

Immortal 511

Chapter 511, Part I: Hidden Affection

Now wasn't the time to ponder over why it was still alive. The taotie monster, with its heavy, plodding footsteps, had reached his position.

Zu An looked up at the sinister monster in front of him and swallowed, the fine hairs on his arms standing on end.

He continually tried his best to cheer himself on, afraid that he would somehow lose the will to fight. Hey, this thing only looks scary on the outside. It might be a rather famous legend, but just look at its size! It's only a mini Tyrannosaurus Rex.

He wouldn't have stood a chance if he'd run into this thing in his previous world, no matter how many lives he had. But things were different now, because he was a cultivator. His body's abilities and reaction speed made him a mini-superman himself, so there was a non-zero chance that he would still emerge victorious.

As these thoughts poured through his mind, he calmed down substantially. "Come at me, you bastard!" he yelled.

The taotie monster seemed to have understood his provocation. It screamed as it ran towards him.

That infantile wailing coming from such a massive figure was just absurd, but Zu An couldn't find it within him to laugh. His opponent sent a paw flying in his direction, but it disappeared before reaching him, pulled away to dodge the counterblow from his longsword. Zu An's Poisonous Prick wasn't effective, so he had switched to the Tai'e Sword, which gave him more reach.

Zu An had been darkly optimistic at first, as he saw the taotie flinging its paw stupidly towards the Tai'e Sword. The monster was still made of flesh and blood after all. The Tai'e Sword was sharp enough to slice through the strongest metal, and it would cut right through the taotie's body like tofu.

However, just as his sword was about to cut into his opponent, the taotie's claw dodged the blow and struck the Tai'e Sword from the side instead, along the flat of the blade.

Caught unprepared, the impact made Zu An lose his grip on his sword. The Tai'e Sword flew through the sky and stabbed blade-first into a pile of bones.

Zu An was horrified. This wasn't a normal monster! It was actually way stronger than it looked! It's not a bloody mini T-Rex, it's way stronger than that!

He felt the wind go out of his sails. It looked like humans weren't the only ones who could increase their cultivation through training. Monsters could do the same thing!

He didn't dare treat his opponent as a monster with a low IQ anymore. The monster's quick reactions in this exchange got him thinking that the taotie had probably noticed the two of them from the very start, but had feigned ignorance. Only when the two of them had put down their guard did it lash out with its tongue, almost taking the both of them out.

Thoughts flooded through his mind as he sprinted towards the Tai'e Sword. He had to retrieve the longsword in order to continue his battle.

He had no confidence in beating this thing bare-handed.

Of course, the taotie had no intention of letting him have his way. It wailed and leapt between him and the Tai'e Sword. In one smooth motion, it tackled Zu An.

Zu An didn't expect it to be able to move so quickly. After all, up to this point, the creature had always walked with heavy, ponderous steps.

He was caught off-guard again, and the taotie managed to pin him down with its body.

Zu An wanted to cry, yet no tears came out. This was the first time he had been pushed to the ground, yet it wasn't a ravishing woman who did so, but this freakish monster!

He began to wonder if he'd been born with some sort of mental disability. Why the hell would he think about such a thing right now?

The taotie didn't show him any mercy. A bloody mouth bit down on his head, and his nose was filled with a foul, bloody stench.

Zu An reached out his hands, grabbing its upper and lower jaws, and closed them before they could reach him.

He had learned from watching the Discovery Channel that many of these creatures were able to exert large amounts of force while biting, but opening their jaws again was an entirely different story.

For example, a crocodile's jaws could tear through buffaloes and horses, let alone a human being. However, if its mouth was shut ahead of time, the strength of a mature man alone was enough to keep it from opening again.

Zu An had already deduced from their earlier exchange that, even though this taotie was stronger than him, the difference in strength wasn't that great. That was why he grabbed its jaws in a moment of desperation, to prevent it from using its menacing fangs.

The taotie was stunned as well. This was the first time it had encountered prey like this. It instinctively tried to open its mouth, but found that its jaws were still tightly clamped together, and there was no way it could open them. It flung its head around frantically.

This was a matter of life and death, so there was no way Zu An would let go.

Seeing that it was unsuccessful at dislodging Zu An, the taotie suddenly raised its sharp tail and stabbed it towards his head.

"Be careful!" Pei Mianman had been watching this battle the entire time. She cried out to try to warn him, but ended up triggering her injuries as well. She was in so much pain that sweat covered her body, but she didn't care. She stared weakly in Zu An's direction.

When she saw that sharp tail stab into the ground, she felt something explode within her head, and her soul almost left her body.

But Zu An's voice sounded immediately afterwards. "You little sh*t, do you think I've never seen 'Aliens' before?"

Pei Mianman was overjoyed to hear his voice, but her injuries were too serious, which prevented her from speaking.

Zu An turned his head and saw that the tail had embedded itself deep into the ground. He sighed in relief. He had been paying attention to its long, sharp tail from the moment the fight had begun, and had known that it was preparing an attack the instant he saw its tail coil upwards like a scorpion's.

The taotie was furious. Its tail trembled. It pulled itself out of the ground, then stabbed downwards again.

Zu An turned in the other direction to dodge the blow. The taotie missed again. It pulled out its tail and stabbed at Zu An, and Zu An evaded... Just like that, they entered a deadly game of attack and evade.

Of course, this might just be a game for the taotie, but a single moment of distraction for Zu An would result in his inevitable death.

Zu An knew that he would only be delaying his defeat if he focused solely on defense. This wasn't a solution. However, with his current level of strength, it was all he could do just to keep the taotie's mouth closed. There was no way he could push this heavy body off of him.

A flash of cruelty lit up his eyes, and he purposely chose not to dodge the next blow, allowing the tail to stab deep into his shoulder.

There was a fountain of blood, and Zu An's eyes became bloodshot. He wanted to suffer more injuries in order to activate the Phoenix Nirvana Sutra's strengthening effects. He was already injured, and this horrific new injury sent a fresh wave of power through him.

He pressed his leg against the taotie's stomach. As the tail stabbed downwards once more to take his life, he sent the taotie flying with a kick.

There was a loud crash as the taotie landed in a pile of bones, crushing them to pieces. The strange snakes hiding inside fled in disarray, but the taotie swiftly grabbed them with its claws and threw them into its mouth.

The eyes on its shoulders stared at the human across from it. It couldn't understand why he had suddenly gained a burst of strength.

Zu An had already taken the opportunity to pick up his Tai'e Sword. At the same time, he stared at the taotie's paws, which seemed somehow human, but with claws as sharp as a tiger's.

The way the monster had flung those strange snakes into its mouth was exactly like how a human would eat with their hands. Its claws were clearly extremely agile. This was not good news at all.

The taotie hesitated for the briefest of moments. Its gluttonous instincts propelled it to throw itself straight at Zu An.

Zu An was prepared for its speed this time. He used the Sunflower Phantasm to dodge to one side, his technique boosted by the Phoenix Nirvana Sutra's effects. As he passed alongside the onrushing taotie, he thrust his sword towards its head.

The taotie sensed the oncoming danger. Its long tail thrashed out, stabbing towards his body.

Zu An sized up the reach of the Tai'e Sword with the length of the taotie's tail, and determined that trading blows with it right now was not worth it.

He gave up on stabbing its head, and hacked his sword sideways instead. The Tai'e Sword was incredibly sharp, and sliced through the midsection of the taotie's tail with ease. Greenish-gray liquid splattered across the white bones, the corrosive liquid burning large holes in them.

"Screech!"

The taotie screamed in pain. Clearly, the sudden loss of half its tail had caused it great suffering.

All this screeching was giving Zu An a headache. He swung his left fist right at its head, dealing it a vicious blow. "Shut the hell up!"

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The impact staggered the taotie several steps backwards, and it smashed into the wall behind it. It shook its head as it crawled back up to its feet. The strike had made it a little dizzy.

Zu An shook out his arm. The blow had also made his own fist really sore. He actually regretted doing that. If he'd known that this would be the outcome, he would've hit its waist instead.

He was worried that Pei Mianman wouldn't be able to hold on much longer. Noticing that the monster was still dizzy, he seized the opportunity to strike with his Tai'e Sword.

However, a crafty look suddenly appeared in the taotie's eyes, and its two horns suddenly crackled with purple electricity. A ball of electricity materialized in the space between them, and it launched the ball of electricity straight towards Zu An.

The whole process—from the first crackle of electricity to the launching of the ball of lightning—was almost instantaneous.

Zu An couldn't use Grandgale, so there was no way he could evade the attack. The ball of electricity smashed squarely into his chest. An intense pain rippled out from the front of his chest, accompanied by a burnt smell.

That wasn't the most terrifying thing. His entire body had gone numb, and he couldn't move a single muscle.

This was an electrical paralysis effect!

Zu An turned pale with fright. He couldn't be more clear about what losing all mobility at this crucial moment meant! However, there wasn't a single thing he could do in this situation.

That taotie opened its mouth, and its long tongue shot towards his forehead. The monster clearly intended to crush his skull in one move.

Zu An felt the fine hairs all along his body stand on end as he watched that tongue inch closer and closer. He knew that he was moments away from death.

The tongue was just too quick, and he was paralyzed as well, with no way to put up any sort of effective resistance.

However, the scene of his head exploding was not realized. Instead, the tongue stopped an inch in front of Zu An's forehead.

Both Zu An and the taotie were similarly stunned. The taotie retracted its tongue and fired it out again, but once again, it stopped an inch from Zu An's forehead.

Zu An finally realized what was going on. He had cut off a chunk of its tongue earlier when it had stabbed Pei Mianman. The taotie was accustomed to the usual length of its tongue, which was why it instinctively felt that it was close enough for it to impale its opponent's head. It had forgotten that it was missing a chunk of its tongue.

There was no way Zu An would let this opportunity slip by. While it was distracted, he summoned Hundredwarble and launched a spiritual attack.

Because of the limits of his level of cultivation, Hundredwarble, in its current form, excelled more in defense than offense, but that only applied with high level cultivators. Even though the taotie was cunning, it was still a beast that was incapable of speech, and had not developed any true intelligence. This made it weaker towards spirit element attacks.

Sure enough, as his Hundredwarble screeched, sending an invisible wave rippling outwards, the taotie's body trembled, and its eyes went blank. Even its tongue, which was extended straight out like a spear, fell limply to the side.

Zu An, who had been on the brink of death earlier on, felt his blood ignite. The numbing effects gradually receded, and he just about recovered his ability to move. He didn't dare hesitate for even a second. He gripped his Tai'e Sword and stabbed it into the taotie's side.

He recalled the pain that he'd experienced when he struck its head, and chose a different target this time. Instead of striking its head, he stabbed the longsword through the eye on its shoulder.

This monster was so grotesquely shaped, it was impossible to know whether it had a real head, like any other creature. Generally speaking, however, the eyes wouldn't be too far from the head.

"Screech!"

The sword pierced the eye and went right in, almost up to the hilt, and the taotie shrieked miserably.

Its entire body went rigid for a second, before collapsing to the ground.

Zu An pulled the sword back out. Vile liquid poured out from its eyeball, scorching the surrounding earth black.

“Thank goodness the Tai’e Sword is an extraordinary treasure. If it had been any other sword, it would have already been melted by its blood.” Zu An pulled out his sword. He didn’t have time to examine the taotie’s corpse. He rushed over to check on Pei Mianman instead.

Pei Mianman had been watching the battle the whole time. She had her heart in her mouth each time she saw him dancing on the brink of death. Only when she saw that he had killed the taotie did she heave a massive sigh of relief.

However, as soon as she let it out, all of her strength left her as well, and she collapsed to the ground.

Zu An immediately rushed to support her. “Manman! Manman!”

Pei Mianman struggled to open her eyes. A smile graced her lips. “Ah Zu, you’re so amazing. You even managed to kill such a terrifying monster.”

Zu An would usually never pass up such a great chance to boast, but he only felt his mood sour as he examined the terrifying wound on her shoulder. He couldn’t bring himself to tease her at all. “Manman, don’t speak. You need to preserve your strength.”

Pei Mianman shook her head, which was resting in the crook of his arm. “I’m going to die soon, so I won’t be able to say anything else if I don’t do it now... Actually, I still have many... many things I want to say to you, but when I think about it... even if I tell you anything... It’s... It’s better if I don’t say them at all... Instead, I wish you and Chuyan... the...”

The light in her eyes gradually grew dim. Zu An quickly said, “I won’t let you die! I won’t let you die!”

His brain moved at lightning speed. He quickly fished out a glass bottle filled with bright-red liquid and poured the contents as quickly as he could into her mouth. At the same time, he nervously muttered, “Manman, you have to hold on, you cannot give up here!”

In the end, however, her eyes slowly fell shut.

Zu An felt as if his entire body had been thrown into a frozen abyss. He carried her as he muttered to himself, “Why did it take me so long to remember that I still had a bottle of ‘Faith in Brother Spring’?! I should have given it to you to drink earlier, then you wouldn’t have died...”

“It’s my fault, it’s all my fault... You’re so beautiful, and you have such extraordinary talent. You should’ve been able to enjoy an amazing life... If you hadn’t tried to save me, you would never have died here...”

...

Zu An held onto her, his heart broken into a million pieces. All of his feelings for her poured out. The scene of their first meeting filled his mind—her charming eyes and beautiful smile were still fresh in his memory. He remembered their fight in Chu Chuyan’s room, and how she had snuck into his room late at night to teach him her martial skills. He cherished all the times she had spent with him, and all they had experienced together...

The ache in his heart grew and grew. He embraced her tightly, sobbing in grief and sorrow.

“Hey, it’s itchy. Your snot is getting on my clothes.” A sudden giggle tickled his ears.

Zu An straightened his body in disbelief. When he looked down, his gaze was met by a beautiful face, looking back at him. Those clear peach-blossom eyes were just as lovely as before.

"You... you're not dead?" Zu An asked in disbelief.

"Did you want me to die?" Pei Mianman snorted. "What kind of medicine was that? I already had one foot in the grave, but it somehow dragged me right back."

"It's a medicine that grants eternal life, which was bestowed upon me by an immortal." Zu An said with a smile.

"A medicine that grants eternal life?" Pei Mianman was stunned. "Couldn't you grant immortality to everyone around you with this?"

Zu An scratched his head. "I only had this one bottle left. I might be able to get some more later."

Before he could finish, Pei Mianman's expression changed. "You gave me your only bottle of this miraculous medicine?"

Zu An laughed and said, "I was just messing with you. There's no way this medicine could grant eternal life."

Pei Mianman pursed her lips. "Even so, the fact that that thing could drag me back from the brink of death means it's pretty damned close. I can't believe you actually used something like that on me! How can I even repay you?"

"Hmph, what's all this talk about repayment?" Zu An smacked her bottom in annoyance. "You were already fine a while ago, weren't you? Why didn't you say anything? You just had to watch me cry my heart out."

Pei Mianman's face turned entirely red. She pouted and said, "I really did fall unconscious at first, before gradually waking up. Actually, I'm quite grateful. If this hadn't happened, how would I have found out how much I meant to you?"

She looked deeply into his eyes as she said this, her own eyes filled with tenderness. Zu An stared back into them, lost in their beauty. She seemed even more beautiful than usual. He found himself in a daze.

"Ah!" Pei Mianman suddenly cried out.

"What happened?" Zu An asked. He was worried that something bad had happened to her.

Pei Mianman turned towards her shoulder, "My shoulder injury feels really itchy. Can you help me take a look at it?"

She remembered that her shoulder had suffered a terrible injury. The taotie's corrosive saliva had inflicted some horrific wounds, and she was afraid that it hadn't been completely cleared away.

Zu An gently prodded her wound. "Does it hurt? Don't worry. This medicine is powerful enough that it can regrow lost limbs."

He had experienced this himself, after all. Previously, his wounds had been far worse than hers, yet he had still recovered.

"It really doesn't hurt." Pei Mianman was surprised. She moved her arm around. She could clearly feel that the huge hole was gone, and that she was already back to normal. However, there was one other thing that she was worried about. "Help me remove the clothes covering that area. Can you check if there's a scar?"

Even a regular girl would cherish the appearance of her skin, let alone an exceptional beauty like her. Any girl would be afraid of their injuries leaving behind marks and blemishes.

"Oh." Zu An subconsciously raised his hand towards her shoulder, but then hesitated and said, "That's not very appropriate, is it? Guys and girls shouldn't do this sort of stuff."

Even though the bottle of red medicine could restore her life force, it didn't repair her clothes, which were already in tatters. If he tried to take one part of them off, everything else might just slide right off as well. The last thing he wanted was to be mistaken as some lecherous scoundrel.

Pei Mianman giggled. "You're normally so careless with the things you say, and you were hugging me however you wanted to earlier on. What's up with this sudden gentlemanly behaviour?"

"I was only doing that to save you! Besides, I'm always a gentleman, what are you talking about..." Zu An felt his confidence leaking away the more he spoke.

Pei Mianman gave him a warm look and said, "You silly man, the two of us are already so close. So what if you end up seeing something? It's fine."

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Zu An felt a shudder run through his mind as he heard her words. He wasn't some crass and unromantic man. How could he miss the implied meaning behind them?

His eyes roamed across her beautiful face, taking in her affectionate and charming eyes and her moist, red lips. He could resist no more, and moved in to kiss her.

Pei Mianman stiffened for an instant, but then immediately softened, responding to him with the same intense passion.

After what seemed like eternity, their lips parted again. He looked down at the lovely Pei Mianman, snuggled in his arms, then sighed suddenly and said, "Aren't we letting Chuyan down by doing this?"

He wouldn't have cared so much if it had been someone else, but Pei Mianman and Chu Chuyan were close friends. He had no idea how he was going to explain this to her in the future. One misstep, and Chuyan would feel betrayed.

Pei Mianman rolled her eyes at him. "Aren't you two already divorced?"

Zu An froze for a moment, then a smile appeared on his face. "Oh, you're right. Let's continue then." With that, he went in for another kiss.

Pei Mianman snorted. "Hmph! Playboy!"

Zu An knew that she wasn't actually upset, so he continued to look at her, a big smile on his face.

Pei Mianman pushed him away. "Stop causing trouble already. Help me take a look at my shoulder injury."

"Okay!" Zu An undid her collar button, and then tugged at her clothes. Her skin looked extremely soft and fair, and seemed almost pale in contrast to the bloodstains on her clothes. The skin along her cleavage—which was just barely visible—seemed especially inviting. He stared at it in a daze.

"What are you staring at? I told you to look at the wound..." Pei Mianman protested playfully.

"Oh yeah." Zu An's face heated up. He tore his gaze away from those snowy mountains and lightly touched the scab on her shoulder. "Your wounds are pretty much healed already. The itch is coming from the scabbing over your wound."

"Really?" Pei Mianman was overjoyed. "Will there be a scar?"

"Of course not." Zu An had suffered many wounds himself, yet none of them ever left a scar.

"Are you sure?" Pei Mianman was still a little worried. "Help me check my back as well."

Zu An looked over her back while saying with a smile, "Don't worry, even if you do end up with a scar, I'll still want you."

"Hmph, like you even stand a chance. I have guys lining up all the way from the entrance of the Academy to Hidden Dragon Mountain," Pei Mianman said in annoyance, dressing herself again and fastening her clothes.

Zu An laughed loudly. "All right, all right. Let's get out of here first."

As if they could sense the taotie's death, the strange snakes that were hidden in the shadows seemed ready to emerge again. He didn't want to end up in the situation they were in earlier on.

Pei Mianman nodded and extracted herself out of his embrace. With her injuries now recovered, she felt as though she could move about properly again. Even though she wasn't back at her peak, she had no problem protecting herself now. She grew even more amazed at Zu An's miraculous medicine, and her eyes gaze softened further when she looked at him.

Zu An stood in front of the hole in the wall, then suddenly turned around and stored the taotie's corpse away.

Pei Mianman clutched her nose and said with disdain, "What in the world do you need that thing for?"

Zu An said, "This is a monster that no one outside this dungeon has ever seen before. Its corpse might be useful for something."

His Brilliant Glass Bead already contained a lot of things, and he didn't know if the taotie's corpse would roll around, leaking blood and corroding the other things inside.

Zu An examined the interior of the Brilliant Glass Bead and discovered that the taotie corpse seemed to occupy an independent space within it. The things inside didn't seem to be disturbing each other. He heaved a sigh of relief.

“What use could such an ugly and nasty monster have?” Pei Mianman felt a wave of nausea when she recalled her earlier experience. “By the way, your spatial artifact has a ridiculous amount of storage. I can’t believe it can even hold such a massive monster!”

Zu An smiled and said, “Did you forget about that huge dragon from earlier on? If it can store something like that, what’s so difficult about this thing?” As he said this, he took out the Brilliant Glass Bead and showed it off to her.

Pei Mianman sighed in amazement. “This spatial storage artifact might not be any less valuable than your Phoenix Nirvana Sutra! Aren’t you afraid of revealing your secret to me? What if I end up having some evil thoughts?”

Zu An smiled. “It would be too tiresome to live in this world if I can’t even trust my beloved.”

“Beloved?” Pei Mianman felt her heart tremble. His words clearly left her deeply moved.

Zu An changed the topic and said, “Of course, if big Manman wants to have any wicked thoughts about me, you are welcome any time. You don’t have to pity me just because I look like a beautiful and tender flower.”

Pei Mianman immediately wanted to smack him. “You’re always like this. You can’t maintain your sense of decency for longer than a few moments.”

After a little more back-and-forth, the two of them finally returned to the opening that led to the sloped tunnel. “Be careful,” Zu An warned her, as he looked at the mucus coating the walls.

Fortunately, this mucus wasn’t too corrosive. It was just sticky and gross.

“Okay.” Pei Mianman was already moving on her tiptoes before his warning. As a girl, she felt a natural aversion towards such things.

The two of them followed this slope upwards. They were actually a little thankful to that taotie. It had helped them deal with those strange snakes, and the mucus that it secreted made the climb up the slope a little easier.

After a while, they finally crawled out of the pit. Somehow, seeing the familiar greenish-gray mist gave the two of them a strange sense of comfort.

“We have to be careful. We can’t fall in again.” Zu An looked at the slope beneath them, fear still lingering in the back of his mind.

Pei Mianman raised her head to look at him. “Don’t worry, I’m already more or less recovered. I can back you up if we run into any danger.”

Zu An smiled and said, “I would still prefer not to encounter any further danger.”

Suddenly, he sensed something amiss. He pushed Pei Mianman to the side. “Be careful!”

Pei Mianman shouted these two words at the same time.

Both of them dodged in opposite directions. A greenish-gray tongue speared into the ground where they had been standing just a moment ago, sending up a plume of dust.

They both shuddered when they saw that familiar-looking tongue, and quickly looked at where it had come from.

A terrifying figure slowly shambled out of the greenish-gray mist. That strange head, white fangs, sticky drool, and eyes on its shoulders were identical to the fellow that they had just dealt with.

It was another taotie!

“What the hell is up with our luck today? I can’t believe we’ve run into more of these strange things!” Zu An let out an exasperated sigh. However, he wasn’t all that worried. They had been ambushed by that taotie earlier on, and he had no knowledge about how to fight it. Now that Pei Mianman had recovered, and he already knew what this taotie was capable of, it was much easier to deal with.

The taotie seemed to have sensed his contempt. It wailed as it charged at Zu An. It pushed off its hind legs and reached him in a single bound.

Zu An was already prepared. He slid down beneath it and thrust his sword upwards from underneath, intending to hack its belly straight open.

However, even though the taotie was large, it was extremely agile. Leaping to one side, it pushed his sword to the side with a swing of one of its paws, and struck at his face with the other.

At the same time, its long tail also stabbed towards his stomach.

Zu An quickly arrested his momentum and clambered out from underneath the monster in a rather sorry state. He couldn’t be bothered with how stupid he looked right now.

“Damn it,” he cursed. “I knew the keyboard warriors on those online forums were dumb. Sliding under a tiger to kill it? What a stupid idea!”

The taotie had already landed on the ground. It slammed its forearms into the ground, then screeched again as it charged at him. Its agility far surpassed that of an ordinary human,

A torrent of black flame flew through the air and wrapped itself around the taotie. Pei Mianman had made her move.

The taotie roared in shock. It still sounded like a wailing baby, just with a slightly different pitch.

The creature’s skin seemed rather special. It rolled around the ground a few times, and the black flames, which were usually so hard to deal with, gradually disappeared.

Zu An was astonished, but he still moved in anyway. While the taotie was distracted by the black flames, he stabbed his sword into its eye, the same way he had dealt with the previous taotie.

The taotie screamed in horror, then went limp as life drained out of it. It hadn’t expected to die so easily. It still had other skills that it wanted to show off!

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Zu An put away the Tai’e Sword. “Big Manman, this victory was only possible because of you.”

“My black flames wouldn’t have reached it if you didn’t draw its attention.” Pei Mianman frowned as she looked at the corpse with some uncertainty. “What’s up with this monster, though? Why can’t my black flames injure it?”

Her black flames were strong enough to reduce even steel to ashes. Why were they utterly ineffective against the monster, which was made of flesh and blood?

“This taotie does seem a little strange. My Poisonous Prick was also ineffective against it.” Zu An didn’t understand why this dagger, which always guaranteed a kill, hadn’t worked.

“Taotie? You know what this thing is?” Pei Mianman asked with curiosity.

“Yeah. I’ve seen some written recordings of it...” Zu An told her about the things he remembered.

Pei Mianman was utterly astonished. “Why have I never heard of it before? Where did you read all this from?”

Zu An laughed and said, “The world is full of unknowns. There are many things you haven’t seen or heard of before.”

Pei Mianman wasn’t too surprised when she heard this. “This place is just too weird. Let’s look for an exit first.”

Zu An nodded. “I agree. But this thick fog is everywhere, so we have to be careful. Let’s not run into more of those taotie monsters.”

A chorus of infant wails sounded as soon as he said this.

What the hell?? Zu An could not believe his ears.

The two of them shivered, and couldn’t help but look in the direction the noise had come from. They saw several figures ambling out of the mist. What else could they be but more taoties?

Zu An wanted to smack his own mouth. Damn my stupid mouth! They showed up as soon as he mentioned them... it was almost as if he had commanded them into existence!

What if I say that I’ll become unrivaled under the heavens and have a billion wives? Will that happen as well?

Despite his self-mockery, he acted decisively, without hesitation. He pulled Pei Mianman’s arm and said, “Run!”

It wasn’t too hard for the two of them to deal with a single taotie, but they were definitely outmatched when faced against so many of them at once.

Seeing the two of them turning tail, the newly-arrived taotie horde screeched and chased after them. However, they suddenly stopped as they noticed the taotie corpse on the ground. They surrounded the corpse and began to consume it. The massive corpse was quickly devoured, and even the blood that had splattered on the ground was cleaned up.

Zu An ran frantically, with Pei Mianman close behind him. He didn’t dare linger, even though he saw what those taotie were doing out of the corner of his eye.

After running for who knew how long, they suddenly came upon a gate, standing right in front of them.

The gate was magnificent, towering twenty to thirty meters high, guarded by many massive stone pillars which stood in front of it.

Standing in front of the gate and looking up at it, both Zu An and Pei Mianman felt small and insignificant. The gate seemed to emanate a great pressure.

Unfortunately, the gate was tightly shut, and there was no way it could be opened through human strength alone.

“Ah!” Pei Mianman suddenly cried out in alarm.

Zu An jumped in fright. He whipped around, thinking that she had been ambushed by a taotie or some other monster, but he didn’t see anyone around her.

“What’s wrong?” He walked over and asked, his voice filled with concern.

“Over there...” Pei Mianman quickly pointed to the side.

Zu An looked in the direction she was pointing, and saw a skeleton kneeling by a set of stairs.

This skeleton was large and majestic. Even though it was kneeling on one leg, it still gave off a mysterious and imposing power.

“Is that another one of the victims from the past?” Pei Mianman asked, recalling the bones that had accumulated within the giant pit that they had just left behind.

“I don’t think so.” Zu An shook his head. He pointed at the white bones and said, “Look at that long spear in its hands—it looks like a mighty warrior. I think whoever this was was a valiant warrior, when they were still alive. Its stance seems natural, and there aren’t any visible wounds. It probably chose to guard this place willingly. I wonder if they were buried here, or if they died a natural death while guarding this place and slowly turned to bones.”

“There’s... there’s more over there!” Pei Mianman cried out in alarm, pointing at the pillars in front of the gate.

Zu An walked over to take a look. He felt a chill run down his spine. He thought that the lower section of the pillars were just engraved with decorative designs, but when he got closer, he noticed that every single pillar was built on a set of white bones.

He counted them. There were fifteen skeletons in total, and it seemed that even more of them were buried underground.

“The one who built this place was definitely quite cruel.” Pei Mianman walked over to Zu An’s side, her body trembling visibly.

Even though she usually walked around with a flirtatious smile, she was a decisive and ruthless person. However, after experiencing that pit of death and seeing these structures built atop piles of bones, she too had begun to grow afraid.

Zu An said in a low voice, "Perhaps this is part of their culture and customs. I know of an ancient country that offered up living people as sacrifices. To them, it was a means of expressing their deepest sincerity and adoration to the heavens."

He had watched the documentary 'Yinxu: Ruins of Yinshang', so he obviously knew that the people of Yinshang offered up human sacrifices. This dungeon was also called 'Yinxu'. Even though he didn't know if they were one and the same, he was sure that there was some connection between the two.

"But these are all innocent people! Which one of them would be willing to be offered as a sacrifice to the heavens?" Pei Mianman looked at the bones below the pillars and the stone gate, feeling compassion stirring within her.

Zu An said, "They were probably all prisoners of war. In those times, being taken captive only guaranteed that there would be a miserable fate awaiting you."

Pei Mianman bit her lip. "Let's look for a different way out. I don't feel comfortable being here."

Zu An grunted in agreement. This place was indeed rather strange and ominous.

The two of them walked over to the side to begin their search, but Pei Mianman suddenly stopped. She pulled him back and said, "Be careful!"

Zu An froze. Only now did he realize that just ahead of them was the edge of a cliff. Beyond that cliff was a bottomless abyss, waiting silently like a slumbering beast. Neither of them wanted to look down into it a second longer than they had to.

Pei Mianman threw a rock down, but they didn't hear it hit the bottom. That scared both of them. It either meant that the abyss was so deep that no echo could escape it, or that there were spatial cracks or other strange phenomena below.

Regardless of which one it was, falling down didn't seem like a sensible choice.

The two of them quickly moved to search in the opposite direction. A while later, they were disappointed to find that the path also ended in a cliff, beyond which was the same endless abyss.

They finally understood that the path they had taken while running from the taoties was most likely a floating bridge. Because they were surrounded by dense fog, though, they hadn't been able to see their surroundings clearly.

The two of them were immediately thankful that neither of them tripped or fell while being pursued by those taoties. If they had fallen off a cliff like the one that confronted them now, they would not have been lucky enough to escape again.

Pei Mianman was puzzled. "If it really is bottomless, then what is under the place that we came from? What is beneath those large stone gates? There's no way everything is just floating in midair, right?"

"Floating?" Zu An's voice grew serious. "That's not entirely impossible. After all, this dungeon was within a meteorite. Who knows, we might still be inside that ancient stele. The spatial laws inside it may be entirely different from the outside world."

“Who would’ve thought that we would be trapped here after finally escaping from Mosquito Daoist...? The only thing I want to know right now is how to get out,” he complained.

Oddly enough, Pei Mianman had a smile on her face. “I think this place has been pretty good so far.”

She did not want to face the headache of having to explain things to Chuyan, or whatever complaints and annoyances her own clan might raise. If she could live in this world with Zu An, just the two of them, it didn’t sound all that bad.

A faint chorus of screeches drifted over from a distance away, causing her expression to change. She remembered those taoties and the white bones, and her thoughts of staying here were immediately dispelled.

“We’ll return to that gate first!” Zu An said, running back to it with Pei Mianman. If they kept going forward, they might run straight into the pursuing taotie. If they returned to those stone gates and found a way to get through it, they might somehow be able to make it through this disaster. Even if they didn’t manage to find a way inside, the two of them could still defend themselves without the danger of being surrounded.

Pei Mianman had also read the pros and cons of the situation, so she didn’t hesitate. The two of them quickly returned to the stone gate and began to search for a way to open those doors.

They didn’t notice the spark of red light that flickered within the eye sockets of the skeleton kneeling by the stairs.

Chapter 513: A Flash of Cold Light

“Ah Zu, come look! There’s a strange bird here!” Pei Mianman pointed at the middle of the stone gate. “Maybe the switch to open it is over there!”

Zu An noticed it as well. A strange bird diagram was right in the center of the gate, and it was entirely red in color. It bore a certain resemblance to a phoenix or a peacock, but was neither.

It looked a little bit like the ‘Hundredwarble’ that he could summon.

Zu An made the association and quickly used Hundredwarble, commanding it to approach that diagram. Unfortunately, no matter how it flew around and cried out, the door showed no reaction.

As the Hundredwarble’s cries spread, however, the red lights burning in the eye sockets of the kneeling skeleton warrior gradually dimmed, but neither Zu An nor Pei Mianman noticed this.

Zu An frowned, feeling rather disappointed. “It didn’t do anything?”

He suddenly remembered from that documentary on Yinshang that the forefather of the Shang Dynasty was named Qi. ‘In the Song clan was a woman with the simple name of Di. After ingesting the egg of a strange bird, Qi was born’. Thereafter, the Shang Dynasty would often use that mysterious bird as a totem. This bird was probably the same mysterious bird that they used. What exactly did this mysterious bird symbolize?

While he was deep in thought, Pei Mianman suddenly made a new discovery. “Huh? This bird diagram seems a little strange. I think these rocks around it can be moved. There are some patterns in the center of the bird as well.”

Zu An was stunned. He shifted his attention to the gate, and noticed that there were indeed four lines—two horizontal, two vertical—that divided this mysterious bird diagram into nine small compartments.

Around the diagram of the bird was a ring of small square blocks, each one carved with a strange symbol. Pei Mianman tried to move them, and discovered that these small square blocks could slide into those nine compartments.

“One, two, three...” Pei Mianman counted them, then said with surprise, “There are exactly nine of these blocks. It looks like we just need to put them in the correct spot for the door to open.”

“You’re right. Manman, you’re really sharp.” Zu An walked right up to the gate and stared distractedly at the nine blocks surrounding the diagram. He had thought about it too deeply, and ended up being led astray. In the end, it was Pei Mianman, who was unburdened by these extra thoughts, who noticed these things. “But what do these symbols mean? Have you seen them before?”

“I haven’t.” Pei Mianman shook her head. She trawled her mind for information that might be similar enough to help her out. “I have never seen anything like this from any of the records of the other races. The style of these symbols seem rather similar to the ones on the stele, though.”

“You think so?” Zu An was stunned. He examined those symbols again. Now that she had brought this up, he gradually picked up some things about those strange patterns.

Since this was related to the oracle script, it was easy enough for him to associate the nine numbers and nine compartments, to the mystical diagrams of ancient China, which were believed to be related to the origins of writing. In the book describing the diagrams, this famous verse stood out: “Nine in the crown, and one in the base; three on the left, seven on the right; two and four are the shoulders, six and eight, the feet; five resides at the center.”

To put it simply, the sum of all the numbers along any given line would be fifteen, regardless of whether the line was drawn vertically, horizontally, or diagonally.

Putting these numbers in the locations was quite simple, and anyone with basic mathematical knowledge could do it. The problem was that the symbols on these blocks were different from the numbers he was used to. He had no idea which design corresponded to which number.

There were four patterns that were relatively easy to recognize. The ones with one, two, three and four horizontal lines should correspond to one, two, three, and four respectively.

The others were harder to distinguish. For example, one symbol looked like a trident with a curved shaft, one was in the shape of the 人 character, and yet another had an X in the center, but a horizontal line above and beneath, making it look like a folding stool or a spring in those Mario games. Another looked like)(, like a pair of brackets put the wrong way.

The weirdest one was the one that looked like a cross.

Zu An subconsciously thought of it as ten, since it looked exactly like the modern Chinese character for that number (十), but he immediately threw out this thought. After all, there were only nine compartments, so the number ten should not appear at all.

Regret slowly crept into his mind. If he'd studied more about the oracle script, he might recognize these characters.

He really didn't know how those archaeologists of the past ever figured out which character was which.

Wait a second...

A sudden thought occurred to him. He remembered the documentary stating that the reason why Chinese civilization could always be traced to a common origin was because people thousands of years later could always understand the writings of their ancestors from thousands of years ago.

Why would they recognize them? Clearly, the writing should have evolved, generation by generation, from the older characters.

The characters of later generations came from the Qin Dynasty's lesser seals, while the lesser seals were themselves derived from the oracle script.

In that case, the oracle script should always have some relationship to the characters of later generations. The complicated oracle script might not be that easy to figure out, but he already knew that these characters corresponded to the numbers one to nine. He should be able to figure something out if he examined them carefully.

He looked at the symbol that looked like a trident with a curved shaft and put his mind to work, analyzing it from all different angles.

With a flash of inspiration, he flipped the trident around. Doesn't this resemble the left side of the 'nine' character (九)? The curved shaft corresponded to the hook on the right side of the character.

The flipped brackets... don't they look similar to the 'eight' character (八)?

Wait, but if this is eight, then what about the symbol that looked like 人? Wasn't it also a bit like eight? Perhaps they symbolize the two dots under the 'six' character (六)?

Could the symbol that looked like the spring from the Mario games possibly be the 'five' character (五)?

The symbol matched up nicely if he rotated the 'X' between the two horizontal lines.

The cross symbol should be the character for 'seven' (七). There was only a hook missing.

Zu An examined them again. Even though his reasoning made some sense, there were still holes in his logic. For example, if the four horizontal lines didn't mean four, that would throw him off completely. Also, he wasn't really sure if he'd made the right choices regarding eight and six.

He was just about to give it more thought when the infantile wailing sounded again. Those taotie had finally pursued them here after thoroughly consuming the corpse of their brethren.

“Ah Zu, what do we do?” Pei Mianman stared at the faint shapes of the taotie, barely discernible in the mist. Black flames surged in her hands as she prepared for battle.

The two of them definitely stood no chance against that many taoties.

Zu An was out of time. He placed the stones in the positions that he speculated were correct.

The design of the gate was rather intricate, and there were grooves that allowed the square pieces to slide into different positions.

When he slid the last piece into place, a wave of golden light washed over the nine symbols, then extended outwards even further. They completely filled the crack between the stone gates, and shot out along the entire frame of the gate.

Crack~

There came the sound of gears moving within, and the gate slowly swung open.

Pei Mianman looked at Zu An in astonishment. “Ah Zu, my admiration for you just keeps growing! How were you even able to decipher such a difficult mechanism?”

She was pretty confident in her own intelligence, yet she’d had no idea where to even start when it came to those ancient symbols.

“Haha, there are many, many more amazing aspects of me for you to learn about in the future.” Even though Zu An sounded cocky, he felt a tinge of guilt. He had only been able to decipher those mechanisms because he had the knowledge of the hardworking archaeologists of his previous world. Without this knowledge, he wouldn’t have even known where to begin.

“Show off~” Pei Mianman rolled her eyes. She had no idea how Chuyan had managed to notice how extraordinary he was ahead of time, but she wasn’t in the mood to think about these things right now. She pulled Zu An towards the gate and said, “The taoties are about to catch up! We’d better enter!”

Once they had run through the gate, they looked for a way to close the gate again, to lock the taoties outside. Unfortunately, they couldn’t close the gate at all, no matter what they did.

The situation was dire, and they didn’t have any more time to find the closing mechanism. Zu An could only grab Pei Mianman and run further inside.

“Screech!” A taotie screamed as it rushed towards the gate platform. It was just about to throw itself at the stone gate when there was a flash of cold light, and it froze immediately.

The burly skeleton warrior slowly stood up, and a drop of blood slowly trickled down its spear, falling to the ground with a quiet sound.

The rigid body of the taotie shuddered, and its massive head slowly slid down its neck.

Chapter 514: A Strange Mural

The burly skeleton warrior looked at the taotie, then turned its head rigidly towards the stone gate. Its mouth creaked, and several vague words were audible. "Protect... intruders... eliminate..."

It slowly walked over to the stone gate, gripping the spear in its hands.

It looked as though it had just woken from a deep slumber. Its movements were slightly awkward at first, but as it walked, its body seemed to grow lighter, and its movements also gradually grew smoother. Eventually, it even began to run.

The other taoties rushed out from the mist. They tilted their heads slightly when they saw their beheaded comrade. They couldn't figure out why the strongest and fastest of them had suddenly been reduced to this.

However, their instincts quickly overtook their curiosity, and they began to gorge themselves on their comrade's corpse.

After all, in Chinese mythology, the taotie was synonymous with gluttony. They would eat anything they could find, and according to legend, it was so gluttonous that it ended up eating its own body, leaving only its head...

...

Everything was fine when Zu An and Pei Mianman first went through the gate. The light filtering from outside was enough for them to see the way ahead.

In front of them was a wide and perfectly straight path, lined with several stone statues of various different animals. Some of the animals were common, like horses, elephants, tigers, and camels, but the others had strange appearances, and neither of them could make out what they were supposed to be.

Zu An was afraid that there might be something strange about these stone statues, but they didn't seem to be giving off any signs of life.

To be sure, Pei Mianman burned some statues with her black flames. As expected, however, there was no reaction at all.

The two of them relaxed their guard. "These should be stone statues from ancient times," Zu An postulated, "which probably means that there is a great tomb up ahead. However, I don't feel like this is a tomb at all. Our surroundings, and the stone gate earlier on, makes it seem more like a palace."

"We can decide whether it is a tomb or a palace later. Let's find a place to hide first." Pei Mianman was still afraid of the taotie, and she really didn't want to have anything more to do with them.

"Okay." Zu An knew as well that it wasn't the right time to ponder over this matter.

The two of them continued forward, and quickly found themselves faced by three bridges. A winding brook murmured below them.

Pei Mianman was surprised. "There's actually water here."

This place seemed to have been abandoned for a long time. Many great rivers often changed their paths or dried up as centuries passed, and a small brook like this should have been no exception. It was a miracle that it still continued to exist.

Zu An knelt beside the brook and dipped his hand into it. The water was cold to his touch. "It's water. It seems like the sort that flows out from karst landform caves."

"Karst landforms?" Pei Mianman was perplexed. She wasn't familiar with this terminology.

"They are cavities formed when limestone is corroded by groundwater, forming caves... You can just think of them as the caves with stalactites growing on them," Zu An explained, still absorbed by his own thoughts. "From the temperature of the water, we can conclude that this place is underground. Could it be that stele sent us to this underground space...?"

"Be careful!" Pei Mianman suddenly called out a warning.

Zu An had watched many videos about the animal kingdom, and there was no way he would approach any body of water without putting up his guard.

He saw a dark shadow rush out towards him, and nailed it to the riverbank with a stab of his sword.

It was an alligator, far smaller than a Nile crocodile, and more like a spectacled caiman.

"Are you okay?" Pei Mianman walked over to him, still watching the water surface vigilantly. She didn't know if Zu An's clean and efficient strike had intimidated its companions or not. The water's surface was completely calm, and there was no sign of any other crocodiles.

"I'm fine." Zu An pulled his sword back out and squatted down beside the crocodile to examine it. "It seems no different from a normal crocodile, but its eyes have degenerated. This is strange... Why does this place have so many carnivorous animals? What do they eat?"

This place really was full of unexplainable things, but he didn't have the time to think about it right now. He stored the crocodile in his Brilliant Glass Bead.

Pei Mianman was shocked. "Why did you store that thing?"

"To eat it later, of course." Zu An replied, as if it was the most obvious thing. "We have no idea how long we'll be trapped here, and we'll have to eat something eventually."

The strength and speed of cultivators far exceeded normal people, but their energy requirements were also much higher. To put it simply, they needed to eat much more. They had been getting into one fight after another continuously, and Zu An was already starving. If they weren't so pressed for time, he might have already roasted and devoured the crocodile.

There were many countries in which roasted crocodile meat was served, but he had never tried it before.

"You're going to eat it? I'll pass." Pei Mianman had a strange look on her face. As a woman, she didn't like to look at such nasty things, let alone eat them.

Zu An chuckled and didn't force the issue. Either way, once they got hungry enough, it would look delicious all the same. It was the same for him when he had first come to this world. He hadn't liked the thought of mooching at first, but ended up enjoying it immensely in the end.

The two of them crossed the bridges and went inside some buildings. It had grown darker as they got further and further away from the entrance, and it was even darker inside the buildings. It was so dark that they couldn't even see their own fingers if they held out their hands in front of them.

The two of them already experienced the consequences of poor visibility, out in the fog. Back then, they had fallen into a pit trap by accident, and neither of them was eager to repeat that right now.

Zu An ran through the things he had on him. He subconsciously wanted to take out his magical flashlight to light the way, but remembered that it wouldn't light up without the presence of a light source.

Piece of junk!

While Zu An was feeling annoyed, a burst of light suddenly flickered next to him. Black flames swirled around Pei Mianman. Not only did it light up the surroundings, it made her look more beautiful too.

Zu An rushed over to hug her. "Big Manman, you really are beautiful."

Pei Mianman jumped in fright and quickly extinguished the flames, afraid that she would hurt him. She quickly remembered that she had given him her pendant, which granted immunity against the black flames, and heaved a sigh in relief.

"You're so annoying!" Pei Mianman's face reddened as she pushed him away. "I saw several marks on the walls that could have been made by fire. They may be braziers. Let me see if I can light them."

With a wave of her hand, a streak of black flame shot out like a snake. It slithered across the walls, moving across the places that she remembered.

In a moment, fires burst into life one after another. Those markings had been made by braziers after all. Who would've known that there would still be oil stored within them after all this time?

The light from the fires quickly lit up their surroundings reaching far into the distance. The two of them looked around and saw that they were indeed within a magnificent palace.

The firelight reflected off something golden in the distance. It was as if they had arrived at a capital city made out of gold.

"Is all of this gold?" Pei Mianman was stupefied. Massive golden pillars stretched out before her eyes. If they managed to bring these back with them, they would be rich enough to rival a nation.

Zu An walked over to the closest wall and pinched it, then shook his head. "Sorry to disappoint you. Gold is rather soft, but this material is much sturdier. It's probably brass. You can check those braziers if you don't believe me. The surface facing the fire should be covered in a layer of black. That wouldn't happen with real gold."

Metallurgy was quite advanced in the Shang Dynasty, thanks mostly to the discovery of copper smelting. Both copper and bronze had a golden sheen when first forged, and only turned green after endless years

of corrosion by water and oxygen, taking on the appearance of the ancient bronze artifacts that everyone was so familiar with.

Pei Mianman was greatly disappointed when she learned that all this wasn't gold. "I got all excited for nothing. Hm? What is that?"

Zu An had to give this woman some credit. She was always noticing these clues before him.

They walked forward a little more and noticed many beautiful carvings on the walls. However, the murals all seemed rather abstract, so he couldn't immediately figure out what they represented.

Words were carved around the murals as well. Pei Mianman looked at him with great expectation. "What do those words say?"

These were written in the same strange and ancient oracle script, after all. Zu An had deciphered the characters on the stele and the stone gate, so she thought that he could understand these too.

Zu An grumbled secretly. Do you take me for some archaeologist? I was already pushing my luck, deciphering the simple oracle script from earlier. There's no way I'll know what those characters mean!

However, as he looked into her beautiful and expectant eyes, Zu An couldn't help but act all knowledgeable. "Maybe a monster laid its eggs in a young woman's mouth. The infant monster incubated inside the young woman's body, then it burst straight out of her body..."

The mural did depict a monster and a young lady, after all. There seemed to be an egg-shaped object inside her mouth. Then, the woman's belly was shown to be enlarged...

He had just been making up nonsense, borrowing from the plot of 'Aliens', but the more he spoke, the more it seemed to match the contents of these carvings, as though what he said was actually the truth.

"Absolute nonsense!" a cold voice thundered.

Chapter 515, Part I: Show Me What You've Got!

Instead of being alarmed by this sudden voice, Zu An was overcome with joy. "Big sis empress, you finally woke up! I thought that you... I thought..."

"That I died?" The ice-cold voice remarked snidely in his head.

"That's not it." Zu An laughed in embarrassment. "I thought that you'd gone to sleep and didn't care about me anymore."

"Why would I come out when you're flirting with that big-boobed sis of yours over here?" Mi Li said with a snort. It was easy to imagine her rolling her eyes.

"Big-boobed sis?" Zu An subconsciously glanced at Pei Mianman's chest. He had to admit that this was indeed a fitting nickname.

"What do you mean, 'flirting'? I encountered so much danger along the way, and I almost died, okay? Why didn't you help me out?" Zu An said with a bit of bitterness.

“What do you mean by ‘encountering danger’? You only fell into danger because you tried to save that big-boobed sis! Earlier on, while that mosquito was around, you even risked your life several times to save that Zheng girl, and that lady whatever of the Devil Sect as well. Hmph! That big-boobed sis got one thing right—you really do risk your life to chase skirts. Even if I tried to save you, it would hardly make a difference, given how easily you keep trying to throw your life away, so why would I even bother? I’d rather you just died earlier. That way, I wouldn’t have to keep feeling so annoyed.” The cold in Mi Li’s voice was piercing.

Despite this, Zu An giggled and said, “Big sis empress, even though your words are rather mean, you still care about me, right? Otherwise, you wouldn’t have paid so much attention to all that had happened along the way.”

“Hmph! Wipe that smile off your face. I’m not as easy as those other girls of yours.” Despite her words, Mi Li’s tone had clearly softened a little. She looked at the carvings on the wall and said, “Let’s talk about those murals.”

In her current form, no one besides Zu An could see her unless she wanted them to. She pointed towards the wall and said, “Everything you said earlier on was absolute rubbish. This here clearly shows a giant bird spreading its wings above. This thing below it is a bird’s nest, filled with eggs. It was the young woman who crawled up to it and stole an egg, and then ate it. The young lady became pregnant soon afterwards and gave birth to a child... This is the legend that you recalled earlier: ‘In the Song clan was a woman with the simple name of Di. After ingesting the egg of a strange bird, Qi was born.’”

Zu An had a look of surprise on his face. “Big sis empress, you’re so smart!”

He had only known of that because of a documentary, but she was somehow aware of such obscure knowledge!

Mi Li snorted. “Are you stupid? Yinshang isn’t even that far removed from the period I lived in.”

Zu An laughed awkwardly. It came to him that she was from the Qin Dynasty, which was only a single dynasty away from the Shang Dynasty.

Mi Li walked over to another mural, this one depicting a scene of war. A great number of chariots were arrayed on both sides, with many ranks of soldiers behind them.

On one of the chariots stood a tall and stalwart man. It was obvious that he was strong and mighty, and was clearly the main character of this mural. Another man stood on the opposite side of him, marking him as his opponent. However, this person’s expression looked rather dark and cowardly.

Mi Li studied the characters written next to the mural, then pointed at the two men. “That’s the founder of the Shang Dynasty, Cheng Tang. This is the battle of Mingtiao, which spelled the end of the Xia Dynasty. On the other side of him is the monarch of the Xia Dynasty, Xia Jie. After this defeat, he fled to Nanchao and died, while Cheng Tang returned victorious. He gathered the feudal vassals and formally established the Shang Dynasty and its capital city, Bo City.”

“Bo City?” Zu An was shocked. “Wasn’t Yin City the capital of the Shang Dynasty?”

Yinshang had gotten its name because, over the years, people had grown accustomed to using that name to refer to it. Of course, those who had read ‘Investiture of the Gods’ would know that the capital

city of the Shang Dynasty was Zhaohe. Regardless of whether it was Zhaohe or Yin City, however, neither of them were Bo City.

"I'm amazed at how naïve you are, trying to show off with how little you know. The Shang emperors of the past moved their capitals frequently." Mi Li pointed at a mural in the back and explained, "That was all because of the way inheritance worked in the Shang Dynasty. In these ancient times, danger lurked in every corner. The foreign tribes were coveting their land, and beasts of nature roamed freely as well, and so the average lifespan was rather short. Most died in the prime of their lives, and the Shang emperor was no exception. There was no way he would pass on his throne to a young child, because all that mattered in those times was whether or not the emperor could properly lead his people to survival.

"That was why, in the early years of the Shang Dynasty, the throne was inherited by the emperor's brothers. Once the Shang emperor died, his younger brother would succeed the throne. This continued on for some time.

"There was one problem with this—any branch of the imperial clan could claim the right of inheritance. Once the dust settled, the lifespans of the people would have naturally grown longer. Soon enough, the emperors often began to have mature heirs, and were thus no longer willing to pass on their imperial position to their brothers. They wanted to pass it onto their sons instead, but the other kings wouldn't agree to that. A cruel power struggle was unavoidable.

"Once the new emperor succeeded the throne, most of them would choose to move the capital, to reduce the threat that the other remaining kings posed. This way, the complicated and tricky balance of powers in the capital would be rendered meaningless."

"I understand that!" Zu An remembered something similar playing out in the Song Dynasty. During the early period, when Zhao Kuangyin usurped the Later Zhou regime and established the Northern Song Dynasty, he planned to pass on his throne to his younger brother, Zhao Guangyi, to solidify the Zhao clan's power. Later on, however, after ruling for more than ten years, his young son had already grown up, and he changed his mind, wanting to pass on the imperial throne to him instead.

Unfortunately, back then, an unwritten rule stated that the heir apparent to the throne would serve as overseer of the capital, Kaifeng. Zhao Guangyi had already held that position for many years, and so he wielded massive influence there.

Zhao Kuangyin planned to deal with this situation by moving the capital, but this attempt encountered intense opposition within the court. It was ultimately dismantled by Zhao Guangyi's famous words: 'If the monarch knows no honor, the people will rebel'. When Zhao Kuangyin saw how many people were backing his younger brother, and that he was naturally benevolent by nature, he abandoned all thoughts of moving the capital.

Mi Li pointed at the third mural and said, "The Shang Dynasty continued to change capital cities again and again. This lasted until Pan Geng made Yin City the capital, where it finally stabilized. This mural describes various things regarding this move by Pan Geng."

Zu An looked at the fourth mural. "Huh? There's a woman in this mural. She looks quite pretty too."

Mi Li snorted. "Look at you, your head is filled to the brim with thoughts about whether girls are pretty or not. You're disrespecting your ancestors! She is Fu Hao, the empress of Wu Ding, and one of the

Shang Dynasty's most powerful monarchs. After Pan Geng moved the capital, the Shang Dynasty gradually stabilized. When it reached Wu Ding's generation, the state, which had been in decline, flourished once more. Not only was Wu Ding capable, his wife, Fu Hao, was also vitally important.

"Back then, the Gui, Tu, Qiang, Ren, and Hu parties surrounding the Shang Dynasty were all extremely strong. They all desired the riches of the Shang Dynasty's land..."

"Parties?" Zu An asked, cutting her off.

"It's what the Shang Dynasty called the surrounding foreign tribes and nations," explained Mi Li. She looked back at the depiction of Fu Hao. "Back then, the Shang Dynasty was constantly engaged in war. The empress Fu Hao personally commanded troops, defeating the foreign tribes one after another, and even wiping out a few of the enemy territories. This helped to completely stabilize the Shang Dynasty. She was truly a woman worth admiring."

Zu An saw the adoration in Mi Li's eyes, and remembered that she was also an empress. She was probably moved by Fu Hao's accomplishments.

Mi Li stopped in front of another mural. Suddenly, she frowned. "Something is not right!"

"What is it?" Zu An asked with a strange tone. This mural was located next to a river. There were many boats on this river, and the lanterns and colored banners on it made it seem like a festive day. There were men escorting the groom and bride from both sides. It looked like a grand wedding.

Mi Li pointed at a few of the words beside it and said, "The theme of this mural is 'Match Made in Heaven', but if I recall correctly, 'Match Made in Heaven' comes from the Shijing, the Book of Songs. It portrays the wedding of Ji Chang, the ruler of the Zhou Dynasty.

"In times gone by, Ji Chang met his wife on the banks of the Wei River, and was moved by her beauty. When he learned that she was compassionate and wise, and that she lived a simple and unadorned life, Ji Chang decided to take her as his wife. Because there were no bridges across the Wei River, Ji Chang decided to use boats to fashion a bridge over the Wei River. The boats lined up bow-to-stern to form a bridge, and he would meet her on this bridge. It was a grand and magnificent scene."

Zu An was amazed. "That's exactly what's on the mural. So where's the strange part?"

"This is where the strangeness lies," Mi Li said with a frown. "The empress was a noble woman from the Shen state. Back then, even though the Shen state was a part of Yinshang, she was definitely not a true Shang Dynasty princess. However, the words next to this mural state that it was king Di Yi who married off his own beautiful younger sister to Ji Chang, and that was the actual match made in heaven. However, this goes completely against what is written in the Shijing!"

515, Part II: Show Me What You've Got!

"Di Yi?" All these names were starting to make Zu An's head spin.

Mi Li replied, "He is the second-last monarch, as well as the father of King Zhou, whom you might know more about."

“Oh, King Zhou!” Zu An’s eyes lit up. “I know who that is. He fell in love with the fox spirit Daji, which resulted in the destruction of the Shang Dynasty. Everyone knows that. I wonder just how beautiful Daji was for him to completely lose himself in that way.”

Neither modern textbooks nor the ‘Investiture of the Gods’ contained many positive things about King Zhou of Shang and Daji. However, he didn’t really care about that. He was burning to know just how stunning history’s most famous fox spirit really was.

“You really are a pervert!” Mi Li berated him. After his interruption, she moved on from the ‘Match Made in Heaven’ mural. She pointed at the last mural and said, “I believe the Daji that you so desperately want to see is right here.”

Zu An peered at it curiously, and saw a woman outlined by graceful lines. Unfortunately, he couldn’t see her real appearance through such a medium, and could only tell from her curves that she indeed possessed an exceptionally beautiful figure. “Wow, her waist is so thin! And her chest is so large, it’s almost on the level of Big Manman...”

Mi Li rolled her eyes. She was already used to this degenerate side of him. She continued with her explanation of the mural. “This painting explains the eradication of the Shang Dynasty. Over here is the battle of Muye. The Shang Dynasty’s army changed sides right before the battle, leading to a crushing defeat... In the throes of despair, King Zhou committed suicide with his wife by self-immolation. Thus, the Zhou Dynasty was established. King Zhou’s son, the crown prince Wu Geng, was left in Yin City as an offering to the ancestors.”

“Huh?” Zu An was rather curious. “Wasn’t the Shang Dynasty completely wiped out by the Zhou Dynasty? Why was King Zhou’s son allowed to stay in the capital city, under the banner of the Shang Dynasty?”

“In ancient times, there was an unwritten rule stating that one could destroy a nation, but not their customs. However, this was rarely actually put into practice.” Mi Li sneered. “In the end, the victorious side was forced into making such compromises only because the defeated side still had a substantial force remaining. The Zhou Dynasty destroyed many other smaller countries following that—when did they ever allow them to carry on their customs? Our Qin State was never so hypocritical. If we want to wipe out an enemy, we would do it. If we said we’d eradicate a clan, that’s what we did.”

Zu An stared at her, speechless.

He noticed the frenzy in Mi Li’s eyes, and swallowed. This woman was a rather strong-willed person.

Mi Li continued, “The Shang Dynasty had existed for many centuries, after all, so even if King Zhou died, their remaining forces were still substantial. The Zhou Dynasty allowed Wu Geng to remain in Yin City as the monarch of the remaining Shang loyalists. However, you shouldn’t look down on him just because of how easily he was defeated in the Battle of Muye. Four years later, Wu Geng instigated a rebellion, and it took the Zhou Dynasty three whole years before he was defeated.

“Even though Wu Geng’s bloodline had ended, the Shang loyalists still had two other powerful forces. King Zhou’s uncle Jizi wasn’t willing to bow down to serve the Zhou Dynasty, so he led some of the people from Yin City to Beiqian, establishing the Chaoxian state. History calls it the Ji Clan Chaoxian. The only son of King Zhou’s older brother’s led several subordinates and established the Song state, which is

quite famous as well, so you should know about them. There are many stories whose main characters are stupid Song people.”

Mi Li’s smile dripped with mockery. “After all, the Song state was made up of migrants from Yinshang. The other states were all made up of Zhou people, which is why they always mocked those from Song.”

Zu An was stupefied. All of that had actually happened? Many of those jokes had become commonly used phrases, even in his modern age. Even thousands of years later, everyone still remembered the stupidity of the people from the Song state... That’s really brutal.

“Ah Zu, Ah Zu?” Pei Mianman’s voice tugged at Zu An’s consciousness the same way she tugged at his clothes.

Zu An snapped out of his daze. “What is it?” he asked her.

Pei Mianman looked worried. “You were acting rather strangely for quite a while. You were looking at the murals and muttering to yourself. I thought that you’d been affected by some kind of spell! Are you all right?”

Zu An now realized that his conversation with Mi Li had gone entirely unnoticed by her. She couldn’t see Mi Li, after all. He was quick to reassure her. “I’m fine. I was trying to figure out what those murals were saying and fell into a little bit of a trance,” he said in explanation.

Pei Mianman was curious. “You can understand what the words mean?”

“Of course!” Zu An roughly explained everything he’d just heard, making some adjustments so that it was easier for her to understand.

Pei Mianman’s beautiful eyes grew wide with astonishment as she listened to what he said. She grabbed his arm. “Ah Zu, you’re so learned! You even recognize characters from the ancient past. I’ve already made up my mind. I am going to make you mine, even if Chuyan doesn’t agree!”

Zu An was left speechless.

The wonderful feeling of her hands on his arm completely overwhelmed him as well, and a look of ecstasy swept across his face.

“Hmph!” A cold snort sounded beside his ear.

You have successfully trolled Mi Li for 998 Rage points!

This kid is using my knowledge to show off in front of a girl! This is so annoying!!!

Seeing that big-boobed girl latch onto Zu An so intimately, as well as that stupid expression on his face, was enough to leave Mi Li feeling suffocated. Her soul body immediately vanished, and she didn’t reappear again, no matter how Zu An called her.

Oh no... did I really piss big sis empress off this time?

Zu An called and called, but she didn’t respond. He couldn’t help but say, “Big sis empress, you’re not jealous, are you?”

“Hah! Jealous my ass!” Mi Li finally responded.

Zu An laughed heartily. “I know, I know. You’ve spent quite a bit of time with a handsome and outstanding man like me. It’s completely natural for you to fall for me.”

Mi Li would have put her face in her hands if she had either of them.

She didn’t know where this fellow got his thick skin from. Did he actually think that she liked him?

She was the empress of an entire nation! How could she end up liking a brat from the streets?

If it wasn’t because their souls were tied together, she would have killed him with a single smack to the face.

If I really go blind and end up favoring this kid, I’m going to make him kneel before me every day and sing ‘Conquer’ as punishment!

Their souls were linked together, so they understood each other very well, and she had even gotten to know the song ‘Conquer’.

You have successfully trolled Mi Li for 33... 33... 33...

Zu An quickly apologized when he realized that he had pissed her off for real this time. Unfortunately, Mi Li didn’t respond any further, no matter what he said.

Zu An was used to this as well. This stuff happened all the time. Sigh, what can you do when you have an arrogant big sis like her?

He held Pei Mianman’s hand as they continued to head deeper inside. Suddenly, his sixth sense tingled, and he quickly pushed Pei Mianman out of the way, throwing himself in the opposite direction.

A streak of cold light descended from above, lancing down on the ground where the two of them had been standing a split second ago.

“Ah Zu!” Pei Mianman reacted as well. Black flames surrounded her as she took up a combat stance. She caught sight of their attacker... and froze. “That’s...”

A skeleton stood facing them, sparkling with a vague luster. A faint red light flickered within its eye sockets, and it held a long spear in its hands. The skeleton gave off a powerful and menacing aura.

Zu An swallowed. “Doesn’t this fellow look kind of familiar?”

Pei Mianman replied, “I think it’s the same skeleton warrior that was kneeling by the stone gate...”

The skeleton warrior was already moving before she even finished her sentence. It flipped into the air and somersaulted to the side, then brought its spear down onto Zu An. It was clearly dead, yet it still had enough of an instinct to treat the man as the greatest threat, intending to eliminate him first.

Its aura surged powerfully. The aerial maneuver it pulled was incredibly stylish, making it look like a scythe-wielding reaper of death.

Zu An might’ve cheered in admiration if the skeleton hadn’t been coming after him.

However, the powerful feeling of fear welling up within him prevented him from acting carelessly. He drew his Tai'e Sword to face his opponent and charged at it head on, not bothering to evade. "Show me what you've got!" he roared.

Boom!

A thunderous noise echoed around the chamber. A figure flew through the air and slammed into a wall, sending several bricks tumbling.

Zu An crawled up off the ground. He spat out some dirt that had gotten into his mouth. "All right, you're pretty strong, bro."

Pei Mianman laughed. Even the way this guy fought was funny. She quickly summoned her black flames and moved in to support him.

Chapter 516: Natural Enemies

Pei Mianman figured that her opponent was an undead creature, so it was probably scared of fire. With that reasoning, she summoned a flame dragon and sent it flying towards it.

The skeletal warrior also sensed danger. It spun around, retrieving a spherical shield from its waist. The shield looked small at first, the size of a small disc, but it immediately spun, fanning outwards to become much larger. It turned into a meter-wide shield that blocked all of the incoming flames.

Pei Mianman was astonished. She was about to command the flames to go around the shield, but with a shake of the skeletal warrior's arm, countless sharp teeth emerged around the rim of the shield.

Even Zu An's eyes grew wide when he saw this. Didn't they only find bronze artifacts in Yinshang? How the heck did this thing get its hands on something with such advanced technology?

The stalwart skeleton sent the shield spinning through the air. The spherical shield sliced through the air, flying straight at Pei Mianman. The shield flickered with a vicious metallic glint, and the whoosh that it made as it cut through the air was quite frightening as well. It was clearly powerful enough to slice whatever—or whoever—it hit into two.

Pei Mianman twisted her upper body to the side. Her body bent elegantly like a willow branch, displaying her incredible flexibility. The shield whizzed right past her.

However, this round shield seemed to have a pair of eyes. After it flew past her, it spun around, slicing at her from the opposite direction.

Fortunately, Pei Mianman was prepared. With a tap of her toes, she flipped backwards, barely evading the shield.

Even so, a part of her dress could not avoid the spinning shield. The shield's sharp edges sliced through it, cutting it right off.

Pei Mianman's face paled. She would have lost half her leg if she had been even a moment too slow.

That skeletal warrior grabbed the returning shield, then flung it out again.

Pei Mianman's entire body surged with black flames, and her movement speed increased as well. She dodged to the side, but that spinning shield pursued her relentlessly.

Zu An leaped in to attack the skeletal warrior as well. He noticed that the red lights in its eyes were flickering, and attributed this to its need to control the flying shield. He was worried about Pei Mianman, so he attacked the skeleton to try and distract it.

The skeleton brandished its spear about, creating a zone around him that Zu An could not enter.

Zu An had already suffered a heavy blow in the first skirmish, and he knew that he wasn't a match for it in terms of power. As such, he used Sunflower Phantasm to split himself into two and attack it from different directions.

That skeletal warrior's head tilted to the side, confusion somehow swirling within its red eyes. How did this person suddenly split into two?

Despite this, it swung its spear without hesitation, slicing both figures in half.

However, it was given another shock, because it did not feel like it was cutting through flesh. Instead, it only sliced through empty air.

A third Zu An appeared behind it, and the Tai'e Sword cut straight across its neck.

The Tai'e Sword was incredibly sharp, and Zu An had attacked with a good amount of his strength. He didn't believe that it could withstand this blow, no matter how tough its bones were.

A skull landed on the ground and rolled around.

The shield, which was still spinning in midair, went out of control as well. It lost its ability to continue attacking, burying itself into a nearby wall.

Zu An rushed over to support Pei Mianman. "Manman, are you all right?"

"I'm okay." Pei Mianman gave that skeleton a fearful look. "We might already be dead if it had decided to ambush us by the gate."

"Which is why our luck is actually pretty good." Zu An chuckled. He walked over to the wall to examine the stationary shield. He had witnessed the power and intricacy of this thing just now. This was definitely an excellent defensive tool and a formidable weapon. He wondered if there was a way he could use it himself.

He reached out his hand to remove the shield. With a sudden whoosh, the shield began to spin again, freeing itself from the wall. Zu An dodged to the side in alarm. His head had almost been sliced in half!

"What the heck? Is this weapon intelligent?" Zu An looked at the flying shield with shock.

"Ah Zu, over there!" Pei Mianman's voice contained an unmistakable tremble. It was as if she had seen a ghost.

Zu An looked over and shuddered. The skeletal warrior's headless body hadn't fallen. Instead, it was walking around. When it got near its head, it squatted down and felt around on the ground, as though it

couldn't see. Even though its head was within reach, it was still slightly off, and couldn't quite find its head.

Zu An immediately snapped out of his daze. He shouted and charged at it, sword in hand. Unfortunately, that spinning shield flew between the two of them, blocking his path.

Clunk!

Sword and shield collided with a muffled crash. Zu An took several steps back, his arms sore.

The headless skeleton had finally found its skull. It picked it up and placed it on its neck, then twisted it, as though aligning the wound.

White light flashed on its neck, and the massive cut disappeared, as though nothing had happened. Red light flickered to life within its eye sockets, and its spear stabbed towards the two of them again.

Zu An dodged to the side. "Does this thing never die?" he exclaimed in alarm. "How the hell am I supposed to beat that?!"

Pei Mianman replied with a strained voice. "Let me see if I can burn it to ashes with my black flames. I refuse to believe that it can revive itself after that."

A burst of flame rushed towards the skeleton.

This time, the skeletal warrior didn't have its shield to defend itself. Instead, it stomped on the ground and leaped upwards.

The two of them were stunned. Its speed was much faster than expected, nothing like the clumsy skeletal warriors that they were used to.

The three of them quickly got into a massive tangle. Pei Mianman sent her flames burning towards their opponent, yet it always managed to stop them using its vicious attacks.

The skeleton's attacks were just too strong for them. It wove its spear about itself in an intricate series of patterns, creating a zone several meters around it that they could not breach.

Such a weapon, with its long reach, was normally weaker in close combat, yet when they finally managed to close the gap after considerable effort, they were confronted by the spinning shield, which served as both offense and defense. It was like a very deadly hedgehog! The two of them had no idea what to do.

After several more exchanges, Zu An and Pei Mianman were both hit, and crashed into a nearby wall. Fortunately, the two of them managed to evade the sharp edge of its blade at the last second, saving themselves from being ripped apart.

The skeletal warrior turned around, ready to pursue them again.

Suddenly, a chorus of wails came from a distance away, accompanied by the thudding of heavy footsteps.

All three of them turned around. Five taoties slowly trundled in.

The skeletal warrior ignored the two of them, and pointed its spear at the approaching. Even though it was made of bones, both Zu An and Pei Mianman could still see that it had gotten serious.

The newly-arrived taoties did not spare a glance at Zu An, charging towards the skeletal warrior instead.

Zu An was surprised. "That's way too strange. The taotie is a glutton by nature—shouldn't it be more interested in fleshy bodies like ours? Why did it go straight after that skeleton?"

"The Shang people were fond of capturing taotie and training them to use in battles against surrounding nations," Pei Mianman mumbled in reply. "However, the taotie are incredibly cunning and vicious, and were unwilling to let themselves be used like that forever. The soldiers of the Shang army killed many of them, but many of their soldiers were devoured by taotie in return. They are natural enemies who will fight to the death as soon as they encounter each other."

Zu An felt his eyes go wide. "How did you know all of that?"

Pei Mianman had a confused expression on her face. She rubbed her forehead subconsciously. "I don't know. My mind was flooded by a multitude of scenes in an instant. They were unfamiliar, yet somehow familiar as well. I replied on instinct when I heard your question."

Chapter 517: A Strange Elevated Pavilion

Zu An frowned. "Did something invade your consciousness?"

He looked around anxiously, but didn't see anything. "This place is really weird."

Pei Mianman shook her head. "I don't think so. I don't feel the dizziness that comes with being manipulated, and those scenes feel like my own memories... I only know that there's a strange feeling about all this."

Zu An was about to reply, but something changed dramatically in the fight below them. The stalemate between the taoties and the skeletal warrior was finally broken. A taotie screamed and charged at the skeleton.

Those cruel white teeth looked as though they could bite straight through any bone on the skeletal warrior's body.

The skeletal warrior flung out its shield, straight towards the taotie, which was charging at it with great speed. The shield was flying almost as fast as the taotie was running—how could it possibly evade?

The spinning shield was like a cutting machine, cleaving the taotie's skull right in half. The momentum continued to push the rest of the taotie's body forward, but it soon crashed to the ground, its legs and feet twitching about.

Meanwhile, the spinning shield behaved like a boomerang, returning to the skeletal warrior's hands.

The two horns on one of the taotie's heads flickered with electricity, sending a streak of blue light lancing out at the spinning shield and striking it squarely. The flying shield shuddered before falling to

the ground. It stopped spinning and became completely still, as if its connection to its owner had been severed.

The other taoties' horns also began to flicker with electricity. Streaks of blue light shot towards the skeletal warrior.

The skeletal warrior brandished the long spear in its hands, forming an impenetrable barrier in front of itself and blocking every bolt of blue lightning.

With a firm push off the ground, the skeletal warrior flew forward, leaving behind an afterimage. It appeared beside the closest taotie and hacked at it with its spear, instantly chopping off the taotie's feet. Unbalanced, the taotie fell to the ground.

The skeletal warrior didn't give it another opportunity, and dealt a lethal blow.

Its long spear sunk into the taotie's body. A taotie's long tail flicked over, striking the skeleton's arm.

No matter how sturdy its bones were, the skeletal warrior was unable to shrug off this blow. The ferocity behind the attack knocked the spear out of its hands.

Despite this setback, it reacted quickly. It reached out one hand to grab the attacking tail, and then it used this taotie as its new weapon, flinging it as though throwing a discus. It collided with another of its brethren.

"Screech!" The two taoties wailed miserably, confused and disoriented from the collision.

With a flick of its foot, the skeletal warrior flipped its long spear into the air and sent it flying with a firm side kick.

The spear shot out with absolute precision, instantly impaling one of the unsteady taoties and nailing it into the wall.

Zu An swallowed. This skeletal warrior had to have been an incredible warrior when it was alive. There was no other way it could be this badass!

The most unfortunate taotie was the one which had had its tail grabbed. The skeletal warrior picked it up and slammed it back into the ground again and again. After more than ten earth-rattling blows, its entire body was covered in wounds, seeping with all sorts of vile liquids.

The last taotie finally shook itself out of its daze. It threw itself at the skeletal warrior, knocking it to the ground.

The skeletal warrior let go of the tail he was holding and turned his attention to this remaining taotie.

Zu An found himself caught in two minds. Should he help this last taotie? After all, he had only stayed because he wanted to find a chance to deal with all of them once and for all. That way, he wouldn't have to worry about being chased by either side.

However, the skeletal warrior was just too strong. It had taken care of four taoties almost instantly.

Even though a taotie managed to knock it down, it was an undead creature. He really didn't think that the taotie had any chance of victory.

This battle had already reached its climax. The taotie continuously raked its sharp claws against the skeletal warrior's body, filling the air with ear-splitting scraping sounds.

Deep, long furrows were beginning to show on the skeletal warrior's sturdy bones.

The taotie's sharp tail waved about, stabbing at the skeletal warrior's skull again and again. The skeletal warrior continuously evaded the strikes, and the sharp tail kicked up fountains of dirt. It was a truly chaotic scene.

Zu An stroked his chin. Why does this scene look so familiar...?

He was still hesitant about whether or not he should help. However, that skeletal warrior could heal even if its skull were chopped off, so he really didn't know what could possibly counter it.

In the end, he decided to let the taotie test the waters a little longer. After all, according to what Big Manman said, the two of them were mortal enemies, and each of them definitely knew about the other's weaknesses.

The skeletal warrior planted his foot against the Taotie's belly and kicked out, sending it smashing into a nearby wall. Debris flew everywhere.

The skeletal warrior crawled to its feet and charged at the taotie. The taotie suddenly launched its incredibly sturdy tongue at its skull.

The skeletal warrior was already prepared for this attack. It dodged to the side and reached out a hand, grabbing the tongue. With a ferocious yank, he ripped the entire tongue out of the taotie's mouth.

The taotie screeched in untold agony. Blood and other unknown liquids gushed out of its mouth. It staggered to the side and collapsed. Having this massive tongue torn out was apparently a mortal wound, even for something as tough as this creature.

Zu An couldn't hide his disappointment. I know you can't beat that skeleton, but you can't be that useless, right? You all seemed so vicious when up against me earlier, but you just let that skeleton annihilate all of you like that?

No wonder this fellow was put on guard duty. It's just way too strong.

Despite this, Zu An remained calm. He looked at Pei Mianman. "I think I know what its weakness is."

Pei Mianman wasn't stupid either. She had also figured out what he was thinking from watching the battle. "It's head!"

Those Taotie were always trying to attack its head. There was surely a reason for this.

Zu An had only removed the skull from its body, but did not fully crush its head. That was why he had mistakenly believed that it was immortal.

The taotie which had been smashed repeatedly into the ground was somehow still alive. It staggered to its feet and instinctively tried to run, having already lost its will to fight.

That skeletal warrior reached out its hand, and then the shield that had fallen to the floor earlier came alive again. It flew past the taotie and returned to its owner's hand.

The taotie continued to run a few more steps before its head slid off.

The skeletal warrior walked over to the taotie impaled against the wall to retrieve its spear. It pulled out the spear in one smooth motion, then turned around. Its red eyes stared coldly at Zu An and Pei Mianman.

Zu An swallowed. Even though he knew its weakness now, it had just shown them how terrifyingly strong it was. The two of them stood absolutely no chance.

He was just about to wonder what he should do when something unexpected happened. The sharp end of a tail came poking out of the skeletal warrior's forehead.

The skeletal warrior wanted to turn around and see what had killed it, but with its head pierced through like that, it couldn't even complete this simple movement.

Zu An and Pei Mianman squinted, and noticed another taotie hidden on a beam behind it. They didn't know how long it had spent hiding there. It had waited until the skeletal warrior had killed its comrades and dropped its guard before delivering this lethal strike.

The skeletal warrior tried to raise its spear, but a terrifying tongue flew out, blasting its skeletal hand to pieces.

The taotie slowly lifted its tail into the air, raising the skeleton with it. The red light burning within the skeletal warrior's eyes dimmed and scattered, and its other arm hung powerlessly. The shield it was holding fell to the ground with a thunk.

Zu An wanted to take that shield for himself, but he gave up on the idea when the taotie hopped off the beam. This taotie was larger than any of the other ones he had seen, several times the size of those ordinary taoties.

"I think we should leave this place as quickly as possible," said Pei Mianman.

"I concur." The two of them turned and ran as soon as the words left his mouth.

The earlier taotie's attacks had left behind several scars on the skeletal warrior's bones, but they weren't able to truly defeat it. However, this new fellow's tongue had instantly smashed its entire forearm to pieces. There was no way they would be able to win this fight.

The giant taotie let out a roar and gave chase, plodding after them with heavy footsteps. It moved very quickly, which was completely unexpected, given its enormous body.

"Why isn't that guy eating its friends' corpses?!" Zu An yelled, cursing. Unfortunately, there was nothing else they could do right now but run.

He wanted to find a narrow path to run towards, which would hopefully slow down the creature behind them. However, this palace was incredibly massive, and there were no narrow spaces to be found.

After some time, the two of them found themselves in front of a staircase, leading up to an elevated pavilion. They stared upwards, their expressions slightly despairing. Heading up these stairs and into the pavilion was asking for death.

They turned back around, preparing to fight. It was almost as if their backs were against a wall. Unexpectedly, the massive taotie suddenly stopped. It stayed several zhang away, staring vigilantly at the elevated pavilion, as though it was somehow afraid.

Chapter 518: Turn Back Now

“What's going on?” Zu An was taken aback by how hesitant the giant taotie was.

Pei Mianman glanced at the elevated pavilion. “I think it’s scared of this elevated pavilion. There might be something terrifying lurking over there.”

“But there’s nothing over there...” Zu An jumped high up into the air, but did not see anything.

“Let’s wait for a while,” suggested Pei Mianman. Regardless of what was going on, something that could scare even this giant taotie was probably not something that they could deal with on their own.

“All right.” Even though Zu An was usually rather easygoing, he was a cautious person deep down. There was clearly something dangerous up there, so there was no way he would run headfirst into that.

“I wonder when that guy will leave,” Pei Mianman remarked, frowning at the giant beast.

“I don’t care about it leaving. I’m more worried about it charging over.” Zu An estimated that the distance between them was only about ten or so meters. For most cultivators, such a distance could be taken care of in a single leap, and the same went for that taotie monster.

That giant taotie had clearly grown impatient as they were talking. It pushed off its hind legs strongly and charged at them.

Zu An could not believe it.

Why the hell did I have to raise a stupid flag for myself?!

“Does your mouth have some bloody superpower?” Pei Mianman was incredulous. This sort of thing had already happened more than once.

With no other escape route, the two of them were forced to run up the stairs.

They had only made it up a few steps when ancient music began to fill the air around them.

The ferocious giant taotie hesitated when it heard this music, and subconsciously took a few steps back.

“Where is that music coming from?” Pei Mianman was confused. There were no instruments around them to explain the sudden music.

“I think it’s coming from the stairs.” As he said this, Zu An stomped on the step he was standing on, and music drifted out.

“Why would these stairs make music?” Pei Mianman stomped in disbelief as well. Sure enough, more music followed.

"I dreamt of some musical staircases. All sorts of songs could be played when they were stepped on..." Zu An didn't dare bring up his hometown as an excuse anymore. After all, everyone knew that he had spent his entire life in Brightmoon City. Pei Mianman was intimately familiar with Brightmoon City, so he wouldn't get away with that sort of bluff. He could only put all of this on dreams.

Pei Mianman already knew that he dreamt of weird things, so she accepted what he said. "The music that is being played sounds like wind chimes, but also a bit like the bianzhong, that ancient bell instrument. But this melody is different from the usual sweet-sounding tunes that these instruments tend to play. It actually sounds rather sinister. I think it's giving me the chills."

"If something's not right, then let's not climb up any further!" Zu An pulled Pei Mianman back. Creepy music was playing, and they had a giant taotie right behind them. Everything about this was weird!

Unfortunately, that giant Taotie had no intentions of letting the two of them go. Even though it didn't dare climb up, it opened its bloody mouth, sending a long tongue shooting out at the two of them.

The skeletal warrior's bones, which were as hard as steel, had been instantly shattered by this tongue. The two of them didn't dare underestimate its power, and instantly evaded to the side.

However, the massive taotie used its tongue like a spear, continuously thrusting it at the two of them. There wasn't that much room to evade, since they were on a flight of stairs, and they were almost impaled by the tongue several times.

Zu An knew that it was folly to continue on like this. They were going to be wounded by that tongue sooner or later. He grabbed Pei Mianman and began to run up the stairs. "There's no choice! We have to go up!"

Even if this giant taotie didn't continue to attack them, its mere presence would be enough to trap them here, and they would die sooner or later.

Pei Mianman voiced her agreement. Given their current situation, she would much rather risk whatever was up there than face the giant taotie.

The two of them went up the stairs. It was as if they were stepping on a piano—every step produced music that echoed through the cavernous place. It really was eerie.

"Do you feel like the air is getting colder?" Pei Mianman crossed her arms and asked in a puzzled manner.

Zu An spread his arms. "Come here, I'll give you a warm hug."

Pei Mianman snorted. "You're always so annoying. I'm being serious!"

Zu An put away his smile. "You're right. There might be some sinister things nearby. We need to be careful."

"I think there's a stele over there. There seem to be some words on it," Pei Mianman said, pointing at the distant summit.

Zu An's eyes narrowed. "I can't see what's on it."

Given their cultivation, it shouldn't have been difficult to make out the words from this distance away. However, the air around that stele seemed rather strange, and it was making the words blurry.

As the two of them approached, the words grew less blurred. By the time they reached the end of the stairs, they could finally make out those words.

Unfortunately, they were still written in the cryptic runes of the oracle script, and Zu An could not make heads or tails out of them. He called out to his big sis empress, but Mi Li didn't respond at all.

"Turn back now, turn back now; forty-four steps, none shall leave!" Pei Mianman looked at that stele and slowly recited the words.

Zu An looked at her in shock. What the hell...?

"You can understand these characters as well?"

Pei Mianman shook her head. "I don't understand them, but for some reason, I subconsciously read them out when I looked at those words."

"Forty-four steps... I think we just happened to have walked up forty-four steps." Zu An's face paled. Whoever planted this stele had put it in a terrible spot! They hadn't been able to see it clearly beforehand, and it only managed to warn them when they were close to it.

Of course, by the time they were close enough to read it, it was already too late! What a stupid scam!

The music grew ever more sinister and eerie, sounding as if countless spirits were wailing.

The two of them felt the ground beneath them tremble. When they looked down, they didn't see any stairs. The path was made of countless skulls!

There was a row of torches along the sides of the stairs, which Pei Mianman had lit with her black flames earlier on. The ordinary flames within them suddenly flickered, and took on a frightening green color.

Zu An swallowed. "What the hell is this... I don't like where this is going at all!"

As soon as the words left his mouth, many transparent ghosts suddenly appeared from within the mist, each with a sinister appearance, and every single one of them wailing and howling.

"Ghosts?" This sight was a rude shock for someone like him, who had been educated using science.

Pei Mianman jumped in to explain it to him. "In some special circumstances, if the souls of the deceased are not extinguished, they will turn into these evil, spirit-like existences. Some texts refer to them collectively as the underworld race, but they are quite rare..."

As she was explaining this, the spirits, which seemed to be flickering in and out of existence, suddenly grew alert, as though they had smelled blood. A group of them flew towards the two humans, but the majority headed towards the giant taotie. Its massive size clearly made it more attractive.

That taotie immediately broke out into a run. Unfortunately, it had unknowingly ended up on the stairs while chasing Zu An and Pei Mianman, even if it wasn't as far up as the two of them.

Those evil spirits swarmed over it, drowning its massive body in a sea of ghostly ones.

The taotie wailed continuously, waving its razor-sharp claws about itself, and using its bloody mouth to tear at the spirits. Its sharp tail thrashed about.

Unfortunately, the evil spirits had no material form, and so its physical attacks passed straight through them without doing anything.

“Screech!”

The giant taotie shrieked furiously, but as time went on, its utterances sounded more and more like cries of anguish.

In a matter of moments, its massive body collapsed. The flesh covering some parts of it had already disappeared, exposing the white bone beneath

At this rate, its entire body would soon be devoured by those evil spirits.

Zu An and Pei Mianman had no time to be distracted. Some of the evil spirits were swooping towards them as well.

Chapter 519: An Offering

Zu An thrashed about with his Tai'e Sword. Unfortunately, these malicious spirits weren't material creatures, and the sword passed right through their bodies.

The evil spirits let out sinister laughs as they bore down on him, showing no fear at all.

Fortunately, Zu An had his Sunflower Phantasm, so he was able to just barely evade their attacks, and wasn't subjected to the giant taotie's horrifying experience.

Even so, the malicious spirits still managed to claw at his arm and legs, immediately sending a fiery pain shooting through the areas they made contact with.

He couldn't see anything on his legs, but when he pulled back his sleeves, there were dark handprints on his arms.

“What the hell is this!” Zu An was less than thrilled. He couldn't hit them, yet their spiritual bodies could hurt him. How the hell was he supposed to fight something like this?

The malicious spirits realized they had missed their target. Screaming, they whirled around and charged at him again.

Zu An's heart sank. He was trying to figure out just how he was supposed to face them when a torrent of black flame swept over.

The malicious spirits let out terrified wails and backed up several meters. They were clearly afraid of these flames.

Pei Mianman had already rushed to his side. She held Zu An's hands in her own. “Are you all right?”

“I'm all right. I didn't expect your black flames to be so effective in such a situation!” Zu An remarked, clearly astonished.

“These malicious spirits are sinister yin-type creatures, while my black flames produce a dominant yang force. It is a natural counter to them,” Pei Mianman replied.

The giant taotie’s miserable screams echoed from below. The two of them subconsciously glanced downwards. The malicious spirits were gradually stripping the flesh from its body, turning it into nothing but a pile of white bones.

Zu An gulped. The things in this strange palace were all ridiculously strong... That skeleton warrior earlier on had killed five ordinary taoties on its own, only to end up being done in by this giant taotie. He thought that this giant taotie would be the final boss, but it had met such a tragic end!

As the flesh of that giant Taotie was picked clean, many malicious spirits began to fly back up, approaching the two humans.

Pei Mianman made her black flames burn even more powerfully. Only then did the malicious spirits finally keep their distance.

“Should we get out of this place first?” Pei Mianman said. The giant taotie that had threatened them earlier was already dead, and would pose them no danger if they chose to head back down.

Zu An frowned. “We’ve already spent quite some time in this secret dungeon,” he said, “We need to find a way out before we die. Besides, now that we’ve made it all the way up here, I fear that leaving might not be that easy.”

Pei Mianman couldn’t shake her worry. “But I can’t maintain these black flames forever! Once they go out, we’ll have our flesh stripped off, just like that taotie.”

“We’ll head down temporarily and come up with a plan first,” Zu An said.

The two of them made their way slowly down the stairs.

Countless malicious spirits continued to linger around them. Just as they were about to reach the first step, the spirits moved to block their way, wailing and howling.

Whenever Pei Mianman used her black flames to chase away a portion of them, more would quickly take their place. There was no way to break through this barricade.

That wasn’t the end of their troubles. It seemed as though the malicious spirits could communicate with each other. They quickly changed their plan. A large group of them moved to surround the duo, then began to spin.

As they spun, they generated large gusts of sinister winds, blowing Pei Mianman’s black flames about.

Her face paled. “I won’t be able to hold out for much longer like this!”

These sinister winds made it more taxing than usual to maintain her black flames.

Zu An’s voice grew serious. “Let’s go back up to that elevated pavilion.”

“Won’t it be even more dangerous up there?” Pei Mianman asked, extremely worried.

Zu An shook his head. "Often, only a fine line separates life and death. Who knows, the way out of this dungeon might be hidden up there."

They hadn't passed any other possible paths on the way here, and they had yet to find any other way out. They had no choice but to press forward. The only path left open to them was up those stairs.

Pei Mianman was at her wits end as well. She followed him up the stairs to the pavilion.

The pavilion was circular in shape. Aside from a large bronze cauldron at the very center, it was utterly bare

Zu An rushed over to check if there were any hidden exits, but found nothing.

The screaming and wailing was getting louder and louder. The malicious spirits seemed to have realized that the two of them had no way out. Their strange and terrible laughter filled the air.

"Ah Zu, what do we do now? I won't be able to hold out for much longer!" Pei Mianman cried, her voice on the edge of full panic. The sinister winds had caused her to reduce the range of her flames as much as possible, just so she could hold on for a little longer.

Zu An frowned. He was just about to reply when Mi Li's voice came to him. "Why are there so many spirits?"

Zu An was overjoyed. "Big sis empress, you've finally come out!"

Mi Li snorted coldly. "You're always provoking trouble. Look at how many vengeful spirits there are. All your flesh would have been devoured if I'd come out even a second later."

"I knew that big sis empress still cared about me," Zu An said, giggling. "By the way, you're a soul as well. Can you talk to them and tell them that we're all on the same side?"

Mi Li was momentarily speechless.

You have successfully trolled Mi Li for 233 Rage points!

"What do you think I am?!"

"Um... I thought that you guys seemed kind of similar in terms of your state of existence, so you might have some things in common..."

"Hmph! These things only have their instincts left. They can't even be considered intelligent. How could they possibly compare to me?"

Hearing the bare anger in her voice, Zu An also recognized that he had messed up, and he quickly changed the topic. "Ahem, ahem... Big sis empress, do you have any suggestions for what we should do?"

"But of course I do," Mi Li said proudly. "I presume that this is Yinshang's sacrificial altar."

"Sacrificial altar?" Zu An looked around him. It wasn't quite what he expected, but that wasn't important right now. "What does a sacrificial altar have to do with our current situation?"

Mi Li replied, "In Yinshang, the offering of sacrifices was considered a big deal. From birth to death, battles, agriculture... a sacrifice would be held for all sorts of important occasions. Once the sacrifice was made, the people would ask the heavens for guidance. Whenever a sacrifice was held, the most important thing was the offering. Since this is the sacrificial altar, making an offering should be able to get you out of this disaster."

"An offering?" The people of the modern world were rather far removed from things like sacrificial ritual. Burning incense and ritual money was pretty much the limit of what they did. Who bothered with things like sacrificial offerings?

Mi Li said, "Usually, these were animal sacrifices, but in the case of Yinshang, the highest quality offerings would be human lives. The people of Yinshang believed that an offering of flesh and blood was appreciated by the heavens the most, and would elicit the best response."

Zu An recalled the contents of that documentary. No wonder there were so many white bones out there earlier. They were probably all used as sacrifices.

"Why can't I use that taotie as a sacrifice?" Zu An asked in confusion. "It died here, and its flesh was stripped clean as well."

"The people of Yinshang always cooked their offerings in the bronze cauldron. For them, the purpose of this bronze cauldron was to cook things. Since that taotie wasn't cooked inside this cauldron, it cannot be considered an offering."

"I should've seized its corpse if I'd known things would turn out like this!" Zu An's heart filled with regret. "Where would I find an offering now?"

"What's so difficult about that?" Mi Li's voice became ice-cold. "Isn't that big-boobed sis of yours a perfect offering? It's a human sacrifice of the highest quality. She's pretty, and her chest is large. I believe the heavens will be extremely pleased with this sacrifice."

"Given your relationship with her, there's no reason why she would be on guard. It would be easy enough for you to kill her..."

Zu An couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

Does she really hate her that much? She actually suggested using Big Manman as a sacrifice, and she even figured out the details! Are you just jealous that her chest is bigger than yours?

Mi Li gave an impatient huff. "You should think things through, or else you'll end up dying with her. If you want to die, go ahead, but don't drag me down with you. If you can't do the deed, then I'll help you."

"No way!" Zu An refused her right away. His mind raced, perhaps worried that Mi Li might actually try something. A thought struck him like a bolt of lightning. "I have an offering!"

Chapter 520: An Underground Tunnel

He took out the corpse of the crocodile from his Brilliant Glass Bead and tossed it into the large bronze cauldron.

Mi Li was surprised. "I didn't expect you to have something like that in your spatial artifact. Unfortunately, that crocodile isn't precious enough, and can't serve as a sacrifice on its own."

Zu An saw how she was eyeing Pei Mianman, and his scalp went numb with tension. He really was worried that she might just kill Big Manman. He fished out the other taotie that he had picked up earlier. "I have this too!"

"A taotie? Even though it looks quite nasty, the people of the Shang Dynasty often used it as sacrifices before battle. It should serve its purpose." Mi Li finally nodded.

Zu An sighed in relief. If this was still not enough, I'd have to bring out that giant dragon's corpse as well. There's no way that wouldn't be enough to appease them.

The only thing that worried him was how he was going to fit that massive dragon's corpse inside this puny cauldron.

Pei Mianman gave a frightened start. "What are you doing?"

He hadn't responded to her earlier question at all, and then suddenly threw a crocodile and a taotie corpse into the large cauldron. She had no idea what was up with him.

The taotie was slightly larger than the cauldron. He took out the Tai'e Sword and began to chop off its head, limbs, and tail before putting the corpse in.

The taotie's bodily fluids flowed out everywhere. However, for some reason, nothing happened even when the corrosive liquid landed on the ground or the bronze cauldron.

However, this butchering scene was truly bizarre to watch. If Zu An hadn't looked so clear-eyed, she would've thought that he was somehow bewitched.

"I'm trying to find a way out of this situation." Zu An explained. "Hey, can you light a fire underneath the cauldron? I need to cook everything inside."

"What?" Pei Mianman was stunned. "I can't even summon enough of my black flames to protect the two of us! Why should I cook this stuff?"

She really couldn't figure out the inner workings of this fellow's brain.

Zu An explained the situation quickly, giving her a rough idea of the connection between this place and the need for the sacrifice.

Pei Mianman was still skeptical, but she knew that Zu An usually thought things through before taking action, which was why she decided to trust him.

As such, she used her black flames to protect the two of them while using whatever she could spare to heat up the bronze cauldron.

She could've kept her black flames going for almost an hour more, but now, the most she could last was another fifteen minutes.

She looked at Zu An again, but clenched her teeth and chose to keep her silence.

Zu An pulled her next to the bronze cauldron. This way, they could use the flames under the bronze cauldron as cover, easing the pressure on her.

The bronze cauldron was quite large to begin with, and it would have been hard for ordinary flames to heat its contents, let alone cook them.

Fortunately, Pei Mianman's black flames were extraordinary, and were able to quickly bring up the temperature of the cauldron. Soon, the smell of cooking meat wafted out from within the cauldron, together with an assortment of other disgusting, nauseating smells.

Those were probably the taotie's mucus and corrosive liquids coming to a boil.

Zu An looked at the black mess simmering within the pot, and his expression immediately grew extremely bizarre. Will the gods in heaven get a stomach ache if they eat this stuff? What if whichever deity up there punishes us out of anger...?

However, they were already committed, and he could not back out now. The only thing left was to brace himself for the consequences.

Pei Mianman frowned as well. She couldn't help but say, "This smell, it's like... like..."

Zu An laughed when he saw how embarrassed she was. "Like a pot of sh*t, right?"

"Please, stop..." Pei Mianman felt her stomach churning. She retched. "Are you sure that this can serve as an offering?"

"It should be good enough." Zu An wasn't sure either. "This is made out of flesh, after all. Even though it smells bad, it's like sh*t-flavored chocolate, which is still chocolate in the end. It's way better than chocolate-flavored sh*t. If you're a deity, which one would you choose?"

Even though she had never heard of chocolate before, Pei Mianman could guess at what he meant. She pinched her nose in embarrassment. "Neither."

This momentary distraction produced a gap in her defenses, and countless malicious spirits swarmed in.

Pei Mianman's expression changed. Zu An wrapped her in his arms to protect her. He had already fished out his mysterious flashlight. This little gadget was good at stopping undead creatures.

He knew that he could only get one final use out of it, and he didn't want to waste it unless he absolutely had to.

Unfortunately, there was already nothing else he could do. He was just about to activate the flashlight when the malicious spirits acted as though they had been suddenly drawn to something delicious, and they all flew towards the bronze cauldron.

The indescribable mess inside seemed like a delicacy for all the evil spirits, and they all threw themselves at it with aplomb. The strange flesh inside was devoured at a visible rate.

The crocodile and taotie corpses had filled up the entire cauldron, but the contents of the cauldron were gobbled up in a matter of moments by the malicious spirits.

None of the spirits came back out after entering the cauldron. The sinister mist gradually dissipated, and the green flames burning within the braziers also returned to a more normal hue. The malicious spirits had all vanished.

“It really... worked.” Pei Mianman’s face was pale. She had resigned herself to death, yet they had actually managed to survive.

Mi Li snorted. “Just a big-boobed bimbo after all. She only knows how to seduce men.”

Zu An scrunched up his face, puzzled.

Just what is going on with big sis empress today? Isn’t she getting way too jealous?

Of course, he didn’t dare voice these thoughts out loud, since he wanted to keep on living.

A strange rumble began to fill the air, and a part of the floor behind the large bronze cauldron split into several sections. These sections rotated, revealing a circular hole.

Within it was another long flight of stairs which wound downwards. The flames under the large bronze cauldron only lit the first several meters down, and the rest of the hole was pitch-black. There was no way of telling what was down there.

“Big sis empress, what is going on?” Since Mi Li was already awake, Zu An did not want to waste this opportunity, in case she went back to sleep again.

Mi Li’s tone was grave. “I read an old record before that spoke about a strange architectural quirk of Yinshang. While the palace was above ground, the Imperial Tomb was situated beneath it. Since this is the sacrificial altar, it’s naturally a place linked to the supernatural. The people of the Shang Dynasty didn’t only offer sacrifices to deities. They worshipped ghosts as well. The deities were in the heavens, while the ghosts were their ancestors. If my suspicions are correct, this path should lead to the Shang Dynasty’s Imperial Tomb.”

Zu An swallowed. “We’ve already run into so much danger in the palace! First there was the powerful skeleton soldier, and then these malicious flesh-eating spirits... Who knows what else is awaiting us below!”

Mi Li snorted coldly. “You’re out of options. Have you forgotten about what happened in the dungeon where you met me? Every dungeon has its own special dungeon core, and unless you shatter this dungeon core, you’ll be stuck inside forever. From what you’ve seen so far, this dungeon core isn’t above ground, so it has to be below.

“I know that you still have two dragon corpses to use as food, and you carry some daily necessities on you as well. These will probably last you a year or two, but what about a few decades, or even a century? This place is full of dangers anyway! Your safety isn’t guaranteed even if you stay in this surface palace region.

“Also, if my predictions are correct, this dungeon should contain a miraculous technique that is at least on par with the Primordial Origin Sutra. You were granted a tremendous opportunity to be able to enter this dungeon. How can you hesitate now?”

Seeing that she had taken on her stern teacher role, Zu An muttered, "I was just saying those things. I didn't say I wouldn't go..."

"Good." Mi Li's expression eased a little. She looked over at Pei Mianman. "It's actually fortunate that you entered this dungeon with this woman. According to what I know, Yinshang's women were granted much higher status than those of other feudal dynasties. The queens of Yinshang were often high priests, great generals, or held other positions similar to senior ministers, helping the monarch deal with many government affairs. Having a woman at your side might actually turn out to be a huge blessing."