

## Immortal 551

### Chapter 551, Part I: A Match Made in Heaven

"No, absolutely not!" Zu An was incensed by the suggestion. What the hell is this? How can Manman be used as a pawn in a political marriage?

A court minister was quick to step in. "We all know that the prince and the princess share close ties as siblings, but this is for the sake of our country. My Prince, please do not let your emotions affect your decisions!"

"If you want a marriage, then send your own daughter or sister," Zu An shot back.

More and more court ministers began to criticize him for being small-minded and refusing to look at the bigger picture. No matter how glib his tongue was, Zu An couldn't win against all these old foxes.

He was pushed back further and further. Eventually, the whole court began to question his virtue and morality.

Just as Zu An was forced into a corner, a clear voice suddenly sounded by the main doors. "Let me be the one to go, then."

The whole court turned to look. It was Princess San Cai, a resolute expression on her face.

Zu An was shocked. "San Cai, what are you doing here? Nothing's going on here..."

The other ministers whispered among themselves and shook their heads. Clearly, they felt that this was inappropriate.

San Cai cut right to the point. "What is inappropriate? Am I not a princess as well?"

The ministers began to argue between themselves. In the end, Wen Ding, the Shang monarch, tapped his hammer on the table. "San Cai will be offered in marriage."

With that, he sent an emissary to the west to discuss this with the Zhou court. The matter was thus settled.

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When they had withdrawn from the court, Zu An and Pei Mianman anxiously approached San Cai. "Why did you volunteer for this marriage? Who knows if you'll be happy if you go there! You might lose your chance at a lifetime of happiness."

San Cai smiled. "Is big sis going to take my place if I don't go?"

Zu An choked for a moment, then continued, "It's not her place to go. Even if our two states are to be joined in marriage, can't we just use any daughter from one of the noble houses? Why do either of you need to go?"

San Cai shook her head. "It's not so simple. Our country is facing an unprecedented crisis. Father killed the ruler of the western Zhou state, who was the leader of the western states. How could any noble girl

assuage the wrath of the people of Zhou? Only a princess can ease the tensions and allow our Shang State to focus on dealing with the Yi invasion. We cannot afford to be crushed from both sides right now.

“The only princesses of suitable age in the royal family are my big sister and myself. Big sis, since you aren’t willing to go, I am the only one left. As a princess, I’ve enjoyed a comfortable life. Now that my country needs me, I will have to answer the call.”

Zu An was at a loss for words. He didn’t expect her to already be so mature at her age. Too many daughters of the nobility enjoyed their wealth from birth, yet weren’t willing to take up the corresponding duty when the time came.

Now, it seemed as though he and Pei Mianman were the ones who were being selfish. However, the two of them had come here to pass a trial, and nothing more. There was no way for them to have any deeper feelings towards this country.

Pei Mianman spoke up quietly. “How can I let my younger sister sacrifice herself? As the big sister, of course I need to go.”

Zu An panicked. “Manman!”

Pei Mianman gave him a reassuring look. Given her skill and experience, she was confident that she could retain her purity while in the Zhou state, at least for a time. As for what happened afterwards, they would cross that bridge when they got there.

San Cai smiled and said, “Big sis, if you really do get married, what would big brother do?”

Zu An and Pei Mianman both froze. “San Cai, what are you saying?”

San Cai sighed. “The two of you were always playing around with each other whenever you thought you already put me to sleep. Do you think that children really are that naïve?”

Zu An was left speechless.

Pei Mianman couldn’t believe what she was hearing as well. She gave Zu An an embarrassed look. It was all this guy’s fault!

San Cai continued, “Others might not know about your relationship, but I’m your little sister. How could I not know? Even though I don’t know what awaits the two of you in the future, I can’t just watch as the two become separated.”

They hadn’t expected her to be doing this for their sake. Both Zu An and Pei Mianman’s eyes reddened. Now, they were even more unwilling to watch her sacrifice herself.

As they began to dissuade her, San Cai put away her smile. “Big brother, big sister, please don’t think that I am only doing it for the two of you. I was always puzzled whenever I listened in on your conversations, but I could at least tell that the people of Zhou might very well bring about the destruction of the Shang State.

“As a princess of the Shang State, I felt like I had to do something as well. Unfortunately, I was never good at anything, and I cannot compare to either of you. If a great strategist like big sister is married off

to the Zhou state, that would be the greatest loss to our Shang State. Rather than being married off, she should stay here and help our great Shang State while I serve as an insider within the Zhou court. This way, we can work together and ensure the continued prosperity of our great Shang State.”

Zu An and Pei Mianman now knew that she wasn’t making this choice on a whim. On the contrary, she had already thought things through carefully.

“But this is unfair for you! You are sacrificing a lifetime of happiness!” Zu An and Pei Mianman both said. The three of them had grown up together, and they were all very close. The two of them really did see her as their own dear sister. There was no way they were willing to see her suffer any wrong!

San Cai giggled. “Who knows, maybe it won’t be so bad. For better or for worse, I am getting married to the leader of the Zhou people. In theory, I would become the queen of a country. Furthermore, I heard that Ji Chang isn’t a terrible person, and he’s actually quite handsome as well. What if we really do fall in love? I might even be able to convince him to offer his allegiance unconditionally.”

“Ji Chang?” Zu An’s mood immediately sank. Even though the Shang Dynasty was eventually brought down by King Wu Ji Fa, the bulk of the groundwork had been laid by King Wen Ji Chang. Ji Fa had merely finished the job he had started. How could someone like this be subdued by a woman?

San Cai shook her head when she heard his concerns. “Even if I cannot convince him to swear allegiance, I will help our country by giving birth to many children. Given my status, he cannot make me a mere concubine. My children will thus become the successors of the Zhou throne. They will be relatives of the Shang king, and will ease the tensions between the two great states.”

“But...” Zu An and Pei Mianman exchanged a look. This plan really did seem like it had a chance of working.

Putting aside the fact that they would be related by blood, these children would also be raised by San Cai, which would give them a strong connection to their Shang heritage. If this passed down for several generations, the people of Zhou might truly come to serve the Shang Dynasty. Such occurrences were prevalent throughout history.

In the end, this trial wasn’t a true recounting of history. By dealing with this critical situation and changing its course, they might just be able to succeed in this trial.

San Cai smiled and said, “Enough, I don’t want to talk about this with you two anymore. I still have a ton of things to take care of.” With that, she left with a spring in her step.

Pei Mianman sighed deeply as she watched her departing figure. “We didn’t try hard enough to keep her out of our discussions. We let her listen in, which was why she subconsciously began to see the Zhou state as the enemy, and eventually volunteered for this marriage.”

“I hope everything goes smoothly.” In the end, Zu An did not stop her. In his opinion, even if they failed this trial and both he and Pei Mianman died, it wouldn’t stop San Cai from becoming the founding mother of the Zhou Dynasty. That wouldn’t necessarily be a bad thing.

Soon, an emissary returned with news that the people of Zhou had agreed to the marriage. Ji Chang would meet them at the Wei River to escort his new bride home.

The Shang court was not opposed to such an arrangement. After all, they had just invited the previous leader of the Zhou state to Yin Capital, only to have him executed. If they insisted on having Ji Chang come to the capital as well, no one would show up.

As such, the Shang court arranged for some men to escort Princess San Cai to Wei River. Zu An volunteered to make this trip, while Pei Mianman disguised herself and followed as an attendant.

Their party arrived at the bank of the Wei River. There was no bridge across this river during this age, but Ji Chang was already prepared for this.

Zu An saw a bridge of boats stretched across the surface of the river. He sighed in admiration. This was probably the first bridge of boats in history!

They finally laid their eyes on Ji Chang. The man seemed refined, gentle, and elegant. He was both handsome and a good speaker.

Zu An felt a sudden impulse rising within him. If he killed this man, who almost single-handedly buried the Shang Dynasty, would that change history?

However, he quickly dispelled this thought. Leaving aside the multiple layers of Zhou guards that made this an extremely challenging task, even if he managed to succeed, it would only further cement the hostility between the two states.

They still had the eastern Yi invasion to deal with. If the western Zhou state were to march on them in a quest for revenge, it would only hasten the fall of the Shang Dynasty.

Several unpleasant things happened during this event, as many of the people within the Zhou state were against this marriage. Those who were sent out to collect fruits came back with empty baskets, cursing the Shang princess and implying that she would be doomed to be infertile.

Aside from this, some of the cooks who prepared the meals deliberately choose not to let out the blood from the animal carcasses, making the lamb meat taste foul and hard to swallow.

Zu An was infuriated by the insults. Ji Chang quickly apologized and ordered someone to sing a song for San Cai. "The ospreys call on the islet in the river. The modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady makes for our prince a good mate..." He named this marriage song 'Match Made in Heaven'.

San Cai was beaming with joy when she heard this song, and her expression softened as she looked at her new husband. Even the other members of the Shang party gradually relented, and their anger slowly turned to happiness.

Zu An wore a rather strange expression. He didn't expect the most popular piece of the Shijing—the Book of Songs—to be a gift for his own little sister! He had to admit that Ji Chang looked all right. Paired with his use of songs and poetry to woo girls, he could tell that this man was definitely an experienced playboy.

Of course, there was no way Zu An would let himself be tricked by a song like that. However, he also understood that an angry word now would only make things difficult for San Cai in the future. With that in mind, he could only suppress his rage, and try his best to mellow his hostility with friendship.

San Cai secretly sought out Zu An when she had a chance to, during an intermission within the ceremony. “My dear big brother, are you still sulking?” she asked him with a smile.

Zu An sighed deeply. “I can’t help but feel like this flower that I so carefully raised is about to be trampled by another man. How can I feel happy about that?”

San Cai blushed. “If you weren’t my brother, I would never have agreed to a marriage with some random Zhou leader.” She sighed. “Unfortunately, I’m not as brave as my big sister.”

## **551, Part II: A Match Made in Heaven**

Zu An had no idea how to reply to that.

Pei Mianman, who was hiding nearby, was speechless as well, but for a different reason.

“All right, I have to go now,” San Cai said with a smile. “Big brother, do you have anything you want to say to me?”

Zu An’s tone grew serious. “San Cai, from what I’ve seen, putting aside the hostile way in which each side sees the other for now, this Ji Chang seems like an outstanding person. You don’t always have to think about doing what’s best for the Shang State. It would be more than enough if you spent your days peacefully with him. Please do not let your considerations for our matters prevent you from obtaining happiness.”

San Cai curled her lips in a sneer. “Is that all you wanted to say to me?”

With that, she turned and left, dissatisfaction written on her face.

In the end, though, she still turned around and said quietly, “In truth, I don’t really feel much towards that Ji Chang, or whatever his name is.”

After she said this, she fled.

Zu An was baffled by this whole series of events. He looked at the approaching Pei Mianman and asked, “What did she mean?”

Pei Mianman was quiet for a moment, then sighed. “This thing called love truly is painful sometimes.”

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The next day, the groom brought San Cai away. Zu An and Pei Mianman had no choice but to return to Yin Capital, no matter how unwilling they were.

Then, they had to help their ‘father’ deal with the Yi invasion.

Zu An and Pei Mianman were already experienced in all sorts of battles and political affairs, thanks to the previous trial. Dealing with their current tasks was not at all difficult.

However, the two of them soon realized that the Shang Dynasty was plagued with many problems. Their nation wasn’t as powerful as it once was, and the bureaucratic system was a mess. Zu An ran into many obstacles while dealing with the logistics of the war.

Pei Mianman also noticed that the military prowess had declined significantly since the days of the ever-victorious army under Wu Ding's reign.

The two could only do the best they could. They felt as though the country was like a small boat being tossed about in a great storm, one that might capsize at any moment.

During this period, San Cai contacted them from time to time, regaling them with snippets of her daily life, her life after marriage, the local customs of Zhou, as well as how much she missed her home.

She mentioned as well that Ji Chang treated her well, which set their hearts a little more at ease.

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As time went on, her letters came more and more infrequently. Even though the two of them found it strange, they didn't think too much about it. They were busy dealing with the Yi invasion, and did not have much spare attention to ponder over other matters.

After years of war, Zu An gradually set himself above the rest of the court, becoming the undisputed successor of the Shang monarchy.

When Wen Ding passed away, Zu An succeeded him as the new Shang king. Together with Pei Mianman's help, they finally managed to quell the chaos created by the Yi invasion.

At this time, they received dire news from the Zhou state. San Cai had died from a difficult birth.

The sudden news struck the two of them like a bolt of lightning out of a clear sky. They dared not believe the news.

After all, Pei Mianman had passed away in exactly the same way in the previous trial. Zu An had been so worried that he had carefully researched this matter, and passed on his knowledge to San Cai. How could she have died the same way?

He quickly sent men to investigate, and soon enough, they dug up more information.

Ji Chang had taken in a noble daughter from the Shen State as a concubine. Once San Cai passed on, he immediately elevated her to his side as his main wife.

Not only that, there were new songs spreading through Zhou's territory, praising the union as a marriage predetermined by fate. Even the song 'Match Made in Heaven' began to circulate again.

His younger sister was supposed to be the main character of this song, yet her role had been stolen by another! As the centuries rolled by, who would remember San Cai? Those who came after would only know this other concubine as the main female character in 'Match Made in Heaven'.

Zu An was furious. He refused to listen to the opposition of his subjects, and decided to declare war against the Zhou state, firstly because he wanted to settle this seemingly endless trial, and secondly to avenge his dear little sister.

Pei Mianman did nothing to stop him. She was angry as well, because this was the younger sister she had grown up with and loved.

The two were just about to set out to war when the entire world distorted.

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When their vision cleared up again, they discovered that they weren't in their familiar palace, but in a strange and foreign place.

It was clearly still a palace, but it was far inferior to the grand imperial palace in Yin Capital.

Pei Mianman was leaning against his shoulder. The two of them were seated on a wide and magnificent throne, watching as a group of palace maids in revealing costumes danced below them.

Even though Zu An was already a veteran of such scenes, his face still flushed red. The outfits these maids wore were just too revealing! Their dance was extremely seductive as well, dark and enchanting.

This was on the verge of being obscene!

Zu An quickly snapped out of his daze, he and Pei Mianman exchanged looks.

Since they were already used to passing through different worlds, the two of them managed to calm themselves rather quickly. They ordered the dancers to withdraw, and then called over a female attendant.

They were much more clever with their questioning this time around, compared to the first trial, when Zu An was Wu Ding. At the very least, no one suspected them of losing their memories.

They managed to determine their current situation and knew their respective identities without much hassle.

Zu An had a rather strange look on his face, and he stared at Pei Mianman in somewhat of a daze. After decades of progress, it seemed that the spinning and weaving technologies had advanced substantially.

She was dressed in a lavish dress that also functioned as a nightgown. He wondered who it was that managed to combine these two entirely different styles together perfectly.

She was leaning naturally against the throne, the thin material of her dress perfectly outlining her striking curves.

Topped off with her moist red lips, her figure seemed to possess an even more seductive charm than usual. Anyone who saw her would surely daydream about her constantly.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Pei Mianman said, her face reddening. Even though they had already spent so much time together, she seemed to still be the young woman from the past.

Zu An sighed and said, "I didn't expect the two of us to take on the identities of these two people. This is probably the last phase of the trial. Whether or not we pass or fail will hinge on this."

"Why are you so certain that this is the last phase of the trial?" Pei Mianman was rather perplexed. "Is there something wrong with our identities?"

"Something is very wrong." Zu An sighed. "In my dream world, they were the most famous individuals of the Shang Dynasty."

“Really?” Pei Mianman sighed in relief when she heard that they were still a part of the Shang Dynasty. They had already served as the Shang king and queen for so long, so they were already familiar with the military and system of governance. This bolstered her confidence in their ability to tackle whatever would come their way.

“Of course. It is because you are Daji, and I am Di Xin.” Zu An was full of conflicting emotions. Of all the identities they could have assumed, these two were the last ones that he’d expected.

Could it be that nothing he’d done in the past could change the turning of the wheel of time and help him avert the tragic fate that this country faced? It looked like they were doomed to fail this trial.

He was so overwhelmed that he didn’t even bother mocking himself for becoming his own son.

The father of Di Xin was Xian, the man he had been in the previous trial.

“What’s really going on?” Pei Mianman asked hurriedly.

Zu An sighed and told her the story of Di Xin and Daji.

As she listened, Pei Mianman’s expression grew strange as well. She did not expect them to be faced with this sort of situation.

She quickly sensed Zu An’s sullen mood, though and said, “Ah Zu, even though we don’t know if the world in your dream is real or not, we’ve already experienced so much together. We cannot just accept this fate! Since we already know what to avoid, then even if the conclusion you spoke of seems inevitable, I’m sure there’s a chance that we can still avoid it. It will all depend on whether or not we can grasp this opportunity!”

Zu An felt a shudder run through his body. “You’re right. We won’t give up until the very last second!”

Her words had stirred a renewed sense of motivation in his heart. His spirit lifted, and his heart grew more at ease.

Zu An couldn’t help but laugh when he looked at the devastatingly beautiful woman in his arms. “You vixen.”

“You perverted and incapable king,” Pei Mianman scoffed. After hearing his story, she knew that Daji was history’s most famous fox spirit. Of course, Di Xin was also synonymous with the words perverted and incompetent.

“A pervert? Me? Then I’ll show you just how perverted I am!” Zu An was terrified yet weirdly stimulated when he thought about her current identity. He immediately pounced on her.

Pei Mianman gazed at him with her charming peach-blossom eyes, and she wrapped her arms gently around the man on top of her. “You really are a good-for-nothing king after all. In the previous world, even when I was little, you...”

The two of them had been trapped in this strange trial for way too long, causing several negative emotions to accumulate within them. If they didn’t take whatever opportunity they could to vent them, they would’ve already gone mad.



After their exchange of passion, the two began to seriously consider what they were going to do. Suddenly, a maid entered with a report. "The eldest son of the leader of Western Zhou, Bo Yikao, has come to pay his respects to my king!"

## **Chapter 552: New Rivals, Old Hatreds**

"Bo Yikao?" Zu An stiffened for a moment as he recalled the corresponding part of history.

Wasn't Ji Chang imprisoned by King Di Xin, after which his son, Bo Yikao, was sent by the Western Zhou state carrying many precious gifts in order to ransom him? The history books said that Daji took a fancy to him and tried to seduce him, but he was completely unmoved. Instead, he lashed out at her. Daji was furious and accused him of harassing her, demanding that Bo Yikao be chopped up into mincemeat and fed to Ji Chang...

Daji was an incredibly charming and famous beauty in the annals of history. Would she really be tempted by some random youngster? He was sure that the later generations had defamed her.

Now that they were in this world, however, Zu An knew that he did not have to worry about Pei Mianman being interested in this pretty boy. Instead, he was delighted by this visit, and quickly asked one of his men, "Is that fella Ji Chang locked up here?"

"Yes." That subordinate replied. "The crown prince of Western Zhou has come to the capital precisely to ransom his father."

"Ransom?" Zu An sneered. How could he possibly let them go? There were still a ton of things that he wanted to get revenge for.

"Send him in!" Zu An remembered what had happened to San Cai, and there were too many questions and too much rage within him.

Soon enough, a young man was escorted in. Zu An had to admit that this kid was quite handsome—perhaps just a little less handsome than himself.

"Bo Yikao pays his respects to the king and queen." The young man maintained a perfectly respectful attitude.

"Why are you here?" Zu An said with a sneer.

Bo Yikao was alarmed. He could sense Zu An's displeasure, but he still said, "This subject has come bearing gifts, in the hopes that you will release my father. I hope the king can be magnanimous towards us."

In ancient times, captives could be ransomed even while two states were at war, and it was perfectly understandable since Western Zhou was still a vassal state of the Shang State at the moment, and hostilities had not yet begun.

"You wish to ransom him?" Zu An didn't give him an answer. Instead, he locked eyes with him and asked, "Who is your mother?"

“My mother?” Bo Yikao froze, and his expression grew strange. He had heard that the man on the throne was both licentious and tyrannical. Don’t tell me he is interested in my mother?

Absolutely preposterous!

You have successfully trolled Bo Yikao for 999 Rage points!

Of course, this wasn’t a place where he could lash out in anger. He could only lower his head and suppress his rage. He replied with a low voice, “My mother’s name is Tai Si, a lady of the Shen State.”

“Then what about San Cai?” Zu An asked, continuing with his line of questioning. He really wanted to know if there was any connection between this current trial world and the previous one.

Pei Mianman’s hands tightened around his own. She was also concerned about what happened to San Cai. She was afraid that these worlds were unrelated, and that they would never hear anything about San Cai again.

“San Cai?” A look of confusion filled Bo Yikao’s eyes.

Zu An started to grow impatient. “I’m talking about my little... ahem, my aunt. She was married to your father.”

Even though they were siblings in the previous world, he was now Di Xin, her nephew.

Bo Yikao nodded in realization. “You’re talking about my aunt! She passed away during a difficult birth. I wasn’t born yet, so I do not know the details regarding this.”

Zu An sighed. So, San Cai existed in this world after all! In that case, he was definitely going to find out the truth.

Pei Mianman spoke up as well. “Why do you sound like you’re in such a rush to express your innocence? Perhaps... you’re lying?” Her tone was frosty.

Bo Yikao turned to look at her, a sudden hint of shock appearing in his eyes, but it was soon replaced by fear. “This subject is merely stating a fact that is common knowledge! I would not think of lying.”

Zu An’s voice had become a low growl. “What is common knowledge might not be the actual truth. Send someone in and have him locked up too. Torture him to find out the truth about what happened!”

Bo Yikao turned pale with fright. The rest of the court quickly stepped in to advise against this. “My king, you must not do this! Bo Yikao is the crown prince of Western Zhou. Our relationship with Western Zhou has already grown tense, now that Ji Chang has been imprisoned. If we imprison his son as well, we would be openly declaring our hostile intent!”

“If it is to be war, then so be it. Do you think I’m afraid?” Zu An was annoyed. The issues surrounding Western Zhou had plagued him for a long time. It was something he had to deal with eventually.

This time around, even San Cai was involved. He had to get to the bottom of this no matter what.

The whole court continued urging him to reconsider, and even Pei Mianman grew annoyed with them. “I’ve heard that Bo Yikao has come bearing many gifts, and I see that all of you are so eager to defend him. Could it be that you have all taken gifts from him?”

When confronted with this accusation, the dissenting voices quickly died down, and Bo Yikao was swiftly thrown into prison.

Zu An had someone question him about San Cai, but he knew that it wouldn't bear fruit immediately. As such, he decided to visit Ji Chang in his cell first.

When he laid eyes on him, he discovered that the man didn't look too different from what he remembered. He was bearded now, and seemed slightly more mature, but age had yet to leave many traces on his face.

Zu An was shocked that he actually looked the same. Could it be that there was actually some connection between this world and the previous one?

Ji Chang was equally shocked when he saw him. After a long moment of silence, he finally said with a sigh, "Too similar. This king and the previous one look too similar."

The two of them had met once before in the previous world, on the banks of the Wei River. Surprisingly, he still remembered that moment.

Zu An's eyes narrowed. "Ji Chang, do you know why I locked you up in here?"

Ji Chang calmly said, "The king naturally has his reason for locking me up. This subject does not dare to guess your thoughts haphazardly."

Zu An frowned. This fella was incredibly cunning after all, both enigmatic and unpredictable.

However, he wasn't in the mood to play these games. He got straight to the point. "My... aunt, San Cai. What did you do to her? How did she die?"

Ji Chang was stunned by this question. He replied, "She passed away in labor, during a difficult birth. I suffered endless grief over her death as well." He sighed. "If she hadn't met with such an early death, my relationship with the king might not be so tense."

Zu An watched his expression carefully. He saw no hint of panic, which made him begin to wonder if San Cai had really died of natural causes.

Pei Mianman sneered. "There is no way San Cai would die from difficulties during childbirth. Back then, even I..." she coughed, then continued, "Back then, we ensured that many specialists passed on their knowledge regarding childbirth to her, precisely because we were worried that such a thing would happen."

Ji Chang replied, "The moon is round and slender at different times, and humans experience disaster and happiness between dawn and dusk. There are too many things outside of our control when it comes to those you love; everything is subject to the whims of the heavens. I was also heartbroken at San Cai's death, but there is nothing I can do against heaven's will."

Zu An sneered. "Then according to your words, it was heaven that demanded her death?"

Ji Chang replied calmly, "Respectfully, that is not what I said. I merely meant that it is hard to predict heaven's will. I do not dare to hazard a guess when it comes to such matters."

Zu An knew that this was an experienced old fox, and that it would be useless no matter how he questioned him. He shouted for someone to come over. "Torture him. Find out exactly what happened back then!"

Ji Chang remained unfazed. "Torturers have always been inferior to doctors. I fear that my king's decision is unwise, and it will only serve to completely sever the relationship between our two states."

"Relationship? Your Zhou people have rapacious designs. Do you really think that I do not know of them?!" Zu An waved his hand, indicating for his subordinates to begin.

The Shang Dynasty employed many forms of torture. Once the king gave the order, it wasn't difficult to find a good torturer.

Ji Chang sighed. "The king's erroneous ways may incur the criticisms of the common people."

Zu An had no wish to argue with him further, and turned to leave. At the door to his cell, he paused for a moment and said, "I know that your bones are tough, and I probably won't get any information out of you. However, I wonder if Bo Yikao is as tough as you."

Ji Chang's impassive expression finally slipped when he heard this.

Zu An and Pei Mianman then paid a visit to Bo Yikao's cell. They could hear Bo Yikao's miserable screams and anguished curses, even from far away. The torture that was being carried out inside made their eyelids twitch uncontrollably. It was just too cruel.

Even watching it for a short moment was too much for the two of them. They went outside to wait.

A while later, a report came from inside the prison. "He is willing to confess."

Zu An and Pei Mianman were thrilled, and went back in quickly. Bo Yikao was no longer his handsome old self. His entire body was badly mangled, and seemed moments away from his last breath.

Zu An had to admit that this fellow was quite tough. He had somehow managed to last this long.

Bo Yikao's lips moved when he saw them come in. He had been cursing brutally the last time, yet now, he didn't even have the strength to curse anymore. "I just want a quick death..." he muttered weakly.

Often, living was more painful than being dead. Bo Yikao understood his current situation well. Death was a form of release for him.

Zu An knew that now wasn't the time to show compassion. He grabbed a stool and sat down. "Talk. How did San Cai die?"

### **Chapter 553: The Marrying Maiden**

Zu An's eyelids twitched continuously as Bo Yikao spilled his tale, and the rage that burned within him grew hotter and fiercer.

He finally knew how San Cai died. Complications during childbirth? It was all a lie!

Back then, after Ji Chang brought San Cai back to Western Zhou, he had a palace prepared just for her.

San Cai was ecstatic at first, and felt that Ji Chang truly cared about her.

However, she gradually began to sense that things were not as they seemed. There was nothing wrong with the way Ji Chang interacted with her publicly, and he also invited her to participate in various important occasions, like a loving husband normally would.

Despite all this, he had never visited her palace in private even once. The two were only husband and wife in name, not in reality. Ji Chang seemed to treat her as a mere tool, to be used to accomplish his goals.

San Cai didn't really mind this, because she didn't really like Ji Chang. Instead, being able to live alone in her own palace gave her a sense of freedom.

She could even write letters to her big brother and sister now and then. Of course, she never mentioned the truth about her own life, so as not to cause them undue worry.

After her initial happiness, San Cai gradually remembered her purpose. Her first reason for entering into this marriage was to gather information on Western Zhou, and the second reason was to develop a closer relationship with her now-husband.

As such, she took the initiative to approach Ji Chang, but Ji Chang never let slip any information, and she couldn't find a way to bring the two of them closer together.

One day, something unexpected finally happened. San Cai overheard a conversation between Ji Chang and a strategist.

It turned out that Western Zhou had already set into motion a plot to take down the Shang Dynasty. The wheels had begun to turn during the time of Ji Chang's grandfather. Back then, Western Zhou already had thoughts of overthrowing the Shang Dynasty. However, the Shang Dynasty was simply too strong, so they could only bide their time.

After the Qiang Faction was defeated and the territory was left without a ruler, they helped the Shang state wipe out the remaining Qiang forces. Under the guise of guarding the border, they spent several decades slowly acquiring the land that used to belong to the Qiang Faction.

Then, they began to rope in various nobles of other states and improve their relationships with them.

Unfortunately, something unexpected happened. Ji Li, Ji Chang's father, was killed by the Shang monarch, which was a serious blow to Western Zhou's plans to overthrow the Shang Dynasty.

They also realized that the Shang Dynasty had grown wary of their sudden rise to power. Since the two states were not equally strong, they decided that it was not the right time to show their true colors.

They planned to use the eastern Yi invasion as a way to whittle down some of the Shang Dynasty's strength, while they themselves used the opportunity to grow stronger.

Thus, when the Shang Dynasty suggested a political marriage, they immediately agreed.

Of course, agreeing to such a marriage was one thing. There was no way that Western Zhou would allow the blood of a Shang State's princess to flow into their successors, which would hinder their grand scheme, which by now dated back over a hundred years.

That was why Ji Chang kept his distance from San Cai. They could only be husband and wife in name.

What horrified San Cai even more was that, on the day that she was betrothed, Ji Chang hadn't come to Wei River merely to fetch her home. Rather, he was using that opportunity to scout out the topography of the area to plan for a future attack.

Making a bridge over the Wei River using boats sounded romantic, but it was actually practice for a future attack via the river.

San Cai's entire body went ice-cold as soon as she realized this. She knew that her country was truly in danger.

She had always listened to her big brother and big sister talk about the threat that the people of Western Zhou posed. Back then, she didn't believe them, and merely thought that they were being paranoid.

Who would have known that the situation would be even more dangerous than they had expected?!

She quickly tried to contact her siblings to let them know about all of this, but Ji Chang and his cohort found out about her.

As such, Ji Chang placed her under house arrest. She wasn't allowed to have any contact with the outside world.

All of San Cai's methods to contact Yin Capital failed. She knew that she would be locked up until her death.

She didn't want to die in such a meaningless way, so she steeled herself for the inevitable, and committed suicide.

She knew that she had no way of contacting her home country, so she could only rely on such an extreme method.

Ji Chang could keep her under house arrest, but there was no way he could hide the news of her death.

Once news of her death reached Yin Capital, they would surely be on guard.

Her big brother and big sister were so intelligent, and they would definitely understand the meaning behind it all...

However, she could never have predicted that Ji Chang would fool the Shang Dynasty by pretending that she had died during childbirth. Even though Zu An and Pei Mianman weren't convinced, they had been quickly sent over to the next part of the trial. As such, they weren't given the opportunity to avenge her death.

Zu An and Pei Mianman both wept when they learned the truth about what had happened.

"My foolish sister, do you think we didn't know how vicious and dangerous the people of the Zhou state were? There was no need for you to give your life as a reminder!" Zu An and Pei Mianman both recalled the cute little sister they had grown up with. When they thought about just how much despair she had

felt, and what she had gone through while all alone in a foreign country, they felt as though knives were digging into their hearts.

She had sacrificed her own happiness for the sake of her country, and then sacrificed her life as well. She had been made to suffer so much that she should never have had to go through at such a young age.

Zu An suddenly rose to his feet. He was going to settle things with Ji Chang.

“My king, what should we do with Bo Yikao?” asked the jailer.

Zu An’s voice was cold. “Chop him up into mincemeat!”

Since this was his end historically, Zu An was more than willing to let history take its course.

Bo Yikao quivered in fear when he heard this. “You tyrannical and incapable ruler!” he yelled. “You are completely untrustworthy, and you won’t be granted an easy death...”

You have successfully trolled Bo Yikao for 1024... 1024... 1024...

Zu An remained unfazed. Right now, he only had the desire to kill.

A moment later, Zu An returned to Ji Chang’s cell. He saw that, even though Ji Chang’s body bore several marks, he wasn’t being tortured severely at the moment. Instead, he was sitting in a corner fiddling with a rock. He seemed to be scribbling on the ground.

Zu An’s expression grew cold. “Who allowed him to rest?”

The jailer beside him replied carefully, “The imperial uncle Bi Gan came in earlier and said that the Western Duke should not be subjected to such torture. He was just about to speak with you, my king. It seems like the two of you just missed each other.”

“Bi Gan?” Zu An’s eyelids gave an involuntary twitch. He was well known as a just and honorable official. From recorded history, this man had continuously tried to rectify Di Xin’s corrupt ways. Eventually, Di Xin ordered Bi Gan to be executed by extracting his heart.

Now wasn’t the time to think about Bi Gan, though. He walked in front of Ji Chang and looked down at the writing he had made on the ground. “The Book of Changes?”[1]

Ji Chang was shocked. “I did not expect the king to know about this. This is something that I’ve only managed to figure out in recent years!”

Zu An offered no reply. Instead, he said, “I’ve heard that the Book of Changes is used in divination. You seemed to be doing some of that earlier. What did you find out?”

Ji Chang lowered his head to look at the diagram below. He said with a bitter expression, “The Marrying Maiden; violence and killing.”[2]

Zu An was stunned. He didn’t expect this man to actually have some skill at divination. He was indeed out for blood this time, and it had to do with his younger sister.

Under different circumstances, he would actually have tried to learn about the usage of the Book of Changes from him. After all, Ji Chang was the creator of the Book of Changes, and it was definitely full of mysterious power.

However, he had no interest in all of this right now. He waved his hand casually, and a subordinate appeared in a few moments, bearing a plate of food.

A jailer quickly brought Ji Chang a meat patty. It was still steaming, and had clearly been freshly prepared.

Ji Chang's expression instantly paled when he saw the meat patty in front of him.

Zu An sneered. "What's wrong? Is the Western Duke afraid that I will poison you?"

Ji Chang sighed. "The king is the son of heaven. If you wished for this subject to die, then I must die. Why is there a need to resort to poison? This subject thanks the king for your favor."

With that, he reached out a trembling hand towards the meat patty and brought it up to his mouth. Hesitation flickered across his face.

Zu An stared at him. He didn't expect himself to really become history's tyrant. He didn't know why King Di Xin would do something this cruel, but he had his own reason for doing this. He had to have justice for his cute little sister.

Ji Chang sighed. In the end, he steeled himself and bit into the meat patty. However, he could not control his reaction. Turning to the side, he retched horribly.

Zu An sneered. "What's wrong? Does it not suit the Western Duke's tastes? This meat was freshly slaughtered and prepared."

Ji Chang was speechless for a moment.

He took a deep breath to compose himself, then said, "The food is delicious, my king, but my body seems to be..."

Before he could finish, Zu An said, "Since it's delicious, then have some more."

Ji Chang's breath caught, and he almost choked.

You have successfully trolled Ji Chang for 999 Rage points!

No matter how shrewd he was, Ju Chan couldn't help but grow furious. However, he reminded himself of his mission. As long as he could make it past this, he would eventually get his revenge on the Shang Dynasty. He would kill this tyrannical ruler and his witch with a thousand blades. What did this momentary shame and disgrace matter, compared to the grand scheme of things?

As such, he ate all of the meat patties in front of him without a hint of expression. "Thank you, my king, for your gift."

Zu An looked at him. "Do you know what type of meat these patties were made of?"

Ji Chang's heart began to pound. "I do not know, nor do I want to know."



Zu An's voice grew cold. "Do you think that just because you obeyed me and ate these patties, I will somehow believe that you are truly obedient? That I'll let you go back to the west so you can continue to carry out your revenge, and eventually destroy my great Shang Dynasty?"

Ji Chang knew that things had taken a turn for the worse, when he suddenly heard the words of the man in front of him. "I will make sure to repay your treatment of San Cai severalfold!

"Men, turn the Western Duke into mincemeat!"

## **Chapter 554, Part I: The Final Boss**

A panicked shout interrupted him. "You absolutely must not do this!" An old man with gray hair was hurrying over to him, surrounded by a group of people.

Bi Gan? Zu An frowned when he turned around and saw this man. The memories he had inherited from this body told him that this was his uncle, Bi Gan.

He looked exactly like someone whose top priority was the welfare of his country and its people. He was dressed like a faithful official that was commonly portrayed in the dramas that he used to watch.

"Why not?" Zu An said, not hiding his displeasure. This seemed like someone who he just would not get along with.

Bi Gan interposed himself between Zu An and Ji Chang and said anxiously, "This is the Western Duke. How can he be executed for no reason? Wouldn't this alarm the other vassal states?"

"No reason?" Zu An sneered. "He was the one who killed my little... aunt, San Cai. Isn't that a good enough reason? Murderers should pay with their lives! This is right and proper!"

Bi Gan was stunned. He clearly hadn't expected to run into something like this. Pei Mianman gave him a rough summary of what had happened to San Cai. She knew that the imperial uncle Bi Gan commanded extraordinary prestige within the court. If they could bring him onto their side, this matter would become much easier to deal with.

Bi Gan knew who San Cai was, and hearing what had happened to her caused a deep furrow to appear between his brows as well.

Despite this, he still said, "My king, since all this is in the past, San Cai won't come back to life even if we execute the Western Duke! We arranged for San Cai's marriage precisely for the sake of easing tensions between our two states. If we kill the Western Duke, wouldn't that make San Cai's death completely meaningless? Besides, strictly speaking, San Cai committed suicide, so the Western Duke wasn't the one who killed her!"

Zu An laughed when he heard this. "From what I've heard, uncle, it seems like you're blaming San Cai for her own death."

Bi Gan replied, "That's not what I am trying to say, my king. I only ask that you think about the bigger picture, and not let your emotions affect your decisions."

Zu An sneered. "You keep mentioning the bigger picture, but there's already such great hostility between our two states. Even if we let Ji Chang go, do you think he will somehow think better of us? He will plot his revenge on the Shang Dynasty. We are releasing a tiger into the mountains! Imperial uncle, you are too close-minded."

He couldn't be bothered to argue with Bi Gan any further, and immediately carried through with his order. "Where is the executioner? If he doesn't do his job this instant, then turn him into mincemeat, together with the Western Duke."

He was utterly furious right now. He was done discussing this matter, and he couldn't care less if he altered the course of history because of this. The only thing on his mind was getting revenge for San Cai.

The jailor jumped into action, and quickly escorted Ji Chang out for execution.

Bi Gan panicked. "My king, you absolutely must not do this! You will be bringing a huge disaster upon yourself by doing this!"

Zu An let his annoyance show. "Are you the imperial uncle of our Great Shang Dynasty, or the imperial uncle of Western Zhou? You seem eager to speak up for them all the time." He dismissed the man from his mind, and he and Pei Mianman walked out of the prison together.

"You... you..." Bi Gan was so angry that his entire body was shaking. He was so choked up with rage that he couldn't even form a proper sentence.

You have successfully trolled Bi Gan for 733... 733... 733...

In the end, Ji Chang was executed. The next day, the entire court rose up in uproar, and countless officials penned letters of admonishment to Zu An.

Ji Chang had always conducted himself well. He had the bearing of a wise man, and had maintained good relationships with the aristocrats and nobles.

Zu An paid close attention to the proceedings of the court. He saw that a faction of the ministers were led by the imperial uncle Bi Gan, while another faction was led by a different imperial uncle, Ji Zi. The two of them shared similar attitudes, and it looked like it would be hard to break them down.

A third faction was controlled by his own brother, Weizi. This Weizi really was unlucky. They clearly shared the same parents, yet because his mother hadn't yet been appointed the queen when she gave birth to him, Weizi was considered a bastard child. Meanwhile, his mother had already ascended to queenhood when his little brother—Di Xin, whose identity Zu An now assumed—was born, and so it was his little brother who ultimately succeeded to the throne.

Zu An knew that there was bad blood between them. Sure enough, he blasted Zu An with criticism, together with Bi Gan and Ji Zi.

The prime minister Shang Rong and court historian Xin Jia were even more brutal with their verbal attacks.

Yet another faction existed in the court, led by the crown prince Wu Geng. The knowledge that he already had a grown-up son in this world gave Zu An a headache.

He obviously had no personal affection for this son. Fortunately, though, this son was still rather filial, and sometimes spoke out on his behalf.

Wu Geng was birthed by Queen Jiang. Zu An had seen her before in the palace. She was a sweet-tempered woman, but Zu An wasn't in the mood to fool around at all. All of his attention was placed on completing San Cai's revenge, as well as completing this trial with Pei Mianman.

When he saw that most of the ministers within the court and the military officials opposed him, Zu An couldn't help but view Di Xin with contempt. This king really was too much of a failure! He was practically alone in the court. It looked as though he would have to find some new and trustworthy aides.

After wasting much of the day on conflict and bickering, the court finally settled down to deal with the real issue: How were they going to handle the retaliation that was sure to come from Western Zhou?

After all, both Ji Chang and his son had been made into mincemeat. This was a serious offence that would surely shatter any relations with the people of Western Zhou.

Knowing that hostile conflict was inevitable, Zu An and Pei Mianman began to reorganize the military and wait for the people of Western Zhou to make their move.

Unfortunately, even after waiting for several months, the armies of Western Zhou never materialized. While Zu An was left puzzled, news suddenly arrived from the northwest. Western Zhou forces had captured the Li State, within the Taihang Mountains.

Li State was the Shang Dynasty's northwestern barrier, and had always enjoyed good relations with the Shang State. But now, they have been eradicated by Western Zhou.

Zu An was furious. He hadn't received any news of this at all, even as it was going on.

He immediately investigated the matter, and discovered that the pleas for help from the Li State had somehow been lost when it reached prime minister Shang Rong.

Even though Shang Rong had a proper reason to excuse himself from this matter, Zu An had already served as king for many, many years. He could see through it all at a glance, and knew that this slip-up had been completely intentional. Aside from the prime minister, no one else would have enough authority to intercept such urgent military intelligence.

He was about to throw him into prison, but Shang Rong was warned of this ahead of time, and fled the city with his family to the Taihang Mountains to live out their lives as bandits. Once there, they declared that they had been persecuted by King Di Xin and his evil wife, Daji. Unable to put up with King Di Xin anymore, they had left to seek asylum.

Historian Xin Jia was also extremely dissatisfied by this matter. He angrily denounced Zu An in the court, then when he heard that the prime minister had fled, he too fled west, and became Western Zhou's distinguished guest.

Zu An was beyond furious. It was clear that these fellows had sold out their own country, yet public opinion had somehow been distorted to reflect that he was a brutal ruler who mistreated his subjects!

After all, public opinion was completely controlled by the royal lines of Bi Gan and Ji Zi, as well as the rest of the nobility.

King Di Xin was truly an abject failure. That was why, all around him, people were deserting him and rebelling.

However, Zu An did not try to ease the relationship with Bi Gan and the others. He knew that there was no way to get them back on his side.

He had already served as the Shang monarch for several generations, so he could tell that there were too many issues to deal with. There was still tension between factions that held differing views on whether the throne should be passed to a deceased king's brothers, or to his son. At the same time, the position of High Priest was often controlled by the aristocrats and nobles, which meant that they had power almost equal to the Shang king himself.

Knowing that they would be unwilling to relinquish power so readily, he began to establish his own faction, made up of the different hierarchies within society—lesser nobles, mid-level scholars, commoners, and independent soldiers.

## **554, Part II: The Final Boss**

Having shortlisted his candidates, Pei Mianman inspected them and picked out the best among them.

Both Fei Lian and Elai, a father and son duo, were outstanding. Fei Lian was a quick fighter, while Elai was bold and powerful. They were both unmatched on the battlefield.

Fei Zhong was a man of poor character, but he was an extremely crafty and sharp individual, and a rare talent.

Jiao Ge, a captive eastern barbarian, was good at business and accumulating wealth.

All these names were familiar to Zu An, and left a queasy feeling in his gut. He vaguely recalled that, besides Jiao Ge, they all seemed to be famously corrupt court officials in history. He didn't expect that he would walk the same path as the actual King Di Xin.

Unfortunately he didn't have a choice right now, since there was no one else he could rely on. He had to make use of any resources he had, even if he was drinking poisoned water to quench his thirst.

Fortunately, these individuals were competent enough. Under their management, the Shang State gradually strengthened its fragmented national power.

With that settled, Zu An and Pei Mianman turned their attention towards eradicating Western Zhou.

Unfortunately, a new disturbance arose within the court. Fei Zhong's faction had risen in prestige because of their successes, and began to seize control over the court's authority, causing Bi Gan and the rest of the old nobility to grow dissatisfied.

The older nobility rounded up many people who had either been abused or received bribes, and used them to accuse Fei Zhong's faction of misconduct, even implying that the king was relying on scoundrels and riff-raff to govern.

This left Zu An with a huge headache. It was true that Fei Zhong's faction had very loose morals. They weren't men of good breeding either, and they were quick to abuse their newly-gained authority.

Of course, this didn't mean that the noses of Bi Gan and the rest of the old nobility were completely clean either. Relying on their family backgrounds as backing, they had no need to stoop to such measures, and even when they did, they had their own ways of hiding their unsavory actions. The nobility had honed these methods over hundreds of years, and they were not something that Fei Zhong and his cohort could easily pick up.

In the past, Zu An might have chosen to slowly ease the enmity between the two factions, but he had little patience for that right now. His sole objective was to deal with Western Zhou and make it through this trial.

Even though Bi Gan and the rest of the nobles were more upright in terms of character, there was no way Zu An could rely on them. On the contrary, even though Fei Zhong's faction wasn't made up of the most morally upstanding bunch of people, they were much more loyal to him. He finally understood why so many incapable rulers like to have treacherous ministers around them...

Thus, he dealt with the old nobility swiftly and decisively, using Fei Zhong's faction to slander Bi Gan. This was a specialty for those from the lower rungs of society.

Eventually, Bi Gan grew so angry that he resigned. Zu An was afraid that he might also seek asylum in Western Zhou, so he put him under house arrest instead, and ordered men to guard his residence. However, he couldn't bring himself to kill someone as upright as him.

Because he was under house arrest, however, all sorts of false rumors began to spread. There was even a ridiculous theory that Daji was sick, and she wanted to use Bi Gan's seven apertures to heal herself, which led to Bi Gan being killed by having his heart extracted.

Zu An was speechless. He sent people to look into the source of the rumors, but his investigations were fruitless. Things only went from bad to worse.

When imperial uncle Ji Zi heard about these vicious methods, he resigned from his post as well, worried that he would be next. He stayed home and played the fool.

Zu An obviously saw through his actions, but now that these people had left the imperial court, it became easier for him to do what he needed to do, which was why he didn't force them to stay.

Finally, the new leader of Western Zhou, Ji Fa, called for a Great Assembly at Mengjin, purportedly involving eight hundred feudal princes, which was a hostile move against the Shang State.

Over the past century, Western Zhou had forged a terrifying alliance with other states. Many of the other vassal states had good relationships with Western Zhou, and were also dissatisfied with the Shang Dynasty's rule. Many of these states took part in this assembly.

Of course, Ji Fa wasn't stupid. He had realized that the Shang Dynasty had grown in strength recently, and was no longer a hundred percent sure that he would emerge victorious. As such, he didn't declare war immediately. Instead, he bided his time, waiting for a good opportunity to present itself.

Zu An couldn't care less about those eight hundred-or-whatever feudal princes who took part in the assembly. He knew that, ultimately, his enemy was Western Zhou. As long as he defeated them, the most powerful of the vassal states, the other vassal states would naturally surrender.

Both sides continued to prepare for the decisive battle.

After some time had passed, the Eastern Barbarians suddenly launched a great invasion of the Shang Dynasty.

The Shang Dynasty has always been besieged by enemies from all sides. There was the Qiang Faction to the northwest, the Ghost Faction to the north, the Eastern Barbarians to the east, the people of the River Yi to the southeast, the Ba Faction to the southwest...

Those of later generations might have viewed this period of endless war as the beginning of the unification of China, but for those who lived during these times, it was a brutal and trying time.

The Eastern Barbarians were always one of the Shang Dynasty's most tenacious enemies. They had been defeated several times throughout the past few centuries, but could never be fully subdued.

Zu An even spent a lot of effort trying to improve the relationships between the two peoples and form an alliance, but it unfortunately fell through.

The entire court, both the civilian and military leaders, all suggested going to war with the Eastern Barbarians. Zu An did not refuse this request, and allowed the general Fei Lian to lead the bulk of the Shang army in an attack on the Eastern Barbarians.

Ji Fa, who had been waiting for an opportunity all this time, was elated. He mobilized all of his state's forces and marched east to attack the Shang Dynasty's capital.

The capital was left mostly unguarded, since their main forces were off to the east. Caught unprepared, Zu An had no choice but to put together a slave army, promising them their freedom after the battle.

Taking Elai and Fei Zhong with him under the royal banner, they met the approaching Zhou army at Muye.

Seeing this ragtag slave army, Ji Fa sensed victory within his grasp. He spread his own forces out, preparing to encircle the Shang army and wipe them out.

However, at the crucial moment, the situation suddenly changed. Fei Jian suddenly appeared at the head of the main Shang army and surrounded the Western Zhou forces.

Ji Fa was shocked. After all, his intelligence reports all stated that this army was supposed to be off dealing with the Eastern Barbarians.

Zu An sneered. He knew from the very start that the Eastern Barbarians were never the real threat, and that Western Zhou was his greatest enemy.

That was why he openly sent his great general east, but secretly ordered Fei Lian to double back with the army.

After this initial alarm, Ji Fa calmed himself quickly, and demanded with a cold voice, “What are all of you waiting for?”

As soon as he spoke, chaos erupted within the Shang army. The forces being led by Weizi suddenly turned around and began to attack the army under the command of Zu An.

Yet another armed force rushed out as well. These were the forces led by Shang Rong, who had been hiding in the Taihang Mountains.

These sudden developments tipped the scales slightly in Western Zhou’s favor.

Zu An sighed. “I’ve already predicted all of this.”

Weizi was someone who had barely missed his chance at the throne. It was inevitable that Zu An would set up precautions against him.

With a wave of his banner of command, Pei Mianman charged out, leading her own army.

No one in this world expected the charming Daji to be so ferocious. Of course, there was no way they could know that she was the Shang Dynasty’s war goddess, Fu Hao.

As he saw the battle slowly swinging in his favor, Zu An sensed a bad premonition. Ji Fa seemed far too calm. Does he still have another card hidden up his sleeve?

He had always had a nagging feeling that he had overlooked something. He closed his eyes, completely ignoring the slaughter taking place, and began to go over every single detail in his mind. He suddenly recalled the murals he had seen in the upper tomb, and remembered the things Mi Li had told him.

He turned towards the nearby crown prince. He saw him slowly raise his hand, as though he was about to give a hand signal.

“Wu Geng,” Zu An said, “let’s talk.”

Wu Geng was stunned by this sudden remark, and seemed rather uncertain. However, he still urged his horse over to Zu An and bowed respectfully. “What orders do you have for me, father?”

Zu An waved his hands, gesturing for those around them to leave them alone. Then, he sighed. “I’m sure both of us know that we aren’t really father and son. Why is there a need to put on this facade?”

Wu Geng’s expression flickered. “Respectfully, I do not know what you mean.”

Zu An looked at the intense battlefield around them and said calmly, “Weren’t you about to order your soldiers to rebel just now?”

Wu Geng grew silent, offering no reply.

Zu An looked at him. “Should I call you the traitor of the Shang Dynasty, or the creator of this trial?”

**Chapter 555, Part I: Heaven-Devouring Sutra**

Upon hearing this statement, Wu Geng's expression, which had been calm and composed before, changed immediately. He quickly rose from his respectful bow, and his humble demeanor was suddenly replaced with the domineering aura of a king.

He looked at Zu An and said calmly, "When did you find out?"

As he said this, the surroundings suddenly changed. Just a moment ago, they had been on a battlefield bathed in rivers of blood, but it all vanished in a blink of an eye.

This was not the battlefield of Muye, but a deer terrace pavilion, which had been constructed a few years before the battle.

Pei Mianman appeared as well, seemingly dazed by the sudden change. She quickly rushed over to Zu An's side and asked, "Ah Zu, what's going on?"

Zu An smiled bitterly. "The one before you is the creator of this trial, the true final Shang king."

Pei Mianman looked at the crown prince in shock. This quiet and soft-spoken prince had often visited her to wish her good health. She really couldn't associate him with the final boss of the trial.

Wu Geng frowned at Zu An. "You still haven't answered my question."

Zu An turned to him and said, "Ever since I entered this dungeon, something had bothered me. Since King Di Xin fled to this deer terrace pavilion to immolate himself after his defeat at Muye, he clearly had no time to make this dungeon. That leaves only two possible candidates. The first is King Di Xin's step-brother, Weizi, who later established the Song State, and the other is King Di Xin's son, Wu Geng, who succeeded him as the king of the Shang State.

"Weizi struggled with Di Xin for the throne, so to a certain degree, he can be considered a traitor of the Shang Dynasty. Furthermore, he is the founding ruler of the Song State, which means he shares a good relationship with the people of Western Zhou. I cannot picture him creating this dungeon.

"That leaves you as the only choice. The Zhou Dynasty took power after Di Xin committed suicide, and you became the last king of the Shang State. After temporarily acknowledging their rule for a few years, you led the remaining people of the Shang State in a rebellion, while the new ruler of the Zhou Dynasty was still young. This war lasted for three years, but still ended in failure."

Wu Geng was shocked by Zu An's analysis. "You seem to be quite familiar with this period of history. However, the people of this world do not know about this. Who are you?"

Zu An sighed. "Perhaps I'm just someone led here by fate."

Wu Geng clearly had no intentions to probe further. He let his gaze wander around the deer terrace pavilion, his voice growing softer. "Do you know what happened after we were defeated at the battle of Muye?"

Zu An shook his head. The other party seemed as though he had a lot to say—why would he stop him?



Wu Geng reached out a hand. The air in front of him rippled, then, like the surface of a mirror, several scenes appeared.

A tall and valiant man fled to this deer terrace pavilion. He sighed towards the heavens. Unwilling to be humiliated by the people of Zhou, he set himself on fire.

This was King Di Xin. Daji accompanied him in death as well.

Soon afterwards, The army of Western Zhou entered Shang Capital. After awarding achievements and handing out rewards, they carried out sacrifices to thank the deities.

The best offerings were always human lives, and they had more than enough candidates to choose from.

A hundred of Di Xin's trusted subjects were escorted up to the sacrificial platform. They were dismembered and left alone to struggle in a pool of blood. The louder their howls and the greater their struggles, the better they were as sacrifices for the deities.

The generals who had fought fiercely on the battlefield of Muye as well as the clan leaders of Shang's major noble clans were stripped of their clothes and thrown into a cauldron of boiling water.

King Di Xin's corpse was found, and the heads of Di Xin and his concubines were burned on a giant bonfire. This scorched smoke was the favorite food of the deities.

...

Zu An and Pei Mianman stared blankly for a long time. They had served as the kings and queens of the Shang State themselves, so seeing these cruel scenes made rage burn within them.

Wu Geng said, "The main reason I created this dungeon was to ensure that the truth of the past was restored, as well as revisit why the Great Shang Dynasty eventually perished."

After pausing for a moment, he turned his sharp eyes towards Zu An and Pei Mianman. "You've both gone through several trials. Were you able to conclude why the Great Shang Dynasty was destroyed?"

Zu An's heart skipped a beat. Was this the final trial? He didn't dare treat this carelessly. After organizing his thoughts, he said, "In my opinion, there are four main reasons. The first is obviously the rise of the Zhou state. At first, when the northwestern Qiang Faction was defeated, the Zhou State used this chance to seize the newly vacant Central Plains. The Central Plains have always been a territory greatly coveted by many powers. As long as this territory is properly utilized, whoever controlled this territory would inevitably rise to power. Unfortunately, the Shang Dynasty faced all sorts of powerful enemies, and were not able to turn their attentions fully to this matter. When the Shang Dynasty had finally dealt with the rest of their enemies, the Zhou State had already come to power, and the Shang Dynasty was forced to engage them using the twin prongs of war and diplomacy—for example, killing Ji Li, and marrying off San Cai. Unfortunately, the Zhou State had already been scheming for a long time, and successive generations of rulers vowed to take down the Shang Dynasty. There was no way for the Shang Dynasty to escape its destruction."

Wu Geng's face remained expressionless. "What else?"

Zu An continued, "The second reason concerns the right to inherit the throne. Whether a brother or a son should inherit the throne is something that the factions within the court can never agree on. As such, the royal family is constantly in a state of internal conflict, greatly reducing the national power of the Shang State and preventing it from truly uniting against its enemies."

Wu Geng sighed. "Indeed. Internal struggles within the royal family never ceased throughout the five hundred years of the Shang Dynasty. The capital was moved frequently precisely because of this reason."

Zu An let out the breath he was holding. He held Pei Mianman's hand and continued, "Thirdly, the struggle between imperial and divine authority. Things like the offering of sacrifices were merely used to deceive the common people. As the Shang king, it should be clear to you that deities do not truly exist. However, the High Priest can still borrow the divine will to keep imperial power in check. This is something that no ambitious Shang ruler would accept, resulting in yet another power struggle. To be honest, this reason is linked to the second reason, since the High Priest is usually royalty who lost the right to succeed the throne."

Wu Geng nodded. "The High Priest has always been granted great authority, ever since the dynasty was founded. Every Shang king tried to seize the power of divine authority for himself, but apart from Wu Ding and a few other kings with exceptional ability, divine authority was always controlled by the other branches of the royal family. So, what is the fourth reason?"

"The fourth reason..." Zu An paused for a moment, and then said, "If the reasons I mentioned earlier were the key reasons behind the Shang King's destruction, then this fourth thing directly relates to the Shang Dynasty's destruction. During King Di Xin's reign, The imperial uncle Bi Gan and the old nobility led by Ji Zi were not unified behind the will of the Shang king, because the many centuries of history behind their families prevented them from doing so. On top of that, Weizi lost his right to the throne because of a laughable reason, which led him to ally himself with the powerful Zhou State and fulfill his aspirations to become king. Even though he didn't become the Shang king in the end, he still became the ruler of the Song State.

"There were also important statesmen in the court, such as Shang Rong and Xin Jia, who were on good terms with the Zhou State. There are far more names that I didn't mention. King Di Xin must have felt as though he was completely alone, and that no one agreed with him."

"There was one person that you did not mention." Wu Geng said. "Jiao Ge, whose father single-handedly rose to power, was someone who had secretly sought out the Zhou State a long time ago."

Zu An was stunned. "Jiao Ge? Wasn't he a slave that your father freed? Why would someone directly under his charge switch sides?"

Wu Geng snorted. "Because before father saved him, he had already been bought by the Zhou State. Do not forget that he is an eastern barbarian. After centuries of war, the grudge between the Eastern Barbarians and the Shang Dynasty had gone too deep. The Great Shang Dynasty even stole the artifact sacred to the Eastern Barbarians—their jade badge. How could any of them ever truly serve the Shang Dynasty?"

“The jade badge...” Zu An suddenly thought of something. The young lady Jiangjiang, who was outside the trial, was looking for this item. He had seen it during Wu Ding’s reign, and it had been buried with Fu Hao later on.

He quickly brought himself back to the present, and continued, “Apart from those people I mentioned, you, the crown prince, also seemed to be unhappy with King Di Xin. I believe that you also joined in the betrayal. King Di Xin had enemies at all sides. How could he possibly win? However, there is one thing I do not understand. It makes sense for the others to betray King Di Xin, but you are the crown prince. Why would you betray him?”

## **555, Part II: Heaven-Devouring Sutra**

Wu Geng’s expression grew downcast. “My father doted on Daji greatly. Because my mother, the queen, was constantly losing favor, I felt that she might be abandoned at any time. If Daji gave birth to another son, then my position as the crown prince would become unstable. As such, I thought that it would be better if I made the first move. I did not truly wish to betray the Shang Dynasty. I merely wanted to use the people of Zhou to force my father off the throne. Unfortunately, I never predicted that the Zhou State would be so ambitious, and that they were planning to completely eradicate the Shang Dynasty from the very beginning.”

Zu An sighed. “You all let the wolf right in.” All these Shang nobles had been so busy struggling amongst themselves that they had let the predator right in, with no idea how dangerous it could be.

“By the time we realized this, it was already too late. The broader situation was already set in stone, and the Zhou State had already assumed lordship,” Wu Geng said through gritted teeth. “The Zhou State was too strong, so we could only bide our time. Later on, after Ji Fa’s death, his young son succeeded to the throne, and I used the opportunity to rebel against the Zhou State. I was afraid that we might lose, so I prepared this dungeon ahead of time. This way, even if we lost, others would still be able to find out the real truth.”

Wu Geng turned towards Zu An and Pei Mianman. “The two of you are rather excellent. All the previous participants had higher cultivations than you, but I stripped everyone of their cultivations for this trial, turning them into normal people. What I wished to see wasn’t the cultivation of the participants, but rather whether or not they could understand the anguish and hatred of the people of the Shang Dynasty, and whether or not they could find a solution to our downfall.”

He continued, “The participants were all wise and intelligent, but many of them weren’t even able to pass the first trial. If they weren’t deceived by Xiao Tuo, they either disagreed with Fu Shuo, or forgot themselves and their reasons for participating in this trial after a few decades of living as royalty.

“As for the second trial, if they weren’t truly close to San Cai, she would not have taken the initiative to agree to the marriage. If the female trial participant went to Western Zhou, the only thing awaiting her would be death.

“As for the third trial, you actually managed to sort out a chaotic situation within the court, and clearly identified friends and foes. The main force was present during the Battle of Muye, and your companion

even joined the fray with another army. On top of all of this, you saw through my identity. If my father had shared your insights and tenacity, things might have turned out differently.”

Zu An and Pei Mianman exchanged a look, and both let out a sigh of relief. They knew that they were the first of all of the trial participants to get this far.

However, Wu Geng’s tone suddenly changed. “Unfortunately, you have not succeeded in the trial. You have only realized all of this at the last second, and it is too late to change anything. Once I give the order, my troops will rebel, and we will reach the same conclusion. You weren’t able to alter the course of our fate.”

Zu An and Pei Mianman shared a somber look. Failing at the final hurdle was truly a terrible feeling.

Wu Geng’s voice was also full of regret. “Your performance during these trials was truly outstanding, far more outstanding than any participants in the past. Unfortunately, the more things like this happen, the higher my expectations become. Perhaps there might be others more outstanding than the two of you who will show up later, participants who could clear this trial perfectly. Prepare yourselves—the only thing that awaits you is death.”

As he said this he slowly rose into the air, and black mist shrouded his body. He lifted a hand slowly, and a sinister taotie rune appeared on his palm. A black hole took form in front of it, producing a powerful gravitational force that destroyed everything around them. Even the majestic deer terrace pavilion began to crumble. All things were being sucked into that black hole.

He had already judged them as failures, and he was going to close the world of the trial. He would wait another endless period for the next pair of destined participants.

The force was so strong that both Zu An and Pei Mianman felt that their souls were about to be ripped from them and sucked into the black hole.

Pei Mianman tightly gripped Zu An’s hand and smiled apologetically. “For better or for worse, we’ve still spent a lifetime with each other. I’m okay with dying like this.”

“Don’t give up so soon.” Zu An looked at Wu Geng and said, “I didn’t fail this trial. I still have another card to play!”

“Oh?” Wu Geng was stunned. He sneered. “None of your machinations escaped my notice. What else could you possibly have up your sleeve?”

Despite these words, he still closed his palm slightly and the suction force decreased substantially.

Zu An felt the pressure ease considerably, and said with a sigh, “It looks like you still subconsciously wish for us to succeed.”

Wu Geng snorted and said, “Your words are useless. If you do not tell me what else you’ve planned, all that awaits you is destruction.”

Zu An quickly said, “You left this dungeon behind in order to keep a record of the true history of the Shang Dynasty, and to wash away the stain of infamy. You also wanted to see if anyone could find a way for the Shang Dynasty to avoid its tragic fate.”

“So what? Even though you’ve succeeded in discovering the first objective, you have not succeeded in reaching the second, Wu Geng said coldly.

Zu An laughed. “Do you still remember Fei Lian and Elai, that father and son duo?”

Wu Geng frowned. He wasn’t sure where Zu An was going with this. “I do. You elevated them from their status as common soldiers. They can be considered loyal soldiers. Even if we allowed the battle to play out, Elai would have died in the Battle of Muye. Even though Fei Lian would eventually escape and vow to defeat the Zhou State, he alone cannot make a difference. He is just too weak.”

Zu An replied. “Even though Fei Lian didn’t succeed, he planted a seed that was passed down, one generation after another. Fei Lian is the progenitor of the people of the Qin State, and the Zhou Dynasty was eventually brought down by the Qin State! While the people of Zhou spent many generations plotting the downfall of the Shang Dynasty before finally succeeding, Fei Lian did the same!”

“Fei Lian is the progenitor of the Qin people?” Wu Geng was stunned. He closed his eyes, as if searching through a library of information.

A moment later, he suddenly opened his eyes and let out a burst of laughter. “Fei Lian raised Elai’s son Nu Feng, and Nu Feng sired Pang Gao. Pang Gao sired Tai Ji who in turn sired Da Luo. Da Luo sired Fei Zi, and Fei Zi established the Qin State, and eventually took down the Zhou Dynasty. Ha ha ha! Wonderful, truly wonderful!”

Zu An sighed in relief. If not for the empress of the Qin Dynasty, Mi Li, he wouldn’t have known about this at all. That was why he had immediately placed Fei Lian and Elai in important positions as soon as he found them. He planned to keep them as a trump card just in case. He never expected that they would end up playing such a vital role in events.

Wu Geng pulled his hand back and slowly descended to the ground again, and the destruction of the world around them halted.

He looked at Zu An with a complicated expression. “You’ve truly surprised me, I didn’t expect you to have thought so far ahead. Even though you didn’t directly alter fate and prevent the eradication of Shang, even if you managed to change it, so what? After all, this is but a trial, and nothing here is real. None of this can compare to reality. It cannot compare to the joy of seeing Fei Lian’s successor taking down the Zhou Dynasty!”

Zu An clasped his fist. “It was only luck. We were only given so many chances to succeed because of the crown prince’s expectations towards the participants of this trial.”

Wu Geng nodded slightly. “Not bad, not bad at all. You aren’t arrogant despite your achievements. If my father had shared your humility, perhaps he wouldn’t have been so utterly isolated.”

Zu An did not offer any comment. It was fine for Wu Geng to speak ill of his father, but that didn’t mean that he could. “Does this mean that we have successfully passed the trial?”

Wu Geng didn’t reply. Instead, his tone grew serious, and he said, “Answer one last question for me. Why do you possess the Phoenix Nirvana Sutra, which belongs to the Zhou royal family? Have you entered the Zhou Dynasty dungeon?”

He did not suspect him of being a descendant of the Zhou royal family because he had seen this fellow turn Ji Chang and his son into mincemeat. What descendant would ever be so unfilial?

He wasn't familiar with the Primordial Origin Sutra, which belonged to the Qin Dynasty, and so he wasn't as sensitive to this.

Zu An sensed the killing intent, and said carefully, "I did not enter any dungeon or trial set by the Zhou Dynasty. It was a senior of mine who entered, and I was fortunate enough that it passed on to me." He gave a rough rundown of what had gone on with Old Mi.

"I see, that's good." Wu Geng roared with laughter. "It seems you are blessed with good fortune. You are worthy of the inheritance of my Shang Dynasty. Take it."

A bronze book flew through the air. Zu An caught it, and saw the large characters on the copper cover: Heaven-Devouring Sutra.

"This will serve as your reward for passing the trial." Wu Geng said, "The Heaven-Devouring Sutra is something only successive generations of Shang kings were worthy of cultivating. It is far stronger than the Zhou State's Phoenix Nirvana Sutra. My Great Shang Dynasty would never be inferior to the Zhou State when it comes to this."

Zu An was immediately overjoyed when he heard the contempt in the crown prince's voice. Apparently, his hatred for Zhou truly ran deep.

He asked quickly, "Then what about my companion? Can she cultivate this skill? What kind of reward will she obtain?"

Wu Geng said indifferently, "The Heaven-Devouring Sutra is something only Shang kings can cultivate, and it is not available to her. However, you need not worry. She has her own share of rewards."

Then, a shining piece of jade fell into Pei Mianman's hands. "This is Heaven's Wisdom Jade," Wu Geng explained. "It can absorb the ki of the world, allowing you to cultivate twice as quickly with only half the effort. In addition, it has another use. As long as this jade piece does not break, even if the flesh perishes, the soul can continue to live on."

Pei Mianman held the piece of jade within her palm. She felt as if her soul was being nurtured. It was easy to see how this would improve her rate of cultivation. Furthermore, from what he was saying, wasn't this equivalent to granting her a second life?

Wu Geng continued, "Lastly, the bearer of this jade piece will be acknowledged by the owl statue that serves as the conduit for this trial. That statue is also a formidable treasure. Since you lived one of your lives here as Fu Hao, it is a perfect match for you."

Pei Mianman's eyes lit up. "Thank you, crown prince!"

"It should be me who offers my thanks to the two of you." Wu Geng clasped his fist. "You may feel free to leave. This sinner can finally visit the great temple with honor, and pay my respects to my ancestors..." With that, he turned and left, his lonesome figure gradually fading into nothingness.

Chapter 556: New Function Unlocked

"How do we leave this dungeon?" Zu An suddenly realized that he hadn't asked the most important

question. Unfortunately, there was no reply. He didn't know if Wu Geng did this on purpose, or if he had already left this world.

The space around them began to warp. The two of them felt a feeling of weightlessness, and when they woke up again, they discovered that they were still touching Fu Hao's owl statue.

This was where they had begun the trial. There was no one else around them. Previously, they had been worried that Ya Zhang's corpse would be waiting to ambush them, but after going through Wu Ding's trial, they knew that Ya Zhang was both loyal and reliable. Zu An actually wanted to spend some time reminiscing with that fellow, but he wasn't around. He had most likely gone back to his coffin to sleep.

"Hm? Why did you return so quickly? Did you fail to start the trial?" Mi Li's familiar voice came to him.

Zu An was stunned by her remark. "How much time has passed since we touched this statue?"

"Not that long, maybe just a few breaths. Did you fail to start the trial, or have you already passed it?" Mi Li was someone with great experience, and already had a vague idea of what had happened.

"Of course we passed." Zu An sighed. "I didn't expect that only a few seconds had passed. We went through several decades inside."

Even though the period between Wu Ding and Di Xin spanned several centuries, Zu An and Pei Mianman had only experienced a few decades themselves.

Then again, it hadn't truly felt like several decades either. To Zu An, his time spent living the different lives within the dungeon seemed to go by much more quickly than in the real world as well.

"Time flows at its own pace in these trials, which is why such a phenomenon is quite common." Mi Li replied, "You can tell me the details of what happened later. For now, what did you obtain from completing the trial?"

She suddenly realized that it had been a long time since she was this excited about anything. She hadn't even been this excited when she stumbled upon pleasant surprises while cultivating in the past. Why was she so excited over Zu An potentially getting stronger?

She was quite perplexed when she thought of this, but she merely put it down to her eagerness to reforge a new body. After all, the stronger he was, the quicker she would be able to achieve her own goal. That must be it.

Zu An replied, "I received something called the Heaven-Devouring Sutra."

"Heaven-Devouring Sutra?" Mi Li was taken aback.

"Do you know about it, big sis empress?" Zu An was somewhat startled by her reaction.

"Of course! The Shang royal family's Heaven-Devouring Sutra is a technique that would leave the world terror-stricken!" Mi Li's expression was hard to read. "Most techniques in this world obey the natural laws. In essence, these natural laws make use of abundance to compensate for deficiencies elsewhere. However, the technique of the Shang royal family takes the exact opposite approach. It uses deficiencies to further one's own abundance, relying on the devouring of other cultivators' ki to strengthen oneself..."

When he heard what she said, Zu An subconsciously blurted out, "Like the Star Devouring Art?"[1]

"What is this Star Devouring Art?" Mi Li was confused.

"Nothing..." Zu An threw her a random explanation as he pondered over his new skill. It seemed pretty similar to the Star Devouring Art, but was probably an upgraded version of it. At the very least, it didn't seem like one had to cripple his own intrinsic cultivation and start from scratch again.

These Shang Dynasty fellows were truly something else... They used humans as sacrifices, ate human flesh, and now I find out that they even sucked out their ki... It was difficult not to call them cannibals at this point.

Mi Li said, "Even though this technique seems a little treacherous, it suits your current situation quite well. Since your cultivation is still so low, you can use this skill to grow quickly. However, I have to warn you that this technique has a sinister undercurrent to it. If you are even a little bit careless, it might consume you instead. The more you use it, the more ruthless you will become, and you may eventually lose yourself."

Zu An laughed. "Big sis empress, you're worrying too much. There can be good or bad people, but there's no such distinction when it comes to techniques. As long as I only use this to devour bad people, then even a sinister technique will become a good one."

Mi Li nodded. "It's rare for someone as young as you to understand that. However, I do not believe there is a need to limit yourself to only devouring bad people. There is no such thing as an absolutely good or bad person, so just focus on your own goals of cultivation, and don't rely on it too much. Anyways, since you're already conscious, there's nothing for me to worry about anymore. I'll give you and your big-boobed sis some personal space."

With that, she seemed to disappear without a trace. She seemed to have already fallen asleep.

Even though it seemed like the two of them had chatted for a while, based on the number of words exchanged, their conversation had been carried out between their two souls, so it all happened in a split second.

Pei Mianman didn't notice anything strange. She said, "Ah Zu, Wu Geng didn't tell us how to get out of this dungeon. What do we do now?"

They had successfully exited the trial, but they were still inside the secret dungeon, which was located within the ancient stele. They had no idea how to get out.

"We have no choice but to look around ourselves," Zu An said with a sigh. "By the way, Wu Geng said that you could take Fu Hao's owl statue with you. Give it a try. Do you think you can move it?"

Pei Mianman gently caressed the owl statue beside her. "I can sense some special connection and intimacy with this owl statue, so I should be able to commune with it somehow. I'll need some time, though."

"Take your time to settle that first. We have plenty of time. I'll keep watch from over there." Zu An said.

Pei Mianman nodded. She wrapped her hands gently around the owl's wings and focused on trying to communicate with it.



Zu An saw her intense focus, and figured that he should leave her alone for a while. As such, he began to study the Heaven-Devouring Sutra that Wu Geng had given him.

As soon as he took out the bronze document, an icy voice sounded in his head.

Yinxu's secret manual, Heaven-Devouring Sutra, has been detected. Do you wish to cultivate it?

Zu An obviously hit 'Yes'. The bronze item in his hands turned into starlight and vanished, and a wave of information flowed directly into his head.

When he looked inside himself, he saw a taotie diagram take form. This taotie greedily devoured everything it could. Once it had done so, it even began to eat its own body, eventually leaving only a large mouth.

Even so, it still wasn't satisfied. It suddenly raised its head towards the sky and widened its massive mouth, swallowing the heavens themselves.

Then, there was a great rumbling noise. The taotie's giant mouth turned into a black hole, swallowing up all the celestial bodies that approached it...

Zu An felt his throat go dry after watching this entire 'animation'. This technique really did seem quite sinister. Would he end up turning into a black hole as well if he continued to use it...?

While he was lost in his own thoughts, the cold, mechanical voice sounded again.

A new function of the Keyboard has been unlocked because you have obtained a second complete secret manual: The Valkyrie System!

Unlike in other dynasties, where men were considered of much higher status than women, many outstanding heroines emerged during the rule of the different kings and queens of the Shang Dynasty. These women were revered by the common people of the Shang Dynasty as valkyries.

Many other worlds have such outstanding women as well. Unfortunately, as their worlds collapsed, these dazzling valkyries lost their former strength and glory as well. Their souls became fragmented and incomplete, and their bodies continually drift along the ebb and flow of space-time.

Tiger Talismans can be used in the Valkyrie System. If your luck is good, you might resonate with a certain valkyrie who has been lost to the flow of space-time, and you can summon her to your world to fight for you!

Tiger Talismans can be obtained through the Rage lottery system. As a congratulatory reward for unlocking the Valkyrie System, you have received ten Tiger Talismans. We wish you the best of luck and hope you can resonate with a valkyrie during your ten free attempts.

As a friendly reminder, if you have purchased lottery tickets your entire life but have never won, we advise you not to have any high expectations for the Valkyrie System...

As he listened, Zu An slowly shook his head.

## **Chapter 557: The First Valkyrie**

Zu An was in a bit of a daze after listening to the explanation of this new system. He seemed to have returned to his previous world and the games he used to play. Wasn't this Valkyrie System just a heartless waifu gacha game?!

These abysmal drop rates were the exact mechanism through which those gaming companies scammed everyone of their money! Countless people spent crazy amounts of money chasing after those SSR cards.

Of course, spending money wasn't enough, since it all boiled down to luck in the end. For the sake of obtaining those SSR cards, people tried out all sorts of weird rituals to improve their luck. Those who prayed to the Buddha before trying their luck were rank amateurs. He'd once seen someone chanting strange 'cthulhu' incantations before he started drawing. It was as if he had gone completely mad...

Thinking about these familiar things from his previous world left Zu An feeling warm and fuzzy inside. When he considered this Valkyrie System again, he felt a sense of familiar intimacy.

Annoyingly, though, people in his previous world could just swipe their credit cards in order to obtain these things. What was the currency used for this System?

Rage points?

And what the hell was with that friendly reminder? It sounded so smug and sinister as it described to him just how low the probability of a successful draw was.

He was precisely the type of person who had bought lottery tickets without ever winning once...

But it was pointless to dwell on this now. He still had to give this new system a try.

He took out a Tiger Talisman and fiddled with it in his hands. It looked pretty similar to the Tiger Talismans of his previous world, but were much more exquisite. It was made of a material that seemed a mix of gold and jade, and there were many fine runes carved on its surface. These runes probably formed a link with the flow of space-time.

"The runes engraved on these talismans might have even more significance than those on the actual Tiger Talismans." Zu An wasn't in a rush to put it to use, but took his time to look it over.

Unfortunately, he knew nothing about runes, so these didn't mean much to him. He decided to make an imprint of the runes, so that he could get someone to research them later.

He took out an ink set from his Brilliant Glass Bead. Unfortunately, the ink wouldn't stay on the talisman, so he couldn't make a print of it. Unwilling to give up just yet, he tried to copy them out himself. However, even though he could clearly make out the details of the runes, whenever he tried to replicate the lines, his mind would grow foggy, and he would inexplicably seem to forget.

After several unsuccessful tries, Zu An finally gave up. It was clear that these rune formations had some form of protection on them, precisely to prevent others from deciphering it.

"So stingy!" Zu An grumbled. Helpless to do anything about it, he could only hold the Tiger Talisman and say a sincere prayer, as the System stated.

A mysterious force spread out from his hand, and Zu An felt as though his body was levitating towards the heavens.

It seemed to him as though his soul had left his body, and he was ascending into the boundless starry expanse. All of a sudden, a powerful astral storm swept over him.

A flash of understanding struck him. This was probably the so-called chaotic flow of space-time.

Zu An focused his attention and carefully explored the flow. This chaotic flow of space-time was surrounded by a destructive power. Fortunately, he seemed to be enjoying the protection of some strange runes. Without them, he would've been instantly obliterated.

These are the runes on the Tiger Talisman...

Zu An pondered over the connection for a bit, but he quickly sensed several fine specks of light flickering within the chaotic stream.

"Could those be the so-called valkyries?"

Zu An was overjoyed. He tried to communicate with them using his soul. Unfortunately, his pleas seemed to elicit no response at all.

Then, a single speck of light responded, zipping towards him quickly.

Zu An beamed with happiness, and laughed crazily towards the heavens. "Hahaha! I am the protagonist after all! I've established a connection with a valkyrie on my very first try! Just what kind of crazy luck is this?"

I wonder if this valkyrie will be pretty... Ahem, I don't judge by appearances! But I mean... if I had a choice, I wouldn't mind someone who's cute...

Please, please, please don't let it be someone like Solitary Lightning...

The image of Solitary Lightning, her body like that of a pillar of iron, flashed into Zu An's mind. If he ended up with a valkyrie like that, he might just end his own life.

While his thoughts were running wild, the flickering speck of light had already appeared in front of him, and he subconsciously reached a hand out to catch it.

Huh? Why is it so light?

However, his expression changed a moment later, because what was inside his hand wasn't a valkyrie, but a hat. A shining green hat.

Zu An couldn't believe his eyes.

What the hell is this? He didn't know why this Valkyrie System would give him a female hat. But he figured that since it came out of his usual lottery system, it probably wasn't too bad of an item. Didn't that Hat of Forgiveness he had drawn earlier have an amazing ability?

He quickly examined the hat in his hands. However, he was stupefied when the explanation of the item appeared in front of him.

Even though this is just a normal green hat that cannot be any more normal, if it is to your liking, put it on, and I'm sure you'll be the hottest topic on the block!

"Fuck off!" Zu An tossed the hat away in anger.

Unlucky!

He couldn't believe he had received this stupid thing on his first try. Even if he was going to buy a green hat, it would be for someone else to wear!

With a despondent expression, he took out a second Tiger Talisman and began the summoning ritual.

This time, he didn't treat it as frivolously as before. Instead, he opened his heart to the flow completely, hoping that he could truly communicate with one of those specks of light.

A moment later, there was a response. He sensed the heat contained within this speck of light, and even his soul seemed to jump with excitement.

Zu An couldn't help but smile. He'd heard that, when master alchemists and blacksmiths produced their proudest works, their souls would often resonate with these items. He never expected that he would end up having a similar experience.

Soon afterwards, the flickering speck of light reached his hand, and the light faded. He looked down at what he'd received.

"A book?"

Is this some type of exceptional secret manual?

But I already have three top-tier secret arts. That's more than enough for me to handle right now...

Of course, he wouldn't mind getting another one of the secret manuals from these Unknowable Regions. That would be absolutely amazing.

His heart was full of expectation. The first character that drew his attention was 'Shao'.

Shao what?

Shaolin's Seventy-Two Supreme Skills?

He continued reading. Suddenly, his eyelids twitched. The second word was 'Fu' (Woman).

Zu An told himself to calm down. Even emperors had to study the 'Classic of the White Madam' [\[1\]](#). Maybe this Shao Fu whatever was a similar technique.

However, he immediately had a bad feeling when he saw the third character—'Bai'.

He quit stalling and read the entire title. Sure enough, the last character was exactly what he thought it was, and his face twisted in annoyance.

Still, Zu An refused to admit defeat. He flipped through the contents to see if this cover had just been slapped on the book, while its contents were something else entirely.

He was quickly disappointed. The contents were exactly the same as the book he was thinking about, and he had even written out a copy for Ji Dengtu back in Brightmoon City. He couldn't be more familiar with the story.

His face utterly dark, he took out the third Tiger Talisman and tried his luck a third time.

When the light scattered, he saw a medicine pouch in his hands labelled 'Sleeping Pills'.

Zu An was speechless.

Unconvinced, he gave them a try. After spending so much time with Ji Xiaoxi, he had picked up a couple of things about medicine himself. These were the most ordinary sleeping pills, and had no special effects at all.

He could buy this stuff by the kilogram back in Brightmoon City, and yet he'd used up a precious Tiger Talisman for them!

His three draws so far had all been trash! Didn't the explanation state that they would all be things that resonated with his soul?

Don't tell me I'm truly such a despicable and low-class being?

Zu An wept in anguish. I'm being wronged!

It took him a while to regain his composure after which, he continued to use his remaining Tiger Talismans.

He had made up his mind. If all ten attempts gave him trash, he would never use this stupid Valkyrie System again.

After all, if he really wanted to mooch off of girls, then there were plenty of candidates in the real world. Why did he have to chase after these valkyries, who might not even be real?

Perhaps the System somehow registered his complaints, because the following pulls weren't as terrible as the first three. He ended up with a bunch of weapons—scimitars, wolf's-teeth clubs, meteor hammers...

Despite this, they were still common items. Even though some of them were sharp, they were made of the most basic materials. They were only high-quality items when compared to ordinary weapons.

He even received something that looked like a musical instrument. This jade 'pipa' looked quite precious, and it had an eye-catching appearance as well.

I'll give this to one of my female friends later. Wait, I don't think any of them play the pipa...

His mind wandered as he used the tenth Tiger Talisman, and a glowing ball of light quickly approached him. He was just wondering what kind of garbage he was going to get this time when his eyes suddenly widened. What appeared in front of him wasn't an object, but a woman. An extremely beautiful woman.

He had already seen his fair share of beauties, yet the instant he saw her, it was as if something had exploded within his mind, leaving him in a daze.

Even more shocking than her appearance was the information that appeared next to her.

Endless charm shrouds this noble woman, whose figure is adorned in extravagant jade and golden silk. Her beauty rivals that of goddesses in the highest of heavens, yet in reality, she is the fox that caused the downfall of Yinshang.

“Da... Daji?”

## **Chapter 558, Part I: The Mysteries of Life**

This stunning woman’s fair and glowing skin had a slight pinkish hue, as if a small amount of blush had been applied across flawless white jade, enhancing her exceptional appearance.

Wisps of otherworldly mist swirled about her white dress, which was adorned with pieces of jade and golden silk. Together with her elegant bearing, she seemed like a perfect and unattainable goddess who had descended from the heavens to grace the mortal world.

Although her dress didn’t reveal much, it was fashioned in a way to increase the air of mystery about her, which only served to further drive the minds and hearts of men wild.

It enhanced her graceful and curvaceous figure, her slim and elegant neck, her thin waist and full bottom and her pure white skin—every single part of her wonderful body seemed exceptionally lovely.

Her beautiful eyes were as deep and breathtaking as the starry sky, vast and peaceful. Although they betrayed no emotions, her very being still exuded elegance and seduction.

Zu An felt his heart beating faster from just a single glance, and his breathing became slightly ragged. This woman really was devastatingly beautiful! Although she was standing still, and not even her eyes were moving, she somehow stirred some primal urge within him.

Without a doubt, this ridiculously gorgeous woman had to be Daji.

“How can Daji be considered a valkyrie?”

Zu An was rather bewildered. He had really never associated history’s most famous fox spirit with any sort of martial prowess.

Unless, of course, it was combat strength in bed. If so, she’d be SS tier for sure.

When he examined her description further, though, he discovered that his initial impressions were wrong. This Daji really could fight.

Following the System’s instructions, he looked more closely at Daji, and a menu popped up, displaying her various skills. It did not display her strength, defensive stats, health, or things like that. Instead, it described some of her abilities.

Daji excelled at using musical artifacts. She could play something called ‘Voice of the Devil’, which would make those of lower cultivation or willpower enter a state of confusion or lose consciousness.

Besides this, she also had the 'Fox Charm' skill, which let her control a target of the opposite sex with lower cultivation than her for a short time. It would even have an effect on someone of higher cultivation, stunning them with her beauty and making them more reluctant to hurt her.

She could also summon a nine-tailed fox to fight for her. As her cultivation rose, the nine-tailed fox would slowly develop flaming tails. At its pinnacle, it would have nine tails of fire.

After reading through the entire tooltip, Zu An felt an intense amount of shock. Which world did this Daji come from? Why was she so OP?

He shuffled his way over to her. "Excuse me... great heroine. How are you? My name is Zu An. You can just call me Ah Zu in the future. Of course, I wouldn't mind at all if you wanted to call me master."

Despite his introduction, the woman showed no response. This exceptional beauty only stared at him calmly, with eyes devoid of emotion.

Zu An was stunned. Her eyes were indeed beautiful, but he felt as though something was missing from them. It was as if he was staring at a doll.

He moved to the side, and saw that her eyes did not track his movements.

He suddenly remembered the explanation that the Valkyrie System had provided him. The valkyries that were summoned would have lost their memories and souls, and only their combat instincts would remain.

"So it's just a human shaped doll?" Zu An thought to himself. They probably can't even talk, then.

He'd watched his fair share of shows in his past world, so it wasn't like he had never seen such things before. These valkyries seemed similar to battle puppets and machines.

Of course, these valkyries looked much prettier.

"Is it some kind of a robot?" Zu An couldn't hold himself back and poked Daji's arm. What he felt left him incredibly shocked. Is she actually a real person?

He was sure that her skin was no different from an ordinary person's, although it looked much smoother and softer.

"I wonder if the rest of her also resembles an ordinary person..." Zu An had a weird look on his face. He knew that people from his past world spent vast sums of money on replica dolls that imitated real people, yet no matter how real they looked, it was easy enough to tell that they weren't actual people. However, even though this doll in front of him didn't have a soul, she wasn't that much different from an actual person.

He cursed. Wouldn't these valkyries become sex dolls if this system fell into the hands of a bad person?

Wait, there's no way that would be allowed.

After pondering it over for a while, he decided to give it a try. He slowly reached his hand towards Daji's chest.

As if she sensed his hand approaching, a trace of... something... seemed to appear within Daji's initially-vacant eyes. She dodged backwards, and the sound of a sharp crack rang out.

Zu An counted his blessings. If he hadn't moved backwards quickly enough, he would have been slapped in the face instead of just on his hand.

Only now did he notice a value on Daji's menu: Goodwill: 0

That was perfectly understandable. This was their first meeting, after all. Why would she have a favorable opinion of him?

Then again, how was he supposed to raise this?

If this value reaches its maximum in the future, does that mean that...

Ahem, ahem!

His face turned completely red. Pah! I only did that to study the system, I don't have any perverted thoughts...

Now that he knew that he couldn't do anything unethical towards these valkyries, his heart began to calm down.

He then issued an order to Daji. "Attack me!"

Daji, who had been expressionless a moment ago, raised her head to look at him. A strange radiance appeared in her eyes, and then she charged at him.

After exchanging several blows, Zu An ordered her to stop, and Daji stopped, becoming motionless again. The radiance in her eyes also gradually faded, and she returned to her original, emotionless state.

Judging from their previous exchange, Zu An judged Daji's fighting techniques as rather outstanding. Even he had been left rather flustered several times.

Unfortunately, she didn't possess exceptional strength or speed. In fact, in these areas, she was practically no different from an ordinary person. She didn't even seem like a cultivator. This was quite different from his expectations of her as a legendary war goddess. Even if he did summon her, she wouldn't be able to help him at all.

He examined the tooltip describing her skills again, and noticed that many of the skills referenced her level of cultivation, which surprised him.

Her cultivation level right now was the same as an ordinary person's. But what if this could be raised somehow?

He noticed that there were several formation diagrams on Daji's body, which were quite similar to the formations inside of him.

Does that mean that her cultivation can be increased using Ki Fruits?

Given Zu An's current level of cultivation, raising it by even a single step required a crazy amount of Ki Fruits, and he had already given up on using these Ki Fruits to raise his own cultivation.



However, he still received large amounts of Ki Fruits whenever he entered the Rage point lottery system. Not using them would be too much of a waste. The Valkyrie System seemed to be the perfect place to dump all of these fruits.

Zu An prayed that this valkyrie didn't need that many Ki Fruits to fill up her formations. If her formations required the same astronomical amount of Ki Fruits as his own, he would be at his wit's end.

Inspired by this new thought, he decided to put it to the test.

It has already been a long time since he'd drawn the lottery. He looked at his Rage points balance, and saw that he'd accumulated a total of 350,862 Rage points. He spent it all in one go.

This gave him a total of 3,508 draws. Thankfully, the system now had a multi-draw function. It would have been an absolute pain if he'd had to perform each draw one by one.

When the results of his draws rolled in, he couldn't help but curse.

After all, he had stored up more points than ever before! He was hoping for at least one useful skill to appear.

In the end, however, he didn't get a single skill!

Strictly speaking, though, he wasn't burned too badly. Even though he didn't get any skills, the drop rate for Ki Fruits seemed higher than usual. He expected to only receive between 350 to 400 Ki Fruits, but he ended up with 700 this time.

He also received another five Tiger Talismans. His heart was pounding when he saw the light marker hover over the 'Shift' key during the lottery, because this key had never been lit up before, and he was hoping to get something incredible.

In the end, he was only rewarded with five Tiger Talismans.

Zu An was just about to use these five talismans to see if he could snag a new valkyrie, but after some thought, he reconsidered. He had already used up all of his luck drawing this Daji. He probably wouldn't get anything even if he used up the rest of the talismans.

Besides, even if he did draw another valkyrie, they were no different from ordinary people in their initial state, and would require resources in order to be upgraded. He didn't have a lot of resources right now, so it would be a waste even if he did manage to attract one of them.

With these thoughts in mind, he stored the five talismans away for later use.

He turned his attention to the Ki Fruits, and hesitated. Should he use these on himself, or Daji?

## **558, Part II: The Mysteries of Life**

He looked within himself to examine the current status of his cultivation. He was already at the fifth rank before, and four of the rank's formations had been illuminated. Wait, why is the fifth formation also filled up now?

After all, this fifth formation required a total of 2,178,309 Ki Fruits to fill!

He began to revisit what had happened to him in this period. He had faced off against the Cash Warrior, and participated in a series of battles against Mosquito Daoist. He had suffered injuries from which he'd recovered from several times, contributing to the remarkable progress of his fifth formation. Even his Primordial Origin Sutra seemed to have improved quite a bit after constantly repairing his battered body. He sensed that he was getting closer to the third layer.

Getting continuously beaten up was the right way to cultivate the Phoenix Nirvana Sutra. He wouldn't make much progress even if he sat around eating Ki Fruits all day.

He calculated that the sixth formation would need 3,524,578 Ki Fruits to fill. The paltry sum of Ki Fruits he had was a mere drop in this vast ocean, so he set aside the idea of using the Ki Fruits on himself.

Instead, he walked over to Daji and peered at her pure and charming face. "Open your mouth," he ordered.

Daji was surprisingly obedient.

"Open it wider," Zu An said with a sigh. No matter what state they were in, a beauty was still a beauty. Even without a soul, her movements were incredibly graceful.

Daji opened her mouth wider. Zu An slowly tossed the ki fruits into her mouth one after another. Fortunately, the ki fruits melted as soon as they went into her mouth. She didn't even have to swallow them.

"Is this considered throwing food away?" Zu An couldn't help but chuckle as he tossed the Ki Fruits one by one into her open mouth. What if I make her drink the Eighteen Spring Winds? What would happen then...?

He quickly dispelled this thought, and stopped his mind from wandering any further.

He didn't immediately use up all 700 Ki Fruits, but fed them to her in batches, while paying close attention to the changes in her cultivation

He noticed that the more Ki Fruits Daji consumed, the faster her ki began to circulate, and her cultivation also climbed rapidly.

Zu An quietly kept count as he observed the results. 60 fruits were enough to bring her to the first rank, and 120 the second rank, after which the rate of increase began to slow. In total, the 700 Ki Fruits brought Daji to the peak of the fourth rank. She was just a hair's breadth away from the fifth rank.

Her rapid progress made Zu An incredibly jealous. He had endured endless suffering just to get to the fifth rank! There's no way he would've been able to reach such a level just by eating Ki Fruits. Meanwhile, this woman had already reached the pinnacle of fourth rank.

Even though he couldn't figure out the exact mathematical relationship between the number of Ki Fruits consumed and the increase in her cultivation, he could tell that it was relatively linear, judging by the rate it had taken to get her to the fourth rank. Even though it would take more Ki Fruits in the future, it wouldn't be the ridiculous amount that would be needed for him to raise his own cultivation.

He ran the numbers quickly in his head. If a thousand Rage points earned him a single Ki Fruit, he could raise Daji to the ninth rank with just a few million Rage points.

Even though a few million Rage Points seemed like a lot, it wasn't impossible for him to collect that many.

Zu An was starting to look down on himself. This pretty chick over here could increase her cultivation so easily! Why was it so bloody difficult for him to increase his own strength through Ki Frutis?

A sudden development startled him out of his train of thought. He could sense that the ki around him had become somewhat different.

He was certain that he'd sensed traces of the fire element.

He moved his hand slowly around, and a sliver of flame unexpectedly appeared within his palm. Shocked, he shook his hand rapidly, and the tongue of flame vanished.

He collected himself and continued to observe the fire element around him silently. Without warning, another tongue of flame appeared in his hand.

He was prepared for it this time and examined it patiently. It didn't seem to pose any threat to him—on the contrary, he sensed an intimate connection to it. He tried to experiment with it, and realized that he could control it with his will.

"Huh? How did you suddenly awaken the fire element?" Mi Li's voice broke in, full of surprise.

Zu An jumped in fright. "Big sis empress, I'm really beginning to think that you're spying on me!" he yelled. "That's why you always appear out of the blue!"

Mi Li snorted. "Stop acting so smug. Who wants to keep tabs on you?"

Her soul body materialized, and she looked at the flame in his hand, clicking her tongue in wonder.

Pei Mianman was currently focused on communing with the owl statue. Her eyes were closed, and she wasn't aware of what was happening around her.

"What is going on? Did you run into another lucky encounter?" Mi Li asked curiously.

Zu An pondered a moment, then summoned Daji. Mi Li would see her sooner or later, since he was going to rely on her to fight for him often in the future. He might as well take her out now so that she could examine her as well.

Even Mi Li jumped in fright when the ravishing beauty suddenly appeared next to her. "What is going on? Don't tell me there are people living inside you?"

"No, no! Uh..." Despite racking his brains for a long time, Zu An couldn't find a way to properly explain Daji's existence. "Just treat her as something that I've summoned," he finally managed.

"Something you've summoned?" Mi Li had a weird look on her face. She had heard of summoning beasts, departed spirits, and even giant dragons, but she had never heard of anyone summoning an exceptional beauty before.

Mi Li's face suddenly went red. "You're a freaking pervert after all!" she scolded him.

Zu An was taken aback by her sudden outburst.

What the hell? What on earth did I do wrong now? It's this damned System's fault more than anything!

"She isn't conscious?" Mi Li was quick to notice the flaw within her after a short examination.

Zu An nodded. "She's lost both her soul and her memories. She only has her fighting instincts left."

Mi Li was curious. "Judging from your tone, you seem to know her past identity."

"She's Daji," replied Zu An.

"Daji?" Mi Li twitched with shock. "The one from the Shang Dynasty?"

"How many other Dajis are there in this world?" Zu An said with a bitter smile.

"No wonder she was hailed as a fox spirit even after a millennia... She is truly a stunning femme fatale after all! Even a woman like me is touched by her beauty." Mi Li's praise was effusive. "But can this dainty thing fight? I've never heard of Daji having any fighting skill."

Zu An couldn't help but poke fun at her. "Even a Qin empress like you has such incredibly high cultivation. Can't she be as strong as well?"

Mi Li blushed. This did make some sense.

She considered this for a bit, then asked, "Is she a fire element cultivator?"

Zu An froze for a moment, then nodded. "She should be."

Daji could summon a nine-tailed fox, and the nine tails were all fashioned from flames. What other element could she wield but the fire element?

Mi Li's expression was one of realization. "That makes more sense. From what I know, a summoner often shares some of the skills of the summoned being. She's probably the reason why you can interact with the fire element."

She said with a laugh, "I was wondering why a fifth rank cultivator like yourself hadn't awakened any element yet. This was it all along. If you're able to summon others like her who have different elemental skills, you might become the first person in this world to master all the elements."

She paused, and then her expression grew strange. "From what I know, you lost both of your parents at a young age and were later raised by your uncle."

Zu An was perplexed. He didn't know why she suddenly brought this up.

However, he still replied, "To be honest, I still don't know if my parents really died, or if they just went missing. I don't even know who they are."

Mi Li gasped. "There's no need for any further confusion. I think I know who your father is."

"Who?" Zu An was stunned.

Mi Li looked at him strangely. "The natural laws of the world."

Zu An was stunned. What the hell?

Mi Li bared her teeth at him. "If you weren't fathered by the natural laws of the world, then why do you keep having such ridiculous luck? 'Master of all elements'. Do you know what a ridiculous concept this is?"

He remembered that he had asked such a question before. Most people could only awaken a single element, and only a very select few could perhaps cultivate multiple elements. Even so, that person would be considered a true genius, appearing once every millennia! If someone like him appeared, wielding all the elements...

Um... This really did seem like cheating.

Mi Li felt a shudder run through her. She was clearly quite shaken by this revelation. "People like us can only awaken a single element despite an entire lifetime of cultivation, yet a brat like you can somehow control all of the elements so easily! If I had met someone like you back when I was still alive, I would have ordered your death as soon as you were born."

Zu An laughed in embarrassment. "You wouldn't have to go that far, right? I mean, my cultivation is progressing really slowly, isn't it? Gaining strength is so much harder than for an ordinary cultivator. Also, I have to pay a big price to summon someone like Daji. I won't be able to summon anyone else for quite some time. There's no way it would be that easy to master all the elements."

Mi Li grunted in satisfaction. "That makes me feel so much better. But coming back to what matters most, the stronger you are, the better it is for me. That way, my safety is guaranteed, and you'll be able to forge me a body that much sooner..."

Midway through her sentence, she trailed off, and turned towards Daji. "Didn't you mention earlier that she was missing a soul?"

Zu An nodded instinctively. "Yeah, so?" He quickly caught on to her train of thought. "But she is my...!"

Before he could finish, Mi Li lunged at Daji, a huge smile on her face. "Don't be so stingy! I'll just borrow her body for a while. She'll still belong to you in the future."

## **Chapter 559, Part I: A Falling Out**

After spending such a long time as a soul, Mi Li desperately wished to go for a stroll as a normal person. She was tired of spending most of her time asleep, and wanted to take a look at this new world for herself.

Even though Zu An was reluctant, he had to admit that she had been a great help to him so far. He had already agreed to help her reconstruct her body. Now that there was an opportunity for Mi Li to have a body of her own, it didn't feel proper to stop her. He let her soul body fly into Daji.

Mi Li entered Daji's body. Zu An was just about to ask her how she felt when he was stunned by a miserable scream. Mi Li's soul leapt back out of Daji's body and stared back at it in horror.

“What’s wrong, big sis empress?” asked Zu An urgently. Clearly something had gone wrong.

Mi Li glared at him. “You said that this woman was lacking a soul?”

“Yup,” Zu An confirmed. That was what the system told him, at least.

Mi Li looked confused by the honesty in his voice. “That’s strange...”

“What’s going on?” Zu An asked in a panic. He noticed that Mi Li’s body was flickering, as if she was fading. She had clearly suffered severe damage.

Mi Li replied, “She isn’t missing a soul. It’s just been sealed by a profound and mysterious formation... Um, I guess you can consider her soul damaged, given this seal. Of her three souls and seven forms, only her Life Soul has been allowed to return to her body. That’s why she looks like a living corpse.”

Every person has three souls and seven mortal forms. The three souls are the Heaven Soul, Earth Soul, and Life Soul. The seven forms represent a person’s joy, anger, grief, fear, love, hatred, and lust.

Zu An was stunned by this revelation. “If I understand you correctly, we can restore her intelligence by undoing her seal.”

Endless possibilities had opened up for him. Daji was already beautiful in her current form, but it just didn’t seem right for only her body to be here. If her soul were to be returned as well, he could find himself in an intimate relationship with a legendary fox spirit.

“Forget it,” Mi Li said with a snort. “The seal on her body is extremely profound, and even seems to resonate with the dao. Even I, at the peak of my powers, would not be able to crack it, let alone someone like you.”

Zu An wasn’t happy with her dismissal. “It’s not as if we’re in a rush to unseal her. Anyway, it’s better than accepting that she’ll be an empty shell forever. Big sis empress, is there no way for you to possess her?”

Mi Li rolled her eyes. “With that terrifying formation within her, I’d just be asking to be extinguished if I try to go in.”

Zu An let out the breath he was holding. “That’s good then, that’s good,” he replied subconsciously.

Mi Li’s expression turned cold. “What? Do you think that you’d lose a girl to play with if I possess her body? You look way too happy about this.”

Zu An sighed. “I just don’t want you to leave me. I’m already used to having you by my side.”

Mi Li’s eyes trembled slightly. She was silent for a while, then said quietly, “I’ll have to leave eventually.”

Zu An laughed. “At least we’re together for now. I have some time to prepare myself.”

Mi Li pursed her lips, but didn’t say anything else.

“Were you injured just now?” asked Zu An hurriedly.

Mi Li nodded, her voice harboring lingering traces of fear and annoyance. “Thankfully, I was still rather careful, and fled immediately when I sensed that something was wrong. If not, my soul might really have

been blasted apart by that seal. Even so, my soul still suffered a considerable amount of damage. All the recovery that I'd made after this period of bitter effort has now been wiped away."

Zu An was at a loss for words.

Even though he knew that her soul had been damaged, he hadn't expected it to be that serious. No wonder her tone had been rather awful just now.

"Forget it. I really have to go into hibernation in order to restore the damage, so I won't be able to help you for some time. You have to throw away the thought that I'm somehow secretly watching you, and that I'll be able to help you if you encounter any danger. Otherwise, you'll die without even knowing what killed you." Mi Li's tone was extremely serious.

Zu An nodded. "Big sis empress, you've already taken care of me for so long, and I've gone through quite a bit myself as well. If I had to rely on you every time, I would be worse than useless.

"Right, I'll definitely find some medicine that can help your soul restore itself once I reach the capital."

"You'll be dealing with the number one cultivator of this world once you reach the capital. Even your own safety isn't guaranteed. Forget about it." Despite her words, Mi Li's expression grew gentler, and she gave a slight sniff. Since this fellow bore such goodwill towards her, she wouldn't bother challenging him on his filthy thoughts.

You put it so nicely just now, but don't think for a second that I don't know what you're really thinking. You're afraid that you'll lose out twice if I seize Daji's body, right? Hmph! How dare you have such thoughts about me? You're just a shameful pervert after all.

Mi Li quickly went into hibernation. Zu An stowed Daji away as well, and began to study the Heaven Devouring Sutra. From its description alone, it seemed like quite a ferocious technique. It was now rather obvious how Wu Geng had been able to decimate everything around the deer terrace pavilion by channeling a single skill through his palm. He had probably used the Heaven Devouring Sutra.

He felt anticipation building within him. He didn't know when he would be able to reach that level of power.

His expression suddenly grew strange. Wu Geng had been a participant in the final trial, but so had his mother, Queen Jiang. Her appearance within the trial would not have been different from her real self.

His anxiety regarding the trial had led him to ignore the chambers of imperial concubines during his time as king. What if he hadn't held back, but kept Queen Jiang company? Would Wu Ding have interfered to stop him?

"What are you thinking about?" Said a sweet-sounding voice beside his ear.

"I was just regretting that I didn't..." Zu An was halfway through his reply when he suddenly noticed Pei Mianman standing next to him, a smile across her face.

"What are you regretting?" Pei Mianman asked curiously.

"Nothing." Zu An's face turned red. How could he possibly say it out loud? Even he was embarrassed by the thought. "You've successfully communed with Fu Hao's owl statue?"

“Yup. I already established a connection with it.” Pei Mianman opened her fair hand. The owl statue had shrunk to a miniature size, and was slowly spinning within her palm.

Zu An was jealous, but only of how cool she looked right now. “What does this owl statue do?”

Pei Mianman shook her head. “I still don’t know too much about it, but I know that it’s somehow related to the darkness of the night. I need some more time to study it.”

Zu An nodded. Many magical artifacts only unlocked all of their functions after the two souls merged completely. Pei Mianman had just established a connection with this owl, but given that she had taken on the identity of Fu Hao within the trial, he believed she would quickly reach that stage.

“Oh, right. A hidden passage opened up after I connected with the owl statue. It seems to lead further down,” Pei Mianman said.

Zu An looked at where the owl statue had stood. Sure enough, a dark passage led down through the ground. The murals along the sides of this passage seemed extremely familiar. “This is Fu Hao’s tomb!” he blurted out.

“Huh? How do you know?” Pei Mianman asked him curiously.

A look of great turmoil appeared on Zu An’s face. “Did you forget that I was the one who constructed your tomb after you died in the trial? These murals and this owl statue, everything is exactly as I remember them.”

Pei Mianman held his hand gently. “All of that is already in the past. I’m right here by your side.”

Zu An nodded. “Yeah. Let’s head down. I remember that the jade badge of the Eastern Barbarians was placed among the funerary objects. We still have our promise to Jiangjiang to fulfill.”

“Won’t it be poor etiquette if we disturb her rest, though?” Pei Mianman said with a worried look.

Zu An laughed and said, “Aren’t you Fu Hao? I am Wu Ding. We’re just taking a stroll down memory lane. Even if there is some part of her still down there, she might be overjoyed to see some old friends.”

“Everything in the trial was fake though...” Pei Mianman mumbled. Despite her words, a fair amount of tension seemed to drain out of her.

## **559, Part II: A Falling Out**

The two of them headed down into the tomb. Sure enough, everything was just as he remembered, which left even Zu An slightly baffled. He felt it a little difficult to distinguish between what was real and what had happened within the dreamworld of the trial.

It didn’t take him long to find the jade badge, and the bronze vessel where Jiangjiang’s head was stored. In the trial, Zu An had specifically given the order that Jiangjiang’s remains were to be placed in this tomb out of worry that he wouldn’t be able to find them later on. Sure enough, her remains were truly in this tomb.



Pei Mianman had a strange look on her face. "I can't believe that it's really here. Could it be that what we experienced in the trial was all real?"

"It might not be what you think. There's no way for us to explain this coincidence based on what we know so far. Let's not make any blind guesses." Despite his words, Zu An couldn't resist looking towards the giant coffin, which was resting off to the side.

Pei Mianman was also drawn towards it. She suddenly said in a soft voice, "I want to see the person buried inside."

Zu An held her hand and shook his head. "I think it's better if we don't. In my heart, you are my Manman, no one else is. There is no need to cause any unnecessary complications."

Pei Mianman was stunned for a moment, then she smiled sweetly. "You're right. I am myself. There's no need to make myself doubt my own path."

With that, the two of them avoided any further speculation, and left Fu Hao's tomb hand in hand.

"By the way, I now know how to leave this dungeon," Pei Mianman said. A new revelation had come to her mind.

"How do we leave?" Zu An asked eagerly. The two of them had already stayed in this dungeon for way too long. They wondered how Chuyan and the others were doing outside.

Even though Mi Li told him that he hadn't spent that much time in the trial, they had still been wandering this dungeon for a considerable amount of time before they had even attempted the trial. Assuming that the flow of time within this dungeon was different from the real world, things might already be drastically different in the outside world. If that were true, it would be a terrible tragedy.

"This owl statue is the formation core of this dungeon. We can leave through it whenever we want." Pei Mianman replied. "However, if we leave the dungeon through its formation core, this dungeon might never open again."

"Then let's give Jiangjiang the badge before leaving," Zu An said. "That way, she'll at least be able to bring her clansmen peace."

The two of them both believed in keeping their promises, and weren't about to go back on their word. They hurried back to the entryway where they had separated from her.

"Jiangjiang?" The surroundings were pitch black, and Zu An couldn't see anything, so he had to resort to calling out her name.

Despite the darkness, they knew that this was Jiangjiang's territory, and they had gone through so much together, so they weren't nearly as scared as before.

"She's over there," Pei Mianman said, pointing.

Zu An was surprised, but walked in the direction she was pointing. It was still pitch black, and he couldn't make anything out. "How can you see her even when it's this dark?"

"I think it's because of Fu Hao's owl statue. After all, the owl is the king of the night. Even in the darkness, things seem just as clear as day for me. I have a feeling that if I completely master this owl statue, I might be able to create darkness and drag an enemy within it in battle," Pei Mianman said excitedly.

"That's probably some sort of domain. Now, you might stand an even chance if you encounter opponents with a higher level of cultivation than you," Zu An said with a sigh of admiration.

While the two of them were chatting, the spectral girl had already run up to them. "Big brother, big sister..."

She had been running towards them excitedly, but when she came closer to the two of them, her expression suddenly changed.

Since the two of them were in a hurry to leave, they didn't notice this slight change in her expression. Zu An handed her the jade badge. "Jiangjiang, thankfully, I didn't have to go back on my word. This is the jade badge you asked for."

The young lady took it from him. When she touched the jade badge, happiness returned to her face. "Thank... thank you."

She slipped the jade badge onto her arm. As she put it on, the surface of the jade badge glowed momentarily, before the light gradually faded. A pattern resembling the jade badge had been engraved around her arm.

Zu An clicked his tongue in wonder. They had learned in the trial that this was the holy artifact of the Eastern Barbarians, yet for him and Pei Mianman, it looked just like a normal jade badge. It was exquisitely crafted, but aside from that, they hadn't noticed anything special about it. However, it clearly became something different when in Jiangjiang's possession.

Despite this development, neither of them would go so low as to covet someone else's possessions. Zu An remembered something else, and handed her the earthenware vessel containing her head. "Jiangjiang, this should be your head..."

He wanted to say some words of consolation, but when the girl saw the head in the earthenware vessel, her eyes immediately turned red. "All those from Shang shall die!" she said, baring her teeth at them.

Zu An immediately put up his guard, and quickly pulled Pei Mianman behind him. The ground where the two of them had been standing just a moment ago crumbled instantly. Clearly, it had been blasted by a wave of tremendous power.

"Jiangjiang, have you gone mad?" he demanded angrily.

The girl floated in midair, her beautiful hair fluttering about her. "All the people of Shang must die. The two of you carry extremely strong Shang auras. You are definitely genuine people of Shang."

Zu An was speechless. It was probably the Heaven Devouring Sutra that he was carrying, and Fu Hao's treasured owl statue and the Heaven's Wisdom Jade that Mianman had on her. They also served for many generations as the rulers of the Shang Dynasty, so it would be hard to get rid of this aura even if they wanted to.

The young lady's voice thundered again. "That is why... you must... die!"

She stretched out her hand, and a cacophony of voices began to rustle in the wind. Zu An and Pei Mianman's expressions immediately grew awful. The Guman Tong had appeared around the young lady again, and skeletal warriors were assembling as well. There was even the sound of hissing, indicating the presence of the strange snakes they had seen in the great pit outside the tomb.

Zu An could still remember how much of a headache those strange snakes had posed, and he hurriedly turned to Pei Mianman. "Didn't you say we have a way out of this dungeon?" he asked. "Can we leave right now?"

Pei Mianman shook her head. "Not yet," she replied with a frown, "I need some time to establish a link. I don't think they'll give us the time."

The approaching skeletal warriors had already drawn their blades and swung them at the pair of them even before she had finished her sentence.

Zu An whipped out the Tai'e Sword and stuck it into the head of the closest skeletal warrior. However, more skeletons quickly charged at him, taking the place of their fallen comrade. In addition, several of the strange snakes were slithering across the ground, spewing venom at the two humans. Some of them even flung themselves at them in an attempt to bite them.

The skeletal warriors naturally did not fear the venom of these strange snakes, but Zu An and Pei Mianman surely did.

The two of them quickly found themselves in a spot of bother. Suddenly, a black rose blossomed on the battlefield. It was beautiful, yet full of devastating power. All the skeletons and strange snakes were burned to ashes.

This was Pei Mianman's skill, 'Flaming Rose'. She had not been in the best condition ever since being in the dungeon, and wasn't able to use this skill so far. Now that she was back to her peak, her attacks were vicious.

"I haven't had the opportunity to use this move until now," Pei Mianman said softly.

More and more strange snakes and skeletal warriors swarmed at them, pouring forth like an endless tide.

The girl floating in the air frowned. As though she had given some sort of order, the Guman Tong around her charged at Pei Mianman.

Pei Mianman had a look of consternation on her face. She remembered the suffering she had experienced while under the control of one of these Guman Tong. The Guman Tong were immune to flames as well, which made it a bad matchup for her.

Zu An quickly leaped to her side, brandishing his sword to fend off the incoming Guman Tong. Despite this, he knew that his efforts were not enough. He wanted to use the Heaven Devouring Sutra, but the creatures around him were all deceased beings or disgusting snakes. He might have been able to devour anything once he mastered the skill, but at his current level of understanding, there was no way for him to do so.

A sudden burst of inspiration struck him. There were so many of these fellows around them, and they were all of low intelligence. He might not have any area-of-effect skills, but he knew someone who did!

He quickly summoned Daji and gave her an order.

Pei Mianman's eyes went wide. A ridiculously beautiful woman suddenly appeared, carrying a jade pipa in her arms. She plucked the strings gently with her fingers, and a pleasant melody began to fill the space. The incoming Guman Tong, skeletal warriors and endless waves of strange snakes all froze.

## **Chapter 560, Part I: Unstoppable**

### **Voice of the Devil!**

It immediately caused those of lower cultivation or intelligence to lose their awareness and go mad.

Daji was only at the peak of the fourth rank, and many of these skeletal warriors and the Guman Tong possessed stronger cultivations than her. However, they all had one trait in common—they had low intelligence.

Even though the Guman Tong had the ability to manipulate minds, they did not possess a high level of natural intelligence.

The skeletal warriors and the Guman Tong all fell into a frenzy. Even though the Guman Tong did not show any facial expressions, it was easy enough to sense their suffering.

Almost immediately, the undead creatures began to attack their companions around them, frantically causing chaos to erupt.

The strange snakes were even worse off. They had tangled around each other, and were biting down on each other with their poisonous fangs, or trying to crush other snakes with their own bodies. It was like something out of hell itself.

Pei Mianman was stupefied. She subconsciously leaned against Zu An to find safety and comfort.

The young lady Jiangjiang was also shocked. The Voice of the Devil was naturally ineffective against her, given her intelligence and level of cultivation.

Having lost control of her subordinates, Jiangjiang quickly pressed her hand—the one adorned with the jade badge pattern—against the head of the Guman Tong next to her. Sparkling light flickered around the Guman Tong's body, which started to grow.

In the blink of an eye, it had grown from the size of an infant into a giant, ten zhang tall, with Jiangjiang standing on its head.

Both Zu An and Pei Mianman could hardly comprehend what they were seeing.

Jiangjiang pointed at the two of them, and the giant Guman Tong began plodding towards them.

Even though it was not moving quickly, a single giant step was enough to cover a dozen meters. It moved even faster than a normal person sprinting.

\*Boom, boom, boom!\*

Its heavy steps sent shudders throughout the entire mausoleum. Any unfortunate skeletal warrior caught beneath its feet were instantly crushed to dust.

There was no way Zu An and Pei Mianman could face that massive thing head on. Nodding at each other, they split up, dodging in different directions.

This giant Guman Tong was surprisingly agile. Just as they moved, two fleshy palms crashed down on where the two of them had been standing.

The two of them continued to dodge, as fountains of debris shot into the air all around them.

The young lady atop the giant Guman Tong steered it towards Daji. She knew that, once she got rid of this woman, her subordinates would recover their senses.

With a light tap of her feet, Daji gracefully evaded the onrushing giant. Her dress fluttered about, making her seem like an immortal fairy.

Even though she lacked a soul, she still retained her instincts for battle, and she was able to easily dodge the attacks aimed at her.

Despite this Zu An knew that continuing on like this wouldn't get them anywhere. It didn't matter how many times the Guman Tong missed—they would be finished if they were hit even once.

He summoned Grandgale, blinking forward towards the Guman Tong's head.

Jiangjiang seemed to have sensed something. She instructed the Guman Tong to dodge to the side.

This sudden move meant that Zu An had nowhere to plant his feet. As he fell, he plunged the Tai'e Sword into the shoulder of the Guman Tong instead.

The Guman Tong's body was extremely tough and hard to cut into, but Zu An's sword was shrouded in primordial ki, and stabbed straight into its flesh.

The Guman Tong squealed in pain, and tried to dislodge him by swinging a massive palm towards its shoulder.

Zu An was stuck in an awkward spot, and he was briefly unable to exert any sort of strength. He was planning to jump back down to the ground to look for another opportunity.

However, he knew that Jiangjiang was already on guard against a second attempt, and that it might not be that easy to get close again.

Pei Mianman took out her owl statue, which quickly enlarged in size. It let out a screech as it whirled towards him, perfectly blocking the Guman Tong's incoming palm.

Zu An used this chance to sort out his inner ki and find his feet. He pushed off against the Guman Tong's body and leapt straight onto its head.

Shocked by this sudden move, Jiangjiang raised her hand sending countless evil spirits flying towards him.

Zu An snorted. He summoned his primordial ki, and his longsword flashed about him, leaving trails of white light. Upon making contact with the sword, the spirits melted like snow against a flame.

Jiangjiang raised her hand, and the jade badge erupted with radiance. Countless blue arrows of light appeared all around her.

With a twitch of her finger, the arrows streaked out towards Zu An.

The Eastern Barbarians were praised for their skill at archery. As expected, their reputation was well deserved.

Jiangjiang's efforts were not rewarded. Even though the arrows struck home, her target instantly shattered, melting into thin air. It was just an illusion.

She was just about to use another skill when her entire body went rigid. The blade of a longsword was pressed against her neck.

Zu An had used his Sunflower Phantasm to maneuver himself behind her.

"Why are you showing me mercy?" Jiangjiang said with difficulty.

Even though it was only close to her neck, she could feel a scorching pain from the terrifying white light that imbued the blade, which had already caused her irreversible damage. If this blade were to pierce her, she would instantly lose her life.

Zu An looked at her and sighed. "You've already lived a pitiful life. Why would I make your fate even more tragic? My companion and I aren't people of the Shang Dynasty. We just participated in their trial, which is why we have their aura."

It would have been easier just to kill her, but this young lady had been captured by the Shang Dynasty as a prisoner and cruelly used as a human sacrifice. Her head had even been thrown into a bronze vessel to be cooked. Yet after that, she had to wander this dungeon alone as a spirit for such a long time. She had already suffered a fate that was beyond tragic.

Jiangjiang was moved by what he said. Her bloodshot eyes gradually returned to normal, losing their frenzied look. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "I couldn't control my emotions."

"This hatred has been etched into your bones. It's to be expected." Zu An retracted his sword. The hatred that the Eastern Barbarians felt towards the Shang Dynasty wasn't something that could be set aside so easily.

Jiangjiang looked at him strangely. She was surprised at how easily he had withdrawn his blade. "Aren't you scared that I'll continue to attack you?"

Zu An shook his head. "I know that you aren't one of those murderous evil spirits."

He wasn't dumb enough to believe that—he was just confident that he could easily kill her with his primordial ki, which was why he wasn't afraid if she suddenly retaliated. Of course, there was no way he would say that out loud.

Jiangjiang remained silent for a while, then said, "Thank you!"

She gently patted the Guman Tong beneath her. Its massive body quickly shrunk, returning to its normal size. With a wave of her hand, the strange snakes slithered away as well, and the skeletal warriors also returned to their burial pits. The Guman Tong giggled as they crawled and tottered away.

Zu An was amazed. He hadn't the slightest idea how she controlled them.

Jiangjiang turned to Zu An and said, "Big brother, I want to help my clansmen find peace. Can you escort me to them?"

Zu An nodded. This was something he had promised her before.

Pei Mianman opened her mouth, but closed it again without saying anything. She had many things she wanted to ask Zu An, for example, who that ridiculously beautiful white clothed woman was...

But her heart was full of pity for Jiangjiang, and decided to see her matter through first.

The three of them soon found themselves at the elevated pavilion at the top of the stairs. Jiangjiang sighed as she looked at those stairs. The endless resentful spirits rushed over immediately, having apparently sensed something. They wailed as they gathered around her, as if trying to say something. Their previously-vicious expressions were now full of sadness and grief.

Jiangjiang consoled them gently, then spread her hand upwards. The jade badge slowly rose into the air, and she began the ritual to free her clansmen.

A gentle light radiated from the jade badge. Bathed within this light the expressions of the resentful spirits soon became peaceful. One after another they closed their eyes, before turning into specks of light.

They had been trapped here for over ten thousand years. This was the day when they were finally freed.

After sending them off, Jiangjiang turned around and bowed towards Zu An. "Thank you big brother and big sister. If I didn't receive your help, I would have never been able to do this."

Zu An was about to say something, but his expression changed suddenly. "Your body..."

Her body had begun to flicker, as if she was about to vanish at any moment.

Jiangjiang smiled. "The only purpose for my long existence within this underground palace was to free my people. Now that my wish has been fulfilled, I need to find peace as well. I've existed for so long, and I feel tired."

Zu An did not know what to say or do. Her story was just too tragic! She had carried on alone in this underground palace for such a long time. It seemed that any words of consolation he could utter would be meaningless.

Jiangjiang stretched out her hand towards him, and a jade badge flew to Zu An. "This is the sacred artifact of the Eastern Barbarians. Big brother, since you have helped us so much, I pass this on to you. There is no need to let it remain buried here. You can use it to control them..."

With that, she became one with the endless specks of light.

**560, Part II: Unstoppable**

Pei Mianman's eyes were red. "Jiangjiang's life was so pitiful."

Zu An hugged her tightly. He was also overcome with emotion, and was speechless for a long time.

Just like that, the two of them stood there in silence.

A gentle breeze drifted over, carrying a delicate fragrance that tickled Pei Mianman's nose. She turned around and saw a beautiful white clothed woman standing quietly off to the side, as if she was Zu An's maid. She could not contain her curiosity any longer. "Ah Zu, who is she?"

"She is someone I can summon..." Zu An tried to explain the best he could, in a way that she would be able to understand.

Pei Mianman was shocked by this sudden revelation. "How amazing!"

She thought that this woman was some random girl Zu An had picked up along the way. When she heard that she was summoned, her nervousness immediately eased.

She rushed over to Daji's side to examine her, and even reached out a finger to poke her. "Huh? She feels just like a real person!"

The sight of the two beautiful women standing next to each other was enough to leave Zu An utterly dazed.

However, another detail stunned him even more. No matter how Pei Mianman poked her, Daji showed no reaction. Yet, when he had poked her earlier on, he was almost slapped in the face.

"She was a real person, once upon a time," Zu An said, then told her about how she had lost her soul.

Pei Mianman sighed. "There really are many pitiful people in this world. She is such a stunning woman, but she still had to end up as someone else's puppet."

Zu An wasn't happy with her choice of words. "What do you mean, 'someone else'?"

Pei Mianman snorted, then blushed and said, "She is already pitiful enough. You're not allowed to do anything awful to her."

Zu An choked on a mouthful of saliva and sputtered.

"Am I that type of person?"

"Do you really have no self-awareness?"

"Um... don't worry. Even though I'm her master, I will only use her for combat. I can't even get close to her..."

He showed her what would happen if he tried, and Pei Mianman laughed so hard that her entire body shook uncontrollably. "You really had impure intentions after all! You've already tried!"

"I accidentally touched her earlier..." Zu An said guiltily. "Stop laughing already! I'm going to get mad if you keep on laughing."



Pei Mianman noticed his downtrodden expression and stifled her giggling. "All right, I won't laugh anymore. Does she have a name?"

"Daji."

"Daji?"

Seeing Pei Mianman's shocked face, Zu An forced a smile and said, "It's the same Daji that you're thinking of. After her world was destroyed, she was stuck in the flow of space-time, and then I summoned her."

Zu An had told Pei Mianman many things about Daji over the course of their long years within the trial, so she knew much about this woman and her past. "She is ridiculously beautiful after all..." she said with a sigh. "No wonder everyone called her a once-in-a-millennia fox spirit."

Her face suddenly turned red. She pinched Zu An and said, "I finally know why you got so excited that night after you found out I was Daji!"

Zu An had no words to defend himself.

Instead, he recalled Daji and quickly changed the topic. "Hey, isn't it past time we left this dungeon?"

Pei Mianman was shocked. "Where did she go?"

"Probably some special spatial plane..." Zu An said.

He didn't know how to explain it either, but he knew that he could summon her again at any time. Also, once Daji suffered a certain amount of damage, she would be forcibly sent back to that spatial plane to slowly recover. Of course, this recovery process was extremely slow, and she would still require her master to supplement this with medicine.

Pei Mianman nodded in understanding. She took out the owl statue and used it to communicate with the dungeon, making the necessary preparations for them to leave.

Zu An stroked the jade badge around his wrist. He recalled what Jiangjiang had said before she disappeared. This thing seemed to have the ability to communicate with the supernatural. It was mainly used during sacrificial rituals, but of course, it had a more practical effect, which was controlling creatures with lesser intelligence, even undead things. For example, Jiangjiang had used it earlier to command all those creatures to attack the two of them.

This was different from Daji's 'Voice of the Devil'. Daji's skill made her targets enter a confused state, but it did not allow her to completely control her targets. Their effects were different.

Zu An pondered on this item a little more. This jade badge seemed similar to a skill belonging to any druid class in the games of his previous world. With it, he could make many creatures obey his commands.

Rather than using it for battle, it seemed much more useful for scouting purposes. It was easy to imagine just how terrifying he could become if the ordinary little creatures around his enemies could suddenly become his eyes and ears.

Wait, what if those little creatures accidentally caught a peep of some girls bathing...?

Ahem, ahem! I am an honorable man. Why would I ever do something like that?!

While his thoughts were running wild, Pei Mianman took hold of his hand. "It's ready!"

A portal suddenly appeared in front of them. Holding tightly onto his hand, Pei Mianman stepped through it.

Everything blurred, and the whole world before their eyes exploded with a blinding brilliance. They were no longer within the dark and sinister depths of the underground palace. Instead, a cool breeze caressed their faces, and the air was filled with the sound of birds chirping.

Both of them smiled when they saw the sun shining above them, and took in the familiar feeling of ki in the air. "We're finally back."

Pei Mianman suddenly grew agitated. "Ah Zu, the emperor still wants you arrested. Why don't you use this chance to go into hiding? Everyone will assume that you died in the dungeon. Once the emperor passes on, you'll be safe."

Zu An shook his head. "Even though everyone believes that the Emperor doesn't have many years left to live, he is still the world's most powerful expert. At worst, he'll still live another decade or so. What if he ends up living for a few more decades? How much longer am I supposed to wait?"

"Besides, everyone in the world already knows about my Phoenix Nirvana Sutra. I'd actually prefer to have the emperor after me. If he dies, then I'd be in even more danger. This is the best chance for me to head to the capital and deal with this situation once and for all."

Pei Mianman pursed her lips. "Your words sound so noble, but aren't you doing all of this for Chuyan in the end?"

Right after the words left her mouth, the two of them colored with embarrassment. In the confines of the dungeon, the two of them could live as husband and wife. However, this was the real world, and they had too many other things to worry about out here.

Zu An gently took her hand in his. "Manman, I'm also doing this for you. You went inside the dungeon with me. If I go into hiding, doesn't that mean that you won't be able to show yourself in public ever again? Unlike me, you don't only have yourself to look out for. You still have your clan and the rest of your loved ones."

Pei Mianman thought of her mother, and her eyes reddened with tears. She threw herself into his arms. "Ah Zu, you're so great."

As they shared their affection with each other, a cold laugh echoed from close by. "What a cute pair of lovers! However, the two of you ruined my greatest opportunity. How will you compensate me for my loss?"

Zu An and Pei Mianman were both given a huge fright. They hadn't noticed anyone around them, even with their cultivation! They turned around, and immediately felt chills run up their spines.

A yellow-robed woman was sneering at them. Who else could this be but Mosquito Daoist?

Mosquito Daoist had defeated so many powerful individuals on her own. Right now, they only had each other to rely on, and Mosquito Daoist's injuries had already healed completely. The pressure that she was radiating was greater than anything they had felt before. Both of them shivered in fear.

Strangely, though, while Mosquito Daoist had always been shrouded in a sinister aura, she now seemed like a heavenly presence instead, radiating a solemn, holy aura.

"Why are you here?" Zu An said, his voice low.

Mosquito Daoist snorted, "Since the two of you left the dungeon, I was naturally made to leave as well. Hmph, it's a pity that I didn't run into the two of you in the dungeon. I would have just killed you both if it would have prevented my opportunity from being ruined."

Zu An was shocked by her words. It appeared that she didn't even care about the Phoenix Nirvana Sutra anymore. "What kind of opportunity did we ruin?"

Mosquito Daoist bared her teeth, and the aura of holiness was instantly replaced by viciousness. "I was in the midst of absorbing the most prized holy treasure of the Western Sect—the Twelve-layered Golden Lotus. I would have become unstoppable if I had absorbed all of it! Who cares about the Great Zhou Emperor, or the King of Fiends? None of them would have been my match. But I was dragged out of the dungeon by the two of you after absorbing only three layers!"

"What?!" Zu An was stupefied.