think the Buddha will protect you?”

Daoxiang looked at him and smiled slightly. “Protection does not necessarily mean keeping you from meeting suffering.”

The young man did not understand. “Then what is it?”

“It is that when you meet suffering, there is still a lamp in your heart, so that you do not lose yourself as well.”

The young man was silent for a long time. Finally, he joined his palms to her, though not quite properly.

In Nepal, the faith Daoxiang saw was more mixed than in China’s mountain temples, and also more primal. There was Mahayana, Vajrayana, Hindu temples, and folk deities. Before a small Buddha image at a street corner, some offered flowers, some lit lamps, some merely touched the stone image in passing before hurrying on. Poverty and holiness stood shoulder to shoulder. Dust fell on stupas, pigeon droppings fell on temple eaves, beggars sat beside offering lamps, and children played beneath prayer wheels. This place was not clean, yet it was devout; not orderly, yet full of life; not far from smoke and fire, yet within smoke and fire it preserved a heart turned toward the Buddha.

Daoxiang gradually understood that a Buddhist land was not a place without suffering.

A Buddhist land was a place where, within suffering, there were still people who believed in compassion.

She borrowed shelter in Chinese guesthouses, homestays, temple corridors, and small lofts in believers’ homes, living on occasional offerings. Sometimes for several days in a row she ate only dry flatbread and drank hot water; sometimes,

when she met kind people, she could have a steaming bowl of vegetarian noodles. She did not accumulate money, and she did not dare accumulate money. When she received a little offering, aside from keeping a small amount for the road, she often gave the rest to older people and children at the roadside who were poorer still. When Sister Liang saw this, she scolded her gently: "Master, you yourself have nowhere secure, and you still give to others?"

Daoxiang said, "I still have feet. I can still walk. They sit there and can no longer walk."

Sister Liang shook her head. "A person like you will suffer losses in this world."

Daoxiang smiled. "I already have. And I am still alive."

She said this calmly, yet it made Sister Liang's heart ache.

One evening, all the butter lamps around Boudha Stupa were lit. Wind blew from the valley, prayer flags fluttered in the dusk, and the Buddha eyes quietly watched all beings. Daoxiang sat beneath the stupa. The old scars on her hands were softened by lamplight, like a string of incense burns long extinguished yet still holding residual warmth.

Suddenly she felt that to have wandered here was not to be utterly without reliance.

She had had teachers, old temples, dangerous roads, and one night when she had nearly been swallowed by darkness. Now she also had these Chinese people in a foreign land, giving her a bowl of porridge, an old quilt, a sentence of "Master, take care" in a little guesthouse. The human world was dangerous, but it had never been entirely black. Evil people were like deep ditches; good people were like bridges. Stumbling and falling all the way, she had somehow relied on these bridges and reached the land where the Buddha had once been born.

Night deepened.

Daoxiang joined her palms and bowed toward the stupa.

She did not pray for peace, because she knew that in this life she probably would not have peace. Nor did she pray for wealth, status, fame, or for anyone to remember where she had come from. She only asked the Buddha and Guanyin to give her an unbroken heart, so that in long wandering, after seeing evil she would not become evil, after suffering pain she would not abandon compassion.

In the distance, the lights of the Chinese guesthouse came on.

At the mouth of the lane, Sister Liang called, “Master, come back for porridge!”

Daoxiang turned back and smiled faintly.

That voice, carrying the accent of Lingnan, passed through the dusk beneath the Nepalese stupa, and unexpectedly became a small lamp the human world had left for her.



CHAPTER 64

THE LONG ROAD OF PILGRIMAGE TO THE BUDDHA'S BIRTHPLACE

Daoxiang finally reached India.

After entering from Nepal, the sky seemed suddenly to lower. Dust rose along the roadside. Cars, ox carts, motorcycles, three-wheelers, crowds, and livestock all mixed together, and the shrill sound of horns seemed sharp enough to pierce the eardrums. In the air there was heat, smoke, the smell of rotting garbage, and also the mingled scents of spices, fried food, sweat, and burning incense. She had seen the purity of snow mountains in Tibet, and the devotion beneath stupas in Nepal. She had imagined that the Buddha's homeland, even if poor, should possess an ancient and solemn air. Yet when she truly set foot on this land, what she first felt was not solemnity, but chaos.

Beggars gathered in groups along the streets. Barefoot children chased passersby for money. Women sat in the dust holding infants. Old people were thin as handfuls of bone. Cows slowly chewed at something beside garbage heaps. Crows perched on electric wires, their black eyes coldly watching the human world. Dirty water pooled before guesthouse doors, flies coming and going. In the railway station, the crowd surged like a tide; some slept on the ground, some fought for seats, some shouted in argument. Holding her small bundle, Daoxiang stood among them and felt like a fallen leaf, at any moment liable to be trampled into the mud.

She went to the places where one should go for the Buddha.

Bodh Gaya, the place where, according to tradition, the Buddha attained enlightenment. The Mahabodhi Temple tower rose high. Beneath the Bodhi tree, monastics and believers from many countries sat quietly and chanted. Tibetan monks made long prostrations; Theravada monks wore yellow robes; European and American devotees closed their eyes in meditation; Han Chinese pilgrims burned incense and bowed. At that moment, Daoxiang was still moved. Beneath the tree she joined her palms, touched her forehead to the ground, and silently recited in her heart: The World-Honored One once sat here too, facing birth and death, affliction, demonic states, and the suffering of the human world, and finally attained awakening.

But not far beyond the temple gate was another world altogether.

Vendors crowded around to sell prayer beads, bronze statues, postcards, and so-called Bodhi leaves. Children stretched out their hands for money. Guides solicited visitors in various languages. Seeing that she was a Chinese nun, some shouted, "China? Chinese temple? Cheap room!" That bustle was not entirely evil, yet it carried a strained and excessive air of making a living, wrapping layer upon layer around the coolness of the sacred place. Daoxiang suddenly thought of the incense stalls, blessed bead bracelets, donation boxes, and restaurant oil smoke before the mountain gate of Heavenly Temple. So it turned out that all sacred places under heaven, once they fell into human desire, could hardly escape the fate of being bought and sold.

She went again to Sarnath.

That was where the Buddha first turned the Dharma wheel. Ruined stupas and ancient platforms stood amid level green grass, and deer ate quietly in the distance. Wind passed over the ruins, as though one could still hear the sound from more than two thousand years ago, when suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path were first taught. Daoxiang stood before the ruins for a long time. She thought that the first teaching the Buddha gave was not supernatural powers, not wealth, not long life, but suffering. The human world originally had suffering: the suffering of birth, old age, sickness, and death; the suffering of separation from what one loves; the suffering of meeting what one hates; the suffering of seeking and not obtaining. Had she not wandered to this point in life and tasted each of these sufferings one by one?

Yet even outside Sarnath, the sounds of bargaining continued without cease.

A boy selling small bronze Buddhas pestered her. When he saw her shake her head, he seized her sleeve and would not let go. Daoxiang gently pulled it back. First there was pleading in the boy's eyes, then something like resentment. She could not bear it, yet truly had no money, and could only join her palms and leave. Not far away, she discovered that the little change in her sleeve had disappeared.

The real robbery happened on the road to Kushinagar.

That evening, she came out of a station. The sky was yellowing, and dust had been dyed a dim red by the setting sun. Two young men followed her for a stretch. At first, she thought they were only taking the same road, but later the path grew more and more deserted, and her heart became alert. She quickened her steps, and the two quickened theirs. As she turned into a narrow lane, one of them suddenly

grabbed her small bundle from behind, while the other reached to snatch the cloth bag in her arms. Daoxiang held on with all her strength and cried out the Buddha's name, but was pushed to the ground.

Her palms were scraped raw, and her knees struck the stones so hard that the pain made her vision blacken.

By the time she climbed up, the men had already run far away.

Every bit of money she had was gone.

There had not been much in her small bundle to begin with: a few pieces of clothing, a little offering money, several sheets of paper, a spare string of prayer beads—all gone. She sat at the side of the lane, dust covering her Daoist robe, blood seeping from her palms. People nearby saw, but only glanced once before hurrying away. A tea seller said a few sentences in a language she could not understand; she did not know whether he was comforting her or driving her off. The sky gradually darkened, and the noise of the unfamiliar city pressed in from every side. Suddenly she felt that after walking all the way to the Buddha's homeland, she had not come closer to the Buddha; instead, she had seen more deeply the poverty, greed, and helplessness of the human world.

That night, she sat beneath the eaves outside a small temple until dawn.

No money, no lodging, no old bundle, no change of clothes. Only the string of prayer beads around her wrist remained; it was what she had gripped tightly when the bag was being snatched. She pressed the beads near the wound in her palm, and blood stained the wooden beads in one dark red line. She did not cry. She only watched the eastern sky whiten little by little.

When the first birdsong of morning sounded, she suddenly smiled.

It was not a joyful smile, but it carried a clarity after desolation.

She finally understood that she had always believed the farther west she went, the closer she would be to the Buddha. Heavenly Temple had become defiled, so she went to Nanhua; Nanhua was not pure, so she went to Tiantai; Tiantai could not shelter her, so she went to Tibet; after Tibet, she went to Nepal and India, to the places where the Buddha was born, awakened, taught, and entered nirvana. She had thought sacred places were steps rising higher and higher, and that when she reached the end, she would surely meet a place untainted by the dusty world.

But there was none.

Ancestral courts too had human affairs. Famous mountains too had business. Buddhist lands too had poverty. Sacred places too had thieves. Beneath the Bodhi tree there was enlightenment, and outside the temple gate there was commerce. In Sarnath, compassion was taught, and in the streets there were people who stole. Kushinagar commemorated nirvana, but the living still struggled for a mouthful of food. The Buddha's homeland had not preserved for her a clean world. It had merely placed the real human world before her more nakedly.

Suddenly she understood: the Buddha did not become Buddha in India because India was clean.

Precisely because the human world is so filthy, suffering so deep, and sentient beings so lost, awakening is needed.

If the world were pure from the beginning, why would the Buddha need to appear?

When this thought arose, Daoxiang's heart instead became somewhat settled.

She had gone to the places she should go and bowed at the temples where she should bow, but they had left her with no beautiful impression. India did not become the Buddhist land of her dreams. It was dirty, chaotic, poor, noisy, dangerous; it frightened her and disappointed her. Yet precisely this disappointment broke the last bit of attachment in her heart toward "sacred places far away." So it turned out that sacredness was not in geography, and cultivation was not in journeying westward. If greed, anger, and delusion remained in the heart, then even standing beneath the Bodhi tree one was still an ordinary person. If compassion and clear awareness still remained in the heart, then even walking through alleys where dirty water flowed could be a place of practice.

She thought: it is time to go back.

But back to where?

Heavenly Temple was no longer the Heavenly Temple of old. Muyang Monastery no longer had Perfected Master Zitian. Zhengyang Temple was not her refuge. Mount Tiantai could not keep her. Tibet was too far away. Nepal had only guesthouses and offerings. India was even less a home. Suddenly she discovered that after all this wandering, there was no definite "return" left for her.

Perhaps going back did not mean returning to some temple or Daoist monastery.

It meant returning to the human world.

Returning to the side of those who were ill, poor, lonely, deceived, and abandoned. She herself had suffered, and therefore knew that what suffering people fear most is not poverty, but being unseen. She herself had nearly been

swallowed by darkness, and therefore knew that compassion was not the smile on a Buddha image's face, but a hand extended when another person falls into trouble.

That morning, outside the small temple, Daoxiang asked an old monk for a bowl of water. Seeing her ragged state, the old monk asked, "Where do you come from?"

Daoxiang thought for a moment and said, "From suffering."

The old monk asked again, "Where are you going?"

Daoxiang joined her palms. "Toward the human world."

The old monk looked at her for a long time, nodded, and asked no more. He only handed her a piece of dry flatbread.

She received the flatbread, slowly finished eating it, and when she rose, she bowed three times before the Buddha image.

The first bow was to thank the Buddha for letting her come here.

The second bow was to thank India for disillusioning her.

The third bow was to thank this disillusionment for teaching her that true faith is not the search for a place without dust, but the refusal, even within dust, to abandon clarity.

Daoxiang walked out of the small temple. The sun had already risen high. The street was still noisy, garbage still piled at the roadside, cows still walked slowly, children still stretched out their hands for money, and in the distance temple towers appeared and disappeared within dust and mist. She had not a coin on her, and the road ahead was vast and uncertain, yet she was no longer as bewildered as when she had first arrived.

The Buddha's homeland had not given her a dream.

It had given her a deeper awakening.

Life was originally like this: you travel ten thousand li seeking a pure land, only to discover in the end that pure land is not found, but cultivated bit by bit within filth. If religion is left with only sacred places, incense, temples, and legends, then it will be swallowed by the dusty world. But if religion can allow a person, after being deceived, robbed, and struck down by suffering, still to refuse to become evil, and still to be willing to return to the human world to care for those in pain, then that is living faith.

Daoxiang softly recited the Buddha's name and walked back along the road by which she had come.

She did not know what place she was returning to.

But she knew that she could not remain forever in the far distance.



CHAPTER 65

FAITH IS THE GOLDEN ROAD BENEATH ONE'S FEET

After Xinde had stayed in the Foreign Trade Administration for some time, he soon began to see things he should not have seen.

At first, there were only rumors.

So-and-so section chief had been called in for a talk; so-and-so department director's office had suddenly been sealed; the bureau chief of a certain local office had not come to meetings for several days, and whenever one called, the answer was always that he had "gone out for study." In government offices, the place most skilled at spreading news was not the bulletin board, but the corridor, the canteen, and the bicycle shed. If someone suddenly stopped appearing, first someone would lower his voice and ask, "Have you heard?" Then someone else would say, "Don't talk nonsense. It has not been characterized yet." Later still, the news spread like a tide: he had accepted benefits from enterprises and relaxed inspections; used expedited certificates to collect money; taken kickbacks through factory visits; foreign currency, gold watches, passbooks, and imported electrical appliances had been found at home.

In the end, the red-headed document came, and the notice came too. The name was printed in black and white on paper, and a person who once sat perfectly well on the rostrum had suddenly become an economic criminal.

The first time Xinde saw an acquaintance fall, it was a deputy director of a local branch bureau.

His surname was Cai. Xinde had met him several times. He did not speak loudly, and when he smiled, fine lines gathered at the corners of his eyes. At provincial bureau meetings, he often sat in the third row, taking notes with a fountain pen. Once, during a cadre training session, he had even patted Xinde's shoulder and said, "Young man, write your materials well. In an office, the pen is also a rice bowl." Xinde remembered that when he said this, his tone had been warm, like that of an ordinary elder.

But several months later, Deputy Director Cai was taken away.

It was said that he had taken money from a foreign agent while inspecting imported equipment, and had also loosened the gates for local enterprises' export products. The amount was neither very large nor very small; what was more fatal was that it implicated a whole chain of people. That day, the corridors of the provincial bureau were very quiet. Even those who normally loved joking did not speak. In the canteen, everyone carried their lunch boxes, yet their eyes did not dare meet. Someone said softly, "Old Cai never seemed like that kind of person." Another sneered, "What use is seeming or not seeming? When the hand stretched out, it did not seem like it either."

Listening, Xinde felt a chill in his heart.

He thought of the fine lines at the corners of Deputy Director Cai's eyes, thought of that sentence—"the pen is also a rice bowl"—and suddenly felt that human beings were truly unfathomable. A person could stand on a platform and speak of integrity, talk about rules at a dinner table, pretend before young people to be a kind and honest elder, and at the same

time receive money, pass notes, and put in words beneath another table. A person's face could be so calm, yet in his heart there could be another set of accounts.

Later, more and more things like this happened.

The inspection and quarantine gate did not have power as frightening as public security, procuratorates, and courts, yet it lay closer to money. Goods had to be exported, and shipping schedules could not wait; certificates had to be issued, and customers pressed urgently; loosen a standard a little, and an enterprise earned a sum; inspect a little faster, and a foreign trade company paid one less day of warehouse rent. And so there were many banquets, many gifts, many red envelopes, many samples. Today a crate of fruit, tomorrow two cartons of cigarettes, the day after a watch, and later foreign currency, passbooks, renovation money, expenses for a child to study abroad. At first, everyone called it "enterprise gratitude." Only later did one realize that gratitude, if continued long enough, became a rule; and a rule, if continued long enough, became a trap.

On the surface, the office remained calm.

At half past eight in the morning, everyone clocked in as usual, made tea, read newspapers, and received documents. At half past nine there were meetings, and leaders still spoke of strengthening team building, improving the level of service for foreign trade, and strictly guarding the quality of inspection. At noon, the canteen still had hot soup; at dusk, bicycles still rang in the shed. But beneath this calm, Xinde slowly saw another set of office workings. Who was close to whom; who had a backer behind him; who returned from factory visits with more things in hand; who suddenly changed to an imported watch; whose housing allocation came quickly; whose speech in meetings carried hidden

meanings; who immediately drew clear boundaries after a notice was issued.

The human heart was like a fine net. Usually it did not show, but when wind blew, every thread shone.

Xinde was in the Personnel Department, farther from money, yet closer to people.

Files passed through his hands, assessment materials passed through his hands, and transfer, appointment, training, and disciplinary documents also often had to go through Personnel. A person whose previous year's assessment read "works actively, has strong professional ability, and receives relatively good mass evaluation" might the following year have a cold line added: "Due to suspected economic problems, transferred to the relevant departments for handling." Holding such a document, Xinde's fingers would stop on the paper. He felt that line was carved by a knife.

He often wondered: from what moment does a person begin to slide downward?

Is it the first time he accepts a box of tea? The first time he allows an enterprise to host him? The first time he signs an expedited approval for someone? Or the first time he says to himself in his heart, "Everyone does this. I am not really doing anything"?

In philosophy class, they had spoken of human free will, reason, moral law, and that human beings should be treated as ends rather than tools. But once inside the office, Xinde discovered that many times a person was neither an end nor a complete person, but a position, a signing authority, a node in a chain of relationships. Enterprises sought you not because you were gentle; colleagues flattered you not because you were learned; superiors valued you, sometimes

not because you were noble and clean, but because you were useful, obedient, steady, and did not speak recklessly.

He felt as though he were standing beside a gray river.

The water was not black. Sometimes sunlight even shone upon it, giving it a pleasant brightness. Many people washed their hands in the river, drank from it, caught fish from it, and on the surface all seemed to live fairly well. Yet he always felt that there was mud in the water, undercurrents, invisible whirlpools. Some people stood firmly; some, with one slip of the foot, were swept away. Those on the bank first cried out in shock, then discussed it, and afterward lowered their heads again to wash their own hands, as if nothing had happened.

One evening, he returned to the Huangsha dormitory. Everyone was cooking.

Acong was cutting roast goose, Old Tang had opened beer, and Little Zhou was calculating how much each person should share. The table steamed with heat, and outside the window, the Pearl River flowed darkly. Someone mentioned that a certain department director had been sentenced to several years, in a tone as casual as speaking of the weather.

Old Tang picked up a peanut and said, "These days, the bold eat meat, the timid drink soup, and the unlucky go to prison."

Little Zhou immediately replied, "You had better say less. Otherwise one day you may not even have soup to drink."

Acong laughed. "What am I afraid of? At most, I accept two chickens from someone."

Sitting to the side, Xinde suddenly said, "What is the difference between two chickens and twenty thousand yuan?"

Everyone was stunned.

Acong said, "Here comes the philosopher again. Two chickens can make soup; twenty thousand yuan can buy a refrigerator. Isn't that a big difference?"

Xinde smiled, but did not continue smiling. He lifted his cup and drank a mouthful of beer. Its bitterness slowly spread at the root of his tongue.

"What I mean is," he said softly, "when a person takes something for the first time, does he not always feel in his heart that it does not count as much?"

The table went quiet for a moment.

Old Tang looked at him and put away his joking. "Xinde, you think too much. In an office, if you think too clearly, you will have trouble sleeping."

Xinde said, "And if one does not think clearly?"

Old Tang sighed. "If one does not think clearly, one easily makes mistakes."

This sounded like an unwritten philosophy of the bureaucracy.

That night, Xinde slept very late. He lay on the narrow bed in the Huangsha dormitory, hearing someone washing dishes downstairs, the tap water rushing noisily; in the distance, a boat passed on the Pearl River, its whistle low. Outside the window, the dampness was heavy, and in the corner of the wall there was a slight smell of mildew. Canton's night was unlike Shanghai's grand river atmosphere, and unlike Hong Kong's pressing brilliance of lights. It was humid, hot, sticky, quiet, yet hidden within that quiet were many human voices that refused to disperse.

He thought of the Fudan campus, of afternoons in the philosophy department classroom when chalk dust flew.

His teacher had once said that philosophy does not give people answers, but teaches them to ask questions. At the

time, he had thought this sentence beautiful; now he felt its weight. Because questioning in reality does not make people light. When you ask what goodness is, you will see evil. When you ask what justice is, you will see transactions. When you ask what freedom is, you will see human beings bound by position, desire, fear, and rice bowls. When you ask whether you yourself are clean, you will discover that your own heart is not spotless either.

Xinde was not a saint.

He too had envied those who returned from factory visits carrying large and small bags. He too had once felt a moment of jealousy: why could others take things, while he could only guard a few files, a few forms, and a few mild words of praise? He had also wondered, if one day he held greater power, would he change too? Would he, at some banquet, for the first time stretch out his hand and accept an envelope, then say to himself: this is only human feeling, not greed?

As soon as this thought appeared, even he himself was frightened.

He discovered that what was truly frightening was not that others were greedy, but that he himself could understand greed. Understanding is not the same as approval, but understanding can make boundaries blur. If one sees only a criminal, the heart can be very clear; but if one sees that the criminal was once also an ordinary colleague, a good father, a warm-hearted leader, someone who wrote a fine hand, then matters become complicated. Evil does not suddenly descend. It often comes step by step wearing the clothes of ordinary life.

Once, the Personnel Department was organizing the files of disciplined cadres, and Xinde stayed alone in the office working overtime.

Outside the window, traffic sounded continuously along Huanshi East Road. Across the street, the lights of the Friendship Store were still on. The Garden Hotel had long since been completed and opened, and from a nearby construction site came the faint sound of machinery. The provincial capital was changing, foreign trade was growing, the ports were busy, and the Foreign Trade Administration was also becoming larger and larger. Reform and opening had brought opportunity, and also money. After money entered, the human heart seemed to be illuminated once; in some people, the bright places appeared; in others, the dirty places.

As Xinde flipped through one document after another, he suddenly wrote several words on the edge of a sheet of paper:

“The system is the riverbank; the human heart is the water.”

After writing this, he paused for a long while, then added one more sentence:

“If the riverbank is low, the water will overflow; if the human heart is low, money will overflow.”

He looked at these two sentences and gave a bitter smile. If Old Tang were there, he would certainly say Xinde had gone philosophically mad again. But Xinde knew that he was not writing aphorisms; he was leaving himself a rope. A person needs some words to tie himself down, otherwise when the wind grows strong, his feet will no longer know where to stand.

Later, another department director had an incident.

This man was usually very imposing. In meetings, he loved most to talk about principles, and when criticizing subordinates, his voice was loud. On the day he was taken

away, many people gathered around the office door, yet no one dared approach. Several staff members opened his drawers, and file bags, account books, and several boxes of expensive cigarettes were packed away one by one. Xinde watched from a distance and suddenly felt that everything was terribly desolate. Yesterday, the man had still sat in the main seat; today, even the desk no longer belonged to him. Yesterday, people still called him "Director"; today, when everyone mentioned him, there remained only "him."

The dignity of the human world, it turned out, was as thin as a sheet of paper.

After work, Xinde did not immediately return to the dormitory. He rode his bicycle alone to the Pearl River, parked it by the roadside, and watched the river flow slowly. There was wind by the river, scattering a little of the day's stuffiness. In the distance, lights reflected in the water, broken and glittering. Standing there, Xinde suddenly wanted to ask himself: is the road I am walking right?

He had come out of Fudan's philosophy department, originally wanting to be a man of books, perhaps to write essays, perhaps to enter a publishing house, perhaps to follow Second Brother into the sea of commerce and see the world. In the end, he had entered an office and become a personnel cadre. Here there was stability, identity, a rice bowl, and also a complexity he had never imagined in books. Every day, he watched people enter, leave, rise, fall; watched smiling faces turn into notices; watched lively scenes become silence; watched morality soften bit by bit before interest.

He doubted this society, and he doubted his own heart.

Yet after doubting to the end, he felt that perhaps philosophy was not far away. Philosophy was not only in Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche, but also in the corridors of the

Foreign Trade Administration, in the red-headed words of disciplinary documents, in the chicken someone smilingly accepted at a dinner table, and in the suddenly lowered voices of colleagues after a cadre was taken away. Philosophy does not make a person leave reality; it forces him to open his eyes and continue looking at the ugliest parts of reality.

He stood by the river for a long time.

The Pearl River was not clear, yet it kept flowing forward. It passed docks, ships, dirty water discharged from factories, lights and garbage, and also the days of countless people on both banks. It did not stop because it was turbid, nor did it forget its direction because it had flowed through darkness.

Xinde suddenly thought that perhaps being a person was the same.

One cannot guarantee a life without dust, but at least one must know where the water flows. One cannot guarantee that the world is clean, but at least one must guard that bit of clarity in the heart unwilling to drift with the filth. The office teaches people smoothness, and also teaches people silence; but silence is not necessarily corruption, and smoothness is not necessarily betrayal. What truly matters is that one day, when the wind is strong and the waves fierce, and someone pushes an envelope before you, you can still recognize yourself.

He pushed his bicycle and slowly rode back toward the Huangsha dormitory.

The night wind blew against his face with a trace of coolness. When he reached the dormitory downstairs, Acong was calling to him from the balcony. "Philosopher, we saved food for you! If you don't come back now, there will be no chicken leg left!"

Xinde raised his head and smiled. “Keep it for me. I have not fallen so low that I refuse a chicken leg.”

Everyone upstairs burst into laughter.

The laughter fell into the damp Canton night, ordinary and warm. Xinde parked his bicycle in the shed and suddenly felt that to live in this world, a person cannot rely only on aloof purity, nor only on doubt. He also needs a little heat from food, a little joking from friends, a little clarity in the night wind.

And the unfinished philosophy of life in his heart.



CHAPTER 66

ALL DHARMAS ARISE FROM THE
MIND'S IMAGININGS

The thought of resigning truly took root in Xinde not when one particular person got into trouble, but after those incidents had passed, one after another.

A section chief was taken away, and everyone was startled for a while; a department director was sentenced, and everyone discussed it in low voices for a few days; the chief of some local bureau went to prison, and the office held a meeting to communicate the matter. After the document was read aloud, tea was still drunk, meals were still eaten, and bicycles were still parked row upon row in the shed. Life was like a wet towel, slowly wiping the bloodstains faint. But the traces in Xinde's heart could not be wiped away.

More and more, he felt that he was not suited to remain long in a government office.

Not because he was aloof, nor because he did not understand reality. On the contrary, he already understood too much. He understood how a sentence was passed along, how a list was ranked in front or behind, how much human favor might stand behind a transfer, and how a person could smile warmly every day while hiding another set of accounts in a drawer. Precisely because he understood, he was afraid. He feared that one day he too would become numb, feared that when he saw improper things he would no longer be startled in his heart, feared that he too would learn to say, "Everyone does it."

The most frightening thing is not darkness suddenly rushing toward you, but the eyes slowly growing accustomed to the dark.

On weekends, he began going with old classmates from Fudan to a Catholic church in Dongshan District.

According to office rules, staff of state organs were not supposed to enter religious places frequently. Of course Xinde

knew this. He was always cautious in what he did. Each time he went, he dressed very plainly and did not tell people from his unit. That church was not grand, yet it possessed a quiet wholly different from the office. Stained glass shone in the morning light, long pews extended in rows toward the front, and candle flames trembled softly. When the priest taught, his voice was not loud, yet it slowly settled the heart.

The first time he attended Mass, he did not understand the rituals. He only followed others in sitting, standing, and bowing his head. It was not that he immediately believed in anything, but that he suddenly felt a cleanliness he had not felt for a long time. In the office there were too many words: transmit, implement, study, coordinate, principle, discipline, organization, assessment. Those words were also solemn, but after being said for too long, they often became empty. The language in the church was strangely simple: sin, love, forgiveness, soul, repentance, redemption.

These words made him uneasy, and also made him yearn.

One Sunday, the priest spoke of what profit there is if a person gains the whole world but loses his own soul. Sitting in the back row, Xinde's heart suddenly trembled. He thought of those people in the Foreign Trade Administration who had been taken away, thought of how they once had salaries, positions, housing, unit canteens, colleagues' forms of address, and Spring Festival benefits, and then had lost all of it overnight. He then thought of himself. Though he had not been greedy, had not accepted money, had not made mistakes, if he merely learned to be silent in the grayness day after day, was his own soul not also being discounted bit by bit?

After Mass ended, his classmate asked him, "Do you believe now?"

Xinde said, "Not yet."

"Then why do you come?"

Xinde looked at the sunlight at the church entrance and said softly, "I came to see whether, besides a rice bowl and a work unit, a person can still have something else."

Once he said this aloud, even he himself fell silent.

He began seriously thinking about a new road.

Changing units? That seemed merely moving from one room to another. As long as he remained in the office system, many things would still be unavoidable. Going to graduate school? He had studied philosophy to begin with; if he could return to campus, perhaps his heart might become quieter. But after finishing graduate school at home, most people still returned in the end to work units, staffing quotas, and webs of human favor. Going into business with his second brother Yide? Yide was in Shanghai, carrying on with the Silk Road enterprise at full blaze, its name resounding like thunder. But Xinde knew he was not suited to the marketplace. It was not that he had never seen the temptation of money; the money inside government offices had already frightened his heart. The winds and waves of the business world would only be greater.

Thinking and thinking, his mind settled on going abroad.

At first, this thought was very small, like a blade of grass emerging from a crack in the wall. Later, it grew clearer and clearer. He began looking into schools, writing letters, and asking classmates to help gather information. Britain was too expensive, America too far and too difficult, but Australia slowly entered his view. It was in the Southern Hemisphere, a place whose seasons were opposite to Canton's. It had the sea, sunlight, universities, and a relatively quiet academic

atmosphere. In the end, he set his goal on the Department of Philosophy at the University of New South Wales.

He wanted to continue exploring the meaning of life.

Spoken aloud to others, this sounded almost laughable to everyone.

When Acong heard about it, his chopsticks nearly fell onto the table. “Philosopher, are you mad? A provincial government office, personnel cadre—so many people want to get in and cannot, and you want to resign and go abroad to study philosophy? Can philosophy make soup?”

Xinde smiled. “No.”

“Can it get you housing?”

“No.”

“Can it promote you to department director?”

“Probably not.”

Acong slapped the table. “Then why study it?”

Xinde thought for a moment. “To let me know why I am alive.”

Acong froze. For a long while, he could not speak. Finally he sighed. “You scholars really only get this kind of illness after eating your fill.”

Old Tang advised him more realistically. “Xinde, don’t be impulsive. There are rotten things in the office, yes, but where are there no rotten things? You go to Australia—do you think everyone there is a saint? Right now you have status, a rice bowl, a dormitory. If you endure a few more years, it will not be hard to be promoted to deputy section level, then full section level. Life is not like writing an essay; you cannot ruin one sentence and simply start over.”

Xinde lowered his head and listened without arguing.

He knew Old Tang was right. But some correct words cannot save the heart.

His family opposed him even more fiercely.

As soon as his mother, Youlan, heard of it, her eyes reddened. "You have perfectly good public rice to eat. Why run so far away? Where is Australia? The Southern Hemisphere? If you go there alone and fall ill, who will take care of you? Who will look after your meals?"

His father, Cunhui, kept a dark face and said nothing for a long time. After a while, he asked, "Have you thought this through?"

"I have thought about it for a long time."

"Is this escape, or pursuit?"

Xinde's heart shook.

This sentence from his father was heavier than all scolding. He was silent for a while, then said, "Perhaps half is escape, and half is pursuit."

Cunhui looked at him. "Escape will not make a person free. If you only run abroad because you have seen that government offices are not good, then that is not pursuing meaning. That is fear of dirt."

Xinde said softly, "I know."

"Then you still want to go?"

Xinde raised his head. His eyes were gentle, yet carried a rare stubbornness. "Dad, I am afraid that if I stay any longer, I will become someone I dislike. I am not saying that everyone in the office is bad, nor that going abroad means cleanliness. But I want to change places and ask myself again. I studied philosophy for so many years. I cannot end with only a salary form and a *cadre résumé*."

His mother wept beside them. "What is wrong with a salary form? How many people beg for one and cannot get it!"

Xinde said gently, “Mom, a salary form is very good. It just cannot answer the questions in my heart.”

His father did not scold him again.

That night, Cunhui smoked alone on the balcony for a long time. Seeing his father’s back, Xinde suddenly felt that he was deeply unfilial. His parents had worked hard to send him to Fudan, then entrusted connections to arrange him into a provincial government office, thinking that at last he was stable. Now he wanted to resign and go to a distant country to study an even less profitable philosophy. Such a son, in the eyes of relatives and friends, was simply mad.

But that thought in his heart could no longer be pressed down.

He went to the Dongshan church more often. Each time he sat in the pews, he did not necessarily pray; he simply sat quietly. Outside the church, Canton remained noisy: trams, bicycles, government compounds, restaurants, shops, foreign trade companies, banquets of human favor—all continued. Inside the church, however, it was like another current of time. Xinde often felt that he was not searching for some religious answer, but searching for the courage to face himself honestly.

Once, the priest asked him, “Why do you wish to leave?”

Xinde said, “I want to know whether life has a meaning deeper than position, interest, and fear.”

The priest looked at him and said gently, “Wherever you go, you must take yourself with you. If you do not face yourself, Australia will only be another Canton.”

Xinde remembered these words for a long time.

He began preparing application materials. Transcripts, recommendation letters, personal statements, English examinations, correspondence with schools—each item was

not easy to handle. By day he still worked in the Personnel Department, organizing files, writing notices, and making forms. At night, back in the dormitory, he spread out English materials, checked dictionaries, wrote letters, and revised his statement. In his personal statement, he wrote that he had once worked in a Chinese state organ and had seen with his own eyes the complex tension between institutions, power, morality, and personal choice, and therefore hoped to continue studying ethics, political philosophy, and the meaning of life.

When he reached this point, he stopped for a long time.

Outside the corridor of the Huangsha dormitory, some people were playing cards, some were boiling water, and some called him to eat late-night snacks. Life was warm and concrete, while the far distance was like a very cold lamp suspended in his heart.

The day he received the reply from the Department of Philosophy at the University of New South Wales was a muggy afternoon.

Canton was about to rain, and the sky pressed low. Xinde collected the envelope from the mailroom. Seeing the English and the university name on it, his palm actually began to sweat. He did not open it immediately. He walked to the Pearl River, sat on a stone bench, and only then slowly tore it open. The letter was not long, but its meaning was clear: he had been admitted.

River wind blew over, carrying dampness and the smell of machine oil. Looking at that letter, Xinde did not feel the wild joy he had imagined. Instead, there was an enormous quiet. He knew that from this moment onward, he could no longer treat going abroad as a thought, a fantasy, an exit with which to comfort himself at night. It had become a real road.

And a road meant farewell.

On the day he submitted his resignation report, he wore a white shirt, just as he had on the day he first reported for duty.

After reading the report, the leader of the Personnel Department frowned deeply. "Xinde, do you know what you are doing? Public office is not a vegetable stall in the market, to be given up whenever one says so. You are young, educated, and steady. It is not as though you have no opportunities in the future."

Xinde said, "I know the organization's cultivation is not easy."

"Then you are still leaving?"

Xinde was silent for a moment. "Precisely because I know it is not easy, I cannot continue occupying a position where my heart is no longer present."

The leader stared at him for a long time, then finally sighed. "You philosophy people always have things in your heads that we do not understand."

Xinde smiled lightly. "Sometimes I do not understand them myself."

After the news spread, the office discussed it for a while. Some said he was foolish, some said he was aloof, some said his family had money and allowed him to be willful, and some quietly admired him. When Axue heard, her eyes reddened a little, and she only said, "When you leave, who will write such clear handwriting for us to type?"

Yunni, beside the bicycle shed, handed him a packet of medicine and said, "Australia has colds too. You—your heart is too far away, and your body is not sturdy."

Xinde accepted it and smiled. "Thank you."

Yunni looked at him. "Will you come back?"

Xinde looked at the rows of bicycles in the shed. After a long while, he said, "I don't know. But I hope that when I come back, I will understand a little more than I do now."

On the night before leaving the Foreign Trade Administration, he went again to the Dongshan church.

There was no Mass that day, and the church was very empty. Candle flames glowed faintly, and the stained glass darkened in the dusk. Xinde sat alone in the back row, thinking of the rumors in the office over these years, the notices, smiling faces, banquets, and nights beside the river; thinking of how he had tried so hard to adapt, yet in the end still had to leave.

He did not make a vow to God, nor ask for a definite answer.

He only said silently in his heart: May I not run away from myself.

When he walked out of the church, a light rain had begun to fall in Canton. The leaves of Dongshan District rustled under the rain, streetlamps lit up, and pedestrians hurried past beneath umbrellas. Standing in the rain, Xinde suddenly felt that sometimes in life, one does not set out because meaning has already been found; one has to set out precisely because meaning remains unclear.

He pushed his bicycle slowly toward Huangsha.

The bicycle bell rang softly once, like a very gentle farewell sounded for his years in government service.



CHAPTER 67

LEARN TO BECOME A PHILOSOPHER WITH A SOUTHERN CROSS

On the day Xinde arrived in Sydney, it was a misty, drizzling morning.

When the plane landed, the sky outside the window was gray-blue, and threads of rain, fine as silk, hung slantwise upon the glass. It was not the clinging damp of Canton's plum-rain season, nor the humid heat in Hong Kong's sea wind, but a cool, clean rain, carrying the strange breath of the Southern Hemisphere. Xinde dragged two suitcases out of the airport, and the first mouthful of air he drew into his lungs seemed faintly mixed with the scent of grass and seawater. Standing at the waiting area, he saw people of many skin colors passing to and fro. English, Cantonese, Mandarin, and languages he did not understand crossed one another in the sound of rain. His heart suddenly felt empty for a moment, and then lighter.

He did not go to the University of New South Wales at once. There was still some time before classes began, and he wanted first to look at the city.

Before coming, he had looked up information and knew that hotels around Kings Cross were cheap. It was Sydney's well-known red-light district, full of neon lights and wine, bars, nightclubs, small hotels, backpackers, homeless people, prostitutes, taxi drivers, and those returning late at night all mixed together. If he had been in China, Xinde probably would not have chosen to stay in such a place. But now he

was in a foreign country, and the money in his pocket had to be carefully counted, so he could no longer be particular. Dragging his suitcase, he entered a small hotel. The room was narrow, the carpet old, the curtains a little damp, but there was a clean bed and a small window from which he could see the street corner.

The middle-aged woman at the front desk asked him, “Student?”

Xinde nodded. “Yes. From China.”

She smiled. “Welcome to Sydney. Don’t worry, Kings Cross is noisy, but convenient.”

Xinde understood most of it and smiled too. “I only need a cheap room.”

The woman laughed. “Then you are in the right place.”

After settling in, he did not sleep. Jet lag, rain, unfamiliar streets, and the excitement of arriving in a foreign land drove away all drowsiness. Holding an umbrella, he walked out of the hotel and slowly followed the streets of Kings Cross. The red-light district by day was not seductive; instead it looked somewhat tired. Last night’s neon had not yet fully gone out. At the doors of bars, people swept up cigarette ends. Convenience stores gave off the smell of coffee. At the street corner stood several women in exaggerated clothing, yet their eyes were quite ordinary. Looking at them, Xinde thought of what the priest in the Dongshan church had said, that “everyone has a soul.” In his heart there was no contempt, only a strange tolerance that came after leaving his homeland far behind.

Beside the hotel there happened to be a Christian church. Stone walls, a pointed roof, and a small notice board by the door listing the times of Sunday services. Xinde stopped and looked at it for a long while. Rain struck the surface of his

umbrella in a fine, dense sound. Suddenly he felt that his whole road from Canton to Sydney seemed to have been pulled by some invisible thread: the church in Dongshan District, his resignation report, the acceptance letter from Australia, the rainy hotel in Kings Cross, and this church on a strange street corner.

During the next week, he measured Sydney almost entirely with his feet.

He did not have money to take many buses or trains, and he did not want to shut himself into campus too soon. He set himself a foolish method: walk every day, as far as he could. In the morning he set out from Kings Cross, passed through streets, and went toward the city center. On the first day, he walked to Hyde Park. In Sydney at the end of winter or the beginning of spring, sunlight leaked through the clouds, and the grass was a bright green. Hyde Park was not lively and noisy like parks in China. It was broad and quiet. Pedestrians sat on benches reading, pigeons paced along the roadside, and office workers carrying coffee hurried through. Standing beneath a tree, Xinde looked at the tall plane trees and St Mary's Cathedral in the distance, and suddenly thought that even the heart of a city could have such a place where people were allowed to breathe.

He then walked all the way to Circular Quay.

When the Opera House truly appeared before his eyes, he stopped. The white roof he had seen countless times in photographs was now unfolding by the bay, like a group of white sails, and also like shells born from the sea. Sea wind blew over with the taste of salt. Boats entered and left the wharf, and seagulls cried in the air. Across the water, the Harbour Bridge was dark gray and magnificent, its iron frame spanning the two shores like an enormous arm, pulling the

city tightly together. Standing by the railing, Xinde suddenly smiled. He thought: I have truly come. Not on a map, not in an acceptance letter, not in some late-night fantasy, but truly standing here in the sea wind of the Southern Hemisphere.

The next day, he walked west and went to Darling Harbour.

Darling Harbour was more modern than he had imagined. The water surface was calm, and restaurants, shopping centers, cruise boats, glass buildings, and pedestrian bridges gathered together, like a stage prepared especially for tourists and young people. He crossed the bridge and saw a family pushing a stroller, couples taking photographs by the water, and a street performer playing the violin. Farther on was Chinatown. Chinese signs suddenly increased: roast-meat shops, noodle restaurants, grocery stores, travel agencies, video-rental shops; familiar red characters hung in shop windows. Standing before a roast-meat shop, Xinde smelled char siu and roast duck, and suddenly missed home.

He went in and ordered the cheapest rice meal. The proprietress asked him in Cantonese, “New student?”

Xinde nodded. “Yes. UNSW.”

She handed him the meal box. “Study hard. Australia is not easy, but it is quieter than China.”

That sentence—“quieter than China”—made something stir faintly in Xinde’s heart. Holding the meal, he sat in a corner and watched the Chinese faces passing outside the window. Suddenly he felt that a foreign country was not entirely foreign either. Wherever Chinese people went, they could open up a small China. Only this China had fewer work-unit compounds and more of the hardship and freedom of immigration.

The third day happened to be a weekend, and he went to the church beside the hotel.

There were not many people in the chapel: elderly people with white hair, young couples, and a few Asian faces like his own. The pastor did not speak quickly, yet Xinde still could not understand everything. He only caught words like grace, forgiveness, journey, and home. He followed the others in standing, sitting, and singing hymns. The singing was not grand, yet it fell layer by layer into the heart like light on a morning after rain. After the service, someone shook his hand and asked where he came from. He said, "China." The other person smiled and said, "God bless you." Xinde did not know how to respond, and only said softly, "Thank you."

When he came out of the church, sunlight was already shining on the street. Kings Cross by day was still somewhat disorderly, but his heart was much more settled. He suddenly understood that he had not come here to hide from the complexity of the human world, but to continue facing it in another place. God, philosophy, foreign countries—none of them could live on his behalf. They merely gave him a lamp, so that on the road he would not be completely lost.

In the following days, he walked farther and farther.

From the city center he went east, passing slopes, houses, cafés, and small courtyards full of flowers, until he finally reached Bondi Beach. That day the sunlight was excellent, the sea dazzlingly blue. Waves rolled onto the sand layer after layer, then retreated. Some people surfed, some sunbathed, some ran barefoot. Xinde took off his shoes and stepped onto the fine soft sand. The seawater came cold over the tops of his feet. Standing there and gazing at the boundless Pacific, he suddenly thought of the Pearl River in Canton, Victoria Harbour in Hong Kong, the Huangpu River

in Shanghai, and then of the truly vast ocean now before him.

Rivers all have direction, and in the end they enter the sea.

What about people?

Perhaps people too must pass through many bends, turbidities, collisions, and farewells before they know where they are meant to flow.

A week later, Xinde finally went to the University of New South Wales to register.

The campus was more open than he had imagined. Slopes, lawns, modern buildings, libraries, student centers, and young people from many countries. Standing before the building where the philosophy department was located, registration materials in hand, he suddenly remembered the words he had spoken when he graduated from Fudan's philosophy department: "First observe the world, then enter the world." After circling and wandering for years, he had returned to the gate of philosophy. Only this time, he was no longer a simple student. He carried the dust of the office, the rain of Canton, the candlelight of the Dongshan church, and the questions raised beside the Pearl River, and had come here with them all.

After registration was completed, he did not live near the university. Rent there was too expensive, and he soon found a relatively cheap room in the small town of Campsie. Campsie was farther from the city center, but had many Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese residents. On the streets were Asian supermarkets, bakeries, butcher shops, and small restaurants. The room was not large; it was shared housing, the walls thin, and the kitchen often smelled of cooking oil. But the rent was bearable, and the train was convenient.

On the evening he moved in, he set down his luggage, sat on the edge of the bed, and heard children speaking English outside the window, while a neighbor called someone to dinner in Cantonese. Sunset slipped through the crack of the window and fell upon his books. One of them was a philosophy reader he had brought from Canton; its cover was already somewhat worn.

Xinde reached out and touched the spine of the book, and a quiet joy suddenly rose in his heart.

Sydney was very large, and his room was very small. The future was very far away, and his money was not much. The meaning of life still had no answer. Yet at that moment, he knew that he was already on the road.

And being on the road was itself a kind of answer.

At first, Australia's openness made Xinde feel refreshed. Later, it left him somewhat at a loss.

Classes at the University of New South Wales were not as demanding as he had imagined. The teachers in the philosophy department did not urge students to memorize, nor did they require that one theory be enshrined as truth. In class, students could question professors, refute textbooks, and place Plato, Kant, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and the confusions of real life together for discussion. Sitting in the classroom, listening to English in different accents collide back and forth in the air, Xinde often felt as though he had walked out of a room long shut and suddenly stood in an open field.

But when the field is too vast, a person can also panic.

The coursework was not very heavy, and so there was much free time. In Campsie there were many Chinese people, and on weekends, along the streets, beside the train station, and at the entrances of Asian supermarkets, there were

always people handing out leaflets. Falun Gong people set up display boards by the roadside, telling passing Chinese about their so-called truth. There were also believers in Yiguandao from Taiwan, smiling attentively and telling young international students, “Classmate, come and listen to the Way. Life is not only study and work.” Xinde accepted their pamphlets and looked at them. In his heart, he did not easily believe, nor did he rudely reject them. He felt that coming to Australia had originally been for the sake of seeing different roads. It was only that when there were too many roads, it became even harder to know which one led toward the heart.

Later, he entered a small Christian church near Campsie.

The church was not large: white walls, wooden chairs, a somewhat old piano. During Sunday services, children ran back and forth, and elderly people sat in the front rows praying softly. The Chinese brothers and sisters were very warm. Seeing that he was a newly arrived international student, they invited him to Bible study, fellowship, and shared meals. The meals were often abundant: fried rice noodles, braised chicken wings, vegetables, dumplings, red-bean soup, and cakes someone had made at home. In a foreign land, eating hot food and hearing everyone speak in mixed Mandarin, Cantonese, and English, Xinde felt a warmth, as though he had for a while been caught and held.

The people at church soon came to like him.

He was quiet, polite, had studied philosophy, and was willing to listen. The pastor said to him, “You have many questions in your heart. God will slowly answer you.” Several sisters also urged him, “Believing in the Lord does not mean you believe only after you understand; it is after you believe that you slowly come to understand.” In less than a month,

the church began arranging his baptism. Everyone was happy, as though a lost child had finally found a home.

But on the night before the baptism, Xinde was in such pain that he did not sleep well.

He sat in his small rented room in Campsie. Outside the window came the sound of trains passing one after another. On the desk lay the Bible, philosophy books, student bills, and half a glass of cold water. He admitted that the church had given him warmth, and that Christianity had given him many solemn and beautiful words: love, grace, forgiveness, redemption, eternal life. Yet the deepest questions in his heart seemed still not truly answered.

Why do good people suffer too? Why do systems make people bad? Why does a person, while clearly knowing goodness, still move step by step toward evil? If faith means handing everything over to God, then where do human freedom and responsibility fall? He had escaped from the Foreign Trade Administration not to immediately enter another ready-made answer. He wanted to search, but he did not want to stop questioning too early.

The next day, he went to the pastor and said softly, "I'm sorry. I want to cancel the baptism."

The pastor looked at him and was silent for a moment. He did not reproach him, but only asked, "Is it that you do not believe, or that you are afraid?"

Xinde thought about it. "Perhaps both. But more importantly, I am not ready. I cannot say that I completely believe simply because I am grateful that everyone has been kind to me."

The pastor sighed gently. "Honesty is also a lesson."

Xinde lowered his head. "The only thing I can be certain of now is that I still have to continue asking."

After leaving the church, his heart felt empty, yet also possessed a difficult lightness. That night, he walked alone through the town for a long time. Campsie's night was not splendid. Along the roadside were Asian grocery stores, roast-meat shops, Korean restaurants, Vietnamese pho shops, and two-dollar stores. Light fell on the damp sidewalk, and in the distance a train passed with a rumble, pulling his thoughts back to reality.

Reality soon pressed before him more concretely than philosophy.



CHAPTER 68

MAKE A LIVING IN AUSTRALIA AS A STUDENT

In less than a month, Xinde moved into a smaller one-bedroom apartment in Campsie. It was old but affordable, tucked above a row of shops that included a Chinese grocery store, a herbal medicine shop, and a family-owned Cantonese restaurant. Every morning he walked past a bakery fragrant with freshly steamed pork buns, elderly men reading Chinese newspapers outside cafés, and schoolchildren who switched effortlessly between Mandarin and English. The streets reminded him of home, yet the feeling of belonging remained just beyond his reach.

The apartment was quiet. After lectures at the University of New South Wales, he returned to an empty room where only the ticking of the clock and the distant rumble of trains broke the silence. His philosophy books occupied one corner of the living room, while rent notices, utility bills, and supermarket receipts slowly spread across the kitchen table.

At university he debated Plato, Confucius, Kant, and Wittgenstein. They asked what justice was, whether truth could be known, and what made a good life. Yet every evening another question pressed more urgently upon him.

How was he going to pay next semester's tuition without asking his parents for help?

Life in Sydney was far more expensive than he had imagined. Rent disappeared every fortnight. Train fares, textbooks, groceries, telephone bills, and health insurance quietly emptied his bank account. His parents had borrowed money to send him abroad, and he could not bear the thought of asking them for more. If he wished to finish his degree, he would have to earn his own way.

Finding work, however, proved far more difficult than he expected.

Many of his classmates had already discovered opportunities.

One delivered meals across Sydney on an electric bicycle, riding until midnight before attending morning lectures.

Another stocked shelves in an Asian supermarket through the night.

A nursing student worked weekends in a café near Bondi Beach.

A mathematics student earned good money tutoring high school students in Hurstville, where ambitious Chinese parents spared no expense on education.

Everyone seemed to know someone who could introduce them to a job.

Xinde knew no one.

For several weeks he searched almost every afternoon. He walked into restaurants carrying handwritten résumés, only to hear polite refusals.

"We're fully staffed."

"Leave your number."

"We'll call you if something comes up."

No one ever called.

He pinned small advertisements to community noticeboards in Chinese supermarkets, offering Mandarin tutoring, translation services, and assistance with Chinese literature assignments. Days passed without a single inquiry.

At times he wondered whether philosophy had been a foolish choice.

"What practical use is philosophy?" one classmate joked.

Xinde smiled politely, but the question stayed with him long after the conversation had ended.

On weekends he wandered through Campsie, Burwood, and Ashville, partly looking for work and partly trying to

understand the community around him. Every suburb seemed like a small piece of China transplanted onto Australian soil.

Restaurant owners greeted customers in Cantonese or Shanghainese.

Retired migrants practiced tai chi beneath gum trees.

Young professionals hurried toward railway stations carrying takeaway coffee while speaking to their parents in Mandarin over their phones.

The streets were filled with movement, ambition, and quiet determination.

One rainy afternoon he finally found temporary work washing dishes in the Cantonese restaurant near his apartment.

The work was relentless.

Steam clouded the kitchen windows.

Plates arrived faster than they could be washed.

By the end of each shift, his hands were rough from detergent and hot water, his shoulders aching from standing for hours.

Yet the kitchen became another classroom.

The restaurant owner had arrived in Australia thirty years earlier with only two suitcases.

The head chef had once taught engineering at a university in Guangzhou before beginning life again as a cook.

A young waitress was studying pharmacy while sending part of every paycheck home to support her parents.

Everyone carried a different dream, and every dream demanded sacrifice.

One quiet evening an elderly customer noticed the worn copy of bilingual *The Analects* beside Xinde's backpack.

"You study philosophy?" the old man asked.

"At UNSW."

The old gentleman nodded with quiet approval.

"Then don't spend all your time reading."

Seeing Xinde's puzzled expression, he pointed toward the dining room.

"Look around."

Families celebrated birthdays.

A lonely widow finished her dinner in silence.

An international student carefully counted coins before paying the bill.

A businessman laughed loudly with his clients, yet the moment they left, the smile disappeared from his face.

"Every table," the old man said softly, "is another chapter in a philosophy book."

Those words lingered in Xinde's mind long after the restaurant had closed.

Perhaps philosophy was not confined to libraries or lecture halls.

Perhaps the deepest lessons were hidden inside ordinary lives.

As the weeks passed, Xinde stopped searching only for the highest-paying casual job. Instead, he became willing to accept almost any honest opportunity. He continued advertising translation services, offered to tutor children in Mandarin, helped elderly migrants understand English letters from government offices, and even edited bilingual documents whenever small publishing companies needed temporary assistance. None of the work paid much, and the income arrived unpredictably, but each task introduced him to another corner of immigrant life.

Even so, money remained painfully tight. Every fortnight he sat alone at his kitchen table with a calculator, dividing

what little he had between rent, food, transport, and tuition. No matter how carefully he planned, there was never quite enough.

One Saturday morning, while walking through Campsie with only a few hundred dollars left in his wallet, he noticed a lively weekend market he had somehow overlooked before.

People crowded between rows of colourful stalls. Fresh fruit, handmade crafts, second-hand books, antiques, and homemade food filled the narrow aisles. Vendors greeted strangers as though they were old friends, while bargains were struck in English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, Arabic, and half a dozen other languages.

Wandering around the place, Xinde suddenly felt that this bustling market was more than a place to buy and sell.

It was a place where opportunity wandered in disguise.

It was a lively street market. Early on Saturday morning, stallholders set out folding tables, canvas tents, cardboard boxes, and clothes racks one by one. Fruit sellers piled apples, oranges, and bananas into little hills. A secondhand-book seller sat on a chair in the sun. Some sold used clothing, some small electrical goods, some toys, socks, tableware, kitchen supplies, plastic flowers, and cheap jewelry. People of different colors walked among the stalls, bargaining, choosing, trying things on. The air mingled the smells of grilled sausages, coffee, fish and chips, and Asian cooked food.

Xinde asked a Chinese stallholder nearby and learned that renting a stall cost only five Australian dollars.

“Five dollars?” Xinde could hardly believe it.

The stallholder laughed. “That’s right. If you sell well, you make it back in one morning. If you don’t, at worst you lose getting up early.”

This sentence fell into Xinde's heart like a seed.

Suddenly he thought of his second brother, Yide. In China, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, Yide knew so many factories, had worked on business yellow pages and e-commerce, and surely had connections with many daily-goods manufacturers. Chinese goods were cheap; Australian retail was expensive. If Yide could help him contact a few manufacturers and send some small commodities to Australia, not in large batches at first, only a little to test: socks, towels, umbrellas, hair clips, stationery, small alarm clocks, plastic lunch boxes, kitchen scissors, sewing kits, cheap toys. Campsie had many Chinese and many Asian immigrants, and everyone liked inexpensive and practical things. A five-dollar stall had a low cost for trial and error.

Once this thought arose, his heart actually grew warm.

He had originally thought that leaving the office was to move away from the secular world and seek the meaning of life. But in the weekend market of this Australian town, he suddenly discovered that life would not exempt you from rice, oil, fuel, and salt simply because you studied philosophy. Meaning was not necessarily only in churches, classrooms, and books; sometimes it was also in a cheap plastic basin, a pair of socks, a stall, and a cry of sales in broken English. If a person wanted to live honestly, he must first admit that he too needed money, food, and his feet on the ground.

That day, after returning to his rented room, he wrote a long letter to Yide.

In the letter, he did not, as before, speak only of philosophy. Instead, he carefully listed his observations of Australia's small-commodity market: weekend foot traffic in Campsie, Chinese consumer habits, stall rent, possible

product categories, estimated purchase prices, retail prices, and transportation issues. He wrote:

“Second Brother, I have seen a very small opportunity here. It is not grand, not like your Silk Road, and it is not something that will change the age. But perhaps it can let me survive, and let me personally do a little real business. If it is convenient for you, please help me contact several reliable daily-goods factories. Nothing expensive, nothing large—only small batches at first. If they sell, I will slowly expand.”

After finishing the letter, he laughed at himself.

A graduate of Fudan’s philosophy department, resigned from the Provincial Foreign Trade Administration, crossing the seas to Australia to study the meaning of life, and in the end calculating socks, towels, and plastic lunch boxes in the small town of Campsie. It sounded somewhat absurd, yet he did not feel ashamed. On the contrary, for the first time he felt that if philosophy could not pass through life, it was only empty talk; if faith could not face rent, it was only comfort; if ideals could not be laid out on a small stall in the market, they had not yet truly touched the ground.

On the weekend morning, he went again to the market.

Sunlight fell upon the stalls. An old man was choosing cheap socks, a child held a toy car and refused to let go, an Italian fruit seller cried out loudly, and beside him a Chinese stallholder bargained with customers in Cantonese. Standing among the crowd, Xinde suddenly felt an excitement he had not felt for a long time.

This was not the stability of the office, nor the gentleness of the church, nor the abstraction of the classroom.

This was life itself.

Messy, concrete, noisy, hard, yet full of heat.

He thought that perhaps his Australian road did not need to begin only from the philosophy department; it could also begin from a five-dollar stall. A person seeking his soul must also learn to make a living. If one day, on this foreign soil, he could read while setting up a stall, think about life while selling Chinese small goods to immigrants passing back and forth, perhaps that too would be a new kind of cultivation.

Thinking this, he smiled softly.

The wind of Campsie blew past the street corner, carrying the fragrance of coffee and fruit. In the distance, a train entered the station, and the tracks gave off a low sound. Standing beside the weekend market, Xinde held in his hand the small piece of paper with the stall phone number written on it. Suddenly he felt that perhaps the meaning of life would not descend from the sky; often it was hidden in the most ordinary days, waiting for a person to bend down and spread out the cloth of his stall.



CHAPTER 69

THE SEA OF COMMERCE RISES AND FALLS LIKE THE TIDE

At this time, Yide was thinking that the internet, too, could deceive people, though he did not dare say so publicly.

It made people think that liveliness was success, that traffic was a gold mine, that media reports, government visits, corporate registrations, exhibition business cards, and a roomful of computer screens glowing through the night could all naturally turn into profit. After the Silk Road platform made its name in Shanghai, there had indeed been a period of glory. Newspapers interviewed him, television stations filmed him, foreign trade associations invited him to give lectures, development zones from various places invited cooperation, and when entrepreneurs met him, their first sentence changed from “What use is the internet?” to “President Ma, we also want to get on your platform.”

On the office wall, a map of the whole country was covered with markings. Shanghai, Ningbo, Suzhou, Canton, Shenzhen, Qingdao, Tianjin, Xiamen, Wenzhou—one city after another was circled in red. Every day, enterprise materials arrived by mail. Salespeople returned from other places carrying thick stacks of business cards. Customers called to ask, “When will our company page go online?” The servers in the technical department grew busier and busier, and the data in the backend increased day by day. Young employees looked at the rising traffic numbers with the excitement of people watching a tide come in.

But the financial statements were cold.

There was traffic. There were inquiries. There was fame.

There was no money.

To be precise, money came too slowly, too little, and too unstably. Many enterprises were willing to register as free members and willing to put their company information online, but once fees were mentioned, they began to hesitate. They thought a basic page was expensive, English translation expensive, product photographs expensive, priority ranking expensive. Salespeople painstakingly explained: “When you attend one trade fair a year, how much do you spend altogether on booth fees, airfare, hotels, and sample shipping? How much is our platform’s annual membership fee compared with that?” But the boss would ask in return: “At a trade fair, I can see the customer. Online, who knows whether it is real or fake?”

The director of a small factory in Zhejiang put it most bluntly: “President Ma, it is not that I do not believe you. It is that right now I do not have the money to believe you. Orders are unstable, workers’ wages are still being delayed—where do I have spare money to buy the future?”

This sentence left Yide silent for a long time.

The greater the platform’s influence, the higher its costs. Servers had to be expanded, technical staff added, customer service had to answer calls, sales teams had to travel, advertisements had to be placed, exhibitions had to be attended, pages had to be maintained, translators had to be paid. Traffic was like water, rushing in with a roar; profit was like sand, impossible to hold between the fingers. Every week, Zuyi came to him with the cash-flow statement, her face calmer each time.

“If this goes on, the money on the books can support us for at most six months.”

Yide rubbed his brow. “Give the market a little more time.”

Wang Zuyi pushed the report before him. “The market will not pay salaries because you have ideals. Look here: enterprise registrations have tripled, but paid conversion is under ten percent. It is not that there is no demand. It is that demand cannot afford to pay.”

Old Qin, in charge of sales, was also worried. “Foreign trade enterprises are having a hard time now. Many bosses do not refuse to go online; they simply do not dare spend money. They have few orders in hand, long payment cycles, banks pressing loans, and foreign buyers still forcing prices down.”

Technical director Xiao Chen muttered from the side, “The technical department, at least, has been spending money nonstop.”

Zuyi looked at him. “That is why every line of code you write has to make you think: can this line of code make a customer pay?”

Xiao Chen smiled bitterly. “President Wang, what you just said is scarier than a compiler error.”

Everyone laughed once, but the laughter quickly dispersed.

The external environment also left them no room to breathe.

The Asian financial crisis had only recently passed, and its aftershocks remained. Many Southeast Asian currencies had depreciated, and the export prices of many competitors had been pushed very low. Chinese enterprises had originally relied on cost advantage to survive, but now suddenly discovered that their competitors’ goods had become cheap

too, and foreign buyers were even better at seizing the opportunity to cut prices. Demand in Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asian markets was weak; many orders shrank, were delayed, or were even canceled. When bosses met Yide, in the past they talked about “how to find customers”; now they talked about “how to survive.”

“President Ma, can your website help me clear inventory?” asked one boss in garment export.

“We can do promotion,” Yide said.

The boss shook his head. “Promotion is not money. I need cash.”

Then there was the bursting of the internet bubble in America. Zhide called from Silicon Valley, his voice much lower than before.

“Second Brother, many internet companies here in the United States have collapsed. Capital no longer listens to stories. Now they ask about revenue, profit, and cash flow. In the past, as long as a website had users, people rushed to invest. Now when you talk about traffic, they ask how the traffic will be charged for; when you talk about growth, they ask when the losses will stop.”

Yide stood before the window of the Shanghai office, looking at the gray sky outside. “We are in China. The situation is different.”

Zhide was silent for a moment. “It is different. But the chill from capital will travel across. The internet is not worthless; it is only that before, too many people spent tomorrow’s money as if it were today’s. Second Brother, we must be careful too.”

These words were like a basin of cold water.

More complicated still was the fact that China had just joined the World Trade Organization. Everyone said

opportunity had arrived, the doors had opened, and the global market was now before their eyes. But Yide quickly discovered that macro-level opportunity, when it fell onto individual enterprises, did not immediately become orders. Joining the WTO meant lower tariffs, open markets, and alignment with rules; it also meant more direct competition, stricter standards, more demanding foreign buyers, and for domestic enterprises, not only opportunity, but a harsher selection.

In the past, some enterprises could survive by relying on low prices, connections, and foreign trade companies as intermediaries. Now, foreign buyers wanted quality systems, stable delivery, product certification, intellectual property, and contractual credit. The platform could help enterprises be seen, but it could not improve quality on their behalf. It could transmit inquiries, but it could not raise financing for enterprises. It could build a bridge, but it could not guarantee that the people on both sides of the bridge had money, credit, and the ability to cross.

At an internal meeting, Yide said, “In the past, we thought blocked information was the greatest obstacle. Now it seems that information is only the first gate. Once the gate opens, behind it there are still credit, payment, logistics, quality, finance, law, exchange rates, and international demand. E-commerce is not a webpage plus a telephone; it is the reconstruction of an entire commercial infrastructure.”

Zuyi nodded. “This is macroeconomics. A platform does not make money in a vacuum. Only when enterprises have profits will they be willing to buy services; only when exports grow will the platform have water; when international demand contracts, the upstream and downstream will both

tighten with it. We are merely standing in the middle of the river channel. We cannot order rain to fall upstream.”

Deputy General Manager Old Qin sighed. “Then what do we do? Wait for rain?”

Yide looked at him. “We cannot only wait for rain. We have to deepen the river channel, and also look for new sources of water.”

And so they began adjusting. Only after entering the sea did they begin learning how to swim.

Free membership would remain, but paid services had to become more practical. They could not merely sell pages; they had to sell foreign trade toolkits: English materials organization, product photography, overseas inquiry translation, preliminary customer credit checks, exhibition information, buyer directories, and industry reports. The platform also began pushing enterprise grading, selecting those with real export ability for focused service. As for those enterprises that only wanted to hang up their names for free, maintenance costs would be reduced. Zuyi proposed that they could no longer worship the idea that “the more, the better.” Sometimes ten thousand users who did not pay were worth less than one hundred customers willing to take out money.

At first, Yide was reluctant.

“Isn’t the internet about scale?”

Zuyi said, “Scale needs quality. Empty traffic is like a busy crowd in a square, but the stallholders still cannot sell goods. You like liveliness. Finance does not.”

Yide gave a bitter smile. “President Wang is becoming more and more like a judge.”

Zuyi looked at him. “If I do not judge, cash flow will sentence us to death.”

This sentence made the whole room quiet.

The coldness of macroeconomics, in the end, always falls on specific people. It is not a curve in a textbook. It is the reduced commission of a salesperson, the postponed bonus of a technician, a boss's sleepless phone call at night, a customer's payment cycle stretching from three months to six, export goods piled up in a factory warehouse and unable to be sold. When demand is insufficient, prices are pushed down, profits narrow, and enterprises cut every expenditure that does not appear to "save life immediately." Platform membership fees were often placed precisely in this category.

Yide had once liked talking about the future. Now he had no choice but to learn to talk about cash.

He went to Ningbo to meet a boss who made hardware tools. The machinery in the factory was very loud, and workers wearing gloves were busy on the assembly line. The boss took him to the warehouse and pointed at boxes of products. "President Ma, the goods are good goods. But American customers have cut orders by thirty percent this year. You tell me to join the platform, and I also want to. But tell me: after joining, how many months before I see money come back?"

Yide did not speak with the same heroic confidence as before. He only said, "I cannot guarantee money back in a few months. What I can guarantee is that your products will be seen by more buyers, your inquiries will become more standardized, and you will take fewer wrong turns. The platform is not a miracle medicine. It is a tool. A tool cannot work in your place, but without tools, you will be slower."

The boss looked at him for a long time and finally said, "These words are more practical than before."

Yide smiled. “Before, I wanted too much to sell the future to you in advance.”

The boss smiled too. “The future can be sold, but it cannot be sold too expensively.”

In the end, they signed a smaller service package. The amount was not large, but it was cash.

On the train back to Shanghai, Yide looked out the window at fields, factories, and small towns passing by one after another, and in his heart there was a complicated clarity. He thought: at the beginning, entrepreneurship depends on hot blood; in the middle, it depends on models; in the end, it depends on common sense. So-called macroeconomics, when all is said and done, is the account books of countless ordinary enterprises added together. When a foreign buyer places one fewer order, a boss in Zhejiang buys one fewer membership service; when the American internet bubble bursts, a young programmer in a Shanghai office may lose part of a bonus; when Asian currencies depreciate, Chinese export prices are forced down a little more; when joining the WTO opens the door, what comes through from outside is not only opportunity, but also wind and rain.

No matter how idealistic a platform may be, it cannot go against the economic cycle.

Yet he also understood that a cycle was not death. Winter could freeze people to death, but it could also select the trees truly able to survive. When the bubble burst, false stories became fewer, and things of real value instead remained. Chinese exports were facing difficulties in the present, but after joining the WTO, industrial capacity, foreign trade experience, infrastructure, and the speed at which enterprises learned were all quietly accumulating. The fact that the internet did not make money today did not mean it had no

value tomorrow; only that today's road had to be walked lower, more solidly, and more patiently.

When he returned to the company at night, the office lights were still on.

Xiao Chen was modifying the system, Old Qin was organizing customer lists, and Zuyi sat at her desk in a coat, looking over the accounts. Standing at the doorway, Yide suddenly felt that this company did not resemble a great ship riding the wind and breaking through waves, but rather a cargo boat struggling through a river channel at low water, its bottom constantly scraping against stones. But as long as the boat had not broken, as long as the people were still there, there remained a chance to wait for the tide to rise.

Zuyi looked up and asked, "How was Ningbo?"

Yide placed the contract on the desk. "A small order."

Zuyi opened it and looked. "A small order is still an order."

Yide sat down and let out a long breath. "I finally understand now: traffic is not profit, influence is not cash, and reputation cannot pay salaries."

Zuyi smiled faintly. "Congratulations, President Ma. You have entered the second lesson of commerce."

"What is the first lesson?"

"The first lesson is daring to dream."

"And the second?"

"After the dream wakes, whether you are still willing to continue."

Yide was silent for a moment, then nodded.

Outside the window, the Shanghai night was deep, and the lights of Pudong were coming on one by one. China's internet economy had not yet truly flourished, and those enormous names of the future had not yet stepped into the center of the stage. At this moment, the Silk Road platform

had fame, users, ideals—and also losses, anxiety, and piles upon piles of bills pressing down on the desks.

Looking at those bills, Yide's heart was no longer as blazing as before, but there was something harder in it.

He knew that a truly great business was not the one that shouted loudest with the wind behind it, but the one that still refused to abandon ship when the wind was against it.

This time, he no longer said he wanted to change the world.

He only said to Zuyi, "Tomorrow, revise the paid services again. We cannot only wait for the wind to come. First we have to mend the sails."

Wang Zuyi nodded. "Good. Mend sails, save money, collect payments, survive."

Yide laughed. "President Wang, those eight words of yours are more useful than my speeches."

Zuyi laughed too. "Speeches are for the media. Staying alive is for us."

A few tired laughs sounded in the office. The laughter was no longer as fervent as it had been at the beginning of the startup, but it was more real. For everyone knew that what they were passing through was not merely one low point in the company's life, but also a necessary passage in Chinese internet commerce as it moved from fantasy toward reality.

The storm had not ended.

But the boat was still there.



CHAPTER 70

EAST AND WEST ARE WOVEN INTO ONE SHARED FATE

What gave Yide an even greater headache than the constant coming and going in the office was payment.

On the Silk Road platform, buyers and sellers could find one another, send inquiries, discuss prices, and even reach preliminary agreement on orders. But when it truly came to receiving money, making payment, and settling accounts, the road suddenly narrowed. The payment system the platform had been testing internally was named Bebebo. It sounded intimate, and carried a little of the lovable air of the internet age, as though with one light click online, money could travel from the buyer's pocket into the seller's account. But reality was nowhere near as light and easy as the name.

Domestic settlement itself had not yet been fully straightened out. Corporate accounts, personal accounts, bank transfers, intercity remittances, bills, invoices, taxation—every link had rules, and every link had delays. Buyers feared paying first and not receiving goods; sellers feared shipping first and not receiving money. The platform wanted to provide guarantees, yet lacked a clear legal status. If foreign exchange was involved, the layers of regulation became still more numerous. When U.S. dollars came in, there had to be contracts, customs declarations, verification and cancellation, bank review. Where the money came from, why it came, whether it could be retained, whether it could

be converted into renminbi—none of these were things a website could decide.

The policy granted by the state was only a pilot program.

The words “pilot program” sounded hopeful, but they also meant blurred boundaries. It could be done, but not too quickly; one could explore, but if problems occurred, one bore responsibility oneself; one could innovate, but not touch the regulatory red line. Yide often said that the internet was like a new car, while policy was like an old road. When the car ran fast, every pit in the road appeared. Without a closed payment loop, e-commerce was like a bridge built halfway across a river: the first half bustling, the second half hanging in empty air.

Zuyi put it more directly: “It is not that customers do not want to transact. It is that they dare not place their money into a basket the system has not yet recognized.”

And so Silk Road began consciously using the media to make its voice heard.

When Yide accepted interviews, he no longer spoke only of dreams and traffic, but of payment systems, foreign-exchange settlement, credit guarantees, electronic contracts, tax recognition, and the facilitation of cross-border trade. He said that after China’s entry into the WTO, enterprises needed not only online display, but an entire set of institutional innovations to support new forms of trade. If policy forever followed half a step behind the market, Chinese enterprises would see the world at the doorway, yet have their feet tied by rope when it came time to pay.

One newspaper turned his words into a headline:

“E-commerce Cannot Have Only Websites; It Must Also Have Roads, Bridges, Banks, and Rules.”

After this report came out, it sparked discussion in foreign trade circles and among certain competent authorities. Some said Yide was bold, daring to lay the problems open; others said he was asking for policy on behalf of his own company. Hearing this, Yide only smiled faintly.

Of course he was asking for policy on behalf of the company—but not only for the company.

He knew that if the gates of payment, foreign exchange, settlement, and credit were not opened, the thing that fell would not be Silk Road alone. All of Chinese e-commerce would be stuck at the threshold of “information without transactions.” A platform could burn money while waiting for the wind, but a nation’s commercial innovation could not forever depend on enterprises gritting their teeth and bearing the weight alone.

In the office, he said to the team, “We have to survive, and we also have to shout it out. Children who cry get milk; industries that appeal get roads.”

Zuyi glanced at him. “Then this time, don’t just shout slogans. Write the problems in detail.”

Yide nodded. “In detail. So detailed that after reading it, they cannot pretend not to understand.”

Outside the window, Shanghai’s wind was still hard. But Yide knew that if the wind could not immediately be made gentler, then one had to let more people see where the wind was coming from.

In any case, Yide’s name did indeed slowly become known across the country.

Some said he was a pioneer of Chinese e-commerce; some said he was an internet merchant burning money and telling stories. Some admired his courage in raising the banner of “Silk Road” in Shanghai; others laughed behind his back:

“Famous name, poor accounts.” But this was the way of the age: first it allowed a few people to be seen, and only later did it let the majority slowly understand what exactly they were doing. In his own heart, Yide knew clearly that Silk Road had not yet truly made money. Payment, foreign exchange, settlement, credit, logistics—each pass choked people until they could hardly breathe. But a name that rang out was still better than no one knowing. If a new industry had not even a voice, policy would be even less likely to hear it.

It was at this time that Lee Hong came to Shanghai again.

In earlier years, she had worked as a contract employee at the People’s Daily, taken part in the special interview project “Fifty Glorious Years of the Republic,” and traveled to many places, seeing great factories, old mines, borderlands, ports, and private enterprises that had just begun to emerge. After that reporting project ended, she had not remained in Beijing, but resigned from that seemingly respectable contract position and returned to her home province of Zhejiang, becoming a reporter for the Qiantang Evening News. Others said she was foolish, abandoning the signboard of Beijing to run back to a local newspaper. She merely said, “The People’s Daily is a great ship, and I was only a temporary sailor. Back in Zhejiang, at least I can row a small boat of my own.”

On this day, she came again to Shanghai to visit Yide.

Yide personally went downstairs to receive her. Lee Hong wore a beige trench coat, a canvas bag over her shoulder, an interview notebook in her hand. Her hair was shorter than before, but her eyes were brighter. They were old classmates of many years; as soon as they met, they laughed first.

“Ma Yide,” Lee Hong looked him up and down, “you are quite something now. Does your business card need to print ‘Pioneer of China’s Internet’ on it?”

Yide waved his hand. “Don’t mock me. Being a pioneer is not easy. There is no road in front, and behind you, death is urging you on.”

Lee Hong laughed. “You look all right to me. You don’t look as if you’ve been urged to death.”

“That is because my skin is thick.” Yide led her upstairs. “If the account books grew on my face, I would already be gray as ashes.”

In the office, people came and went. Telephone sounds, keyboard sounds, and fax-machine sounds mixed together. On the wall hung a national map, densely marked with red dots indicating member enterprises, partner chambers of commerce, and pilot cities in various places. Lee Hong looked as she walked and nodded. “The scene is not small.”

Yide smiled bitterly. “The scene is the scene; profit is profit. You reporters are most easily deceived by scenes.”

Lee Hong closed her notebook. “That is why I did not come today to listen to you brag. I came to hear you tell the truth.”

These words moved something in Yide’s heart.

The two entered a small meeting room. Zuyi poured tea for them, exchanged a few simple greetings, and then went out, leaving the old classmates their space. Outside the window, Shanghai’s sky was overcast, and from the direction of the Huangpu River there seemed faintly to be wind. Yide sat down, was silent for a while, and finally laid out both the good and the bad.

He said that the platform’s recognition had indeed risen, that many export enterprises across the country knew Silk

Road, and that quite a number of overseas inquiries had come in through the internet. He said that after China joined the WTO, enterprises had a strong interest in international markets, and the government was also willing to talk about technological innovation and trade facilitation. But when he spoke of the bad, his voice lowered: enterprises were struggling, exports were under pressure, the aftereffects of the Asian financial crisis had not yet scattered, and the American internet bubble had made capital cold; customers were willing to register for free, but unwilling to pay; the Bebebo payment system had been built, but lacked clear policy space; foreign-exchange collection was strictly regulated, cross-border settlement procedures were complicated, and domestic payment custody had no legal identity; the platform had traffic, yet could not smoothly turn traffic into transactions, still less smoothly turn transactions into profit.

Lee Hong listened very carefully. She almost never interrupted, only occasionally asking, “Can this data be written?” “Can this enterprise be used as an example?” “Has the regulatory department given a formal reply?” “Who approved the pilot policy?”

Watching her lower her head and record the details, Yide suddenly felt moved. When they were classmates in the past, Lee Hong had already been like this: while others chatted, she observed; while others grew excited, she recorded details. Now that she had returned from Beijing to Zhejiang, she had lost some of the caution of a major newspaper and gained the sharpness of a local reporter.

“Lee Hong,” Yide said, “do you think this can be saved?”

Lee Hong raised her head. “Are you asking about the company, or the industry?”

Yide was startled. “Is there a difference?”

“Of course there is.” Lee Hong said, “A company may die; an industry may not. You Silk Road people may have walked too early, and those who walk early are likely to fall. But the places where you fall show precisely where the road has not yet been built. What the media should write is not only how bold you are, nor how much money you have burned, but the institutional bottlenecks Chinese e-commerce has encountered.”

Yide slowly straightened in his seat.

Lee Hong continued, “What you lack now is not a puff piece. If I praise you as a pioneer, tomorrow everyone will watch the excitement, and the day after tomorrow they will forget it. What you need is for a set of problems to enter public view: Do electronic contracts count? Can a platform that matches online transactions provide guarantees? Can foreign trade enterprises have more convenient pilot channels for cross-border collection? Can small enterprises reduce settlement costs for export? When technology platforms spend money building infrastructure, can the state give innovative policies in taxation, credit, foreign exchange, and payment?”

Yide’s eyes brightened as he listened. “You are writing policy recommendations for me.”

Lee Hong smiled. “Not for you. I am looking for depth in the news. You are only an entry point.”

Yide laughed too. “That sounds a little hurtful, but I like it.”

Lee Hong set her pen on the table. “Start by building momentum in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shanghai. Zhejiang has many foreign trade enterprises, Shanghai has finance and platforms, Jiangsu has strong manufacturing. Your problem is

not the problem of your company alone; it is the problem that all small and medium export enterprises in the Yangtze River Delta will meet when they go online to do business. The Qiantang Evening News can first publish an in-depth report, and then contact several local media outlets to reprint it. If it can draw the attention of the province, the ministries, the foreign trade system, and financial regulators, there will be a chance to push the pilot program to expand.”

Yide was silent for a moment, then said softly, “I used to think I could force my way through by relying on the market.”

Lee Hong said, “The market is of course important. But in China’s market, many times one must first wait for an institutional door to open. You cannot only crash against the door. You must also let the people inside the room hear the sounds outside.”

This sentence struck Yide’s heart.

A few days later, Lee Hong’s report appeared in the Qiantang Evening News.

The headline was striking:

“Where Is the Online Silk Road Stuck?—Chinese E-commerce Calls for Institutional Innovation.”

The article did not write Yide into a mythical figure, nor did it write Silk Road as a legend certain to make money. She wrote about an internet company in Shanghai whose lights burned all night, about how twenty or thirty young people moved Chinese enterprise directories online, about the platform already having influence across the country, and about how export enterprises in Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Shanghai had received inquiries through the internet. She also wrote about the difficulties of payment, foreign exchange, credit, settlement, and unclear boundaries in pilot

policies; she wrote about a new industry growing with difficulty in the cracks of an old system.

One sentence from the report was later reprinted by many media outlets:

“E-commerce does not end with moving enterprise information onto webpages. It needs banks, foreign exchange, taxation, customs, law, and credit systems to jointly make a road for new forms of trade.”

This sentence spread quickly.

First, several Zhejiang media outlets reprinted it; then the financial pages in Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Southern Yue also followed up with discussion. Some commentary said that Silk Road’s difficulties were not an individual enterprise’s management problem, but a miniature of the transformation of China’s foreign trade service system after entering the WTO. Others said internet enterprises could not shout innovation on the one hand while asking regulators to yield without limit on the other. Once debate arose, the matter became even hotter.

Yide spread the newspaper across the office desk, and the team gathered around to look.

When Xiao Chen read the sentence “technology platforms must be built in step with institutional platforms,” he could not help saying, “Reporter Li writes this line more beautifully than we write code.”

Zuyi smiled. “If the code is badly written, the report can be beautiful and it still won’t matter.”

Yide did not smile. Looking at his own name in the newspaper, and at the problems Lee Hong had so clearly listed, an indescribable solidity suddenly rose in his heart. In the past, he had always worried that if he spoke of the bad points, people would think Silk Road was failing. Now he

finally understood that if certain difficulties were never spoken aloud, no one would ever help you repair the road.

That evening, Lee Hong called.

“Ma Yide, did you see the report?”

“I saw it,” Yide said. “It was heavy.”

“It has to be heavy for people to hear it.”

“You did not make me look very glorious.”

Lee Hong laughed on the phone. “If you want a glorious portrait, look for a photojournalist. If you want a way to survive, look for me.”

Yide laughed too, and as he laughed, his eyes faintly grew hot.

He looked out the window. Shanghai’s sky had already darkened, and lights in the direction of Pudong were coming on one by one. Silk Road was still losing money, Bebebo was still immature, policy was still only a pilot, and enterprises remained difficult. But from this day on, Yide knew that their predicament was no longer merely bills inside an office, no longer merely the nighttime anxiety of entrepreneurs. It had begun to become a public problem that could be seen, discussed, and pushed forward.

The media had sent the voice outward.

Whether there would be an echo in the distance still depended on the wind.

China, in the end, withstood the storm.

When the Asian financial crisis was at its fiercest, many people believed this great wave would overturn the boats of East Asia one by one. Currencies depreciated, capital fled, factories lost orders, and foreign trade enterprises stood like trees in a cold wind, their branches and leaves stripped away layer by layer. But China did not fall. It held the exchange rate, held the pressure on exports, and held up against those

doubtful gazes from outside. When the storm slowly passed and people looked back, they discovered that although the country too had been wounded, it could withstand wind and waves better than many great nations.

It was within this change that Yide once again saw hope.

Foreign trade remained important, but the center of gravity of China's economy was quietly changing. Cities grew brighter, shopping malls more numerous, and ordinary people had more spare money in their hands. Home appliances, clothing, food, furniture, building materials, small commodities—what had once been a question of “is there any?” had become “is it good?” “is it cheap?” “will it be delivered?” The phrase domestic demand had once sounded like something from official documents; now, when it fell into the market, it became the purchasing desire of ordinary households, and the routes of goods running from factories to cities, county towns, small towns, and villages.

Looking at a set of industry data, Zuyi said to Yide, “The foreign trade platform is like the Great Wall: it can hold, but climbing it is slow. The domestic market is like a plain. Once it starts running, it will be faster than exports.”

Yide asked, “You mean Silk Road should turn?”

“Not abandon Silk Road,” Zuyi said. “Silk Road is the outward-facing banner, the channel by which Chinese enterprises go out. But we also need an inward-facing platform. China is so large: factories are looking for distributors, distributors are looking for sources of goods, shopping malls are looking for suppliers, small shops are looking for wholesale channels, and in the future ordinary people will buy things directly online. This road is no smaller than foreign trade.”

Yide was silent for a long time.

He thought of the Yellow Pages in Hong Kong, the Silk Road in Shanghai, the money burned, the nights endured, the membership fees that could not be collected, the payment system that was stuck, and the policy tone that had gradually loosened after media reports. In the past, he had always wanted to send Chinese enterprises before the eyes of the world. Now he suddenly realized that China itself was also an enormous market not yet truly connected.

More importantly, capital began to arrive.

International capital had the sharpest nose. After the financial crisis, when they looked at China again, their gaze had already changed. This country had a large population, a vast market, capable government, social stability, an ever-stronger manufacturing base, rising consumption, and growing internet users. Although Silk Road's book profit still looked ugly, it had national recognition, an enterprise database, user traffic, media influence, a technical team, and experience with policy pilots. What capital valued was not how much money it currently made, but which river's upstream it stood upon.

Private funds from the mainland and Hong Kong also gradually became active.

In the past, many bosses, upon hearing "internet," only asked: "When will it make money?" Now they changed their wording: "How many users do you have? How many enterprises? How much traffic? Can you do transactions in the future?" Losses on the books suddenly were no longer an absolute crime. Traffic, data, entry point, platform, network effect—these new terms began appearing at dinner tables. When Ma Gaohui heard this, he only sneered. "Before, they disliked that you burned money. Now they are afraid you haven't burned enough."

The most striking investment came from Zhide.

Zhide had spent many years in Silicon Valley. He had seen the madness of the internet bubble, and also the cruelty after the bubble burst. He understood better than anyone that when capital runs hot, it can lift a company to the sky; when capital turns cold, it can cut off one's grain overnight. Yet he still brought Yide an old-established American investment institution. The institution was not the most aggressive, but it had old eyes and enough patience. It had studied American e-commerce and also Chinese manufacturing. They sent people to Shanghai, examined the data for several days, and asked countless questions: user growth, customer retention, fee models, payment compliance, domestic consumption trends, team structure, policy risks.



CHAPTER 71

TREASURE BOWL BECOMES THE E-COMMERCE PAYMENT PLATFORM

On the day of the meeting, Yide no longer spoke only with youthful passion as he had in earlier years.

He spoke of the good, and he spoke of the bad. Silk Road had recognition, but thin profits; enterprises were willing to go online, but cautious about paying; the Bebebo payment system was in pilot use, but policy had not yet been fully straightened out; foreign trade was greatly affected by cycles, but domestic consumption was rising; if the platform only held onto export enterprises, growth would be slow; if it turned toward domestic trade, it could open a larger space of imagination.

After listening, the American investor asked, “Mr. Ma, are you building a trade directory, or are you building a marketplace?”

Yide looked toward Zhide.

Zhide did not answer for him; he only nodded slightly.

Yide slowly said in English, “We started as a road. Now we want to become a market.”

The investor smiled. “Good. Roads are important. But markets make money.”

Yide remembered this sentence for a long time.

From then on, the company began discussing a new platform. It would no longer be an attached section of Silk Road, but a brand-new name aimed at domestic trade, at tens

of millions of small and medium merchants, and at ordinary consumers. The name became the first difficulty.

Someone suggested “Wanshangtong”—Ten Thousand Merchants Connect.

Old Qin liked it very much. “Wanshangtong, how good. Ten thousand merchants, connected through one network. Enterprises will understand it immediately.”

Zuyi shook her head. “It sounds like a software company, and also like a telephone card. Too hard, not enough smoke-and-fire of daily life.”

Someone suggested “Jiuzhou Shanglu”—Commercial Roads of the Nine Provinces.

Xiao Chen felt it had culture. “Jiuzhou is classical. Shanglu also echoes Silk Road.”

Yide thought about it. “It is good, but a little too formal. Ordinary people may not remember it immediately.”

Others proposed “Chinese Market,” “Warehouse Under Heaven,” “Hundred Goods Connect,” “Merchant Joy.” The whiteboard filled with names, and the more they wrote, the more chaotic it became. By the end of the discussion, everyone was tired.

That evening, Ma Gaohui happened to come from Hong Kong to Shanghai. Listening to everyone argue over names, he sat at the side drinking tea and said nothing the whole time. Just as the meeting was about to end, he suddenly asked, “When you were little, did you ever hear of the treasure bowl?”

Everyone quieted.

“Treasure bowl?” Yide repeated.

Ma Gaohui set down his teacup. “Shen Wansan or folk stories—it doesn’t matter. Ordinary people all understand it. Treasure Bowl, the Treasure-Gathering Bowl: it sounds like

wealth, good fortune, business, and household use. You are building a domestic platform, not something for a handful of foreign trade managers. It is for small bosses, small merchants, housewives, county wholesalers, people who set up stalls. If the name is too elegant, they won't feel close to it; if it is too hard, they won't love it. The three words Treasure Bowl are remembered as soon as they are heard."

Zuyi's eyes brightened slightly. "Indeed. Popular, auspicious, with a story behind it. It can work for merchants and consumers alike."

Xiao Chen laughed. "Then from now on, should our technical department be called the alchemy room?"

Old Qin replied, "Don't refine elixirs. Just don't refine the system until it explodes."

The meeting room burst into laughter.

But Yide did not laugh. On the whiteboard, he solemnly wrote three words:

Ju Bao Pen — Treasure-Gathering Bowl

Those three characters did not have the vastness of Silk Road, nor the classical tone of Commercial Roads of the Nine Provinces, but they carried a folk vitality that came straight toward the face. It was like red lanterns by the street, like firecrackers when a shop opened, like the smile of a proprietress receiving money, like ordinary people's plain wish for better days. Yide suddenly understood that in building the domestic market, one could not always stand on the Bund talking about great rivers and seas. One also had to squat by market stalls and small shop doors, and see how ordinary people bought, how they sold, and how they hoped their days might become a little easier.

The slogan was also soon decided.

Someone proposed, “Good Goods Under Heaven, All in Treasure Bowl.” Someone else proposed, “Business Flourishes—Come to Treasure Bowl.” Zuyi felt these sounded too much like advertisements and lacked memorability. Finally, during one discussion, Yide said half-jokingly, “What do ordinary people want? A little more money, and a little more love. Merchants earn more, buyers suffer fewer losses, and family life improves. Isn’t that just ‘more money, more love?’”

Xiao Chen immediately slapped the table. “That’s vulgar!”

Old Qin said, “Vulgar in a good way. Vulgar and loud.”

Zuyi smiled. “So vulgar that ordinary people will remember it.”

And so the new headline slogan came down:

Treasure Bowl—More Money, More Love.

When this slogan first came out, the young people in the company laughed. But later, the more they repeated it, the smoother it became. It was not as grand as Silk Road, but it had another kind of force. Silk Road belonged to distant places, camel bells, customs, orders, and the world market. Treasure Bowl belonged to families, shops, wholesale, retail, streets and alleys, and the daily wishes of Chinese people. One faced outward; one faced inward. One spoke of connecting with the world; the other spoke of enriching everyday life.

Standing before the meeting room, Yide said to the team, “In the past, we always wanted to help Chinese enterprises find foreign buyers. Now we must also help ordinary Chinese people find cheaper and better goods, and help Chinese merchants find larger markets. Silk Road is China going toward the world; Treasure Bowl is China itself coming alive.”

When the American investor heard the name, at first he did not understand.

Zhide translated it for him: “It means a treasure bowl. In Chinese folk culture, a bowl that gathers wealth.”

The investor laughed. “Very Chinese.”

Yide said, “Exactly. This one must be Chinese.”

At that moment, he suddenly felt that he had walked very far, and yet returned to the beginning. The internet was not only for elites, not only for foreign trade enterprises and overseas buyers, and not only for telling stories to the capital market. In the end, the internet had to fall into ordinary people’s days, into a pair of shoes, a bag of rice, an electric fan, a sweater, and the few dozen extra yuan earned by a small shop. Macroeconomics spoke of expanding domestic demand. When it fell into Treasure Bowl, it meant making buying and selling more convenient, information more transparent, markets larger, and money flow more smoothly.

Capital came chasing traffic, policy slowly opened its mouth, and domestic consumption began to warm.

Yide knew this was another new battle.

But this time, he was no longer only that hot-blooded merchant standing by the Huangpu River shouting that he would open a new Silk Road. He had gone through Hong Kong’s narrowness, Shanghai’s losses, the cold of foreign trade, the blockage of payment, media appeals, and the warmth and coldness of capital. Now, looking at Treasure Bowl, there was less empty fire in his heart and more steadiness.

At night, only he and Zuyi remained in the office.

On the whiteboard, the words still read: Treasure Bowl—More Money, More Love. Zuyi stood beside it and looked for

a long time, then said softly, “Don’t you think this slogan is too ordinary?”

Yide laughed. “Ordinary is exactly what I want. Silk Road is too far; Treasure Bowl must be near. So near that ordinary people smile as soon as they hear it, so near that small bosses want to try it as soon as they hear it.”

Zuyi nodded. “Then begin from nearby.”

Yide looked out the window. Shanghai’s night was bright, and the lights of Pudong were becoming denser. China’s economy was like a great river, just turning out of the storm, its waters rising again. Far away were the sails of capital; nearby were the lamps of ordinary people. The platform stood in the middle, needing to catch money, and also to catch life.

He picked up the pen and wrote another small line beneath the whiteboard:

Let all trade under heaven return to the smoke and fire of ordinary life.

Zuyi looked at that line and smiled faintly. “That sounds like you.”

Yide said, “That slogan is for advertising. This one is for myself.”

Outside the window, wind passed lightly. A new name, new capital, a new market, new desires—on this night, they were slowly flowing together.

Silk Road was still extending into the distance.

Treasure Bowl had already opened beneath their feet.

In the past, when Yide was building a foreign trade platform, what he feared most was blocked information, blocked payments, and blocked settlement. Now that he was building domestic trade, a new set of difficulties lay before

him: how would the goods move, where would the warehouses be, who would deliver them, how fast could they arrive, who would be responsible if something broke, and how would returns be handled? China's highway network was being laid out route by route, and high-speed rail, like silver threads, was stitching city to city anew. Places that once seemed distant on the map now gradually acquired the warmth of reality—an overnight journey, half a day's travel.

Yide often said, "The internet is the road in the sky; the expressway is the road on the ground. No matter how fast the road in the sky is clicked open, if the goods on the ground cannot move, it is all for nothing."

If Treasure Bowl was to truly rise, it could not only build webpages, orders, and advertisements. It also had to consider warehousing, delivery, distribution, returns, and exchanges. Zuyi spread materials on several warehousing parks in East China across the desk; Old Qin contacted wholesalers in Yiwu, Changshu, Wuxi, and Hangzhou; Xiao Chen studied how to display inventory inside the system. Once again, the company's lights burned through the night, as though that treasure-gathering bowl from folk legend were really beginning to take shape amid piles of cables, reports, telephone calls, and the smell of sweat.

It was at this time that Yide specially invited Lee Hong to dinner.

He chose a riverside restaurant on the Shanghai Bund. That evening, the wind over the Huangpu River was very soft, and the lights on the opposite bank came on layer by layer, as though someone had hung the future along the river in advance. Lee Hong came from Hangzhou, still carrying her old canvas bag. Her hair was shorter than last time, and she looked somewhat tired.

Yide raised his glass and said, “Reporter Li, this cup is to thank you. Without that report of yours, who knows how much longer we would have had to keep those words buried.”

Lee Hong smiled. “Come now. Inviting me to dinner is real; thanking me is fake. Now that you have money, you want to make up a favor meal.”

Yide laughed too. “What I fear most now is people saying I have money. All the money is in servers, employee salaries, and the future.”

Looking out the window, Lee Hong said softly, “The future—when one is young, the word sounds hot-blooded. When one grows a little older, it begins to feel tiring.”

This sentence made Yide pause.

Halfway through the meal, Lee Hong slowly began talking about her own situation. Work at the newspaper was not as glamorous as outsiders imagined. Interviews, writing drafts, running to meetings, revising headlines, waiting for page space—when she was young, she felt she was recording the age, and the farther she ran, the more excited she became. Now that she had run so much, she instead felt that her body was covered in dust. She said, “Actually, I don’t much like the newspaper anymore. Every day I write other people’s stories, and in the end, my own story grows less and less.”

Yide did not interrupt.

Lee Hong smiled faintly. “I also want to go out and walk a little. Not for interviews, not for publication—just as an ordinary person, to see what the world really looks like.”

Yide thought for a moment and said, “Then go. I’ll sponsor the expenses.”

Lee Hong lifted her eyes to him. “Is Boss Ma trying to buy off a reporter?”

“You wrote the report for me long ago. It is too late to buy you off now,” Yide said. “Take it as an old classmate sending you a stretch of the road. You helped me send my voice outward; I will help send your footsteps outward.”

Lee Hong lowered her head and smiled, but did not immediately refuse.

Yide continued, “How about Australia? My fifth brother Xinde is in Sydney, studying philosophy at the University of New South Wales. There is sea there, sunshine, and also a group of Chinese international students. If you go, he can look after you.”

“Xinde?” Lee Hong thought for a moment. “The younger brother who resigned from the government office and ran off to study philosophy?”

“That’s right,” Yide said. “The one in our family least like a businessman.”

Lee Hong looked toward the river, and a little light suddenly entered her eyes. “Australia... It sounds far away, and quiet.”

Yide nodded. “Farther is better. Sometimes a person has to leave familiar places before she knows what is still left in her heart.”

After dinner that night, the two of them walked slowly for a while along the Bund. River wind stirred Lee Hong’s trench coat, and in the distance the lights of boats moved slowly. Shanghai was becoming faster and faster, brighter and brighter, more and more like an enormous machine unwilling to sleep. Standing by the river and looking at those lights, Lee Hong suddenly said softly, “I have written about so many Chinese people running. It is time I let myself stop and look at another sea.”

Yide said, "Then go to Sydney. When you get there, look in on Xinde for me. That man has too deep a heart and too few words."

Lee Hong smiled. "You Ma brothers—each one better than the last at pushing people onto roads."

Yide did not deny it. He only lifted his eyes and looked out over the river.

That night, the story of Treasure Bowl paused for a moment amid the lights of Shanghai, while another thread had already quietly stretched toward the Southern Hemisphere. There, there was Sydney's sea wind, the small town of Campsie, Xinde still questioning the meaning of life, and Lee Hong, a woman reporter about to set out on a long journey.

The river flowed east.

The sea waited far away.

And the story, too, should now change its wind.



CHAPTER 72

DREAMERS BENEATH THE SOUTHERN CROSS

When Lee Hong flew to Australia, it was the bright season of sunlight in the Southern Hemisphere.

The plane passed through the clouds, and the rivers, rooftops, and great stretches of green trees of Brisbane slowly emerged beneath the window. Seeing the city from the air, her first impression was not prosperity, but spaciousness. It was a spaciousness different from Beijing, and different too from Shanghai. Beijing was pressed down by history; Shanghai was pushed forward by money. Brisbane was like a person just awakened from sleep, his buttons not yet fully fastened, but sunlight already upon his face.

When she walked out of the airport, hot wind rushed toward her, carrying grass and trees, seawater, and a faint fragrance of unfamiliar flowers. Standing by the roadside, Lee Hong suddenly smiled. It had been a long time since she had traveled alone like this. In the past, whenever she went out, there was always an interview assignment on her shoulders: outlines, recorder, camera, instructions from leaders, deadlines for copy. She had seen many places, yet often had never truly arrived at those places. Now she had come to Australia with no interview subject, no editor urging a manuscript, and no need to think about how to title a story. She was only an ordinary woman, a somewhat tired reporter, coming to the country watched over by the Southern Cross to let her heart loosen for a while.

She stayed in downtown Brisbane. The hotel was not large, and from the window she could see tall trees along the street. In the afternoon, she walked slowly through the city center, passing shops, cafés, bus stops, and riverside paths. The Brisbane River did not run fast. Carrying a mild greenishness, it curved and wound through the middle of the city. Along the river, some people jogged, some pushed strollers, and some sat on the grass eating sandwiches. Lee Hong sat for a while on a bench and watched sunlight fall upon the water, broken like a handful of gold dust. It seemed that the dust accumulated in her heart over so many years was also being blown open little by little by the wind.

The next day, she went to the Gold Coast.

The car drove south, and the sky outside the window became bluer and bluer. When she arrived at the seaside and stepped out, Lee Hong was instantly stunned by that sea. It was not the water she was used to seeing in Jiangnan, nor the kind of river like the Huangpu, heavy with the weight of a city. It was a bright, vast, almost unreasonable blue. Waves pushed up layer after layer, dazzlingly white, and the beach stretched so long that its end could not be seen. Barefoot people walked on the sand, children chased seagulls, and young people ran into the waves carrying surfboards. In the distance, tall buildings rose like a row of quiet silver screens, yet before this sea, all architecture seemed light.

Lee Hong took off her shoes, held them in her hand, and slowly walked to the water's edge.

The sea rushed over the tops of her feet, so cool that she drew in a small breath. She lowered her head and watched the waves retreat, leaving fine lines in the sand, and suddenly thought of her own years of rushing about: her contract-worker identity at the People's Daily, the interview car of the

Qiantang Evening News, the lamp beneath which she hurried manuscripts at dawn, Yide's office on the Shanghai Bund where the lights never went out, and those bold headlines printed in the newspaper. She had once believed she was recording the age, but sometimes she also felt that the age was like a vehicle, and she was only a person running after it, panting.

Now, she was not chasing.

At least for these two days, she did not have to chase.

She stayed one night on the Gold Coast. In the evening, the lights by the sea came on, laughter floated from restaurants, and the air carried the smells of grilled fish, beer, and sea wind. Lee Hong ate a simple dinner alone and ordered a glass of white wine. She was not much of a drinker; after a few sips, warmth rose in her face. She took out her notebook and was about to write a few lines, then closed it again. She said to herself: Tonight, do not write. A reporter who has written too much of others must occasionally allow herself to write nothing at all.

On the third day, she flew to Sydney.

Sydney was more compact than Brisbane, and more like a true metropolis. When she arrived, the weather was clear, the air transparent as though just washed. She stayed one night in the city center, and the next day went out sightseeing. First she went to Hyde Park, then walked toward St Mary's Cathedral. Sunlight fell through the gaps in the leaves, and pigeons paced slowly by her feet. Standing outside the cathedral and looking at its high spires, she suddenly thought of Xinde, who had once sat in a church far away in Canton's Dongshan District. In Yide's words, this young man who had resigned from an office and come to Australia to study philosophy always sounded like a riddle: he did not love

money, did not love official career, and did not love excitement, yet had insisted on running to a foreign land to question the meaning of life.

A little curiosity about him arose in Lee Hong's heart.

Later, she walked to Circular Quay. The white roofs of the Opera House shone so brightly beneath the sun that they were almost dazzling, and the Harbour Bridge stretched between the blue sky and the sea. There were many tourists; cameras and laughter rose and fell. Lee Hong did not hurry to take photographs. She only stood by the railing, watching ferries sail out one after another, and seagulls skim close to the water. Suddenly she felt that Sydney's beauty did not lie in how grand it was, but in the way it placed the city and the sea so close together. A person walked and walked, and came to the water; a heart stayed stifled and stifled, and was opened by the sea wind.

In the afternoon, she went to Chinatown.

Chinese signs, the smell of roast meats, milk tea shops, Asian supermarkets—suddenly the far distance drew near. She ate wonton noodles in a small shop. Hearing that she had come from the mainland, the proprietress smiled and asked, "Traveling?"

Lee Hong said, "More or less. Clearing my mind."

The proprietress nodded. "Clearing the mind is good. Australia is a big place; the heart becomes a little bigger too."

This simple sentence made Lee Hong smile for a long time.

She stayed another night in Sydney, and on the third day continued wandering through the city. She went to Darling Harbour to look at the waterside restaurants and tour boats. She also took a bus to Bondi Beach and watched the waves, white as newly washed cotton. Bondi's sea had more human

heat than the Gold Coast: young people, tourists, surfers, elderly people sunbathing, all stretching their bodies in the sunlight. Standing by the sea, Lee Hong's hair was blown into disarray by the wind. She suddenly felt that over these years, she had been too much like a newspaper: folded, laid out, printed, sent out, seen by many people, and forgotten by many people. But a person should not only be a newspaper. A person should also have skin, breath, and hair loosened by sea wind.

Only then did she contact Xinde.

On the phone, Xinde's voice was still gentle, with a scholar's slight hesitation.

"Sister Lee, you've already arrived in Sydney?"

"I've been here two days," Lee Hong said with a smile. "I walked around on my own first. I was afraid of troubling you as soon as I came."

Xinde laughed softly on the other end. "You are a reporter. Of course you first observe the world."

This amused Lee Hong. "Isn't that what you said back then? First observe the world, then enter the world."

Xinde was silent for a moment, as though he too remembered the old words, then said softly, "Now I am still observing."

He told Lee Hong that he no longer lived in Campsie. Campsie was convenient, rent was cheap, and there were many Chinese people, but later, for classes, work, and going to the sea, it was not especially close. So he had moved to Maroubra. It was nearer to the University of New South Wales, and also nearer the beach. The house was a two-bedroom unit, in fairly good condition, not far from the sea; in the evenings one could often hear the wind.

“Maroubra?” Lee Hong pronounced the place name somewhat awkwardly.

Xinde laughed. “Once you come, you’ll remember it. It is not as famous as the Opera House, but the sea is good.”

They agreed to meet on the third day.

After hanging up, Lee Hong stood on a Sydney street and watched the evening light slowly withdraw from the faces of the buildings. She suddenly felt that this journey had finally moved from scenery toward people. Brisbane’s river, the waves of the Gold Coast, Sydney’s bridge and Opera House—all had been like layers of a prologue opening. The real story, perhaps, would begin from the less famous stretch of sea at Maroubra.

That night, Lee Hong slept very well.

Outside the window, traffic murmured softly, and in the distance were city lights. The Southern Cross shone quietly somewhere high above, though she could not see it. She dreamed she was walking on a long beach, holding neither interview notebook nor recorder, only a pair of shoes wetted by seawater. Someone in the distance was waving to her. She could not see who it was, yet felt it must be a new story.

And she, at last, was willing to walk toward it slowly.

On the third day, when Lee Hong went to Maroubra, the weather was almost extravagantly good.

The sunlight in Sydney’s eastern suburbs was unlike Shanghai sunlight, which seemed always separated by a layer of gray; nor was it like Canton’s, which always carried dampness. It was bright and clean, falling upon sidewalks, low rooftops, and flowering shrubs by the road, so that even rubbish bins and wooden fences appeared somewhat charming. The car traveled southeast from the city. The streets gradually loosened, there were more trees, and the

wind carried the smell of the sea. Sitting in the car and looking at the red-tiled roofs, small yards, and clothes hanging on balconies outside the window, Lee Hong thought: this place is far from the world, and yet close to daily life.

Xinde's home was a modest two-bedroom unit, not too far from the university and convenient to the beach. There was a small patch of grass before the door, not very neatly grown, and an old car parked nearby. When Lee Hong rang the bell, there first came a burst of footsteps from inside, then the sound of cardboard boxes being bumped, as though something in the house had fallen over.

The door opened.

Xinde stood there in a blue shirt that had been washed somewhat old. His hair was a little longer than Lee Hong had imagined, his body thin, his eyes still gentle. In the instant they looked at each other, neither quite knew what to say. Lee Hong had heard many things about him from Yide: Fudan's philosophy department, the Provincial Foreign Trade Administration, resignation, the church, Australia, flea markets. Xinde too had heard his second brother mention Lee Hong: contract worker at the People's Daily, reporter at the Qiantang Evening News, the report that had helped Silk Road speak out, that dinner on the Shanghai Bund, and now her coming to Australia to clear her mind.

They seemed like old acquaintances, yet in truth this was their first real meeting.

Lee Hong smiled first. "Ma Xinde?"

Xinde smiled too. "Sister Lee?"

"You are more old-fashioned and honest than I imagined."

"You look less like a reporter than I imagined."

Lee Hong raised an eyebrow. "What should a reporter look like?"

Xinde thought for a moment. “Probably she should hold a notebook and start asking questions as soon as she enters.”

Lee Hong laughed. “No questions today. Today I am only here to freeload a meal, a bed, and some sea wind.”

Xinde moved aside from the door. “Then you have come to the right place. The meal may not be good, the place is a little messy, but the sea wind is real.”

Dragging her small suitcase inside, Lee Hong stopped after only two steps.

The living room was indeed messy.

One room door stood half open, and inside were piles of cardboard boxes. On the outside of the boxes, written in black marker, were the words “towels,” “socks,” “sweaters,” “children’s socks,” and “bath towels.” Along the wall of the dining area were also several rows of goods, with plastic bags, wrapping paper, and packing tape everywhere. In one corner of the living room stood folding tables, clothes racks, canvas bags, and several small metal tins for coins. The garage door was half open, and within it one could vaguely see unopened boxes. The air carried a smell mixed of cotton textiles, cardboard, and wooden floorboards warmed by sunlight.

Lee Hong looked around and could not help laughing. “Is this a philosophy department, or a wholesale warehouse?”

Xinde’s face reddened slightly. “At first, I only wanted to test a little stock. Later, the factories Second Brother contacted sent more than expected. When it arrived, it was a small container. The rooms, dining area, and garage were all full. Now that more than half has been sold, this already counts as tidy.”

“You call this tidy?”

“Compared with the beginning, it is already close to civilized society.”

Lee Hong laughed even harder. Most of the awkwardness of first meeting scattered in that phrase, “civilized society.”

Xinde carried her luggage into the bedroom that had been cleared out. To call it a bedroom was barely accurate. There was a single bed, a small desk, and along the wall two boxes of towels that had not yet been fully unpacked, which he had temporarily moved into the corner and covered with a clean sheet. Outside the window, one could see the neighbor's tree, where two gray-white birds perched on a branch, their calls crisp.

“Sorry to make you put up with this,” Xinde said. “I originally wanted to find you a hotel, but hotels around here are expensive. If you don't mind, stay here for now. I'll sleep on the sofa.”

Lee Hong put down her bag and looked at the little bed he had arranged with somewhat clumsy care. Her heart instead warmed. “When I was running news stories, I slept in township guesthouses, factory dormitories, and hard seats on trains. You have a bed, a window, and Australian birdsong. This already counts as superior.”

Xinde let out a breath. “That's good. I was afraid that when you saw these goods, you would think I had fallen in Australia and become a petty vendor.”

Lee Hong turned back to look at him. “What is wrong with being a petty vendor? A petty vendor is more lovable than an empty talker. Besides, aren't you still studying philosophy?”

Xinde smiled. “Metaphysics by day, socks on the weekend. The structure of life is relatively complete.”

Hearing this, Lee Hong suddenly felt that this man was interesting. There was a contradiction in him: he was clearly

gentle and restrained, yet had dared to resign from public office and leave the country; clearly studying philosophy and questioning meaning, yet selling towels and socks at flea markets; clearly living in a house as messy as a warehouse, yet had earnestly made up a clean bed for his guest. Such a man did not shine outwardly like Yide, but possessed a kind of honesty that slowly seeped into the heart.

A little later, Xinde took her out to walk by the sea.

The streets of Maroubra were quiet, the houses low, the flowers and trees abundant. Children rode scooters by the road, elderly people walked dogs, and the air carried the smells of toasted bread and lawnmowers. As they walked, the view ahead suddenly opened, and the sea appeared.

It was a great sea.

Maroubra was not as crowded as Bondi, nor as showy as the Gold Coast. It was simpler, a little wilder. Waves rolled in layer after layer, striking the sand with a low and spacious sound. In the distance, surfers appeared as small black dots rising and falling among blue and white waves. The wind at the shore snapped the edges of people's clothes. Standing by the railing, Lee Hong suddenly felt her own heart being opened wide by the wind.

"Can you come and see the sea every day?" she asked.

"Not every day," Xinde said. "When I am busy, I have classes, work, and goods to sort. But when I am troubled, I come here and walk once around."

"Does it help?"

Xinde thought for a moment. "It doesn't solve the problem, but it can make the problem a little smaller."

Lee Hong looked at him and nodded. "That is enough. Many places do not even have a wind that can make the problem a little smaller."

They walked slowly along the sea. Lee Hong spoke of Brisbane's river, the Gold Coast waves, the Sydney Opera House, and that bowl of wonton noodles in Chinatown. Xinde listened carefully, smiling occasionally. He spoke of how, when he first came to Australia, he had stayed in Kings Cross, then moved to Campsie, and later moved to Maroubra so he could be closer to the university and the sea. He spoke of going to different flea markets on weekends to set up a stall, loading goods before dawn and aching all over when he packed up in the afternoon. He spoke of a Greek old lady who came every time to buy towels and still complained that he did not know how to bargain. He also spoke of how Chinese international students studied and worked at the same time, and how none of them had it easy.

Lee Hong asked, "Do you regret it? Leaving the office, coming here, studying philosophy, and selling goods?"

Xinde did not answer immediately. He looked at the sea and was silent for a while. "Sometimes I regret it. I regret it when paying rent, when moving goods, and when a professor questions me until I am speechless. But when I think back, if I were still in the office, perhaps I would regret it even more."

"Why?"

"Because that kind of regret has no sea."

Lee Hong was stunned for a moment, then laughed.

It did not sound like an answer, yet it resembled an answer more than an answer would have.

At dusk, they returned to the house, and Xinde made a simple dinner. Rice, stir-fried greens, fried eggs, and a small plate of roast duck bought from a Chinese shop. The living room was still piled with goods, so they moved the small table beside the window to eat. Sunset shone in from outside, falling on cardboard boxes, bowls and chopsticks, and the

back of Lee Hong's hand. At that moment, the disorder of the living room suddenly did not seem shabby. Instead, it had the heat of a life unfolding with effort.

Lee Hong picked up a piece of egg and said, "Your place is better than a hotel."

Xinde thought she was being polite. "A hotel would at least be tidy."

"A hotel has no story," Lee Hong said. "Every box here has a story."

Xinde laughed. "Then don't write about me. It would be too embarrassing if it got out."

Lee Hong smiled too. "Today I am not being a reporter."

"Then what are you being?"

Lee Hong thought for a moment. "A guest who temporarily has no purpose."

Xinde nodded. "Then I will be a host who is temporarily still passable."

After dinner, Xinde insisted on sleeping on the sofa. Lee Hong had wanted to refuse, but seeing that he had already taken out a thin quilt and pillow, she said no more.

Sometimes getting along is just like this: too much politeness makes people distant; a little simplicity makes both sides relaxed.

At night, the wind outside the window was very soft, and from far away came the faint low sound of waves. Lee Hong lay in the temporarily cleared room, with two boxes of towels silently leaning against the wall beside her. Suddenly she felt that she had not entered a messy house, but had entered a person's real life. There was the leftover warmth of ideals, and also cardboard boxes for making a living; there were philosophy books, and also socks; there was the sea, and there was the host sleeping on the sofa.

When she closed her eyes, her heart was very quiet.

It turned out that acquaintance did not necessarily need to be grand. Two people who had grown tired walking their separate lives needed only a clean bed, a simple meal, a few true words, and a gust of sea wind outside the window, and the distance between them would begin to draw near.

And the night of Maroubra was gently gathering them into the same story.



CHAPTER 73

MAKING A LIVING AT A BEACHSIDE STALL

The next day, Xinde went to the university for class as usual.

When he left in the morning, the sky was still very clear. Wind from the sea slipped in through the crack of the window and made an empty cardboard box in the corner of the dining room rustle softly. Lee Hong had just got up, her hair not yet combed, and stood at the kitchen doorway watching him stuff his books, notes, and a simple sandwich into his backpack. The scene made her want to laugh a little. The man who had still been discussing the meaning of life

the night before was now rummaging through drawers for half a day in search of a ballpoint pen; the life of a philosopher, it seemed, was not much tidier than anyone else's.

"Eat whatever you like for lunch," Xinde said. "There's bread, eggs, and leftover roast duck from yesterday in the fridge. Do you know how to use the microwave?"

Leaning against the doorframe, Lee Hong smiled. "I've run news stories for so many years. Surely I won't starve to death in an Australian kitchen."

Xinde grew a little embarrassed. "That's not what I meant."

"I know," Lee Hong said. "Go to class. Don't be late. Even the study of life's meaning has to be punctual."

Xinde smiled, shouldered his bag, and went out. After the door closed, the house suddenly fell quiet. Lee Hong stood in the living room, looking at the boxes filling the place and the shadows of trees outside the window. Suddenly she felt as if she had temporarily moved into an unfinished book. Half the book was philosophy, and half was towels and socks; half was Southern Hemisphere sunlight, and half was the smell of Chinese small commodities.

During the day, she was alone in the house. First, she tidied the tabletop a little, separating scattered coins, tape, price labels, and several philosophy books. When she picked up one book and casually opened it, a receipt for a flea-market stall was tucked inside. The amount written on it was one hundred Australian dollars. That thin slip of paper was like a thread, quietly tying Kant, Heidegger, and a stall by Bondi Beach together. Looking at it, Lee Hong could not help laughing aloud.

Later in the morning, she walked to a nearby shopping center.

The shopping center in this Australian suburb was not large. It had a supermarket, pharmacy, café, bakery, and newsstand, everything one needed, yet it was not noisy. Elderly people pushing shopping carts slowly chose fruit; young mothers held children while buying milk; several high school students with backpacks laughed and talked outside a fast-food shop. Lee Hong bought a coffee and sat by the window, watching sunlight fall over the parking lot. Suddenly she felt that life here was not dazzling, but very solid. There were no calls from the newspaper office urging copy, no social niceties at banquets, none of the lights on the Shanghai Bund that pushed a person forward. She was simply sitting there, drinking a cup of coffee, watching people live.

In the afternoon, Xinde returned, his face carrying a little of the fatigue that comes after class.

“The professor asked a question today,” he said as soon as he entered. “It stopped me.”

Lee Hong asked, “What question?”

“He said, if human beings pursue meaning but cannot leave material life behind, then is meaning outside material life, or within it?”

Lee Hong glanced at the boxes filling the room and smiled. “You should have brought him here. The answer is piled all over the living room.”

Xinde laughed too. “I’m afraid if he saw this, he would start researching the ethics of wholesale.”

Toward evening, the two went to the small town to buy groceries.

The wind on the street was soft, and along the roadside were trees blooming with purple flowers. In the supermarket,

Lee Hong pushed the cart while Xinde chose vegetables. A philosophy student who had resigned from a government office was seriously comparing the prices of two packets of greens in an Australian supermarket, with an expression almost solemn. Lee Hong asked him, "Are you this serious even when buying vegetables?"

Xinde said, "Things are expensive here. One extra look might save fifty cents."

"You look very much like someone who knows how to live now."

Xinde lowered his head to choose tomatoes. "In the office, life was lived for you by the work unit. Once you arrive in Australia, life comes to your door in person."

They bought greens, chicken thighs, potatoes, milk, and a small bag of rice. After returning, Xinde cooked while Lee Hong washed vegetables beside him. The kitchen was small, and when the two of them turned around, they often had to give way to each other. Once in a while their shoulders lightly touched, and each would smile, pretending it was nothing. When oil splattered as Xinde fried the chicken, Lee Hong quickly stepped back. "Philosopher, the heat is too high."

Xinde said with perfect seriousness, "This is existentialist cooking smoke."

Lee Hong laughed so hard she nearly doubled over. "Then this meal is ideologically dangerous."

When the food was ready, warmth filled the house. The greens were bright, the chicken fragrant, the potatoes stewed soft. Outside the window, the sky slowly darkened, and from far away there came the faint sound of waves. Eating the meal, Lee Hong suddenly felt that this kind of day was very strange and wonderful: she had come to Australia to clear

her mind, yet in a little house full of goods, she had eaten a dinner more settled than anything in a restaurant.

The next day was the weekend.

Xinde rose early to load the goods. The sky was not yet fully bright, and there was dew in the yard. He moved boxes of towels, socks, and a small number of sweaters into the back of the car, then packed the folding table, clothes rack, canvas shelter, coin box, and cardboard price signs one by one. Lee Hong also got up to help. Only when she lifted a box of children's socks did she realize that this work was not easy.

"You do this every week?" she asked, catching her breath.

"Exercise before selling," Xinde said. "Cheaper than a gym."

"How much can you make in a day?"

"The Bondi stall fee is expensive—one hundred Australian dollars for a day. But there's a lot of foot traffic. When the weather is good, the net profit can be three or four hundred. Much better than washing dishes in a restaurant."

Watching him close the trunk, Lee Hong suddenly felt that this young man was tougher than she had imagined. He had not fled to Australia to dream. Between dreams and bills, he was carrying life onto the car box by box.

They drove to Bondi Beach.

Along the way, the sky grew brighter and the sea wind more distinct. By the time they reached the market area, many stallholders were already busy. Bondi's weekend market was lively as a moving painting: some sold handmade jewelry, some secondhand clothes, some old records, some scented candles, some leather bags, toys, hats, picture frames, and strange little ornaments. The smells of coffee, hot dogs, seawater, and sunscreen mingled together. Tourists wore shorts and slippers, backpackers wandered slowly, local

ladies led dogs while choosing things, and young couples drank coffee as they flipped through old clothes racks.

On the other side of the market was the sea.

Waves rolled up layer after layer, white foam glittering in the sunlight. Surfers chased waves in the distance, and children screamed and ran on the sand. The sound of the sea was like the market's background music; no matter how lively the human voices were, it continued behind them at its own unhurried pace.

Xinde skillfully set up the table, spread the towels by color, arranged packets of socks, and hung sweaters on the simple rack. Lee Hong helped him tear tape and set out the price signs. The signs read: TOWELS \$5, SOCKS 3 PAIRS \$10, WOOL SWEATERS \$25. Looking at these English words, she suddenly felt that she too had become part of this small stall.

The man from the neighboring stall came over. He wore sunglasses, his skin tanned light brown, his hair somewhat graying; he seemed to be in his forties or fifties. His stall was covered in sunglasses, the lenses shining in the sun like a small sea.

"Morning, Sean!" the man called loudly.

Lee Hong was startled. "Sean?"

Xinde smiled and explained, "He calls me Sean. He thinks Xinde is too hard to pronounce."

The man took off his sunglasses and extended his hand to Lee Hong. "Steven. Friend of Sean?"

Lee Hong shook his hand. "Ruby."

Steven blinked. "Good name. Ruby sells towels today?"

Xinde laughed. "She is my guest. From China."

Steven theatrically patted his chest. "Then I must behave. International guest!"

Lee Hong was amused by him. Steven was a mixed-race white man; his mother seemed to have some Asian ancestry. He spoke warmly and laughed loudly. He and Xinde had long set up stalls beside one another and often looked after each other. When Xinde went to the restroom, Steven watched his stall; when Steven went to buy coffee, Xinde greeted customers for him. Sometimes customers who bought sunglasses would also casually buy a towel; sometimes those who came for towels were persuaded by Steven to buy a pair of cheap sunglasses.

The market soon grew busy.

An Australian elderly woman picked up a towel and felt it. "Good cotton?"

Xinde nodded. "Good cotton, from China. Very soft."

The old lady looked at him critically. "Five dollars? Too much."

Standing beside him, Lee Hong almost wanted to laugh. Xinde actually answered very seriously, "Madam, not too much. You use it every day. One dollar per year, maybe five years."

The old lady was amused, and in the end bought two towels. Xinde took the money and gave change with practiced motions. Watching him, Lee Hong felt that this philosophy youth who had once walked out of a government office had been trained by the Australian market into a gentle kind of commercial eloquence.

Business was good on Steven's side too.

"Try this one! You look like movie star!" he said, putting sunglasses on a young girl. The girl laughed until she bent backward, and her boyfriend paid for them. Steven turned and shouted to Xinde, "Sean! See? Philosophy doesn't sell. Compliments sell!"

Xinde shouted back, "But compliments need philosophy!"

Lee Hong laughed helplessly at the side. Suddenly she felt that this little Bondi market possessed a lovable equality. Here there was none of the airs of bureau chiefs, department directors, bosses, or reporters, nor the complicated glances of offices. Everyone stood behind his or her own stall and relied on voice, smiling face, goods, and luck to eat. The sun shone on everyone's head; the sea wind passed over every face. When business was good, everyone was happy. When it was poor, they merely shrugged and drank a cup of coffee.

At noon, Steven watched the stall for them, and Xinde took Lee Hong to buy fish and chips and coffee. They sat on nearby steps to eat, the market before them and the sea in the distance. Holding the paper box, Lee Hong saw sweat on Xinde's forehead, his shirt sleeves rolled up, and a little red mark on the back of his hand rubbed there by cardboard boxes.

"Is it hard?" she asked.

"It is," Xinde said. "But this kind of hardship is clearer. Move one box of goods, sell one towel, earn a few dollars. The body gets tired, but the heart is not chaotic."

Lee Hong nodded. She understood this sentence. For many years, she too had been dragged along by a kind of unclear hardship. Writing was hard, interviews were hard, social obligations were hard, but the most exhausting thing was not knowing exactly what all that hardship was for.

"Today I'm helping you sell goods," she said. "You have to pay me wages."

Xinde asked seriously, "How much?"

Lee Hong thought for a moment. "Make dinner a little better."

Xinde smiled. "That wage I can afford."

In the afternoon, there were even more people at the market. Lee Hong gradually relaxed and learned to greet customers in simple English: "Good towel! Very cheap!" Her pronunciation was not accurate, but her smile was sincere. A Chinese tourist heard her Mandarin and asked with surprise, "Are you from China?"

Lee Hong said, "He is half a Chinese businessman, and I am a temporary sales assistant."

The tourist laughed and bought three packets of socks, saying, "Buying Chinese socks in Australia feels close to home."

The sun slowly tilted west, and the sea wind turned cool. Xinde's goods decreased by another two boxes, and the coin box grew full of coins and notes. Before closing his stall, Steven came over and handed them two bottles of ice water. "Good day, Sean. Good luck lady."

Lee Hong accepted the water. "Thank you, Steven."

Steven pointed at Xinde, then at her, and smiled meaningfully. "You two work well."

Xinde's face reddened slightly, and he pretended not to understand. Lee Hong, however, smiled openly. "Good team today."

Steven laughed loudly. "Yes, good team!"

When they closed the stall, Lee Hong helped Xinde carry the remaining goods back to the car. Sunset shone upon Bondi Beach; the sand was golden, and waves still rolled in layer after layer. Tourists gradually dispersed, market canopies were folded one by one, and the bustle slowly receded like the tide. Xinde closed the trunk and let out a long breath.

"Not bad today," he said.

"How much did you earn?"

“After deducting the stall fee, probably over three hundred.”

Lee Hong nodded. “More solid than writing an article.”

Xinde smiled. “And faster than writing a thesis.”

The two stood beside the car and looked at the sea for a while. Lee Hong suddenly felt that this day was more real than any scenic spot she had visited in Sydney. The Opera House was magnificent, the Harbour Bridge grand, and Bondi’s waves beautiful, but what truly warmed her heart was this small stall, Steven’s laughter, the sound of tourists bargaining, and the grounded expression on Xinde’s face as he handed out towels one by one.

She thought that sometimes a person does not fall in love with life again in grand places, but before a small stall, amid sea wind and the sound of coins, suddenly discovers that she is still willing to laugh, willing to help, willing to stay.

On the road back, the car smelled of cardboard boxes, and also of the salty sea wind left behind. Lee Hong sat in the passenger seat, watching the sky outside gradually darken, her heart quiet and bright.

Xinde asked, “Tired?”

Leaning back against the seat, Lee Hong smiled and said, “Tired. But this kind of tiredness is clear too.”

Xinde paused, then smiled as well.

The car followed the coastal road back toward Maroubra. The remaining goods in the trunk swayed gently, like the days of a little boat after work was done. In the distance, the waves were still sounding, as though sending the day’s laughter and human voices back into the night on their behalf.



CHAPTER 74

HALF OF TRUE FEELING IS SEAWATER

By the time they returned to Maroubra that day, the sky had gone completely dark.

The car stopped in the yard. There were still several boxes of goods left in the trunk, the corners of the cardboard worn fuzzy from being moved back and forth. Xinde carried the folding table, the coin box, and the remaining towels into the house, and Lee Hong helped by holding a box of socks. They had spent the entire day under the sun at Bondi Market. Though the sea wind was cool, the sun had been fierce; their clothes clung to their bodies, sweat drying and wetting again, wetting and drying again. When the two of them stepped through the door, both felt a kind of fatigue as if life had kneaded them firmly from head to toe.

But it was not a hateful kind of tiredness.

It was clear, clean, countable: a stall fee of one hundred Australian dollars, more than three hundred dollars of net earnings, boxes of goods fewer than before, the ice water Steven had handed them, tourists' laughter, and the waves in the distance rolling ashore layer after layer. Lee Hong thought that this day had not been like an interview, nor like tourism. It was more as if she had truly lived once inside the days of people in a foreign land.

Xinde simply cooked noodles, and they ate quietly. Goods were still piled beside the table, and in the air there was a

faint smell of cotton textiles and laundry powder. After Lee Hong finished eating, she put down her chopsticks and said, "I need to take a shower, otherwise I feel like a salted fish dried in the sun."

Xinde lowered his head to gather the bowls and smiled. "The bathroom is inside. There's enough hot water. Use a new towel. After all, what I have most here is towels."

Lee Hong smiled too. "A man who sells towels, at least, won't leave his guest without one."

She took her clothes and went in. The bathroom was not large: old tiles, and a little trace of steam left around the mirror. When the hot water came on, white mist slowly rose, and the sweat, grains of sand, sea wind, and marketplace noise of the day retreated little by little in the sound of water. Lee Hong stood beneath the water with her eyes closed and suddenly felt that all the things inside her body that had been tight for many years were also being softened by the heat.

It had been a long time since she had relaxed like this.

At the newspaper, she was always rushing somewhere; at interview sites, she was always recording; in Shanghai, watching Yide and those young people wrestle with fate, she too had been tense on their behalf. When she came to Australia, she thought she was only clearing her mind. But after these past days, layer by layer, she discovered that what had loosened was not only her mood, but also her dependence on her old identity. She was no longer only a reporter, no longer only an observer of other people's stories. At this moment, she was simply a woman, in a disorderly little house by the sea in a foreign country, washing off a day's sweat and preparing to meet a night whose shape she did not yet know.

When she was nearly done, she realized that the clean towel had been left a little too far away, and that the door was only half closed. She called out, "Xinde, could you pass me that large towel outside?"

There was a moment of stillness outside, then came his footsteps.

The door was gently pushed open.

Xinde stood at the doorway, holding a pale new towel in his hand. Originally, it should have been an ordinary moment. But steam drifted outward, the light was soft, and when Lee Hong turned to look at him, both of them suddenly stopped. She did not panic, nor did she cover herself in flustered embarrassment. She only looked at him quietly. The Lee Hong who had called out "Good towel, very cheap" in the market during the day was gone. Before him was a woman washed clean of her fatigue by hot water: slender, yet warm; unshowy, yet carrying the clarity and softness particular to a woman of Jiangnan.

Xinde instinctively looked away, his face reddening at once.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice very low. "I'll leave the towel here."

But Lee Hong said softly, "It's all right."

Those three words were very light, yet they were like the wind outside the door suddenly stopping.

Xinde lifted his head. In Lee Hong's eyes he saw no blame, only a tremor that was equally difficult to name. During these days, they had walked by the sea together, eaten together, bought groceries together, carried goods together, and spent a day under the sun at Bondi Market together. Many words had not been spoken openly, yet between heart and heart there

had long been an invisible little path. At this moment, in the steam and lamplight, that path suddenly became clear.

He stepped closer and handed her the towel. She reached out to take it, and her fingertips touched the back of his hand. Both of them trembled slightly. The towel slipped down, and Lee Hong's pale, clean naked body was completely revealed before Xinde. Her two small peaks still carried the heat of the bath, deeply alluring.

No one spoke again.

Lee Hong wrapped herself in the towel and still stood where she was. Xinde looked at her. At first there was panic in his eyes, then tenderness, and after that a heat he could no longer suppress. He was not a boy, nor was he ignorant of matters between men and women. But over these years of wandering, study, stall-keeping, and living alone, he had long pressed many thoughts beneath the weight of daily life. Lee Hong's arrival was like a gust of wind, first blowing open the stuffiness of the house, and then opening those corners of his heart he had thought were already quiet.

Lee Hong asked softly, "Are you afraid?"

Xinde's throat moved. "Yes."

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid this is not what you want."

Lee Hong looked at him and suddenly smiled. There was a little fatigue in that smile, and also a little tenderness. "If I did not want it, would I let you stand here?"

When this sentence fell, it was as though a lamp had truly been lit.

Xinde reached out, at first only holding her wrist. Lee Hong did not avoid him. Instead, she took one step forward, closer to him. The moisture of the hot water still remained on her body, her skin warm, and droplets fell from the ends of

her hair onto the back of his hand. That little drop was like a spark—so light it could not be lighter, yet it made both of them lose the strength to go on pretending calm.

They embraced.

At first the embrace was somewhat awkward, carrying hesitation, the fatigue of travel, and the ache of suddenly meeting after long loneliness. Xinde's hands were restrained, as though he feared startling her, and also feared startling himself. But Lee Hong slowly relaxed, resting her face against his shoulder. She smelled on him the scent of cardboard boxes, sea wind, and laundry powder. It was not perfume, not alcohol, not the greasy smell of banquets, but a poor and true breath of life.

They slowly retreated from the bathroom doorway into the bedroom.

Outside the window, the night was quiet, and from far away came the low sound of waves. There were no splendid lights in the room, no roses, no deliberately arranged romance. There was only a temporarily made bed, two boxes of towels still against the wall, and the clothes she had changed out of during the day hanging over the back of a chair. Yet precisely because of this, the night seemed especially real. Two tired people had not met in some place of pleasure, nor in a scene arranged by a story. Amid the traces of making a living filling one room, they suddenly admitted that they needed warmth from each other.

Leaning by the bed, Lee Hong said softly, "I am not young anymore."

Xinde looked at her. "I am not so young that I understand nothing."

"I'm afraid tomorrow will be awkward."

“Then let tomorrow be awkward tomorrow,” Xinde said gently. “Tonight, let’s not think that far.”

Hearing this, Lee Hong’s eyes grew a little wet, but she smiled. “You philosopher have finally learned to say one sentence that is not philosophy.”

After that, words gradually became fewer.

They drew close in the night like two rivers that had once flowed separately, and after many winding roads finally met for a while in a quiet harbor. Lee Hong’s fatigue, loneliness, and softness pressed down by the years slowly loosened in this embrace; Xinde’s restraint, hesitation, and the coldness accumulated through long wandering also slowly melted in her response. They were in no hurry to prove anything. They only searched in each other for a kind of confirmation: that they could still be needed, still be cherished, still be settled by another person’s body warmth on an ordinary night in a foreign land.

Outside the window, waves struck the shore again and again.

The sound was not fervent, but deep, as though covering for them all the movements inside the room that could not be spoken of too plainly. Occasionally, car lights swept through the crack in the curtains and quickly disappeared. The world remained vast, the city still strange, but on this bed, distance, identity, age, and past all temporarily withdrew. What remained were two bodies and two hearts, finally no longer supporting themselves alone after fatigue.

Deep in the night, everything quieted.

Lee Hong slept beside him, her breathing light and even. But Xinde could not fall asleep for a while. In the faint light, he saw her clothes draped over the back of the chair. One piece of intimate clothing had been washed thin at the edge,

and in one corner there was an inconspicuous little hole. The hole was very small; if the light had not fallen there just so, it would almost have been invisible.

Xinde's heart suddenly ached.

He thought of Lee Hong during the day at the market, smiling as she helped him sell towels, bargaining, carrying boxes, drinking the ice water Steven had handed over. He thought of her standing on the Bund in Shanghai, looking at the Huangpu River and saying that she had written too many stories of other people, while her own story had become fewer and fewer. He also remembered Yide mentioning that her family was from the countryside of Anji in Zhejiang. Anji had bamboo seas and tea mountains, and later gradually developed, but life for country people was not wealthy for every household. Many Jiangnan women looked fresh and respectable on the surface, yet behind the scenes lived very frugally, mending and wearing the same clothes again and again, saving a little money and then saving a little more. She was a reporter, but she could not live only by interviewing and writing articles; she also had to help the newspaper bring in advertising and corporate sponsorship. She had written of the splendor of the age, yet she herself had perhaps not truly enjoyed much splendor.

At that moment, Xinde's desire for her slowly turned into pity, and from pity arose a deeper closeness.

He gently pulled the quilt over her.

Lee Hong seemed to wake a little and murmured, "What is it?"

"Nothing," Xinde said softly. "I'm afraid you'll be cold."

She did not open her eyes, only moved a little closer to him.

Xinde looked into the darkness and suddenly felt that sometimes people meet not because both are so complete, but precisely because each carries gaps of their own. Usually those gaps are hidden inside clothes, smiles, writing, philosophy. Once they are seen, one can no longer bear to push the other person far away.

Outside the house, the night of Maroubra was very deep.

Sea wind passed through the trees beyond the window, gently stirring the leaves. In the living room, towels and socks were piled up; in the garage there were still goods not yet sold. When the sun rose tomorrow, they would still have to face life, money, roads, identity, and this relationship that had not yet been clearly spoken. But tonight, Xinde only felt that this disorderly little house was suddenly no longer shabby.

It was like a small boat, moored by the sea in the Southern Hemisphere.

On the boat there were goods, books, fatigue, and also two people keeping each other warm.

From that night on, Lee Hong never again mentioned returning to a hotel.

Nor did Xinde ever again say, "I'll sleep on the sofa." The house was still the same house. Several boxes of unsold towels and socks still stood in the living room, and in the dining-room corner there were still the folding table, clothes rack, and coin box. Yet everything seemed changed. Those cardboard boxes that had once looked chaotic now seemed like the background of life; the little bed that had only been a temporary place for a guest had become the softest refuge for two people by the sea in a foreign land.

By day, Xinde still went to class.

He carried his old schoolbag out, while Lee Hong stayed in the house reading, writing a few lines of notes, occasionally

going to the nearby shopping center for groceries, or walking slowly along the streets of Maroubra. She grew more and more familiar with the sunlight here, the sea wind, the low houses, and the flowering shrubs by the road, and also with Xinde's rhythm of life: class in the morning, sorting goods in the afternoon, buying groceries toward evening, reading at night. Only now, when he came home, he was no longer a person opening the door alone; someone was waiting inside.

Sometimes Lee Hong would be stir-frying in the kitchen. Hearing the key turn, she would look back and say, "The philosopher has returned?"

Xinde would set down his schoolbag and smile. "Today the professor stopped me again."

"Then eat first. Life's questions can wait until after dinner."

This later became a joke between them. Many great questions, once they entered this little house, first had to yield to rice, vegetables, hot soup, and washing dishes. Yet precisely in these small, fragmented days, they slowly tasted a peace neither had known before. Lee Hong was no longer like a newspaper reporter always ready to run toward other people's stories, and Xinde was no longer like a lonely international student facing books and goods alone. The two ate together, washed dishes together, calculated how much stock to take on the weekend together; even silence had warmth.

Night was another kind of tenderness.

Sea wind slipped in through the window cracks, and far away the waves sounded again and again. After the lights were turned off, the house grew quiet, leaving only their breathing. Xinde often felt that Lee Hong carried a clarity of Jiangnan waterways: cheerful when helping him sell goods

by day, yet when she came close at night, so soft it made one's heart ache. Lee Hong also discovered that Xinde was not as thin and calm as he looked. In his embrace there was heat pressed down for many years, a scholar's clumsiness, and a man's deep feeling.

They were not in a hurry to speak of love, yet they lived mutual reliance into love.

Sometimes only an embrace was enough to lay down the fatigue of a whole day; sometimes a softly spoken question was enough to warm both hearts. Physical closeness did not take away the quiet of the soul. Instead, it gave the questions floating in the air somewhere to land. Lee Hong had once thought the body was merely a vessel for fatigue; Xinde had once thought meaning could only be sought in books. Later they came to understand that if a person has never truly been held, much philosophy will seem too cold.

On weekends, they went together to set up the stall.

Before dawn, Xinde loaded the goods, and Lee Hong counted them. Socks, towels, sweaters, price signs, the coin box—one by one, everything went into the car. By the time they reached the market, the sea wind was already rising. On the Bondi side, people flowed like woven threads: tourists, surfers, local elders, young backpackers all slowly gathered in the sunlight. Seeing them from far away, Steven would raise his sunglasses and call, “Sean! Ruby! Good team again!”

Lee Hong would answer with a smile, “Good business today!”

After a day of selling, both of them would be exhausted, aching in waist and legs, yet there was a grounded joy in it. They sold several boxes of goods, took in several hundred Australian dollars, bought two coffees, and sat on the steps by the sea to watch the waves. Lee Hong would often take off

her shoes and press her feet into the sand, watching young people run with surfboards in their arms. Xinde would sit beside her, holding the day's coins and his small notebook, carefully keeping accounts.

Seeing him lower his head and calculate money, Lee Hong could not help saying, "Ma Xinde, you are looking less and less like a philosopher."

Without lifting his head, Xinde said, "True philosophy should understand stall fees."

Lee Hong laughed. "And what about love?"

Xinde paused with his pen, looked at her, and said, "Love should understand that after closing the stall, two people go home together."

The words were simple, yet Lee Hong's heart suddenly softened.

At dusk, they often walked by the sea at Maroubra. The sunset dyed the water dark gold, and waves came up in white layers. Lee Hong walked beside him, letting the wind disarrange her hair without caring. In the past, she had always feared life going out of control, feared losing her identity if she left the newspaper, feared being forgotten by the world if she stopped writing. But now, on this small seashore in the Southern Hemisphere, she unexpectedly felt that for the first time, she did not need to prove anything to anyone.

Once, after standing by the sea for a long time, she suddenly said, "Xinde, I don't want to go back."

Xinde looked at her. "Not go back to China?"

"Mm." Her voice was soft. "At least not now. If I go back, it will be the newspaper again, interviews, pages, banquets, leaders, acquaintances. It feels as if I have already climbed out of that shell. I don't want to crawl back in."

Xinde did not answer immediately. He only reached out and held her hand.

Lee Hong continued, "Here is hard too—selling goods, cooking, counting money, everything is concrete. But my heart is lighter. Sweat in the day, shower at night; sleep when tired, laugh when I want to laugh. Your place is messy, but it is cleaner than my old life."

As Xinde listened, warmth rose in his heart, and also an ache. He knew she was not being willful for a moment. When a woman says she does not want to go back, it is often not because the distant place is perfect, but because the hometown holds too much old fatigue.

He said softly, "Then stay for now. We will slowly think of a way."

Lee Hong looked at the sea and nodded.

At that moment, sea wind blew from behind them, gently brushing the edges of their clothes together. In the distance, someone laughed, a dog ran across the beach, and surfers walked toward shore with boards in their arms. The world had given them no guarantee, but they were not in a hurry to ask for guarantees. Two people in a foreign land, with a little house, an old car, several boxes of goods, a bed, and a stretch of sea, could unexpectedly live their days with fresh light.

Lee Hong thought that perhaps a new life was not sudden wealth, not a clear future, not everything arranged properly.

It was waking together in a strange place, making a living together, growing tired together, taking joy together; and at dusk, still being able to hold hands and go look at the sea.

That alone was already very good.



CHAPTER 75

LIFE'S UNEXPECTED TURNS

Good days do not break all at once.

They first broke on a very small morning.

That day, Xinde woke later than usual. The day before, they had returned from the market so exhausted they even saved their words. They had not cooked dinner properly, only bought McDonald's by the roadside—hamburgers, fries, cola—and after eating, each had showered and slept. In the early morning, the shops on the streets of Chatswood had not yet fully opened, and downstairs one could occasionally hear delivery trucks stopping. When Xinde went into the bathroom, he was still thinking about his morning class and the boxes of socks he needed to sort in the afternoon. But when he lowered his head and looked, his heart suddenly sank.

Blood in the stool.

At first, there was only a small amount. He thought it was fatigue, internal heat, or perhaps something he had eaten. After he began setting up stalls, his diet had become increasingly irregular. On weekends he left before dawn; breakfast was often a cup of coffee and a hamburger. At noon, he ate fish and chips beside the market. At night, he came home too tired, casually boiled noodles, ate canned food, or made do with fast food. Lee Hong had warned him, "Sooner or later your stomach and intestines will protest." He always smiled and said, "Let them hold on until this batch of goods is sold."

But the body is not merchandise. It does not wait for clearance.

Several days passed, and the situation did not improve. Xinde began to have abdominal pain and diarrhea, and his complexion grew worse and worse. Lee Hong saw it and felt her heart tighten. One day, after returning from the Chinese restaurant where she worked, she saw him sitting by the table drinking plain water, a thin layer of sweat on his forehead. She hung the apron in her hand over the back of a chair and said, "Go to the hospital."

Xinde still wanted to delay. "Maybe it will be better in another two days."

Lee Hong looked at him. "You can study philosophy, sell socks, and save on rent, but you cannot save on illness. Ma Xinde, go to the hospital."

Her words were not heavy, but they were firm. Xinde knew that she was truly afraid, and he argued no more.

They went to St George Hospital.

The Australian hospital was spacious and clean. In the waiting area sat people of different skin colors: elderly people, children, and men in work uniforms. Xinde sat in a chair, gripping the examination form in his hand, and suddenly felt very small. In the past, he had loved talking about life, meaning, freedom, and faith. But once pain fell upon the body, many grand questions first retreated to one side. A person must first be able to eat, sleep, not suffer pain, and leave the house with peace of mind.

The doctor asked in great detail: when it began, how much bleeding, where the abdominal pain was, what his recent diet had been like, whether he was under stress. Xinde answered slowly in English, saying he was a student and also sold goods at weekend markets, that he had been very tired

recently and had not eaten well. The doctor nodded and arranged tests. Later, he underwent a colonoscopy. The preparation was exhausting; the bowel cleansing left his whole body weak. Lee Hong stayed with him the entire time, pouring water, handing tissues, arranging clothes, speaking little, yet remembering everything clearly.

The result was ulcerative colitis.

The name did not sound especially frightening, yet it was a grinding illness. The doctor said it was a chronic inflammatory bowel disease, possibly related to immunity, stress, constitution, and diet. It required medication to control and could easily relapse. Xinde half understood and half did not, but two English words remained firmly in his mind: chronic, relapse. Chronic. Relapse. Like two damp little stones, they pressed heavily on his heart.

He stayed in the hospital for several days.

The ward was beside a window, and outside there was a little shadow of trees. Nurses delivered medicine, measured his temperature, and asked about symptoms on schedule, their manner gentle. After taking Western medicine, the bleeding eased slightly, and the abdominal pain lessened somewhat. When Lee Hong did not have work, she stayed with him at the hospital; when she had to go sell dim sum at the restaurant, she first cooked him a little plain congee, packed it in a thermos, and brought it over. She had originally been a reporter, someone who held a pen; now she skillfully chose rice and ginger in Chinese supermarkets, asking which vegetables nourished the stomach and which foods a patient should not eat.

Watching her come and go so busily, Xinde felt guilty. "Don't run here every day. It's too tiring."

Sitting beside the bed, Lee Hong lowered her head to peel an apple. "If I don't run here, are you going to discuss Kant with the hospital bed?"

Xinde smiled bitterly. "Hospital beds don't understand German."

"Then all the more reason not to discuss it." Lee Hong cut the apple into small pieces. "Eat something."

A few days later, the doctor prescribed medicine and told him to go home and continue recuperating. Back in the little Chatswood place, Xinde had thought he would soon recover, but illness was not so obedient. Today he was a little better; tomorrow it flared again. Medicine could suppress it, but once he grew tired or ate the wrong thing, discomfort returned. Two or three months passed, and the illness still did not completely leave its root.

During this time, they had already moved from Maroubra to Chatswood.

The reason was very practical. Maroubra was near the sea and had a good environment, but rent was not cheap, and buying groceries was not convenient. After Xinde fell ill, he could no longer often set up stalls, so income decreased, but expenses did not. Chatswood was a large Chinese area in Sydney's south, with many Chinese signs and supermarkets, roast-meat shops, dim sum bakeries, Chinese medicine shops, butcher shops, and fruit and vegetable stores. It had everything needed for daily life, was convenient, and saved money. There was no Maroubra sea wind here, but there was a steadiness that came from Chinese people gathering together to live.

They rented a cheaper place. Not far downstairs was a Chinese supermarket, and around the corner was a small shop selling greens and tofu. Lee Hong also found work

selling dim sum in a Chinese restaurant. In the morning she helped set out steamers, at noon she greeted customers, and in the afternoon she packed orders and worked the register. The work was not easy; her hands were often reddened by steam, and her feet ached from standing. But the wage was steady, enough to supplement rent and daily expenses. The first time she came home wearing the restaurant apron, she deliberately turned once in front of Xinde. “Do I look like an Australian career woman?”

Xinde sat by the table drinking congee, his face still somewhat pale, but he smiled. “Like a queen who controls the fate of siu mai and barbecue pork buns.”

Lee Hong placed half a box of dim sum she had brought back onto the table. “A reward from the queen. But the patient can only eat bland food. These are for looking at.”

After moving to Chatswood, life became somewhat steadier, yet Xinde’s heart was still not light. He could no longer spend whole days running weekend markets as before. Goods moved more slowly, and the number of stalls decreased. In class, sometimes he would sit for a while and then feel abdominal pain, and could only quietly leave the room. His philosophy books still lay open on the table, and those sentences about meaning, existence, and freedom remained lofty, but his body repeatedly reminded him that a person cannot live only inside thought.

One evening, he called his elder brother in Beijing.

His eldest brother Rende had originally studied Western medicine and later continued his studies at Beijing University of Chinese Medicine. After the call connected, Xinde slowly told him about the examination at St George Hospital, the colonoscopy result, the diagnosis of ulcerative colitis, and the fact that after two or three months of Western medication, it

still kept recurring. Rende listened very carefully on the other end, then asked in detail: how many bowel movements a day, what color the bleeding was, where the abdominal pain was, how his appetite was, how he slept, whether his weight had dropped, whether his tongue coating was thick, whether he usually feared cold or heat.

Xinde answered each question one by one.

After a moment of silence, Rende said, "Take the Western medicine as the doctor instructed. Do not stop it carelessly. But with this repeated failure to heal, and with your constitution damaged by overwork and diet, it would be best for you to come back for a trip and see a Chinese medicine doctor in Beijing. Regulating the spleen and stomach, the intestines, and your overall condition may help."

"Back to Beijing?" Xinde hesitated.

"Only to see the illness. I am not telling you to come back and stay," Rende said. "You still have to study and live in Australia. If the illness is unstable, it will drag you down. Come back, have a consultation, get some prescriptions, regulate yourself, and then return once you are better. Don't just endure it."

These words settled Xinde a little.

After hanging up, he sat by the table for a long time. Lee Hong came out of the kitchen carrying a bowl of very soft plain congee. Seeing that his expression was not right, she asked, "What did your brother say?"

Xinde said, "He wants me to go back to Beijing to see a Chinese medicine doctor. Not to go back long-term—just to see the illness, recover, and then return."

Lee Hong did not speak immediately. She placed the congee before him, sat down, and gently stirred the edge of the bowl. "Then go back."

Xinde looked at her. "If I leave, what will you do here alone?"

Lee Hong smiled. "I am not a child. The restaurant work is steady, and I can cover the rent for now. This is Chatswood—Chinese shops everywhere. Buying groceries and cooking are more convenient for me than for you. Leave your goods here for now. It does not matter if you set up fewer stalls. Your health matters."

Warmth rose in Xinde's heart, and also shame. "I should have been the one taking care of you."

Lee Hong lifted her eyes to him. "When two people are together, it is not a matter of who should take care of whom. You are sick, so I care for you. Later, if I am tired, you care for me. Very fair."

The words were plain, yet Xinde's eyes grew faintly sour.

Over the next few days, they began preparing for his return to Beijing for treatment. Xinde bought the plane ticket and organized his medical records, photocopying the colonoscopy report, blood-test results, and the names of the medicine the doctor had prescribed. Lee Hong separated the pills box by box, writing notes on slips of paper to make the dosage clear, and packed several loose, comfortable pieces of clothing for him. She also specially went to the Chinese supermarket to buy dried tangerine peel and several packets of rice. "Don't eat carelessly on the road. When you reach Beijing, drink congee first too. Don't let your family feed you fish and meat as soon as you get back."

Xinde smiled. "You are more like a doctor than the doctor now."

"I am protecting my patient," Lee Hong said.

On the night before his departure, they did not go out, but ate a simple dinner at home: plain congee, steamed egg, and

a little greens. Outside the window, the streetlights of Chatswood were on, and downstairs one could faintly hear Cantonese and Mandarin mixed together. This place was lively, practical, and reassuring. Looking at the little room, thinking that he would soon leave temporarily and soon return, Xinde instead felt steady.

After dinner, Lee Hong sat by the bed and checked his luggage once more.

“Come back when you are well,” she said.

“Of course I’ll come back,” Xinde answered quickly.

Lee Hong looked up at him. “Don’t go back and let your family persuade you to stay in China.”

Xinde shook his head. “I won’t. Here I have my courses, and these unsold goods.”

He paused, then said softly, “And you.”

Lee Hong lowered her head and continued folding clothes, but the corners of her mouth slowly curved.

That night, the little room in Chatswood was very quiet. There was no sound of waves, no market clamor, only two people arranging a brief parting with careful steadiness. Beijing was only a destination for healing, not a fork in fate. Xinde was going back to restore his body; and after he recovered, he would return to Australia, to Lee Hong’s side, to this life that had begun again.



CHAPTER 76

RENDE CAME TO STUDY ONLY BECAUSE HIS HEART HELD THE SUFFERING OF ALL BEINGS

Beijing University of Traditional Chinese Medicine stood in the northeastern part of the capital, far from the clamor of imperial palaces, yet possessing its own scholarly air. The campus was not luxurious. Its buildings were plain. When autumn wind rose, the locust trees and gingko leaves by the road turned half yellow. In the teaching buildings, one could often hear lectures on the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon, the Treatise on Cold Damage, and the Essential Prescriptions from the Golden Cabinet. In the classrooms sat young students, as well as doctors from hospitals around the country who had come for further study. In the air mingled the smells of chalk dust, old book paper, and the herbal fragrance of the pharmacy. Every day, Rende attended lectures, copied prescriptions, and followed clinical consultations, like a student beginning anew—humble and quiet.

He did not become self-satisfied because he had ten years of experience in Western medicine, nor did he look down on Western medicine because he had turned to studying Chinese medicine. He only came to believe more and more that a true physician should not be confined by sectarian gates. What can save in emergency should be used in emergency; what can regulate the root should be used for the root. When knife

and drugs are needed, one must not avoid knife and drugs; when qi and blood should be observed, one must not stare only at machine indicators. It was in this state of mind that, upon hearing that Xinde suffered repeated bloody stools, abdominal pain, and a long illness that would not heal, he urged him to return to Beijing for a trip, so that he could examine him face to face and slowly regulate his condition.

That year, autumn came early to Beijing. The sky was high and the clouds pale. There was already coldness in the mornings and evenings. The fragrance of roasted sweet potatoes at the hutong entrance drifted outward with the wind, and fallen leaves on the campus were swept up layer after layer. When Xinde dragged his weak and ailing body into this ancient and chilly city, he did not know that this journey for treatment would leave another deep turning point in his elder brother's new path of Chinese medicine, and also in his own wandering life.

Rende first took his younger brother to the affiliated Chinese medicine hospital of Beijing University of Chinese Medicine for another examination.

Xinde had seen Western doctors in Australia, undergone a colonoscopy, and been diagnosed with ulcerative colitis. He had taken many medicines, yet the illness kept recurring and never seemed to leave its root. Rende did not dare judge solely from old reports. He personally accompanied him to register, draw blood, and repeat the colonoscopy, and also invited his teacher in gastroenterology and an old specialist of Chinese internal medicine to consult together. The hospital was crowded. In the corridors spread the particular grass-and-wood smell of a Chinese pharmacy, and patients came and went with slips of paper in hand. Xinde sat on a bench, his face pale, so thin that his cheekbones showed, yet he still

forced a smile and said, "Brother, is my illness rather troublesome?"

Rende looked at him, his voice gentle. "Illness may be troublesome. People cannot be afraid of trouble."

After the examination results came out, the condition was considered clear. The Western medical diagnosis remained ulcerative colitis. In Chinese medical pattern differentiation, it was mostly seen as spleen deficiency with damp-heat, injury to the intestinal collaterals, also mixed with yin damaged by long illness and insufficiency of qi and blood. After listening to the teachers' analysis, Rende filled several pages of notes. Back at his own lodging, he settled Xinde in the small room by the window, changed the bedding to clean quilts, and instructed him to eat lightly during this period, forbidding cold drinks, forbidding greasy and spicy foods, and forbidding him to stay up late reading those abstruse philosophy books.

Xinde smiled bitterly. "Brother, life is already bitter enough. You won't even let me read?"

Rende was organizing the prescription. He looked up and said, "You may read, but do not read yourself even more depleted. Philosophy cannot save your intestines. Drink the congee first."

Xinde was stunned by his words, then burst into laughter. The laughter was very light, yet it added a bit of long-absent vitality to the little room.

From that day on, Rende personally took his younger brother's pulse every day. Before going to class in the morning, he first sat beside Xinde's bed, gently placing three fingers on his brother's wrist. Outside the window, Beijing's autumn wind blew past, and ginkgo leaves fell in the courtyard. Inside, it was so quiet that only the brothers'

breathing could be heard. Sometimes Rende would close his eyes for a long while before asking softly, “How many times did your abdomen hurt last night? Has the bleeding decreased? Are you thirsty? Do you fear cold or heat?”

Xinde answered each question. Rende then deliberated over additions and subtractions on the prescription paper: atracylodes, poria, coptis, white peony, sanguisorba, sophora flower, honey-fried licorice; sometimes he added smoked plum, sometimes astragalus, and sometimes removed bitter-cold herbs, fearing they would injure the spleen and stomach. Each herb he wrote down seemed to give his own heart a place to settle. His younger brother was a patient, and also kin. This prescription was both a medical case and an elder brother’s concern.

After the herbs were brought back, Rende decocted them himself. On the small coal stove, the earthenware pot bubbled, and the medicinal vapor gradually spread, bitter with a trace of sweetness, astringent with warmth. Smelling it, Xinde frowned. “Brother, this smell is simply like boiling an entire mountain into the pot.”

Rende handed him the medicine bowl. “Mountains can nourish people. Drink.”

Holding the dark brown medicinal liquid, Xinde blew on it again and again, then suddenly said softly, “Brother, you are different from before.”

Rende asked, “Different how?”

“Before, you were like a lamp in a hospital. Bright, yes, but far from people. Now you are like a stove. There is bitterness, and also heat.”

Rende paused and did not speak.

By day, he still returned to the university for class. He listened to lectures on the Treatise on Cold Damage, read the

Essential Prescriptions from the Golden Cabinet, and followed his teachers in copying prescriptions, observing tongues, and differentiating pulses. In the classroom, he was a silent and serious middle-aged student; back at his lodging, he was elder brother, physician, and the one who decocted the medicine. At night beneath the lamp, he recorded Xinde's symptoms, pulse signs, tongue coating, and responses to prescriptions one by one into his notebook, both treating his younger brother's illness and accumulating the most real medical case material for his own renewed study of Chinese medicine.

Sometimes Xinde's abdomen hurt in the middle of the night, and Rende would rise with a coat over his shoulders, pour him warm water, gently massage his abdomen, and say softly, "Endure a little. When illness has lasted long, improvement too has to come inch by inch."

Looking at his elder brother's thin profile, Xinde suddenly remembered how, when he was small and fell on the mountain road of Heavenly Temple, Rende had also bent down like this to pat the mud from him. Only after drifting around a foreign country and then returning weak with illness to Beijing did he realize that the words elder brother were not merely a form of address.

During those autumn days, Beijing's wind grew colder and colder, and the leaves in the courtyard became fewer day by day. But in Rende's little room, the fragrance of medicine rose every day. Bowl after bowl of bitter medicine went down, and Xinde's bloody stools gradually lessened. The abdominal pain also eased, and at last a little color returned to his face. Rende did not speak of joy; he only wrote four characters lightly beside the prescription:

"Righteous qi gradually restored."

At that moment, he felt that his return to the medical path was not vain. At least this younger brother before his eyes was returning little by little from illness.

After Xinde stayed with Rende, he rested by day and read by night. At first, he merely flipped casually through the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon, the Treatise on Cold Damage, and the Essential Prescriptions from the Golden Cabinet on his brother's desk. Later, however, he gradually began reading them with real attention.

Those ancient books were very different from the philosophy books he had read at Fudan. Western philosophy often contended by way of concepts: existence, substance, freedom, will, reason, layer upon layer of deduction, like palaces built of stone. But the words in the old medical texts were like clear water in the mountains. In only a few sentences, they spoke through the human body, life and death, heaven and earth, and illness. When Xinde read in the Plain Questions that the Yellow Emperor asked Qi Bo, "What are deficiency and excess?" and Qi Bo replied, "When pathogenic qi is abundant, there is excess; when essence qi is taken away, there is deficiency," he put down the book and stared in silence for a long time.

That night, wind rose in Beijing. Outside the window, phoenix-tree leaves rustled. In the room, medicine was decocting on the small coal stove, and the earthenware pot made a slight sound. Rende had just returned from the university. Putting down his schoolbag and seeing Xinde holding the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon in a daze, he asked, "What are you reading so absorbedly?"

Xinde raised his head. "Brother, this sentence is truly powerful. 'When pathogenic qi is abundant, there is excess; when essence qi is taken away, there is deficiency.' Such a

complicated pathology is spoken almost like everyday language.”

Rende smiled and sat down by the table. “That is the good thing about the Inner Canon. It does not go in circles. Deficiency means righteous qi is insufficient; excess means pathogenic qi is too strong. Illness is not always judged by a single name. First one must see whether within the body there is too much of what should not be too much, or too little of what should not be too little.”

Xinde thought for a while. “That is rather like presence and absence in philosophy. Excess is some external force occupying the body; deficiency is life’s own root being taken away.”

Rende nodded. “That way of saying it is not wrong. For example, your intestinal illness this time is not only the name ‘ulcerative colitis.’ Western medicine looks at inflammation of the intestinal mucosa, ulcers, and immune reactions; all these are important. But Chinese medicine must also ask: why does it recur? Is damp-heat lingering? Is the spleen qi weak? Has long illness damaged yin? Are qi and blood insufficient? When pathogenic qi is abundant, one must clear, transform, and expel it. When righteous qi is deficient, one must support, nourish, and supplement it. If one only attacks the pathogen without considering the righteous qi, the person becomes more deficient; if one only supplements the righteous qi without expelling the pathogen, the illness remains.”

Xinde smiled. “Then life is the same. When a person has afflictions, it may not only be because there are too many bad things; it may also be because the inside is too empty.”

Rende glanced at him. “You studied philosophy, and now you have learned to see illness.”

Xinde leaned back against the chair. His face was still pale, yet his eyes had brightened a little. “I used to feel that Chinese medicine was mysterious: yin and yang, the five phases, zang-fu organs, meridians and collaterals—as if none of it could be verified. But after reading these past few days, I feel it is not mysterious. It is a different language for speaking of the order of life. The dialogue between the Yellow Emperor and Qi Bo has a very particular tone: clear, open, decisive. It does not hurry to persuade you, yet it makes one believe without realizing it.”

Rende said, “Because it was not imagined empty in a study. The ancients had no microscope, no CT scan, no blood tests, but they had eyes, hands, and long observation. How a person has fever, how he fears cold, how he eats, how he sleeps, how his pulse feels, how the seasons change—over a long time, these formed a way of seeing the person. Later physicians built upon the Inner Canon, developing six-channel pattern differentiation, defense-qi-nutrient-blood differentiation, triple-burner differentiation, slowly establishing yin and yang, the five phases, visceral manifestations, pulse studies, causes and mechanisms of disease, treatment methods, prescriptions, and medicinals. It did not come into being overnight. It was polished over a thousand years by patients and doctors together.”

Xinde turned the pages and softly read, “Human beings correspond with heaven and earth.”

Hearing this sentence, Rende’s expression grew slightly solemn.

Xinde asked, “Brother, do you think this sentence is medicine, or philosophy?”

Rende said, “Both.”

He rose and poured the medicine from the earthenware pot. Dark brown liquid fell into a porcelain bowl, steam curling upward. Rende placed the medicine before Xinde and said, "Drink first. After you drink, we can talk about the unity of heaven and humanity."

Xinde accepted it with a frown. "You Chinese medicine people discuss unity of heaven and humanity only after making people suffer first."

Rende said lightly, "Treatment originally requires a little bitterness. If philosophy only makes people comfortable, it may not be true philosophy either."

Xinde was choked into a laugh, then lowered his head and drank the medicine. Bitterness flowed down his throat, yet gradually there was a warmth in his abdomen.

Only then did Rende continue. "Buddhism speaks of causes and conditions; Confucianism speaks of central harmony; Daoism speaks of naturalness. None can be separated from the relationship between human beings and heaven and earth. The Inner Canon says: human beings are born from earth, their lives suspended from heaven; heaven and earth combine their qi, and this is called human life. It means people do not live alone. Heaven has cold and heat; earth has dryness and dampness; people have diet and labor, joy and anger, worry and thought. When the weather changes, the body changes. When diet is disordered, the spleen and stomach are injured. When emotions are constrained, the qi dynamic stagnates. If a person lives against heaven and earth, against the body's own nature, illness naturally comes."

Xinde said softly, "So the phrase 'the Way is to know astronomy above, geography below, and human affairs in

between; then one can endure for long' is not only the Way of the physician, but also the Way of life."

Looking at his younger brother, there was a little comfort in Rende's eyes. "You understand quickly."

But Xinde shook his head. "It is not that I understand quickly. It is that after being tossed around abroad these years, and after my body broke down, I finally know that philosophy cannot only be thought. A person is not merely a head, nor merely a set of ideas. A person becomes hungry, cold, passes blood, fears, loses sleep. In the past, when I spoke of freedom, it was as though freedom meant being able to go wherever one wished. Now I know that if the body is not free, one cannot go anywhere."

Rende was silent for a moment, then said, "That is why Chinese medicine speaks of nourishing life. It is not fear of death, nor greed for life. It is letting a person live according to the principles of life. Sleep when it is time to sleep, eat when it is time to eat, keep rhythm with the four seasons, and keep emotions within measure. Modern people believe this least of all: staying up late, drinking cold drinks, overeating, anxiety, greed for speed. Once ill, they hope one injection, one medicine, will immediately suppress it. It can be suppressed for a time, but not at the root."

Xinde lowered his head and looked at his hands. "Did my illness come from this too?"

Rende did not answer immediately.

The wind outside grew tighter, and autumn deepened. Looking at his younger brother's thin face, Rende thought of him in Australia, studying by day and making a living by night, eating McDonald's and cold food, running back and forth in exhaustion, with such heavy thoughts. He said softly, "Illness does not come in one day, and one dose of medicine

cannot take it away in one day. You are young, and your righteous qi is still there; it has only been consumed too harshly. Now we must slowly support the spleen and stomach, clear out the damp-heat, and nourish the intestinal collaterals. Treating illness is like repairing a road. If mud and stones block it, they must be cleared; if the roadbed has collapsed, it must be rebuilt; if the water flows wrongly, it must be guided."

Xinde listened in absorption and suddenly said, "Brother, before, when I read Buddhism, it said all sentient beings suffer; when I read Confucianism, it spoke of cultivating the self and regulating the family; when I read Daoism, it said human beings follow earth, earth follows heaven, heaven follows the Way, and the Way follows what is natural. Now, reading the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon, I finally feel that these sayings are not lofty mysterious principles high above us. They actually all fall into the body. The body is a small heaven and earth."

Rende nodded. "Perhaps the most valuable thing about Chinese medicine lies here. It does not split the person apart. Illness is not alone in the lungs, liver, spleen, or stomach. Illness lies in disharmony between the person and heaven and earth, and also in disharmony between the person and himself."

Looking at the little dark liquid left at the bottom of the medicine bowl, Xinde said softly, "Then treating illness is helping a person reconcile again?"

Rende paused.

This sentence was like a small stone falling deep into his heart.

He thought of Shiya, of Jiawen, of the cracks that had not yet reconciled between himself and Western medicine,

Chinese medicine, and fate. After a long while, he said softly, “Yes. Treating illness means helping pathogen and righteousness reconcile, cold and heat reconcile, qi and blood reconcile, organs and bowels reconcile. If one speaks still more deeply, it is also helping a person reconcile with heaven and earth, with life, and with his own suffering.”

Looking at his elder brother, Xinde suddenly understood that Rende studied Chinese medicine not only to heal others, but also to heal himself.

In the room, the fragrance of medicine gradually faded, and outside the window, the autumn wind gradually cooled. The two brothers sat facing each other beneath the lamp: one moving from Western medicine toward Chinese medicine, the other from philosophy toward a suffering body. The ancient book lay open on the table, and those questions and answers from two thousand years ago, across the long years, still struck the human heart like a clear bell.

Xinde gently closed the book and said, “Brother, when I recover, I also want to properly read the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon.”

Rende put away the medicine bowl and smiled faintly. “First drink tonight’s congee.”

Xinde sighed. “See? In the end, Chinese medicine still comes down to eating congee.”

Rende said, “The great Way of heaven and earth must also begin from a bowl of congee.”

The two brothers looked at each other and laughed. The laughter was light, yet in the little room on an autumn night in Beijing, it added a bit of warm vitality.



CHAPTER 77

A PERSON'S FACE IS ALSO THE PALACE OF THE PERSON

One afternoon, the autumn sun in Beijing was just right. Rende had just returned from the university after listening to a lecture on Warm Disease Studies. In the courtyard, locust leaves had fallen all over the ground. Xinde was leaning by the window reading the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon, half a bowl of warm congee at his side, while the fragrance of medicine had not yet fully dispersed. Suddenly someone knocked at the door. Rende opened it and saw that the visitor was a professor from his class, surnamed Shen. Professor Shen originally saw patients in the gastroenterology department of the affiliated Chinese medicine hospital, and now also taught the advanced-study class. He was about fifty, with clear brows and eyes, not given to many words, but highly skilled in clinical practice.

Professor Shen smiled and said, "I heard your younger brother came back from Australia to regulate his illness. I happened to be passing by today, so I came to have a look."

Rende hurriedly invited him inside. Xinde rose to salute him, but Professor Shen waved his hand. "A patient need not be polite. Sit and speak. Your elder brother has examined you very carefully these past few days. I have only come to help sort things through."

The three sat around the small table. Outside the window, wind stirred the fallen leaves; inside, a stove of medicinal

vapor filled the room. It was as though the place had temporarily become a small consultation room.

Professor Shen first asked, “When you were in Australia, what was the diagnosis?”

Xinde said, “Western medicine said it was ulcerative colitis. I had a colonoscopy. The bloody stool, abdominal pain, and diarrhea kept recurring. When it flared, it happened several times a day, and I became very weak.”

Professor Shen nodded. “What medicines did they use in Australia?”

Xinde thought for a moment. “At first, they used aminosalicylates, something like sulfasalazine, saying it was anti-inflammatory. After I took it, I had headaches and nausea, and my abdomen actually became more uncomfortable. Sometimes the diarrhea was also severe. Later, when there was an acute flare, they said corticosteroids could be used to reduce inflammation. But I heard that if those are used long-term, they can cause mood changes, osteoporosis, and may affect blood sugar, so I was frightened. The doctor also mentioned immunosuppressants, such as azathioprine, saying they could be considered in serious cases. But when I looked up the information, the risks of liver damage, infection, and even cancer made me afraid to touch them lightly.”

Rende added from the side, “Besides drug control, Western medicine also has surgical options for severe cases. But this illness is not easy to cure at the root. Most treatment controls inflammation, relieves symptoms, and prevents recurrence. Xinde is still young, and the course of illness is not yet too long. I do not want him to go too early toward steroids or immunosuppressants.”

Professor Shen reached out and took Xinde's pulse. His three fingers rested on the wrist; after closing his eyes for a moment, he looked again at the tongue coating. Xinde's tongue body was somewhat red, the coating yellow and greasy, yet with little fluid. Professor Shen asked, "Where is the abdominal pain? What is the color of the blood? Is there bitterness in the mouth? How is urination?"

Xinde answered one by one. "Mostly in the lower abdomen. Sometimes a dull ache, sometimes cramping pain. The blood is sometimes fresh, sometimes dark. There is bitterness in the mouth and dryness, but if I drink too much, I feel bloated. The urine is yellowish and not very smooth."

Professor Shen withdrew his hand and looked toward Rende. "How do you see it?"

After pondering briefly, Rende said, "Although this illness is named ulcerative colitis, from the Chinese medical point of view it is close to what the ancients called bloody dysentery. Its root lies in spleen deficiency, while its manifestation lies in damp-heat. Damp-heat accumulates in the large intestine and forces blood to move recklessly, therefore there is bloody stool. Heat pathogen lies within, rushing and pressing against the intestines, therefore there is abdominal pain and diarrhea. After long dysentery, righteous qi is consumed; the pathogen enters the yin aspect, and one also sees heat from yin deficiency. Therefore the illness lingers, sometimes light, sometimes heavy."

Professor Shen nodded slightly. "Continue."

Encouraged, Rende went on. "I also thought of what the Inner Canon says about the lung and large intestine being externally and internally related. If lung qi fails to diffuse, or lung heat moves downward to the large intestine, the heat pathogen lodges within and becomes constrained in the

intestines. It may also involve impaired qi transformation of the bladder, so the urine becomes yellow and rough. If one only sees bleeding and stops bleeding, or only sees diarrhea and stops diarrhea, I fear it would be shutting the door while leaving the bandits inside. In treatment, we should take the idea of ‘unblocking because there is blockage.’ It should not be only astringing and stopping, but guiding heat downward, clearing and promoting urination through the bladder, so that qi transformation can move and damp-heat has a way out.”

Xinde half understood and half did not. He frowned and said, “Brother, do you mean that even when I have diarrhea, we cannot just stop it?”

Rende looked at him. “The pathogen is still inside. If you forcefully stop it, the surface may look better, but inside it becomes more chaotic. It is like smoke in a room. You cannot simply seal all the windows.”

Professor Shen smiled. “That is a good comparison.”

He continued, “Your illness at first was mostly due to irregular diet and overwork injuring the spleen, plus a foreign climate and imbalance of cold and heat, giving rise to internal damp-heat. After long illness, the intestinal collaterals were damaged, yin and blood were consumed, and righteous qi became deficient while the pathogen lingered. So treatment cannot be simple. In the acute stage, clear damp-heat, cool the blood, and stop dysentery. In the slower stage, strengthen the spleen, nourish yin, regulate qi, and harmonize the center. If there is an unresolved exterior pathogen, one must first use acrid-cool methods to release the exterior, so the external pathogen has a way to leave. When internal heat is obvious, then use bitter-cold medicinals to clear the interior and guide heat downward. Clear without

injuring the righteous qi; supplement without retaining the pathogen. This is the measure.”

Xinde smiled bitterly. “It sounds even more complicated than philosophy.”

Professor Shen said, “Philosophy talks about why people live. Medicine talks about how people go on living. Neither is simple.”

Rende asked, “Teacher, should the formula still be adjusted?”

Professor Shen took the prescription paper Rende had written and read it once. “You use atracylodes and poria to care for the spleen, coptis and scutellaria to clear heat and dry dampness, white peony to ease urgency and relieve pain, sanguisorba and sophora flower to cool blood and stop bleeding, and honey-fried licorice to harmonize. The thinking is correct. But he has been ill for a long time, and the yin aspect has already been injured; bitter-cold medicinals must not be excessive. You may add smoked plum in appropriate amount, which astringes without sealing in the pathogen, and combine it with a small amount of raw rehmannia and ophiopogon to nourish yin and clear heat. If yellow, rough urination is obvious, you may add plantain seed and akebia-type medicinals to lead heat out through the urine. Once the bloody stool stops and abdominal pain eases, then turn toward strengthening the spleen, supplementing qi, nourishing yin, and harmonizing the collaterals.”

Xinde listened carefully, then suddenly asked, “Professor Shen, does this count as a root cure in Chinese medicine?”

Professor Shen did not answer immediately.

He lifted the teacup and slowly took a sip before saying, “For many illnesses in this world, one should not speak lightly of root cures. Western medicine has its honesty when

it says this illness is difficult to cure at the root and can only be controlled long term. Chinese medicine also must not boast that one formula will sever the root. So-called treatment is the restoration of the body's disordered balance. If diet, labor, emotions, and daily rhythm remain chaotic, damp-heat will still be generated and righteous qi will still be consumed, and recurrence will happen. If righteous qi gradually recovers, the pathogen gradually retreats, and the intestinal collaterals are nourished, recurrences will become fewer, even absent for many years. That is real skill."

Xinde said softly, "So the patient must also participate in healing."

Rende said, "Of course. The doctor's formula only helps you up. The road still has to be walked by you."

Professor Shen looked at the two brothers, and there was some satisfaction in his eyes. "Rende, you come from Western medicine and have ten years of clinical experience in a major hospital. That is your foundation. Now that you are studying Chinese medicine, the greatest fear is two kinds of bias. One is forcibly applying Western medical thinking to Chinese medicine, breaking Chinese medicine down into a few components and indicators. The other is entirely rejecting Western medicine because Western medicine has shortcomings. A truly good doctor does not argue over schools. He only argues for whether the patient can suffer less."

Rende nodded solemnly. "I think the same. Western medicine saves in emergency; Chinese medicine regulates the root. Western medicine looks at lesions; Chinese medicine looks at the whole person. If both can be studied seriously, perhaps patients will have one more road."

Professor Shen said, “In recent years, the state has gradually seen this too. For a period in the past, Chinese medicine was belittled and pushed to the margins. Many ancient formulas, teacher lineages, and folk experiences nearly broke off. Now, from the central government to local authorities, there is renewed emphasis that Chinese medicine is a national treasure, a storehouse left by our ancestors. Establishing Chinese medicine universities, restoring classical education, organizing the experience of famous elder Chinese medicine doctors, and supporting the construction of Chinese medicine hospitals—all of this is meant to continue this root.”

Xinde asked, “But many people now still believe machines, laboratory tests, and imported drugs, and do not much believe Chinese medicine.”

Professor Shen smiled faintly. “That is normal too. Trust is not shouted into being through slogans. For Chinese medicine to revive, it cannot rely only on national attention, nor only on patients’ nostalgia. It must rely on efficacy, medical ethics, and generation after generation of doctors reading the classics thoroughly and doing clinical work well. If ancient Chinese medicine is only a plaque hanging on the wall, it will become decoration. If it can truly allow patients to avoid unnecessary surgery, suffer less, and waste less money, then it will return to people’s hearts.”

Hearing this, Rende’s heart stirred slightly.

He thought of those wards in Canton Hospital where one bed was hard to find, thought of Shiya, and thought of Xinde returning weak from Australia. The road of modern medicine had become more and more precise, and also more and more expensive. If the road of ancient Chinese medicine could reconnect between the classics and reality, perhaps it truly could open another door for many patients.

Before Professor Shen left, he took Xinde's pulse once more and said, "Do not rush this illness. First bring down the damp-heat, then support the righteous qi. Drink congee. Do not touch cold food. Do not stay up late. And do not let your heart become too heavy. You who study philosophy should not always use your brain to torment your intestines."

Xinde laughed. "Professor, that sentence is more bitter than the medicine."

Professor Shen smiled too. "Good medicine is bitter to the mouth. Good words are the same."

After seeing Professor Shen off, the room became quiet. Rende copied the formula again, his handwriting upright and neat. Sitting beside him and watching his elder brother lower his head to write the prescription, Xinde suddenly said softly, "Brother, this road of yours seems not to be for yourself alone."

Rende's pen paused.

After a moment, he said, "For the patients, and for Shiya, and for you."

Xinde said nothing more.

Outside the window, autumn wind passed through. Beijing's sky was high and clear. In the little room, the fragrance of medicine rose once more, bitter yet not muddy, like a wisp of smoke from ancient medicine rekindled in the new age. Both brothers knew that this one bowl of medicine could not solve all the suffering under heaven, but at least at this moment, it was helping one young man returned from wandering gather his scattered life back little by little.

During his studies in Chinese medicine in Beijing, Rende gradually gained his own understanding over two years.

When he first arrived, he still carried the habits of Western medicine. When seeing illness, he first thought of laboratory

tests, imaging, indicators, pathology, and pharmacology. Later, after following his teachers in clinical practice for a long time, he finally understood that in Chinese medicine, the first glance at a person had already begun the diagnosis. How a person walks when entering the door, how his breath is when he sits down, whether his voice is loud or low, whether his eyes are bright and moist or floating and scattered, whether his complexion has spirit or no spirit, whether his hands and feet are warm or cold, whether his appetite is open or defeated—none of these are idle details. They are the writing of life showing outwardly.

In his notes, he wrote: A person's complexion is like the luster of pearl and jade. A truly healthy person is not necessarily fair-skinned, nor necessarily ruddy. Rather, the five colors each return to their proper place, with spirit, root, and light. If a pearl is round and moist within, its luster shines outward from inside; then one knows the righteous qi is abundant. If the color is vivid yet floating and unstable, or dull and withered, then one knows qi and blood have lost harmony.

Thus he began to understand “observation diagnosis” anew.

If a person's usual complexion is red, as long as the redness has spirit, and the spirit and qi are kept within, it is not necessarily illness. People in Lingnan often live in damp-heat places; some have a constitution leaning toward yang, or vigorous qi and blood throughout the years, so redness in the face may simply be their natural color. But if someone who is usually not red suddenly becomes flushed and feverish after falling ill, with thirst and restlessness, it is often an excess pathogen with blazing fire, heat attacking upward. If a chronically ill person whose face was originally gray and

defeated suddenly has red cheeks, even red in an abnormal way, one must not take it lightly. If the red is like a rooster's comb, there may still be a thread of life; but if the red is dark and stagnant, like blood stasis floating on the face, it is an ominous sign of righteous qi about to collapse and deficient yang floating outward. That is not improvement; it is the last flare of a dying lamp.

The same is true of blue-green.

Some people are normally blue-green in complexion yet have spirit, clear eyes, firm sinews and bones; this is not considered disease. But if during illness the complexion turns blue-green, it is often related to the liver. The liver governs the sinews, stores blood, and governs free coursing; blue-green is the color of liver wood. If the blue-green is bright, there is still vitality. If it is blue-green like withered grass, dim and without light, one knows the liver qi is failing and life is not flourishing. Rende thought of severe patients he had seen in the hospital before, their faces blue-gray and the areas around their lips dark. At that time, he only thought of hypoxia and circulatory failure. Now, seeing again, he felt that what the ancients called "distinguishing life and death by the five colors" was not empty talk.

White belongs to the lung.

Some people are naturally pale, yet have spirit; their skin is clear and moist, their voice not weak, and their breathing calm. That is abundant lung qi and clear qi and blood, not a diseased state. But if after illness the face suddenly becomes white, white without luster, spirit and qi not gathering, and the voice low, this is often lung qi deficiency and insufficiency of qi and blood. If the white is like cold frost spread over the face, one must be more alert. In burn wards, Rende had seen patients after blood loss, shock, and infection. That kind of

white was not cleanliness; it was emptiness after the tide of life had receded.

Yellow belongs to the spleen and stomach.

A face that is usually yellow but has spirit is not necessarily illness. Farmers exposed to wind and sun, or people of an earthy constitution, may have a yellow glow to the face; if diet is normal and spirit sufficient, it may instead show the thickness of spleen earth. But if yellow appears during illness, it must be differentiated. Yellow with fever, abdominal distention, and foul breath often means food accumulation in the stomach, with turbid heat obstructing within. Yellow without spirit, with fatigue and reluctance to speak, is often qi deficiency, the spleen failing to transform and transport. From this, Rende valued stomach qi still more. In his notes, he repeatedly wrote: With stomach qi, there is life; without stomach qi, there is danger. However grave the illness, if the patient can still eat, still knows hunger, and can still accept medicine, there is a turning point. If once the appetite collapses, soups and water cannot enter, and both medicine and food are rejected, it is like the supply line of an army being cut. Danger suddenly increases.

Black belongs to the kidney.

Some people are born dark in complexion, or have long lived under the sun. As long as the black has spirit, the eyes are bright, and the waist and knees are strong, it is not disease. But if after falling ill the complexion suddenly turns black, then it is a problem. Black that is moist and has spirit means kidney qi is still present. Black that is withered and without spirit, like smoke and dust covering the face, often means kidney qi is failing and water and fire do not support each other. Rende thought of many patients with chronic illness, long illness, and decline; at the end, their faces

became dark and dull, their eyes sank, as though the entire life had withdrawn deep inside. That was the image of kidney qi nearing exhaustion.

These understandings made Rende more and more reverent toward the “person.”

Western medicine had taught him to look at lesions; Chinese medicine taught him to look at the whole atmosphere of life. Lesions could show on films, but the atmosphere of life revealed itself through brows and eyes, skin color, voice, appetite, hands, and feet. Sometimes the lesion was very small, yet the person had already declined; sometimes the lesion was large, yet stomach qi remained and spirit remained, and the person still had strength for a fight. If a doctor only stares at machines, he may miss a person’s vitality; if he relies only on feeling and does not ask for evidence, he may enter delusion. The more Rende studied, the more he felt that the true medical Way lay precisely in seeking impartiality between the two.

At night, he often read the Inner Canon. When he read, “In treating illness, one must examine above and below, accord with the pulse signs, observe the will and intention, and assess the patient’s capacity for illness,” he could not help circling it again and again. Treating illness is not only looking at the disease name. To examine above and below means examining the body inside and outside, its rising, descending, entering, and exiting. To accord with the pulse signs means examining the abundance and decline of qi and blood, cold and heat, deficiency and excess. To observe the will and intention means looking at the person’s mind, emotions, and will. To assess the patient’s capacity for illness means seeing how much disease-resisting strength this person still has. Whether a person can recover lies not only in

medicine, but also in his righteous qi, stomach qi, willpower, and the fire of the life gate.

Rende therefore reorganized his understanding of the diseases of the five viscera.

“All wind, shaking, and dizziness belong to liver wood.” When wind moves, there is shaking; when the liver fails to course freely and the sinews and vessels lose nourishment, there are dizziness, twitching, and trembling. But liver disease is not only abnormal liver tests. It may also be a person’s long-term depression, anger, repression, and failure of qi to move smoothly.

“All pain, itching, sores, and ulcers belong to heart fire.” Fire-heat smokes and scorches; the blood vessels are not at peace. Sores and ulcers become red, swollen, and painful, or the skin itches unbearably. Fire toxin is often seen. But heart fire is not only sores of the mouth and tongue; it may also be desire too strong and the heart spirit unsettled.

“All dampness, swelling, and fullness belong to spleen earth.” Dampness is heavy and turbid. When the spleen fails to transform and transport, water-dampness collects, producing swelling, fullness, heaviness, and oppression. If a person eats too richly, thinks too much, sits long and moves little, spleen earth is pressed down.

“All qi surging and constraint, and wilting disorders, belong to lung metal.” When the qi dynamic does not diffuse, becomes constrained and rebels upward, or when the lung fails to descend and purify, wheezing, cough, chest oppression, and weakness may arise. The lung governs the qi of the whole body and also governs the opening and closing of skin and hair. Between heaven and earth, a person’s first breath and last breath are both related to the lung.

“All cold, contraction, and pulling belong to kidney water.” Cold causes contraction and pulling. When kidney yang is insufficient and warming is without authority, one sees fear of cold, sinews and vessels drawn tight, and cold pain of the waist and knees. In the deepest place, a person is still supported by that little true yang within the kidney.

He gradually understood that when Chinese medicine speaks of the five phases, it does not force human beings into five rigid boxes of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. Rather, it borrows the images of heaven and earth’s movements to explain the mutual generation and restraint within human life. Liver wood must course; heart fire must be bright; spleen earth must transport; lung metal must descend; kidney water must store. When the five are harmonious, the person is at peace. When one place becomes biased, the hundred illnesses arise.

But however many illnesses there are, in the end they must return to yin and yang.

At the end of his notes, Rende wrote one heavy line:

All illnesses must ultimately be sought in yin and yang.

When yang qi is excessive, the body is hot without sweating; when yin qi is excessive, there is much sweating and a cold body. When fire is abundant, there is heat; when yang is deficient, there is cold. Excess is fire; insufficiency is cold. Yang transforms into qi; yin forms substance. Qi can move; form can carry. Yang warms; yin moistens and nourishes. If there is only yang and no yin, dryness and intensity burn the body. If there is only yin and no yang, cold and dampness congeal and stagnate. When a physician writes a prescription, he is regulating bias and rescuing error between yin and yang.

He especially valued yang qi.

In the Western hospital, he had spoken of circulation, metabolism, immunity, and energy supply. Now, reading Chinese medicine, he discovered that the ancients had long used the two characters yang qi to summarize the upward fire of life. To preserve one portion of yang qi is to preserve one portion of life. Warm hands and feet are favorable; cold hands and feet are adverse. However grave the patient, if the hands and feet remain warm, stomach qi remains, and consciousness remains clear, there is vitality. If the hands and feet are reversal-cold, sweat pours like oil, and the gaze scatters, this is a sign that yin and yang are about to separate.

These principles sounded ancient, yet they cut deeply into life.

Rende often thought that this was true of a person's life, and also true of a person's fate. If there remains one bit of yang qi in the heart, one will not be completely crushed by suffering. After Shiya left, he had once nearly grown cold to the bottom of his heart. His marriage had scattered, and his old beliefs had also shattered. If not for that one portion of physician's vow-power refusing to retreat, perhaps he would already have sunk into darkness. Chinese medicine says to preserve yang qi; is life not also preserving that little fire in the heart? If that little fire is extinguished, then however good the house, status, and wealth may be, they are only cold ashes.

When he read Qi Bo's words to the Yellow Emperor—"When the five officials are already distinguished, the palace court must be open; then the bright hall is established. If the bright hall is broad and great, the screens and barriers appear outside, the square walls and high foundation are raised, the hanging parts draw down outside, and the five colors are

regulated, level, broad, and great, then one's life reaches a hundred years"—he wrote beside it:

A person's face is also the palace of the person.

When the five facial features are upright, the court and gates open, the bright hall broad, and the complexion harmonized, one knows that qi and blood are sufficient, the organs and bowels at peace, and the heart spirit has a master. A person's face is not only skin and flesh; it is also the palace of his inner life. If the heart is broad, qi is relaxed; if the stomach is harmonious, color is moist; if the kidney is sufficient, the spirit is settled; if the lung is clear, the voice is bright; if the liver is free, the eyes are clear. "Appearance arises from the heart" is not superstition, but the long accumulation of qi, blood, and spirit on the face and eyes.

The more Rende studied, the more he felt that Chinese medicine and life were originally one.

In treating illness, one must distinguish deficiency and excess; in being a person, one must also distinguish deficiency and excess. Someone forceful on the outside is not necessarily sufficient within; someone silent and gentle is not necessarily weak. When pathogenic qi is abundant, there is excess; when essence qi is taken away, there is deficiency. Many sufferings in life are due to external pathogens being too strong and must be driven out with effort; others are due to one's own emptiness and must be quietly nourished. Not attacking when one should attack is indulgence; attacking recklessly when one should supplement is harming people.

In treating illness, one must observe stomach qi; in being a person, one must also preserve the root. If a person can still eat, still sleep, and still hold a little goodwill toward others, there is hope of recovery. If even appetite, sleep, and kind

thoughts are damaged, one must be alert that the foundation of life has already been injured.

In treating illness, one must protect yang qi; in being a person, one must also protect that little heart turned toward life. However cold the world, however deep the illness, however ruthless fate, as long as there remains one portion of warmth in the heart, a person can still walk forward.

Two years later, when Rende looked back through his earliest notes, he suddenly felt moved. When he first came to Beijing, he came carrying the pain of losing his daughter, the wound of divorce, and doubts about Western medicine. Now, he had not found an answer that could explain everything, yet he had learned to look at people from a deeper place. Medicine is not the elimination of death, nor the expulsion of all illness and suffering. Medicine only allows the physician, amid impermanence, to see deficiency and excess, cold and heat, as clearly as possible; to protect righteous qi and stomach qi as much as possible; and when a person is about to fall, to support him with one hand.

Outside the window, autumn wind had come again.

Beijing's ginkgo leaves lay golden across the campus paths. Rende sat beneath the lamp and closed his notebook. On the stove, the fragrance of medicine rose faintly, and from a distant classroom came the sound of students reciting the classics. Suddenly he felt that the life of ancient Chinese medicine was not on paper, but in every taking of the pulse, every observation of complexion, every asking about illness, every hand extended to steady a patient.

People have five colors; illness has yin and yang; fate has flourishing and decline.

And what a physician can do is merely this: amid the great transformation of heaven and earth, to help a person guard that one portion of vitality not yet extinguished.



CHAPTER 78

RESEARCH IN INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE

During his studies at Beijing University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Rende attended lectures, followed clinical consultations, and copied prescriptions by day; at night he read the Inner Canon, the Treatise on Cold Damage, and the Essential Prescriptions from the Golden Cabinet. Gradually, he was no longer only a man who had come carrying pain in search of an answer.

At first, his study of Chinese medicine had begun from personal grief. Shiya's departure, the shattering of his marriage, and those costly yet cold instruments, drugs, and surgeries within the Western medical system had raised enormous questions in his heart. But the deeper he studied, the more he understood that true medicine cannot stop at one person's sorrow. If a doctor seeks only an explanation for his own wound, he can easily become obsessive; only when he places his own pain within the illness and suffering of sentient beings can he possibly walk out onto a road.

In earlier years, Rende had worked for many years at the Provincial People's Hospital. Because his father-in-law, Guo Xiaoquan, had overseen the cultural and educational front, Rende had also met experts and scholars from the Ministry of Health system at certain medical and public health meetings. After arriving in Beijing, he occasionally visited them. Some worked in health policy research departments, some took part in development planning for Chinese medicine, some were elder experts at national-level hospitals, and some were scholars in public health. They did not all believe in Chinese medicine, but neither did they casually dismiss it. Rende liked speaking with them, because when they looked at illness, they did not look only at a prescription. They also looked at a nation's disease structure, medical finance, population aging, and the larger currents of public health.

One evening, Rende went to visit an elder expert surnamed Lu.

Mr. Lu had worked for many years in the Ministry of Health system. His hair was gray-white, and he spoke slowly and clearly. His study was piled with documents and statistical materials. On the wall hung a map of China, densely marked with hospitals, disease control centers, and Chinese medicine research institutes across the country. Outside the window, Beijing's autumn wind passed through, locust leaves falling into the courtyard; inside, the fragrance of tea was faint.

Mr. Lu poured tea for Rende and smiled. "I hear you have been studying Chinese medicine very diligently these past two years. A Western-medicine attending physician from a burn department sitting back in a classroom to read the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon—that is not easy."

Rende said, “The more I study, the more I feel that the way I saw illness before was too narrow.”

“Oh?” Mr. Lu set down his teacup. “In what way narrow?”

Rende pondered for a moment and said, “In the hospital before, what I saw was: a patient came, burned, infected, in shock, and I saved him. If he could be saved, that was technique; if he could not, that was regret. Later I discovered that by the time many patients reached the hospital, it was already too late. Grave illness does not suddenly fall from the sky. It grows bit by bit from diet, labor, emotions, environment, poverty, and lack of medical knowledge. Western medicine is good at emergency rescue, but if a country relies only on emergency rescue, it will never be able to rescue everyone.”

Mr. Lu’s eyes brightened. “That touches public health.”

Rende said, “I now think that the highest strategy of medicine should be the prevention of major illness. Cancer, cardiovascular and cerebrovascular disease, diabetes, kidney disease, chronic liver disease, immune diseases—once these illnesses are dragged into late stages, money flows out like water, patients suffer, families collapse, and medical insurance also becomes unable to bear the weight. Western medicine has screening, testing, surgery, and drugs; these cannot be lacking. But Chinese medicine speaks of treating disease before it arises, regulating yin and yang, supporting righteous qi, moderating diet, harmonizing emotions, and following the four seasons. Perhaps it can play its role precisely at the front end.”

Mr. Lu nodded. “In these years, the state has also spoken of putting prevention first. But the problem is that slogans are easy; implementation is hard. Ordinary people often do not go to the hospital until illness knocks them down.

Doctors are paid by service items, and may not have the incentive to spend half an hour teaching people how to fall ill less often.”

Rende said, “That is why I want to begin from my own practice.”

“How would you begin?”

Rende opened the notebook he carried with him. Inside were densely written points. “First, establish chronic-disease constitution files. Not only measuring blood pressure, blood sugar, and blood lipids, but also observing complexion, tongue and pulse, sleep, appetite, urination and stool, warmth or coldness of hands and feet, emotions, labor, and fatigue. Second, carry out integrated Chinese and Western medical intervention for high-risk groups. For example: long-term late nights, obesity, fatty liver, constipation, recurring mouth ulcers, menstrual irregularities, allergic constitution, chronic gastrointestinal disease. In Western medicine, these may not all count as major illnesses; but in Chinese medicine, they are already imbalances of yin and yang, disturbances of the qi dynamic, and biases in the organs. If at this stage one regulates diet, daily rhythm, and constitution, it is far better than waiting to treat cancer, diabetes, or kidney failure.”

Mr. Lu listened carefully, then asked, “How will you avoid turning into the path of health supplements and wellness fraud?”

Rende’s expression became solemn. “This is exactly what I fear most. Restoring ancient Chinese medicine absolutely cannot become selling miracle formulas, secret prescriptions, and fear. For Chinese medicine to stand again, it must have medical ethics, clinical records, follow-up on treatment effects, and also modern medical testing. If blood tests should be done, do blood tests; if imaging should be done, do

imaging; when surgery is needed, it cannot be delayed. Chinese medicine does not replace everything. It supplements those places modern medicine does not see, cannot attend to, or cannot handle in time.”

Mr. Lu smiled. “You do not sound like an extreme believer in Chinese medicine. You sound like someone who has truly studied Western medicine.”

Rende smiled as well. “I am originally from Western medicine. I do not want to deny Western medicine. I have seen antibiotics save lives, surgery save lives, ICU care save lives. But I have also seen patients crushed by expenses, tortured by side effects, frightened by excessive testing, and driven into desperate corners by the four words ‘this is the only way.’ What I want to do is place one more checkpoint before knife and drugs, one more road of recovery after surgery, and allow the precision of Western medicine and the wholeness of Chinese medicine to stop despising one another.”

After a moment of silence, Mr. Lu suddenly asked, “Rende, have you ever thought that this road of yours will be very difficult?”

Rende nodded. “I have.”

“Where will the difficulty lie?”

“In the fact that the Western medical system may not truly accept Chinese medicine, and some people in Chinese medicine may be unwilling to accept modern standards. In the fact that hospitals need revenue, and preventing disease may not necessarily make money. In the fact that patients want speed, while regulating constitution is slow. In the fact that although national policy values Chinese medicine, implementation at the grassroots may turn into plaques, publicity, and formality. And what is harder still is that good

Chinese medicine doctors are too slow to train, while bad Chinese medicine doctors ruin the reputation too quickly.”

Mr. Lu looked at him and slowly said, “Since you know it is difficult, why do you still want to do it?”

Rende lowered his head and looked at the teacup. After a long while, he said, “Because I have seen too much too late.”

Once these four words were spoken, the room fell quiet.

Rende continued, “My daughter Shiya left too early. Many burn patients were brought in too late. Many cancer patients were discovered too late. Many poor people sought medical care too late. This country is so large, and its population so vast. If medicine always waits until people collapse before reaching out, it will always be one step too late. I dare not say Chinese medicine can solve everything, but the ideas within ancient Chinese medicine—treating illness before it arises, guarding righteous qi, following heaven and earth, observing the subtle to know the manifest—are exactly what we lack most today.”

Mr. Lu sighed softly. “You have placed your personal pain inside the pain of the nation.”

Rende raised his head. “It is not that I possess such a broad mind. It is that I increasingly feel personal fate and national fate were never separate. When ordinary people have many illnesses, the country grows heavy. When medical insurance pressure is high, the treasury grows heavy. When young and middle-aged adults collapse, families grow heavy. When children fall ill again and again, parents grow heavy. The strength of a country lies not only in factories, foreign trade, tall buildings, and railways, but also in whether its people have healthy bodies and hospital beds that are not so filled with fear.”

Mr. Lu slowly nodded. “That is worth writing down.”

Rende said, "After I graduate, I want to return to clinical work. I will not begin by seeking some high office, nor by rushing to establish some major institution. I want to start from one outpatient clinic, one group of patients, one set of medical cases. Combine Western medical examinations and Chinese medical pattern differentiation, and follow up over the long term. Which constitutions are likely to develop major illness? Which lifestyles most damage yang qi? Which chronic inflammations can be intervened in early? Which postoperative patients can restore original qi through Chinese medicine? Which children with repeated colds, allergies, and diarrhea can be regulated from the spleen, lung, and kidney? I want to make these things solid, little by little."

Mr. Lu said, "If done well, it can become a model. What the state needs is not a few legends of miracle doctors, but a path that can be promoted, verified, and used to train talent."

Rende's eyes brightened. "That is also what I think. Ancient Chinese medicine cannot hide only inside ancient books, nor remain only in oral transmission between master and disciple. If it is to re-enter modern China, it must preserve the spirit of the classics while facing contemporary hospitals, contemporary diseases, and contemporary systems. If integrated Chinese and Western medicine exists only in name, it is meaningless. If it can truly join forces in prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation, perhaps it can open a new road for Chinese medicine."

Mr. Lu stood and walked to the map of China on the wall.

Pointing at the map, he said, "Look. Such a large country. The southeastern coast is wealthy; the western borderlands are far away. Urban hospitals are crowded; rural grassroots care is weak. Major diseases are increasing, and population aging is accelerating. The state values Chinese medicine not

only because of cultural confidence, but also because of real need. If China's own medical resources cannot be used, and we rely only on the Western high-cost medical system, in the future no one will be able to bear it."

Rende also walked over and looked at the mountains, rivers, and provincial borders on the map. In his heart, a long-absent heat suddenly surged.

He thought of the mountains of Qianzhou, the hospital in Canton, the classroom in Beijing, Xinde's illness, Shiya's grave, and also the countless faces waiting beneath dim lights in hospital wards. A person's medical road, it turned out, could lead from one hospital bed toward the future of a nation.

Mr. Lu turned back to look at him. "Rende, if you truly want to do this, you must have patience. Ten years, twenty years—do not hurry for results. Medicine is not commerce, not journalism, and not a political-performance project. Things of true value always come slowly."

Rende closed his notebook and said solemnly, "I understand. My life has already been interrupted once by fate. If I can still walk from now on, then I will walk slowly, and walk a little deeper."

Mr. Lu looked at him and smiled faintly. "Good. In the past, you seemed not to seek advancement. Now it appears you intend to advance on another road."

Rende smiled too.

Outside the window, autumn wind stirred the locust leaves, and the sky gradually darkened. One by one, the lights of Beijing came on; in the distance, traffic sounded like a tide. Rende left Mr. Lu's home and walked slowly along the street back toward the university. The night wind was cold

and clear. He held that notebook in his arms, but in his heart there was a fire.

That fire was not the ambition of youth, nor desire for official career.

It was a heavier, more bitter, more steadfast vow-power.

He would begin with himself, with one prescription, one patient, one medical case, one clinic room. With the clear discernment of Western medicine, he would connect to the root and pulse of ancient Chinese medicine; with personal pain, he would enter the suffering of the nation; with a lifetime's medical Way, he would respond to the heavy and urgent question of this age:

How can people fall ill a little less, suffer a little less, and feel a little less despair in hospital corridors?

Rende knew this road would not be easy.

But he was no longer afraid of difficulty.



CHAPTER 79

XINDE RETURNED TO AUSTRALIA AFTER RECOVERY

Xinde stayed in Beijing for several months, and his illness, unexpectedly, improved day by day.

At first, there was only less bleeding, and the abdominal pain became lighter. Later, he could sleep through the night, and his appetite slowly opened. Rende still did not dare lower his guard. Every morning, he took his pulse, looked at his tongue coating, asked about urination and stool, carefully reduced the bitter-cold medicinals, and gradually shifted the treatment toward strengthening the spleen, nourishing yin, harmonizing the center, and securing the root. Beijing's winter turned from deep to shallow. Outside the window, accumulated snow melted into pools of clear water, and sparrows hopped back and forth beneath the eaves. The medicine stove in the little room still sounded every day, only the smell of the medicine was no longer so bitter and fierce; little by little, it gained a mild sweetness and warmth.

One morning, after Rende finished taking his pulse, his fingers paused for a moment before he gently let go.

Xinde asked, "Brother, how is it?"

Rende did not answer immediately, but looked at him carefully for a while. A few months earlier, Xinde's face had been pale, his eye sockets bluish, and even his speech carried a weak breath. Now his complexion had a moist glow, his eyes were bright again, and though he was still thin, he no longer looked like a sheet of paper wrinkled by the wind.

"It is all right now," Rende said. "The serious illness has passed. What remains is nourishment. After you go back, don't eat recklessly, don't stay up late, don't treat philosophy as food, and don't eat food as if it were your enemy."

Xinde laughed. "Your medical instructions are sounding more and more like Mother."

Rende smiled too. "You may not listen when a doctor speaks, but when Mother speaks, you should at least be a little afraid."

At the mention of their mother, both of them fell quiet.

Xinde lowered his head and touched the edge of the medicine bowl, saying softly, "Brother, I want to go back to Qianzhou first. I have been ill for so long; Father and Mother must have been uneasy. I also want to go home and have a look."

Rende nodded. "You should go back. You returned from Australia; if you did not go home, even if they said nothing, they would be waiting in their hearts."

"After that, I still have to go back," Xinde said. "Back to Australia, to continue studying, and also to keep thinking about which road I should take."

Rende looked at him. "You still want to study philosophy?"

Xinde thought for a moment. "Yes. But this time it will not only be the philosophy in books. After drinking bitter medicine here for several months, and watching you attend classes by day and decoct medicine at night, I have come to feel that life cannot be passed through simply by thinking it through. The body must be cared for, kin must be cherished, and suffering must be endured little by little until it is finished. If philosophy cannot descend into a bowl of congee, a prescription of medicine, and one journey home, then it is too light."

Hearing this, Rende's eyes showed some comfort.

"If you can think this way, then this illness was not suffered in vain."

On the night before they parted, the two brothers did not go to bed early. Rende cooked plain congee, stir-fried a small dish of greens, and sliced a few pieces of ginger. Looking at

the food on the table, Xinde sighed. "When I was in Australia, I was always thinking of freedom, of faraway places, of why people live. Now I finally know that sometimes a person lives simply in order to eat one proper hot meal."

Rende ladled congee for him. "A person who understands hot meals is more grounded than one who only understands freedom."

Xinde asked softly, "Brother, what about you? Will you always remain in Beijing?"

Rende looked at the fire in the stove and was silent for a while. "First, I will make my learning solid. Whether I return to Canton in the future, or where I will practice medicine, I have not yet decided. But one thing is settled: I will not return to the old state of seeing people only through knives, drugs, and indicators."

Looking at his elder brother's thin face, Xinde suddenly said, "If Shiya were here, she would surely be proud of you."

Rende's hand paused slightly.

The room was silent for a long time.

In the end, Rende said in a low voice, "I only hope she suffers a little less in heaven."

Xinde's eyes grew warm, and he said nothing more.

The next day, Rende took Xinde to the station. The chill of early spring still remained in Beijing, and the wind made the edges of people's clothes stiff. Before the station, the crowd flowed like a tide. The sound of suitcase wheels, announcements, and vendors' calls mingled together. Rende helped his younger brother settle his luggage, then took several packets of pills and a page filled with instructions from his bag.

"Keep these with you on the road. Don't take the pills carelessly; use them only if you truly feel unwell. When you

see Mother in Qianzhou, tell her not to over-supplement you. First nourish yourself lightly.”

Xinde accepted them and smiled. “Understood, Doctor Ma.”

Rende looked at him. “Also, when you reach Australia, write to me, or call. You are not allowed to report only good news and hide the bad.”

Xinde nodded. “You too. Don’t always bear everything alone.”

Rende did not answer. He only reached out and straightened the scarf around his neck. That gesture suddenly reminded Xinde of childhood: before he went to school, his elder brother had once adjusted his collar just like this. The years had turned in a great circle. He had returned weak from a foreign land, and now his elder brother had pulled him back, bit by bit, from illness into the human world.

When the train was about to depart, Xinde suddenly embraced Rende.

“Brother, thank you.”

Rende patted his back. “Between brothers, we do not say this.”

After Xinde boarded the train, he looked out through the window. Rende stood among the crowd, his white scarf lifted by the wind, his expression still quiet. The train slowly began to move, and Beijing’s streets gradually receded. Xinde suddenly understood in his heart that life’s far distance is not always in foreign countries, nor always inside philosophy books. Sometimes, the far distance is in a night when an elder brother keeps watch beside a medicine stove; in the lamp beneath which parents wait for you to return home; in a morning after illness has passed, when one can set out once again.

He would first return to Qianzhou, see his parents, eat a bowl of hot congee cooked by his mother, and listen to the few instructions his father would give.

Then he would return to Australia.

Continue studying, continue drifting, continue thinking about life.

Only this time, he knew that however far a person walked, he must not lose his roots.



CHAPTER 80

IN LIFE'S BITTER PLACES, ALL HAVE THEIR SEEKING

The day Xinde returned to Sydney, the night was faintly cool.

When the plane landed, the world outside the window was a field of lights. Sydney's night lay spread between the bay and the highways like black silk washed by rain, with the occasional thread of car lights winding in the distance. Xinde sat by the window, holding in his hand a small packet of pills he had brought back from Beijing and an amulet his mother Zhao Youlan had pressed upon him. In his heart, however, there was a lightness he had not felt for a long time.

He was well.

That hidden weakness inside his body, the thing that had faintly dragged at him, was like a long rain finally stopped. A few months earlier, when he had left this place, his face was pale, his abdomen hurt, he passed blood, and in his heart he feared both the illness and becoming a burden to Lee Hong. Now he had returned from Beijing, his complexion much better, his appetite opened, even his eyes brighter than before. He had not told Lee Hong in advance, wanting to give her a surprise. In his imagination, he would push the door open; Lee Hong would first be startled, then smile and scold him, "Why didn't you say something!" Then the two of them would embrace, and all the worry, hardship, and grievance of these months would be put down inside that one embrace.

He had even bought a small bottle of perfume at the airport duty-free shop.

It was not expensive, but it was a brand Lee Hong had once looked at a little longer before a shop window. He thought that a woman far from home, selling dim sum in a restaurant amid oil smoke and heat every day, ought to have a little fragrance that belonged only to herself.

Past ten at night, he dragged his suitcase back to Chatswood.

Most of the Chinese shops on the street had already closed; only a few roast-meat shops and convenience stores still had their lights on. Wind blew over from the railway bridge, carrying a little damp chill. The small building they rented was still where it had been. The corridor light was yellow and dim; in the corner were takeaway boxes and old newspapers. As Xinde carried his suitcase upstairs, his heart beat somewhat fast, like a boy secretly returning home.

He gently opened the door.

But the room was dark.

There was no smell of food, no television sound, no tapping of Lee Hong's slippers. The living room was empty. A thin layer of dust had fallen on the table. A water glass was turned upside down to one side. On the sofa lay one of her old coats, yet it looked as though its owner had not sat there properly in a long time. The bedroom door was half open. The bed was messy, the quilt cold. Xinde stood at the doorway, his suitcase still in his hand, and the joy in his heart suddenly seemed to be pinched out by someone's fingers.

At first, he thought she was working overtime.

The restaurant was busy, and returning late at night was common. He pushed his suitcase to the wall, turned on the light, boiled water, placed the perfume on the table, and called Lee Hong.

The phone rang for a long time before it was answered.

It was noisy on the other end. There was the sound of sea wind, and also what sounded like men's laughter. Lee Hong's voice was pressed low. "Hello?"

Xinde tried to keep his voice calm. "I'm back."

There was silence on the other end for several seconds.

"You... why did you come back today?"

"I wanted to give you a surprise." Xinde smiled a little, but the smile quickly stiffened. "Where are you?"

Lee Hong did not answer at once.

In those few seconds, Xinde heard something inside his heart slowly sink. If she were at the restaurant, she would say the restaurant directly; if at a friend's home, she would say a friend's home. But she was silent.

"I'm outside," she finally said.

"Outside where?"

“I’m not coming back tonight.” Her voice suddenly hardened. “It’s too late. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Xinde held the phone, the veins on the back of his hand slowly rising.

He wanted to ask many things. He wanted to ask who she was with, why she was not coming back, whether this was how she had waited for him while he was ill and away for months. But those words clogged his throat, and not one came out.

In the end, he only said, “All right.”

After the call ended, the room was terrifyingly quiet.

The kettle boiled, gurgling. Xinde stood without moving until hot water rushed from the spout and splashed onto the stove. Only then did he seem to wake and turn off the fire. That night, he did not sleep. He sat on the living-room sofa with the light on until dawn. The perfume bottle stood quietly on the table, its wrapping still unopened, like a joke that had come too late.

The next afternoon, Lee Hong returned.

She wore a dress unlike what she usually wore to work in the restaurant. Her hair had been curled, and there was fatigue on her face, but it was not the fatigue of working late. She pushed the door open and saw Xinde sitting in the living room. First she froze, then set down her bag.

“You didn’t sleep all night?”

Xinde looked at her. “Where did you go?”

Lee Hong avoided his eyes. “A friend’s place.”

“What friend?”

She was silent.

Xinde slowly stood. “Lee Hong, we have been together so long. Will you give me one truthful sentence?”

This sentence was like a key, opening a door that could never again be shut.

The matter was not complicated.

After Xinde left, Lee Hong lived alone in Chatswood. By day she sold dim sum in the Chinese restaurant, standing until her legs ached and smiling until her face stiffened. The restaurant proprietress was shrewd, the customers picky, the wages not high, and life tight. She had once been a supplement reporter for the People's Daily, once spoken of ideals, youth, and writing beside the cloud seas of the Yellow Mountain. Now she wore an apron, served siu mai, barbecue pork buns, and shrimp dumplings, and listened to customers urging her in Cantonese to hurry. She did not say it aloud, but inside she became emptier and emptier.

On weekends, she began going to Bondi Beach.

It was different from Chatswood there. Sunlight, waves, young white people, coffee, surfboards, tourists, open-air markets—everything was so bright it hurt the eyes. She helped Xinde's friend Steven set up his stall selling sunglasses. Steven's skin was reddened by the sun, his eyes blue, and his smile casual. He had his own house in the eastern suburbs, not far from the sea. He did not ask about her past, nor did he dislike her poor English. After closing the stall, he often invited her for coffee and said, "Ruby, you deserve a better life."

Half a year earlier, when someone called her Ruby, even her own name had seemed strange to her.

When Lee Hong heard him call her that again, her heart trembled faintly. She had changed her name from Li Huahong to Lee Hong in order to cast off a rustic air; now Steven calling her Ruby seemed to drape her in a layer of foreign light. She knew this light was not necessarily real. But

lonely people are often touched by light first, and only afterward remember to distinguish true from false.

“So you went to his place?” Xinde asked.

Lee Hong’s face turned pale. “I didn’t intend it that way at first.”

“Then how was it?”

“I don’t know either!” She suddenly raised her voice. “You were sick. You went back to Beijing. You had your brother, your parents, your home. But what about me? I was here alone, serving plates every day, calculating rent, train fares, next month’s visa, calculating when you would come back. I was afraid too. I was tired too. I didn’t want to live like this forever!”

Xinde’s chest tightened.

He wanted to be angry, and he was angry. Anger rushed up like fire, burning until his ears rang. In Beijing, he had swallowed bowl after bowl of bitter medicine, thinking of her at night. As soon as he recovered, he rushed back, full of the belief that the two of them could begin again. Yet she had spent the night in another man’s house. That humiliation was sharper than illness.

“When I was sick, what I feared most was burdening you,” Xinde said, his voice low and hoarse. “Every day I thought: once I recover, I will come back and live properly with you. And you? You were thinking about how to leave this poor place and live in a white man’s house in the eastern suburbs?”

Lee Hong was stabbed by his words, and tears came at once. “You think it was easy for me? I am not a saint. You Ma brothers each have more roads than the last—your eldest brother a doctor, your second brother in business, your third brother in the courts, your fourth brother in America, and

you, the fifth, studying philosophy. But what about me? I came from Beijing to Australia, my education is not recognized, I have no network, and I have no money. I do not want to go on being that woman in the restaurant, ordered about by everyone!”

“So Steven gives you a house, coffee, and an English name, and you feel you are no longer that woman?”

This sentence was too cruel.

Lee Hong’s face suddenly went white, as if she had been stripped naked in public. She looked at Xinde, with hatred in her eyes, and shame, and also an indescribable plea.

“Xinde, I know I wronged you,” she finally said in a low voice. “But I do not know how I got to this point either. At first I only helped set up the stall. Later he drove me home. After that... I did not want to come back and face this room. It was too cold, too poor, and too much like days with no end in sight.”

Xinde looked at her and suddenly felt that half the fire in his heart had gone out.

It was not that it no longer hurt, nor that he no longer hated.

Only that he saw her misery.

Lee Hong was not simply a woman greedy for vanity. She too had once had literary dreams, a reporter’s sharpness, and the clarity beneath a the Yellow Mountain sunrise. But life abroad had ground her lower bit by bit. Poverty, loneliness, the fall in status, the language environment, the humiliation of working, the unclear future—they were like an invisible net trapping her inside. Steven had merely opened what looked like a bright door at the very moment she most wanted to flee.

Only that door led precisely to betrayal.

Xinde sat back down on the sofa, as if he had suddenly aged several years.

“Do you love him?” he asked.

Lee Hong froze.

After a long while, she shook her head, then nodded, and finally gave a bitter smile. “I don’t know. Perhaps what I love is not him, but that kind of life. The sea, the house, not having to calculate money every day, not having to smile at the proprietress, not having to wait for a sick man to come back from Beijing.”

The words were cruel, but true.

Xinde closed his eyes.

The room was silent for a long time. Outside the window, a train passed; the rumbling came from the direction of Chatswood Station. The sound was like reality rolling over their youth, crushing the cloud seas of the Yellow Mountain, the Beijing address, their life together in Australia, and the waiting through illness, section by section, into the fading sound of rails.

Lee Hong walked to the table and saw the unopened bottle of perfume.

Her fingers gently touched the box, and her tears fell again.

“For me?”

Xinde did not look at her. “It was.”

Lee Hong covered her mouth and cried without sound.

Xinde suddenly felt very tired.

He remembered what his brother Rende had said: not all of life’s illnesses are in the body. Some illnesses are in desire, some in loneliness, some in the narrow places fate gives a person. Lee Hong was ill, and he was ill too. They had once believed love could resist the wind of a foreign land; only

later did they learn that if love has no money, identity, stability, and future supporting it, it too will be blown apart little by little by reality.

“Go,” Xinde said.

Lee Hong raised her head. “What?”

“Since you have already moved over there, go.” He spoke very slowly. “Do not want that house on one side, and still treat this place as a fallback on the other. A person can be weak, but should not keep lying to herself.”

Lee Hong shook her head through tears. “Xinde, I...”

“I hate you,” Xinde interrupted her, his voice low and clear. “Last night I hated you so much I wanted to smash everything here. But now I also feel you are pitiable. You are not so bad that you have no heart. You are only too afraid of suffering, so afraid that you grabbed something you should not have grabbed.”

Lee Hong stared at him.

Xinde continued, “I cannot bless you. I am not that generous. But I do not want to use hatred to destroy the rest of my own life. Go. If you live well later, then live well. If you do not, do not come back looking for me. Our road ends here.”

Lee Hong’s tears fell one by one.

She moved slowly as she packed her things: clothes, books, a few small ornaments, notebooks. At the end, she picked up the perfume, hesitated for a long time, then put it back on the table.

“I have no right to take it,” she said.

Xinde did not answer.

When the door closed, the room was empty again.

This emptiness was deeper than last night’s. Last night he had still been waiting for an explanation, waiting for the

possibility of turning back. Now the explanation had come, and there was no turning back. Xinde sat on the sofa and looked at the bottle of perfume on the table. Suddenly he laughed once. There was no mockery in the laugh, only the desolation of someone struck by fate.

He stood and opened the window.

Sydney's evening wind blew in from the streets of Chatswood, carrying the smells of the train station, roast-meat shops, damp leaves, and sea wind from far away. This city was still vast, still strange, and still unwilling to pity any drifting person. Lee Hong had gone to the eastern suburbs, to the seaside, to what she believed was a brighter life. He remained in this empty room, his body just healed, while his heart seemed to have fallen ill all over again.

But Xinde did not collapse.

He placed the perfume in a drawer and closed it.

Then he boiled a kettle of water and made himself a cup of hot tea.

As the tea vapor rose, he suddenly understood that forgiveness was not excusing the other person, nor saying that he did not hurt. Forgiveness was only admitting that people sometimes lose to poverty, loneliness, and desire; admitting that someone you loved may also wound you; admitting that when a road has reached its end, there is no need to bind each other with hatred anymore.

Night gradually deepened.

Xinde sat beneath the lamp and opened a philosophy book, but could not read a single word. After a long while, he wrote one line on a piece of paper:

"People do not always fall in evil; sometimes they lose their way while trying to survive."

After writing it, he put down the pen.

Outside the window, another train passed, heading into the distance.



CHAPTER 81

TO REMAIN IN AUSTRALIA, SHE PINNED HER HOPES ON MARRIAGE

Only later did Xinde slowly come to know that Lee Hong's matter was not only about Steven, nor only about that house near the sea in the eastern suburbs.

The deeper knot lay in her visa.

Her visa had already expired. Xinde did not want to ask, but he could guess most of it.

This matter, Lee Hong had never told him. At first she was afraid he would worry; later she was afraid he would ask; later still, it became a secret she could no longer speak. Every day she sold dim sum in a Chinese restaurant in Chatswood, wearing an apron that smelled of oil smoke, smiling at customers, enduring the proprietress, and living in fear of the shadow of immigration. When she occasionally saw police on the street, her heart tightened; when she heard people speak of visas, overstaying, deportation, she lowered her head and pretended not to hear. When she left Beijing, she still carried

the pride of an educated woman, thinking she had merely fallen temporarily into difficulty. But Australia's reality soon made her understand that without legal status, all dignity was like paper hanging in the wind, ready at any moment to be torn apart.

It was not that she had never thought of returning to China.

But what would happen if she returned? The old position in the People's Daily supplement would certainly not be waiting for her. She had changed from a woman with a work unit, writing, and a future into someone serving dim sum in an overseas restaurant, hiding her status and counting rent. If she returned to Beijing in such a defeated state, covered in dust, she could not bear it. It was not that she could not endure hardship; it was that she could not admit all her choices had ended in nothing but failure.

Thus marriage became the most practical, and most cruel, road.

She had heard many Chinese people say that some looked for locals with status to enter fake marriages. More than a hundred thousand Australian dollars, paid in installments: take photos, live together, handle investigations, endure several years in exchange for legal status. The words sounded filthy, yet they were also like a door in the black night. At first, Lee Hong too felt disgust. She had once spoken of ideals beside the cloud seas of the Yellow Mountain, had once written of human sorrow and joy on the manuscript paper of the People's Daily—how could there come a day when she calculated marriage as a price, and identity as a transaction?

But when a person has no retreat, even morality trembles under the pressure of reality.

Steven appeared at exactly that time.

He was one of Xinde's stall-keeping friends, often selling sunglasses near Bondi Beach. He smiled casually, his skin slightly red from the sun, his English sounding light and quick. He was not wealthy, but he had local status, his own little house in the eastern suburbs, a car, and the smell of seaside life around him. On weekends, Lee Hong helped him set up the stall. Sunlight shone on the sea, white girls in swimsuits ran across the beach, music came from cafés, and Steven handed her a latte, saying, "Ruby, you should not waste your life in that restaurant."

That sentence was like a hand gently touching the place that hurt her most.

At the beginning, Lee Hong only wanted to discuss a transaction.

Tentatively, she spoke of her visa. Steven was not surprised. He looked at her, was silent for a while, and said, "I can help you." In that moment, Lee Hong knew he understood what she meant. Later, the two talked intermittently several times, and money was also discussed. It was not the coldness of a clearly marked price, but neither was it completely selfless compassion. More than a hundred thousand Australian dollars was, to Lee Hong, a mountain. She said she could slowly pay it back: restaurant work, market stalls, several years of repayment.

Steven smiled and said, "Maybe you don't need to pay like that."

This sentence was more dangerous than asking for money.

Because it turned a transaction into a relationship, a fake marriage into ambiguity, and tore open the last seam of Lee Hong's self-deception. Originally, she had wanted to exchange a paper marriage for status. But after living together, many things no longer followed the plan. Steven

liked her—whether truly, or because she was new, in any case he was willing to take her to the beach, buy her dresses, teach her English, help her handle forms, and give her a roof under which she did not have to hide. Lee Hong was tired too. She had no money to repay, and no longer wanted to repay. She laid down the word fake bit by bit, and gave herself over to the play already begun.

When false play becomes real, it becomes a true couple.
At least to outsiders, that was how it looked.

By the time Xinde came to know these things, some time had already passed. After the initial anger receded, what remained in his heart was not clean hatred, but a more painful understanding. He finally understood that Lee Hong had not betrayed him only for seaside scenery. She had clutched at a man who could help her stay when she stood at the edge of the cliff of identity. This choice was not noble, not innocent, and even hurtful, but it was real. So real that Xinde felt powerless even to curse her.

One day, he saw Lee Hong from far away on a Chatswood street.

She and Steven got out of a car together. Steven carried shopping bags for her. Lee Hong wore a pale coat, her hair loose over her shoulders, and there was more color in her face than before. When she saw Xinde, her steps halted, and her eyes grew flustered; then she forced a small smile.

Xinde did not walk over.

Neither did Lee Hong.

Across a street, across passing cars, across visas, poverty, illness, betrayal, and the lives neither could turn back from, the two looked at each other for one brief instant. In that instant, Xinde suddenly remembered what Lee Hong had once said about the cloud seas of the Yellow Mountain. At

that time, she had said: "Youth is originally like this. Some people look at mountains, some hurry along roads, and some stand by the roadside watching those who hurry." Now she was no longer standing by the roadside. She had boarded another car, heading toward the place where she believed she could settle.

Xinde turned and left.

He never again went to Bondi Beach to set up his stall.

Those towels and socks imported from China had once been the hope by which he and Lee Hong endured life together. Later, when the goods were nearly sold out, he no longer had the heart to import more from China. Setting up a stall required smiling, greeting customers, bargaining, standing for an entire day in the sea wind. Once, there had been Lee Hong there, weekend sunlight, and a small illusion of the future. Now, whenever he thought of Bondi Beach, his chest felt empty. That bright sea had become a place he no longer wished to visit.

But tuition still had to be paid, rent still had to be paid, and days could not stop merely because love had died.

So he found casual work at a factory near Bankstown called Thermotech. It was a small factory that produced plastic swimming toys. The factory's outer walls were gray-white, and pallets and cardboard boxes were stacked at the entrance. Inside were plastic heat-pressing machines, molds, and packaging tables. The air always carried a smell of heated plastic, machine oil, and cardboard dust. The production line made swim rings, inflatable balls, floating boards, and children's water toys. The colors were almost glaring: red, yellow, blue, and green plastic sheets were formed under the machines, then checked, folded, and packed by workers.

When Xinde first walked in, he suddenly felt it was absurd.

He had studied philosophy at Fudan, then come to Australia to study. His mind had held Plato, Kant, Sartre, Heidegger, and had also read Buddhist scriptures, the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon, and his brother's medical cases. Yet now he stood beside a heated machine, taking plastic toys for children's water play one by one from the conveyor belt, checking for leaks and cracks, then placing them into transparent bags.

The shift leader was a middle-aged man of Lebanese descent, thick-bearded and quick-tempered, who spoke very fast. On the first day, he pointed at the machine and said to Xinde, "Don't think, just follow the line."

Do not think. Follow the assembly line.

This sentence struck Xinde's heart like a dull blow.

Do not think.

Yet he happened to be a student of philosophy.

As he mechanically picked up plastic toys, he thought: what, after all, is a human being? Free will, or a pair of hands on an assembly line? A mind that thinks about existence, or a body that must sell its time for tuition and rent? These colorful toys floating in swimming pools would one day be slapped, laughed over, and chased by Australian children in the sunlight. But the people who made them stood silent and tired in the factory, heads lowered, unable to see the sea.

The workers in the factory came from everywhere.

There were Vietnamese, Lebanese, Turkish people, and several Chinese. No one's English was especially good. At lunch, they sat together on the concrete steps outside and opened their lunch boxes. Some ate bread, some rice; some smoked; some phoned home and scolded children for

disobedience. Xinde brought simple white rice and greens, sometimes with a boiled egg. His illness had only just healed, and he did not dare eat recklessly. He touched no cold drinks, no fried food, no restaurant leftovers. The dietary instructions his brother Rende had written for him were folded and kept in his wallet, like a small protective charm.

An old worker from Guangdong saw how plainly he ate and laughed. “Young man, eating like that, where will you get strength?”

Xinde smiled. “I’ve been ill. I’m afraid now.”

The old worker nodded. “In a foreign country, one cannot afford to be sick. No kin, no old friends. Once you fall, there may not even be someone to cook you a bowl of congee.”

The words were casual, yet they pierced Xinde’s heart.

He thought of the medicine stove in the little Beijing room, his elder brother taking his pulse in the morning, his mother Zhao Youlan cooking congee in Qianzhou, and his father Ma Cunhui’s few but weighty glances. At that time, he had thought himself free, crossing oceans and questioning life. Now he finally knew that true freedom was not having no attachments, but that when you collapsed from illness, someone was still willing to decoct medicine for you.

After work, he often took the train back to Chatswood alone.

There were not many people in the Bankstown line carriage. Outside the window were low houses, tracks, graffiti walls, warehouses, and the evening sky. Sometimes Australia’s sunsets were very beautiful—pink, violet-blue, golden-orange, layer after layer spread along the horizon. Xinde looked at those beautiful colors, yet often had no mood for them. Beauty seemed to belong to others; the city too belonged to others. He was merely someone temporarily

passing through, carrying expired love, a body just healed, and a degree soon to be completed, enduring silently on this land.

Lee Hong would occasionally call him.

Sometimes she only asked, "Are you all right?"

Xinde said, "I'm all right."

"I heard you went to work in a factory?"

"Mm."

Lee Hong was silent for a moment. "Don't work too hard."

Xinde almost wanted to laugh.

If he had heard this before, it would have sounded like concern. Now it sounded like a thread fallen from an old garment. Tug it gently, and all that came loose was useless old feeling. He did not stab her with words; he only said, "You take care too."

Once, Lee Hong suddenly said, "Xinde, I know you look down on me."

Xinde was silent on his end of the phone for a long time before saying, "I do not look down on you. I only see clearly now."

"See clearly what?"

"See clearly that when people have no road, they will sell themselves to something that looks like a road."

Lee Hong said nothing.

Xinde continued, "I am not much nobler than you. If I had no brother, no family, perhaps I too would grab a dirty rope and climb upward. So I no longer curse you."

Lee Hong cried on the other end.

Hearing her restrained sobs, Xinde's heart still hurt, but he no longer wanted to rush over and embrace her as before. He knew that the deepest thing between them had already broken. What remained was only two people wounded by

reality in a foreign land, preserving one last bit of dignity for each other across the telephone.

He worked at Thermotech until shortly before graduation.

The days were dull and bleak, yet they had a numb order. Rise early, take the train, enter the factory, clock in, move goods, inspect plastic toys, eat lunch, continue working, finish work, return home, shower, read, write his thesis. His body gradually recovered, but his heart seemed to have been smoked by heated plastic and had lost much of its sharpness. Yet precisely within this grayness, Xinde's philosophy began to leave the books and fall into the calluses of his palms, the ache of his back, the cold rice in his lunch box, and the reflection in the window of the night train.

When he wrote the final chapter of his graduation thesis, he wrote this passage:

"In a foreign land, what one first loses is not language, but the imagination of the self. Who you think you are is not important; reality will use rent, visas, illness, love, factories, and loneliness to peel you open layer by layer. When all has been peeled away, if there remains one heart unwilling to deceive itself, then that is the shape left of the soul."

After writing this passage, he paused for a long time.

Outside the window, another train passed, the sound of its rails cutting through the night of Chatswood. There was no perfume for Lee Hong on the table; it had long been placed in the deepest drawer. Nor were there goods left from the old market days; the last few pairs of sunglasses had been sold cheaply to a Chinese stallholder. The room had emptied a great deal, and therefore looked cleaner.

On the day of graduation, Xinde did not inform Lee Hong.

He wore an old suit and stood on the university lawn. Beside him were classmates from many countries. Everyone

smiled for photographs, embraced, and talked of the future. Xinde smiled too, but in that smile there was fatigue, and also a faint clarity after surviving winter. He did not feel the excitement he had once imagined. He only felt that he had finally walked out of a stretch of mud. His shoes were still stained, but he could continue walking.

Lee Hong became Steven's wife.

He became the philosophy student who endured the Thermotech assembly line until graduation.

In different ways, they both survived in Australia.

Only some ways of surviving are remembered for an entire lifetime.



CHAPTER 82

EACH HAS A WILL, AND TEARS STILL FLOW

After graduation, Xinde did not immediately see light.

The thesis had been submitted, the degree obtained, and he gradually stopped going to the Thermotech factory. The plastic swimming rings, colorful floating boards, and inflatable balls on the assembly line seemed like an excessively bright mockery within a gray-white life. On the

day he left, the Lebanese shift leader patted him on the shoulder and said, “Good luck, philosopher.” Hearing it, Xinde only smiled. The word philosopher, coming from the mouth of a supervisor in a plastic-toy factory, was absurd, yet carried a little thin warmth.

He still lived in Chatswood.

This Chinese district had once been the place where he and Lee Hong lived together. Now only he remained. The roast-meat shops, Vietnamese pho shops, Chinese medicine stores, travel agencies, immigration agencies, accounting offices, and tutoring centers opened and closed day after day. Trains rumbled past the platform, carrying workers away, then bringing tired people back again at dusk. Sometimes Xinde went out holding résumés, looking for work; when he came back, only a few recruitment advertisements remained in his pocket. He had an Australian degree, and his English was acceptable, but status, opportunity, stable work—each was a checkpoint. A master’s degree in philosophy was not worth much here. Many employers, hearing his field of study, merely smiled politely, as though he had studied a dream that could not be exchanged for food.

But they did not know that Xinde was not someone who could only speak of philosophy.

Before going abroad, he had worked in the Personnel Department of Guangdong Foreign Trade Administration. During those years, he had seen personnel transfers, professional-title materials, training lists, and staff evaluations, and had also helped the department organize many documents. Although the Foreign Trade Administration was not a front-line foreign trade company, it was very close to import and export, inspection, certification, documents, customs declarations, ports, and quality standards. Those

seals, formats, letters, proofs, serial numbers, and files had once been part of his daily work. Only later, feeling that life in the office was too peaceful, and carrying in his heart the wish to study and seek the Way, had he come to Australia to study philosophy. Who could have known that after finishing philosophy, life would press him once again back toward the rice bowl of reality?

One afternoon, feeling unbearably stifled, he wandered alone through the streets of Chatswood.

That day the weather was very good. Australian sunlight was bright and unreserved, shining the glass windows along the street until they turned pale. At the entrance of the Chinese supermarket, boxes of greens and fruit were set out. Elderly Cantonese people pushed small carts slowly along, and young students hurried toward the train station with bags on their backs. Xinde walked along Forest Road without any clear aim. When he reached an office building, he suddenly stopped.

At the entrance downstairs was a sign.

The sign was not large, with a white background and black lettering, Chinese and English side by side:

The Dragon Kingdom Foreign Trade Group Australia Pty Ltd

Below it was written:

17th Floor.

Xinde stood before that sign, and something in his heart seemed to be gently struck.

The Dragon Kingdom Foreign Trade Group.

The Foreign Trade Administration.

Those words suddenly pulled him from the streets of Chatswood back to the old office building in Canton. At that time, he had still been young, wearing a white shirt, sitting

by the window in the Personnel Department. On his desk were cadre résumé forms, salary-adjustment forms, training notices, and meeting minutes. In the corridor, someone would be carrying certificate samples to the business department; someone else would be discussing export-goods inspection; someone had just returned from the port, his clothes carrying sea wind and warehouse dust. At that time, he had not felt how deeply that system had anything to do with his own fate. He had even disliked it for being too stable, too slow, too much like an invisible net. But on a foreign street, suddenly seeing the same net extending all the way to Australia, his heart unexpectedly felt a long-lost closeness.

He stood there for a moment, and suddenly a thought arose: go up and have a look.

The elevator was old, and trembled lightly when the doors closed. The numbers jumped upward floor by floor. Looking at his blurry reflection on the elevator wall, Xinde felt some hesitation, and also an inexplicable anticipation. When the seventeenth floor arrived and the doors opened, the corridor was covered in gray-blue carpet. On the walls hung several photographs of Chinese ports, shipping containers, and inspection sites. Behind the glass door was an office occupying the whole floor. At the front desk lay Chinese newspapers and English brochures, and the company logo hung on the wall. The sounds of telephones, fax machines, and keyboards mingled together. In the air were the smells of coffee, paper, and photocopier toner.

That smell made Xinde's heart ache.

It was not the smell of hot plastic in a factory, nor the oil smoke of a Chinese restaurant, nor the coffee and tide by the beach. It was the smell of an office—the smell of documents,

systems, procedures, and respectable work. He suddenly realized that he had never truly been far from this kind of life. He had only circled a long way around, through illness, heartbreak, factories, and loneliness.

The receptionist looked up and asked, "Sir, who are you looking for?"

Xinde felt somewhat awkward for a moment, but still said, "I... I saw the sign downstairs and wanted to come up and have a look. I used to work in the Personnel Department of Guangdong Foreign Trade Administration."

When the receptionist heard the words "Foreign Trade Administration," her expression immediately changed a little. She quickly invited him to sit and poured him a glass of water. Before long, a middle-aged man came out from an inner office. He was in his forties, not tall, with a broad forehead and bright eyes. He wore a dark suit and a properly tied necktie, yet did not have that official air that keeps people at a distance.

"I am Liu Chengyin." He extended his hand. "You came out of the Canton Bureau?"

Xinde hurriedly stood. "Mr. Liu, hello. My name is Ma Xinde. I used to work in the Personnel Department of the Guangdong Foreign Trade Administration in Canton. Later I came out to study, and I have just graduated."

Holding his hand, Liu Chengyin smiled. "Ah, then you are one of our own system. Come, sit inside."

The general manager's office was not large, but very tidy. On the desk was a stack of documents, and beside it several English certificate samples. On the wall hung a map of China and a map of Australia, side by side, as though two northern and southern worlds had been temporarily stitched together. Liu Chengyin poured tea for Xinde and asked him detailed

questions. “What year did you leave the Canton Bureau? Who is still in the Personnel Department? Do you know Old Chen? What about Section Chief Xu in the Cadre Section? Was he transferred later?”

Once these names came out, the layer of strangeness in Xinde’s heart was immediately lifted. Many old faces rose from memory: Old Chen loved strong tea; Section Chief Xu spoke slowly; the Cadre Section was busiest at the end of every year, with selecting advanced workers, adjusting salaries, arranging training, and even a broken photocopier could make people sweat with anxiety. He answered one by one. Liu Chengyin listened and nodded repeatedly, and his words became more numerous.

“I also came from the old Foreign Trade Administration system,” Liu Chengyin said. “Later, after institutional adjustments, overseas business also needed people, so I came to Australia. Don’t think this office is small; there are many matters. Chinese goods entering Australia, Australian products returning to China—certification, inspection, origin, quality, certificates, client communication—none can be treated carelessly. We connect at one end to the domestic system, and at the other to the Australian market. We have to understand Chinese rules, and also English documents.”

Listening, Xinde felt these words were long-lost and intimate.

Liu Chengyin asked, “What is your status now? Have you found work?”

Xinde lowered his head and smiled a little. “No formal job yet. Before this, I worked casually at a factory near Bankstown called Thermotech, making plastic swimming toys. I suppose I endured there until graduation.”

“You came from the Personnel Department of Guangdong Foreign Trade Administration, studied a master’s in philosophy, and went to make plastic toys?” Liu Chengyin frowned, but there was no contempt in his tone, only a little regret.

Xinde said calmly, “In a foreign country, sometimes the rice bowl comes first.”

Liu Chengyin was silent for a moment, then nodded. “That is true. I have seen the hardships of overseas students often. Some wash dishes in restaurants, some move goods in warehouses, some stock shelves in supermarkets. But you are different. You have system experience, understand official documents, have English, and can write. You cannot keep wearing yourself down in a factory.”

He picked up a certificate sample and handed it to Xinde. “Take a look.”

Xinde accepted it. It was an inspection certificate in Chinese and English, neatly formatted, with serial number, product name, specification, inspection basis, date of issue, authorized signature—each item clearly arranged. With one glance, he understood that this kind of document feared carelessness most. One wrongly translated product name, one omitted number, one inaccurate cited standard could cause trouble for both client and organization. The attention to detail he had developed in the Personnel Department suddenly found its use here.

Liu Chengyin looked at him. “Can you write formal documents? Reports, letters, meeting minutes, explanatory certificates?”

Xinde said, “Someone from the Personnel Department may not dare claim much else, but document format, wording, and file awareness—I know a little. I can also learn to

prepare English certificates. Translation, client emails, market materials—I should be able to help with those too.”

Liu Chengyin smiled. “That is right. Our office is just lacking such a person. Xiao Ma, would you be willing to come and try?”

Xinde froze.

“Mr. Liu, you mean... you want me to work here?”

“A probation period first,” Liu Chengyin said. “The salary will not be high immediately, but this is proper office work, better than the factory. Certificates, documents, translation, market support, client reception—you can slowly take these on. You have a Foreign Trade Administration background, so you should become familiar with it quickly. Here, we are not afraid of young people not knowing; we are afraid only of people having no roots, not being careful, and not being willing to learn.”

Warmth suddenly rose in Xinde’s heart.

It was not the wild joy of winning the lottery, but like a person who had walked for a very long time in rain suddenly seeing someone light a lamp beneath the eaves. He thought of the smell of hot plastic in the Thermotech factory, of the shift leader’s words, “Don’t think, just follow the line,” of the résumés he had sent out after graduation without reply, of Lee Hong taking that ambiguous road for the sake of status, and of himself walking aimlessly along the streets of Chatswood. It turned out that fate sometimes does not open the door at the place where you desperately knock. Instead, when you turn away exhausted, it quietly reveals a crack.

Liu Chengyin asked again, “Your status matter has not been settled yet, has it?”

Xinde’s heart tightened, and he answered honestly, “Not yet.”

Liu Chengyin nodded. "If you truly do well here, the company can consider sponsoring you for Australian status. Of course, this must follow regulations. It will not be settled by one sentence today, and there is no need to rush. But at least this is a proper road."

A proper road.

These two words nearly made Xinde's eyes grow hot.

He thought of the road Lee Hong had taken for status, of the fake marriage, of Steven's house, of that unclear transaction and the later married life in which false and real could no longer be distinguished. Now, the "proper road" in Liu Chengyin's mouth arrived without drama, but cleanly. It did not rely on deception, did not rely on selling oneself, did not turn marriage into exchange. It relied on work, ability, company sponsorship, and step by step planting one's feet more steadily in a foreign country.

Xinde lowered his head and took a sip of tea. The tea had already grown somewhat cool.

"Mr. Liu," he said, his voice a little hoarse, "I am willing to try."

Liu Chengyin smiled. "Then come tomorrow. Dress a bit formally. I will have Xiao Zhou from the office first show you the certificate process. Since you came from the Personnel Department, you should know that no organization runs on business alone. It also runs on rules, files, responsibility, and people. Overseas companies are even more like this. The Chinese must be accurate, and the English must also be accurate; toward the domestic side, one must speak in terms of the system; toward Australia, in terms of the law; toward clients, service; toward certificates, truth."

Xinde nodded. "I understand."

Looking at him, Liu Chengyin's tone became gentler. "Xiao Ma, overseas, a person can sometimes be beaten by life until he falls apart. But as long as the roots from your past are still there, and the abilities in your hands are still there, then you have not truly drifted away. You were originally someone from the Foreign Trade Administration system. Now you have merely changed places, using old skills again."

These words were not grand, but they sounded like something from a father or elder brother.

When Xinde left the office, it was already evening. The elevator descended to the ground floor, and Chatswood's streets were still full of cars coming and going. The lightboxes of roast-meat shops had come on. People were beginning to gather more densely in the direction of the train station. At the entrance of the Chinese supermarket, someone was buying vegetables; elderly people spoke Cantonese; students made phone calls in English. This familiar yet strange district suddenly appeared different in his eyes.

He turned back and looked at that office building.

Warm light came from the windows on the seventeenth floor. There were maps of China and Australia, fax machines and certificates, the cup of tea Liu Chengyin had handed him, and a beginning that might change his fate. More importantly, it was not luck that had fallen from nowhere. It was more like a seed planted by his earlier life, passing through illness, love, factories, and foreign land, finally breaking through the soil on this day.

Xinde slowly walked along the street toward his lodging.

Evening wind passed over him. Suddenly he felt that Chatswood was no longer only the empty room after heartbreak, no longer only the place Lee Hong had left, no longer only a transfer station after exhausting factory shifts.

It could also become a new beginning. Fate had once made him lose love, dignity, and illusions here; now, on the very same street, it placed before him a sign that read “China Foreign Trade Management.”

After returning to his room, Xinde took his old suit from the wardrobe, carefully brushed away the dust, and found a fountain pen that could still write. On the desk were piled his graduation thesis, several philosophy books, the dietary instructions his brother Rende had written for him, and some pay slips left from Thermotech. He put the pay slips into a drawer, straightened the philosophy books, and wrote on a blank sheet of paper:

Dragon Kingdom Foreign Trade Group Australia Pty Ltd,
17th Floor. Start work tomorrow.

After writing it, he paused for a long time.

Then below it, he wrote another line:

Sometimes a person walks very far not to leave the past behind, but to recognize himself again in the distance.

Outside the window, another train passed through Chatswood. The sound of the rails was no longer as desolate as before. Instead, it seemed like drumbeats coming from afar, one after another, urging a person to set out again.



CHAPTER 83

THE BLESSING HE NEVER SOUGHT WHEN THE WILLOW TOOK ROOT

Only after Xinde began working did he slowly come to understand that Liu Chengyin was no ordinary manager of an overseas company.

He had originally been director of the Agricultural Inspection Division of the Shenzhen Foreign Trade Administration.

Shenzhen, after the reform and opening, was a place where wind and clouds surged. The ports were busy, foreign trade was hot, and the flow of vehicles, goods, and people moved a thousand li a day. Although the Foreign Trade Administration was not at the very front of the marketplace, it was an indispensable link in the foreign trade chain. If goods were to go out, the certificates had to be accurate. If agricultural products were to enter or leave, inspection had to be strict. Behind one sheet of proof lay not only the credit of an enterprise, but also the image of the country's ports. When Liu Chengyin was young, he had fought and worked his way along the agricultural inspection line. He had inspected fruit, vegetables, feed, timber, grain, and had also run through ports, warehouses, cold-storage facilities, and docks. He was not the sort of man who loved grand talk. He worked carefully, respected standards, understood procedures, and step by step rose within the system to the position of director of the Agricultural Inspection Division.

By rights, had he remained in Shenzhen, his official future would not have been poor.

In those years, Shenzhen was developing too fast, and people who understood business, understood management, and could hold a situation steady were exactly what the system needed. Everyone said that if Director Liu endured a few more years, deputy bureau chief, even full bureau chief, might not be impossible. Yet fate pushed him outward. The organization needed to send people overseas for stationed work. When many people heard the words overseas assignment, they felt both envy and hesitation. They envied the fine-sounding name of being overseas; they hesitated because leaving the home system and office meant the future might not be clear. At that time, Liu Chengyin's English was not good. One could even say that aside from commonly used inspection terms and document vocabulary, when it came to truly opening his mouth to speak with foreigners, his heart felt weak.

Someone laughed and said to him, "Old Liu, your name is fitting. 'Plant a willow without intending it, and it grows into shade.' Who knows—you may really be planted overseas."

Liu Chengyin laughed too. "This willow tree of mine may be planted in sandy ground. Whether it lives or not is still unknown."

Who could have known that once he went, he would first spend five years in Southeast Asia, headquartered in Singapore and managing exports to China from six countries: Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar. These small Southeast Asian countries exported mostly agricultural and sideline products, and the volumes were not large. Only Malaysia's timber, Thailand's rice and cassava, and a few others had somewhat larger quantities. Singapore,

as a new petroleum processing and transshipment center, also required attention.

Life in Southeast Asia was completely different from Shenzhen. It was hot and humid there, and the air often carried a mixture of tropical fruit, rainwater, spices, and diesel. The business was complicated if one said it was complicated, and monotonous if one said it was monotonous. Thailand, for instance—apart from scrap inspection, what came and went were mostly rice, cassava, timber, and the like. Rice required checking grade, impurities, moisture, and fumigation; cassava required checking dried chips, starch, and mildew; timber required checking species, pests, and specifications. When Liu Chengyin first arrived, his English was not smooth, and he knew no Thai at all. He could only rely on interpreters, gestures, and documents, slowly wearing the work into order. When local Chinese merchants invited him to meals, he did not dare agree casually; when domestic enterprises urged him for certificates, he did not dare release them carelessly. Thailand's weather was hot enough to make people restless, yet he still verified one form after another, inspected one shipment after another.

Later, whenever he spoke of Singapore, he always did so with some feeling.

“Singapore taught me one thing,” he once said to Xinde over lunch. “When a person is outside, what he relies on is not his title, but whether he can get the matter done accurately. In China you may be a division director; once you go abroad, others do not recognize that. They only look at whether your certificate is valid, whether your words count, and whether you can bear responsibility when a problem arises.”

Xinde listened and nodded.

Liu Chengyin smiled again. “But the Southeast Asian business was still narrow. Rice, cassava, timber—after looking at them long enough, I could fill out the forms with my eyes closed. A person cannot keep turning around in one small pond. Later, when they transferred me to Australia, the stage truly became larger.”

Australia was indeed different.

Here the land was vast and rich, and the categories of trade were broad. Agricultural products included wheat, wool, beef, dairy products, wine, and fruit; minerals included iron ore, coal, and bauxite. There were also scrap materials, machinery, chemicals, daily-use goods, food safety, certification audits, pre-shipment inspections, and origin services. The clients coming and going were more complex too: Chinese enterprises, Australian manufacturers, Chinese trading companies, local lawyers, accountants, logistics firms, and government departments. Documents had to be more standardized, English more rigorous, standards more familiar, and communication tested a person all the more.

After arriving in Australia, Liu Chengyin truly felt that he had changed from a stationed cadre into the helmsman of an overseas company.

The company had more than thirty people. It was not large, but it already had a structure. The business department, certification department, inspection department, office, finance, and marketing were all busy. When the phone rang, it was often an export enterprise in China asking about certification required by an Australian client. What the fax machine spat out might be inspection materials for mineral products. Sitting in the meeting room might be Chinese food merchants, Australian farmers, or delegations from China. The two maps on the wall—the map of China and the map of

Australia—were not mere decorations. They were the two worlds the company had to cross every day.

After Xinde arrived, Liu Chengyin was very pleased.

This pleasure was not merely because there was one more pair of hands.

What an overseas company finds most rare is someone who understands the domestic system and can also adapt to the overseas environment. Some people have good English, but do not understand the rules of Chinese offices and the Foreign Trade Administration system. Some understand the system, but struggle with English and become nervous when facing Australian clients. Some can run the market, but cannot write formal documents well. Some can write documents, but do not have the resilience to survive overseas. Xinde, by chance, touched all these things. He had come from the Personnel Department of Guangdong Foreign Trade Administration and knew how documents moved within the system; he understood careful wording and file awareness. He had also studied philosophy, had a good foundation in Chinese, and passable English. Rarer still, he had suffered in Australia, set up market stalls, and worked in a factory. He was not a person who could only sit in an office and speak empty reason.

In his first week at work, Liu Chengyin had him read several old certificates and pieces of correspondence.

“Xiao Ma, don’t hurry to do business yet,” Liu Chengyin said. “First become familiar with these documents. In our line of work, what we fear most is pretending to understand when one does not, and also carelessness. A certificate is not an essay. It is not enough for it to be beautifully written. Product name, specification, batch number, standard, date—if one item is wrong, the client may lose an entire shipment.”

Xinde replied, “I understand. When we prepared materials in the Personnel Department, even a name, a date of birth, or a period in a résumé could not be wrong. Documents look like paper, but behind the paper are people’s fates.”

Hearing this, Liu Chengyin looked up at him and smiled. “You really are someone who studied philosophy. The words you say have some flavor. But they are not wrong. Behind inspection certificates, too, are the fates of enterprises.”

Xinde picked things up quickly.

First, he helped the office organize Chinese and English correspondence, revising some stiff translations into accurate and fluent language. Then he assisted the certificate group in checking formats, classifying templates according to different business types. Sometimes when delegations came from China and someone was needed to receive and interpret for them, he also followed into the meeting room. At the beginning, he did not understand local Australian regulations, so he carried a small notebook and wrote things down. Seeing him work on documents by day and take standards home to read at night, Liu Chengyin felt increasingly at ease.

Once, a colleague from the certification department brought over a stack of materials and complained, “This client’s English materials are a mess. When translated, they do not sound like Chinese; after we polish the Chinese, we worry it will no longer match the original.”

Xinde took them and read page by page. Half a day later, he organized a comparison table: the English original on the left, the Chinese translation on the right, and below them the doubtful points and items requiring client confirmation. Liu Chengyin happened to pass by. Seeing it, he nodded. “This is the right way to do it. If an overseas company wants to last, it

cannot rely on patting heads and guessing. It must rely on procedure.”

Xinde smiled. “Mr. Liu, this too is a habit trained by the Personnel Department—always wanting to leave a trace.”

Liu Chengyin said, “That is not a bad habit. It is a skill.”

That evening, the company held a small meeting.

The office of more than thirty people filled the room.

Outside the window, Chatswood’s sky gradually darkened, and a row of lights came on in the direction of the train station. Liu Chengyin stood at the front of the meeting room, pointed at the whiteboard, and said, “Our business is now much more complex than when we were stationed in Southeast Asia. Over there, the main items were scrap, rice, cassava, and timber. The road was narrow, but it was easier to manage. Australia is different. Agricultural products, minerals, food, certification, inspection, trade services—everything may be involved. The stage is large and the opportunities are many, but the risks are also large. If we want to move upward, we cannot rely only on a few old comrades holding things up. We must standardize the office, certificates, translation, market work, and client management.”

At this point, he glanced at Xinde.

“Now Xiao Ma has come. He is from the Personnel Department of Guangdong Foreign Trade Administration, and he studied in Australia; his English is usable. He will start with documents, certificates, and market support. Do not treat him as temporary help. Treat him as someone in our team who can be cultivated.”

Xinde sat in the back row. Hearing this, warmth rose in his heart.

Since arriving in Australia, it had been a long time since he had heard anyone place him inside the words our team. In the factory, the supervisor had only said, "Follow the assembly line." At the market stall, people saw him only as a Chinese student selling towels and socks. After Lee Hong left, he was even more like a speck of dust forgotten by the city. Now Liu Chengyin's phrase, "someone in our team who can be cultivated," made him feel again that he was not drifting, but had been received once more by some system, some order.

After the meeting, Liu Chengyin called him into the office.

"Xiao Ma," he said, "do not look down on this work.

Overseas, when we do inspection and certification, we are building a bridge. Chinese enterprises want to come out, Australian products want to go in, and both sides need trustworthy standards and certificates. In the past, you were in the Personnel Department and knew how systems operate. Now you are overseas and know the hardships of students and small merchants. If you do well in the future, you will not only write documents; you can also do market work, clients, even management."

Xinde asked, "Mr. Liu, when you first came out from Shenzhen, did you ever regret it?"

Liu Chengyin smiled but did not answer immediately.

He walked to the window and looked at the streetlights and traffic below. After a long while, he said, "When I first went to Southeast Asia, I did regret it. I did not know English, the weather was hot, the business was monotonous, and colleagues back home were being promoted one after another while I watched rice, cassava, and timber overseas. Sometimes I wondered whether I had been transferred aside. But later I understood: a person's official path is not

necessarily only inside office buildings. If you can build up a stretch of the overseas world, that too is a kind of ascent.”

He turned around, his tone calm. “My name is Liu Chengyin—Willow Grows Into Shade. When I was young, people always laughed and said, ‘Plant a willow without intending it, and it grows into shade.’ Now that I think about it, there is indeed something of that meaning. I had no intention of going overseas, yet I was planted in Southeast Asia, then moved to Australia. Whether a transplanted tree dies or lives depends on whether its roots remain. If the roots are in the system, and the branches and leaves are overseas, perhaps it can still grow into shade.”

This sentence made Xinde pause.

He suddenly felt that Liu Chengyin was speaking not only of himself, but also of him.

Xinde had come out of Guangdong Foreign Trade Administration, circled around to Fudan philosophy, then to Australia; he had fallen ill, loved, lost, and endured with his head lowered in a plastic-toy factory. Now, unexpectedly, he had returned to the overseas branches and leaves of the Foreign Trade Administration system. It turned out that the road of life, though it seemed to have strayed, sometimes only circled to another side and connected again.

“Mr. Liu,” Xinde said softly, “then I must be a leaf blown back by the wind.”

Liu Chengyin laughed. “If the leaf can return, it means the tree still recognizes you.”

The company’s days improved day by day.

Business volume increased, and there were more clients. Local Australian agricultural enterprises began to ask proactively about China-market certification. Chinese merchants brought samples to consult. Domestic

manufacturers sought introductions, hoping to understand Australian standards. The certificate group was busy, the market group was busy, finance was busy, and the front desk phone almost never stopped. When the fax machine spat out paper, it was like little white waves; the printer hummed, like the company's own heartbeat.

Xinde sat at his workstation. Before him were Chinese and English documents, client name cards, certificate templates, and a small work notebook. His old suit had finally found use, and his fountain pen once again had ink. Afternoon sunlight fell against the glass window and lit his profile, which looked much clearer than it had at Thermotech.

Sometimes he looked toward Liu Chengyin's office.

The door was half open, and people often went in and out. Mr. Liu would answer calls from China one moment, discuss standards with Australian clients the next, approve documents, then scold someone: "A certificate is not a composition; you cannot write by assumption!" After scolding, he would teach personally; after teaching, he would invite everyone to drink tea. He had the steadiness of a cadre from within the system, and also the resilience of an overseas pioneer. Such a man might not have been the most dazzling back home, but overseas, he was like a stake driven into the ground, holding an entire company steady.

Xinde understood in his heart that this was a good thing.

For Liu Chengyin, it was another kind of ascent in his career; for the company, it was the beginning of rising day by day; for himself, it was a proper and solid rope handed to him by fate after the darkness. He no longer needed to rely on market stalls to make a living, no longer needed to suppress his thoughts on a factory assembly line, and no

longer needed, like Lee Hong, to entrust his status to an ambiguous marriage.

At last, by relying on his past experience, his present ability, and a heart willing to begin again, he could stand a little more steadily in a foreign country.

When he left work that day, Xinde walked out of the office building. Lights were just beginning to glow along the streets of Chatswood. A train rumbled past. At the entrance to the Chinese supermarket, people were still choosing vegetables; in the roast-meat shop window, glossy ducks hung in rows. Life had not suddenly become brilliant, but he knew that something had already changed.

He lifted his head and looked at the lit windows on the seventeenth floor.

That layer of light was not large, but it shone steadily.

Like a willow planted without intention, it was at last, in the wind of the Southern Hemisphere, slowly growing into shade.



CHAPTER 84

XINDE LIKES OFFICE WORK WITH HIS GOVERNMENT AGENCY

Only after Xinde had worked for some time at the Australian company did he gradually see clearly that this office on the seventeenth floor in Chatswood was by no means an ordinary company merely doing inspections, issuing certificates, and translating documents.

On the surface, it was an enterprise; in its bones, it carried somewhat the atmosphere of a “small government office.”

Every morning, when the phone at the front desk rang, the call might be from some import-export company in China, or from the commercial office of the Chinese embassy or consulate in Australia, or from a local Australian chamber of commerce, a Chinese community association, a law firm, an accounting office, even a representative of a state-owned enterprise that had just arrived in Australia to open up the market. The office had more than thirty people, each with a workstation and a line of business, yet it was like a fine and close-woven net, linking Australian ports, mines, farms, scrap yards, and Chinese business circles with China’s domestic ports, enterprises, ministries, and commissions.

Liu Chengyin often said, “Here, we are not only looking at goods. Behind goods is information; behind information are relationships; behind relationships are the nation’s trade security and enterprises’ rice bowls.”

When Xinde first heard this, he only felt that the words had weight. Later, after seeing more with his own eyes, he realized that Mr. Liu was not exaggerating.

The company maintained close contact with Chinese embassies and consulates in Australia. When domestic delegations came to Australia for visits involving trade, inspection, food safety, mineral resources, or waste-material imports, Liu was often invited to introduce the situation. When the embassy's commercial office needed to understand trade trends in a certain category of goods, the office could also quickly organize materials. Some Australian enterprises wanting to enter the Chinese market first inquired not with advertising companies, but about certification, inspection, standards, and entry thresholds. Some Chinese enterprises wanting to purchase or invest in Australia also often could not bypass this office, because here they knew which goods were genuine, which merchants were reliable, and which links were most likely to produce problems.

The major chambers of commerce also came and went frequently.

There was the Australia-China Trade Chamber, Chinese business federations, enterprise organizations with backgrounds in local hometown associations, and industry associations for minerals, agriculture, food, and waste recycling. The Australian Foreign Trade company was also the chair unit of the legal committee. On the surface, this did not sound like a matter directly belonging to the inspection industry, yet it precisely showed that the company had a position within Chinese community organizations and business circles. When disputes arose among merchants, when there were disagreements in contracts, when complaints appeared over goods quality, when standards and

certificates needed interpretation, and when people asked whose institutional word carried more credibility, the matter often circled around in the end to Liu for an opinion.

Once, Xinde followed Liu Chengyin to a Chinese community banquet. During the meal, someone joked half-seriously, “Mr. Liu, your company is something else. It looks like the Foreign Trade Administration, the embassy, the court, and the temple of the God of Wealth all at once.”

Liu Chengyin waved his hand and laughed. “Don’t say that carelessly. We only do inspection and certification. Certificates must be true, words must be steady, and matters must be handled according to rules.”

The others laughed. “Mr. Liu is too modest. In the Australian Chinese business circle, who doesn’t know that you are a central point? Whenever there is any movement in the wind, you are the first to know.”

Sitting to the side and listening, Xinde silently took note of the words central point.

Those words were indeed accurate.

Especially in the years when the waste-material business was flourishing, the whole company was as busy as if it were fighting a war. Some jokingly called them a “scrap company,” which sounded inelegant, yet inside it was all money. In those years, Chinese manufacturing had a great appetite. Factories needed raw materials; paper mills needed waste paper; smelters needed scrap metal; plastics factories needed waste plastic. Australia, rich in resources and with a mature recycling system, loaded container after container of waste paper, scrap copper, scrap aluminum, and waste plastic at its ports, shipping them across the ocean to China. In good years, the waste paper, scrap metals, waste plastics, and

similar materials imported from Australia to China exceeded twenty thousand containers in a single year.

Twenty thousand containers.

The first time Xinde heard that number, the pen in his hand paused.

At the Thermotech factory, he had seen plastic toys come out of machines and get packed into bags one by one. Now, in the company, he saw the other end: waste plastic, scrap metal, and waste paper being sorted again, inspected, and loaded into containers, becoming new raw materials for Chinese factories. Those seemingly insignificant waste materials, once they began flowing along the trade chain, became money, resources, and the blood of industry.

But Liu Chengyin warned him, “Xiao Ma, the more money there is in a place, the more careful one must be. Waste materials are the easiest to have problems. Adulteration, pollution, concealment, passing off inferior goods as good—any one of these can cause great trouble. China needs raw materials, but it cannot treat foreign garbage as resources; enterprises need profit, but they cannot treat inspection as a formality. Once a certificate is signed, responsibility must be borne.”

Xinde nodded. “That is why we are needed.”

Liu looked at him. “Yes. Others see containers; we must see the risks inside the containers.”

Beyond waste materials, the company’s reach extended farther.

Chinese coal, iron ore, COFCO, and other state-owned enterprises all had cooperation, investment, or import business in Australia. Mining companies came to discuss pre-shipment inspection of iron ore; coal enterprises cared about calorific value, moisture, ash content, and sulfur content;

grain and oil companies cared about market entry and quality control for wheat, oilseeds, dairy products, and meat. In the meeting room, Xinde often saw different faces: state-owned enterprise representatives in suits, Australian farmers with skin reddened by sun, mining-company managers, Chinese interpreters, accountants, and lawyers. Spread out on the table might be a Chinese-English contract, or a batch of goods inspection reports, or a map of Australia with mining areas, ports, warehouses, and farms circled on it.

He gradually understood that this company did not live only on inspection fees. Its true preciousness lay in gathering information.

Where there were goods, where there were mines, where policy had changed, which enterprise had good credit, which category of waste-material imports was tightening, which port was inspecting strictly, which state-owned enterprise was coming, which Australian chamber of commerce was organizing a delegation to visit China, which domestic leader would be making an inspection tour, which standard would be updated, and which trade route had suddenly encountered turbulence—at Liu's place, the first whispers were often heard.

Because Xinde's Chinese was good, his English usable, and he understood system documents, Liu Chengyin soon arranged for him to organize materials and take meeting minutes. He began to come into contact with all kinds of reports: waste-material import situation briefs, Australian agricultural product export summaries, mineral cooperation information digests, chamber of commerce activity memos, communication records with the embassy's commercial office, and client visit notes. Those documents seemed dry, yet for

the first time, they allowed him to see the veins of China-Australia trade from a macro level.

In the past, when he studied philosophy, he liked to ask why people lived. Now, sitting in the office and watching boxes of waste paper, shiploads of iron ore, batches of wheat and meat move across paper, he suddenly felt that a nation, like a person, also has hunger, breathing, and blood vessels. Chinese industry needed raw materials, Chinese cities needed food, Chinese enterprises needed markets, and Chinese standards needed to go outward. Australia had mines, land, agriculture and animal husbandry, and resources, but also rules, laws, and local interests. Between the two countries, there was not some abstract diplomatic rhetoric, but certificates one by one, contracts one after another, shiploads of goods, and negotiation after negotiation.

Once, when they worked overtime late into the night, Liu Chengyin came to Xinde's desk holding tea. Seeing that he was still organizing materials on mineral cooperation, he asked, "Tired?"

Xinde smiled. "Much easier than the factory."

Liu also smiled. "The factory tires the body; here, the mind gets tired. Do not underestimate these materials. If you truly understand them in the future, you will know that commodity inspection is not merely stamping seals. It is seeing how the world flows."

Xinde looked up. "Mr. Liu, your company really is like a small government office."

Liu Chengyin nodded and did not deny it. "An overseas company needs the legs of an enterprise and the brain of a government office. If it only knows how to make money, it will not go far; if it only knows how to speak of rules, it will

not live. We are caught in the middle. We must understand national needs, and also market interests.”

After speaking, he walked to the window and looked down at the gradually quieting streets of Chatswood.

“Sometimes I also feel that we are like a small dock,” Liu Chengyin said. “Domestic ships, Australian goods, Chinese community relationships, information from the embassies and consulates, news from the chambers of commerce—all of them tie up here for a while. Whether they dock steadily depends on whether we have the ability.”

Xinde listened, absorbed.

After the work became familiar, Liu Chengyin also gradually came to know Xinde’s family situation. At first it was only casual talk, but the more he heard, the more he felt that the young man’s background was not simple. The five Ma brothers: the eldest studied medicine, the second did foreign trade and internet commerce, the third was in the courts, the fourth studied computer science in America, and Xinde himself had come from the Personnel Department of Guangdong Foreign Trade Administration, studied philosophy, and suffered hardship in Australia. Such a family had both scholarly air and a foundation in reality.

Especially once, Xinde unintentionally mentioned that one of his brothers was now bureau chief of the Shenzhen Construction Bureau, also a full department-level cadre.

Hearing this, Liu Chengyin’s teacup paused slightly in his hand.

“Shenzhen Construction Bureau?” he asked.

“Mm,” Xinde said. “My brother works there. There are many brothers in the family, each walking his own road.”

Liu Chengyin smiled. “Your Ma family truly has many talents.”

Xinde was somewhat embarrassed. “Each has only worked hard in his own way.”

Liu Chengyin did not ask more, but he remembered it in his heart.

He himself had come from the Shenzhen Foreign Trade Administration, and he had old feelings and old relationships in Shenzhen. After many years overseas, he often felt like a willow tree transplanted to the Southern Hemisphere—branches and leaves in Australia, but roots still in Shenzhen. Now, under him had come an old man of Guangdong Foreign Trade system, and this young man also had a brother who was a bureau chief in Shenzhen’s construction system, likewise at full department level. Within this, there was not only personal affinity; perhaps there might also be future business, visits, cooperation, and the exchange of human favors.

Later, one afternoon, while Liu Chengyin sat idly talking with Xinde, he said half-earnestly and half-jokingly, “Xiao Ma, if I return to Shenzhen for a business trip in the future, I should visit this brother of yours. The Construction Bureau manages urban construction, and Foreign Trade manages trade quality. The systems are different, but in a place like Shenzhen, all roads are connected.”

Xinde smiled. “If Mr. Liu goes, I will make a call in advance. My brother is steady and does not like empty ceremony, but meeting someone from the old system should make him happy.”

Liu Chengyin nodded. “Good. Overseas, what people fear most is severed roots. Being able to return to Shenzhen and see old people is also a way of watering oneself.”

Hearing this, Xinde’s heart stirred.

He suddenly felt that this office on the seventeenth floor was reconnecting many people and matters that had once been scattered: Liu Chengyin's old roots in Shenzhen, the overseas branches and leaves of the Australian company, the vast tide of Chinese trade, his own Foreign Trade Administration experience, the thread of the Ma brothers, and a future visit to Shenzhen that had not yet happened.

Outside the window, sunlight fell on the glass, and the fax machine spat out another new page.

Xinde rose to fetch it. The paper was warm, the ink clear. Looking at those lines of Chinese and English text, he suddenly understood that many of life's preparations are at first as plain as ordinary documents. Only when one looks back years later does one realize that on that sheet of paper, the opening of fate's next chapter had already been written.



CHAPTER 85

WITH MANY FRIENDS, THE ROAD IS
EASIER TO WALK

The day Liu Chengyin returned to Shenzhen, the South was just entering early summer.

When the plane landed, the world outside the window was moist and green. Shenzhen's sky was unlike the North's, which was high and distant. Here the clouds pressed low, and sea wind blew dampness in from the bay, leaving a thin sheen of water on the glass curtain walls. Along the roads, banyans, kapok trees, and flame trees grew in profusion, as though even the leaves of this city were more eager than elsewhere to grow upward. The car drove from the airport toward the city center; overpasses, office towers, construction cranes, and streams of business traffic swept past in layer after layer. Sitting in the back seat and looking out the window, Liu Chengyin felt, unexpectedly, a little dazed.

He was a man who had gone out from the Shenzhen Foreign Trade Administration.

When he left back then, the office building had still been the old one, and many of his colleagues had still been young. Now that he had returned, the old sign had already changed. The Shenzhen Foreign Trade Administration had become the Inspection and Quarantine Bureau. Old colleagues told him that above them, an even larger institutional reform was still being brewed; perhaps in the future they would be merged into Customs. The name had changed, the seals had changed, and personnel relationships, divisions of function, and business procedures were all changing too. As Liu Chengyin listened, he could not say for a moment whether what he felt was emotion or loss. The people in the office were still warm. When old colleagues met him, they patted his shoulder, shook his hand, exchanged greetings, and said that "Mr. Liu has returned from overseas in glory." He smiled and waved it

away. "What glory? I have only come back to report and handle matters, and to see old friends along the way."

At noon they had a simple meal, without making a great show of it. Several old colleagues ordered steamed fish, boiled shrimp, roast goose, and greens, and opened a bottle of wine that was not especially expensive. During the meal they spoke of Thailand, of Australia, of waste-material inspection, and of Shenzhen's changes over the years. Someone sighed. "Old Liu, if you had not gone out back then, there should be a chair for you in the bureau now."

Liu Chengyin smiled. "Each person has his fate. You stayed at home to guard the stall; I went outside to look at the world. We are all working for the system."

After lunch, following the arrangement Xinde had already made for him, he went to the Shenzhen Construction Bureau to visit Ma Lide.

When the car arrived downstairs at the Construction Bureau, Shenzhen's afternoon sun poured down through gaps in the clouds, hot and damp. The air carried a smell mixed of cement, green trees, and sea wind. The Construction Bureau building was not luxurious, but it had the brightness and order particular to the offices of a new city. Flagpoles stood high at the entrance, security guards checked visitor registration, the corridors were clean, and the walls were hung with urban planning diagrams and photographs of key projects. As Liu Chengyin walked inside, he thought that this city of Shenzhen was indeed filled everywhere with the two words construction. The roads were new, the buildings were new, the districts were new, and even people's spirit seemed to be pushed forward by speed.

Ma Lide's secretary was already waiting at the elevator.

"Mr. Liu, Director Ma is waiting for you in his office."

Liu Chengyin nodded his thanks. As the elevator rose, he was still thinking that Xinde had said his elder brother was director of the Shenzhen Construction Bureau, a full department-level cadre. He imagined him to be a man in his forties, steady and dignified. Who would have expected that when the door opened and he entered the office, Ma Lide rose from behind the desk to greet him, and Liu Chengyin was slightly startled.

Ma Lide was much younger than he had imagined.

He was tall, with straight shoulders and back, clear brows and eyes, and a dark short-sleeved shirt worn neatly and cleanly. He had the competence of a southern cadre, and also the understated elegance of a scholar. He looked almost ten years younger than Liu Chengyin. Were it not for the steadiness and measure already worn into his eyes by long experience with official affairs, judging only by his face, one would hardly think him a man in charge of an entire bureau.

“Mr. Liu, welcome, welcome.” Ma Lide stepped forward to shake his hand. His smile was not broad, but very sincere. “Xinde mentioned you several times over the phone. He said you are a senior from the old Foreign Trade Administration system, and that you opened up the situation in Australia. I have long wanted to meet you.”

Liu Chengyin hurriedly said, “Director Ma is too polite. Xinde has done very well in our company—careful, steady, with skill in writing. In the end, it is because your Ma family has a good family style.”

Ma Lide smiled slightly. “Only after suffering did he become steady. Mr. Liu was willing to give him a chance; our family should thank you.”

The words were not heavy, yet they settled kinship, personal favor, and social courtesy all at once. Liu Chengyin

secretly praised him: young though he was, his speech was seasoned.

After the secretary served tea, he withdrew. Only the two of them remained in the office. Ma Lide did not hurry to talk business, but invited Liu Chengyin to sit on the reception sofa. As soon as Liu sat down, his gaze was drawn to a piece of calligraphy on the wall.

The characters hung on the side wall by the desk. The placement was not ostentatious, yet one could see it upon entering. The paper was faintly yellow, the ink rich and moist, the brush force steady. It bore four large characters:

Shen Zhong Ru Shi - Be as careful at the end as at the beginning.

At the signature was the name of a certain central leader.

Liu Chengyin looked at it for a while and could not help saying, "Director Ma, this piece has no small bearing."

Following his gaze, Ma Lide looked over and smiled. "Mr. Liu also looks at calligraphy?"

"I would not say I understand it. I only like it." Liu Chengyin stood and walked a few steps closer. "These four characters are very fitting in the office of a Construction Bureau director. What city construction fears most is bustle at the beginning and carelessness at the end. To be as careful at the end as at the beginning—is difficult."

Ma Lide nodded. "It is difficult. When a project begins, flags flutter; when it is completed, there are many cameras for the ribbon cutting. What is truly hard are the invisible links in between: planning, bidding, quality, safety, inspection and acceptance, later maintenance. If one step is not handled carefully, the debt will have to be paid in the end."

Liu Chengyin smiled. "It is the same in our Foreign Trade work. When a certificate is signed and issued, it is only a

sheet of paper. But if the inspection beforehand is not real, what follows may be a shipload of goods, a compensation claim, even the credit of a national institution.”

Ma Lide looked at him. “Mr. Liu’s words are connected with these characters. Whether engineering or commodity inspection, both begin in detail and end in credibility.”

The two looked at each other and smiled, and the atmosphere relaxed a great deal.

Liu Chengyin again looked at the calligraphy and said, “The strength of these characters is upright, not charming or flattering. When central leaders write characters, most of the time it is not purely calligraphy; there is a pattern of mind within it.”

Ma Lide said, “Yes. At a certain level, calligraphy writes not only brush method, but also the order within the chest. If characters have only technique, they easily become light; if they have only force, they easily become crude. What is hardest is spirit within discipline.”

Liu Chengyin liked hearing this and said, “Director Ma is young, yet speaks with maturity. One can tell you truly love calligraphy.”

“I dare not claim that,” Ma Lide smiled. “Daily work is too mixed and complicated. I can only occasionally copy model calligraphy to quiet my mind. I have looked at Wang Xizhi’s Lanting Preface often, but truly copied it little. The more I look, the more I feel that ‘floating like drifting clouds, powerful like a startled dragon’ is not description, but realm.”

Liu Chengyin continued, “The marvel of Wang Xizhi’s characters lies in their not deliberately striking a pose. The spirit of the Jin people was pure, spacious, and natural. When I was young, I also copied the Lanting Preface. The more I copied, the less it resembled it. Later I understood that it was

not written by the hand alone, but by an entire age, temperament, and cultivation together.”

Ma Lide nodded. “That is why many people now copy model calligraphy and only learn the outer form, not the breath. Being a person and being an official are the same. If one only learns the frame and not the inside, it easily becomes empty.”

Liu Chengyin paused slightly, then smiled. “Director Ma’s words go deeper than calligraphy.”

Ma Lide smiled too. “Mr. Liu is my senior; I do not dare display my little skill before an expert. But I worked in the courts before, and now in the construction system. Having seen more, I increasingly feel that discipline matters. Without rules, calligraphy scatters; without rules, engineering becomes chaotic; without rules, official life becomes dangerous.”

Liu Chengyin heard the experience and measure inside his words, and followed the thread. “Xinde said you were originally in the court system?”

“I worked in the Ruizhou Intermediate Court,” Ma Lide said briefly. “Later the organization arranged for me to come to Shenzhen’s construction side. The systems are different, but neither can be separated from the two words rules.”

Liu Chengyin nodded. “No wonder. You carry both a legal man’s caution and a construction cadre’s competence.”

“Mr. Liu flatters me.” Ma Lide lifted his tea. “You, on the other hand, went from Shenzhen Foreign Trade to Southeast Asia, then to Australia. You have seen more waves than I have. An overseas institution is not easy. It must speak of national credibility, and also of market methods.”

Liu Chengyin said, “Only after being outside for a long time does one know that those rules inside domestic office

buildings are actually roots. Without roots, things easily become disorderly overseas. But roots alone are not enough. The branches and leaves must understand the local wind and rain.”

The words were just right. Hearing them, Ma Lide’s eyes brightened slightly.

The topic returned again to calligraphy. Liu Chengyin said that when he was in Thailand, he had once seen a pair of couplets by a late Qing Hanlin scholar in a Chinese merchant’s collection; the paper had grown brittle, yet the ink was settled and deep. Ma Lide then spoke of how, after Shenzhen’s economy rose in recent years, many people had begun collecting calligraphy, paintings, porcelain, jade, and old furniture, with genuine and false mixed together, elegance and vulgarity side by side.

“Collecting,” Ma Lide said, “most reveals the human heart. Some truly love old things and like that breath of time inside objects; some use old things to decorate their façade; and some merely treat cultural relics as another kind of currency.”

Liu Chengyin nodded. “Yes. It is the same in overseas Chinese circles. Some hang calligraphy and paintings in the living room because they want to keep a little Chinese air. Others hang them to be seen by others. Those who truly understand may not be showy; those who are showy may not truly understand.”

Ma Lide smiled. “Mr. Liu’s words sound like someone who does inspection. Goods must be examined for truth and falsehood; people too must be examined for truth and falsehood.”

“And as Construction Bureau director, Director Ma must see even more truth and falsehood,” Liu Chengyin joked.

Ma Lide did not respond too deeply, only said lightly, "City construction also has something of collecting in it. Old buildings, old streets, old villages—whether to demolish or preserve them is often not a technical question, but a value judgment. A new city must grow, but old things cannot all be destroyed. If a city has only glass and concrete left, it may be rich, but its memory will be thin."

Hearing this, Liu Chengyin's heart stirred.

He had originally come only because Xinde had introduced him, but he had not expected that this young bureau director before him not only understood calligraphy, but also cultural relics, and still more, the order and memory behind a city. By this point, the conversation was no longer mere courtesy and small talk; it had found room to continue deeper.

He said slowly, "Director Ma's words make me think of Australia. Australian cities are not as fast as Shenzhen, but many old buildings, old docks, and old warehouses are preserved very carefully. China has developed too quickly in these years. Sometimes one bulldozer goes down, and old things are gone. Yet when the country moves forward, it cannot only carry old burdens on its back. The measure between these two is perhaps the hardest test of a construction department."

Ma Lide looked at him, his tone steady and reserved. "The two words measure are the hardest. If all the old remains, the city cannot move; if all the old is demolished, the human heart has no root. Doing construction is not only building towers and roads; it is also arranging a place for memory within the city."

Liu Chengyin nodded slightly. “Director Ma is young and promising, and rare in possessing such a state of mind. Xinde said you were steady. Today I have seen it.”

Ma Lide smiled. “Mr. Liu must not praise me again. Shenzhen has too many talented people and too many urgent matters; no one dares say he is steady. You, rather, after many years overseas, have built an inspection and certification company into a national window. That is real skill.”

“It is all the times pushing us along,” Liu Chengyin said. “Plant a willow without intending it, and it ended up planted in Australia.”

Ma Lide heard both his modesty and the meaning inside his name, and smiled. “Mr. Liu’s name is good. A willow planted without intention grows into shade; to grow into shade in the Southern Hemisphere is also an ability.”

Both men laughed.

Outside the window, Shenzhen’s afternoon light shone on the office building glass, and in the distance, construction cranes slowly turned. Inside the office, the fragrance of tea was faint, and the four characters “Be as careful at the end as at the beginning” hung quietly on the wall, as if annotating this first meeting. Two full department-level cadres—one drifting from the Foreign Trade system overseas, one transferred from the courts into construction; one older and steady, one young and deep—had begun with a piece of calligraphy, and spoken of Wang Xizhi, collecting, city memory, then, through just-right compliments, slowly seen each other’s weight.

Liu Chengyin understood that this visit had not been wasted.

Ma Lide also knew that this Mr. Liu whom Xinde had encountered in Australia was not merely a manager of an overseas company.

Many deeper words did not need to be spoken in a hurry.

For a first meeting, to move from characters to temperament, from cultural objects to cities, from rules to credibility, was already enough. True relationships often do not suddenly become hot at the wine table. Rather, in a cup of tea, a piece of calligraphy, and a few measured words, the first piece is slowly placed on the board.



CHAPTER 86

OFFICIALS HAVE ALWAYS SHIELDED THEIR OWN

In later exchanges, Liu Chengyin and Ma Lide gradually became familiar.

Neither was a man who easily revealed everything. One had spent many years in the Foreign Trade Administration system and drifted overseas, knowing that words should be spoken only three parts, and matters left seven parts. The other had moved from the courts to the construction side; though young, he had long understood that in official life, many words cannot be spoken to the end, and many

intentions cannot be fully exposed. Therefore, at the beginning, they still mostly spoke of calligraphy, collecting, urban construction, and overseas trade; of Wang Xizhi and Mi Fu; of old building preservation; of Shenzhen speed and Australian rules. But as topics turned back and forth, they would eventually fall upon personnel matters and future destinations.

Once, after dinner, the two sat in a quiet teahouse in Shenzhen. Outside the window was humid, hot night, and city lights were reflected on the glass. Liu Chengyin lifted his tea and said lightly, "My term in Australia is almost complete. There is an intention from above that I may return to Beijing, to serve as deputy general manager at headquarters."

Hearing this, Ma Lide's smile drew in slightly; then he raised his cup. "Then I should first congratulate Mr. Liu. After a term overseas, returning to Beijing as deputy general manager—that is a real step forward."

Liu Chengyin waved his hand. "The formal document has not yet come down, so I dare not call it advancement. Besides, the waters in Beijing are deep, and headquarters is not an idle place. Overseas, the sky is high and the emperor far away; one can actually open one's hands and feet. Once back in Beijing, there are more levels, and more rules."

Ma Lide nodded. "More rules sometimes also means more opportunities. To enter a larger office and a larger platform changes a person's position."

Liu Chengyin looked at him. "Director Ma's words sound as if they come from feeling."

Ma Lide smiled and did not answer immediately. He lowered his head and moved the tea lid for a while before saying, "My side may also move a little."

"Oh?"

“Leaders above have arrangements. I may go to Beijing, to a post under the National Development and Reform Commission. In name, it is a lateral transfer. The position is not conspicuous, and it is not a powerful office.”

Liu Chengyin understood.

In official life, what one fears most is not being sent to an idle post, but having no one arranging anything at all. So-called idleness is sometimes truly idle, and sometimes only a transition. Especially moving from a locality to a ministry, what appears to be a lateral transfer is in fact a change of platform. If there were no later move planned above, who would take the trouble to transfer a full department-level cadre from Shenzhen’s construction side to Beijing? Ma Lide spoke lightly, but Liu Chengyin heard the weight.

He smiled. “Director Ma is young. Going to Beijing to pass through those waters may not be a bad thing. Localities have local fire; ministries have ministerial water. Fire tempers a person; water reveals a person. To sink down first may be for the sake of rising more steadily later.”

Ma Lide smiled too. “Mr. Liu is an understanding man.”

The two looked at each other, and neither said more.

The rules of official life are often like this. On the surface, one speaks of organizational arrangements, work needs, and lateral transfers. Beneath the surface lie judging people, using people, transition, observation, and paving roads. A post that seems quiet may be a shelter from wind, or may be a springboard. A position that appears inconspicuous, if it lies in a key department and under the eyes of key leaders, may carry more meaning than a bustling post in the provinces.

Liu Chengyin said, “If I return to Beijing later, and Director Ma is also in Beijing, then we can meet often.”

Ma Lide said, "Naturally. Once in Beijing, everything will be unfamiliar. Mr. Liu is from the old system and an old hand; I will still need to ask much guidance."

Liu Chengyin smiled. "Director Ma is too polite. Your construction side and the Development and Reform Commission are originally close. Cities, investment, projects, planning, approvals—which one can be separated from Development and Reform? Once you go, though it may seem temporarily idle, your view will broaden."

Ma Lide did not agree or disagree, only said slowly, "When one arrives in Beijing, one cannot be impatient. First recognize the doors, recognize the people, recognize the rules. What local cadres fear most upon reaching ministries is still carrying the temper of the locality. Beijing looks at hierarchy, measure, and patience."

Liu Chengyin nodded. "In the end, it is all changing rules. Shenzhen speaks of speed, Australia speaks of law, Beijing speaks of order."

Hearing this, Ma Lide's eyes brightened slightly. "Mr. Liu, those six words can be written down."

The fragrance of tea slowly dispersed in the small room.

Liu Chengyin suddenly sighed. "Since ancient times, official life has had its own logic. Outsiders often say that officials shield officials. The words are unpleasant, yet they have their root. Those who serve as officials are within the same net. They know each other's difficulties, and also each other's risks. When one can offer support, one supports a little; when one can leave a step, one leaves one. It is not entirely favoritism. Sometimes it is also maintaining order."

Ma Lide answered lightly, "But support has boundaries. One may shield a person, but not evil; one may leave favor, but not break the law. If one speaks only of mutual protection

and not of bottom lines, what is protected in the end is not officials, but disaster.”

Liu Chengyin looked at him and secretly approved.

“Director Ma came from the courts. You have the foundation to say this.”

Ma Lide shook his head. “Foundation is too much to claim. I have only seen too many case files, and know that once people treat rules as decoration, they will have to repay sooner or later. Yet if one understands no human feeling at all, it is also very difficult to walk far. The difficulty of official life lies in seeking a measure among law, human feeling, interest, and position.”

Liu Chengyin lifted his tea. “Then may we, in Beijing later, each keep our measure, and each leave room to support the other.”

Ma Lide also raised his cup. “Mr. Liu has said this well.”

The edges of the cups touched lightly. The sound was very soft, yet it seemed to plant a hidden clasp for the days to come.

Outside the window, Shenzhen’s lights were brilliant, and traffic flowed like water. Neither of them spoke further of Beijing, but both understood in their hearts that this acquaintance in Shenzhen would not end in Shenzhen. If they met again in Beijing in the future, one in the group, one in a ministry, their identities would be different, the platform higher, and the topics deeper.

The road of official life is sometimes not beneath one’s present feet, but in the next city, the next cup of tea, and the next seemingly accidental reunion.



CHAPTER 87

AT THE THRESHOLD OF POWER

That Ma Lide was transferred to Beijing appeared, to outsiders, to be a lateral move. Those who understood the game knew it was merely a chess piece being moved onto another board.

During his years at the Shenzhen Construction Bureau, he outwardly oversaw urban construction, planning coordination, old-city redevelopment, and key projects. In truth, the people he came into contact with were far more complicated than those known to an ordinary construction bureau director. Shenzhen was a window, and also a dock; a city, and also a passageway. Many relatives of people from central ministries, the military-industrial system, financial institutions, and central state-owned enterprises had houses here, companies here, projects here, and also arrangements that could not conveniently be placed on the table. In the hands of the Construction Bureau lay planning, land use, approvals, redevelopment, supporting facilities, and acceptance inspection. A building, a plot of land, a villa district—without a nod from the construction system, even the greatest background had to take a detour.

What truly drew the attention of upper-level figures to Ma Lide was not that he knew how to flatter, nor that his hands and feet moved quickly, but that he understood measure.

One year, a tract of mountain-and-water land on the outskirts of Shenzhen was packaged as a “rehabilitation supporting project.” In name, it was to build recuperation

housing for retired cadres and experts from certain central units; in reality, quite a few private villas were reserved inside. Later, people in the circle jokingly called it the “back garden.” Those who moved in were either relatives of leaders from certain ministries, wives of senior executives from central enterprises, or figures who had gone south early to do business and were connected behind the scenes to Beijing compounds. Those wives did not necessarily hold official titles, yet they were harder to serve than many who did. They wanted lake views, mountain terrain, private entrances and exits, a sense of security, and a sense of status. Their mouths spoke of quietness, while their hearts complained that the specifications were not high enough.

Every time Ma Lide went to the site, he spoke little, but what he said always landed on the key point.

“The retaining wall cannot be made only for looks. When the rainy season comes and the water pressure rises, any problem will be a major matter.”

“No matter how narrow this road is, space must be left for fire engines to turn around. Otherwise, when the time comes and the vehicle cannot get in, human favors will not be able to put out the fire.”

“The exterior façade may be understated, but the pipelines must be done properly in one go. The owners are not afraid of spending money; they are afraid of rework.”

At first, those wives saw that he was young and did not take him seriously. Later, they discovered that this young bureau director neither fawned nor put on airs. He could get things done properly without leaving too obvious a handle. Gradually, they began to look at him differently. Someone said, “This Xiao Ma does not seem like a Guangdong official; he seems more like someone from a Beijing compound.”

Another laughed, “Young, yes, but his eyes are steady. He knows which words can be heard, and which words must not be remembered.”

It was at that time that Zhu Jianhua truly noticed him.

On Shenzhen ground, very few people who knew her called her by her formal name. Most called her “Zhu Baobao.” Such names were not uncommon among children of Beijing compounds. Those with true family background often had childhood nicknames—Maomao, Guagua, Lanlan, Baobao, and the like. To outsiders, they sounded childish; those within the circle knew that the lighter and more floating such a nickname seemed, the heavier the family background behind it might be. Zhu Baobao was nominally in the jewelry business in Hong Kong. She had several shops, and also participated in cultural relic auctions, antique transfers, and art consulting between the mainland and Hong Kong. She did not dress ostentatiously, but when she spoke, there was the kind of slight arrogance of someone accustomed from childhood to being accommodated. Her smile was sweet, yet her eyes were cold.

There were many rumors in Shenzhen about her origins. Some said she was the illegitimate daughter of a current member of the Central Standing Committee; others said she was not his biological child, but had long been looked after by that family. In official circles, such matters never had documents, nor would anyone seek verification. People only looked at the occasions she entered and left, who accompanied her to meals, who took her phone calls, and whether one sentence from her could make some department revise a plan overnight. Over time, truth and falsehood no longer mattered. As long as most people believed that

mountain stood behind her, she possessed the shadow of that mountain.

The first time Zhu Baobao spoke with Ma Lide alone was in the model villa area of the back garden.

That evening, the rain had just stopped, and mountain mist rose from the grassy slopes. The newly planted osmanthus trees along the garden path had not yet fully taken root, and droplets of water clung to the tips of the leaves. Zhu Baobao wore a beige trench coat, with only one female assistant beside her. Looking at the villa in the best position by the lake, she suddenly asked, "Director Ma, if this place were expanded outward another two meters, would it affect the planning?"

Ma Lide glanced at the drawings, then looked at the site, and answered calmly, "On the drawing, two meters is not much. In terms of rules, one extra centimeter is still extra."

Zhu Baobao turned to look at him and smiled. "Everyone else says there are ways."

Ma Lide also smiled. "Of course there are ways. Only, ways are of two kinds: one kind solves the problem, and the other creates a larger problem for later."

Zhu Baobao stared at him for a moment, then suddenly said, "You are interesting."

Ma Lide did not take up that sentence. He only closed the drawings. "If Miss Zhu only wants a better view, there is actually no need to expand. Adjust the tree planting on the west side of the courtyard, and the lake surface will open up. The procedures will also remain clean."

Later, Zhu Baobao said to those around her, "This Ma Lide knows how to do things for people, and also how not to dirty himself."

When these words reached Ma Lide's ears, he only smiled faintly.

By then, his relationship with Luo Tingting had already faded.

Luo, the secretary of the Ruizhou Political and Legal Affairs Committee, had run into trouble. Although it had not injured the bones and sinews, he had received disciplinary punishment. Luo Tingting had originally shared with Ma Lide a relationship neither close nor distant, with both the sincerity of young men and women and the tacit understanding between two families' political resources. But once Secretary Luo had trouble, Luo Tingting soon went to England. Before leaving, she called Ma Lide once. Her voice still carried the pride of old days, but hidden within it was also the acceptance of fate.

"Lide, I may not come back for a very long time."

Holding the phone, Ma Lide only said, "Going out is good too. Change places."

Luo Tingting was silent for a while. "Did you know long ago that we would not make it to the end?"

Ma Lide did not answer directly. "Many roads cannot be walked to the end simply because two people are willing."

A soft laugh came from the other end, like crying, and also like mockery. "You really are still like this. Whatever you say, you leave room."

After that phone call, their relationship ended. There was no tearing of faces, no great quarrel. It was more like a thread soaked too long in water: with a gentle pull, it broke without sound.

Zhu Baobao entered precisely through that gap.

She was sharper than Luo Tingting, and more realistic. Luo Tingting still carried the discipline and pride of a

daughter from a political-legal family; Zhu Baobao, by contrast, was someone accustomed to swimming through the waters of Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and Beijing. She understood officials, and she understood money; she understood the desire in the final second before an auction hammer fell, and also the weight of a vague sentence at a leader's dinner table. She liked Ma Lide not only because he was young and handsome, with a steady bearing, but even more because he possessed that rare quality of being "usable without being frivolous."

"Do you know," she once said to him while holding a glass of red wine in a private club in Central, Hong Kong, "when many men see me, their eyes first look at who is standing behind me. You are different."

Ma Lide smiled. "I look too."

"What do you look at?"

"How far what stands behind you reaches, and how deep what stands before you goes."

Zhu Baobao froze for a moment, then burst into laughter. "Ma Lide, you truly are suited to being an official."

They soon got together, and soon after that, privately registered their marriage.

Very few people knew of this matter. Zhu Baobao did not want to make it public, and Ma Lide was in no hurry to make it public. For people like them, marriage was not only a relationship between man and woman; it was also a political asset. If displayed too early, it easily attracted gossip; hidden for a while, it could instead be more useful. Those around Zhu Baobao only knew that her relationship with Ma Lide was extremely close, and that she often introduced him to people not appearing on public lists. Ma Lide, for his part, continued as before: going to work at the Construction

Bureau, attending meetings, approving documents, listening to reports. Outwardly, nothing seemed unusual.

The real change began with Beijing.

Once, returning from Hong Kong, Zhu Baobao brought Ma Lide an old wooden box. Inside was not jewelry, but a Qing-dynasty jade seal. Its material was warm and lustrous, the knob carved with a beast, and the side inscription extremely fine.

“Take a look,” she said.

Ma Lide held it in his hand, not rushing to judge, but slowly examining it beneath the lamp. “A good thing.”

“In jewelry and auctions, what I lack most is not buyers, nor sources of goods,” Zhu Baobao said. “What I lack is someone who understands the national cultural relics system, policy, approvals, and boundaries. Hong Kong can circulate, but the mainland side cannot be chaotic. Cultural relic circulation, auctions, export, repatriation, appraisal, state-owned museum collections, private collections—the water inside is too deep.”

Ma Lide put down the jade seal. “So you want me to go into the cultural relics side?”

Zhu Baobao looked at him. “It is not that I want it. It is that you are suited to it.”

The words were light, yet they carried the scent of arranging fate.

Later, through the relationships on her father’s side, Ma Lide was first arranged for a lateral transfer to Beijing, to an idle post under the State Council’s Development and Reform Commission. On the surface, it looked like being transferred from the Shenzhen Construction Bureau to a national ministry: his rank did not rise, and his power temporarily weakened. Some acquaintances in Shenzhen did not

understand. “Has Director Ma taken a wrong step? The Construction Bureau has projects and approvals in hand. What is he seeking by going to the Development and Reform Commission to sit on a cold bench?”

Those who understood did not see it that way.

For a local full department-level cadre wishing to enter a higher level, the hardest thing is changing platforms. However hot Shenzhen may be, it remains a locality; however idle Beijing may be, it is close to the center. A so-called idle post is sometimes not abandonment, but transition. Place him first in the Development and Reform Commission, let him recognize the doors, recognize the people, recognize the rules, wash away the local coloration, and then make another appointment. The hand behind Zhu Baobao would not push Ma Lide directly into too conspicuous a position. That would be neither steady nor safe from wind. Truly seasoned arrangements often go from cold to hot, low to high, without power to with title.

The Development and Reform Commission was only a ferry crossing.

The next step would be a principal post in a department under the Ministry of Culture responsible for national cultural relics: vice-department level.

On the surface, this position was not as lively as the Construction Bureau, nor did it directly pull on major projects like finance, development and reform, or land. But those who understood the field knew that another kind of enormous power was hidden inside the cultural relics system. Museum acquisitions, cultural relic appraisal, auction supervision, export approvals, archaeological projects, cultural preservation works, museum construction, overseas repatriation of cultural relics, art funds, expert committees—

which of these had no interests behind it? Especially in recent years, as the wealthy rose, collecting, auctions, and antiques all became hot. Genuine pieces and fakes appeared on the same stage, and power and capital sought passage to one another. A principal post in a department managing national cultural relics seemed elegant and refined, yet in invisible places it could connect money, reputation, history, and human favors.

What Zhu Baobao had her eye on was precisely this road.

Her jewelry business was only the surface layer. Cultural relic auctions were the deeper water. Hong Kong was the entry and exit; the mainland was the market, and also the source of policy. If Ma Lide could in the future sit in the cultural relics side, she did not need him to do anything openly. It would be enough that he understood the rules, understood people, understood which doors could be opened and which could not. True benefits often do not rely on a command, but on an appraisal, an exhibition, a repatriation, an approval; on one extra person added to an expert list; on a certain object shifting from “doubtful” to “discussable”; on an auction moving from “not appropriate” to “can be studied.”

Ma Lide, of course, understood the risks within.

He was not greedy without limit, nor was he a bookish fool. He had read case files in the courts, seen engineering in the Construction Bureau, and witnessed too many transactions beneath the table in Shenzhen. He knew that once power drew close to cultural relics, it was like a hand reaching into an ancient well: what it touched was not only water, but mud, snakes, copper coins, and bones that had sunk there for many years.

Once, Zhu Baobao asked him, “Are you afraid?”

Ma Lide answered, "I am not afraid of power. I am afraid of power without boundaries."

Zhu Baobao laughed. "You have too many boundaries."

Ma Lide looked at her. "People with few boundaries move fast. People with no boundaries at all also die fast."

After hearing this, Zhu Baobao was silent for a moment before saying, "That is why I chose you."

Between them, rather than calling it love, one might say it was love, interest, appreciation, and political conspiracy woven together. Zhu Baobao needed a man who could enter the core of the system without being crude and greedy. Ma Lide needed a platform that could push him from locality to Beijing, from full department level to vice-department level. Both knew clearly that the other had something sought; yet it was not wholly without feeling. She admired his restraint; he admired her courage. She had resources; he had measure. She could open doors; after entering them, he knew not to walk recklessly.

This was the most subtle union of officialdom and capital.

Outsiders only saw Ma Lide's lateral transfer to Beijing and thought he had not risen but fallen. They only saw Zhu Baobao selling jewelry and doing auctions in Hong Kong and thought it was merely the elegant hobby of a wealthy woman. They only saw that a certain central leader had always kept a low profile regarding his children, and seemed to have nothing to do with any of this. But the true lines are never written on public résumés. They are written in seating arrangements at dinners, private phone calls, messages relayed by secretaries, project lists, timing of transfers, and one "inconvenient-to-explain" arrangement after another.

Before leaving Shenzhen, Ma Lide once sat alone in his office until deep into the night.

The calligraphy on the wall—"Be as careful at the end as at the beginning"—still hung there. Outside the window, Shenzhen's lights were like a sea, and construction cranes stood silently in the night. This city had given him power, opportunity, women, and complex tests. Now he was going to Beijing. On the surface, it was a lateral transfer; in truth, he was entering a larger game.

Looking at those four characters, he suddenly remembered something his father, Ma Cunhui, had once said: there are two ledgers—one counts money, the other counts the heart.

Now, there were more ledgers in his hands.

The official ledger, the emotional ledger, the family ledger, the power ledger, the cultural relics ledger, the Beijing ledger.

Not one entry could be calculated wrong.

Because with some ledgers, a mistake only costs money; with others, a mistake means falling into ruin beyond redemption.



CHAPTER 88

HE SOUGHT THE WISDOM OF AN ELDER

Before leaving Shenzhen, Ma Lide went alone to the nearby beach - Xiaomeisha.

That day the sky could not decide between sun and cloud. The wind by the sea was strong, and clouds pressed down upon the mountain peaks like gray-blue silk soaked through with water vapor. The sea at Xiaomeisha was not as vast as distant legends made it sound, yet it had the particular tide-sound of the South China Sea, wave after wave striking the reefs, like someone repeatedly knocking at a door in the dark. There were not many tourists on the beach. A few sun umbrellas stood crookedly. The seawater withdrew, then surged back, smoothing away footprints again and again.

Lide took off his leather shoes, carried them in his hand, and walked slowly along the wet sand.

Shenzhen had been too fast these years. Buildings rose fast, roads were built fast, money came fast, and people's hearts changed fast too. In the Construction Bureau office, every day was filled with drawings, approvals, projects, meetings, and phone calls; behind every piece of land were eyes, behind every project were hands. Now he was going to Beijing—nominally a lateral transfer, in truth a change of board. He knew clearly that the real road of official life would enter deep water only after he reached Beijing.

The sea wind disordered his hair, but he did not smooth it.

He thought of his father Ma Cunhui's words: there are two ledgers—one counts money, the other counts the heart. But only now, having come this far, did he understand that in official life there were far more than two ledgers. There were ledgers of human favor, position, faction, reputation, risk, and the future. If any one entry was calculated wrongly, it might drag a person down from a height.

"Relationships are the first resource," he said to himself in his heart.

If he said this to his father, his father might frown; if he said it to his eldest brother Rende, Rende might fall silent; if he said it to his second brother Yide, Yide might nod. For whether one served in office or did business, a person did not live upon empty ground. Without relationships, information arrived one step late; without connections, opportunity took a detour; without support, when the wind came, no one would shield you for even a moment.

But relationships were not random attachment.

Lide understood better than anyone that if relationships relied only on banquets, red envelopes, women, and verbal promises, they came quickly and collapsed quickly too. Truly useful relationships were those in which both sides could accomplish things, add weight to each other, and leave a door open for the other within the rules. Politics and commerce had to combine, because politics could not be separated from resources, and commerce could not be separated from rules. Power and money were bound to be connected, because projects, land, cultural relics, engineering, investment, and approvals—none could be severed from interests. But being connected did not mean being mixed together. Water can carry a boat, and it can also overturn it; money can accomplish things, and it can also bury people.

He stopped beside a reef and watched the waves shatter into white foam.

“One must be flexible,” he thought. “And one must also keep the rules.”

This was not empty talk. Flexibility meant knowing where the door was, to whom words should be spoken, when to enter, and when to withdraw. Keeping the rules meant knowing which door must not be entered, which sentence must not be said, which money must not be touched, and which favor must not be owed too deeply. The higher one climbed, the less one could make oneself look like a vulgar upstart. The greater the power, the lower the posture must be; the wider the circle of connections, the clearer the heart must remain; the more one was flattered, the more one had to understand humility. In official life, those who were too sharp were easily broken; those who were too smooth easily rotted. The road Lide wanted to walk was the narrow one between.

Fine rain suddenly began falling by the sea.

Raindrops landed on the surface of the water, dense and countless, like invisible characters. Lide stood in the rain and did not immediately take shelter. He knew he could no longer turn back. Luo Tingting had gone to England. Zhu Baobao was laying another road for him between Hong Kong and Beijing. The idle post at the Development and Reform Commission was only a ferry crossing; the cultural relics department under the Ministry of Culture was the next step. And farther ahead, there were higher positions, deeper waters, and more complicated people.

He put his leather shoes back on and turned away from Xiaomeisha.

The next day, he went to Hong Kong.

Crossing from Shenzhen into Hong Kong was like passing from a high-speed construction site into a steady machine of money. Hong Kong's sky was overcast. Thin mist lay over Victoria Harbour. Trams moved slowly through Central, and glass towers shone beneath the clouds. Lide rode uphill by car. The mountain road wound upward, and the buildings retreated layer by layer beneath his feet. By the time he reached Victoria Peak, the wind was cooler than in the city. Far below, the harbor, Tsim Sha Tsui, the Kowloon Peninsula, the densely packed towers, and the ships on the water all looked as though they had been arranged upon a vast chessboard.

His Third Uncle, Ma Gaohui, was already waiting for him in a private club at the Peak.

Gaohui still had the appearance of an old Hong Kong merchant. His hair was neatly combed, his suit was not new but fit well, and between his brows and eyes was a trace of sharpness acquired after seeing through storms. When he saw Lide enter, he smiled first and said, "Director Ma has arrived."

Lide hurriedly said, "Third Uncle, please do not call me that."

Gaohui snorted. "If I don't call you Director Ma, should I call you Little Lide? You are a man about to enter Beijing now. Titles must change with the road."

Lide smiled. "Before Third Uncle, I am still a junior."

Gaohui looked at him and nodded with satisfaction. "Remember that sentence. Not only before me—before all old fellows, you must let people feel that you still understand the manners of a junior. Young people who climb fast fear most that their eyes grow onto their foreheads."

Several figures from Hong Kong's real estate world were already seated in the private room. One, surnamed Huo,

specialized in acquiring old buildings and commercial properties; one, surnamed Chen, held hotels and port warehousing; and another was older, addressed by everyone as Uncle Rong. He had come to Hong Kong from Chaoshan in his early years, made his start in real estate, and later invested in finance, jewelry, and art. Seeing Lide enter, they all rose politely. Gaohui introduced him with neither too much nor too little emphasis: "This is my nephew. He came out of Shenzhen's construction side and will be going to Beijing soon."

"Beijing is good," Boss Huo smiled. "Shenzhen is fire; Beijing is heaven. No matter how fiercely the fire burns, one still has to look at the color of the sky."

Lide handed over his name card with both hands. "I am new here. I hope to learn from all you seniors."

Uncle Rong accepted the card, glanced at it, and slowly said, "Young, full department level, going to Beijing. Mr. Ma's future is not shallow."

Lide bowed slightly. "I dare not speak of future. It is only the organization's arrangement, changing places to study."

The men looked at one another and smiled. They understood official language. The more someone spoke of study, the more likely the road was being paved; the more someone spoke of a lateral transfer, the more likely it was a transition. These Hong Kong merchants had done business for decades—how could they not understand the twists of mainland officialdom?

Gaohui personally poured tea for Lide and wine for the bosses.

"Today is not for discussing projects," Gaohui said. "It is to recognize a person. Our Ma family does not speak much, but we recognize friends. When Lide goes to Beijing in the future,

if you gentlemen have proper matters and proper channels, you may walk around more. In the rivers and lakes, one speaks of loyalty; in official life, of rules; in business, of credibility. Only when the three do not conflict can one walk far."

Boss Chen smiled. "Brother Gaohui's words are pleasing to hear. Doing mainland business now, one is not afraid of spending money. One is afraid of finding the wrong person. Find the wrong person, and the money is spent, the matter fails, and trouble is stirred up besides."

Lide continued, "That is why words should be spoken clearly in advance. Matters that are legal and compliant can be studied together. Matters that cross the line—this junior does not dare touch them, and does not dare let you seniors touch them."

Boss Huo looked at him, his smile deepening. "Mr. Ma speaks with a bottom line. We like people with bottom lines. A person without a bottom line may help you today, and sell you tomorrow."

Uncle Rong slowly picked up a mouthful of food and said, "Young man, one must understand money, but one must not hurry to love money. Money is water; power is the channel. Without a channel, water flows chaotically; if the channel is built crooked, the water will also break the embankment. You came from the construction side. You should understand this principle."

Lide raised his cup. "Uncle Rong, I will remember these words."

Gaohui watched from the side and nodded secretly. This nephew of his had a little less of Yide's fire in the marketplace, but more of the dark softness of officialdom; less of Rende's compassion, but more judgment; less of

Xinde's innocence, but more patience. The five Ma brothers each had their own fate, and Lide's road was destined to pass among power, human feeling, money, and rules.

During the meal, they spoke of Hong Kong real estate, and each boss had his own insight.

Boss Huo said that Hong Kong had little land and many people, so the property market was its lifeblood. Boss Chen said that mainland urbanization had only reached halfway up the mountain; the truly great money was still behind. Uncle Rong, however, said lightly, "Money does not sleep. Tonight it is in Hong Kong, tomorrow in Shenzhen, the day after tomorrow in Beijing. Whoever sees clearly where it is flowing can stand on the bridge one step early."

Lide listened, occasionally asking a question, but never interrupting.

"Uncle Rong, if money flows too fast, should the government block it or guide it?" he asked.

Uncle Rong looked at him and smiled. "That depends on the skill of you officials. If you block it too tightly, the water grows foul; if you release it too broadly, the water becomes disaster. The best way is to let it think it is free, while in truth it moves within the rivercourse you have already repaired."

At this, everyone at the table laughed.

Lide also laughed, but he deeply remembered the sentence.

After the meal, Gaohui took Lide out onto the terrace. The night wind of the Peak blew toward them, and Hong Kong's lights lay spread beneath their feet like an inverted galaxy. In the distance, the shadows of ships moved slowly across Victoria Harbour, and the lights of financial towers glowed square by square. Gaohui lit a cigarette and offered one to Lide. Lide waved his hand and did not take it.

“Still not smoking?” Gaohui asked.

“Better to smoke less.”

“Good.” Gaohui smiled. “For an official, one less addiction is a blessing.”

The two stood side by side, looking down the mountain.

Gaohui suddenly said, “Lide, the people today were not brought for you to take money from, nor to have you handle matters immediately. They were brought so that you know where the money is, where the people are, and where the roads are. When you go to Beijing, you cannot go empty-handed. Official life speaks of organization, the rivers and lakes speak of friends, and business speaks of chips. If you have no chips in your hand, why should people remember you?”

Lide said quietly, “I understand.”

“But there is another sentence.” Gaohui turned to look at him. “Money may come close, but must not cling to the body. People may be befriended, but you cannot sell your life to them. Relationships may be laid out, but you cannot lay yourself down as a road for others to tread on. Zhu Baobao’s side is one road; Hong Kong’s side is another; Beijing will have still another. When there are many roads, people easily think they walk steadily. In truth, beneath every road there are pits.”

Lide looked at the lights below and slowly said, “So one must look at heavenly timing, earthly advantage, and human harmony.”

Gaohui nodded. “Not one can be missing. Heavenly timing is the larger trend: what the country wants, where policy is moving. Earthly advantage is the position where you stand: the doors of Shenzhen, Hong Kong, and Beijing. Human harmony is who is willing to help you, who can sit at the

same table with you, and who will speak a sentence for you at the critical moment. If you have all three, you can walk far. If one is missing, you must make it up. If you have none of the three, then however clever you are, you are only a lonely ghost.”

Lide was silent for a long time.

He thought of the sea at Xiaomeisha, of the words “Be as careful at the end as at the beginning” hanging on the wall of the Shenzhen Construction Bureau, of Zhu Baobao’s Qing-dynasty jade seal, of that seemingly idle post at the Development and Reform Commission, and of the Hong Kong lights before his eyes. In stillness, he saw his own heart; in movement, he saw the net of the world.

“Third Uncle,” he finally said, “I will remember. Roads must be laid, but retreat must also be left. People must be befriended, but people must also be judged. Money must be understood, but it must have boundaries.”

Gaohui smiled and patted his shoulder. “Now that is like a son of the Ma family. Go, Lide. Beijing is not Shenzhen, and it is not Hong Kong. The people there smile more lightly, their hands are steadier, and their words are shorter. You must learn slowness.”

The wind on the Peak gradually grew stronger.

The night of Hong Kong flickered beneath them like a city of money that never closed its eyes. Ma Lide stood high above it, yet his heart was heavier than it had been at Xiaomeisha. He knew that from this night onward, he was no longer only the director of the Shenzhen Construction Bureau, nor only Zhu Baobao’s husband behind the scenes, nor merely the third son of the Ma family who spoke little before his father.

He was about to enter a larger game.

Within that game were officials, merchants, money, old loyalties, and new dangers.

And he had to walk step by step—steadily, lightly, and deeply.



CHAPTER 89

WITH PUBLIC DUTY FOREMOST, RULES STAND FIRM

Of all people, Yide was the happiest when Lide went to the National Development and Reform Commission.

When the news first reached Shanghai, Yide was sitting in the Treasure Bowl office, studying a warehousing and distribution plan. East China warehouse, South China warehouse, North China warehouse—which city should be chosen first, which expressway was closest, which logistics company could collect payment on delivery, which industrial park had cheaper rent—the tables were densely packed, spread across the desk like a new commercial map. Wang Zuyi came in and handed him the phone, saying, “Your third brother has been transferred to Beijing.”

Yide took the phone, listened for a few moments, and the expression on his face slowly changed.

After hanging up, he stood by the window for a long time.

“The National Development and Reform Commission?” Wang Zuyi asked.

Yide nodded.

Zuyi was silent for a moment. “That name carries weight.”

Yide smiled. “A great deal of weight. Outsiders may not know exactly what Lide does there, but once they hear those words, before anything is even said, they will already yield three parts in their hearts.”

This was no exaggeration.

In China, when doing business, it is often not necessarily the one with the best product, the fastest system, or the lowest price who wins. The market is important, of course; yet beyond the market there are also the direction of policy, the attitude of departments, the name of a pilot project, the wording inside official documents, and a single evaluation made by a leader during an inspection tour. If a project is only something an enterprise says of itself, then it is business. But if it is written into the language of “expanding domestic demand,” “modernizing circulation,” “scientific and technological innovation,” or “pilot platform economy,” then it at once gains another layer of identity.

In his early years in real estate, Yide had known that relationships were buried beneath land. Later, when he built a foreign trade platform, he learned that behind trade stood foreign exchange, customs, taxation, commodity inspection, and banks. Now, building Treasure Bowl, he saw a still deeper layer: domestic demand was not simply ordinary people buying things. Domestic demand was a national economic restructuring; it was a great tide jointly pushed forward by factories, merchants, logistics, warehousing, payment, credit, consumer capacity, and policy signals.

And the Development and Reform Commission happened to be the place that watched the direction of the tide.

“What does the Development and Reform Commission manage?” a local investment-promotion cadre once asked Yide at a dinner.

Holding his tea, Yide said half-seriously and half-playfully, “It manages planning, issues policy, and points direction. Others manage one road; they look at the whole map. Others look at one deal in front of them; they look at industries five or ten years out.”

The words were beautiful, and also realistic.

After Lide arrived in Beijing, he did not openly run any procedures for Yide. He understood boundaries better than anyone. On the phone, he often spoke only in principles: “E-commerce can lean toward expanding domestic demand, modern circulation, and information infrastructure. Do not always speak of how your company makes money. Speak of how the industrial chain lowers costs, how small and medium enterprises connect to the national market, how ordinary people obtain cheaper and more convenient goods. Policy does not like naked private calculations. Policy likes business models that can be placed inside public interest.”

Yide’s heart brightened as he listened.

He understood his younger brother’s way of speaking best. Lide was not giving him an approval note, nor was he finding someone to greet on his behalf. He was telling him from which direction the wind was coming, how words should be spoken, and how the cards should be laid out.

The deep logic of the Dragon Kingdom society often lay precisely in these questions of “how to say it.”

The same thing, if called a “goods-selling platform,” was the small merchant’s trade. If called “promoting the

upgrading of the domestic circulation system,” it might enter a department’s field of vision. If called “collecting money online,” it easily attracted regulatory attention; if called “exploring a safe and convenient electronic-payment pilot,” it opened a door for innovation. If called “enterprise financing,” it was merely a capital act; if called “attracting domestic and foreign investment to participate in new-economy infrastructure construction,” it gained the meaning of the times.

Yide saw this logic more and more clearly.

Thus Treasure Bowl no longer only shouted its common slogan of “More Money, More Love.” It began to acquire another, more formal language: serving small and medium enterprises, expanding urban and rural consumption, lowering transaction costs, improving warehousing and distribution, promoting the standardization of electronic payment, and exploring new models for domestic trade circulation. What was written for ordinary people was Treasure Bowl; what was written for media and departments was platform economy; what was written for investors was traffic entrance and closed-loop transactions; what was written for himself was survival and growth.

Bebebo, the payment system left from the foreign trade period, continued to be used for cross-border business, slowly piloted under the regulatory framework. For domestic business, a new system was built separately and named Qianduoduo—“More Money.”

Once this name came out, the company laughed for a while.

Xiao Chen said, “Bebebo sounds like baby products. Qianduoduo sounds like a lottery shop.”

Zuyi, however, said, “Exactly. A domestic platform has to be down-to-earth. Treasure Bowl, Qianduoduo—ordinary people hear them and are not afraid. If you call it ‘Third-Party Electronic Payment Clearing Service System,’ who would dare use it?”

Yide made the decision. “Then it will be called Qianduoduo. Let money flow clearly, and flow with peace of mind.”

With the rumor of a policy pilot, and with Lide’s invisible endorsement from Beijing, matters began to move more smoothly.

In the past, when banks heard “internet payment,” they frowned first. Now, hearing “pilot,” “standardization,” and “serving domestic demand,” their attitude softened somewhat. In the past, local governments saw Treasure Bowl only as a private website. Now, seeing that it drove warehousing, logistics, employment, and local product sales, they were willing to provide space, parks, and a seat at meetings. In the past, the media liked to write about how legendary Yide himself was. Now they were more willing to write about how Treasure Bowl helped small commodities go nationwide, how it allowed county-town factories to find urban consumers, and how freight flows on expressways connected with internet orders.

Capital was even more sensitive.

A portion of domestic and foreign investment had already entered earlier, and many people had originally come for traffic. Now, seeing that the policy opening was gradually becoming clearer, that transportation and warehousing had begun to run smoothly, and that Qianduoduo was receiving support from relevant departments, they had greater confidence. Hong Kong private equity, Shanghai local capital,

Zhejiang private capital, and old-line investment institutions brought in by Zhidie from the United States all sat down at the table again. Some valued users, some valued payment, some valued warehousing, and some valued the rise of domestic consumption. But in their hearts, they all understood: in China, if a platform has both a market and a policy direction attached to it, its valuation is no longer only profit and loss on a financial statement, but the price of a future passageway.

Yet Yide was calmer than before.

He knew that the smoother things became, the clearer one had to see. So-called policy support was not a death-exemption tablet for enterprises; so-called capital pursuit was not free money. Policy wanted demonstration, order, and controllability; capital wanted growth, valuation, and exit; the media wanted stories; local governments wanted achievements; merchants wanted orders; ordinary people wanted good cheap goods. Treasure Bowl stood in the middle, like standing at the center of a lively marketplace, with people shouting at him from all directions.

If he could not hold it up, the liveliness too would become a weight that crushed him.

Once, Yide went to Hangzhou to attend a forum on the modernization of circulation. Onstage, experts spoke of expanding domestic demand, upgrading China's consumption structure, and the expressway network and logistics nodes. Offstage, local cadres, business owners, and reporters were all taking notes. When it was Yide's turn to speak, he did not talk grandly about himself, but told a small story.

He said that in the past, if a towel factory in Zhejiang wanted to sell goods to a small city in Sichuan, it had to rely on layer upon layer of wholesalers. The goods would travel

half a month, the price would be marked up several times, the factory would not know who was buying, and the consumer would not know where the goods came from. Now, with expressways, warehouses, platforms, and payment systems, the factory could receive orders online; the goods could first arrive at a regional warehouse and then be distributed to the terminal. Consumers spent less money, factories received payment faster, intermediate links became fewer, and information became more transparent.

“This is not simply selling goods online,” Yide said. “This is the regrowth of the capillaries of Chinese commerce. Large cities have large malls, small county towns have small shops, villages and townships have markets, and families have needs. What Treasure Bowl wants to do is let these places see one another, and let the flow of goods, money, and information all begin to move.”

This passage was later excerpted by the media, and even overseas Chinese came to know it.

The headline was: Treasure Bowl: Letting the Capillaries of Chinese Commerce Grow Again.

After Lee Hong saw the report, she called Yide from Australia and laughed at him. “President Ma is getting better and better at speaking policy language.”

Yide smiled. “After dealing with reporters and officials for long enough, even if you don’t know how, you learn.”

Lee Hong said, “But that sentence is true.”

Yide was silent for a moment. “True words also have to be said well before anyone will listen.”

This was precisely the subtlety of Chinese society.

Many true problems, if spoken too privately, no one paid attention; if spoken too sharply, others grew afraid; if spoken too emptily, they were useless. One had to speak an

enterprise's pain point as an industry's pain point; speak an industry's difficulty as the direction of reform; speak one's own path of survival as a passageway for more people. People who can do things may not necessarily walk far; people who can speak about things may not necessarily have roots. Only those who can both do things and place those things within the narrative of the times can possibly push a company from the edge of the market into the mouth of the policy wind.



CHAPTER 90

BROTHERHOOD BEYOND THE PEACH GARDEN OATH

Silently, from Beijing, Lide helped Yide complete this lesson.

Occasionally, he called Yide, his tone still not warm. "Do not be too high-profile. The Development and Reform Commission is not opened by your family."

Yide laughed. "I know. Don't worry. I never mention you."

"If you do not mention me, others will still guess," Lide said lightly. "Precisely because they will guess, you must be even more rule-abiding. Whether a matter can be done long

term does not depend on others giving you three parts of face, but on whether you yourself have seven parts of ability.”

After listening, Yide put away his smile. “I understand.”

On the other end of the phone, Lide was silent for a moment, then said, “The name Treasure Bowl is vulgar, but correctly vulgar. China’s domestic demand is not in documents; it is on the dinner tables of ordinary people. If you can truly let small merchants earn more money and families spend less wasted money, then this matter has roots.”

Holding the phone, Yide felt warmth in his heart.

He knew that his third brother was not a man who showed warmth openly. To speak to this extent was already great recognition.

The operation of Treasure Bowl came more and more to resemble a true machine. At the front end were the website and Qianduoduo payment; in the middle were orders, customer service, credit ratings; at the back end were warehouses, distribution, logistics fleets, and suppliers in different regions. Shanghai, Hangzhou, Yiwu, Canton, Chengdu, Wuhan—line after line began to connect. Trucks on expressways drove with lights on at night, turning online orders into actual boxes of goods. Workers in warehouses scanned codes, packed boxes, and pasted labels. Customer service girls soothed first-time online shoppers over the phone. Reporters chased interviews about “how the new economy enters ordinary life.”

Standing high in the warehouse and watching the conveyor belts turn slowly, Yide suddenly thought of the early days: looking at land in southern Canton, recording business yellow pages in Hong Kong, building the Silk Road platform in Shanghai, waiting bitterly for policy during the winter of

foreign trade, and the night he had written the words “Treasure Bowl” on the whiteboard.

Many roads, it turned out, were not opened all at once.

First someone had to build expressways, then someone had to build warehouses; first someone had to write reports, then someone had to open policy doors; first someone had to burn money and make mistakes, then someone dared to invest; first someone had to sit in Beijing in a position where he could see the direction, then someone in the market could turn that direction into business. Chinese commerce had never been purely free competition, nor purely administrative arrangement. It was more like a great river: the current had the force of the market, and the banks had the shape of policy. Those who understood water could move fast; those who understood banks could be steady. To understand only water was to capsize; to understand only banks was to run aground.

Yide finally understood that his internet business, having reached this moment, had truly entered the deep waters of Chinese-style commerce.

In these waters there was money, policy, face, risk, and the solid everyday lives of ordinary people.

Looking down at the busy crowd in the warehouse, he said softly to Zuyi, “The roads are open, the money is open, and the goods are beginning to move. Next, it depends on whether human hearts can open.”

Zuyi asked, “What do you mean?”

Yide smiled. “Let people believe that buying things online is real. Let merchants believe the platform will not cheat them. Let departments believe innovation is not disorder. Let capital believe we are not only telling stories. In China, business finally falls upon two words.”

“Which two words?”

“Trust. Trust.”

Outside the warehouse, night was deep. Toward the expressway, rows of vehicle lights flowed past like a bright river. The name Treasure Bowl was vulgar, and its slogan too was vulgar. Yet beneath this vulgar name, a new Chinese commercial network was quietly growing its skeleton.

And Yide knew that this time, he stood at the mouth of the wind, and also in the examination hall.



CHAPTER 91

LOOKING TO WALL STREET IN THE UNITED STATES

Zhide returned from America more and more often.

At first, he only flew to Shanghai occasionally, staying three to five days each time. He would hold several technical meetings, meet several groups of investors, have one meal with Yide, Zuyi, Xiao Chen, and the others, then hurry back to Silicon Valley. Later, this no longer worked. Treasure Bowl was no longer the little company in a Shanghai office where twenty or thirty people stayed up all night writing pages. It had become a giant enterprise of more than ten thousand people, like a sleepless new city of lights, growing its own streets, cafeterias, warehouses, server rooms, customer

service centers, finance buildings, training halls, and clusters of meeting rooms.

Once a company became large, a problem was no longer one problem, but a whole forest.

As users increased, servers could no longer hold up. As merchants increased, search results slowed. As orders increased, payment interfaces jammed. As warehouses multiplied, inventory synchronization became chaotic. Thousands of phones rang at the customer service center at the same time, and any tiny mistake could be magnified in the media. In the past, Yide dared to slap the table and say, “Get it going first.” Now he finally understood that once things truly got going, no matter how loudly he slapped the table, the system would not become one second faster because of it.

After Zhide returned, the first thing he did was change the rules for technical meetings.

He sat in the conference room with a system architecture diagram spread before him. His voice was not loud, but each sentence was harder than the last. “From now on, do not say ‘it more or less works.’ When the platform was small, more or less was usable. Once the platform is large, more or less is disaster. Today, if one order is lost, a customer curses you. Tomorrow, if a hundred thousand orders are lost, the national media curses you. The day after tomorrow, if the payment system makes an accounting error, it will no longer be cursing—it will be the regulators coming to find you.”

Xiao Chen smiled bitterly from the side. “President Zhi, people who come back from America all speak like server alerts.”

Zhide glanced at him. “Server alerts at least give you logs. When I alert you, I only give you deadlines.”

The conference room laughed for a while; after laughing, everyone lowered their heads and took notes.

At this time, experts from the Chinese Academy of Sciences came, and teachers and students from Tsinghua, Fudan, Jiaotong University, and Zhejiang University also came. Some researched search algorithms, some database scaling, some network security, some Qianduoduo payment risk control, some intelligent warehousing dispatch. In the morning there were technical meetings; in the afternoon, investment committee meetings; at night, merchant training sessions. There were not enough conference rooms, so the training hall was temporarily divided into sections. Projectors shone from morning to night; whiteboards were wiped and written on, written on and wiped again, leaving faint gray shadows.

In the past, whenever Yide heard these terms, his head ached. Now he had learned to nod before experts, and had also learned to ask at key moments, “Can this make users wait three seconds less? Can it make the warehouse make one fewer mistake? Can it make Qianduoduo safer?”

A senior researcher from the Chinese Academy of Sciences privately said to Zhide, “Your second brother does not understand technology, but he understands where technology must land.”

Zhide smiled. “He does not understand code, but he understands human nature. For the Chinese internet to grow big, code alone is not enough. One must also understand how Chinese people buy things, how they trust others, and how afraid they are of being cheated.”

The old researcher nodded. “That is true.”

Every morning, the headquarters campus of Treasure Bowl filled with people like the tide coming in. Programmers

carried computer bags; customer service girls wore employee badges; finance, human resources, legal, marketing, advertising, warehouse dispatch, payment risk control, merchant operations, and media public relations—people of every kind surged in from the subway exits, bus stops, and shuttle buses. The elevator hall was like a dock, the meeting rooms like stations. Floor after floor shone with lights, and every whiteboard was filled with goals, data, processes, and deadlines.

Most spectacular of all was mealtime.

The Treasure Bowl employee cafeteria could no longer simply be called a cafeteria. It was more like a vast indoor market. Once eleven-thirty at noon passed, several office buildings released people at the same time, and the corridors filled with footsteps, voices, and elevator chimes. In the large cafeteria, steam rose everywhere. Hundreds of tables spread out. Window after window glowed in rows: Shanghai local dishes, Sichuan cuisine, Cantonese roast meats, northern noodles, Hunan stir-fries, northeastern stews, halal food, vegetarian food, and also coffee, milk tea, bread, yogurt, and fruit. The queues for food bent and wound, like little rivers flowing into the sea.

Some people carried braised pork and rice, looking for seats. Some held a phone in one hand and soup in the other. People from the technical department argued over databases while eating; people from marketing revised advertising lines while drinking milk tea; girls from the customer service center, their voices hoarse, still exchanged ways to soothe customers. On the large screen on the cafeteria wall, the day's orders, warehouse shipment volume, Qianduoduo payment success rate, and provincial sales rankings scrolled continuously. People eating would glance up; the numbers

would jump, and someone would shout, “Zhejiang has passed Southern Yue again!” Another table would immediately call back, “Wait until tonight. Our Southern Yue merchants will strike!”

That liveliness was like the marketplace, and also like a military camp; like a giant factory, and also like a temple fair.

The first time Yide stood seriously on the second floor of the cafeteria and looked down, he suddenly found himself unable to speak. Below was a dark mass of people. The sounds of chopsticks, laughter, bowls and plates, phone rings, and dialects from every region mixed together. He said to Zuyi, “How is this company eating? This is like a small China eating.”

Looking downstairs, Zuyi said lightly, “That is why you can no longer make decisions by patting your head as before. One decision of yours no longer only affects the financial statements. It affects whether all these people have work tomorrow, whether they have bonuses, whether they have a future.”

Yide nodded.

He understood. When a company reached this scale, commerce was no longer only commerce. It became a kind of social organization. Here were young people’s youth, family mortgages, parents’ pride in their children’s work, suppliers’ payment terms, logistics drivers’ night shifts, customer service girls’ voices, warehouse workers’ waists, programmers’ falling hair, and the simultaneous gazes of investors and policy departments.

Capital too surged in like the tide.

American money, Hong Kong money, Shanghai money, Zhejiang money, even some private equity funds wearing new names began circling around Treasure Bowl. Behind these

funds were old-line merchants, the newly rich, and also sons and daughters of central leaders and local high officials. Unlike the previous generation, they did not stand directly at the front. They established investment companies, consulting firms, and industrial funds; wore suits, spoke English, talked of valuation, and also of national strategy. They understood that the money of this age could not roll only in coal mines, real estate, approvals, and import-export quotas. New wealth would grow from the internet, payment, consumption, and data.

The first time Yide met these young capital figures in Shanghai, he knew clearly in his heart: what they valued was not only Treasure Bowl's business.

They valued the mouth of the wind, policy, traffic, a ticket before listing, and the entrance to a platform that might change China's commercial order. In the past, state-owned enterprises had resounding names because behind them stood state credit. Now Treasure Bowl's name resounded because it stitched together national direction, private consumption, capital imagination, and technological trends. Ordinary people heard Treasure Bowl and thought of good cheap goods. Local governments heard Treasure Bowl and thought of expanding domestic demand. Investors heard Treasure Bowl and thought of listing valuation. The media heard Treasure Bowl and thought of a new-era commercial legend.

For a time, the three words Treasure Bowl became louder than the names of many old state-owned enterprises.

Some local cadres, accompanying Yide on warehouse tours, joked, "President Ma, now your Treasure Bowl is more famous than several of our city's old state-run factories."

Yide smiled. “Fame is given by the media; goods are shipped out box by box. State-owned enterprises have factories; we have servers. State-owned enterprises have workshops; we have warehouses. State-owned enterprises have workers; we also have workers—only we also have programmers and customer service.”

The cadre was pleased to hear this. “That is well said. The new economy is also the real economy.”

Yide knew in his heart that this sentence could spread.

Zuyi later reminded him, “Every sentence you speak now may be quoted. Do not speak carelessly.”

Yide smiled. “Then from now on, I will only speak eight words.”

“Which eight?”

“Serve the people; help the merchants.”

Zuyi looked at him. “Those eight words are safe, and also useful.”

What truly brought Treasure Bowl into thousands upon thousands of households was the shopping festival.

Whenever major holidays approached, the whole company seemed to enter a state of war. A month in advance, giant posters were hung on the outer walls of the campus. Advertisements ran from Shanghai to Beijing, from provincial capitals to county-town bus stops. Television, radio, newspapers, building ads, shopping-mall screens, and internet home pages all shouted the same line: “Treasure Bowl—More Money, More Love.” Merchants everywhere stocked goods in advance. Warehousing centers piled up like mountains. Logistics companies added night shifts. Customer service centers hired and trained temporary staff. The Qianduoduo payment system expanded capacity overnight.

It no longer looked like a promotion, but more like a nationwide festival.

For Spring Festival, there was a “New Year Goods Grand Market”; for May Day, a “Good Things for Workers Festival”; for National Day, a “Ten Thousand Families Joyful Shopping Festival”; for Mid-Autumn, a “Reunion Gifts Festival.” On the eve of each festival, the Treasure Bowl headquarters tower blazed with lights. A temporary stage was built in the plaza; hosts, singers, media, partner merchants, and local representatives all came. Employees poured down from every floor, holding glow sticks, work badges, and phones. The square was a sea of people. The giant screen counted down: ten, nine, eight, seven... The shouting rose wave upon wave. In the distance, the towers of Pudong shone; nearby, stage lights swept over the crowd, music roared, like a large concert and also like the New Year bell of a commercial age.

At midnight, the orders opened like a sluice gate.

The national map lit up instantly.

East China lit, South China lit, North China lit, Southwest lit, and the Northeast too. The numbers surged upward like a waterfall. Phones rang in rows at the customer service center. Warehouse conveyor belts roared into motion. Packing machines, scanners, forklifts, trucks, elevators, walkie-talkies—all entered the rhythm. Videos came from warehouses around the country: the Yiwu warehouse blazing with lights, the Canton warehouse with trucks lined up, the Chengdu warehouse with workers shouting rhythms as they loaded vehicles, the Beijing warehouse entrance hung with red lanterns. The company’s internal livestream switched back and forth like branch venues at the CCTV Spring Festival Gala—only here, what was performed was not singing and dancing, but the operation of China’s commercial machine.

Employees watched the big screen and cheered.

“It’s broken one hundred million!”

“South China warehouse is overloaded!”

“Qianduoduo success rate is ninety-nine point something!”

“Xiao Chen, hold the servers!”

In the server room, Xiao Chen stared at the screens, his eyes red as if he had stayed up three nights. Into the walkie-talkie he roared, “Don’t shout my name! Shouting won’t give me another server!”

Everyone laughed, and after laughing continued working.

Zhide led the technical team in the command center. On the table were coffee, mineral water, cold boxed meals, and a pile of emergency plans. He watched system metrics while speaking at the same time with American consultants, domestic experts, the payment team, and warehouse dispatch. In Silicon Valley, he had seen the madness of internet companies; yet the madness of a Chinese-style shopping festival still shook him. Here it was not only online data. Behind it were tens of thousands of warehouse workers, tens of thousands of trucks, countless small and medium merchants, and countless families staying up late before screens to grab New Year goods, appliances, bedding, and clothes.

He said softly to Yide, “Second Brother, this is no longer a company event.”

Yide asked, “Then what is it?”

Looking at the screen, Zhide said, “It is like the whole nation joining a commercial concert together. We merely built the stage.”

Yide felt heat rise in his heart.

Families in the Northeast bought rice cookers from Guangdong; small shops in Sichuan bought socks from

Zhejiang; mothers in Shandong sent quilts to children studying in Beijing; Shanghai white-collar workers bought massage chairs for parents in the countryside; county-town merchants took goods directly from Yiwu manufacturers; Southern Yue factories received orders from the whole country overnight. In the past, China's goods flowed through wholesale markets, acquaintances' introductions, long-distance phone calls, and layers of distributors. Now, one click on a screen connected a warehouse a thousand li away with an ordinary household.

Standing before the big screen and watching the national order map light up piece by piece, Yide felt an excitement difficult to describe.

He thought of his early real estate days in Canton, when he had seen land; of making yellow pages in Hong Kong, when he had seen information; of building Silk Road in Shanghai, when he had seen foreign trade. And now, he saw a domestic market that was awakening. It was not abstract, not the "expanding domestic demand" written in documents, nor the "consumption upgrading" spoken of at forums. It was orders one after another, trucks one after another, smiles when families opened packages, and the sound of small factories starting their machines again.

From a technical angle, Zhide saw another picture.

"Second Brother," he said, pointing at the backend data, "what is most valuable now is not one day's transaction volume, but user habits. As long as ordinary people begin to believe that they can buy things online, and merchants begin to believe they can sell goods online, the platform's network effects will rise. The more people buy, the more merchants come. The more merchants come, the more goods there are and the cheaper they become. The more goods there are and

the cheaper they become, the more people buy. That is the platform's real moat."

Yide nodded. "You sound like a capitalist."

Zhide smiled. "That is exactly what I learned in America. Only China's market is more complicated than America's, and also larger. American investors look at the story; Chinese investors look at relationships; Hong Kong investors look at exit; domestic merchants look at whether they can sell goods today; ordinary people look at whether things are cheap. We have to convince five kinds of people at the same time."

"Can you convince them?"

Looking at the big screen, Zhide said softly, "If the data keeps growing like this, Wall Street will help us convince many people."

Wall Street.

Once this word appeared, even the air in the conference room seemed to brighten.

Zhide's team had already begun planning for a listing. American lawyers, accountants, investment-bank advisers, and audit firms gradually entered Treasure Bowl's field of vision. In the past, Yide only understood financing and thought that getting money into the account was ability. Now, for the first time, he came into contact with the true rules of the international capital market. The finances had to be redone; the equity structure had to be clarified; compliance had to be examined; risks had to be disclosed; the growth curve had to be told beautifully and credibly; the story had to be grand, and the accounts had to withstand scrutiny.

People from an American investment bank asked, "What is the core of Treasure Bowl?"

Yide wanted to say, “Serve the people; help the merchants,” but Zhide answered first: “China’s domestic consumption infrastructure.”

China’s domestic consumption infrastructure.

This sentence was worth more than any advertisement.

The investment bankers nodded after hearing it, their eyes bright. Because this was exactly the kind of story they wanted: not a website selling towels, socks, home appliances, and food, but a new pipeline connecting Chinese manufacturing and Chinese households; not a holiday promotion platform, but a new commercial network jointly formed by consumer data, payment systems, warehousing logistics, and a merchant ecosystem.

Later, in private, Yide asked Zhide, “This English of yours sounds very big. Is it too empty?”

Zhide said, “A listing story must be big, but there must be real things underneath to support it. We have warehouses, orders, payment, users, growth, and more than ten thousand people running this machine. That is not empty talk. Wall Street likes dreams, but it likes visible growth even more.”

Zuyi, however, remained calmer. “Listing is not a celebration banquet. It is entering the examination hall. All old accounts, old shareholders, and old promises will have to be spread out. Funds belonging to central officials’ children have come in, local capital has come in, American capital has come in. The livelier the equity becomes, the harder it will be to sort later. Do not look only at how beautiful the bell-ringing moment is.”

Yide’s heart tightened.

He knew Zuyi was right. The larger Treasure Bowl became, the more people participated, and the more hands there were behind it. Some truly invested money; some

invested relationships. Some waited for dividends; some waited to exit after listing. Some wanted to build for the long term; others only wanted to sell at a high point. Beneath the beautiful commercial scenery there were always complicated strata of interests. Only, the wind at this moment was too strong, the lights too bright, the orders too many, and the media too heated. Everyone was willing to believe that this ship was sailing toward a golden sea.

The Spring Festival shopping festival was the battle that truly enshrined Treasure Bowl.

This time, the platform began building momentum a month in advance. Advertisements ran on television, newspapers, bus stops, shopping-mall elevators, and local radio stations across the country. Merchants hung red lanterns. Golden ingots floated across the web pages. The customer service center was covered with Spring Festival couplets. At the warehouse gates, they even placed two inflatable Gods of Wealth. At first Yide thought it was too vulgar, but Zuyi said, “If Spring Festival is not vulgar, it is not Spring Festival.”

On the day of the event, from nine in the morning onward, orders surged all the way upward.

The numbers on the big screen jumped until hearts grew hot. Every time a round figure was broken, the whole room applauded. The technical team watched the system closely. The customer service center was like a battlefield. Workers in the warehouses ate boxed meals through the night. Media livestreams connected in. Excited hosts said, “This is a nationwide consumption experiment of China’s new economy.” Local newspapers wrote, “From counter to mouse: the way Chinese people celebrate the New Year is changing.”

Deep into the night, the transaction figure finally stopped at a height that astonished people.

Cheers erupted across the headquarters plaza. Some cried, some embraced, some shook open beer, sending foam spraying everywhere. Employees pushed Yide to the center, shouting, "President Ma, say a few words!"

Looking at those young faces, Yide thought for a long while. In the end, he said only this:

"Thank you, everyone. Today is not the end, but the beginning. China is so large, and ordinary people's lives have only just begun to become prosperous. We have merely caught up with the times. Treasure Bowl must remember: more money is good, but there must also be more love. Only by letting merchants earn money, letting buyers feel at ease, and ensuring that this platform does not deceive or cheat people, are we worthy of walking to Wall Street."

The crowd fell quiet for a moment; then applause rang out.

When the shopping festival ended, the sky was nearly bright.

The headquarters plaza was still lit. Stage ribbons were scattered all over the ground. Some employees sat on the steps eating breakfast; some had fallen asleep against chair backs; some held laptops and continued processing data. The cafeteria opened again. Soy milk, steamed buns, eggs, congee, and noodles were brought out pot after pot. The crowd, like seawater after the tide withdrew, slowly flowed toward the windows. Some ate while looking at transaction reports on their phones; some had hoarse voices but were still laughing; someone said, "This is more tiring than a concert." The person beside him replied, "When a concert ends, it's over. Our shipping has just begun."

Yide heard this and smiled.

He walked to the cafeteria entrance and saw whiteness rising at the edge of the sky. Shanghai had not fully awakened, but Treasure Bowl had already survived a night battle. In the distance, logistics trucks drove one after another out of the warehouse, as if loading the night's cheers into their compartments and sending them across the country.

Zhide walked to his side holding coffee and said, "Wall Street will like this story."

Yide asked, "Will they believe it?"

Looking at the vehicle lights in the distance, Zhide said, "They will believe the numbers, and they will believe a scene like this. Chinese consumption is not written on a PowerPoint. It is run out by more than ten thousand people who did not sleep all night."

Yide was silent for a while, then nodded.

Farther away was a place called Wall Street.

But at this moment, the cafeteria, warehouses, customer service center, technical command room, stage, employees, crowds, trucks, and morning light before his eyes were the true roots of Treasure Bowl. Without these, even the most beautiful listing story would be empty. With these, even before the bell had been rung, Treasure Bowl already sounded like a great bell across the earth of Chinese commerce.



CHAPTER 92

QIANDUODUO MEANS HAVING A LOT OF MONEY

After Treasure Bowl grew larger and larger, many people assumed it was only a matter within China.

In truth, it was not.

Like the old Silk Road platform, it had long crossed customs, ports, and sea routes, quietly reaching into the lives of overseas Chinese. At first, Silk Road helped Chinese enterprises find overseas buyers, moving Zhejiang's small hardware, Guangdong's small home appliances, Fujian's shoes and clothing, Jiangsu's textiles, Shandong's foods, and Yiwu's small commodities onto the web page by page. At that time, whenever overseas Chinese merchants, buyers, students, restaurant owners, supermarket owners, and wholesalers wanted to find Chinese goods, someone would tell them, "Go look on Silk Road."

A Chinese wholesaler in Los Angeles would open Silk Road in his office to search for Guangdong kitchenware. A Chinese restaurant owner in Manchester would look online for Zhejiang tableware and disposable goods. A small clothing shop in Paris would fix its eyes on ready-made garments from Shanghai and Canton. Chinese supermarkets in Southeast Asia would import box after box of goods from Fujian, Guangdong, and Zhejiang. In the past, such business relied on relatives' introductions, hometown connections, and luck at trade fairs. Now, with one computer, one inquiry, and

one quotation, two merchants who had never known each other could be drawn together.

Silk Road was like the new shadow of an old trade route.

On the old trade routes there had been camel bells, sea vessels, passes, and relay stations; on the new trade route there were web pages, English descriptions, quotation sheets, emails, and increasingly practiced foreign trade salespeople. It did not completely solve the problems of payment, credit, logistics, and quality, but it first solved the most fundamental problem: letting the world see Chinese manufacturing, and also letting Chinese enterprises see the world's demand.

When Treasure Bowl rose, the story changed another layer.

Treasure Bowl had originally been a domestic platform, facing ordinary people, speaking of "More Money, More Love," selling daily necessities, clothing, food, household goods, New Year goods, and gifts. But Chinese people were scattered across the world, and the ways of daily life in China would also follow them outward. Overseas Chinese went to America, Britain, Europe, Australia, and Southeast Asia; they ate local food, lived in local houses, and their children spoke English, yet in their hearts they still thought of Chinese things: a thick cotton quilt, a tea set, a rice cooker, a box of hometown seasonings, clothes to send back to parents, a gift box for New Year or festivals.

Thus Treasure Bowl gradually became a door through which overseas Chinese could reach Chinese daily life.

Students in Los Angeles placed orders from their dormitories for Chinese books, cotton slippers, and electric kettles. Chinese families in Queens, New York, used the Spring Festival shopping event to buy New Year goods for relatives and friends in China. Chinese students in London

pooled together to buy bedding and kitchen supplies. A young mother in Paris bought a massage chair on Treasure Bowl for elderly relatives back home. In Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, Chinese merchants used Silk Road to contact wholesalers while also using Treasure Bowl to observe what ordinary Chinese consumers liked. America, Britain, Europe, Southeast Asia—everywhere there was the shadow of Treasure Bowl.

Qianduoduo followed it outward too.

It was not merely a payment tool, but more like a procedure of trust. What overseas Chinese feared most was not that they did not want to buy, but that they did not feel reassured. If the money was paid, would the goods arrive? If something was damaged, who would take responsibility? Was the merchant reliable? In the past, buying things across borders was like handing money across the sea; there was always a layer of unease in the heart. The appearance of Qianduoduo slowly lowered that unease. It connected payment, orders, customer service, refunds, after-sales service, and logistics information, making people feel that even across the Pacific, a transaction was not something completely out of control.

Overseas Chinese felt this convenience most personally.

Only after Xinde began working at the Australian Foreign Trade company did he truly see how the power of Chinese internet business crossed the ocean inch by inch and seeped into the everyday lives of overseas Chinese.

At first, it was only colleagues in the office buying things.

In the seventeenth-floor office, there were more than thirty people. Usually they were busy with inspection, certification, certificates, translation, and client visits, but at lunchtime they were no different from ordinary Chinese

people, talking about rent, children, parents back home, and also online shopping. By then, Treasure Bowl had already become popular in China, and Qianduoduo payment was becoming more and more convenient. The business on his second brother Yide's side had long ceased to remain only among mainland Chinese merchants; even Chinese people in Australia often heard of it.

In the office, young female colleagues bought Hangzhou silk scarves, Yiwu hair clips, and Canton leather bags. Others bought small appliances, stationery, and tea sets for relatives in China. Payment was made through Qianduoduo; delivery was entrusted to friends returning to China, or sent through sea-freight consolidation. Someone joked, "In the past, when we returned to China, we bought things in Australia to bring back. Now look—Chinese goods are cheap and beautiful, and we in Australia are buying from China instead."

Hearing this, Xinde often felt a strange intimacy in his heart.

He sat on the seventeenth floor in Chatswood, writing documents, revising certificates, and translating emails for the Australian Foreign Trade company; while at the other end, his second brother Yide, between Shanghai and Shenzhen, was building Treasure Bowl and Silk Road larger and larger. The two brothers, one at an inspection and certification window in the Southern Hemisphere, the other laying platforms in China's internet business sea, seemed far apart, yet in truth they were on the same new trade route.

Later, colleagues from the Treasure Bowl and Silk Road departments began cooperating to develop a new purchasing platform called International Premium Goods.

The name was decided by Yide.

He said, “Silk Road is about Chinese goods going out; Treasure Bowl is about ten thousand merchants entering the web. Now we should also do the reverse, allowing good overseas products to enter China in small parcels. The ancient Silk Road was not one-way; grapes, spices, glass, and gemstones once came in from the Western Regions. Today’s internet cannot only let China sell outward. It must also let good goods from the world come in.”

One of the first places chosen by International Premium Goods was Australia.

In the eyes of Chinese consumers, Australia had a natural sense of cleanliness. Blue skies, pastures, sunshine, coastlines, cows, sheep, vineyards—even the air seemed as if it could be placed inside an advertisement. In the Chinese community, agricultural and sideline products, small health products, and daily chemical goods moved first. Lanolin cream, propolis, fish oil, calcium tablets, vitamins, wine, cereal, milk powder, honey, nuts, wool quilts, and small bottles of skincare products were photographed one by one, given Chinese descriptions, and placed on the web page.

Many Chinese people in Australia suddenly saw a new road.

Originally, they had made their living among restaurants, grocery stores, travel agencies, freight companies, and study-abroad agencies. The money was not large, and the days were hard. Once International Premium Goods appeared, everyone discovered that one did not need to open a large company in order to do small cross-border business. Some piled lanolin cream and health products in their garages; some rented a small warehouse behind a Chinese supermarket; some worked by day and packed goods at night. There were also students who drove on weekends to

pharmacies, wineries, and farms to purchase goods, then came back to paste Chinese labels, weigh items, fill in forms, and send small parcels.

For a time, in Parramatta, Hurstville, Burwood, Chatswood, Bankstown, and even in the Chinese circles of Melbourne, Brisbane, and Adelaide, people were talking about it.

“My relatives back home want fish oil. Can you help send some?”

“How much is a box of lanolin cream?”

“Can wine go by small parcel?”

“Do health products need inspection?”

“Can milk powder be sold directly to domestic customers?”

The more questions there were, the livelier Xinde’s Australian Foreign Trade company became.

Quite a few Chinese came to the seventeenth floor holding samples, documents, and screenshots of web pages to ask questions. There were small freight-company owners, housewives, students, and merchants who had flown over from China. The front desk often led people to the meeting room. Sometimes Xinde was called in too, because his English was good, and he was familiar with both China’s Foreign Trade Administration system and the logic of the platform; he could make the language of both sides connect.

A Guangdong-born Chinese boss asked, “Mr. Ma, I get this lanolin cream from a proper Australian manufacturer. If I send small parcels back to China, do I need a certificate?”

Xinde did not answer in a hurry, but asked, “Are you mailing as an individual, or selling commercially? How large is the volume? Do you have a Chinese web page? Do you

have fixed payment collection? Do you have domestic distribution?"

The boss was stunned. "What difference does that make?"

Xinde patiently explained, "A great difference. Occasional personal mailing and long-term commercial import are not the same thing. If you turn this into platform business and the volume becomes large, regulators will certainly take notice. Product category matters: food, health products, cosmetics, and alcohol all have different requirements. It is not true that just because the parcel is small, it has no trade nature."

A colleague beside them laughed. "Xiao Ma now speaks very much like old Foreign Trade Administration."

Xinde smiled too. "It was originally my old line."

During that period, the office seemed to become a small consultation port. In the morning someone would ask about honey; in the afternoon, someone about wine. One day someone brought a wool quilt sample; the next day someone came with bottles of health products. Many people had excitement in their eyes, as if as long as Australian goods could be sent back to China, money would flow over from the other side of the sea.

Liu Chengyin saw farther than they did.

Once after work, he said to Xinde, "Xiao Ma, this International Premium Goods is a good idea. But you must remember, small-parcel business most easily turns from a new road into a gray road. At the beginning, everyone says it is personal shopping, personal mailing, friends and relatives helping. Once the scale rises and the amount becomes large, taxation, inspection, customs, and food and drug regulation will all follow."

Xinde nodded. “Domestic consumers like Australian goods, and the platform also needs new growth points. But without rules, counterfeit goods, tax avoidance, false advertising, and product safety will all become problems.”

Liu Chengyin looked at him. “You see things more deeply now than when you first came.”

Xinde smiled. “After seeing so many certificates and goods here, I know that a product going from Australia to China is not as simple as sticking on a postage stamp.”

Facts soon proved Liu Chengyin’s judgment.

When International Premium Goods first launched, it was indeed glorious. Chinese buyers sitting before computers could directly see goods uploaded by small Chinese merchants in Australia. After payment through Qianduo, the merchants packed the goods in Australia, attached labels, and sent small parcels. After receiving the goods, domestic customers left messages on the platform: “Good taste,” “proper packaging,” “cheaper than in China,” “direct shipping from Australia feels reassuring.” These favorable comments were like sparks, igniting the enthusiasm of still more Chinese entrepreneurs.

Some sold hundreds of bottles of lanolin cream in a month; some earned their first small pot of money through propolis and fish oil; others turned wine into small gift sets and sold them to middle-class customers in China. Xinde even met a middle-aged Chinese woman who had originally chopped vegetables in the back kitchen of a restaurant. Later, by helping former classmates in China buy health products, she rented a small office and hired two students to pack goods. When she came to consult at China Inspection, her eyes shone. “Mr. Ma, I never imagined before that I too could do international trade.”

Hearing this, Xinde felt emotional.

He thought of the days when he had set up a stall selling towels and socks. The road of small overseas businesspeople always began from the smallest, hardest, and most trivial places. One parcel, one form, one customer, one bit of trust. If the times gave even a crack, many people would desperately thrust their hands inside, hoping to tear open a door for themselves.

But the tide came quickly, and withdrew quickly too.

As the number of small parcels grew larger and larger, relevant domestic departments began to take notice. If imported products entered for long periods under the name of personal mailing, how should tariffs be collected? Who was responsible for regulating food and health products? How should Chinese labels, ingredient filings, and quality responsibility for cosmetics be handled? Wine was managed as an alcoholic import; were small parcels bypassing normal channels? Some bad merchants even seized the opportunity to sell fake Australian goods, using domestic repackaging to impersonate direct shipping from Australia, or exaggerating the effects of health products, causing complaints to increase.

The first policy winds came from the ports.

Later, the state gradually tightened regulation over imported products, cross-border small parcels, tariffs, and commodity supervision. After receiving notices, the platform had no choice but to adjust its rules. Many goods on International Premium Goods temporarily suspended sales; some categories were taken down and required supplementary qualifications, declarations, tax payment, and inspection materials. The once lively Australian small-parcel purchasing business quickly cooled.

Consultations in the seventeenth-floor office also became fewer.

The people who had once lined up to ask about lanolin cream, fish oil, and propolis disappeared. Remaining were a small number of merchants who truly intended to import through regular channels. They no longer asked only “how can we send cheaply,” but “how do we file,” “how do we declare customs,” “how do we pay tax,” and “how do we enter supermarkets.” After the liveliness retreated, business returned from the wild margins into the system.

A Chinese boss who had once done very well sighed, “Mr. Ma, once policy changes, small operations like ours become difficult.”

Xinde said, “It is not that you cannot do it. You must change the way you do it. In the past, you made money through cracks; in the future, you must rely on qualifications and scale.”

The boss smiled bitterly. “Cracks are easy to squeeze through. The front door is hard to enter.”

After hearing this, Xinde said nothing for a long time.

This sentence spoke of the fate of many small overseas merchants. When an age first opens, grass and trees grow in the cracks; once the rules stand up, the grass and trees must either become trees, or be cleared away. The small-parcel fever of International Premium Goods was like a wind blowing from the Southern Hemisphere toward China, carrying Australian sunshine, the smell of pastures, Chinese diligence, and the imagination of the internet, but also regulatory gray areas, tax disputes, difficulty distinguishing true from false, and the hand of the system that would arrive sooner or later.

Later, Yide called Xinde and said the platform would suspend part of the business and study a compliant model anew.

On the phone, Xinde said, “Second Brother, this is not a bad thing. If the road has come to this point, it means it has been seen. Once something is seen, it must enter the rules.”

Yide was silent for a moment, then laughed. “You really sound like someone from the Foreign Trade company now.”

Xinde smiled too. “If one eats from this bowl, one must speak the words of this bowl.”

After hanging up, he stood before the seventeenth-floor window and watched the lights of Chinese shops along Chatswood street come on. Those lights were not large, but each was linked to Chinese livelihoods and distant places. Treasure Bowl, Silk Road, Qianduoduo, International Premium Goods, the certificates and consultations of the Foreign Trade company, the parcels and dreams of Australian Chinese—all had, for a period of time, interwoven into a brief and bright net.

Later, the net tightened.

But Xinde knew that this was not the end.

All new businesses, at first, are like wild grass, growing through cracks. Those that truly remain must eventually learn, under sunlight and within rules, to grow into trees.



Dear readers! We have now come to the end of Book Two.
Please continue to read **Book Three**.
Thank you!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Isherpath — He is nothing but an ordinary freelance writer