

*Casey Vale, based on the account of a 10-year-old boy
about his past lives*

THOUSAND LIVES



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DESTINIES. ONE DESTINATION.

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Destinies. One Destination.

Author: Penned by journalist Casey Vale, based on the accounts of a 10-year-old boy about his past lives.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This book is penned based on true stories, events, and contexts. However, to respect privacy and avoid affecting certain individuals, character names and some identifying details have been changed, simplified, or restructured in a literary form.

Some passages in the book are recounted from the personal perspectives of those involved, reflecting their own experiences and perceptions at the time. These views do not necessarily align with the position of THE EPOCH MEDIA.

In terms of writing style, while the Editorial Board has made necessary adjustments, we have strived to preserve the rustic quality and original voice of the characters as much as possible, in order to respect them and maintain the story's spirit and vividness.

The Editors



INTRODUCTION

The life of a journalist, especially one who frequently travels to remote lands and meets all sorts of people, is often full of surprises. But the fateful encounter with the boy whom I will henceforth affectionately call River far surpassed anything I could have imagined this world might hold.

I met River in a rather coincidental circumstance, in a small, peaceful town in the American West, where I was taking a short vacation after a long assignment in Asia. He was only ten years old, an English-speaking American boy with bright eyes and a contemplative look rarely seen in someone his age. His family, whom I had the opportunity to get to know, were gentle, kind people, and I soon realized they had a deep spiritual life, practicing an ancient cultivation discipline originating from the East—Falun Dafa.

Initially, our conversations revolved around everyday things. But then one day, as we sat together watching the sunset behind the distant mountains, River suddenly began to talk. The stories were not about school, friends, or childish games. They were vivid, astonishingly detailed memories of past lives, stretching from glorious

prehistoric civilizations to familiar historical dynasties, and even to worlds beyond Earth.

River explained that, due to a special karmic connection and his cultivation since childhood, his celestial eye (the third eye) had opened, along with a portion of his wisdom, allowing him to see other dimensions and recall many of his previous lives. A strange thing I noticed was that ever since these abilities became prominent, River's manner of speaking when referring to his past lives also changed. Though his face retained the innocent purity of a child, his words became mature and profound, as if a seasoned soul were sharing life's reflections. He would naturally use "I" when recounting these lives, as if reliving those very moments. When he spoke, his voice was still that of a ten-year-old boy, but the content and depth of his stories carried an unusual erudition and a clear-sighted perspective. He could speak snippets of ancient languages he had never been taught and describe customs and historical events with details not recorded in any book.

As a European, though I had some understanding of Buddhist teachings and Eastern philosophies, I was initially astonished, even a little skeptical. But the more I listened, the more I observed the truthfulness in his eyes and his demeanor, and the strangely coherent and consistent narrative spanning millions of years, the more I was drawn in. There was no exaggeration, no desire to

impress. He was simply recounting what he "remembered," what he "saw" during meditation or in quiet, contemplative moments.

What was particularly special was that River always perceived and assessed events from the perspective of his character in each lifetime. When he was a general, he thought like a general. When he was a monastic, he had the mindset of a monastic. And when he was a diplomatic advisor, he analyzed issues purely from a politician's viewpoint, never mixing in spiritual or karmic explanations in contexts where that character was not a cultivator. This clarity made the stories all the more credible and profound.

After those first surprising conversations, and with the sincere consent of River's parents—who understood their son's uniqueness and also wished for these stories to touch kindred spirits—I spent about two weeks focused on carefully listening to and transcribing his stream of memories. Initially, I had only intended to record them for myself, as a precious document of miraculous things. But the more I listened, the more I realized that these stories were not just for me. They contained profound lessons about history, about karma, about the choice between good and evil, and above all, about a being's endless journey through the cycles of reincarnation to find its origin.

This book, "Thousand Lives," is a compilation of those stories, recorded as faithfully as possible from River's accounts during that time. Throughout his narration, I asked almost no questions, only listened and took notes. Therefore, readers will find that the flow of the story is almost a monologue from the main character, with whom we will journey through countless roles: from a general in a prehistoric war, a Daoist in the Three Kingdoms period, a disciple following Jesus, a Mountain God ruling over a sacred peak, an artisan on ancient Mars, to an American diplomat in the mid-20th century, and finally, the revelation of his true origin—a Lord of a magnificent Heavenly Kingdom, who made a vow to descend to the world to await Dafa.

The first chapter may feel heavy to some readers, as it recounts the terrible karmic retribution the main character had to endure for crimes committed in a distant past life when he opposed the True Fa. But please be patient, for that is an indispensable part of the truth, of the strict yet compassionate law of karma. From the second chapter onward, River, through his memories, will appear more as an "observer" of history, explaining events and figures from the supernatural perspective of a cultivator, focusing on heavenly will and the lessons hidden behind the events. When encountering unfamiliar terms, such as "assistant spirit," I have tried to add brief explanations in parentheses based on my

understanding from the boy's explanations or from reference materials.

I hope that through "Thousand Lives," each of us will gain a new perspective on life and history, and perhaps, find a bit of empathy, a bit of contemplation for our own journey.

Casey Vale

THE EPOCH MEDIA

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CHAPTER 1: PREHISTORIC MOONBEAM

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Sometimes, when I'm meditating, or just when it's really quiet and I'm looking out the window, the memories come back. It's not like remembering what I did

yesterday, or where I played last week. These memories are strange, you know, they come from a place that is very, very far away. So far away that I don't think this Earth still holds any trace of it. (Later, when my parents explained it to me, I understood that I was seeing these things through my celestial eye, because I was only about five years old when it started to open.)

The memories take me back to an era a hundred million years ago, to the final centuries of an incredibly glorious civilization that was also on the brink of collapse.

In the most ancient scrolls that survived from that time, it was said that this civilization had once experienced a brilliant Golden Age. Try to imagine, the Earth back then looked completely different. The cities weren't built of dull gray bricks and stones, but shimmered as if woven from light, with slender towers reaching for the sky. The people of that peak era lived in harmony with nature, and their wisdom and morality were at a very high level.

The annals record that at a pivotal moment, when that cycle of civilization seemed about to end after some five thousand years of existence, a great event occurred. A Supreme Being, whom later generations respectfully called the Creator, descended to the mortal world. He brought with Him Dafa—the truth of the universe—to spread widely and save sentient beings. His teachings awakened hundreds of millions of people. They

embarked on the path of cultivation, their moral character elevated, their wisdom unlocked. And because of this, that civilization was not only saved from destruction but was extended for another ten thousand years in unprecedented splendor.

Throughout those ten thousand years, the genuine cultivators of Dafa achieved extraordinary feats. The Moon that we see today, according to what has been passed down, was one of the great marvels they created or adjusted. It was not just a rock, but an energy center, a sacred place, a symbol of the wisdom and supernormal abilities of those who cultivated their hearts toward goodness. Then there were the temples, the magnificent and imposing architectural works whose traces remain, all testaments to a time when humans and Gods were close, when Dafa was the guiding beacon.

But, as we all know, time is a relentless current. By the time I, in a previous life, was born, those ten thousand glorious years had reached their final days. The name I had in that life, if I try to transliterate it into your language now, would sound something like Arion. The language and writing of that era were very different from what we know, so I'll temporarily use this name, Arion, to make the story easier for you to imagine.

When I, Arion, was born, the Moon still hung majestically in the night sky, and the ancient temples

were still there. But in the minds of the majority of the populace, the stories of the Creator, of Dafa, of the cultivators with vast divine powers who created the Moon, had gradually become "fairy tales." It was like how people today tell stories about the Lady of the Moon or the Man in the Moon. Beautiful, magnificent, but distant, and few still believed they were real.

In my time, Arion's time, society had become deeply polarized. On one side were those who still tried to preserve their faith, cherishing the spiritual values left by their ancestors. On the other, a growing and powerful faction, were those who only believed in what their eyes could see and their ears could hear, who believed in material power, in what they could grasp and control. They were the materialist faction.

For us back then, the generation that grew up in an atmosphere increasingly saturated with pragmatism, stories of the "Supernatural Science" or "Spiritual Science" of the ancients sounded vague and unbelievable. We were taught that only what could be measured, what could be proven by experiment, the technologies we could build and control, was true science.

Of course, we had also heard, vaguely, that there were still a few who called themselves "cultivators" of what they called the "Dafa" of the ancients. It was rumored that they had "divine powers," strange "supernormal

abilities," and could even create some kind of "supernatural technology" that our science couldn't explain. But honestly, I personally, and most of my generation, had never directly witnessed these things clearly. To us, they were mostly just rumors, legends woven from a distant past, or perhaps just some sophisticated tricks. We believed in tangible power, in the military, in the advanced weaponry our faction was researching and developing day and night.

Thus, the moral decline in the last 500 years of that civilization cycle was almost an inevitability. When people no longer believed in Gods and Buddhas, no longer feared the invisible laws of the universe, moral constraints gradually loosened. Greed, selfishness, and the desire for power and material enjoyment grew increasingly intense.

Those who didn't truly cultivate their hearts, or those who had once cultivated but whose will was not firm, were easily swayed by the temptations of fame, gain, and emotion, straying from traditional values. They began to question why they had to live an ascetic life, why they had to believe in things they couldn't see, when material science could bring them a comfortable, blissful life right before their eyes.

And so, from that foundation of moral decay, materialist thought spread wider and wider, not just in my nation

but in many other lands. The leaders and thinkers of these like-minded nations and powers gradually formed a powerful alliance—an alliance of those who believed in absolute material power. My family was also part of this rising movement.

That materialist alliance had a clear goal: to completely eliminate the influence of what they considered "illusory spirituality" from social life, not just within one nation but on a broader scale. They propagated that man was the master of his destiny, that all achievements were created by human wisdom and strength. They attacked the cultivators, those who still held faith in Dafa, viewing them as obstacles to social "progress," as a threat to the new order they wanted to establish.

The atmosphere in those years became increasingly suffocating. The teachings of Dafa, once considered a guiding compass, were now ridiculed and distorted in many places. The materialist alliance, with its promises of a "paradise on earth" created by man, had attracted many followers, especially the youth in its member nations. The alliance's general policy was very resolute, even tyrannical, and its leaders were prepared to use any means, including force, to achieve their goals.

It was not just an ideological battle within a society, but had gradually become a large-scale confrontation, a battle for the very soul of a civilization. And I, Arion,

was born and raised in a core family of one of the key nations in that powerfully rising materialist alliance.

As I said, I, Arion, was born in the last century of that ten-thousand-year civilization cycle, a time when the flames of materialism were burning fiercely. My family belonged to the upper echelons of society, and my parents were core members with great influence in a key party of the materialist alliance.

From a very young age, I was enveloped in an atmosphere that worshipped materialism and power. The first lessons I heard were not fairy tales about Gods and Buddhas, about compassion or faith, but lectures on the power of science and technology, on the superiority of man, on how man could conquer nature and master his own destiny. Atheistic thought was crammed into my head every day. Anything related to spirituality, to the Dafa of the ancients, was considered superstition, a barrier to progress. My parents, and those around me, frequently expressed contempt, even hatred, for those who still held faith, for the cultivators. They called them "backward people," "delusional dreamers."

In such an environment, it was no surprise that I grew up with an ironclad belief in what I was taught. I disdained spiritual values and believed that only material strength and military power were worth pursuing. I looked at the ancient relics, the temples said

to have been built by cultivators, not with reverence, but with a scientific curiosity, trying to figure out what "techniques" were used, without ever considering their spiritual aspect.

Perhaps I was innately talented in military affairs. I enjoyed strategic games, and liked reading accounts of great historical battles (though they were often interpreted from a materialist perspective). My physical constitution was also quite good, and I soon showed leadership potential. My parents, seeing these tendencies, were very pleased and encouraged me to follow a military career. To them, the army was the symbol of strength, the tool to protect and expand the influence of the materialist alliance.

My path of promotion in the alliance's military was quite smooth. I joined the military academy at a young age, studied diligently, and trained relentlessly. I quickly grasped modern tactics and learned to use the most advanced weapons our faction had developed. With my natural talent, decisiveness, and the support of my family, I rose through the ranks quite quickly. Victories in large-scale exercises, or in small border conflicts (with forces that still opposed the materialist alliance), further enhanced my reputation.

And then, while still quite young, I was appointed commander of a main legion—a powerful force of about

fifty thousand men. It was one of the most elite legions of the alliance, and it should be noted that our entire alliance had many other legions of similar size, or even larger, ready for major campaigns.

Imagine armies with neat ranks, dense blocks of infantry with muskets and gleaming bayonets, formidable cavalry squadrons with sabers and spears in hand, and heavy artillery batteries pulled by strong, handsome steeds. Our uniforms were carefully tailored, in vibrant and imposing colors, with each legion and each branch having its own distinct insignia for identification on the vast battlefield. To me at that time, it was the pinnacle of fame, an affirmation of my efforts and beliefs. I was proud of that position, proud of my well-organized and strictly disciplined legion, and completely convinced that I was serving a "noble" cause—the ideal of building a world mastered by man, a world with no place for spiritual "illusions."

That tense atmosphere finally had to explode. The final order was issued from the supreme command of the materialist alliance: an all-out war would be launched. The slogan was clear and broadcast everywhere: this was a war to "liberate" the world from the shackles of superstition, to "enlighten" the lands still shrouded in the darkness of spirituality, and to establish a new world order where man and material science reigned supreme. The initial plan of the alliance leadership was a

"blitzkrieg," expected to sweep away all opposition and achieve a complete victory within a maximum of about six months.

For me and my legion of fifty thousand men, it was the moment we had been waiting for, had been trained for. Without a shred of hesitation, without a shred of doubt about the righteousness of the war. We believed we were bringing the future, smashing what was old and backward.

My legion, along with many other powerful legions of the alliance, began the march. The overlapping formations of infantry, the majestic blocks of cavalry, the rumbling artillery columns moved with overwhelming momentum. We were ordered to attack an area considered a stronghold of the spiritualist faction, a land they called the "City of Light"—said to be the center of the cultivators and home to many scriptures and legacies of Dafa.

However, the war did not go as easily as initially planned. The nations and communities that followed the Dafa faith, though their armies were not initially as professionally organized as ours, displayed incredibly brave fighting spirit. They didn't have large standing armies, but every citizen seemed to be a soldier, ready to defend their faith and homeland. They fought with great

ingenuity, using their familiar terrain and flexible guerrilla tactics, inflicting considerable losses on us.

Furthermore, the silent help of a few cultivators with "supernormal abilities" from the spiritualist faction also significantly slowed our advance. Roads we planned to march on would sometimes collapse inexplicably. Crucial bridges were subtly destroyed. Thick fog and unseasonal downpours would suddenly appear, hindering our movement and logistics. My own legion encountered strange, unexplainable situations many times. Once, while marching under the midday sun, nearly half the soldiers in the vanguard suddenly fainted, with symptoms exactly like severe sunstroke, even though the weather wasn't overly harsh. Another time, a strange epidemic suddenly broke out in a large part of the legion, spreading very quickly and causing about ten percent of the force to die within a few weeks, before our medics could barely manage to control it. Although these actions were not clearly direct, lethal attacks from a tangible enemy, being aimed mainly at stopping and exhausting us, they truly caused a great deal of difficulty and latent panic.

It was because of this staunch resistance and these unexpected obstacles that the war we thought would end in a few months dragged on. It took nearly three long years, with countless major and minor battles and significant losses on both sides, for our materialist

alliance to gradually gain the upper hand on all fronts. The price of every step forward was paid in blood and fatigue.

And then, after nearly three years of campaigning, my legion, Arion's legion, though having gone through many trials and tribulations, finally reached the outskirts of the "City of Light." Our mission remained unchanged: to capture the city, eliminate all remaining resistance, and destroy the symbols of the spiritualist faction. The slogan "invincible wherever we strike" was still shouted, but inwardly, everyone understood that this victory would not be easy.

The assault on the "City of Light" was the fiercest battle my legion had ever experienced. Although the spiritualist faction was weakened after nearly three years of war, their resistance here, in this final stronghold, was incredibly intense. They fought with a desperate determination, as if they knew this was a fateful battle. After many days of bloody fighting, my legion, now with only about three-fifths of its original strength, finally suppressed the last pockets of resistance from the enemy soldiers outside the city.

The path to the city center was now wide open. Our next target was a vast religious complex, a magnificent temple said to be the most sacred place, where the essence of Dafa was preserved. According to intelligence,

it was also the last hiding place of the cultivators and the stubbornly faithful populace.

When the massive temple gates were shattered by the power of our artillery, a scene unfolded before us. Inside the vast courtyard, before a colossal statue of a Buddha Lord, majestic and compassionate, were hundreds of people in the robes of cultivators, sitting in meditation, their mouths murmuring prayers. Surrounding them, and behind them, were thousands of ordinary people—old and young, women and children—all with their hands pressed together, facing the statue with a look of reverence and entrustment. There were no weapons, no resistance. Only the stillness of faith and the whisper of prayers.

For my soldiers, who had fought for three long years, who had seen their comrades fall, who were steeped in hatred for the "superstitious enemy," that scene did not evoke any compassion. They saw it as the final den of "ignorance," as those who must be annihilated to "purify" the world.

The order had been given from above: leave no one alive. And my legion, Arion's legion, poured in.

It was a massacre.

I stood on the high steps, looking down. I saw my soldiers, weapons in hand, rushing into the unarmed crowd. The screams, the wails, the sound of weapons striking flesh and bone, the sound of bodies falling. Blood began to spread across the white stone floor of the temple. The cultivators, even in the face of death, many of them remained calm, continuing to chant until their last breath. The common people panicked, trying to flee in vain.

I did not directly raise my hand to kill any cultivator. My role was to command, to ensure the "mission" was completed. But as those brutal images struck my eyes, as I heard those tragic cries, a chilling feeling suddenly rose in my chest. For a moment, just a fleeting moment, a sense of compassion, a thought of ordering a halt, of ending this senseless slaughter, crept into my mind. The conscience of a human being, though buried under years of materialist dogma, seemed to want to raise its weak voice.

But then, the iron will, the belief in the materialist "truth" that I had been forged in, quickly extinguished that fragile spark. "They are the enemy," a cold voice echoed in my head. "They are the barrier to progress. Their destruction is necessary for a better new order." I closed my eyes for a second, then opened them again, my face turning cold and emotionless. I let the massacre continue, until there was no sound left but the panting of soldiers

and the wind blowing through the now blood-stained, silent corridors of the temple.

That day, the legion under my command, Arion's command, committed a monstrous crime. We not only killed innocent lives, but also destroyed a sacred place, insulting Gods and Buddhas. And I personally, though I did not directly wield a sword, my tolerance, my turning a blind eye to the crime, my rejection of my conscience even for a fleeting moment, had planted an enormous karmic debt that I could not have imagined at the time.

That was the greatest, deepest sin I, Arion, committed in that lifetime. A debt that I would have to repay with indescribable suffering in countless reincarnations to come.

After the "City of Light" was occupied and "purified" in that brutal manner, the nearly three-year-long war finally came to an end. The materialist alliance had achieved absolute victory across the entire realm. The remaining members of the spiritualist faction, if not eliminated, had to go into hiding, live in fear, or were forced to renounce their faith.

I, Arion, with the "merit" of commanding the legion that conquered the "City of Light," was hailed as a hero. I was honored, generously rewarded, and promoted to a very high military rank, probably equivalent to the rank of

General in your armies today. My fame resounded throughout the alliance. With these achievements, and the support of my family and many powerful factions, I was considered one of the most promising candidates for the supreme leadership position of the entire military force of the alliance—a post similar to a "Minister of Defense"—in the upcoming term. Everything seemed to be wide open before me, a future of ultimate power and glory.

I was almost certain that I would hold that position. All the arrangements, all the lobbying, seemed to have been settled. But, life is ironic. Just before the official appointment was to be announced, an unexpected "accident" occurred.

That day, I was on my way back from an important meeting in another city. My carriage was moving quite fast. Suddenly, a heavy rain began to fall, with fierce thunder and lightning. As the carriage passed through a treacherous, slippery mountain pass, for some unknown reason, the horses suddenly panicked and reared violently. The carriage lost control, swerved, and plunged straight into a deep abyss.

My last sensation in the life of Arion was the utter terror of a free fall, then a cataclysmic impact, and darkness enveloped me.

It was only much later, in this present lifetime, when my celestial eye opened through cultivating Dafa, that I was able to see the truth of that "accident." It was not a random accident. It was a sophisticated assassination plot orchestrated by another political rival within the materialist alliance, someone who was also coveting the "Minister of Defense" seat that I was about to obtain. He had bribed the carriage driver, and probably also those responsible for the safety of my route.

It's ridiculous, isn't it? I, who had committed so many crimes in the name of the materialist "ideal," ended up dying at the hands of my own like-minded comrades, also in a struggle for power and material gain. That death, though painful and resentful, was perhaps just the beginning of my endless days of karmic repayment.

My unexpected death at the bottom of the abyss put an end to Arion's life of ambition and sin. But about a week before that "accident" happened, the last news from the distant fronts had been reported. The materialist alliance had won a complete victory. All the remaining nations and territories of the spiritualist faction had been pacified. The cultivators, those who still held firm to their faith in Dafa, had been almost completely eliminated or arrested, imprisoned, and forced to abandon their path. The nearly three-year-long war had finally ended with the absolute domination of the materialist faction. We had "succeeded" in wiping out a

worldview, a faith that had existed for thousands of years.

In those final days, just as the fighting subsided, a strange event, a sight that still makes me shudder to think about, occurred. One night, the sky was clear, and the Moon was full and bright. Suddenly, I and many others in the capital witnessed something unbelievable. The Moon, the giant sphere that our ancestors had passed down was created by cultivators, began to slowly move, drifting from its familiar orbit. At first, it was just a small shift, but then it became faster and more obvious. It didn't fall, nor did it collide with anything. It was simply leaving, flying away from the Earth. We stood there, stunned, horrified, watching that silver orb shrink, and shrink, until it was just a faint speck of light before disappearing completely into the depths of the universe.

None of us, the followers of materialism, could explain that phenomenon. Our scientists tried to propose theories about gravity, about orbits, but they were all meaningless in the face of the obvious fact: the Moon was gone. It wasn't until much later, when my celestial eye opened, that I learned it was not a natural phenomenon. It was a great evacuation. A group of Dafa cultivators with extremely high spiritual attainment, who had foreseen the inevitable decline of the civilization and the corruption of people's hearts, had used their divine powers to transport a portion of the

remaining true cultivators—an estimated tens of thousands of people—along with the cultural essence and seeds of life, to the Moon.

Later, with my celestial eye, I saw more clearly what had happened. That Moon, which looked like a solid rock sphere from the outside, was actually hollow inside. It was constructed with incredible complexity, like a miniature world, with many levels and different areas. There were fertile lands for growing various food crops and precious herbs, and areas for raising the animals they brought along. They even had a special technology, a secret system that could create an artificial force field, maintaining stable gravity and atmosphere inside, just like what you see in science fiction movies today. The entire internal structure was designed to sustain a complete ecosystem, enough for tens of thousands of people to live and survive on a long journey among the stars.

And those cultivators used their vast divine powers to control the Moon, turning it into a giant spaceship, an "ark" for an entire civilization, leaving the solar system to find another safe place to preserve their lineage and hope.

Not long after I, Arion, died in the carriage "accident," perhaps only a few days, an even more terrifying disaster struck. Since I was already dead, what happened

next was what I later observed with my celestial eye. When the Moon, with the refugees on it, had moved far away from the solar system, it seemed there was nothing left to hold the planet's balance. The enormous karma created by all sentient beings in that civilization, especially the monstrous crime of the materialist faction in opposing Dafa and persecuting cultivators, had come due.

I saw the Gods, the Protectors of this universe, the ones our materialist faction had once mocked and denied the existence of, take action... Not to save, because everything was beyond saving. They used their great divine powers to cause horrific geological upheavals, great floods, and terrible volcanic eruptions. And finally, for a complete purification, they blew up the very Earth of that previous civilization cycle. The entire civilization, with all its material scientific achievements, its crimes, and its ambitions, was completely wiped out, without a trace.

Miraculously, the Moon, that reluctant ark, after many years, perhaps several decades by our calculation, drifting and journeying through many distant regions of space at an unimaginable speed, finally, when a new Earth had been recreated by the Gods from the remnants of the old universe, when a new civilization cycle was about to begin, it was guided back to become this planet's satellite, continuing its silent mission.

...

As for the soul of me, Arion, after that tragic death, it carried a heavy, dark block of karma. I began my journey of atonement, a journey that spanned countless lifetimes through reincarnation, in the darkest and most painful realms.

That's when I began my lives as a pig, as a dog.

...

After Arion's death, my soul plunged into an endless darkness, carrying the enormous karma from the crimes I had committed. I don't know how long I drifted in that state, only feeling cold, lonely, and a vague sense of fear. Then, a strong pulling force drew me away, and when consciousness gradually returned, I found myself in a completely different form.

It was a life as a pig. Not just once, but seven times in a row.

The memory of those lives, even thinking back on them now, still makes me shudder. Imagine, from a great general commanding tens of thousands of troops, a man on the verge of supreme power, I was now a four-legged animal, living in a filthy, stinking sty. All of Arion's thoughts and ambitions seemed to have been erased,

leaving only the most basic instincts: hunger, thirst, and a vague, ever-present fear.

I remember the feeling of being cooped up in cramped, damp pens, the ground always sticky with feces and urine. Our food was the scraps and leftovers that humans threw away, poured into a grimy wooden trough. We fought each other for every bite, pushing and squealing pathetically. There was no dignity, no choice. Only a precarious existence from day to day, waiting for an inevitable end.

The greatest pain was not just the filth or hunger. It was the powerlessness, the ignorance. Occasionally, in brief moments, a faint spark of memory from Arion's life would flash in my mind—images of splendid uniforms, majestic battle formations, cheers of praise. But it would quickly vanish, leaving behind a sense of bewilderment, an unnamable anguish. Who was I? Why was I here? There were no answers. Only a heavy, sluggish body, and the ignorance of an animal.

And then, the fateful day would come. I remember the feeling of being dragged out of the sty violently. The squeals of my kind, the utter panic. Then the cold blade, and a heaven-tearing pain. The end of one life. Then another life would begin, also in the form of a pig, also in a dirty sty, and also ending with a painful death. Seven times, over and over again.

But there was one particular life as a pig, one I can never forget, even though it was just a brief moment of awareness before death.

In that life, just like the other pig lives, I was raised in a wretched sty. Then one day, the owner dragged me out, tied my four legs tightly, preparing to slaughter me. At that moment, as death was near, as the butcher's sharp knife was about to descend, something strange happened. For a brief moment, I don't know how, the memory of my life as General Arion suddenly returned to me with crystal clarity. I remembered everything: the conquests, the cruel orders, and the faces of the cultivators I had ordered to be killed in the temple long ago.

And then, I looked up at the butcher standing before me. An overwhelming horror seized me. I recognized him! That face, those eyes, though weathered by time and the hardships of a lifetime, I couldn't possibly mistake them. He was one of the cultivators my soldiers had killed in the massacre at the "City of Light"!

In the body of a pig, I couldn't speak, couldn't do anything but tremble. A belated remorse, an indescribable fear surged within me. I tried to struggle, to do something to beg for mercy. With a phenomenal effort, I managed to push myself up, trying to kneel on my front legs, my forelimbs clasped together as if in

prayer, letting out pathetic squeals, hoping the butcher might understand, might spare me.

But he, the butcher, probably just saw a pig terrified before its death. He could not have known that inside that filthy body was the soul of the one who had caused his death in a previous life. His eyes remained cold. The knife still descended.

I died in utter despair, in extreme horror and regret. The moment of recognizing the butcher, and the powerlessness of being unable to do anything to change my fate, carved a scar on my soul that would never fade. It was a harsh lesson about the law of karma, about the absolute justice of the universe. As you sow, so shall you reap. Every crime must be paid for, sooner or in later, one way or another.

Seven lives as a pig, each a torment, a cleansing of sins through suffering and humiliation...

...

After seven lives as a pig, full of suffering and humiliation, I thought I had reached the bottom of damnation. But Arion's journey of karmic repayment was not over. Following that were fifteen lives I had to endure in the body of a dog.

Fifteen times, I was born again in a different form, still a four-legged animal, but perhaps a bit more agile, and with more complex relationships with humans. Life as a dog brought different kinds of suffering, different lessons, but in the end, it was still about powerlessness, dependence, and experiencing the diverse range of animal emotions.

I remember one life, I was a stray dog, wandering the filthy streets of a crowded city. Every day was a battle to find leftover food, to avoid the beatings from cruel people, to find some corner to spend the night without freezing. I tasted hunger to the point of collapse, the fear of being chased away, and an extreme loneliness.

In another life, I was adopted by a poor family in a remote countryside. They didn't have much, but they shared what they had with me. However, life was not easy. The owner, perhaps because of his own hard life, often took his anger out on me. I remember the causeless beatings, the days of being starved for some minor mistake I didn't even intend to make. I remember the freezing winter nights, when I was forced to sleep outside on the porch, shivering in the bone-chilling cold, looking inside through a crack in the door, seeing their warm light and laughter, and feeling an indescribable self-pity. Despite being treated poorly, the instinct of a dog still made me loyal, still attached to them, still trying to please them.

But not every life as a dog was full of suffering. There were lives where I also tasted love, though sometimes it ended in an even greater pain.

I remember one life most vividly, I was a very smart dog, deeply loved by a family in the countryside. They treated me like a member of the family. I played with the children, guarded the house, and felt their warmth and trust. Those were rare happy days in my long chain of animal lives.

Then one day, the family decided to move to the city. Perhaps life in the city didn't allow them to bring a big dog like me, or perhaps they thought I wouldn't be able to adapt. I don't know the real reason. I only remember that one morning, they packed their things and got on a horse-drawn cart. They petted me one last time, their eyes held a hint of sadness, then the cart rolled away.

At first, I didn't understand what was happening. I just thought they were going somewhere for a while and would be back, like always. I waited patiently at the gate, day after day. I waited for a whole week. The food they had left for me ran out. I missed them terribly. At that time, I still didn't think I had been abandoned. I naively assumed they must have met with an accident on the road, which was why they couldn't return.

With that thought, and with infinite loyalty, I decided to set out to find them. I left the familiar house and began a journey into the unknown. I followed my intuition, following the familiar scents that lingered in the air. I went through days of extreme hunger, being chased away by strangers, and attacked by other dogs. But the thought of finding my owners gave me strength.

The search lasted for who knows how long. I crossed so many fields, so many villages. My body grew thinner and more exhausted by the day. Finally, while wandering in a dense forest, I had no strength left. I collapsed under an ancient tree.

And then, a beast of prey, it seemed to be a tiger, appeared. It looked at me with the cold eyes of a predator. I had no strength to resist, no will to run. Just before it pounced on me, a sharp pain rose in my heart. It was not just the physical pain I was about to endure, but the pain of not finding my owners, and a glimmer, a bitter suspicion that maybe, just maybe, I really had been abandoned.

I died in that forest, with a heart broken by betrayed loyalty, and an unanswered question about the love I once had.

Fifteen lives as a dog, each a different experience of suffering, of powerlessness, of affection, of loyalty, and

also of betrayal. Those memories, though of an animal, are still deeply etched in my consciousness, like never-fading reminders of the sins Arion had sown, and the seeds of repentance, however late, had begun to sprout even in an animal's body.

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CHAPTER 2: PRINCE OF THE BLUE SEA

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After the long, drawn-out days in the bodies of pigs and dogs, which probably amounted to nearly a hundred years in the human world, my soul was finally freed from the animal realm. I was once again reincarnated as a human. But the karma from Arion's life was still too

heavy, so in those first human lives, I still had to live in poverty and hardship, experiencing all sorts of deprivation and humiliation. Life after life, perhaps over a hundred times, I was born into poverty, sickness, or an early death. Gradually, over time and through those relentless karmic repayments, my karma lessened somewhat. I began to be reincarnated into families with slightly better conditions, receiving an education, with some property and social status.

Among the myriad lives that have passed, some are as faint as a fleeting dream, but others are deeply etched in my memory, with very special experiences. And below, I want to tell you about one such life. This happened a very, very long time ago, about two million years ago. At that time, I was not a land-dweller, but a being of the sea. I was a prince of a kingdom of merfolk, living deep beneath the ocean. I think this was also a very memorable life, a magical world with laws and creatures that today probably only exist in legends.

The Kingdom of Coralia – The World of Merfolk Under the Sea

Our kingdom at that time was named Coralia, or something that sounded similar in the language of the

merfolk. It was hidden in a vast abyssal valley, or perhaps on an immense coral plain, surrounded and sheltered by majestic underwater mountain ranges. There was no bright sunlight like on land. The entire kingdom was illuminated by a shimmering, mystical light, emanating from countless species of coral, seaweed, and strange bioluminescent sea creatures. That light was sometimes as gentle as the full moon, other times as vibrant with all colors, creating a breathtakingly beautiful scene. In the shallower waters, near the surface of the kingdom, we could sometimes feel the faint, warm rays of the sun piercing through the deep blue water.

We did not build cities or houses of stone or metal like the people on land. Our homes were gigantic coral clusters, carved by nature over thousands of years, or sometimes "cultivated" and shaped by us according to our wishes over many generations, creating unique forms. Sometimes, we lived in natural caves deep within the underwater cliffs, decorated with sparkling seashells, precious pearls, and colorful sea stones. My father's royal palace, where I was born and raised, was the grandest, most brilliant coral cluster, located in the center of Coralia, emitting a gentle, aquamarine light that could be seen from afar.

The world of merfolk under the sea at that time was not just a single race. Our kingdom of Coralia was just one of many communities, and even within the kingdom, there

were many different lineages of merfolk, living interspersed or having their own distinct territories, but all submitted to my Father the King. A special thing was that each major merfolk race often had its own dialect, characteristic sounds in their communication. And our communication underwater was also very different from how humans talk on land. We did not utter clear words like you do. The language of the merfolk was a series of melodious sounds, whistles, and high and low trills, perhaps somewhat similar to how dolphins or blue whales communicate, as your scientists study today. Those sounds could travel very far in the water, carrying messages and emotions. Besides that, body language and facial expressions were also an extremely important part of our communication. A gentle flick of the tail, a small change in the eyes, or the way we tilted our heads, all could convey very clear meanings. We merfolk of that time lived very simple and natural lives, so we didn't have much need for verbal communication like humans on land later on. Much of the understanding between us came from direct perception, from the resonance of souls, and from those subtle expressions.

My race, the royal Coralian lineage, was considered the noblest. We had aquamarine scales, shimmering like the most beautiful gemstones at the bottom of the sea. When we swam, those scales reflected the shimmering light, creating magical streaks of light. Our hair was long and

soft like sea silk, usually a dark blue or moss green color. A prominent feature of the Coralian lineage was our ability to emit a gentle stream of biological energy from our bodies. This energy stream was not strong enough to attack large enemies, but it could help us defend against smaller creatures, or more importantly, heal minor wounds for ourselves and others.

Besides the Coralian lineage, there were other merfolk races with their own characteristics and roles. For example, there were the Black-Scaled Merfolk. As their name suggests, their scales were a glossy, jet-black color. They usually lived in deeper waters, where light could hardly reach. The eyes of the Black-Scaled Merfolk were extremely good at seeing in the dark, and they were very skilled at camouflaging themselves in underwater crevices or dense seaweed beds. Therefore, they often undertook important tasks such as reconnaissance, scouting the situation in distant seas, or guarding the border areas of the kingdom. They were taciturn, quiet, but very brave and loyal.

Then there were the Coral Merfolk. They were probably the most colorful race of merfolk. Their scales bore all sorts of vibrant colors, exactly like the coral reefs where they often lived and hid. The Coral Merfolk were smaller in stature than us, but incredibly agile and skillful. They were masters of camouflage, able to blend into the coral reefs so perfectly that it was difficult for anyone to spot

them. They were also very good at harvesting various types of marine plants and rare algae used for food or medicine.

In addition, there was a branch of merfolk called the Warriors. They might have been a special branch of our Coralian line, or a combination of Coralian and Black-Scaled, I don't remember clearly anymore. But their characteristic was a much more robust physique than other races, and their scales were also harder, like a natural layer of armor. They spent most of their time practicing combat skills, using weapons made from shark teeth, sharp shells, or long spears made from the bones of large fish. They were the main force protecting the kingdom from external threats.

In terms of scale, our kingdom of Coralia at that time had a population of around one million merfolk. Surrounding Coralia's territory, there were also a few other smaller merfolk states. Sometimes we had peaceful relations, exchanging goods, but other times there were minor conflicts over territory or resources.

The society of our merfolk at that time, if compared to what I know about human history on land later on, was probably similar to an early feudal society, but with very different features. At the head were the King and Queen, who ruled the kingdom together, considered the embodiment of the wisdom and blessings of the Great

Ocean. It is noteworthy that our merfolk society did not have the heavy gender discrimination of many feudal societies on land, such as in ancient China. Men and women were quite equal in many aspects of life, and succession to the throne was not entirely based on gender. A person with sufficient talent, virtue, and strong spiritual power, whether male or female, could be considered for succession. In fact, my older sister, with her superior spiritual power and wisdom, was already being considered by the King Father and the elders of the royal family as the future heir to the throne. Next were the other princes and princesses like me, each with their own roles and responsibilities. Below them were the great clans, those who had rendered meritorious service to the kingdom, granted lands and certain privileges by the King Father. Finally, there were the common people, the Black-Scaled Merfolk, the Coral Merfolk, and even the Coralians who were not of noble lineage.

We did not have a complex system of officials or large schools and libraries like on land. Knowledge, laws, and the historical stories of our people were mainly passed down orally from generation to generation, through songs and melodies that bore the sound of the sea. A few of the most important things might be simply recorded on large coral slabs, in an ancient script, curved like the waves of the merfolk.

We didn't have distinct philosophers or religions in the way you understand them. We merfolk worshipped the Mother Ocean, believing it to be the source of all life, the one who protected and nurtured all. We believed in the balance of nature, in the simple law of karma: doing good would be blessed by the Ocean, doing evil would be punished. In the faith of our merfolk, the members of the royal family, especially the Coralian lineage, were considered to be chosen by the Gods themselves, by the Mother Ocean, to lead and protect the kingdom. It was believed that we were granted special favors, manifested in what was called "spiritual power"—a form of pure biological energy. Thanks to this grace, we not only had special abilities, but our wisdom, health, and lifespan also surpassed that of ordinary people. The average lifespan of merfolk in general at that time was also quite long, around two hundred years. Royal family members like my father, or those with strong spiritual power, could live even longer, some surpassing three hundred years of age.

An important part of the royal family's role, and also an expression of favor from the Mother Ocean, was the ability to connect and communicate with the sea gods. It wasn't always clear, but occasionally, especially the King Father, the elders of the royal family, or a few merfolk with special karmic connections among the common people, could receive messages and guidance from the

gods. This could happen in prophetic dreams, or during moments of deep silence while performing sacred rituals dedicated to the Mother Ocean. These messages often related to major issues of the kingdom, omens of natural disasters, or advice on how to maintain harmony.

However, a special thing was that, despite our long lifespan, the reproductive capacity of our merfolk was naturally not as high as many species on land. Throughout her long life, a merfolk woman would typically only get pregnant and give birth a maximum of two times. This seemed to be a law of nature for our race, helping to maintain a harmonious population balance in the kingdom and avoiding over-exploitation of the Mother Ocean's resources.

The spiritual power of the royal family members, a gift from the gods, was not just a privilege, but also a great responsibility: to use it to protect the subjects, to maintain the prosperity and peace of the kingdom. This spiritual power did not manifest in exactly the same way in each person; it was like a unique signature. For example, my Father the King had the ability to create a weak but effective protective force field around himself whenever he needed high concentration or faced danger. My older sister, who was considered the heir to the throne, had very special eyes; when she wished, those eyes could emit a brilliant light in the darkness, helping to see through illusions or find tiny hidden objects. And

there was an uncle of mine whose spiritual power allowed him to accumulate and discharge an electric current from his body, similar to the electric eels we know of later. That current was strong enough to paralyze small sea creatures or stun larger enemies for a moment.

As for me, in that lifetime, my name was Lyra—I transliterate it into such a name. I was a Prince, the second son of the reigning King of the kingdom of Coralia.

Prince Lyra – Talent and Virtue

From a young age, I displayed the qualities of a member of the royal lineage. The spiritual power bestowed upon me by the Mother Ocean manifested clearly in my extraordinary physical strength. I could swim faster than any young merfolk of my age, and my endurance was also remarkable. Minor injuries and collisions during play or training often healed very quickly on my body. My hair was a dark blue, like the color of the sea on moonless nights, and my eyes, people often said, shone like the most precious pearls found at the bottom of the ocean.

The King Father and the Queen, although they could not "teach" us how to use our spiritual power—because it was a private grace bestowed by the Gods on each person, and its manifestation was also very personal—they constantly taught and admonished us about the importance of maintaining a kind heart and pure virtue. They emphasized that spiritual power only truly had meaning and exerted a good effect when its owner had a benevolent heart, and knew how to think for others. It was these teachings that guided my perception and use of my own power. More importantly, they sowed in my heart the seeds of compassion, justice, and a deep sense of responsibility towards my subjects and the kingdom. I was taught that true strength does not lie in superior combat ability, but in a heart that knows how to love and protect the weak. The spiritual power we possessed was not for pride or show, but to serve, to bring peace and happiness to all living beings under the protection of Coralia.

Our marital life as merfolk also had very special characteristics. Whether royal or common, we all valued fidelity, one husband, one wife. Interestingly, members of the royal family were completely free to get to know and marry the person they loved, even if that person came from a common background. Sincere love was valued above all else. And there was a miraculous thing, considered a blessing from the Mother Ocean: if a

commoner married a member of the royal family and, after a few years of living together, still maintained a kind and virtuous character, then gradually, that person could also be granted a portion of spiritual power by the Gods, although it might not be as strong as their royal spouse's. This further encouraged harmony and love between the classes in society.

As for myself, Prince Lyra, I was at that time deeply in love. She was a Coral Merfolk girl, living in a small village on the coral reef south of the kingdom. She had no spiritual power, nor did she belong to a noble lineage, but her pure beauty, gentleness, and kind soul had completely captured my heart. We often met secretly, exploring mysterious caves together, or simply swimming in silence among schools of colorful fish. Our love was very pure and intense. I had planned to speak to the King Father and the Queen soon, to ask for permission to officially marry her, but the major events that were about to happen forced all plans to be temporarily postponed.

As I grew older, I didn't just stay within the royal palace. I often spent a lot of time swimming throughout the kingdom's territories, from the vibrant coral reefs where the Coral Merfolk lived, to the dark underwater mountain crevices, the home of the Black-Scaled Merfolk. I enjoyed talking (in our merfolk way) with the common people, listening to their thoughts, their wishes, and also

their difficulties. If I could help in any way within my ability, no matter how small, I never refused. Perhaps because of this, even though I was only a second prince and not the heir to the throne like my sister, I still received the love and respect of the vast majority of my subjects. They saw in me not only the strength of a potential warrior, but also the approachability and virtue of someone who would always stand by them.

The Threat from the Border

The peaceful life in Coralia, with the days spent diligently training my spiritual power and secretly nurturing my love for the Coral Merfolk girl, passed by. Until one day, grim news from the northern border of the kingdom began to arrive, bringing with it terror and chaos. It was reported that a herd of Sea Serpent Kings, larger than ever seen before, numbering in the dozens, had appeared in those waters. Leading the herd was a Sea Serpent King chieftain, its size far superior to the others, its scales not the usual stone gray but a terrifying crimson color, glinting with a cold gaze.

This herd of Sea Serpent Kings was extremely ferocious and organized. They no longer hunted alone as before, but coordinated their attacks on the small fishing villages of the Coral and Black-Scaled Merfolk in the border

region. They destroyed homes—the coral clusters where the people lived, killed many merfolk who couldn't escape in time, and spread terror across a vast area. Cries of sorrow and desperate pleas for help began to echo all the way to the royal palace, shattering the usual tranquility.

My Father the King was extremely worried. He immediately summoned the elders of the royal family and the commanders of the Warrior army to discuss countermeasures. The merfolk army of Coralia, mainly consisting of warriors from the Warrior lineage, though brave and skilled in combat, were mostly accustomed to defending territory or engaging in small-scale skirmishes with other small merfolk states or lone Sea Serpent Kings. Facing a whole herd of large Sea Serpent Kings, led by a cunning chieftain, was an unprecedented challenge in the kingdom's history. The elders, who had been through many crises, also expressed grave concern. The entire kingdom of Coralia was plunged into an atmosphere of tension and fear. All the usual recreational activities and singing seemed to cease.

The Prince Charges Forward

Seeing the suffering of my subjects through the accounts of those who had been lucky enough to escape, seeing

the deep worry etched on the King Father's face, my heart burned like fire. I could not sit idly in the luxurious palace while my people were facing danger and death. The spiritual power bestowed upon me by the Mother Ocean, the strength I had trained for so long, was not for enjoyment, but to protect the weak.

In an emergency court meeting, after hearing the generals present the critical situation and the difficulties in dealing with it, I did not hesitate to step forward and kneel before the King Father.

"Your Majesty," I said, my voice resolute, "I request to take the vanguard's seal, to lead the kingdom's most elite troops to the northern border, to annihilate the Sea Serpent Kings, and bring peace to our subjects!"

The entire court fell silent. The King Father looked at me, his eyes filled with surprise and worry, but also a hint of pride. He knew my character, my courage, and my heart. But he also knew the danger of this mission.

"Lyra, my son," the King Father said gently, "your courage is commendable. But this herd of Sea Serpent Kings is very different, they are extremely fierce and led by a chieftain. This is not an ordinary hunt."

"I understand, Your Majesty," I replied, "but it is precisely for that reason that I cannot stand by and

watch. If we do not destroy them, they will continue their destruction, and fear will spread throughout the kingdom. I have been blessed with strength by the Mother Ocean, and I am willing to use that strength to protect Coralia. Please trust in me, Your Majesty!"

My sister, the heir to the throne, also spoke up in support. Many of the generals, who had witnessed my abilities in training sessions, also expressed their confidence. Finally, after some consideration, seeing the firm determination in my eyes and the support of the court, the King Father nodded in agreement.

He stood up, walked over majestically, and personally handed me the royal family's heirloom sea sword. The blade was made from the giant tooth of an ancient shark species that had long been extinct, sharp and incredibly hard. He also gave me a light but durable suit of armor, crafted from the shell of a giant sea turtle that had been fossilized for thousands of years at the bottom of the sea. What was special was that before giving it to me, the King Father had used his own powerful spiritual energy to bless it, infusing energy into every fiber of the shell, making it not only light but also many times more durable, capable of withstanding powerful attacks.

"Go, my son," the King Father placed a hand on my shoulder, his voice deep and powerful. "Take with you

the strength of Coralia, and the blessing of the Mother Ocean. Be careful, and return safely."

I bowed my head to accept the great responsibility, my heart swelling with pride and an iron resolve. That day, I, Prince Lyra, officially entered the life-and-death battle to protect my kingdom.

Fierce Battles

After receiving the order from the King Father, I wasted no time and immediately assembled the kingdom's most elite troops. They were the bravest merfolk warriors, mostly from the Warrior lineage, along with some agile, skilled Black-Scaled Merfolk scouts. All of them were men who had been through many trials, with combat experience and unwavering loyalty to Coralia. The number was not very large, only a few thousand, but they were truly the finest elite.

We quickly set out for the northern border, where the herd of Sea Serpent Kings was spreading terror. The march was urgent but disciplined. As we approached the devastated sea area, the scene before us was truly tragic. The coral clusters, which were the homes of the people, were smashed to pieces in many places. The traces of the brutal attacks were still there. The air was heavy with the

stench of death and fear. This only strengthened the resolve of me and my soldiers to fight.

The war with the herd of Sea Serpent Kings lasted longer than I had initially expected, probably for several lunar weeks. It was a series of incredibly fierce battles, full of hardship and challenges. We had to face them in about six or seven major battles, not to mention countless other small skirmishes.

These Sea Serpent Kings were truly terrifying. They were not only numerous, but also very cunning under the command of the crimson-scaled chieftain. They knew how to take advantage of the complex terrain of the seabed, the deep underwater mountain crevices, or the vast, dense kelp forests to ambush us, or to retreat when at a disadvantage. Their skin was thick and hard, and our ordinary spears could hardly penetrate that layer of scales, unless we hit weak points like the eyes or the softer underbelly.

In some battles, thanks to the bravery of the warriors, the agility of the Black-Scaled scouts, and especially my spiritual power, we achieved important victories. I remember one time, I used my extraordinary speed to charge straight into the middle of their formation, my sea sword in hand slashing down continuously, seriously injuring several large serpents and forcing them to temporarily retreat. At such times, the cheers of the

soldiers echoed throughout the sea, and their morale and confidence were greatly boosted. We also managed to kill a number of Sea Serpent Kings in those battles, reducing their strength somewhat.

But there were also battles where we faced many disadvantages and suffered considerable losses of soldiers. The serpents were too numerous, attacking from multiple directions. The powerful swishes of their giant tails created dangerous whirlpools in the water, and the venom from their bites was a real deadly threat. Many of my brave warriors sacrificed their lives or were seriously injured and could no longer fight. Seeing my comrades fall, my heart ached, but I had to suppress that pain to continue commanding, to continue fighting.

I realized that although I was a skilled warrior with strength and courage, in terms of strategy, of complex plans to deal with such a cunning and numerous enemy, I was still lacking. I often tended to rely on strength and courage to confront them directly, rushing into the most dangerous places. This might inspire the soldiers, but sometimes it put us in disadvantageous situations, or made us miss better opportunities to destroy the enemy with fewer losses. My sister, if she were here, would probably have come up with much smarter and more effective battle plans.

Nevertheless, we did not retreat. Every time we pushed back the herd of serpents, we advanced a little further, reclaiming every inch of the sea for the kingdom. The battle was a seesaw, fierce, and becoming increasingly arduous.

The Trap and the Tragic Death

After receiving the order from the King Father, I did not delay. Based on the initial intelligence gathered by the Black-Scaled scouts, the herd of Sea Serpent Kings that appeared at the northern border only numbered around twenty, although one of them, the leader, looked much larger and more cunning. With this information, I was confident that an elite force would be enough to wipe them out, even with their venom. Therefore, I decided to lead only over five hundred of the kingdom's bravest and most skilled warriors, believing that with this force, we could easily win.

We quickly set out, full of fighting spirit. However, we had no idea that this was seriously flawed intelligence. In reality, that herd of Sea Serpent Kings numbered over two hundred. The crimson-scaled chieftain was extremely cunning; it had ordered its herd to split into many small groups, each with less than twenty, to operate and hunt separately. This was what deceived our

scouts, causing them to submit an inaccurate report on the true scale of the threat.

When my troops approached the border area, we indeed only found a group of Sea Serpent Kings numbering close to twenty, just as reported. They seemed to be quite "cautious" upon seeing our forces. I ordered about a hundred soldiers to advance and engage. The battle was quite swift, and we clearly had the upper hand. That herd of serpents, after a few weak attacks, began to fight and flee very quickly towards the treacherous underwater mountain ranges.

The problem was, the speed of the Sea Serpent Kings when they really wanted to escape was formidable. Most of my soldiers, though brave, could hardly catch up with them in the complex terrain of the seabed. Only a few, including myself and about thirty of the most elite warriors, those with strong spiritual power or superior swimming skills, had a speed comparable to or slightly faster than them.

Seeing the herd of serpents trying to escape, and not wanting to miss the opportunity to destroy them, a sense of haste arose in me. Although I knew that splitting off a small group to pursue could be dangerous, I couldn't think of any other feasible plan to prevent them from escaping and regrouping. I decided: I would personally lead this group of thirty fastest individuals to pursue

that herd of serpents, while the rest of the legion would follow to provide support.

That was a fatal mistake.

That group of nearly twenty Sea Serpent Kings was actually just bait. They had successfully lured our small group, including myself, deeper and deeper into a dark, narrow canyon between the underwater mountain ranges. The terrain here was extremely treacherous, with countless caves and corners, a perfect place for an ambush.

Just as we entered the middle of the canyon, a sudden noise echoed from all sides. From within the caves, from the shadows of the cliffs, hundreds of other Sea Serpent Kings rushed out simultaneously, blocking all escape routes. Their numbers were many times greater than what we had imagined—over two hundred of them. We had completely fallen into a trap.

At that moment, the crimson-scaled chieftain, whom we had only glimpsed from a distance, finally revealed itself. It was larger than any Sea Serpent King I had ever seen, its blood-red eyes stared at me, carrying a bloodlust and ferocity that was chilling.

My thirty brave warriors, knowing they were in a death trap, did not flinch. They immediately tightened their formation around me, preparing for the final battle. But the disparity in forces was too great.

The chieftain seemed to be aiming only for me. It let out a deafening roar under the water, then charged straight at me like an arrow. I fought with all my strength and spiritual power. The sea sword in my hand swung, striking its stone-hard scales, creating sparks that flew up in the dim water. The armor given by the King Father, blessed with spiritual power, helped me withstand many tail whips and venomous bites from it. I had wounded it in many places, and its black blood began to spread.

But it was too strong, too resilient, and the support from its herd was too overwhelming. In a moment of carelessness, as I was trying to block an attack for a loyal warrior who was being attacked from behind by another serpent, the chieftain seized the opportunity. It unleashed an extremely powerful tail whip, sending me flying, causing me to crash violently into the sharp cliff wall. The armor did not break, but the impact stunned me. And before I could regain my senses, its giant jaws, with long, sharp fangs, had snapped down on me.

My last sensation in the life of Prince Lyra was a pain that tore through my entire body, and darkness enveloped my consciousness. My soul seemed to escape,

watching my body being swallowed by the monster... No, not quite like that immediately.

Before my consciousness completely faded, I could still feel the chaos around me. Despite being severely injured by the chieftain's whip and being caught in its jaws, I was not yet dead. A few of my more than thirty brave warriors, perhaps less than ten remained, were also fighting in desperation, trying to form a final small circle around me, though they themselves were covered in wounds. The roar of the Sea Serpent herd, the faint clash of weapons, the pained cries of the remaining men... all merged into a chaotic, deafening sound.

It was at that critical moment, when we were almost completely exhausted, that the rest of the legion, over four hundred soldiers, finally reached the entrance of the canyon. Perhaps they had heard the fierce sounds of battle, or sensed something unusual. Seeing our plight, seeing me, their prince, though severely wounded but still with a flicker of life, surrounded by hundreds of monsters, they did not hesitate to charge in to rescue us, with the faint hope of being able to free us.

But it was truly a desperate effort. Not only could they not break through the dense encirclement of the frenzied Sea Serpent herd, but they were also drawn into an unequal battle. I only had time to see my loyal soldiers

fight and fall, before the chieftain, with one final squeeze, completely ended my life.

In the end, only more than fifty men from the entire relief force, exhausted warriors covered in wounds, were lucky enough to escape that deadly encirclement, bringing back the tragic news of my sacrifice and that of almost the entire elite army to the kingdom.

It was only much later, when my celestial eye opened in my current life, that I learned another tragic detail. The Coral Merfolk girl I loved, after hearing the news of my sacrifice in that battle, had cried incessantly for three days and three nights. And then, in utter despair, she took her own life, with a fervent wish to be united with me in a future life...

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CHAPTER 3: THE MOUNTAIN GOD OF CHANGBAI

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After the life as Prince Lyra deep beneath the sea, with its heroic battles and an unfinished love story, my soul continued its journey of reincarnation. After experiencing many more human lives with all their ups and downs, joys and sorrows, sometimes as an official, sometimes as a commoner, sometimes as a traveling merchant... The memories of those lives are somewhat fainter. But there is one life I remember very clearly, because at that time, I was not human.

In that lifetime, I was a Mountain God, entrusted with ruling over the majestic and sacred Changbai Mountain. (Changbai Mountain is the mountain located on the border between China and North Korea today).

This happened a very, very long time ago, perhaps about seventy thousand years ago, according to our modern way of calculating time. That period belonged to a civilization that existed even before the ancient civilizations we know of. Their language and writing, though different, had some similarities, being close to the ancient Chinese we know of later. Perhaps that is why some concepts and names from that time, such as "Changbai," have left their mark, although their meaning may have changed somewhat. My tenure there, as a Mountain God, lasted for over a hundred human years.

Changbai Mountain at that time was not like ordinary mountains. It was truly a place that the ancients called "a

convergence of spiritual energy, connecting Heaven and Earth." It was like a giant pillar of energy, linking Heaven and Earth, a holy land for cultivators and other living beings within it.

Changbai Mountain – A Sacred Realm

The beauty and sacredness of Changbai Mountain seventy thousand years ago are hard to fully describe in any of our modern words. Imagine vast primeval forests with ancient trees thousands of years old, their trunks so large it would take several people to encircle them, their lush canopies blocking out the sky. The air there was always fresh, cool, and imbued with a special sacred aura; inhaling it made one feel light and refreshed, their mind clear.

The peak of Changbai Mountain was much higher then than it is today; I remember it must have exceeded four thousand five hundred meters above sea level. The summit was perennially covered in a thick layer of pure white snow, sparkling under the sun or shrouded in mist. There was no large lake on the peak like the Heaven Lake that later generations would know. Instead, the summit was a majestic granite massif, where snow and wind howled, creating a scene that was both solemn and harsh, yet incredibly pure and sacred. It was believed to

be the closest place to touch Heaven, where the gods often descended to observe the mortal world.

Changbai Mountain was also home to countless rare and spiritual beasts, birds with brilliant plumage, and strange flowers and exotic herbs that could not be found anywhere else. The most special of all were the thousand-year-old ginseng plants. They were not just precious medicinal herbs, but had truly attained a high level of spirituality, capable of sensing and even moving, hiding from those with unkind hearts.

It was because of this sacredness and abundant energy that Changbai Mountain attracted many Daoist cultivators from all over. They chose secluded caves and simple thatched huts nestled deep in the forest to cultivate in seclusion, seeking tranquility for their souls, and absorbing the spiritual energy of heaven and earth to aid their cultivation. They also often sought and harvested rare herbs on the mountain to refine elixirs, or to prepare medicinal remedies to save people.

My Role and Power (as a Mountain God)

As the God entrusted by the Heavens to generally govern the entire Changbai Mountain region, my responsibilities were immense. I had to oversee the

harmonious operation of nature within my domain, from the blades of grass, the branches of trees, the animals, to the flow of the earth's spiritual energy. My mission was to maintain overall balance, protect the gentle creatures, help the true cultivators who had a karmic connection with the sacred mountain, and sometimes, I also had to punish those who did evil or acted to destroy the sacredness of the mountain. Of course, all my actions had to be based on Heavenly will, and I could not act arbitrarily according to my own wishes.

The power of a Mountain God like me also had certain limits; it was not as boundless as many people mistakenly believe. Within the scope of Changbai Mountain, I could create gentle breezes to drive away the oppressive heat, or light mists to shelter the weak creatures, or sometimes to test the will of those who had just set foot on the mountain. I could also call for small rains to water the plants when needed, or cause small rocks to move, changing the landscape to an extent that did not cause major disturbances to nature. I could appear in various forms when needed, or hide myself from sight. One of my important abilities was to see through the good and evil in the hearts of those who entered my domain, to know who was worthy of help and who needed to be wary of.

However, major weather phenomena such as typhoons from the sea, or prolonged droughts over a large area,

were usually arranged by gods at higher levels, those who governed much larger geographical regions or natural elements. In such cases, I had no power to intervene and change them, but could only try to minimize the damage within my mountain's scope, if permitted by the Heavens.

Under my general governance, each species of creature, each specific area within Changbai Mountain, had other, smaller gods who were more specialized, like a hierarchical system. For example, there was a Tiger God who managed all the tigers in the mountain, ensuring they hunted according to natural laws and did not harm other creatures without cause. There was a Monkey God who watched over his troop. Then there were Wood Gods who cared for the growth of precious trees, Stone Gods who looked after the stability of large rocks and treacherous cliffs, and many other gods, each with their own responsibilities.

This system operated according to very strict rules, based on the law of karma and Heavenly will. For instance, if a Tiger God, due to negligence, allowed his tiger to attack and eat a person without cause—not because the person had trespassed or provoked it first, or there was no karmic debt from a past life—then that Tiger God would also be reprimanded by the Heavenly Court, or even punished, for not fulfilling his responsibility. Everything in this universe has its justice

and order, even in the world of gods. My tenure of over a hundred years at Changbai Mountain was a long series of fulfilling these responsibilities, keeping the sacred mountain always peaceful and harmonious.

Witnessing the Stream of Daoist Cultivators and the Miracle of Ginseng

Throughout my more than one hundred years of governing Changbai Mountain, one of the things I did most often was to quietly observe the stream of Daoist cultivators who came here. They came from many places, carrying different karmic destinies and purposes. Some sought tranquility for meditation, some hoped for enlightenment, and others simply wanted to live a secluded life, far from the mortal world. They spoke an ancient language, which I, as a god of this land, could understand—their prayers, their secret thoughts.

Through my divine eye, I could see the sincere reverence of many, the perseverance and endurance they showed on the arduous path of cultivation. I also saw the trials and tribulations they faced, both from the outside and from within their own hearts. Most of these cultivators, although they might have certain sensitivities to the supernatural world, could not perceive my presence

clearly. They could feel the sacredness of the mountain, but did not know that a Mountain God was quietly watching over and sometimes protecting them.

However, during my long tenure, I also had a few encounters and communions with Daoist masters of very profound cultivation. These were people who had cultivated for many years, had opened their celestial eye, and possessed certain divine powers. With these individuals, we didn't need to use ordinary human language to converse. We communicated through our celestial eyes, through the transmission of thought, a form of ability that later generations might call "telepathy." These were truly special discussions, transcending the limits of words. We could exchange views on the Dao—a concept that had existed very early in their culture, on the wondrous workings of heaven and earth, on the mysteries of the universe. Sometimes, if Heavenly will permitted, I would also offer small pieces of advice, subtle warnings on their cultivation path, helping them to avoid pitfalls or to realize points where they needed to break through. Such encounters were not frequent, but each one left a deep impression on me about the wisdom and determination of true cultivators.

Another thing I often witnessed was the hunt for thousand-year-old ginseng plants on Changbai Mountain. As I said, these ginseng plants were not just ordinary medicinal herbs. They had absorbed the

spiritual energy of heaven and earth for hundreds, thousands of years, so they had a very high level of spirituality, and could even be considered as beings with a certain degree of intelligence. Their shapes were often very special, with roots resembling human figures, emitting a warm spiritual energy that could be felt. They also had the ability to move and hide themselves very skillfully. And of course, such precious ginseng plants also had lower-level Wood Gods, or spirits of the mountain forest, to watch over and protect them.

I often used my divine power, or signaled the Wood Gods, to protect these precious ginseng plants. When those with unkind hearts, the greedy, or those whose karmic destiny had not yet arrived, tried to find them, I would make the ginseng plants seem to "disappear" right before their eyes, or lead them astray in other directions. Only cultivators with high virtue, like the Daoist masters I had the fortune to communicate with, or those common people with truly pure hearts and a great karmic connection with the mountain forest, had the karmic opportunity to "see" and "receive" the ginseng. "Finding" a thousand-year-old ginseng was not simply a matter of luck, but an act of permission from me, the consensus of the guardian gods, and sometimes even the "acceptance" of the ginseng spirit itself. I remember there were Daoist masters of high virtue and prestige who, upon finding a precious ginseng, would not hastily take it. Perhaps they

sensed that the ginseng had not yet reached its "ripest" moment, or they wanted to leave it for someone with a greater karmic connection. At such times, they would often use a bit of their magic to hide the ginseng more carefully, waiting for a more suitable time in the future.

These were the brushstrokes in the life of a Mountain God, the things I witnessed and experienced on the sacred Changbai Mountain.

The Fateful Encounter

In the long years of governing Changbai Mountain, I always tried to keep myself within the framework of Heavenly will, not interfering too deeply in the fate of humans or other beings. I understood that everything in the world has its karmic cause and effect. But there was one time, and only one time, that the compassion in my heart rose so strongly that it made me deviate from that principle. And it was that very time that created a major turning point in my life as a Mountain God.

One day, as I was wandering in my realm, observing the mountains and forests, I noticed a young woman struggling to climb the steep mountain slopes. She seemed to be someone with some foundation in cultivation, her initial Daoist heart seemed quite sincere,

but I could feel that her foundation was still shallow, and her cultivation practice was not much. The name of that girl, if translated into our modern language, would have a meaning similar to Ming Xin.

Ming Xin came to Changbai Mountain not to cultivate in seclusion or seek enlightenment for herself. She came here with a very specific purpose: to find a thousand-year-old ginseng to save her aging mother who was seriously ill back in her hometown. I saw the image of her mother lying on her sickbed, her breath weak, her life like a candle in the wind. I also saw the filial piety, the anxiety, and the boundless love that Ming Xin had for her mother.

She had been on this mountain for many days. Every day, from early morning until sunset, Ming Xin scoured the forests, climbed countless slopes, searching in every rock crevice and bush. Her body was exhausted, her flimsy clothes were worn and torn in places, and her small feet were probably bleeding from hitting sharp rocks. But in her eyes, there still shone a determination, a faint hope. She believed that if she could just find the spiritual ginseng, her mother would be saved.

I had been observing Ming Xin for several days. I saw the sincerity in her filial heart. But at the same time, I also saw the Heavenly secrets. According to predestined fate, Ming Xin's mother's life was nearing its end; it was

the karmic debt she had to pay from previous lives. And Ming Xin herself, with her current foundation and virtue, did not have enough karmic destiny to possess a thousand-year-old ginseng, a spiritual treasure of heaven and earth. Her finding the ginseng at this time, although it might help her mother prolong her life a little, would disrupt the arranged karmic destiny. Moreover, that blessing was too great for what Ming Xin could bear at that time; it might even turn into a disaster for her later on.

I knew that. But when I saw Ming Xin, after many days of fruitless searching, completely exhausted, sitting down on the root of an ancient tree and sobbing, the cry of a weak girl in the desolate mountains was so heart-wrenching. She looked up at the sky, tears mixing with sweat, begging the gods, begging the Mountain God of Changbai Mountain to show mercy, to show her a way. "Please save my mother! I am willing to be a cow or a horse to repay the favor!" Those desperate pleas, mixed with tears of despair, touched the depths of my heart.

Compassion Beyond Limits

Witnessing that scene, Ming Xin's pain and despair, my heart was truly moved. An infinite compassion rose up, overwhelming all considerations of Heavenly secrets, of

the laws that a God like me must abide by. I told myself, I am the Mountain God of this mountain, I have some power, can't I help a filial daughter in such dire straits? Just a little help, perhaps it wouldn't cause any major disturbance. A life about to depart, if it could be extended a little longer to be with a loved one, wouldn't that be a good thing?

At that moment, the compassion in me clouded my reason. I forgot that the compassion of a God must follow Heavenly principles, must be placed in the harmony of the universe, and cannot be based on fleeting sentiment, let alone go against the pre-arranged karmic destiny. I just simply thought that I wanted to help Ming Xin, to alleviate her suffering.

And so, I decided to intervene.

I used my divine power to gently influence the subtle energy flows in the space, creating an invisible guidance. I did not appear directly before Ming Xin, but I skillfully guided her weary footsteps to a remote area where I knew there was a precious ginseng plant, about a few hundred years old—not the rare thousand-year-old type, but with enough spiritual energy to create a miracle. At the same time, I also used my thoughts to send a gentle message to the Wood God who was looking after that ginseng plant, and also to the spiritual consciousness of the ginseng itself, making them lower their guard so that

Ming Xin could find it more easily. I thought that a few-hundred-year-old ginseng probably wouldn't create too great a karmic debt like a thousand-year-old one.

Immediate Consequences and a Warning from the Heavens

Sure enough, a short while later, Ming Xin, in a state of near despair, suddenly saw a faint halo of light emitting from a dense bush nearby. She wiped away her tears, struggled to her feet, and approached it. And then, she let out a cry of immense joy. Before her eyes, hidden under the leaves, was a ginseng root with a very beautiful shape, emitting a pure fragrance. Although it was not the thousand-year-old type she had been hoping for, she could feel the abundant spiritual energy from it. She carefully dug up the ginseng root, cradled it in her hands like a treasure, and then bowed her head repeatedly, thanking heaven and earth, thanking the mountain forest. Then, she hurried down the mountain, her heart filled with hope.

As soon as Ming Xin disappeared behind the trees, carrying the ginseng root that I had "helped" her find, I suddenly felt a powerful shock in the space around me. The clear blue sky above Changbai's peak suddenly

darkened. A majestic and somewhat stern golden light from the ninth heaven shone straight down on where I stood. The air became still, and all the sounds of the mountain forest fell silent.

In my consciousness, a voice echoed, not a sound from a throat, but a direct, powerful transmission of thought:

"Oh, Mountain God of Changbai! You have, out of personal feeling, disrupted the Heavenly principles and interfered with karma! Do you know that your action just now, though stemming from compassion, has gone against the natural operation of fate? The compassion of a God must follow Heavenly principles, must be based on wisdom, and cannot exceed the laws of the universe. You have arbitrarily changed what was pre-arranged, and you will have to bear the consequences for this action!"

I was stunned, my whole body as if frozen. It was only then that I truly came to my senses, realizing my grave mistake. Compassion, if not accompanied by wisdom and absolute adherence to Heavenly will, not only fails to bring about good things but can also cause unforeseen disturbances, and I myself would have to be responsible. A sense of regret and fear rose in my heart, but it was too late. The warning from the Heavens was very clear.

The Judgment and the Compassionate Decision

After the stern warning from the Heavens, I knew I could not escape judgment. Not long after, I felt an invisible pull, taking my spiritual body away from Changbai Mountain to a solemn realm where higher-level gods gathered.

Standing before the Heavenly Court, I did not deny my crime or try to justify my actions. I sincerely admitted my fault, acknowledging that I had, out of temporary compassion, disrupted Heavenly secrets and interfered with another's karma. I accepted any punishment.

The gods in the Heavenly Court, after carefully considering the matter, saw clearly that my action, though flawed and in violation of the laws, stemmed from a compassionate heart, a desire to help a sentient being in distress, and not from selfish or malicious intent. Moreover, my intervention was also moderate, only a few-hundred-year-old ginseng, not enough to cause major upheavals in fate.

Therefore, the punishment the Heavens gave me, though strict, also contained a compassion and an arrangement full of karmic connection. I would be stripped of a

significant portion of my divine power, and more importantly, my tenure as the Mountain God of Changbai would have to end earlier than planned. I would have to descend to the mortal world and be reincarnated as a human.

The purpose of this descent, as I understood it, was not merely to be punished. The Heavens wanted me, by directly becoming a part of the karmic flow I had interfered with, especially the karmic bond with the filial daughter Ming Xin, to experience and understand more deeply the consequences of that action. At the same time, it was also an opportunity for me to further perfect my cultivation, so that my compassion in the future would always be accompanied by wisdom and absolute respect for Heavenly will, no longer swayed by fleeting emotions.

Farewell to the Mountain Forest and a New Beginning

Before my soul officially left the divine realm to prepare for reincarnation, I was allowed to return to see Changbai Mountain one last time. Standing high above, looking over the entire majestic mountain range, where I had been attached and had protected for over a hundred

years, a feeling of reluctant parting filled my heart. I could feel the attachment from the plants and trees, from the animals, from the babbling brooks, and even from the spiritual ginsengs I once protected. It seemed they also knew that their Mountain God was about to leave. I silently bid them all farewell, promising that if we had the karmic connection, I would one day return.

Then, my soul was guided by a god, passing through different layers of space, entering the cycle of reincarnation in the human realm. And it was a truly unexpected arrangement, a wonderful karmic connection that had been set up. I was reincarnated, not into a strange family, but as the son of Ming Xin—the filial daughter whom I had once felt compassion for and helped on Changbai Mountain long ago.

Life as Ming Xin's Son – Experience and Growth

Ming Xin, my mother in that life, was an extremely kind, virtuous woman who loved her children dearly. Perhaps thanks to a little bit of virtue from her filial piety towards her own elderly mother (Ming Xin's mother in her previous life), along with the spiritual energy of the ginseng root I had 'helped' her find long ago, her mother

had recovered from the serious illness and lived for many more years, long enough to see her grandson born and grow up.

My father in that life (Ming Xin's husband) was also a simple, kind man who loved his wife and children very much. Our family lived in a small rural village; life was somewhat hard, but always filled with laughter and mutual care.

From a very young age, I had vague feelings, strange dreams about vast mountains and forests, about something very sacred and majestic. I had a special connection with nature, loved to wander on the hills, listen to the birds sing, and watch the clouds float by. But I could not clearly remember my past life as a majestic Mountain God. However, in my consciousness, there was always a special respect for cultivators, for high mountains, and a vague belief in the existence of Gods and Buddhas.

I was deeply loved and cared for by my parents, and was given a good education. Growing up, I also proved to be a good, filial son, and studied diligently. Later, I also passed the exams and became a small local official, probably equivalent to a county magistrate today. Throughout my years as an official, I always tried to live an upright, honest life, doing my best to help the common people within my ability, trying to bring justice

and prosperity to the people in the region I governed. Perhaps, somewhere in my subconscious, I still wanted to do good things, as a way to compensate for what my thoughtless intervention as a Mountain God might have caused, even though I was not clearly aware of it.

In that life, as Ming Xin's son, I truly tasted the full range of a human life's ups and downs: the joy of family reunion, the sorrow of partings, the worries about food and clothing, the responsibility of work and society. I understood that every living being, no matter who they are, has their own destiny and burdens. I also understood more deeply the love of parents, their silent sacrifices. And I realized that external intervention in someone's life, no matter how good the intention, must be extremely careful, because we can never foresee all the consequences and disturbances it might cause to the already very complex wheel of karma.

The life as Ming Xin's son, though ordinary, taught me invaluable lessons about life, about human love, and about the workings of Heavenly principles. It was truly a necessary preparation for the next journeys of my soul.

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CHAPTER 4: THE HEAVENLY SECRETS OF THE THREE KINGDOMS

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Perhaps today, many have heard of China's Three Kingdoms period, an era of heroic battles, astonishing strategies, and brotherhood praised for generations. But that is only part of the play. Hidden behind the fluttering banners and the clash of weapons, there was another world, a world of reclusive Daoists, of numerology, of those who could see fate. It was an era where Heavenly will and karmic retribution were unusually apparent.

And in one lifetime, I was there, not as a famous general, but as a silent observer.

My soul at that time bore a very Daoist name: Qingxu Zi.

I cultivated the Dao from childhood on Wudang Mountain, a sacred mountain shrouded in mist year-round. My master was a true cultivator. He not only taught me medicine and numerology, but more importantly, he opened for me the path to perceive the workings of heaven and earth, what the world calls Heavenly will. Thanks to a good foundation and his guidance, my celestial eye opened early, allowing me to see things that the naked eye could not.

When my master attained the Dao, achieved consummation, and ascended to the heavens, I left the mountain and began my journey wandering the mortal world. It was a time of great chaos in the land. The Han court was but a shadow, and warlords rose up

everywhere, each with a dream of becoming an emperor. I was over forty then, had traveled through many lands, and had seen much misery. In those years of wandering, I met many Daoist cultivators hidden among the people; some cultivated in famous mountains, others hid in the noisy marketplaces. We often needed only a glance to recognize each other, would discuss the world's affairs and the Dao for a few sentences, and then go our separate ways.

But among them, there were a few special encounters, meetings with people who not only had profound cultivation but also a close connection to the fate of the entire era. And it was through these extraordinary meetings that I gradually saw the invisible net that enveloped the entire land. The first meeting was with Mr. Shuijing, Sima Hui...

And then, karmic destiny led me to the Shuijing Estate.

Meeting Mr. Shuijing

Sima Hui's estate was not in a very remote place, but it exuded a strange sense of seclusion. A sparse bamboo fence surrounded it, a few ancient pine trees stretched out to provide shade, and the sound of water gurgled from a small stream. There were no high gates or grand

walls, no bustling servants. I walked in and only saw a young boy sweeping dry leaves under a plum tree. Seeing a guest, the boy did not ask for my name, just bowed and led me deeper inside.

Under a simple wooden porch overlooking a pond, an old man with white hair and beard, dressed in coarse cloth, was sitting alone at a Go board. The black and white stones were in a complex, tense position. The old man did not look up, but his voice rang out, deep and clear.

"Fellow Daoist, you've brought the mists of Wudang Mountain with you. There is a difficult position on my board, I invite you to have a look."

I knew he was Mr. Shuijing, and he also knew who I was. Among Daoist cultivators, spiritual communion is sometimes faster than words. I smiled and sat down opposite him.

"Master," I said, "in this game of Go, the white side, though at a disadvantage and surrounded, still has a path to life in the corner. It's just that this path is too narrow, requiring a miraculous move to break the siege. I fear an ordinary person would find it hard to see, and even if they did, they would not have the courage to make the move."

Mr. Shuijing finally looked up, his eyes as clear as an autumn lake. He looked at me and nodded slightly. He waved his sleeve, sweeping the Go stones off the board.

"It seems, fellow Daoist, that you and I no longer need to discuss Go. Please have some tea."

The boy brought out a pot of steaming tea. The fragrance was light and pure. We sat in silence for a long time, with only the sound of the wind rustling and the water flowing.

"Fellow Daoist, you have traveled far and wide," Mr. Shuijing spoke first. "What have you seen in this great game of the world?"

"I have seen dragons and snakes intermingled, deer and stags contending," I replied. "But I have not seen the true dragon. The dragon of the Han dynasty, its energy has waned, its dragon vein has been severed, leaving only a lingering shadow."

Mr. Shuijing sighed, a sigh that seemed to contain the sorrow of four hundred years. "Indeed. The dragon vein is broken. What the warlords are fighting for is actually a soulless dragon carcass. Yuan Shao in Hebei, from a family of high officials for four generations, looks like a fierce tiger, but his qi of fortune is mixed; strong on the

outside, weak on the inside. He is a paper tiger; a single heavy rain will dissolve him."

"What about Cao Cao in Xuchang?" I asked. "I see that this man's qi is deep and unfathomable, having both the qi of a king and the qi of a treacherous hero. Very complex."

"Fellow Daoist, you see correctly," Mr. Shuijing took a sip of tea. "Cao Cao is a *jiaolong*, a flood dragon. A flood dragon can dominate rivers and seas, stir up clouds and rain, but it is not a true dragon. It can act on behalf of Heaven for a period, but it cannot become Heaven. His destiny is to end an old era, not to start a new dynasty that can last. He is the whip of the Heavens, used to lash the dead dragon carcass, to clear the stage for other actors."

His words enlightened me. "The whip of the Heavens." That phrasing was so precise.

"What about the descendants of the Sun family in Jiangdong?" I continued. "That place uses the great river as a defensive line, the land is fertile, and the people's hearts are loyal, like a separate realm."

"Jiangdong has the qi of an emperor, but it is the qi of a king who is content with his lot," Mr. Shuijing replied. "They can hold on to their own territory, but they do not

have the destiny to unify the world. They are like a tiger occupying a mountain; it can be the overlord of a region, but it will never come down to the plains to contend with the pride of lions."

We fell silent again. What we were saying, if an ordinary person heard it, would probably be considered idle talk. But I knew, it was what we truly "saw," the workings of qi, of Heavenly destiny.

I looked at the calm surface of the pond. I thought of Liu Bei, a man of royal lineage, now wandering everywhere, his great ambitions unfulfilled.

As if reading my thoughts, Mr. Shuijing said softly, "There is one more person, who carries a little of the true qi of the Han, but it is too weak. This person has an abundance of righteousness, but lacks the timing of fate. He is like a good seed, but has fallen into a cold winter, making it very difficult to sprout into a great tree."

"Master," I asked, "then will this world remain in chaos forever?"

Mr. Shuijing did not answer immediately. He stood up, clasped his hands behind his back, walked to the edge of the porch, and looked at the ripples on the pond.

"It will not. Every stage must eventually have its curtain fall. After the great chaos, the dust will settle. There will be talented people who emerge, to give the game a temporary conclusion. But it is only a temporary conclusion. Fellow Daoist, do you know of a young man in Longzhong?"

"The Sleeping Dragon Master?" I replied.

"Yes," Mr. Shuijing turned back, a complex light in his eyes, a mix of admiration and regret. "This man's talent can be compared to Jiang Ziya and Zhang Zifang. But unfortunately, he was born at the wrong time. Jiang Ziya met King Wen when the Shang dynasty was at its end, so he could help the Zhou dynasty establish an eight-hundred-year foundation. Zhang Zifang met Emperor Gaozu of Han when the Qin dynasty had become extremely tyrannical, so he could help the Han dynasty achieve four hundred years of peace."

He paused, then said a sentence that I still remember to this day.

"As for the Sleeping Dragon, he meets a lord, but at a time when the heavenly mandate of the dynasty has already been exhausted. He is like the best physician in the world, but is invited to treat a patient whose internal organs are all failing. He can prolong the dying breath, can make the last days less painful, but he cannot bring

the dead back to life. That is his tragedy, and also the tragedy of this era."

His words were like a hammer striking my mind, making my vague thoughts clear. I stood up and bowed deeply.

"Thank you, Master, for your guidance. Qingxu Zi understands now."

As I left, I could still hear his faint sigh. I knew that soon, Liu Bei would come here, and Mr. Shuijing would tell him about the Sleeping Dragon and the Fledgling Phoenix. But the core of the Heavenly secret, the "wrong timing," he would probably keep to himself in a sigh.

Meeting Zhuge Liang

Leaving the Shuijing Estate, the clouds of confusion in my mind about the state of the world seemed to have dissipated somewhat. The master's words about the "great physician" and the "patient whose internal organs were all failing" echoed in my head, urging me to go to Longzhong. I wanted to see this "Sleeping Dragon" with my own eyes, not to see how talented he was, but to feel the soul of a man facing a fateful choice.

Zhuge Liang's thatched cottage was situated on a hill in Longzhong, from where one could overlook a vast

expanse of land. Unlike the refined and secluded Shuijing Estate, this place had a different atmosphere. It still had the simplicity of a recluse, but within the stillness, there was a hidden dynamism. I saw neatly plowed fields, lush vegetable patches, and a few military sand table models made of earth and pebbles, meticulously arranged in the courtyard. This was not the place of someone who wanted to completely escape the world, but of someone who was waiting for the right time.

I went there with Cui Zhouping, a mutual friend of both mine and Zhuge Liang's. As we entered, I saw a young man, only in his early twenties, sitting by the window, holding an ancient book, but his gaze was not on the book but on the clouds floating in the sky. The young man was tall, with a scholarly appearance, but his eyes were unusually bright, as if he could see through a person's heart. That was Zhuge Kongming.

He put the book down, stood up, and greeted us with clasped hands, his demeanor poised and elegant. Cui Zhouping introduced me as a Daoist from Wudang Mountain. Zhuge Liang looked at me, his eyes narrowed slightly, a look of scrutiny but not at all impolite. I knew he was also "looking" at me, and not just with his physical eyes.

We sat down, at first just talking about the weather, about farming, the idle chat of friends who hadn't seen each other in a long time. But gradually, the conversation shifted to the state of the world.

Cui Zhouping was a straightforward man. He asked Zhuge Liang: "Kongming, you are a man of great talent and wisdom, why do you keep toiling in these mountains? Why not go out and serve the world, to make a name for yourself?"

Zhuge Liang just smiled, fanning himself with his feather fan. "Brother Zhouping, the time is not yet right, why be in a hurry? A wise bird chooses its branch to perch on, a good minister chooses his lord to serve. The lord has not appeared, the time has not come; to go out now would be like a moth flying into a flame, wasting a lifetime for nothing."

Hearing that answer, I knew he was not an ordinary man seeking fame. He was waiting for a "lord" worthy of his talent. I then spoke up: "Master says 'the time has not yet come,' but can you wait until 'the time comes'? Or, do you intend to create the 'time' yourself?"

My question seemed to have struck a chord with him. Zhuge Liang's gaze upon me deepened.

"Daoist Master speaks truly," he replied, his voice no longer casual. "Time is determined by Heaven, the situation is created by man. Man can create the 'situation,' but cannot go against the 'time.' The Han dynasty's four hundred years, its qi of fortune has been exhausted, that is the 'time.' The warlords contend, the people suffer, that is the 'situation.' A talented person in these times can at most ride the 'situation' to create a new state of affairs, but how can one hold onto a 'time' that has already passed?"

Our conversation delved deeper into the principles of the I Ching, of the art of stargazing. He spoke about the movement of the stars, about the correspondence between celestial phenomena and worldly affairs with clarity and precision, not like a scholar who learns from books, but like someone who has personally observed and verified them. I knew this young man was also a Daoist cultivator, someone who had unlocked his wisdom to a very high level.

When the conversation reached its most engaging point, I focused my gaze on him. And that's when a strange scene appeared before my celestial eye.

The image of the elegant scholar gradually faded, and another image, from a more distant past, was superimposed on it. I saw a battlefield shrouded in smoke and fire. On a high platform, a general was sitting

in a wheelchair, his face covered with scars and the tattoos of a criminal. His legs were still there, but his kneecaps had been removed, leaving them limp and useless, making it impossible for him to ever stand up again. His eyes were sharp and cold, his hands constantly giving signals, directing his troops like a perfect machine. Tens of thousands of soldiers obeyed his every command, forming ever-changing battle formations, trapping the enemy in a deadly embrace. I recognized him. It was Sun Bin, the brilliant but tragic military strategist of the state of Qi during the Warring States period. The image was fleeting, then disappeared, returning me to the sight of Zhuge Liang sitting opposite me, healthy and whole.

In an instant, I understood everything.

The unfortunate soul of Sun Bin, after enduring the cruel betrayal of Pang Juan, had now returned, in a sound body, with an even sharper intellect. And his later habit of sitting in a four-wheeled vehicle in battle was not a show of ostentation, but an indelible mark of a past life, a reminder of the years he had to command his troops from a wheelchair.

I looked at Zhuge Liang, and my eyes must have revealed something. He looked at me too, and then seemed to sense what I had seen. He said nothing, just quietly reached out to pour me more tea.

"Daoist Master, coming from Wudang Mountain, you must have seen many things," he said softly, as if speaking to himself. "This Zhuge Liang is but a farmer, hoping to live a peaceful life. I only fear that the tree wishes for stillness, but the wind will not cease."

I knew he was being modest. "Master, you are not a tree," I replied. "You are a great wind. It's just that this wind is waiting, not knowing whether to blow east or west. But I see that soon, another wind, a wind carrying the true qi of the Han, though weak, will find its way here to join with your wind."

I had predicted the arrival of Liu Bei.

After hearing this, Zhuge Liang did not show any joy or surprise. He put down his teacup and looked out the window, where the clouds were still drifting lazily. He said nothing, but I heard him sigh. A very faint sigh, almost inaudible, but it contained a vast acceptance.

It was not a sigh of hesitation. It was the sigh of someone who already knew the path ahead was full of thorns, who knew the outcome would be tragic, but still accepted it, as part of his mission, part of the destiny his soul had to fulfill. In that moment, I no longer saw a strategic Kongming, but only a great soul, silently facing his own tragedy.

Meeting the Divine Physician Hua Tuo

After meeting the Sleeping Dragon, I did not linger long in Xiangyang. I continued my journey, heading east, where there were mountains famous for their precious herbs. I wanted to find a truly quiet place to reflect on what I had seen. And it was on that path that I had another extraordinary encounter.

On a deserted mountainside, when the morning mist had not yet dispersed, I saw an old man with a white beard and hair, a medicine basket on his back, carefully making his way along a steep cliff to pick a strange branch. His movements were agile and steady, not like a man in his seventies. I recognized him, not because of his fame, but because of the pure and peaceful qi that emanated from him. It was the divine physician Hua Tuo.

I did not approach to disturb him, just sat down on a nearby rock, quietly observing. A while later, after he had gathered what he needed, he turned and saw me. He was not surprised, just smiled kindly and walked over.

"This old man is greedy, wanting to take a little of heaven and earth's spiritual energy, and unexpectedly met a fellow Daoist here," he said, his voice resonant.

"Master takes the spiritual energy of heaven and earth to save living beings, that is in accordance with the Dao, how can it be greedy," I replied.

We sat down together on the rock. Without many words, I could feel that we were fellow Daoists, just that our paths manifested in the world differently. I cultivated the Dao to seek wisdom for myself, while he used the Dao to heal others.

I looked at his medicine basket and saw extremely rare herbs that only grew in places where the earth's qi converged. I understood that his medical skills did not come only from books or accumulated experience. His medical skill, in essence, was a kind of divine power.

When I focused my gaze on him, my celestial eye saw it. I saw that whenever he diagnosed a patient, a faint light shone from his third eye area, penetrating the patient's flesh, allowing him to see every internal organ clearly, to see the meridians operating, to see where qi and blood were blocked, and even the seeds of disease, the tumors that were hiding. That was why he could perform surgeries that the world considered divine miracles. And I knew, that was also why he could see the tumor in Cao Cao's brain, something that no ordinary medical skill could do.

"Master's medical skill has reached the realm of the divine," I said. "It's just a pity that there are some illnesses that cannot be cured by medicine or surgery."

Hua Tuo nodded slightly, his gaze turned to the distant north, where Cao Cao was entrenched. "That's right, fellow Daoist. Illnesses of the body can be treated. But illnesses of the mind, illnesses of fate, my medical skills are powerless against them. There are some people whose suspicious minds have become a tumor even larger than the one in their brain. To cure them, one must first operate on that mind. But that is an impossible task."

In a moment of silence, he and I seemed to see the same scene. I saw him being arrested on the orders of Cao Cao, who was in a fit of rage and suspicion. I saw him sitting in a dark prison, calmly arranging the final pages of his medical books before facing death. Hua Tuo, with his abilities, obviously also saw that fate for himself. But his face showed not a trace of fear or resentment, only a calm acceptance.

"Everyone comes to this world with their own debts, fellow Daoist," he said softly. "This old man has spent his whole life healing the sick and saving people, but there are also debts that must be repaid with this very life. That is the justice of heaven and earth."

I clasped my hands and bowed to him. I respected his medical skills, but I respected his heart of accepting Heavenly destiny even more. We parted in silence, each going our own way, but I knew our souls would meet again in higher places.

The encounter with Hua Tuo, along with what I had seen with Mr. Shuijing and Zhuge Liang, urged me to find a final answer, an answer to the entire tragedy of this era. I found a quiet cave on a mountain and began to meditate, determined to see the root cause.

As my mind calmed, as all worldly distractions faded, my celestial eye opened to a deeper space. My consciousness seemed to transcend time, flying back into the past. Four hundred years, a long time for a human life, but just a blink of an eye in the flow of the universe.

And I saw.

I saw Emperor Gaozu of Han, Liu Bang, majestic and powerful, but his eyes glinted with suspicion and jealousy towards the meritorious officials who had gone through life and death with him. I saw the image of Han Xin, the invincible general, being tricked into the palace and executed. Before dying, he looked up to the sky and lamented with a cry full of resentment: "I regret not listening to Kuai Che, to the point of being deceived by a woman. Is this not the will of Heaven?"

His resentful qi did not dissipate, but condensed, passing through four hundred years of history, entering the body of a child who would later be named Cao Cao.

I then saw Peng Yue, a loyal king, being falsely accused of rebellion and subjected to extreme punishment, his entire clan exterminated. The resentment of him and his clan also turned into a black stream of qi, flying away to find a soul that would later be reincarnated as Liu Bei.

Then I saw Ying Bu, another fierce general, being cornered and forced to commit suicide. His resentful qi also did not dissipate, but found its way to the land of Jiangdong, waiting for the day to be reincarnated as Sun Quan.

The most shocking scene appeared last. I saw the soul of Emperor Gaozu of Han, Liu Bang, after his death, having to go through many reincarnations to repay his karma. And in this life, he had been reincarnated into his own royal family, becoming Emperor Xian of Han, the last emperor of the Han dynasty.

At this point, everything suddenly became terrifyingly clear.

Nothing was a coincidence. This was a perfectly arranged settlement of karmic debts. The debt from long ago was too great, and now an entire empire had to be

used to repay it. The three unjustly killed meritorious officials had now returned, transformed into the three most powerful forces, dividing and tearing apart the very foundation that the ancestor of their tormentor had built. Emperor Xian of Han, the embodiment of Liu Bang, had to pay the price by powerlessly witnessing the collapse of his empire, becoming a puppet in the hands of the descendants of the very people he had killed.

This was "Heavenly destiny," a huge, invisible net of karma that no one could escape. Understanding this, I no longer saw the Three Kingdoms as a contest of heroes, but as a bloody and tragic repayment of debts. And all the characters in it, from Cao Cao, Liu Bei, Sun Quan, to even Zhuge Liang, Zhou Yu, Sima Yi, all were just pawns, playing out their roles on a Go board of karma that had been set up four hundred years before.

The World as a Play

Understanding that this entire era was a grand play to settle karmic debts, I began to see the events that unfolded afterward with different eyes. I no longer saw only human schemes, the victories and defeats on the battlefield, but also the invisible hand of the Heavens arranging everything. The things that later generations

considered mysterious, lucky, or miraculous, became incredibly clear to the eyes of a Daoist cultivator.

I will always remember the story of Liu Bei's horse, Dilu. It was rumored to be a horse that killed its master, and whoever rode it would meet with disaster. When Liu Bei was in Jingzhou, Cai Mao wanted to harm him, and he had to flee alone on horseback. In front of him was the Tan Stream, several zhangs wide, with a swift current, and behind him, the pursuing troops were closing in. In that life-or-death situation, the horse Dilu suddenly made an extraordinary leap, flying over to the other bank, saving Liu Bei from death. People considered it a rare stroke of luck, or that Liu Bei had great fortune and thus escaped disaster.

But when I observed that event in meditation, I saw a completely different scene.

I saw Liu Bei in despair, urging his horse to the stream bank. He knew he had no way out. In that moment of life and death, as his will to live flared up most intensely, a golden beam of light from the high heavens shone straight down, enveloping both man and horse. The light was warm and powerful. I knew it was divine power from the Heavenly Gods who were protecting him. Liu Bei was an important character in this karmic play; his role was far from over, how could it end here?

Under the blessing of divine power, the frightened horse Dilu suddenly became incredibly calm. Its eyes shone brightly. Fear vanished, replaced by an extraordinary bravery. Its entire musculature was filled with a supernatural energy. Its leap was not merely the strength of an animal, but an expression of Heavenly will. It flew over the stream, as light as a leaf, landing safely on the other side. That was not luck; it was the necessary protection for a man with a true destiny, a man whose role had not yet reached its curtain call.

And then there was the matter of Zhuge Liang. As I said, he knew well that the Han's fortune was exhausted, that he could not go against Heavenly destiny. So why did he still decide to leave his thatched cottage, to descend the mountain to assist Liu Bei, to embark on a path he knew had no ultimate successful outcome?

Later generations praised him for his loyalty and righteousness, for the spirit of "knowing something cannot be done, yet still doing it." They saw it as the noblest expression of a great minister utterly devoted to his king and country. That is true, but it is only the surface of the story, the shell that ordinary people can feel and admire.

At a deeper level, I understood that Zhuge Liang, as a cultivator, had accepted his role in this drama. He did not descend the mountain to change the outcome. He

descended to fulfill his mission. What was that mission? It was to make the concept of "Righteousness" (*Yi*) of the Three Kingdoms period more brilliant and rich. It was to leave for posterity an immortal example of loyalty, of the intimate bond between a ruler and his minister, of devotion until one's last breath. He knew he would fail in restoring the Han dynasty, but he would succeed in creating a story for the ages, a lesson that people thousands of years later would still have to ponder.

His life, from the time Liu Bei visited his cottage three times until his death at the Wuzhang Plains, was the most vivid lesson. Without him, Liu Bei's story would just be that of a benevolent imperial uncle who was incompetent. Without him, the "Righteousness" between Liu, Guan, and Zhang would have no ground to shine. The Heavens needed a character like him to make the play perfect, to push the core spiritual values to their peak.

Zhuge Liang accepted that tragic role. He was not trying to fight against fate, but was following fate to play his part to the fullest, a great and lonely role.

The Legends of Zhuge Liang

The mystical legends about Zhuge Liang were the same; they were not mystical at all to those involved. Later generations who read the stories and watched the plays were often amazed and admired him, thinking he was a celestial immortal with divine powers. But in fact, it was just the application of abilities that a cultivator could achieve when their mind nature and wisdom had opened to a certain level.

For example, the story of "borrowing arrows with straw boats."

People only saw the result: in one foggy night, Zhuge Liang sat calmly on a boat, playing his zither and drinking wine, and managed to get over a hundred thousand arrows from Cao Cao, solving the difficult problem that Zhou Yu had set to harm him. They thought it was a supreme stratagem, an extraordinary gamble. But they didn't know that for Zhuge Liang, it was not a gamble, but a certain calculation.

A few days before, I had been observing him. I saw that he was not just studying the river terrain, not just analyzing Cao Cao's suspicious psychology. I saw him go out silently every night, looking up at the stars, his hands performing calculations on his fingers, his mouth murmuring things that ordinary people could not understand. He was not just observing astronomy in the usual way. He was using the art of numbers, combined

with his perceptive abilities, to accurately calculate the workings of the weather.

He knew for certain that on the third night, during the fifth watch, there would be an unprecedentedly thick fog on the Yangtze River. So thick that you couldn't see a person's face from a few steps away. That was "Heavenly timing." He also knew that Cao Cao was a suspicious man, and in such foggy conditions, he would not dare to send his navy out to fight, but would only dare to have his archers shoot arrows out for self-defense. That was "Human harmony"—or rather, a deep understanding of the opponent's psychology. And he knew that the geography of that section of the river was favorable for arranging the boats and retreating. That was "Earthly advantage."

Once he had grasped all three factors—Heavenly timing, Earthly advantage, and Human harmony—the matter of borrowing arrows was just a matter of execution. It was not a miracle, but the result of understanding and applying the laws of nature, an ability that a cultivator could achieve. To ordinary people, it was divine calculation. To him, it was just acting in accordance with nature.

The story of the Battle of Red Cliffs was even more dramatic. People were most terrified by his act of setting up a seven-star altar to pray for an east wind for three

days and three nights. They truly believed he could summon winds and call for rain, changing the very heavens and earth.

But the truth was more subtle.

Zhuge Liang, by observing celestial phenomena and calculating with secret methods, had long known that on the winter solstice of that year, the yang qi would begin to rise. The interaction of air currents over a vast body of water like the Yangtze River, combined with the unique terrain, would create an unusual weather phenomenon: a southeast wind would rise for a few days, right in the middle of winter when the wind usually blew from the north.

He did not "create" the wind. He only "knew in advance" that the wind would come.

The act of setting up an altar to pray for wind was, in essence, an elaborately staged play. It had multiple purposes. First, to elevate his own status, to make the Eastern Wu faction, especially Zhou Yu, respect him and not dare to look down on him. Second, to deceive everyone, creating a legitimate reason for him to stay on the seven-star altar, separated from the surveillance of Zhou Yu, who always intended to kill him right after the fire attack succeeded. Third, and most importantly, it was to buy time. He had secretly arranged with Zhao

Yun beforehand, giving detailed instructions to come and pick him up by boat on the south bank on the very day the wind rose.

On the day the battle was about to take place, I was not the only Daoist cultivator present. Many other reclusive Daoists had also come to the area around the Red Cliffs. We did not arrange to meet, but we all felt that a great play of Heavenly will was about to be performed. We hid ourselves on the hills, on the remote riverbanks, not to participate, but to silently observe. We saw the flag on Zhuge Liang's seven-star altar begin to flutter towards the northwest. We saw the smug look in Zhou Yu's eyes. And we also saw Cao Cao's anxiety as he looked at the warships linked together with iron chains, a fatal mistake that Pang Tong had planted in his mind.

Then, as the east wind began to rise, gently at first and then stronger, we saw it all. We saw Huang Gai's fire ships rushing towards Cao Cao's naval camp. We saw the sea of fire erupting into the sky, the tragic cries. And we saw a small boat, under the escort of Zhao Yun, quietly leaving the riverbank, taking Zhuge Liang away before Zhou Yu could realize it.

The entire Battle of Red Cliffs was a perfect coordination of human schemes and the arrangements of the Heavens. Man can only succeed when his actions are in harmony with the "time" and "situation" that heaven and earth

have already decreed. Zhuge Liang, Zhou Yu, Pang Tong, Huang Gai... they were all excellent actors, but the true scriptwriter and director of this play was Heavenly will.

The Final Battle

But Zhuge Liang was also human. And when a human becomes too immersed in a role, they sometimes cannot avoid making mistakes, cannot avoid letting the worldly mentality of struggle overwhelm the tranquility of a Daoist cultivator.

Throughout his career, I had witnessed him use his extraordinary wisdom to command troops and turn the tide many times. But never before had his "mentality of struggle" been so apparent and so strong as in the final battle at Shangfang Valley.

From my realm, I observed the entire valley like a Go board. I saw clearly every move Zhuge Liang made. He had prepared this trap so perfectly it was terrifying. Shangfang Valley was a death trap, with steep cliffs on both sides, a narrow entrance, and almost no exit. He had his soldiers disguise themselves as laborers, moving fake provisions back and forth day after day, deliberately letting Sima Yi's spies see. He knew Sima Yi was an old

fox, suspicious, and would not easily fall into a trap. So, he patiently acted out that play for many days.

Then he sent Wei Yan into battle, to fight for a few rounds and then feign defeat, abandoning his banners and equipment, fleeing straight into Shangfang Valley. Sima Yi, after many days of observation and seeing Wei Yan's disastrous defeat, finally had his caution clouded by greed. He thought this was a golden opportunity to capture Wei Yan alive and achieve great merit. He had no idea that what he was chasing was the scythe of the grim reaper.

I saw Sima Yi and his sons, along with the Wei army, eagerly rush into the valley. When the entire enemy force had entered the trap, Zhuge Liang gave the signal. Immediately, large rocks and giant logs rolled down from the two cliffs, sealing the exit. At the same time, carts full of dry firewood, sulfur, and saltpeter were pushed down, blocking the entrance. The valley was instantly turned into a giant wooden box, ready to be set ablaze.

Sima Yi, realizing he had been tricked, his face turned pale. He looked up at the cliff, saw Zhuge Liang sitting calmly in his four-wheeled vehicle, fanning himself with his feather fan, his eyes looking down coldly. In that moment, I felt Sima Yi's utter despair. The old fox who

had hunted all his life had now fallen into a trap with no escape.

And then, the fire erupted.

Torches were thrown down, igniting the dry wood and saltpeter, creating a terrifying sea of fire. The tragic screams of the Wei army echoed through the mountains. The blazing red flames licked at the armor, turning brave warriors into living torches. I saw Sima Yi and his sons hugging each other, looking up at the sky in despair and crying: "Today, we father and sons will die here!"

On the mountaintop, Zhuge Liang still sat there, observing silently. His face showed none of the joy of a victor. It was tense, and there was a certain stubbornness to it. I felt that, at this moment, he had become too immersed in his role as the "utterly devoted" Prime Minister. He didn't just want to win; he truly wanted to kill Sima Yi, to use this cataclysmic fire attack to try to go against Heavenly will, to salvage a sliver of hope for the Shu-Han state. A powerful, cold killing intent emanated from him, a killing intent I had never seen in all the years I had observed him.

That was when the Heavens intervened.

It was destined that Sima Yi could not die there. The foundation of the Jin dynasty had to come from this

family. It was also destined that the Shu-Han state had to end its role.

As the fire raged at its fiercest, the clear sky suddenly darkened. Black clouds gathered from nowhere, congregating right above Shangfang Valley. The wind began to howl. And then, a sudden downpour fell like a waterfall.

The raindrops were large and heavy, lashing straight into the sea of fire, creating gruesome "hissing" sounds and columns of white smoke. The rain lasted only for the time it takes to burn an incense stick, but it was like a giant ladle of water from the gods, poured directly onto Zhuge Liang's ambition. The fire was extinguished, the wood was wet, and the Shu army's weapons became useless. Sima Yi and his sons, having returned from the dead, hastily led their remaining troops to break out and flee.

I looked at Zhuge Liang. He sat on his vehicle, stunned. The feather fan had fallen to the ground at some point. He looked up at the sky, his once sharp eyes now full of bewilderment and helplessness. Then a mournful, bitter sigh escaped from his chest, a sigh more painful than a thousand arrows piercing his flesh.

"Man proposes, Heaven disposes," he muttered. "It cannot be resisted!"

As he said this, a mouthful of fresh blood spurted from his mouth, staining the front of his robe red.

I knew he understood. That rain was not a coincidence. It was the will of Heaven, the most severe warning. This act of trying to go against Heaven, even if only in a role, along with the killing of so many lives throughout his military career, especially the fire attack during the seven captures of Meng Huo which burned many Rattan Armor troops to death, had severely damaged his hidden virtue. In essence, he was a Daoist cultivator, but he used his wisdom and learning to interfere too deeply in the struggles of ordinary people, creating too much killing karma. This rain not only extinguished the fire in the valley, but also extinguished the flickering flame of his own life.

The consequence was that his lifespan was shortened by twelve years, and he could not attain the Dao and become an immortal in that lifetime. This was also a lesson the Heavens wanted to leave for posterity: no matter how talented one is, one cannot win against the will of Heaven. Killing karma is an extremely terrifying thing, even for a cultivator.

But it was also because of that failure that Zhuge Liang was able to sublimate.

After the battle of Shangfang Valley, his health declined, and he completely let go of all struggle, accepting Heavenly destiny. His state of mind in his final days reached a great breakthrough. When the struggling "self" disappeared, when he no longer tried to carry the burden of restoring the Han dynasty, his celestial eye became clearer than ever before. He was able to see through the future of the world for nearly two thousand years after.

In his final days at the Wuzhang Plains, as his physical body was gradually failing, I visited him one last time. Not in flesh and blood, but a meeting in consciousness.

I saw that he was no longer the worried Prime Minister, but a soul preparing for a new journey, his mind clear and tranquil. In the space of consciousness, we needed no words.

"Fellow Daoist, you have seen, haven't you?" His thought transmitted to me, serene and without a ripple.

And I knew what he was talking about. In that moment of communion, I not only saw his past life as Sun Bin again, but I also saw a greater flow. I saw his soul from the time of Jiang Ziya by the Wei River, to Sun Bin on the battlefields of the Warring States, and then to himself, Zhuge Liang of the Shu-Han. I saw the arrangement of the Heavens, that this was a soul with a mission, who

would descend to the world at pivotal moments in history to be an assistant, to help turn the tide.

"I have seen," I replied with a thought. "And I also see that your mission is not yet over. In more than a thousand years, when another dynasty of a foreign race is about to decline, you will once again descend, bearing the name Liu Bowen, to assist a commoner Ming Lord in establishing a new foundation."

Zhuge Liang "smiled" faintly in his consciousness. It was a smile of thorough understanding and acceptance. He was not surprised at all. He had seen it all himself.

It was in that state of enlightenment, having completely let go of all attachments of this life and understanding both the past and the future, that he wrote the "Ma Qian Ke" (Horse-Front Divination), one of the most accurate books of prophecy in Chinese history. It was not a product of stratagem, but the final instruction of a man who had clearly seen the Heavenly secrets, completing the mission of the role of Zhuge Liang, before preparing for another role.

The Three Kingdoms period, after all, was a grand stage to show posterity about "Righteousness" (Yi), about the complexity of karma, and about a truth that never changes: Man is very small, and can hardly go against the will of Heaven. Only by cultivating, understanding

one's destiny, and following the Dao, is the most enlightened path.

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CHAPTER 5: FOLLOWING THE LORD IN JERUSALEM

This memory takes me back to a land of dust and sun, a place where faith and doubt always coexisted, equally intense. It was the ancient land of Judea, at the very time when Jesus appeared and preached the Gospel.

My name in that life was Simon. I was not a scholar, nor a man of power. I was just an ordinary carpenter in Jerusalem, with a family, and my life revolved around chiseling wood, the sound of the hammer and the saw. Wood was not plentiful in Jerusalem; we often had to use timber imported from the Galilee region or precious cedar wood brought from Lebanon. The fragrance of that wood was with me my entire life. At that time, I was over forty-five years old, about fifteen years older than Jesus. At that age, a man has been through enough ups and downs, and my faith back then was placed in what my eyes could see and my ears could hear, in the planks of wood in my hands, and in the money earned through sweat to support my wife and children.

Then one day, my friends and neighbors started buzzing about a man named Jesus from Nazareth. They spoke of His strange teachings, of the miracles He had performed. At first, I didn't pay much attention. I had heard too many stories of self-proclaimed prophets, people who came and went like gusts of wind across the desert. For a man who had lived nearly half his life, I had a certain skepticism about things I hadn't witnessed with my own eyes.

But curiosity, and also a sense of obligation to a close friend who invited me, eventually drew me to a place where Jesus was preaching. It was a scorching afternoon, a crowd had gathered on a hillside, dust filling the air. I stood at a distance, arms crossed, with the mindset of an observer.

The man didn't look like a king or a general. His clothes were as simple as any other common person's. But when He spoke, the entire crowd suddenly fell silent. His voice was not loud, but it had a strange power, seeping into the very heart of each person.

He spoke of very strange things, things that went against everything I had ever known about making a living and the ways of the world. He said that the poor in spirit are blessed, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. He said to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Those words, at first, sounded completely contrary to common sense, but they touched something deep inside me, answering questions I never knew how to name. I saw the wealthy people around me; they had everything, yet their minds were always restless. I saw the powerful; they could command others but could not command peace within their own hearts. Jesus's words were like a stream of cool water, slowly washing away the layers of worldly dust that had clung to my mind for so many years.

But what truly made me submit was not just the teaching. It was what I witnessed with my own eyes as I followed Him on the road out of Jericho.

There was a beggar known throughout the region, his name was Bartimaeus. He was blind, and every day he just sat by the roadside, living off the pity of passersby. As our crowd passed, hearing the commotion, Bartimaeus asked what was happening. When he learned it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out, a heart-wrenching cry: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Many in our crowd turned and scolded him, telling him to be quiet, not to bother the Teacher. But the more they scolded, the louder he shouted. His cry contained all the desperation of a life spent in darkness.

And then, Jesus stopped. He turned and said a simple sentence: "Call him here."

They called Bartimaeus. He was overjoyed, threw aside his cloak, stood up, and stumbled his way to Jesus. I stood there, in the crowd, holding my breath, watching.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked, His voice so calm.

"Teacher, I want to see!" Bartimaeus sobbed.

Jesus looked at him, His eyes full of compassion. He said: "Go, your faith has healed you!"

The very moment He finished speaking, something unimaginable happened. Bartimaeus's once dull, lifeless eyes suddenly sparkled. He blinked, and then blinked again, as if he couldn't believe what was happening. Then he looked up, at Jesus, at our crowd, at the blue sky. For the first time in his life, he saw light.

I will never forget his face at that moment. It transformed from despair to utter astonishment, then broke into a joy that words cannot describe. He was no longer wailing, but laughing, a radiant smile, with tears streaming down his face. He knelt, not to beg, but to give thanks. And then, he stood up, not returning to his begging spot, but quietly joining the crowd, following Jesus.

My heart was pounding like a war drum. That was the moment all my skepticism completely collapsed. A carpenter like me could only make a piece of wood useful. But He, He could bring light to a lifetime.

Now, as a cultivator in this era, I understand that it was not magic in the way people often think. Every being has their own destiny and their own karmic debts, arranged fairly by gods at different levels. The fact that Bartimaeus

was blind was not a coincidence; it was part of the plan for him to repay his karmic debts.

When Jesus Christ healed him, He was not breaking the arrangements of other gods. He knew He could not unilaterally erase that debt. Instead, He did something far greater and more tragic: He chose to take that karmic debt upon Himself.

For every person healed, every soul saved, their karma was transferred to Him. Like a compassionate father who sees his child drowning in debt and steps forward to tell the creditors: 'All his debts, let me bear them all.'

And the price for shouldering such a huge karmic burden was the Passion that followed. The extreme pain He had to endure on the cross, both physically and spiritually, was the moment He used His own life and suffering to pay off all the debts He had taken on for His followers. The healing miracles I (Simon) witnessed were just an 'advance' of His compassion. But His death on the cross was when He paid the price for that compassion.

That was the path of salvation He chose, a path of ultimate sacrifice.

From that day on, I was no longer Simon, the carpenter who only believed in what he could touch. I became Simon, an ordinary disciple in the crowd, silently

following His light, listening to every word, and engraving in my heart the compassion and majesty I had witnessed. I was not one of the twelve core apostles; I was just a small drop of water in the ocean of believers. But that drop of water had witnessed the greatness of the sea, and could never go back to being a stagnant drop of water again.

My life changed completely from then on. The carpentry shop was still there, the sound of the hammer and saw still rang out every day, but my mind was no longer just occupied with planks of wood and orders. Whenever I had the chance, I would go to the places where Jesus preached, standing quietly in the crowd, listening and contemplating.

Gradually, a small but tightly-knit community formed around Him. We, the believers, came from all walks of life: there were simple fishermen from Galilee, tax collectors despised by society, virtuous women, and also ordinary craftsmen like me. We had no magnificent churches or temples. Our "church" was wherever the Teacher stopped to teach: on a hillside, by the shore of the sea, or in the courtyard of someone with a devout heart.

We learned to love and share with one another. Those who had more helped those who had less. When one of us was in trouble, the rest would pray together and help.

There was a warmth, a sincere brotherhood that I had never felt anywhere before. We lived together, hoped together, and believed together in a Kingdom of Heaven that the Teacher had promised.

But the path of following the light is never a smooth one.

We quickly faced opposition. The priests and scribes in the great synagogues began to see Jesus as a threat. His teachings about humility of the spirit, about God not only being in stone temples but right in the heart of each person, directly challenged their authority and status. They claimed He was a blasphemer, presumptuous, daring to call Himself the Son of God.

We, who followed Him, were also affected. Neighbors who were once close began to look at us differently. They whispered, gossiped, believing we had been bewitched, following a heretical path. Some no longer wanted to buy my woodwork. Some disowned friends they had grown up with. We were mocked, ostracized, and sometimes even threatened.

The Roman authorities, though not concerned with the religious disputes of the Jews, also began to keep an eye on us. They feared that the crowds following Jesus could turn into a political uprising. All our activities were monitored.

Now I understand, all those difficulties were not coincidental. They were the tests that the Heavens give to those who want to walk the path of cultivation. When a righteous Fa is spread, demons will also come to interfere, to test whether people's faith is truly firm. Those trials are like a sieve, to filter out the best seeds of faith, those who can truly persevere to the end.

And then, the greatest, most painful test came.

I still remember that fateful week in Jerusalem as if it were yesterday. Tension filled the city. I heard that the Teacher had been betrayed by one of His most trusted disciples, Judas. Then the news that He had been arrested at night in the Garden of Gethsemane. My heart clenched.

The next day, I stood in the crowd, helplessly watching them lead Him through the streets. The Man I had seen heal the blind, multiply loaves for thousands to eat, was now crowned with thorns, beaten, and humiliated. I saw people who just days before had hailed Him, now screaming for Him to be crucified.

And I was there, on the hill of Golgotha, from a distance, witnessing it all.

I saw them drive the crude iron nails through His hands and feet. I saw them raise the Cross. I saw Him hanging

between heaven and earth, blood and sweat streaming down His body. The pain and sorrow in me at that moment were indescribable. My faith was tested to its very limit. Why, why would a God full of power have to suffer such a tragic and humiliating end? For a moment, doubt returned, gnawing at my soul.

But then, I heard His last words before He breathed His last: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

In that sentence, there was not a trace of resentment, only absolute acceptance and serenity. And in that moment, I suddenly understood. This was not a failure. This was a completion. This was the ultimate sacrifice I had heard preached, but had never truly understood. He was fulfilling His mission.

After the Teacher's death, fear enveloped our small community. We no longer dared to gather openly, only meeting secretly in locked houses, whispering prayers and comforting each other.

Then, news spread among us like a lightning bolt in the dark night: the Teacher had risen! Mary Magdalene and a few other women had gone to the tomb and found it empty. Then the apostles had also seen Him again.

At first, I dared not believe it. I was afraid it was just a story made up to comfort broken hearts. But then, that

belief grew stronger and stronger, spreading from person to person, not through evidence, but through a strange inner strength. An unprecedented joy and strength surged in each of us. We understood that the Teacher had conquered even death.

It was this belief in the Resurrection that transformed us. Fear was replaced by courage. We began to meet again, more boldly, to share what had happened.

And that was when the scythe of persecution truly fell.

One evening, as I and about a dozen others were meeting in a friend's house, Roman soldiers burst in. They arrested all of us. No questions asked, no lengthy trial. We were accused of following the "heresy" of Jesus and causing public disorder.

When they handcuffed me, I no longer felt fear. My heart was strangely calm. The image of the Teacher on the cross and the news of His Resurrection kept appearing in my mind. I knew I had chosen the right path.

I was thrown into a dark, damp prison with my brothers. The air was thick with the stench of filth and despair. But strangely, none of us cried or complained. We sat together, in silence, occasionally softly reciting the Teacher's words that we remembered. In the darkness of the prison, a strange peace enveloped us.

They did not torture or entice us. This arrest seemed to be just an act of intimidation, to nip our movement in the bud. They wanted a quick and decisive punishment.

The next day, a jailer came and opened my cell door. He said nothing, just gestured for me to follow. I knew my time had come. I looked at my brothers one last time. They looked at me, their eyes held no pity, only sympathy and a silent encouragement. I nodded to them, then walked steadily after the soldier.

He led me to a small courtyard behind the prison. There was only him and an executioner with a cold face, holding a large sword. I understood I was to be beheaded.

The jailer asked me one last question: "Do you renounce your faith in Jesus of Nazareth? If you do, you will be free."

I looked him straight in the eye. The image of the Teacher on the cross, the face of Bartimaeus seeing the light for the first time, the loaves of bread multiplied for thousands... all flashed through my mind like a film. I had seen, I had believed, and I had felt the truth. How could I renounce it?

I shook my head, and a gentle smile appeared on my lips.

That smile was not one of defiance or contempt. It was serenity. It was acceptance. It was the joy of someone who knows he is about to return home, to meet his Teacher in a place where there is no more suffering or tears. It was the consummation of an ordinary disciple, who had kept his faith intact until the very last moment.

The jailer saw my smile, and he frowned slightly, seeming confused. He waved his hand to the executioner.

My last sensation in that lifetime was a cold flash of light before my eyes, and a sharp pain in my neck.

Then everything went dark.

But it was not the darkness of an end. Immediately after, my soul floated out, weightless. I saw my body fall, and I saw a brilliant path of light open up before me. I knew I had chosen correctly.

The life as Simon, the carpenter in Jerusalem, taught me an invaluable lesson about faith. Faith is not something reserved only for saints or extraordinary people. It can sprout in the heart of the most ordinary person, and once it takes root, it can give that person the strength to face even death with a smile.

And I also understood that any cultivation path always comes with trials and tests. The choice between living a

lie and dying for the Truth is a test that many cultivators throughout history have had to face. That choice, in the end, will determine where their souls will go.

* * *

CHAPTER 6: ECHOES OF THE PYRAMIDS

(The boy, River, sat across from me, his clear eyes gazing into the distance, as if watching an old film that only he could see. His voice deepened, carrying a solemnity unsuited for his age.)

...

This time, the memory takes me back to an even more ancient era, perhaps about eighty million years ago, according to your way of calculating time. It was a world where the Earth was very different, a world of giants...

In that lifetime, I was a general named Solon. The names like Solon, or the Middle Heaven Kingdom, Mona, Canla... that I will mention, they are only the closest phonetic approximations I can find in the current language. Our language back then was completely different; it was simpler and more direct, carrying more of the energy of sound than of characters.

The World and its People

Our world back then was a majestic canvas. We people, the giants, typically had an average height of over five meters. Our bodies were robust, but our souls were very pure and simple. We lived in harmony with nature, a nature that you today would find hard to imagine. Dinosaurs were not monsters, but companions. Large, gentle flying dinosaurs were domesticated by us as a means of transportation between cities. Other giant herbivores, with their unparalleled strength, helped us pull heavy materials for construction projects.

Our society was very harmonious and peaceful; everyone had a deep faith in Gods and Buddhas. My kingdom was called the Middle Heaven Kingdom, ruled by a young, wise, and benevolent king named Mala.

The Role of Solon

During that peaceful period, I was the Captain of the Royal Guard. My work within the country was quite leisurely, as the people were very simple and honest, and major disputes were rare. However, the army of the Middle Heaven Kingdom was always kept well-trained and elite. We did not use this elite status for invasion, but to display our majestic virtue.

I remember one time, a neighboring kingdom intended to provoke us. Everyone knew that King Mala and Princess Mona were both cultivators of the Buddha Fa since childhood, possessing an extraordinary temperament and awe-inspiring virtue. In a somewhat surprising decision, the two siblings personally led an army to the border region.

When our army appeared, the might and discipline of the soldiers struck fear into the hearts of the enemy. But what truly disintegrated their will to fight was the majestic presence of King Mala. He sat on his war chariot,

and without saying a word, the majestic and righteous aura of a true cultivator and a sovereign king radiated to the heavens, making the enemy feel small and not dare to have any thought of confrontation. The presence of Princess Mona, with her transcendent beauty and serene temperament, further enhanced the sanctity and righteousness of our army.

That king, when faced with such overwhelming majesty, was completely subdued. He personally ordered his troops to withdraw and hastily sent an envoy to sue for peace. That was how we maintained peace, not with swords and spears, but with the majestic virtue of our leaders.

Sacred Construction

In that lifetime, I witnessed the construction of a great Pyramid. It was not a tomb. Absolutely not. In our perception at that time, this structure had a sacred mission: it was to worship a great Buddha. It was also a gateway to connect with Gods and Buddhas, and a historical Witness for the future.

The design of this great structure was not conceived by human wisdom. I know that the most talented "architects" of the kingdom had received direct hints and

guidance from Gods and Buddhas in dreams or deep meditative states. The numbers, proportions, and internal arrangements... all contained heavenly secrets. As for the specific details of that guidance, even someone in my position was not privy to them. The mission of me and the royal guard was simply to ensure the absolute safety for that sacred process to unfold.

From my position as Captain of the Royal Guard, I was able to witness and protect the entire process.

The selection of workers for the project was not based on mere physical strength. A decree was issued throughout the Middle Heaven Kingdom, recruiting only able-bodied young men who were not yet married, and most importantly, who possessed good moral character and a sincere reverence for Gods and Buddhas. Tens of thousands of such people eagerly flocked to the capital, considering it the greatest honor of their lives to contribute to the building of the pyramid. But those chosen to directly build were limited to nearly 1,000 people; the rest were mainly responsible for quarrying the stone blocks as required and transporting them to the construction site.

Throughout the construction of that first Pyramid, the entire kingdom seemed to beat as one. King Mala devoted all his energy to directing the project. As for the Queen, she was not by the king's side. Every day, she

would sincerely worship the Buddha, praying for the project to go smoothly and for the nation's peace and prosperity. The princes, high ministers, and all the common people followed their example. The atmosphere in the Middle Heaven Kingdom at that time was incredibly pure. Our people were very simple and honest; the men were refined and courteous, the women were virtuous and graceful. There was no contention, only a united heart focused on a noble goal.

And the most amazing thing was the way we built. The construction of the pyramid was done entirely by human strength. The large stone blocks, some weighing two or three tons by today's standards, were not a burden. I vividly remember the image of four or six strong men, shoulder to shoulder, lifting such a stone block together in rhythm without showing any signs of excessive strain. They did not use complex levers, but their own combined force and a kind of spiritual strength.

On their feet were special shoes, very skillfully and tightly woven from a type of grass found only in the nearby mountains. These grass shoes had a strange adhesive quality. When they transported the heavy stone blocks up the steep steps of the Pyramid, I saw that their steps were incredibly steady. Many of them recounted that with each step, they felt as if an invisible force was gently supporting their feet, making their steps unusually light and graceful. They called this

phenomenon "walking on clouds," and all believed it was the gods assisting those with sincere and reverent hearts.

The atmosphere at the construction site was not heavy or laborious at all. The most talented musicians and singers from all over the country gathered there. They saw it as an endless source of inspiration to compose the best music and songs. And the most important, most sacred theme in their works was to praise the greatness and compassion of Gods and Buddhas, and only then to praise the sincerity of the king and the people who had followed the Heavenly will to create this structure.

They not only sang but also performed beautiful dances. These dances were both graceful and noble, yet contained strength and magnificence. The music was a harmonious blend of the grandeur of a large orchestra and the melodious, delicate touch of individual instruments.

(The boy suddenly smiled, a smile that was both distant and familiar.)

Remembering those scenes, an image from this life of mine suddenly appears very clearly. Last year, my parents took me to see a performance by the Shen Yun Performing Arts. I know this company is based in New York, but they tour all over the world, and that day, we

went to Los Angeles to see their show. From the moment the curtain rose, I had an indescribable feeling of familiarity. From the costumes, the choreography, to the resonance of the music, everything reminded me of a deep memory that I couldn't name at the time. Now, I understand. The dances and songs I once saw in the Middle Heaven Kingdom during the time of the giants, they carried the same style, the same spirit as what the Shen Yun artists are presenting today. It seems that what is called truly divinely inspired culture shares a common origin, a common soul, no matter how many millions of years pass.

(The boy's voice returned to the stream of memories.)

Whenever it was time for a break, the servers would kindly bring baskets of sweet, juicy fruits and cool spring water from the mountaintop. And then, the clear songs would rise again. The singing merged with the wind, dispelling all fatigue, making everyone's mood cheerful and uplifted.

In the evening, after a day's labor, there were no noisy festivities. Tens of thousands of workers would sit down together, cross-legged in silent meditation. They would quiet their minds for about an hour, silently chanting a Buddha's name, cleansing themselves of chaotic thoughts, and keeping their bodies and minds always pure.

I will never forget the moment when the last stone block was raised. It was a pointed capstone, polished to perfection. King Mala himself, still very young at the time, took off his royal robes and, along with the four strongest men, personally lifted that block to the highest point of the Pyramid. Below the pyramid, tens of thousands of people held their breath, watching. When the stone was placed perfectly, the entire sea of people bowed in silent worship. There were no cheers, only absolute reverence offered to Gods and Buddhas.

(The boy River paused for a moment, his eyes gazing into the distance, then continued speaking as the narrator in the present.)

Now, when I use my celestial eye to look, I realize that the structure I witnessed being built at that time is the second-largest Pyramid, located in the center of the three great structures at Giza today. Although it is the second-largest in size, it was the first one built in that master plan.

I also see that the other Pyramids were built later, when I, Solon, was no longer alive. Each structure was started about ten years apart. Perhaps because it was the first Pyramid built, with the purest heart and the highest degree of unity, its peak has remained relatively intact to this day, like a silent witness to a forgotten golden age.

Looking back now, I see that the entire complex was planned by the Gods from the beginning, with a very grand purpose. The largest Pyramid, built later, was to worship another great Buddha, symbolizing infinite Compassion. The smallest Pyramid was dedicated to a Buddha symbolizing Majesty.

And guarding the front of that sacred complex is the Sphinx. It is not the image of a king, but the image of a Martial God from the celestial realms, whose duty is to guard and protect the Pyramids and this holy land against all evil demons.

FATED LOVE AND THE MISSION OF PROTECTION

The end of the Pyramid's construction also marked a fateful turning point in my life, Solon's life.

King Mala had a younger sister, Princess Mona. Their parents had passed away when they were young, so King Mala was both an older brother and like a father, deeply loving and protective of her. Now, Princess Mona had reached marriageable age. She not only possessed a pure beauty that made flowers and grass bow, but more importantly, she had an innately kind and virtuous heart. Her fame was known not only within the Middle

Heaven Kingdom but also spread to neighboring kingdoms.

To the west, there was a powerful kingdom called the Westernmost Kingdom, ruled by a young king named Dalac. King Dalac was also a kind and talented man, always wishing to build a peaceful and prosperous country. Envoys traveling back and forth brought with them portraits painted by the most talented artists. When King Dalac beheld the portrait of Princess Mona, and when Princess Mona saw the image of King Dalac, both immediately felt a deep connection. They were not just attracted to each other's appearance, but it seemed that through the brushstrokes, they had seen each other's souls and virtues.

Their karmic connection was not just a political arrangement, but the harmony of two benevolent hearts, born from sincere admiration.

The marriage between Princess Mona and King Dalac was quickly held. It was a momentous event, bringing joy and hope for a lasting peace to both kingdoms. Both the Middle Heaven Kingdom and the Westernmost Kingdom were immersed in celebration. I still remember the image of Princess Mona in her magnificent royal robes, her face shining with happiness, yet with a hint of sadness at having to soon leave her beloved brother and homeland.

Before the princess's departure, King Mala summoned me to the palace privately. He looked at me, his gaze both trusting and stern, filled with the affection of an older brother. He said: "Solon, among all the generals, you are the one I trust most for your loyalty and courage. Mona is my only sister, the most precious jewel of the Middle Heaven Kingdom. Now, she will go to shine in a distant land. I am giving you a mission more important than protecting this palace. You shall lead an elite troop, escort the princess to the Westernmost Kingdom, and stay there as the commander of the Queen's guard. Protect her with your life."

I knelt, kowtowed, and accepted the order. I understood that this was not just a command, but a sacred entrustment, the trust of an older brother for the one protecting his sister.

WAR, SACRIFICE, AND TRANSFORMATION

My life in the Westernmost Kingdom was peaceful for a few years. King Dalac and Queen Mona loved each other deeply, ruling the country together. But then, war broke out from the north.

The Kingdom of the Northern Land, led by a warlike and cruel king named Canla, suddenly launched an invasion.

They were like a flash flood, sweeping down to destroy cities, plundering and killing. Canla's ultimate goal was the capital of the Westernmost Kingdom.

King Dalac, with the courage of a sovereign, personally led his troops into battle to defend the country. In the initial battles, the forces on both sides were quite evenly matched. The army of the Westernmost Kingdom, under King Dalac's command, fought valiantly and repelled several enemy attacks.

But King Canla was not only brutal but also very cunning and treacherous. Seeing that he could not win quickly with strength, he devised a malicious plan. He had his troops feign defeat, abandoning their provisions and retreating into a treacherous mountain gorge. King Dalac, too eager to destroy the invaders and somewhat overconfident after a few victories, did not realize it was a trap. He led his troops in pursuit, and when the entire army had advanced deep into the gorge, Canla's troops ambushed them from both sides of the mountains.

In that desperate battle, King Dalac fought to his last breath and died heroically, surrounded by the enemy.

The news reached the capital like a thunderbolt from a clear sky. Upon hearing the terrible news, Queen Mona collapsed. She locked herself in her room, mourning her beloved husband for two days and two nights. Her

mournful, sorrowful cries made the already grieving palace even more somber.

But after those two days, the Queen stopped crying. She emerged from her room, her face still etched with deep sadness, but now containing a strange calmness. It seemed she had accepted and transformed her pain into some kind of inner strength.

Meanwhile, the capital had begun to fall apart. When news spread that Canla's army was approaching the city, the chaos reached its peak. Many civil and military officials, who on normal days would loudly proclaim their loyalty, were now the first to gather their wealth and flee in the night, leaving everything behind.

A few high ministers with a shred of integrity ran to the palace, knelt before Queen Mona, who was now completely calm, and pleaded: "Your Majesty, the situation is lost! Please take the secret passage and leave this place, to preserve your life! The enemy is at the gates, to stay is to die!"

Queen Mona looked at them, her gaze calm but powerful. She simply replied with a firm shake of her head. She would not go anywhere.

While the cowards fled, I saw in the great square before the palace another tragic scene unfolding. The loyal

generals of the Westernmost Kingdom, those who refused to run, were gathering the remaining soldiers. Their force was now less than a thousand, and every face was etched with a look of suicidal determination. They would fight to defend the capital to their last breath.

I turned back, looking towards the steps leading to the main palace where the Queen was. My guard, the brothers who had followed me from the Middle Heaven Kingdom, numbered less than ten. We didn't need to say a word to each other; a look was enough. Our mission was not to protect the entire capital. Our mission was here, on these steps, to be the final shield for the Queen.

The promise I made to King Mala long ago echoed in my mind. Where the Queen was, that was our battlefield.

And then, as she stepped out to face the final battle, I, Solon, a warrior who had known only swords and spears his whole life, was once again stunned by her transformation.

The Queen's entire demeanor seemed to have sublimated. The calmness of the past few days had now transformed into an immeasurable majesty and compassion. Her eyes were clear and shone with a strange light, reflecting a profound love for all beings that I had never seen in anyone. Her beauty suddenly became more radiant than ever, but it was not the beauty of the mortal world, but a

transcendent, holy beauty, as clear as jade. It seemed an invisible halo emanated from her, making anyone who looked at her feel an involuntary sense of reverence.

When she took a step, her gait was steady and graceful. She was no longer a queen of a fallen nation facing danger, but like a God, a Celestial being walking in the mortal realm. I and everyone else in the great hall were stunned, holding our breath. We knew that something incredibly sacred had happened.

Before my eyes was no longer the grieving Queen Mona, but a sacred image, both compassionate and majestic, a Bodhisattva manifesting in the human world.

The roar of the enemy army was very close. The time had come. The great battle erupted on all the roads leading to the palace. My small guard and I stood firm as a rock right before the main gate of the great hall. We were not facing Canla's entire army, but his most elite vanguard units were trying to charge in here to capture the Queen alive.

We fought like lions, using our bodies to form a small but impenetrable wall of steel. One man fell, another filled his place. Blood stained the steps red. But there were too many of them. I felt a sharp pain in my chest as a spear pierced through my armor. I fell, right on the

threshold of the palace. Everything before my eyes blurred.

But then, I felt weightless. My soul escaped from my body, hovering nearby. I no longer felt pain, only a strange serenity. I saw King Canla, the brutal conqueror, step over my lifeless body without a glance. Immediately, like a primal urge, my soul flew after him, through the great doors and deep into the palace.

And there, I saw the final scene. King Canla, his sword still stained with blood, was storming into the great hall, where Queen Mona was waiting.

He was a conqueror, used to seeing fear, tears, and begging. But when he faced Queen Mona, he was stunned, and stopped short. All the brutality on his face vanished, replaced by a look of awe, a little confusion, and even fear. He had never seen such beauty, such a presence. He stood motionless, seeming to have forgotten his purpose for being there.

In the tense silence, Queen Mona's voice rang out. Her voice did not tremble, held no resentment, but was as clear and calm as a temple bell in the quiet mountains:

"Your Majesty has come all the way south, I have heard what your army has done. I wish to know, what more do you need to do?"

That simple question, along with Mona's majestic and compassionate demeanor, struck a chord with the little conscience that remained in Canla's soul. He suddenly felt the sword in his hand become heavy, and the crimes he had committed flashed before his eyes. He became flustered, stammered a reply, his voice no longer arrogant:

"I guarantee that my army will no longer harm the common people. I want to ensure the safety of the royal capital."

With that, as if to prove his words, King Canla turned and loudly ordered his entire army to withdraw from the capital city.

The invading army was bewildered, unable to understand why their King Canla had made such a decision, but they still obeyed the order, quietly retreating. The slaughter had ended, not by a stronger army, but by the power of immeasurable compassion blended with the holy majesty of a woman.

My soul, Solon, witnessed it all. A sense of complete fulfillment and serenity enveloped me. I had fulfilled my promise to King Mala. I had protected the Queen, not just with my life, but I was also able to witness a power greater than any sword. With a contented smile, my soul slowly faded away, ending the life of a general.

(The boy River was silent for a long time after finishing the story. It seemed he was still immersed in the fulfillment and tragedy of that moment. Then he let out a light breath, his eyes returning to the present, looking at me and continuing.)

ECHOES FROM THE PAST

Solon's life, though short, taught me a profound lesson about loyalty and sacrifice. He lived and died to fulfill his promise. But what truly etched itself into my soul, what still shakes me to this day, is the power of Queen Mona. That power did not come from authority or an army, but from a compassion that had sublimated in adversity. It could transform both violence and hatred.

But the story doesn't end there.

With my celestial eye, I saw that the civilization of the giants also could not escape the cosmic law of Formation-Stasis-Degeneration-Destruction. About fifteen generations of kings after King Mala's time in the Middle Heaven Kingdom, a final king became corrupt, no longer believing in Gods and Buddhas, and even committed acts of blasphemy against the divine. And as a punishment, or rather, as a sign heralding the end, one night, a colossal Great Buddha Statue, created at the same time as the Pyramids, vanished without a trace.

The Gods and Buddhas no longer protected a people who had lost their faith. Not long after, an entire golden age was wiped from history by terrifying geological cataclysms.

The great Pyramids and the Sphinx still stand, weathered by time. But later civilizations, no longer understanding their original sacred purpose, used them arbitrarily for their own ends. Especially the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt. They had their mummified bodies placed inside, turning what was once a temple, a gateway to connect with Gods and Buddhas, into a tomb for mortals.

This act defiled the sanctity of the Pyramids. And I saw that the souls of those Pharaohs, for this crime of blasphemy, had to endure extremely severe punishment, being cast down into the deepest levels of hell after death.

Therefore, what we see today are just silent structures. They carry within them the glorious memory of an era when humans and Gods still communed, the sorrow of a fallen civilization, and also the thick dust of misunderstanding and blasphemy across many ages. They still stand there, like echoes from a distant past, waiting for a day when humanity can once again understand their true meaning.

* * *

CHAPTER 7: THE TWILIGHT OF ATLANTIS

(River sat silently for a long while, as if trying to sort through a complex and heavy memory. Finally, he spoke, his voice distant, tinged with nostalgia and a lingering sorrow.)

This lifetime takes me back to a land whose name still echoes in your legends to this day—Atlantis. But the Atlantis I lived in was no longer an empire at its glorious peak. It was a beautiful world where cracks had begun to appear, heralding a long and painful twilight.

The Atlantis I once lived in, in a life as a High Priest named Lygus, was not always a unified entity. In the ancient scrolls that survived, it was said that there were periods when this continent was divided into many kingdoms, each with its own character, sometimes living in peace, other times in conflict. The political system also varied; at times the King was supreme, while at other times the Religious Council held the most power. It took many upheavals, many efforts by our ancestors, for Atlantis to gradually unify as it was in our era, under the governance of a Supreme Council. But even within that unity, the imprints of a divided past still seemed to linger.

The decline of Atlantis was not a sudden event. It was a process, a slow-acting poison that seeped through generations. And I, Lygus, was there during the pivotal stage of that process.

It's difficult to describe to you the favor our land received. Atlantis was not just a continent, but an energy center of the planet, a place specially blessed by Gods and Buddhas, abundantly infused with divine power.

Thanks to this sacred energy, all life here flourished exceptionally. We Atlanteans, already possessing high intelligence, became even more sharp-witted, healthy, and had much longer lifespans than other peoples. The trees were unusually lush, the fruits abundant, carrying within them a pure energy. Even the animals were larger and more robust. The same breed of horse, but those raised on Atlantean soil could be one and a half times larger, with glossy manes, and their strength and intelligence also far surpassed their counterparts on other continents.

It was because of this favor that our ancestors had a deep faith and reverence for Gods and Buddhas, seeing them as the source of all prosperity. Our science also originated from this. We did not follow the path of mechanics, of burning fuel. Instead, we learned to understand and utilize the cosmic energy that was readily available. We mastered crystal technology to a high degree, using it to provide clean energy for entire cities, operate vehicles that glided silently through the air, heal diseases, and communicate over long distances... Everything was harmonious and reflected the connection between man and the Divine. Atlantean society at that time was clearly stratified, from the Supreme Council and the elite nobility, with High Priests like myself holding spiritual roles, to the class of "Crystal Masters" and wealthy merchants, and then to craftsmen and

laborers. All benefited from a clean and prosperous environment.

But then, the fading began. When later generations were born with everything already provided, the prosperity and comfort from technology became a given. The initial gratitude and reverence for Gods and Buddhas gradually cooled. A portion of the populace and the elite began to see their superiority as a result of the intelligence of the Atlantean people themselves, rather than a grace from higher realms. That was the seed of arrogance, the thing that gnawed at our civilization from within.

They began to abuse their knowledge and technology. Instead of using crystal energy to serve life harmoniously, they sought to exploit it to create increasingly sophisticated comforts for pleasure, tools of control, and even powerful weapons. Within the Supreme Council itself, a rift began to form covertly. On one side was our faction, those who still tried to maintain reverence for the Divine and traditional morality. On the other side was a faction with a growing "materialist," pragmatic tendency, led by a master of energy technology named Magnus. They believed that the people of Atlantis were the masters of their own destiny.

As a High Priest, I recognized the mortal danger of this change in thought. I understood that once Atlantis lost

its reverence and connection to Gods and Buddhas, they would lose the very source of their strength and protection. Grace can be given, but it can also be taken away. I frequently spoke out in the Council, warning that straying from spiritual principles, indulging in arrogance and material pleasure, would offend the Divine, and would ultimately lead to this land no longer being blessed. I presided over rituals to purify the energy of the master crystals, trying to reconnect with higher spiritual forces, and taught the younger generation about gratitude.

But my warnings were dismissed by Magnus's faction. They argued that "Gods and Buddhas" were just abstract concepts, not as important as human capability. True power lay in the hands of the scientists, in the energy crystals, in the technologies they could create. They wanted to develop advanced energy weapons to assert their status and power, covertly propagating that the people of Atlantis could completely master their own destiny. It was the ultimate arrogance, a denial of their very origins.

And I, with my prestige and spiritual influence, became the biggest obstacle in their path.

They did not dare to confront me directly, so they chose a more subtle and cruel method. They began a covert

campaign to bring me down, not with violence, but by weakening me from within.

I began to feel my health decline strangely. My mind was no longer as clear as before, my body was often tired, and my ability to concentrate diminished. When presiding over rituals, I felt my spiritual connection weaken noticeably; my prayers seemed to have lost their former power. At first, I just thought it was due to age, or the "collective karma" of all of Atlantis declining and affecting me. I never suspected that there was a conspiracy targeting me.

It was only much later, in the final moments of my life, that I vaguely realized it. Magnus's faction, with their knowledge of energy and special compounds, had been secretly "poisoning" me. It could have been by altering the energy environment in my study with devices that emitted disruptive frequencies. It could also have been through the things I ate and drank daily. They were not lethal poisons, but compounds that slowly degraded one's mental and physical faculties.

As my signs of weakness became more and more apparent—sometimes I spoke incoherently, other times I forgot important matters—Magnus's faction began to act. They spread rumors among the elite, whispering to each other that High Priest Lygus was "no longer favored by the Heavens," that I had "lost my spiritual connection,"

and was "no longer lucid enough to lead the spirit of Atlantis." They skillfully created situations that made me look helpless or make wrong decisions in Council meetings.

My prestige was gradually eroded. Those who had once respected me began to look at me with doubt. My proposals in the Council no longer carried enough weight; they were easily ignored or rejected. My health deteriorated day by day. Occasionally, I had symptoms similar to a mild stroke, with some difficulty speaking and slower movements.

Finally, seeing that the time was ripe, the pragmatic faction officially proposed in the Council that I should "rest" for health reasons, to "preserve the honor" of a High Priest who had made many contributions. The decision was passed easily, amid feigned regrets and the indifference of the swayed majority. I was forced to step down from my position, effectively placed under house arrest in my own residence, with no power whatsoever.

But that was not the most painful blow.

The fatal blow, the thing that truly destroyed me from within, came from the very person I loved and trusted the most.

I had only one son, named Elara. He was my hope, the one into whom I had poured all my love and effort in teaching, hoping that one day he would continue my spiritual path. But he was too young, and perhaps the outside world was too full of temptations.

Even when I was still in my position but already showing signs of weakness, Magnus's faction had begun to approach Elara. They invited him to gatherings of the elite, to lavish banquets with strange foods and drinks, and forms of entertainment using light and sound that could stimulate all the senses. They showed him a world of power and pleasure he had never known. Under the guise of "freedom," decadent entertainment venues began to spring up in the wealthy districts. There, they used energy technologies to create illusions, stimulating sounds, and even addictive substances that made people forget reality. Through the few servants who remained loyal, I learned with great pain that Elara, my son, had gone to those places not just once or twice. He was sliding down the path I feared most.

And then, they brought him a beautiful woman named Lyra. She was sharp-wittedly beautiful, intelligent, and always knew how to say what Elara wanted to hear. She admired Elara's talent, sympathized with his "frustration," and painted a future where he could become an important figure in the new order. Elara, an

inexperienced young man, quickly became intoxicated with love and fame.

When I was officially deposed, Elara, with the "support" of Lyra and Magnus's faction, was given a position in the Council of Science and Technology. It was a position with a title but no real power to decide on major issues, yet it allowed him to appear in prestigious places and be acclaimed by everyone. Elara publicly supported Magnus's faction, even implicitly criticizing his father's "outdated" views. I heard these words recounted by the servants, and my heart felt as if it were being squeezed.

It was Lyra who frequently brought me "tonics" from the energy masters. She told Elara they would help calm my nerves and improve my health. And Elara, in his innocence and desire to prove himself a filial son in a different way, brought them to me with his own hands. He had no idea that those things, those herbal teas and small energy crystals, were what was slowly destroying my mind and health. Every time I saw him bring the "medicine," my heart ached. I couldn't bear to expose the truth because I knew it would crush him, but to remain silent was no different from drinking the poison myself.

The period when Elara was "highly regarded" lasted for a few years. Those were the years he lived in an illusion of power. But I could still feel the insecurity and emptiness in his soul whenever he visited me. He would

avoid looking me straight in the eye, talk about the "development" of Atlantis in empty phrases, and leave in a hurry.

And then, the inevitable happened. When my prestige had completely vanished, when I was just a sick old man living a precarious life, Elara had also outlived his usefulness. Magnus's faction began to exclude him from important meetings. They said "his experience is still green," that "this position requires someone with more strategic vision." Lyra also gradually grew cold and eventually left him for another powerful figure.

Elara was pushed out of the position he was once proud of, in a humiliating and ruthless manner. He lost both fame and love. One rainy night, he came to me, knelt down, and sobbed uncontrollably. It was only then that he came to his senses, realizing he had just been a pawn in someone else's game. I looked at my devastated son, my heart filled with a mixture of anger, pity, and sorrow for an innocence that had paid too high a price. I said nothing, just raised my trembling hand to stroke his head. His tragedy was also my tragedy, and the tragedy of an entire generation of Atlanteans who had been deceived by glamorous promises.

Meanwhile, I and the remaining High Priests, those who still held firm to their faith, did not sit idly by. We realized that our warnings were no longer effective. The

"ship" of Atlantis had changed course and was heading into stormy seas. In secret meetings, disguised as prayer sessions, we discussed a final plan. We no longer hoped to save an entire society that had turned its back on the Divine, but only hoped to preserve the best seeds for the future.

We began to secretly plan for an evacuation. The plan included building giant ships, using the most advanced technology we still possessed, so that they would be able to cross tumultuous oceans and withstand the disasters we sensed were coming. It was an enormous task that had to be carried out in absolute secrecy, because if Magnus's faction found out, they would surely sabotage it. As for me, being under house arrest and in poor health, I could only contribute with advice and prayers.

After Elara's downfall, I withdrew even more into my residence, but I could not be unaware of the horrific changes happening outside. The process of moral erosion initiated by Magnus's faction had spread like a plague, gnawing at the soul of Atlantis from its very roots. I saw it in the degeneration of art.

(The boy, River, stopped, looking straight at me, Casey, his eyes suddenly becoming strangely sharp.)

You know, this makes me think of our own time. When I look back at the bizarre abstract paintings of Atlantis, I

am reminded of the works of Picasso or Van Gogh that people today praise, paying hundreds of millions of dollars for distorted, chaotic shapes. I even read in the newspaper about a work of "art" that was just a real banana taped to a wall, which was also sold for millions of dollars. The Atlanteans of that time were the same. They praised absurd, irrational things and called it "creativity." Some artists went even further, painting images of demons, horrifying scenes. They called it the art of the "free self," but I only saw in it an extremely negative energy, a mockery of what is sacred.

(The boy looked at me seriously, as if wanting to share an important secret.)

Do you know, those things are not just paintings. They carry the energy of their creator. If a person walks into a 'modern' or 'abstract' art gallery today, and when they look at those paintings, they feel they are truly beautiful, very captivating, and even perceive their hundred-million-dollar value, then that is very dangerous. It means that the frequency of that person's soul is resonating with those paintings, which means it is resonating with the chaotic, deviant, and even demonic energy behind them. And when a person has sympathized with demons, then in the final judgment of the universe, they will also be considered a part of them, and will face being eliminated by the Divine.

Conversely, if that same person walks in, but when they look at the paintings, they feel they don't understand anything, or even feel uncomfortable, dizzy, have a headache, or have a clear awareness that 'these things are grotesque,' then that is a good sign. It shows that their soul still retains its purity, is still connected to the primordial standards of good and evil that the Divine set for humanity. And it is that purity that will be their ticket to have hope of receiving the protection of Gods and Buddhas when disaster strikes.

(The boy's voice returned to his reminiscence of Atlantis.)

Music did not escape that vortex either. That's also very similar to now, isn't it? When so many young people are fanatical fans of singers dressed bizarrely, screaming nonsensical lyrics on stage. The Atlanteans back then were the same. Melodious, noble tunes, and elegant traditional dances were increasingly pushed aside. Instead, entertainment venues were filled with a kind of music with a strong, driving, deafening beat. They no longer danced beautiful dances, but performed dances with grotesque, suggestive movements. They said it was a way to "release energy," but I saw that it was only stirring up the basest desires in people.

Both eras, the time of Lygus and our time, are walking a very similar path. It is a path where true, divinely inspired culture is cast aside, making way for deviant,

ugly things controlled by demons from behind the scenes. Their purpose is only one: to make people stray further and further from the moral standards set by the Divine, to make people no longer able to distinguish between true and false, good and evil, beautiful and ugly. And when humanity has completely lost its connection with the Divine, disaster will come very quickly.

(River sighed, as if shouldering the sorrow of both eras, and then continued his unfinished story.)

And then, on the foundation of a society so rotten in culture and morality, those of the materialist faction in Atlantis realized their darkest ambitions.

They created a handheld weapon, with the beautiful name "Staff of Light," but we, the remaining priests, called it by its true name: "Staff of Destruction." It had the shape of a short staff, fitted with a special crystal. When aimed at a target and activated, it would emit a beam of energy capable of breaking molecular bonds, causing the target to disintegrate into dust almost instantly, leaving no trace.

The production of this weapon was extremely expensive, requiring the rarest crystals. Therefore, it was not a common weapon, but an ultra-luxury item. Its price was equivalent to owning a private island of today's super-rich. Nevertheless, the materialist faction still produced

and sold them for exorbitant profits, turning it into a symbol of absolute power and wealth. Anyone with enough money—usually the corrupt elite or large criminal organizations—could possess the ability to annihilate others. This sowed a silent terror. The law became meaningless, and the value of life was utterly disregarded.

I and the remaining true priests looked at those "Staffs of Destruction" with horror and sorrow. To us, they were not symbols of strength, but signs of ultimate depravity. The hands of a cultivator are for uplifting, not for destroying.

(The boy River's voice seemed to choke, he was reliving the emotions of Lygus at that time.)

My soul in the life of Lygus clearly felt the powerlessness and pain of witnessing the values I had protected my whole life being trampled upon, and was even more heartbroken to know that the son I loved so dearly had unwittingly aided the villains. My body grew weaker day by day, my mind no longer clear, I could only watch Atlantis slide down the path I had tried to warn against. They created terrifying weapons that could turn a person into dust in the blink of an eye. But not everyone could have that weapon; it was as rare and expensive as a whole fortune. So, when someone suddenly disappeared without a trace, everyone tacitly understood that the

person behind it must be an untouchable force. It was an all-encompassing fear, a powerlessness in knowing that there were those who could erase you at any time just because they had enough money to buy that power.

It was not a death on the battlefield, but a slow decay of an entire civilization, starting with moral corruption, with betrayal from the dearest loved ones. And the scary thing was, many people hailed it as "development," as "freedom."

Although Lygus failed to prevent the decline of Atlantis in his time, his efforts and perseverance were not in vain. It sowed a seed, a warning for those who could listen, even in later lives. And my soul learned that the collapse of a civilization is not always a loud affair with swords and fire. Sometimes, it begins when people abandon moral standards, chase after desires and boundless freedom, considering themselves the center, and denying Gods and Buddhas.

Over two or three generations after Lygus's time, Atlantean society became increasingly corrupt, and vices that were once isolated became common. People lost their connection with the Divine, believing only in selfish science and technology and the weapons of destruction they themselves created. It was this internal decay, the accumulation of enormous karma over many generations as people insulted the Divine and lost their grace, that

was the deep-seated cause of the great catastrophe that later submerged the entire continent. The selfish policies, the development of increasingly terrifying energy weapons, and the abuse of nature-controlling technologies by the pragmatic faction and their descendants, based on a completely collapsed moral foundation, finally brought Atlantis to the brink. That was the price for arrogance and for turning their backs on the Divine.

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CHAPTER 8: NAPOLEON'S ASSISTANT SPIRIT

(This time, River didn't gaze into the distance as before. He looked straight at me, Casey, his eyes holding a strange complexity, as if recounting something very close, very personal, yet also incredibly foreign. His voice was deeper and slower.)

There are lifetimes where my soul exists as an independent being. But there was one life where my existence was tied to another destiny, a destiny that shook the entire world. I was not a person, but a part of a person. I was an assistant spirit accompanying Napoleon Bonaparte.

(Note from the transcriber – Casey Vale: Regarding the concept of “assistant spirit” that River mentions, it refers to a situation where a human being has not just one soul, but multiple souls cohabiting in one physical body. The soul that is in charge is called the “main spirit,” while the other souls are called “assistant spirits.” They are independent consciousnesses, separate parts of the soul. The assistant spirit can observe, feel, and even try to offer suggestions, but does not have the final say. That right belongs to the main spirit. In many cases, the main spirit is not even aware of the existence of these assistant spirits. River said that in that lifetime, he was one of these accompanying consciousnesses.)

It's not that I *was* Napoleon, you understand? Rather, a part of my consciousness was arranged to be with him, like a shadow of his soul, to witness, to contemplate, and perhaps, to try to balance the karmic debts and choices of a soul full of ambition, yet also full of tragedy.

This lifetime of mine was even more special. I was not the only assistant spirit. In the subtle realm of his soul, besides the powerful main spirit, there was me and other assistant spirits as well. We were like silent observers, and we had separate streams of consciousness but were bound to one great destiny. Each of us had our own perceptions, our own efforts to exert influence in our own way, but in the end, we were all powerless against the surging tide of ambition and, as I later realized, even extraterrestrial manipulations.

Even when Napoleon was young, I could feel his powerful energy, his extraordinary will, and a certain "mission" that was driving him. But then, a terrifying event occurred that changed everything.

It was around July 1794. At that time, Napoleon was about 25 years old, a young artillery officer who had already shown outstanding talent. One night, when he was alone in his tent or in some other secluded situation, I suddenly felt a strong "invasion" from the outside. A strange, cold, and completely non-human energy enveloped Napoleon's consciousness, causing him to fall into a deep coma.

In that moment, I clearly felt the presence of non-human beings—extraterrestrials. They had no clear form in my consciousness, just an impression of a high-tech, emotionless existence. Not only was Napoleon's main

spirit suppressed, but I and the other assistant spirits also felt an invisible pressure. My perceptive ability felt as if it were covered by a thick fog; though not completely lost like the main spirit, I could not see or understand all the details of the event.

Nevertheless, through what I could still perceive intermittently, I knew that they had taken Napoleon away, possibly onto one of their starships. And it was during that brief period, while our consciousness was somewhat suppressed, that they implanted a microchip into his brain. The entire process was fast, precise, and as cold as a surgical operation.

When Napoleon woke up, he only felt a little dizzy, his mind slightly muddled. He might have explained it to himself as fatigue after stressful days or a fleeting, mild fever. The memory of the event was deliberately scrambled. But I, as an assistant spirit, despite experiencing that "daze," still vaguely remembered the essence of that horrifying event.

Immediately after, I began to feel the existence of a "foreign object" in Napoleon's brain. It didn't directly control his thoughts, but it acted as an extremely powerful catalyst. It amplified what was already in him: ambition, arrogance, suspicion. At the same time, it silenced the weaker voices: compassion, hesitation, conscience. The real tragedy was that Napoleon's main

spirit, being a non-cultivator and unaware of spiritual matters, completely went along with this amplification. He liked the feeling of cold decisiveness, the intense focus on his goals that the chip provided. He chose it.

Because he was not a cultivator, Napoleon could not recognize the struggle within himself. He didn't know that at times, when I and another part of his soul tried to instill a bit of benevolent thought in him, another part, agitated by the chip, would revel in bold plans. All these internal battles, to him, probably just manifested as the strategic considerations and calculations of a leader.

His military career began to flourish brilliantly during the Italian campaign. I witnessed him devising military plans that no other general seemed capable of conceiving. The sharpness, the extraordinary logic in his thinking amazed me. But accompanying it was a terrifying coldness. The lives of thousands of soldiers, to him, seemed to be just numbers on a strategic map, necessary tools to achieve victory.

Then came the Egyptian campaign of 1798. I felt a strong, almost instinctual urge pulling him to this ancient land. It wasn't just for strategic reasons; there was also a curiosity, a strange passion for exploring the ancient ruins, the great Pyramids. He would walk at their base, his eyes full of contemplation, as if trying to remember something long forgotten. But since he was not a

cultivator, he couldn't explain this invisible connection. He just thought it was the admiration of a conqueror for a great civilization of the past.

Returning from Egypt with great fame, his ambition grew even larger. During the coup of 18 Brumaire, I witnessed his decisiveness, audacity, and even extreme recklessness as he seized power. I felt the chip in his brain seem to work more powerfully, amplifying his self-confidence to an extreme level, making him believe he was born to rule.

And then, the peak of arrogance arrived on his coronation day as Emperor in 1804. In Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris, in the presence of Pope Pius VII, who had to travel from Rome for the occasion, Napoleon did not let the Pope place the crown on his head. He snatched the crown himself and placed it on his own head. In that moment, I felt the supreme satisfaction of the main spirit and the "joy" of the chip. It was not just a political act, but a declaration to the whole world: "I have won this power with my own talent. This glory belongs to me."

After the coronation, Napoleon's power seemed absolute. But absolute power also came with absolute suspicion. And the chip did not miss the opportunity to amplify that fear. This was most evident in the execution of the Duke of Enghien shortly after. When rumors of a royalist

plot spread, Napoleon immediately suspected the duke, despite the lack of clear evidence.

As the decision to kidnap and try the duke was forming, I tried everything to dissuade him. I instilled in his mind doubts about the authenticity of the information, images of a fair trial, and evoked the fear of history's judgment if he were to wrongly execute a member of the royal family. But it was all in vain. The anger, the fear of assassination, and above all, I felt a strong "activation" from the microchip; it pushed him to "act with absolute decisiveness," to "nip the threat in the bud" as an example. The decision was made coldly. The trial was swift, and the duke was executed by firing squad. After receiving the news, I felt a ghastly "stillness" from the chip, as if it was satisfied with having eliminated an "obstacle" and consolidated its host's power through fear.

After suppressing domestic threats with an iron fist, Napoleon turned his attention outward. The glorious victories at Austerlitz, at Jena... made all of Europe submit and led him to believe he was truly invincible. But I, inside him, felt a growing sadness and powerlessness. He became more and more drunk with power, viewing human life as light as a feather. My attempts to dissuade him grew weaker, drowned out by the cheers of victory and the self-satisfaction constantly amplified by the chip.

And it was this blind confidence that led to the first fatal strategic mistake: the invasion of Spain in 1807. He overthrew the dynasty there and placed his brother on the throne, believing everything would go as smoothly as in other countries.

When this plan was nascent, I tried to warn him. I transmitted images of a proud and devout people who would never accept a foreign king. I showed him rugged mountain ranges, peasants with crude weapons but eyes full of hatred—a people's war that no regular army could ever completely win. But Napoleon, at the height of his arrogance, dismissed it all. He considered those uneasy premonitions to be cowardice. The chip again pushed him, that the Bonaparte family deserved to rule all of Europe. He had not anticipated that this decision would ignite a bloody guerrilla war, a "Spanish ulcer" that would bleed his empire for years to come, costing countless lives and resources.

That "Spanish ulcer" continuously bled the empire. But instead of learning a lesson about the limits of military power, Napoleon's arrogance, encouraged by the chip, urged him to seek an even greater victory to reassert his absolute authority. And that was when he looked towards Russia.

(The assistant spirit's narrative continues, with a heavier tone.)

The greatest tragedy, the event that marked the beginning of the collapse of an entire empire, was the decision to invade Russia in 1812.

When that plan began to form in Napoleon's mind, I felt a terrible sense of unease. My entire righteous thought, and perhaps that of the other weak, compassionate part of his soul, screamed in protest. In his fitful sleep, I tried to create the most realistic visions possible: endless white snowfields, freezing and starving troops huddling in blizzards, and dark red blood on the white snow. I tried to make him feel the desperate vastness of Russia, the extreme resilience of its people, and a cold that could freeze even one's will.

But it was all in vain. His arrogance at this point had reached its peak. He believed that nothing was impossible for his Grande Armée. And the chip, I felt it working more powerfully than ever, it constantly pushed for a "great gamble," it planted in his mind images of a final glorious victory that would place all of Europe at his feet. All advice against it, whether from his marshals in the real world or from the silent voices within like mine, was dismissed by him as cowardice and pessimism.

And then, the disaster happened exactly as I had foreseen. His mighty army was swallowed by the Russian winter and the courage of its people. I had to

witness through his eyes the scene of loyal soldiers freezing to death on the retreat, of horses collapsing from exhaustion, and the utter despair on the faces of the survivors. It was a hell on earth. And even then, his arrogance did not allow him to fully admit his mistake.

The subsequent collapse was inevitable. The defeat in Russia shook the foundations of his empire to the core. The conquered nations began to rise up, old enemies reassembled. Although he still had brilliant victories afterward, they were all just last-ditch efforts to save a ship that was already sinking.

Finally, he was defeated and exiled to the island of Elba. During this period, with his power and glory gone, I felt the activity of the microchip decrease significantly. Perhaps that extraterrestrial force considered the "Napoleon experiment" to be over, no longer worth interfering with.

The "silence" of the chip created a rare space. Napoleon's thoughts during these months became "clearer" and more genuine. Without the strong interference, our voices of conscience could connect with him more easily. He began to truly confront himself, reflecting on the mistakes, the decisions that had led him to this point.

But then, a final spark of ambition flared up. He escaped from Elba, returning to France for a glorious but brief

Hundred Days. I felt the chip "awaken" again, and the war machine was set in motion once more. But it was just the final flicker of a dying candle. The Battle of Waterloo put an end to it all.

The second exile to St. Helena, a desolate island in the middle of the ocean, was truly the end of his life. There, in absolute solitude, with no more battlefields, no more armies, no more cheers, the chip fell almost completely silent. It had become an inanimate object.

This was when I could truly "converse" with his main spirit. Not with words, but with deep streams of thought. Together, we reviewed a life full of storms. He began to have vague thoughts about fate, about the invisible forces that seemed to have guided his life, though he could not name them. He had regrets, he was tormented. He had had everything, but in the end, he lost it all.

On the day he died, I witnessed his soul leave his body. Tired, heavy with karma, but also with a serenity from finally being freed from ambitions, from struggles, and from the shackles of an exhausted body. At the same time, I also felt my own separation and that of the other assistant spirits. Our mission of accompaniment was over. The life as the shadow of a tragic great man had come to a close.

(River stopped, finishing the story of his life as an assistant spirit. He let out a long breath, then looked up at me, his eyes now back to the clear innocence of a ten-year-old, but holding a wisdom far beyond his years.)

That is the story my assistant spirit went through. But when I cultivated and looked back with my celestial eye, I saw things that even the assistant spirit at that time did not know.

Napoleon's main spirit, in a very ancient lifetime, was the fourth High Priest of the Middle Heaven Kingdom—the civilization of giants that built the Pyramids. Perhaps it was this predestined karmic connection that subconsciously compelled him to undertake an expedition to Egypt.

And that campaign had a hidden mission. In a rare dream while in Egypt, he was enlightened by a God. The God told him that a malevolent priest of a later civilization had placed a curse on the third eye area of the Sphinx, sealing the protective energy of the Martial God. Following the God's guidance, Napoleon ordered his artillery to fire at that exact spot, successfully breaking the curse. He had unwittingly fulfilled a sacred mission.

The true Heavenly will of Napoleon's conquests, from what I see, was to break the old, decadent feudal order of

Europe, and in the process, to preserve many spiritual and cultural heritages from destruction. He had correctly executed the plan of the Gods. But his tragedy lay in the fact that, because the chip amplified his arrogance, he took all the credit for himself. He believed that all his victories were due to his own talent, not the arrangement or grace of the Gods. It was that selfish and arrogant heart that caused him to create countless karmic debts, and ultimately to suffer a tragic end.

And what truly shocks me, Casey, is that when I began to cultivate Dafa and unlocked a portion of my wisdom, I gradually realized that all of us—Napoleon's main spirit and his assistant spirits—have all been reincarnated as people living in this same era. I am here, an American boy telling you this story. As for the other three, I feel that they are in different countries on Earth.

I know exactly who they are in this life, but I'm not sure if they remember anything about that glorious yet sinful past. But I believe that for all of us to appear during the period of Dafa's wide dissemination is not a coincidence. Perhaps, this is the chance for all of us to truly cleanse the karmic debts we have sown, to find our true selves, to choose a completely different path—the path of returning to Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance.

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CHAPTER 9: WITNESS OF THE DUST

(River exhaled softly, his eyes fixed on an indefinite point on the opposite wall. It seemed that with each story, he had to don a layer of the dust of time, and this time, that dust bore the red color of desolation and a sorrow that stretched across millions of years.)

Twilight of a Golden World

There was a lifetime when I was not on the Earth as you know it today. It was a different cycle of civilization, about 40 million years ago. At that time, I was a woman of nearly 30, a traditional pottery artisan. My name then, if pronounced in modern language, would sound something like Aria. Our language at that time was also very different; it relied more on sound frequencies and resonance than on characters.

My world back then, from the outside, was at a peak of development. Cities were built with shimmering alloys that reflected the sunlight into moving rainbows. Noiseless airships glided gently between skyscrapers. Humanity had easily achieved the ability to travel outside the solar system. But behind that glamorous facade was a terrifying emptiness. The social atmosphere was cold and indifferent. People were immersed in materialism and pleasures created by technology, increasingly distant from nature and spiritual values.

I, Aria, lived like an oasis in the midst of that world. My pottery workshop was located in an old quarter, where stone buildings were still preserved. Every day, I found joy and peace when my hands were smudged with clay. I could feel the soul in every fiber of the earth, could

listen to their stories as water and fire merged. But the outside world no longer cherished that. They preferred the "perfect" products mass-produced by machines, industrially beautiful but completely soulless. The sales of my workshop dwindled day by day; I could only work for a few nostalgic people, those who still came to me to order items carrying the warmth of human hands. Many times, amidst the silence of the workshop, I felt lost and doubtful, wondering if the path I was on still had any meaning.

And then, one day, our entire world was shaken.

An emergency announcement from the Inter-Nations Council was broadcast across the planet. It was an organization that brought together representatives from nearly 50 nations on Earth at that time, with the role of coordinating global issues, similar to the United Nations today. The cold, emotionless voice of the Council's President echoed from every screen, announcing a "diplomatic incident" in a distant star system.

But the truth could not be hidden for long. Information began to leak through unofficial channels, spreading like a panic. It was not an "incident." It was a devastating defeat. An Earth resource-seeking fleet, an ambitious project approved by the Inter-Nations Council itself, had trespassed into the territory of another race and was completely destroyed. And the worst part was, that alien

race, with a civilization many times more advanced than ours, had declared they would pursue us to the end and annihilate all life on Earth in retaliation.

Chaos and panic reigned. The member nations in the Council began to blame each other. The materialist leaders, who had always been proud and had absolute faith in their technological power, now faced complete helplessness for the first time.

After many tense and contentious meetings, the Inter-Nations Council announced a final, desperate plan called "Seed Preservation." They would select outstanding individuals from various fields from the member nations to board giant starships, to evacuate to secret bases on other planets in the solar system, in the hope of preserving the race in the worst-case scenario.

I was extremely surprised to receive the notification that I had been chosen. The reason given by my nation, and approved by the Council, was that I was one of the few remaining skilled traditional artisans, a representative of the "cultural heritage" that needed to be preserved. How ironic, the art they considered "outdated" and almost forgotten was now deemed a precious thing to be carried along in the escape.

On the day of departure, I stood before my pottery workshop for the last time. The kiln was still warm, a

few unfinished pieces lay on the potter's wheel. I had to leave it all behind. My whole life and passion remained there. I was only allowed to bring a small toolbox, the items that had been with me since I was an apprentice. My tears fell, not just from fear, but from the pain of having to abandon what had been my soul.

The Secret of the Red Planet

The journey to Mars took place in a tense silence. On the giant starship, thousands of people sat motionless, no one speaking a word to another. I looked around and saw a famous scientist, who often appeared in the media with a confident face, now staring into space with a dazed look. I saw a wealthy family, who always boasted about their assets, now hugging each other and sobbing. All pride, fame, and money became meaningless in the face of the impending destruction. Everyone was glued to the windows, watching our beautiful blue planet shrink, fade, until it was just a bright dot in the vast universe. It was a feeling of loss that nothing could describe.

Our starship did not land on the surface openly. It flew into a deep, desolate canyon, and then a huge door, perfectly camouflaged as a cliff face, slowly opened, revealing a tunnel leading deep into the ground.

When we stepped out of the starship, all the common people like me were stunned. Before our eyes was a completely different world. A giant underground city, illuminated by an artificial sun on the high vaulted ceiling, emitting a soft light. There were lush green botanical forests, and clear underground rivers flowing. The air was fresh and pleasant. This base could easily support several million people.

While we were still marveling, I noticed that the scientists and officials in our group looked quite calm. I later learned that they had known about the existence of this base for many years through space exploration. They knew how to find and open this secret door. That was why Mars was chosen as one of the evacuation points. But knowing of its existence was one thing; understanding it was another matter entirely.

They quickly realized that this great structure was not created by our civilization. It was too ancient, the architectural style and operating technology completely foreign. They were just people who had found a legacy of a forgotten someone, but could not decipher it.

The scientists in the group led us to the central archive of the base. They said they had found this place in previous explorations, but were completely helpless in accessing the information. The information here was not stored in any form of writing or digital data. It was sealed in large,

transparent crystal blocks. They had tried every technological method to extract the data but had failed. Finally, they came up with a hypothesis that it probably required a spiritual interaction, a connection of consciousness.

And that was why they came to me and a few others with sensitive souls, the artists, the poets. They wanted to "try their luck." When I placed my hand on a large crystal block, immediately, a torrent of information, images, sounds, and emotions flooded my mind like a storm. I was no longer Aria. I was reliving the life of another civilization, a civilization that existed 90 million years before my time.

What I saw was beyond all imagination. Their technology was many times more advanced than ours. If we had just taken our first steps out of the solar system, they already considered the entire Milky Way Galaxy their backyard. I saw huge fleets of starships, using quantum energy engines, capable of bending space to travel almost instantaneously. They had conquered, ruled, or allied with two-thirds of the star systems in the entire Milky Way. Their "Intergalactic Empire" was not just a name, but a powerful entity that spanned the universe.

But then, those glorious images gave way to scenes that made me shudder with disgust. With a power that had

no rival, they had slid into ultimate depravity. I found myself standing in a lavish grand hall. The nobles with their genetically altered bodies were enjoying music that could directly control emotions. I saw a beautiful woman walk by, and the scent of roses from her body filled the space. But her eyes were empty, soulless. In another corner, an energy cage held a strangely shaped being from another planet, trembling in fear while the crowd pointed and laughed. In the process of conquering two-thirds of the Milky Way, they had committed countless crimes, enslaving countless races.

I felt disgusted, but I also recognized a terrifying similarity in the core of that depravity: an extreme arrogance, considering themselves the center of the universe, and an extreme emptiness that had to be filled with depraved pleasures. Such a powerful empire, yet their morality had rotted from within.

And then, I saw their end. When they tried to conquer the remaining one-third of the Milky Way, they provoked a force that even they could not resist: the half-human, half-beast race from the Capricorn constellation. The collapse was swift, total. An empire that once ruled the universe was wiped out in a short period of time.

The stream of memory ended. I collapsed onto the floor, gasping for breath, my whole body drenched in sweat. I understood. History was repeating itself.

History Repeats and the Awakening

I tried to recount what I had witnessed to everyone. When the story ended, the entire central control room was silent. The silence was more terrifying than any scream. No one doubted my words. Because the tragedy of a civilization 90 million years ago was a perfect mirror reflecting our own fate.

And then, history repeated itself cruelly. The base's alarm system blared. A huge fleet had entered Earth's orbit. On the main screen, we, the survivors on Mars, were forced to witness the judgment day of our home planet. We saw their terrifying energy weapons firing at Earth. Our beautiful blue planet writhed in silent explosions. In just a few hours, it was all over. Earth, from a vibrant blue sphere, had turned into a charred, gloomy ball.

The pain and despair at that moment reached their peak. An old general who had fought everywhere collapsed on the floor. A scientist who was once the most confident now held his head and cried like a child. As for me, I didn't cry. I just felt a cold emptiness, because I had "seen" this outcome before through the memory of the ancient civilization.

In the panic, an order was given: seal all entrances to the base. We burrowed deeper into the ground, preparing for the worst. The air in the base was suffocating. Food was strictly rationed. Silence enveloped us; even the children no longer played. We waited in fear. A day passed. Then two.

But then, on the third day, something unbelievable happened. The enemy fleet, after circling Mars a few more times, regrouped and... left. They just disappeared into the deep space, as if they didn't care about our existence at all.

The base was plunged into a stunned silence. No one understood what had happened. And amidst that silence, a common understanding began to spread in everyone's mind. We had been protected by a higher power. We had been saved not by technology, but by Gods and Buddhas.

This miraculous event, along with the repeating history I had witnessed, became a shocking awakening for the entire community. A general meeting was held in the largest hall of the base. For the first time, I, an ordinary artisan, stood up to speak before thousands of people. I not only recounted history, but also spoke of my reflections on the law of karma, on the danger of arrogance and the materialist path. My sincere words, combined with the undeniable truth that everyone had just experienced, had a powerful effect. The scientists,

the leaders, after experiencing ultimate helplessness, publicly admitted the mistake of the path our civilization had taken.

A momentous decision was unanimously agreed upon: to completely abandon our reliance on advanced technology, to return to traditional values, to live a simple life based on manual labor, and to focus on inner development, to find our connection with the Divine again.

And in that spiritual revolution, I, Aria, a nearly forgotten pottery artisan, suddenly became a central figure. My art was no longer "outdated." It, along with other traditional crafts, became the foundation for rebuilding a society with a soul.

The Artisan's Mission

The decades that passed underground on Mars were not easy, but they were full of meaning. We turned off most of the automated machines, the things that had once made us lazy and distant. We began to learn from scratch the most basic skills: how to cultivate the land in artificial gardens with our own hands, how to weave cloth from the fibers of plants, how to build and repair houses with simple tools.

My pottery workshop became the heart of the community. Every day, many people came, not just to place orders, but to learn. I taught them how to feel the soul of the earth, how to use patience and love to turn a lump of lifeless clay into a bowl, a vase. I saw the joy sparkling in the eyes of a scientist who had won many awards as he successfully made his first cup with his own hands, even though it was misshapen and imperfect. That joy was more real than any technological achievement they had ever attained.

A few decades after Earth's destruction, the observation systems showed that our planet had gradually healed itself. The atmosphere was clearing, and vegetation was beginning to revive in some places. A great debate broke out in the community: should we return or not? Some were still afraid, believing that Mars was the only safe home. But the majority, including me, felt we had a responsibility to return, to rebuild our homeland from the ashes.

Finally, a decision was made. Half the community would return to Earth. The other half would stay on Mars, maintaining this base as a backup plan, a reminder of the past. This time, the farewell was not with desperate tears, but with tight hugs, promises, and a hope for the future.

Upon returning to Earth, I became one of the most respected people, entrusted with leading the pottery

industry of the new civilization. But in my heart, I knew my mission was now much greater.

I began to undertake a great project, a silent work that would last for the rest of my life. I crafted a series of pottery masterpieces, each piece a living page of history, telling the story that only I and a few others remembered. I carved on them the images of the great starships of the "Intergalactic Empire," scenes of their lavish, decadent banquets. I also carved the image of the brutal Capricorn race and the fall of an empire that once ruled two-thirds of the Milky Way. And I also carved our own story: the arrogance, the punishment, the evacuation, and the awakening in the heart of Mars.

Each piece was a profound meditation, a time I had to relive all the painful memories and the hard-won lessons. My hands molded the clay, but my mind was trying to mold a warning for the future.

After they were completed, these works were not displayed anywhere. They were part of a solemn ceremony. We wrapped them in special cloths, placed them in stone chests, and buried them in various remote locations around the world. Before filling in the earth, we would place our hands on the chest together and send a prayer: a prayer that the people of future civilizations, if they had the karmic opportunity to find these "witnesses," would have enough wisdom and kindness

to understand the message we wanted to convey, so as not to repeat the path of destruction.

In my final years, I no longer made pottery. I devoted all my time to cultivating the Buddha Fa and passing on all my skills, experiences, and reflections to generations of students. They not only learned a craft, but also learned about morality, about humility and reverence for Gods and Buddhas.

On the day I passed away, I was over eighty years old. I knew my time was near. I called my closest students, gave them my final words, to keep alive the flame of their craft and of morality. Then I sat in the meditation posture in my old pottery workshop, where it had all begun. Amidst the smell of clay and the faint scent of incense, I peacefully departed from the world in a manner similar to how some high-level monks in Tibet pass away: a faint golden halo enveloped my body for a moment, and a strange, pure fragrance filled the room, and my entire body, including my clothes, transformed into a multi-colored beam of light and shot up into the sky.

The life of Aria ended thus. A life that began in doubt, went through loss and despair, but ultimately found its mission and fulfillment in becoming a silent witness of history, a sower of seeds for the future.

* * *

CHAPTER 10: REINCARNATION IN THE TANG DYNASTY

(This time, River's narrative voice did not carry the tragic grandeur or mystique of lost civilizations. It was calm and gentle, like the sound of a temple bell echoing on a late afternoon. The boy seemed to be telling the story of an old friend, a very ordinary person yet with an extraordinary perseverance.)

There was a lifetime when I returned to an era not too distant, a golden age in Chinese history, where the Buddha Fa, especially the Chan (Zen) school, flourished—the Tang dynasty.

In that life, I was not a king, a priest, or a person of great influence. Initially, I was a military officer named Chen Kang, serving under the Prince of Qin, Li Shimin, before he ascended to the throne as Emperor. My life in that incarnation was a major turning point, from the clang of swords on the battlefield to the tranquility of a monastery.

A Soldier Amidst the Struggle for Power

I was born in the final years of the Sui dynasty, a time of turmoil, with white bones littering the fields and the common people suffering. My childhood memories were

of hungry days, of robbery and slaughter, of the helplessness of watching loved ones fall without being able to do anything. Therefore, when I heard that the Duke of Tang, Li Yuan, was preparing to raise troops in Taiyuan to rebel against the Sui, I, a young man full of passion, did not hesitate to find my way there to enlist, with a simple wish to contribute to ending the suffering I had witnessed.

The person who directly recruited and interviewed me at that time was his second son, the Prince of Qin, Li Shimin. From our very first meeting, I was completely won over by his extraordinary spirit, his star-bright eyes, and a confidence that radiated from him. Although the uprising was nominally led by the Duke of Tang, in my heart at that time, the Prince of Qin was the true image of an enlightened ruler, someone who could sweep away the chaos and bring real peace to the people. I vowed to use my life to fight under his banner, placing my absolute trust in the enlightened ruler I had chosen.

On the battlefield, I was a good soldier. I fought bravely, never retreating in the face of danger, and had been through life and death many times. I remember once, in an extremely difficult siege, our troops were pinned down by enemy fire arrows, casualties were mounting, and the soldiers began to waver. At that very moment, the Prince of Qin was not in the safety of his command tent. He personally donned his armor, took up his sword,

and charged to the front line. He didn't shout empty slogans. He just stood there, amidst a rain of arrows, using his majestic virtue and bravery to rally the entire army's spirit. Witnessing that, I and the other soldiers felt as if we were infused with an invisible strength; we charged forward, ready to die, and finally captured the city. That image was deeply engraved in my mind, reinforcing a firm belief that by following him, the world would surely be at peace.

But my nature was very simple and straightforward. I didn't know how to use schemes, nor did I have the talent for eloquent speech to curry favor with superiors. I only knew to be loyal to my orders and my ideals. Therefore, despite many meritorious deeds, I was only promoted to the rank of Captain, a mid-level military officer. I wasn't too concerned about it. Rank was not as important to me as seeing the Tang dynasty's territory become more secure each day.

After the founding of the Tang dynasty, it seemed that peace had arrived, but another war, a more terrifying one, was silently brewing right in the capital city of Chang'an. It was the struggle for power. According to tradition, the eldest brother, Crown Prince Li Jiancheng, was to be the successor. But the Prince of Qin, Li Shimin, the second son, was the one who had contributed the most to pacifying the realm. His merits were too great, his prestige too high, which made the Crown Prince's

position shaky. The conflict between the two factions grew increasingly intense. Together with the fourth brother, the Prince of Qi, Li Yuanji, Crown Prince Li Jiancheng made multiple attempts to harm and eliminate the Prince of Qin.

The political atmosphere in the capital during those days was suffocatingly tense. The generals and soldiers in our Prince of Qin's residence all felt a storm was about to break. Every day, we lived in anxiety, not knowing what tomorrow would bring. I, with the sensitivity of a soldier accustomed to danger, also felt a pervading sense of unease. I was just a low-ranking officer, not fully understanding the deep schemes of the court. I only had a simple wish: that the princes could reconcile for the sake of the country and avoid the tragedy of fratricide. But I knew that was just a naive hope.

And then, the fateful night came. My commander, a close general to the Prince of Qin, was summoned to the residence for an urgent meeting. As his guard, I had to accompany him and stand guard outside the study. That night, the air was thick, so tense that I could hear my own heart beating. Through the slightly ajar wooden door, I could hear the low, calculating voices inside. I heard the name of Crown Prince Li Jiancheng, of the Prince of Qi, Li Yuanji. I heard words like "ambush," "Xuanwu Gate," "no other choice." And I clearly heard

the decisive voice of the Prince of Qin, and the staunch support of Zhangsun Wuji and the others.

They were planning a bold and cruel scheme: to ambush and kill his own brothers.

The blood in my veins seemed to freeze. My ears were ringing. My world felt like it was tilting. The enlightened ruler I revered, the one I believed would bring peace through righteousness, was planning a fratricidal massacre. The entire ideal I had risked my life to protect for so many years suddenly became ridiculous and false. I felt disgusted, not only with the plan, but with myself for being a part of this machine. I didn't want to participate, didn't want my hands to be stained by such a wicked deed.

After the meeting, on the way back, I summoned all my courage to speak to my commander. I made the excuse that I had been feeling unwell for the past few days and requested a different assignment outside the city on that day. The commander, who was tense and had his mind entirely on the plan, just glanced at me coldly and dismissed it. "This is a moment of life and death for the Prince of Qin and all of us. There is no room for weakness. You are a soldier of the Prince of Qin's residence, you must be there!" His tone allowed for no refusal.

I realized I had no choice. I was bound by my status as a soldier, by my loyalty to my commander, and by the turning wheel of fate from which I could not escape.

The next morning, the day of the incident, the atmosphere at Xuanwu Gate was as heavy as lead. My unit and I were assigned to guard an outer perimeter, to prevent any possibility of reinforcements from the Crown Prince's faction. I was not the one who directly struck the blows, but I heard everything. The neighing of horses, the terrifying screams, the brief, brutal clash of weapons, and then... a deathly silence. That silence was more terrifying than any sound.

A short while later, the Prince of Qin, Li Shimin, walked out of Xuanwu Gate. I looked at him, trying to find the image of the heroic, enlightened ruler on the battlefield of yesteryear. But no. The person standing before me now had a completely different look in his eyes. A cold, empty gaze, without a trace of warmth, without a ripple of emotion. It was the look of a man who had cast aside all kinship in exchange for power. That look completely killed the image of the "enlightened ruler" in my heart.

After Li Shimin ascended the throne, taking the reign title of Emperor Taizong of Tang, the whole world hailed a new chapter in history. But for me, the ideal was dead. The glory of the new dynasty, built on the blood of brothers, was to me just a disgrace. I felt the uniform on

my body was heavy. The sword at my hip also felt alien. I, Chen Kang, now nearly 40 years old, felt tired and empty. I requested to be discharged from the army, citing poor health from years of campaigning. I gave up the uniform, the sword that had been with me throughout my youth, left the bustling capital, and began a journey of aimless wandering, searching for something that could mend my broken soul.

Thirty Silent Years at the Feet of the Fifth Patriarch

My wanderings led me to Huangmei Mountain, where the Dongchan Monastery was located. When I knelt before the Fifth Patriarch, Hongren, a Zen master with compassionate yet penetrating eyes, I did not ask him for peace. I only asked him for a place to take refuge, a path to follow. He looked at me, a man nearly 40 years old, my sturdy frame still bearing the marks of the battlefield, and nodded. I shaved my head, put on the brown robe, and was given the Dharma name Xuanmo by the Master.

The first few days in the monastery were a battle more arduous than any I had ever fought. It was a battle with my own body and mind.

The body of a warrior accustomed to movement now screamed in protest at being forced to sit still for hours. Each meditation session was an ordeal. My legs, used to leather boots and iron stirrups, now had to be folded. At first, I could only sit in the half-lotus position. After just a short while, an aching pain, as if a thousand needles were pricking my bones, and a fire seemed to run up my spine. My back, used to being straight on a saddle, now ached terribly. I looked at my fellow monks sitting in the full-lotus position, as steady as stone statues, while I was constantly fidgeting, my forehead drenched in sweat.

Following the advice of some fellow practitioners, I used harsh methods to force myself into the mold. Sometimes, I used small, flat stones to press on my knees, hoping the weight would help my legs go down. Other times, I used ropes to tie my legs tightly in the full-lotus position, gritting my teeth against the bone-deep pain.

And my mind was an even wilder horse. Whenever I tried to calm it, the bloody images of the battlefield would return. I saw the faces again, heard the screams again. Some nights, I dreamed I was at Xuanwu Gate, but the person I had to strike down was an old comrade who had gone through life and death with me. I would wake up with a start, a silent scream caught in my throat, my hands still clenched as if holding a sword hilt.

A few young monks, seeing me struggle so, couldn't hide their giggles. I heard them whispering behind my back: "Look, bringing the body of the battlefield into the Buddha's gate," or "How can such a person cultivate?" I heard it all. The pride of a warrior made me angry, but I quickly suppressed it, replacing it with a sense of shame and helplessness.

One day, the Fifth Patriarch Hongren was passing by and saw me meditating, my face contorted in pain, two stones weighing down my legs. He stopped, said nothing, just shook his head slightly and walked on. The next day, he called me to him privately and said sternly:

"I hear you are using stones to press your legs, and ropes to bind your body, hoping to sit in the full-lotus position. Are you trying to subdue this body like subduing a wild horse? This body of yours has created so much killing karma on the battlefield, what's a little pain now? You could endure ten thousand arrows piercing your heart, yet you can't endure a little ache in your legs? This pain is precisely what is eliminating your karma. You are using stones to press your legs, but your mind is still at war with the pain. Cultivation is about cultivating the mind, not the legs. When your mind is no longer at war with it, then what does it matter if there are stones or not?"

The Master's stern but wise words were like a bucket of cold water poured over me. I was awakened. I understood. The problem was not the stones, but my attachment to "having to be able to sit." From that day on, I removed the stones myself. I no longer saw the pain as an enemy, but began to learn to accept and observe it calmly. From then on, I also stopped forcing myself to meditate mechanically. I asked for the heaviest chores in the monastery: chopping wood, carrying water, pounding rice. With every swing of the axe, every step carrying water up the slope, I focused my entire mind on it. Gradually, the images of the past no longer screamed; they settled down. It took nearly ten years for me to truly subdue my body and mind, to be able to sit steadily in the full-lotus position.

For the next ten years, with my mind at peace, I began to focus more on studying the scriptures. And in the Dongchan Monastery at that time, no one could compare to the Head Monk, Shenxiu, in terms of erudition. He was the teaching master, the head of the sangha. I often went to listen to the head monk's Dharma talks, and greatly admired his vast knowledge, his ability to quote scriptures flawlessly, and his eloquent rhetoric. In my heart, I saw him as a beacon, a shining example for me to follow. I also tried to read as many scriptures as I could, trying to memorize and interpret them as Shenxiu did.

But once again, the Master enlightened me. One afternoon, as I was copying scriptures in the library, the Fifth Patriarch came by. He didn't ask me about the content of the scriptures, but just a simple question: "As you copy these words, does your mind feel at peace?" I answered honestly: "Master, I feel I am becoming more knowledgeable, but my mind still wavers at times."

The Fifth Patriarch looked deep into my eyes and said slowly:

"Xuanmo, your foundation is not in scriptures. Shenxiu has his path, you have yours. You should not follow another's shadow. The scriptures are like a finger pointing to the moon; if you keep looking at the finger, how can you see the moon? What you need is not more knowledge, but to let your mind, which has been forged in red-hot fire, settle down, so that wisdom can manifest itself. From now on, read less. Just keep chopping wood, carrying water, and meditating. Concentrate on the practice I have transmitted to you, and enlighten to it yourself."

That enlightenment helped me to redefine my path. I no longer pursued external forms, but returned to the single-minded cultivation of my inner self. I realized that true peace comes from the tranquility in every action, not from knowledge in books.

The final years of this period were when Huineng appeared. By then, Master Hongren was old. A big question began to spread throughout the entire sangha of over five hundred monks: Who would be worthy to inherit the robe and bowl, to become the Sixth Patriarch of the Chan school? In everyone's mind, the answer seemed all too clear. It could be no one other than the Head Monk, Shenxiu. He was the teaching master, the head of the sangha, who often gave Dharma talks on behalf of the Master. His practice of "constantly wiping it clean, not letting dust alight" was considered the most orthodox and profound path of cultivation. Most of the monks in the monastery, including me, deeply respected him and considered him a master, the indisputable successor. The atmosphere in the monastery was both solemn and full of expectation, all awaiting the day the Master would officially announce his decision.

We could not have guessed then that the destiny of the Chan school did not lie with that erudite teaching master, but with an illiterate woodcutter from the South, who was about to step through the monastery gates.

When Huineng arrived at the monastery and was assigned to pound rice in the kitchen, I, now an elderly monk, was also occasionally assigned odd jobs in that area. I had the opportunity to observe Layman Lu (Huineng's name at the time). I saw a thin, small man, but when he pounded rice, each strike of the pestle was

steady and rhythmic, without a trace of complaint or fatigue. His face always radiated a strange calm and peace. Once, seeing him taking a break, dripping with sweat, I brought him a bowl of water and asked: "Such hard work, repeated every day, doesn't the layman feel tired?"

Huineng just smiled and replied with a simple sentence: "The body may be tired, but the mind is not." That sentence had a powerful impact on me, making me respect this illiterate woodcutter even more.

I had that foundation, so when the event of composing the gathas (verses) happened, I was able to comprehend it.

Knowing everyone's thoughts, one day, the Fifth Patriarch gathered the sangha and gave them a task. He said:

"The matter of life and death is a great matter. Each of you, look into your own wisdom, and if anyone has seen their original nature, compose a gatha and present it to me. Whoever has enlightened to the great meaning, I will pass the robe and bowl to them to be the Sixth Patriarch."

The whole monastery fell silent. No one dared to present a gatha. I knew that the Head Monk, Shenxiu, had

struggled greatly. He paced back and forth in his room for several days, wanting to present a gatha but fearing his level was not worthy of the Master's mind-seal, yet not presenting it would be a betrayal of the Master's expectations.

Finally, one night, he secretly wrote his gatha on the wall of the main corridor. The next morning, the whole monastery was in an uproar. People gathered before the wall, marveling in admiration. Even the Master, after seeing it, praised it and told everyone to light incense, bow to this gatha, and recite it, and they would not fall into the evil paths. The gatha was as follows:

"The body is a Bodhi tree,

The mind like a bright mirror stand.

Time and again, diligently wipe it clean,

And let no dust alight."

「身是菩提樹，

心如明鏡臺。

時時勤拂拭，

勿使惹塵埃。」

When I read these lines, I was deeply impressed. It perfectly expressed the path of cultivation that I and most of my fellow monks were striving to follow. For so many years, weren't we also trying to keep the "body" as pure as a bodhi tree, and the "mind" as clean as a bright mirror stand? But deep down, I still felt something was incomplete, a weariness in that very "diligence."

We did not know then that in the kitchen, the layman pounding rice, upon hearing this gatha, just smiled and shook his head. Being illiterate, Huineng asked another monk to write his gatha on the wall, right next to Shenxiu's. It was the gatha that changed my entire life:

"Bodhi is fundamentally not a tree,

The bright mirror is also not a stand.

Fundamentally there is not a single thing,

Where could dust alight?"

「菩提本無樹，

明鏡亦非臺。

本來無一物，

何處惹塵埃？」

When I heard those four lines, it was as if a current of electricity ran through my entire body. A powerful shock from the depths of my soul. It was like a thunderous hammer blow that shattered the "mirror stand" I had painstakingly tried to wipe clean for so many years. "Fundamentally there is not a single thing"! That's right, if original nature is fundamentally nothing, then where could dust come from to be wiped away? All my previous efforts were attachments to "having." Huineng's gatha pointed directly to the true path of liberation. The biggest knot that had been in my heart for so long was suddenly untied. I was not enlightened, but I had "seen" the path.

From that moment on, I knew for sure that the layman pounding rice was the one who had truly "seen his nature." Therefore, when I later learned that the Fifth Patriarch had secretly transmitted the robe and bowl to Huineng and sent him away that very night, I was not surprised or jealous at all. While the whole monastery was in an uproar, while a portion of the sangha, unable to accept the truth, became jealous and chased after them to snatch back the robe and bowl, I just quietly returned

to my room and sat down to meditate. My mind was unusually calm.

Consummation in Stillness

After the storm of the robe and bowl transmission, the Dongchan Monastery was no longer the same. There were divisions, there was gossip, there was regret for the Head Monk Shenxiu, and also doubt about the successor from the South. But none of that affected me anymore. My mind was like a lake that had become still after the rain. I did not leave the monastery, but continued on my path of cultivation for many more years, but now with a completely different understanding. I no longer strove to "wipe it clean," but just quietly lived in that state of "fundamentally not a single thing." I did not seek divine powers, did not experience supernatural phenomena, just delved deeper into the stillness of my inner self day by day.

When I was over 70, I felt that my karmic connection with the masses was fulfilled. The noise, even the noise of a monastery, was no longer necessary for me. I asked permission from the abbot at that time, left the monastery, and went to a nearby remote mountain to cultivate in my final years.

I built a simple thatched hut myself by a stream, under an ancient pine tree. My life from then on became extremely simple. My companions were the clouds and the mountain wind. The sound of the stream was the Dharma talk, the song of the pines was the sutra. Every day, I did only two things: enough manual labor to sustain my life, and meditation.

Twenty years of solitary cultivation passed in a flash, but also as long as a lifetime. In that absolute stillness, I had completely let go of my final attachments. The image of the military officer Chen Kang, of the Prince of Qin Li Shimin, of the Xuanwu Gate incident, all had vanished like smoke. Even the image of the monk Xuanmo with his thirty years of arduous cultivation was no more. Everything became light, empty.

On the day I passed away, I was over 90 years old. I knew my time was near. That morning, I felt my body was light, my mind as clear as crystal. I did not eat or drink, just went to the stream to wash my face thoroughly, then put on my most intact monk's robe. I returned to the thatched hut, tidied everything up, then sat in the meditation posture, facing Huangmei Mountain, as a final word of thanks to Master Hongren.

I reflected on my entire life, from an idealistic military officer to a Zen monk seeking tranquility. And then I smiled serenely. Amidst the sound of the stream and the

song of the pines, I peacefully departed from the world. There was no brilliant halo, no multi-colored relics, only the serene departure of an old soldier who had found true peace, a nameless Zen monk who had completed his own path.

(The boy River finished the story, a deep respect shining in his eyes. He was silent for a moment, then continued, as if having just discovered something wonderful.)

When Xuanmo heard Huineng's gatha, he had a great awakening. But now, in this lifetime, as I cultivate Dafa, I've discovered something even more interesting about the two gathas of Shenxiu and Huineng.

They are not contradictory, and one cannot say which is "right" or "wrong" in an absolute sense. They are like principles for different levels of cultivation.

At the first level, for a beginner, their mind is full of thoughts, desires, and karma, like a mirror covered in dust. At this point, Shenxiu's gatha is completely correct. They must "diligently wipe it clean," must make a tangible effort to eliminate the bad things, to keep their minds pure. That is a necessary path to walk.

But when they cultivate to a certain level, they suddenly realize that their original nature is fundamentally pure, not defiled at all. "Dust" is just a false appearance, not the

true nature. At this point, they break through to the second level, and Huineng's gatha ("Fundamentally there is not a single thing") becomes the truth for them. This is sudden enlightenment.

But the miracle doesn't stop there. When one ascends to an even higher level, I see that Shenxiu's gatha becomes correct again, but with a completely different meaning... And then at an even higher level, when everything has completely assimilated with the Fa of that level, Huineng's gatha once again expresses the correct meaning. That process repeats itself, at each major level.

It's like the rungs on a ladder of cultivation. No rung is wrong, only which one is suitable for the position the person is standing on.

(The boy smiled, seeming very pleased with his discovery.)

Understanding this helps me to cherish Xuanmo's journey even more. He patiently walked his own rung on the ladder, and finally found peace. Perhaps, not everyone who cultivates needs to do earth-shattering things. Enlightenment can come from the most ordinary people, like the Sixth Patriarch Huineng whom Xuanmo witnessed. And even without achieving the great wisdom of the Patriarchs, a lifetime of persevering in cultivating one's mind nature, seeking true liberation, is also a very worthy journey.

It helps me to better understand patience, and how important it is to cultivate one's inner self, just like when I read the books and do the exercises of Falun Dafa now. Sometimes, the greatest progress lies in the silent changes from within.

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CHAPTER 11: THE NAMELESS STRATEGIST

(This time, River's narrative voice carried a different weight, as if unrolling an ancient scroll. The first half of the scroll depicted smoke and fire, the pain and hatred of an oath carved in blood. The second half was the mist and clouds of a monastery, the stillness and wisdom of a true cultivator. The boy was about to tell a story of how a negative karmic bond was benevolently resolved in the most miraculous way.)

This memory takes me back to a karmic debt. A debt written in blood and tears, originating from a lifetime before my soul even came to the land of Vietnam in the 13th century, when this nation was still called Dai Viet. To understand the story of the reclusive Zen master, perhaps we must begin with the pain of an ordinary man, a husband, a father named Li Gang.

The story took place in the late Southern Song dynasty, a dynasty in its dying days. An atmosphere of unease permeated everywhere. But in a small village on the northern frontier, bordering the Jin state, the life of Li Gang still passed in relative peace. He was not an official, nor a general. He was just an ordinary carpenter, his hands rough and calloused from holding a chisel and plane every day. His greatest joy and his entire world lay within a simple thatched hut: his gentle, hardworking wife and their two children, a boy and a girl, in their growing years.

I still remember the feeling of Li Gang at that time, a feeling of simple and steadfast happiness. Happiness was coming home from work and hearing the crisp laughter of children from afar. Happiness was seeing the silhouette of his wife bustling by the hearth, the evening smoke mingling with the fragrant smell of newly cooked rice. Happiness was the simple but warm evening meal,

the whole family gathered around the wooden table he had made himself, telling each other stories without beginning or end. For Li Gang, that was enough. He wished for nothing more than for these simple days to last forever.

But peace on the frontier was always fragile. Rumors of the Mongol cavalry had begun to spread. People said that army was like a flash flood; wherever they went, not even grass would grow. They had begun their campaign to conquer the Jin state, and the villages in the border region, like Li Gang's, began to feel the breath of war. Occasionally, small bands of soldiers would pass through, looting food and causing brawls. Anxiety began to seep into every household, but the people still clung to a thin hope that the disaster would pass.

One autumn morning, Li Gang agreed to go to a neighboring village, about twenty kilometers from his home, to help someone rebuild a roof. The work would only take a day. Before leaving, he stroked his two children's heads, promising to be back before dark. He looked at his wife; she smiled gently and gave him a bag of rice balls. That was the last time he saw them alive.

In the middle of his work, he suddenly heard terrified screams from the main road. A panicked crowd, their clothes disheveled, ran towards the village, shouting as

they ran: "The Mongols! The Mongols are raiding! They are massacring the villages along the river!"

Li Gang's heart stopped. His village was right by the river.

Thinking no more, Li Gang hastily threw down his tools, rushed to the horse tied to a tree, jumped on, and spurred it into a gallop towards home. The familiar road now seemed endless. The wind whistled past his ears, but he could only hear his own heart pounding as if it would burst from his chest. Every thud of the horse's hooves on the ground was a desperate prayer from him, praying to get back in time, praying for his family to be safe. He whipped the horse mercilessly, wishing only that he could fly home instantly.

When he was a few miles from the village, a smell of acrid smoke hit his nostrils. His heart sank. He saw columns of black smoke rising from the direction of his village. A deathly silence pervaded. There were no human voices, no sounds of livestock. Only the sound of the wind blowing through the half-burnt thatched roofs.

Li Gang jumped off the horse before it had even fully stopped, stumbling towards his house. The wooden door was hacked to pieces, thrown to one side. He rushed inside, screaming his wife's name, his children's names. But only a ghastly silence answered him.

And then he saw them. The scene before him made the world collapse around him. Everything in the house was smashed, overturned. And on the cold, earthen floor, amidst the broken pieces of bowls and furniture, were three familiar bodies. His wife... and his two small children... They lay there, motionless, their bodies still bearing dried bloodstains. Their eyes were wide open, still etched with extreme terror.

He was too late.

Li Gang did not cry. His tears had dried up along with his heart. He fell to his knees, his trembling hands touching the cold face of his wife, then his two children. The warmth he once cherished had now turned into a chilling coldness. His world, everything he loved, every reason for his existence, had been destroyed in a flash. The pain, the helplessness, the torment of not being able to get back in time, all merged into a blazing fire of hatred, fierce and dark.

He sat there, amidst the devastation, holding the cold bodies until it was pitch dark. In his mind, there was only one thought, one purpose: revenge. He was no longer Li Gang, the gentle carpenter. From that moment on, he was dead. What remained alive was just a machine driven by hatred.

After burying his wife and children, Li Gang had nothing left to lose. He heard that a fierce battle was taking place not far away, where the Jin army was trying to repel an attack by the Mongols. Without a moment's hesitation, he packed a few simple belongings, took his wood-chopping axe, and set off. He did not seek out the Southern Song army. His hatred did not distinguish between nations; it was aimed at a single enemy.

When he reached the battlefield, he saw a scene of chaos. The Jin army was trying to hold its line against the fierce assault of the Mongol cavalry, who were well-equipped and experienced.

Without waiting for an order, without needing any tactics, Li Gang let out a wordless roar, a scream that contained all the pain and hatred of a man who had lost everything. He no longer saw the enemy or the battlefield; he only saw the ghosts who had taken his family. Charging into the elite formation of the Mongol army with an axe in his hand, he was like a wounded beast crazily attacking its predator.

But rage cannot replace experience, and hatred cannot block sharp blades. The Mongol soldiers coldly pierced through him with their long spears. He barely felt the physical pain, as the pain in his soul was too great. He fell, blood gushing out, in his first and last battle.

In his final moments, as his breath grew weaker, the image of his wife and children appeared clearly again. The pain and hatred did not diminish; on the contrary, they burned even more fiercely. Li Gang raised his eyes, blurred with blood, to the gray sky, then at the unfamiliar faces of the enemies surrounding him. With all his remaining strength, he uttered an oath from the bottom of his soul, an oath that echoed, deeply engraved into his being:

"If there is a next life, I will definitely find you and avenge my wife and children!"

That was his final thought before sinking into darkness. That oath, heavy with resentment, became an indelible mark, a karmic debt that followed his soul into the cycle of reincarnation, waiting for a day to be settled.

And it was this very debt that was arranged by the Heavens to be resolved in a way no one could have expected, in another land, in another identity, when the soul of Li Gang was reincarnated into the Tran dynasty of Dai Viet.

Reincarnation in Dai Viet – The Monk with Hidden Military Knowledge

The soul of Li Gang, carrying the heavy oath of resentment, sank into the cycle of reincarnation. But instead of being condemned to dark realms because of his hateful thoughts, it seemed that some compassionate arrangement had intervened. The debt had to be paid, but not through a path of further sinking into killing karma. That soul was guided to a new beginning, in a land that was prosperous, where the Buddha Fa was revered—the nation of Dai Viet under the Tran dynasty.

I was born into a commoner family, but from a young age, I showed unusual traits. While other children my age liked to play, I would often sit alone for hours, quietly watching the clouds drift by, or observing ants carrying food back to their nest. I had a strange empathy for all living things and a vague concern about the suffering of life that I myself could not explain.

One day, as I was sitting under a tree, intently watching a wilting flower, an elderly Zen master came through the village on his alms round. His gaze fell upon me. He said nothing, just quietly observed me for a long time, then smiled. After that, he went to my parents and said:

"Benefactors, you have a son with a very special disposition. The boy has a rare tranquility and compassion. This is a good seed; if planted in the right place, he will become a great tree in the future, providing shade for many."

Pausing for a moment, the Zen master continued:

"This humble monk is the abbot of the small monastery on the hill at the end of the village. If the two benefactors don't mind, please consider letting the boy come to the monastery to be a novice, so he can be close to the scriptures and nurture that kind heart. Perhaps, that is his path."

My parents, who also believed in karmic destiny, were deeply moved and respectfully agreed upon hearing the Zen master's words. And so, at the age of ten, I bid farewell to my family and followed that Zen master to the monastery. He was my first Master, the one who gave me the Dharma name Minh Tinh.

In the first few years at the monastery, I mainly learned the rules of the Zen school, memorized scriptures, and practiced meditation. My young mind at that time could not yet fully grasp the profound teachings, but I had an innate tranquility and a better ability to concentrate than the other novices. The Master noticed this and did not rush to explain complex philosophies to me. Instead, he patiently used daily chores like sweeping leaves and carrying water to polish my disposition and sow the first seeds of the Buddha Fa in my heart.

At the age of thirteen, when my mind began to branch out and grow leaves, those seeds truly started to develop.

I no longer just recited the scriptures but began to ponder their meaning. The suffering of sentient beings, the cycle of life and death, the things the Master taught suddenly became vivid, urging in me a desire for deeper understanding.

It was during this period, from about thirteen to sixteen, that the monastery's scripture repository became my world. The Master, seeing that I was mature enough, allowed me to freely read books other than the Buddhist scriptures. Initially, I turned to the books of Confucianism and Daoism, hoping to better understand the principles governing society and heaven and earth.

And then, very naturally, I was drawn to historical records, the stories of the rise and fall of dynasties. Reading about wars, I did not feel the excitement of a warmonger, but rather a deep sense of sorrow. It seemed there was something in my blood, an invisible memory, that made me particularly sensitive to the brutality of warfare. This prompted me to read ancient military treatises.

To me at that time, military strategy was not the art of killing, but the art of ending killing. I realized that war was not just about swords and spears, but also a contest of wisdom and human hearts. I saw the wonderful correspondence between Buddhist principles and military strategy: a good general must have a

compassionate heart to avoid excessive killing, must have the wisdom to know himself and the enemy, and must have the tranquility to not be disturbed by events, just like a cultivator.

The combination of Buddhist wisdom, the profundity of Confucianism and Daoism, and a natural understanding of military strategy created in me a different kind of understanding of the world. My fellow monks in the monastery respected me for my diligence and knowledge of Buddhism, but also found me a bit hard to understand, when a young monk could spend hours just setting up a game of Go, murmuring about moves as if calculating a battle formation.

Years went by, and I was appointed the abbot of a small, tranquil monastery on the western outskirts of the capital city, Thang Long. The monastery was situated on a low hill, hidden among green bamboo groves, an ideal place for those who wanted to find a quiet place to wash away worldly dust. I was in my fifties then, my mind almost as calm as a ripple-less lake. I thought the rest of my life would just pass by in that peace.

But karmic destiny is something one cannot foresee.

One summer afternoon, as I was meditating under the Bodhi tree in the monastery courtyard, a young visitor arrived. The visitor was dressed simply like a scholar,

but his appearance and demeanor exuded a strange nobility and wisdom. Although the young man tried to hide it, I could still feel the latent true qi of a sovereign within him. He was accompanied by only one guard, also dressed as a commoner, who waited at the monastery gate.

The young visitor clasped his hands and bowed with great humility. He said that he was on an inspection tour and, seeing the tranquil scenery of the monastery, had stopped by to offer a stick of incense and hoped to ask the Master for some guidance on the Buddha Fa. He was Crown Prince Tran Kham, who would later become the wise king Tran Nhan Tong.

I invited the young man into the meditation hall and brewed a pot of lotus tea. The atmosphere was quiet, with only the sound of the wind gently rustling the leaves outside. Our conversation began with the Crown Prince's questions about the "Mind," about the suffering of sentient beings, and about the path to enlightenment. Although the young man was young, the questions he raised were incredibly profound, showing a great concern for the fate of his people and humanity.

I realized this was no ordinary person. This was a future Bodhisattva in the body of a sovereign. Seeing his foundation and his benevolent heart, I did not hesitate to share what I had enlightened to.

Our conversation lasted for hours, naturally shifting from the Buddhist path of liberation to the Confucian way of governing the country and pacifying the people. The Crown Prince asked:

"Master, how can the people be prosperous, the country be peaceful, and the scourge of war be avoided?"

I looked deep into the young man's eyes and slowly replied:

"To have a peaceful country, the root must be in the hearts of the people. Only when the people's hearts are at ease can the country be stable. To put the people's hearts at ease, the ruler must have a compassionate heart, love the people as his own children, and put the interests of the people above his own. That is 'Benevolence.' But benevolence alone is not enough. To protect that peace from foreign invasion, the ruler must also have wisdom and decisiveness. That is 'Wisdom' and 'Courage.'"

Crown Prince Tran Kham fell silent in contemplation, then asked again:

"Then what, according to you, Master, is the core of 'Wisdom' and 'Courage' in leading an army and protecting the nation?"

At this point, I knew that the karmic connection had arrived. I did not speak of specific tactics, but only touched upon a few great principles:

"Military strategy has countless ingenious plans, but they all boil down to three things. First, know yourself and know the enemy. Second, win the hearts of the soldiers, so that superiors and subordinates are of one mind. Third, know how to use the weak to defeat the strong, the few to defeat the many, and use timing and terrain to compensate for human strength. But above all, the highest realm for a military leader is not to win every battle, but to win without fighting, to subdue the enemy with majestic virtue, or if force must be used, to end the war as quickly as possible, with the least loss to both sides. That is the 'Courage' of a benevolent person."

With every word I spoke, the Crown Prince listened attentively, his eyes shining with understanding. He did not ask for more specific stratagems, but I knew he had grasped the spirit, the core principles of leading an army. The meeting that day ended as the sun set. Crown Prince Tran Kham bid me farewell, his eyes full of respect and gratitude. He promised to return for more guidance.

As the silhouette of the young Crown Prince disappeared behind the bamboo grove, I stood alone in

the monastery courtyard. I felt a great karmic connection had just been forged. A reclusive monk and a future king. I vaguely felt that the knowledge of military strategy I had accumulated over the years was perhaps not just for myself. Perhaps, it was waiting for the right person, at the right time, to be used for a greater cause, something that could contribute to protecting the peace for millions of souls in this land.

The hatred of Li Gang from long ago, it seemed, was being arranged by fate to be resolved in a way that I myself could not yet fully comprehend at the time.

The Invisible Strategist – Contributing to the Nation

True to his promise, after our first meeting, Crown Prince Tran Kham, and later Emperor Tran Nhan Tong, would occasionally visit my small monastery. His visits were always in secret, without pomp or ceremony, with only a few trusted guards. He came not as a sovereign, but with the mindset of a student of the Way, seeking tranquility and guidance.

Our discussions often revolved around the Buddha Fa. The young king brought his worldly concerns, the burdens of a man holding the nation's destiny in his hands, to find relief in the teachings of impermanence, compassion, and the path of liberation. I could see clearly that behind the royal robes of an emperor was a

soul strongly inclined towards the Buddha's gate. Each time we talked, I not only explained the scriptures, but also tried to sow in his heart the seeds of enlightenment, of a higher, world-transcending path.

As the threat from the Mongol Empire grew, our conversations began to include matters of state policy. The king did not ask me which battle to fight or where to set a trap. Instead, he asked bigger questions.

Once, he asked with a worried expression:

"Master, the enemy is as fierce as tigers and leopards, and our army is smaller. How can we preserve the nation?"

I did not answer immediately, just poured him a cup of tea. Waiting for the fragrance to spread, I slowly said:

"Your Majesty, the strongest fortress is not built of earth and stone, but of the people's hearts. The enemy can break down a fortress, but they cannot break the will of the people. I ask Your Majesty to ease the people's burden, to let them see that the court truly cares for them, loves them. When the people consider the nation's affairs as their own, then every citizen will be a soldier, every village a fortress. At that time, the strength of our country will be like a rising tide, which no enemy can stop."

Another time, when the king was troubled about appointing officials, amidst the factions and animosities within the royal family, I said:

"Only a great sea can hold a large ship. The heart of a sovereign must be like the ocean, able to accommodate a hundred rivers. There is no lack of talented people in the world, but whether they are willing to serve the country depends on the heart of the leader. I ask Your Majesty to set aside petty resentments, and to value them based only on their talent and loyalty. Especially with those who hold military power, Your Majesty must have complete trust, entrusting them with great responsibility, without suspicion. When a general goes to battle without worrying about the rear, only then can he devote his full heart and strength to fighting the enemy."

I knew that in the court, there was Prince Hung Dao, Tran Quoc Tuan, an outstandingly talented general who had some hidden discord with the royal family. The words I spoke, though not naming anyone specifically, I believed a wise king like Tran Nhan Tong would understand. And indeed, later on, the king's decision to completely trust and grant full command of the army to Prince Hung Dao was one of his wisest decisions, the key to the great victories.

I never considered myself a military strategist. I was just a monk, offering advice on great principles based on what I had read and contemplated. I did not discuss "techniques," only the "Way." I did not outline a specific plan, but I tried to enlighten the king on an overall strategy: to prepare for a long-term resistance, to rely on the strength of the entire populace, and to implement a "scorched-earth" policy to exhaust the resources of an invading army unfamiliar with the local conditions.

Each time the king came and left, I returned to my tranquil life, chanting scriptures and meditating day after day. I did not ask about the war situation, nor did I hope for any credit. My role was just that of a listener, an enlightener, a silent spiritual support for the young king in the nation's most difficult times. My small contribution, if any, was like a drop of water in the ocean of patriotism and indomitable will of the entire Tran army and people.

Many years later, after having led the people to defeat the Mongol-Yuan invaders twice and building a peaceful and prosperous nation, King Tran Nhan Tong came to me again. This time, he came not to ask about state affairs, but to express a resolve that had matured.

At that time, the king was still very young, only in his mid-thirties, but his eyes no longer held the worries of the world, but shone with a serenity and a great

aspiration. He told me that he had fulfilled his responsibility to the country and his ancestors, and now it was time for him to walk his own path—the path of renouncing the secular world to become a monk. He expressed his wish for me to accept him as a disciple, to guide him on the path of liberation.

I was deeply impressed by the king's great vow. For someone at the pinnacle of fame to be able to give up everything to seek the truth was an extremely rare thing. However, I humbly declined. I said that my own spiritual attainment was still shallow, and I did not dare to be the teacher of a sovereign with such a deep karmic connection to the Buddha Fa.

Seeing that the king's aspiration was firm, I sincerely shared a few of my thoughts:

"Your Majesty, it is a great blessing that you have a great vow to renounce the world. To go to China to seek the ancestral home of the Chan school, or to make a pilgrimage to the Buddhist land of India to learn the original teachings, are all incredibly noble vows."

I paused for a moment, then continued in a warm, deep voice:

"However, this humble monk thinks that among the myriad practices of cultivation, the core is still just the 'Mind.' Where the body is, is not as important as where one's mind is directed. The Buddha land is not only in distant India, but right within each person's heart. The ancients said, 'three feet above one's head, there are divine beings'; as long as we sincerely cultivate ourselves and keep the precepts, then no matter where we are, all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will know and bestow their blessings."

"That is also the path that this humble monk has cherished and followed throughout these years of reclusive cultivation in this place. I believe that Your Majesty can go to the sacred Yen Tu Mountain of the Nam country, or to any other place in this world. Whichever place allows Your Majesty's mind to be at peace, whichever place helps Your Majesty to cultivate diligently, that place is Your Majesty's cultivation ground. As for which path, please let it be decided by karmic destiny."

King Tran Nhan Tong was silent for a long time, his eyes lit up with a deep understanding. He clasped his hands to thank me, said nothing more, but I knew he had found his own answer.

Not long after, he abdicated the throne to the Crown Prince, becoming the Emperor Emeritus. And a few years later, when the court affairs had stabilized, he truly went to Yen Tu Mountain, beginning a great journey of cultivation, founding the Truc Lam (Bamboo Forest) Zen school, becoming one of the most beautiful images, an eternal symbol of Vietnamese Buddhism.

For me, to have witnessed and contributed a small part to the journey of such a king-Buddha was a great karmic blessing. I never thought that the advice of a reclusive monk could contribute to protecting the nation, and then guide a king to the path of the Buddha. Everything seemed to be the arrangement of destiny.

Attaining the Dao and Enlightening to Karmic Connections

After King Tran Nhan Tong went to Yen Tu, my life returned to its original tranquility. The discussions about great state affairs were no more; instead, there were long days dedicated to cultivation. Having been through the ups and downs of the times, witnessing great events, my mind became even more settled. I was no longer swayed by knowledge of military strategy or worldly affairs, but used that very understanding to contemplate more

deeply on the nature of suffering, of life and death, and of the cycle of reincarnation.

I continued on my path of cultivation silently. Day after day, I still chanted scriptures, meditated, and worked. I did not seek divine powers, did not hope to unlock strange abilities. My only goal was to completely wash away the remaining dust in my consciousness, to achieve an absolute purity and stillness.

Time passed, and my hair turned as white as frost. When I was nearly seventy, I felt my spiritual attainment had reached a new level. Though my body was old and weak, my spirit was extremely lucid.

One late, silent night, as I was in deep meditation, my celestial eye suddenly opened.

In that moment, I saw through my past life: The vengeful oath of the warrior Li Gang long ago was the karmic connection that allowed the Zen Master Minh Tinh to have the opportunity to use his wisdom to help a nation resist a common enemy. The debt of hatred was not paid with swords and spears, but was benevolently resolved through the path of wisdom and compassion. All grievances and karmic debts from countless lifetimes vanished like smoke, and my mind became completely empty, peaceful, and at ease.

In the final years of my life, I lived in absolute serenity. One morning, after chanting the final scripture, I called my disciples, gave them a few words of advice, then sat in the full-lotus position and peacefully passed away.

The oath of Li Gang was fulfilled. The karmic connection with the Tran dynasty had ended. And the journey of the Zen Master Minh Tinh had also come to a close, to begin a new journey in the cycle of reincarnation.

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CHAPTER 12: ADVISOR TO THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

(This time, River's memory was not of monastic mist or the light of lost civilizations. It carried a different color, a cold gray of corridors of power, of strategic maps and cigar smoke. This was a world run by reason, by geopolitical calculations, a world that seemed to have no place for spirituality, yet karmic

connections and retribution still operated silently according to their own laws.)

This lifetime was very recent, so recent that I can still feel the suffocating atmosphere in the closed-door meeting rooms of Washington D.C. in the mid-20th century. In that life, I was Freder Rein, a diplomat, a policy advisor to the U.S. Department of State.

This was a lifetime where I was not a cultivator of any discipline. I was a political analyst, and my thoughts and decisions were entirely based on what I had learned, the experience I had accumulated, from the perspective of a politician of that era.

I was born into an educated family and early on showed a passion for international affairs. After graduating from prestigious universities, I joined the State Department in the late 1930s. The early years of my career took me across Europe, witnessing the rise of fascism, the brutality of World War II, and the first nascent calculations for a new confrontation. The years working in Vienna and Moscow after the war taught me a deep understanding of the thinking and strategy of the Communist bloc.

When the flames of the Cold War erupted in Asia, I was appointed U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam. It was a challenging term. I lived in Saigon, breathed the hot, humid air, and witnessed the complexity of a society trying to shape itself after decades of war. I interacted with politicians, generals, and ordinary people. It was these direct experiences that gave me a different perspective, an understanding that the dry reports sent back to Washington could never fully capture. After my ambassadorship, I returned to serve as a Senior Advisor at the State Department, specializing in foreign policy issues.

This was in the 1950s and 1960s, and all of Washington was overshadowed by the "Domino Theory." The fear of the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia was very real, and it dominated almost every policy decision.

I understood that threat well. I was not a dreamer or naive about politics. But my experience in Europe, and especially in Vietnam, had led me to believe that mechanically applying this theory to a country with a complex culture and history like Vietnam would be a fatal mistake.

In high-level meetings, amidst the hawkish voices of generals and politicians, I was often a dissenting voice. I argued that military force could not be a sustainable solution. Pouring our money, weapons, and even the

lives of American soldiers to prop up a government that did not have the firm support of its own people would be like building a castle on sand. This war, if it happened, would not just be a war between the two ideologies of Communism and Capitalism, but also a war of nationalism. And history has shown that no great power can defeat the nationalism of a resilient people.

The strange thing was, whenever I thought of Vietnam, a special concern, an indescribable nagging feeling, would arise in me. At the time, I just thought it was the attachment of a diplomat to a land where he had once served. I couldn't explain why I felt such a strange sorrow at the thought of bombs further devastating that land, at the thought of the people having to endure more suffering. I just knew, by the intuition of an analyst, and by a vague feeling from deep within my heart, that a large-scale military intervention in Vietnam would be a disaster for all parties.

And I tried, with all my knowledge and experience, to issue those warnings, even knowing that my voice was a minority in a growing storm of hawkishness.

A Dissenting Voice Amidst a "Storm of Hawks"

As the United States began to wade deeper and deeper into the quagmire of Southeast Asia, my office at the State Department became the birthplace of analyses and reports that I knew went against the mainstream. I did not openly oppose; that was not the way things were done in diplomacy. Instead, I persistently presented my assessments in internal meetings and through official documents, hoping that reason would prevail.

I analyzed that both Vietnam and the Korean peninsula before it were gradually becoming "proxy battlegrounds" for the global confrontation between us and the Soviet Union. We and they were turning those countries into chessboards, and the local people were the pawns who had to bear all the suffering. I emphasized that military intervention would only add fuel to the fire, turning a civil war with ideological overtones into a war against foreign aggression, which would only increase the strength and legitimacy of our opponents.

In one analysis, I dedicated many pages to discussing the two central figures of the conflict: Ngo Dinh Diem in the South and Ho Chi Minh in the North. Setting aside the confrontational lenses of the Cold War, I tried to see them as nationalist leaders. I saw in both a common aspiration for an independent, unified Vietnam with a respected position on the international stage. The fatal difference lay in the path they chose—one was pro-Western nationalism, the other was Communism.

And what made this situation even more bitterly ironic was that we were not always seen as the enemy. I reiterated in my reports that it was the experts from the OSS, the predecessor of the CIA, who had once collaborated with Mr. Ho Chi Minh and his forces to fight the Japanese fascists in World War II. There was a period when the Viet Minh leadership had favorable feelings towards the Americans, seeing us as a symbol of freedom, opposing colonialism. Even after 1945, Mr. Ho Chi Minh sent several letters to President Truman, expressing his desire for the United States to recognize Vietnam's independence and establish cooperative relations.

But those letters went unanswered. Due to the context of the Cold War and the need to keep France as a key ally in Europe to counter the Soviet Union, Washington chose to ignore those proposals and side with the French.

During long nights in Washington, I often tormented myself with unanswerable questions. I wrote in my memos that history might have taken a completely different turn. If, during the 1945-1954 period, the United States had not chosen to side with France, but instead had maintained a neutral role, or even better, had acted as a mediator between France and the Viet Minh? If we had used the vision of the Marshall Plan to help Vietnam rebuild and develop a free economy, as we did with

Japan or South Korea, would the situation today be different?

Of course, my colleagues would argue that the burden of proof lay with Ho Chi Minh. But I also posed the counter-hypothesis: if he had been wise enough to publicly declare that his path was purely for national liberation, that he would not follow the Communist bloc, would Washington have believed him? Or was the paranoia and fear of Communism at that time so great that anyone with any connection, even superficial, to Moscow or Beijing, was considered an unforgivable enemy?

I feared we had given them no other choice. We had slammed the door of diplomacy shut, and now we were surprised when they went through another door that was already open to them, into the arms of China and the Soviet Union.

And now, in the eyes of an ordinary soldier or peasant in the North, the image of the United States had been completely equated with that of the French empire. They were propagandized and they believed that we were just a new-style colonial power; they could not understand our complex calculations about the Domino Theory or the global balance of power.

Furthermore, the victory at Dien Bien Phu had created a sense of national pride that soared to an extreme. They had defeated a European military power, and in their minds, they believed that under the leadership of the Party, no enemy was invincible. It was this confident, even somewhat overconfident, mentality that made them unafraid of America's power. They looked at us, not with the eyes of a small country looking at a superpower, but with the eyes of a nation that had once defeated "foreign invaders" and was ready to do it again.

When nationalism and ideology merge into one, it creates a strength that we cannot underestimate. Sending in American troops would only serve to reinforce their propaganda and turn us into a direct enemy in the eyes of an entire nation that we could have, perhaps, been friends with.

Witnessing the Quagmire and Tireless Efforts

Time passed, and my analyses, the warnings dismissed in closed-door meetings, painfully became reality on the evening news. Year after year, America sank deeper into the war. The numbers I had once projected on paper now became cold headlines in the newspapers: the number of American troops in Vietnam surpassed one hundred thousand, then three hundred thousand, then half a

million. The casualty figures also rose on an almost vertical graph.

Strange names like Khe Sanh, the Tet Offensive, or Hamburger Hill suddenly became obsessions in every American family. The anti-war movement, from small, scattered groups, erupted into massive demonstrations with tens of thousands of participants. The division in American society deepened. Everything happened just as, and even worse than, what I had warned.

But it was not a victory for reason. It was a tragedy. A heavy sense of torment overshadowed the final years of my career. I felt helpless watching the giant war machine, once set in motion, just grind down all diplomatic efforts, all possibilities for reconciliation. I read the casualty reports, not as an analyst, but as a human being seeing the names of someone's son, husband, or father.

Every news report about a bombed village, every image of a tired young soldier on television, was like a knife twisting in my conscience. I felt a share of the responsibility, not for starting the war, but for not having enough strength, not enough influence to prevent it. That special, nagging feeling about the land of Vietnam became even more pronounced in me, though I still couldn't name it precisely.

Even when the situation had become extremely dire, I did not give up. In my role, I continued to push for secret communication channels, searching for faint glimmers of hope for a negotiated solution. I argued that although we could not win on the battlefield, we still had to find a way to withdraw with honor, and that could only be achieved through diplomacy.

By 1968, feeling I had reached the limit of what I could do within the government machine, I officially requested retirement. But retirement did not mean I stopped caring. The habits of decades of work in the diplomatic service, the anguish over the war, could not be shaken off.

In the last three years of my life, from 1968 to 1971, I would still often spend time in my study, writing letters, personal analyses, and sending them to old colleagues still serving at the State Department. I continued to suggest solutions, analyze changes in the global political landscape, and constantly remind them of the exorbitant cost of the war. Those efforts were probably just like pebbles thrown into a great river; they created a few ripples and then sank, unable to change the course of the current.

Freder Rein passed away in 1971, when the wish for peace for Vietnam and an honorable withdrawal for America was still a distant, unfulfilled dream.

...

That lifetime was one full of political calculations, tensions, and also silent sorrows. I, in the identity of Freder Rein, had tried to do what I believed was right, tried to prevent a war that I foresaw would bring much suffering. But the strength of one person was too small against a war machine that had already been set in motion, against the prejudices and fears of an entire era.

When I look back, I can still feel the suffocating atmosphere of Washington D.C. in those years, and also the images of the young soldiers who had to go. The strange thing is, I always had a special concern for Vietnam, a sorrow that I couldn't understand at the time. I just knew I didn't want to see more blood shed on that land, a feeling even stronger than mere political analysis.

Now, knowing about my past lives, like the life as the Zen Master Minh Tinh in Dai Viet, and also the "coincidence" of being appointed Ambassador there, I am beginning to vaguely understand. Perhaps, the feelings, the karmic connections from long ago had been silently influencing me. Even though I was no longer a cultivator in the life of Freder Rein, perhaps a little bit of compassion from previous lives still remained, turning into a nagging conscience, an urge to speak out for peace.

And I also realize that no matter the role, whether a reclusive Zen master or a political advisor in the corridors of power, maintaining one's conscience and trying to do good are equally important. Falun Dafa teaches me that everything has its cause and effect, and the best we can do is to act according to Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance in all circumstances.

* * *

CHAPTER 13: LORD OF A HEAVENLY KINGDOM

(River's narrative voice this time was completely different. No longer the solemnity of a Zen master, or the torment of a diplomat. The boy's voice was clear, yet it carried a majesty and magnificence, as if he were not recounting a memory, but returning to his own primordial being. This is the story of the beginning, and also the answer to everything.)

All the lifetimes I have recounted, looking back, they were just like plays, individual journeys. Each role, each experience, whether as a god, a general, a female artisan, or an animal, was all preparation, a tempering to serve a deeper purpose, for a mission tied to my true origin.

And the truth about that origin, what I have been able to see, is the final and most important piece of the puzzle, explaining why I have had these extraordinary experiences and the purpose of all these reincarnations.

I was once the Lord of an immensely vast and beautiful Heavenly Kingdom, located at an extremely high level, where matter is completely different from that of the human realm. In the realm that I saw, my title was the Heavenly Realm King.

There was no sun there like here. My entire world was illuminated by the very halo radiating from me—from the Lord. That light was warm, pure, and nurtured all things. The architecture of the palaces and temples was crafted from substances that, if described in human language, could perhaps only be temporarily called precious gems or crystals, but their essence was completely different. They were high-level matter, possessing life and energy, and they naturally emitted a wondrous light that transformed through myriad colors with my every thought.

The trees and flowers there bore magnificent colors that mortal language could never fully describe. They were not simply green, red, or yellow, but were vibrant bands of color, self-transforming, self-blending. They had spiritual intelligence; every leaf, every flower could feel and sing wondrous music with every breeze. The spiritual beasts were also incredibly beautiful and gentle; they could understand and converse with other beings. Even the rocks and mountains were not inanimate objects; they too had life and could produce deep, resonant sounds like the echo of the universe. The sentient beings in my Heavenly Kingdom were boundless and innumerable, including Gods, Immortals, Bodhisattvas, Arhats, and countless forms of life that the human imagination could never possibly touch. They all lived in absolute harmony and bliss under my guidance and protection, abiding by the Principles of that cosmic level.

But the universe also has the law of formation-stasis-degeneration-destruction. After endless eons, I began to notice signs of decline not only in my own Heavenly Kingdom but also in neighboring worlds. Beings were no longer as pure as they were in the beginning, matter began to deviate, and the Principles of the old universe had come to an end. Seeing my world gradually heading towards destruction, seeing the countless sentient beings I was responsible for protecting facing the danger of

elimination, my heart was filled with immense sorrow and anxiety.

It was at that moment that a supreme Buddha Lord, the Creator, appeared among the cosmic levels. He brought with Him the light of hope and an unprecedented solution: He would personally descend to the human realm during the Dharma-ending period to rectify the Fa of the entire cosmos, recreate everything, and save sentient beings. I, along with many other Lords of other Heavenly Kingdoms, had the eternal karmic opportunity to have an audience with the Creator.

Realizing this was the only hope for my world and my sentient beings, I did not hesitate for a moment and respectfully made a sacred vow to Him. That vow still echoes in my mind to this day:

"I vow to renounce my position as Lord and descend with You to the mortal world. I ask to be reincarnated as a human, to wait until You formally spread the Great Fa that rectifies the cosmos, at which time I will find it to cultivate and assist Master in the Fa-rectification."

Before leaving, I left behind at the center of my Heavenly Kingdom a wondrous sphere of light, invisibly connected to my primordial spirit. When I did good, the sphere would brighten; when I did evil, it would dim. It

was the hope, the beacon for the sentient beings in my world to follow, awaiting the day I fulfilled my vow.

That sacred vow was witnessed by all the Gods. From that moment on, my destiny was redefined, linked to the destiny of the entire universe during the Fa-rectification period. And that sphere of hope began its long, arduous journey, watching over its Lord as he embarked on the perilous path of descent.

The Long Journey of Descent

Temporarily setting aside the position of Lord was not a loss, but a purposeful journey, initiated from infinite compassion and responsibility for my sentient beings. It was not like taking off a crown, but like a head of a family having to temporarily leave his glorious homeland and loved ones, bravely stepping into a strange mortal realm full of delusion and hardship, with a single purpose: to find the remedy of salvation for all.

That downward journey was long and arduous. And looking back now with my celestial eye, I have come to understand its essence: it was a series of arrangements full of wisdom, not a random journey.

And there is one thing I see very clearly now: during each stage of that journey, I was not in a conscious state to "entrust" or "choose" anything. Once I descended to a certain level, my primordial spirit was completely controlled and arranged by the Gods at higher levels. Based on the good and bad karmic relationships I had formed, the binding laws of the universe, and the ultimate mission of my vow, it was They who would place me in a new "role." Of course, while in that role, I was completely unaware of this.

And this is also an immutable law of the universe that I have only now come to understand: when descending from a higher level to a lower one, one's wisdom and memories of the higher realm will be sealed. I could no longer look up, but could only see realms at my level or lower. For example, when I descended from a very high level to a divine realm, I would truly become a God there, with power and consciousness equivalent to other Gods at that level. And in my perception at that time, I would, along with the other Gods at that level, believe that our world was great, even mistakenly thinking that it was the highest realm.

This sealing and weakening was a prerequisite for me to exist within the laws of that level without breaking the balance. Thus, I put on one layer of delusion after another, forgetting my true origin, retaining only the most invisible and fragile connection to the vow of

yesteryear, to step by step descend closer to the human realm.

In the lifetimes on that journey of descent, I formed many karmic relationships, both good and bad. There were beings I met and became friends and family with. There were beings I unintentionally harmed, creating debts that I knew I would have to repay. All those relationships were recorded, becoming the karmic threads that would govern my relationships later in the human realm.

On that journey, I was not alone. I also met other Lords, other Kings of other worlds, who had also made similar vows to the Creator and were also on their way down. We might not have recognized each other clearly, as our wisdom was much sealed, but our primordial spirits could still sense each other. Sometimes it was just a meeting of eyes, an indescribable feeling of familiarity, a silent empathy of those sharing the same great mission. We knew that we would meet again at the final destination.

Finally, after passing through countless worlds, countless heavenly layers, my primordial spirit descended to the lowest level in the universe—the Three Realms. And then, I stepped through the final door, the door into the human realm. This was when the sealing was most complete. Everything that remained of a Lord,

all the memories of the Heavenly Kingdom, of the vow, were tightly locked away. I had completely become a being lost in delusion, subject to the law of birth, aging, sickness, and death and the suffering of reincarnation like all other sentient beings, to begin the "roles" in the Three Realms.

My first human life on Earth, as I have recounted, was during the prehistoric civilization a hundred million years ago. I became Arion, a powerful general, and in the delusion of fame and gain, I committed a monstrous karmic crime by opposing the Dafa that was being spread at that time.

That was the beginning of my thousand lifetimes of reincarnation in the human realm.

A Thousand Reincarnations and the Predestined Relationship of This Life

Having gone through countless thousands of reincarnations in the human realm, I have worn innumerable guises, played countless roles. I have been a prince of the blue sea, a Mountain God on the peak of Changbai, a strategist hidden behind emperors, a female artisan on a distant planet, and even a diplomatic advisor in the modern world. The twelve lives I have

recounted are just a few fleeting frames in an endless film, a few footprints on a journey of ten thousand miles.

There were lives where I lived in glory and wealth, but my heart was lost in desire and power. There were lives where I lived in extreme poverty, but maintained my kindness and forbearance. I have been male, have been female, have been white, yellow, and black. I have experienced the joy of reunion and the pain of separation, have tasted the sweetness of kindness and the bitterness of betrayal. Every single lifetime, every single role, was an arrangement, an opportunity for me to form karmic ties with sentient beings, to temper my mind nature, and most importantly, to wait. To wait for the moment when the vow of yesteryear would be fulfilled.

And then, after all those ups and downs, in this lifetime, the vow has been fulfilled.

By Master's arrangement, I was reincarnated in America, in a family where both my father and mother are cultivators of Falun Dafa. I was born in 2015, and this year (2025) I just turned ten. This arrangement was not a coincidence. With my celestial eye, I can see the deep karmic connections that have linked us from before. My mother in this life, I had met and formed a karmic bond with her in a lifetime on the journey of descent. As for my father, we were close brothers in a life just about three lifetimes ago, going through hardships together. It

was these threads of predestined relationships that brought us together, to obtain Dafa together in this life.

From a very young age, my parents let me listen to the Fa lectures and did the exercises with them. The pure energy of Dafa cleansed my body and mind, gradually breaking the seals that had locked away my wisdom for countless lifetimes. By the time I was five, during one meditation session, my celestial eye suddenly opened very clearly. Memories of past lives, scenes from other dimensions, appeared before my eyes like a vivid film.

My parents were not too surprised by what I told them. They just gently reminded me that what I saw was to strengthen my own belief in cultivation, not for showing off or display. My father said that the ability to see other dimensions does not represent a high or low cultivation level, and that the most important thing is to truly cultivate one's heart according to the principles of Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance. My father's teaching helped me to understand my responsibility, that I must use what I see to remind myself to be even more diligent.

Present-day Insight and a Message

With my celestial eye, I see that the process of the Creator's Fa-rectification is reaching its final stages; there is truly not much time left. When I began to genuinely cultivate Falun Dafa, a magnificent scene appeared in my meditation. I saw my Heavenly Kingdom in the distance, and the sphere of light I had left at the center of that world long ago, after so many ups and downs, after moments when it seemed to have dimmed, now suddenly burst forth with an unprecedented brilliance! That light carried the energy of Dafa, radiant and pure, illuminating my entire Heavenly Kingdom, dispelling the dark clouds of the degeneration-destruction period. The sentient beings in my world, who had waited for countless eons, all rejoiced and cheered. They knew that their Lord had found the way back, was fulfilling the vow of yesteryear.

I also realize that many of the Lords who made vows with me back then are also present in this world today. More than ten such individuals, all of them are currently Falun Dafa disciples, silently fulfilling their missions all over the world. A large portion of them are in China, facing extremely harsh tests to protect their faith and save sentient beings.

I also saw something even more astonishing. In the perception of the Gods, the Three Realms has always been the lowest and most filthy place in the universe. More terrifyingly, it is a "path of no return"—a one-way

street downward. For countless eons, not a single being has ever been able to return on its own. Once they fall in here, they will be forever lost in the cycle of suffering and reincarnation, constantly creating karma. According to the old laws of the universe, when an individual's karma accumulates to the point where it cannot be repaid, that being will be destroyed, ultimately resulting in the complete destruction of both body and spirit.

However, in the past thirty years or so, a great event has shaken the entire universe: right here on this "path of no return," the Creator has formally spread Dafa to the public, creating the one and only Fa "boat"—a path of salvation that can bring qualified beings back.

It is precisely because they saw this unprecedented hope in the most desperate of places that countless beings from very high cosmic levels have done something they never dared to think of before: they have vied with each other, earnestly pleading to descend to the human world. Because they knew that if they could become human, they would have the chance to personally enter into cultivation and could be saved, not only themselves but also the countless sentient beings they represent.

This process of descent is not simple either. Usually, a being would be arranged a role by Gods at higher levels. There are also special cases where some Gods personally descend to become human, but once they enter this

realm of delusion, they are also quickly sealed and lose all their divine powers, becoming ordinary people just like everyone else.

Because human bodies in the mortal world are limited, and the risk of getting lost in delusion is very high, there was another option. Many Gods, for lack of sufficient karmic opportunity to become human, willingly chose to be reincarnated as animals or plants. They understood that although animals and plants are not allowed to cultivate, the boundless compassion of Dafa would encompass all things, and they too would have the chance to be assimilated and saved in the field of Fa-rectification. That is why they accepted a lower status, as long as they could be near places with Dafa disciples, to be bathed in the Buddha's light.

Witnessing these things, I feel even more the preciousness and urgency of the karmic opportunity to be a human, to cultivate Dafa during this Fa-rectification period.

Therefore, I want to leave a message. To my fellow practitioners, especially those in the most difficult circumstances, we need to be truly more diligent, to do well the three things Master requires of us, and not to miss this eternal karmic opportunity. Let us remember the vow we made before coming here!

As for the worldly people who are still lost in delusion, I hope everyone can listen with their hearts, awaken soon, recognize the truth, and distinguish between good and evil. Please cherish the kindness in your hearts and try to learn about Falun Dafa, because this is the only hope for us to pass through this final tribulation.

Now, I understand everything. All the past lives, from a prehistoric general, a prince of the blue sea, a Zen master on a mountaintop, to a modern diplomat... all were arrangements, necessary pieces of the puzzle. Every single experience, every single lesson, whether of suffering or glory, was preparation for me to be able to uphold my vow of yesteryear, to have enough wisdom, perseverance, and character to fulfill my mission upon finding Dafa again.

All roles were to prepare for a single role, an ultimate purpose: to become a Falun Dafa disciple during the Fa-rectification period, to cultivate myself well, and to help the sentient beings in the world I once promised to return to, to be saved.

(At this point, River's narrative voice returned to that of a normal, ten-year-old boy, clear and sincere. The majestic gaze of a Lord had vanished, leaving only purity and tranquility.)

These stories... – the boy looked straight at me, the one taking notes, then looked out into the space before him –

they are not to show off or to prove anything. They are just memories, footprints on a very long journey to find my origin.

Now I understand, the tragedy of Arion a hundred million years ago was not merely a punishment, but the first lesson in the grand rehearsal of the universe, to ensure that this time, I would not take a wrong step.

And I know, the road ahead still remains, but now, I have found the most righteous path, the path home.

I am just a ten-year-old boy, an ordinary Falun Dafa practitioner. But I carry within me the vow of a Lord, and I will do my very best to fulfill that responsibility.

(The boy concluded his story with a serene smile. His clear eyes looked forward, unburdened by the past, unworried about the future, with only the steadfastness and peace of the present. The tape recorder was still running, but only silence remained. A silence that spoke more than a thousand words, closing a journey of a thousand lives.)

* * *

EPILOGUE

The last tape stopped. The room fell silent, with only the faint ticking of the wall clock and the warm yellow sunbeams dancing on the wooden floor. River, the ten-year-old boy with clear eyes, had been sitting quietly for some time, back to being a normal child after having just carried the weight of an entire universe on his shoulders. The story of his thousand lives had come to a close.

For two weeks, my job was simply to listen and take notes. I had traveled with River through glorious dynasties and lost civilizations, from a prehistoric general, a prince of the blue sea, a female artisan on Mars, to a tormented modern-day diplomat. At first, I thought I was just recording strange stories, fragmented memories. But now, looking back at the whole thing, I realize they were not separate stories, but pieces of a giant puzzle, arranged with incredible sophistication.

When I heard River recount the first life of Arion from a hundred million years ago, I thought it was simply a personal tragedy. But when I reached the final chapter, I suddenly realized it was also a hard-won lesson in the universe's *first rehearsal*. It turns out, nothing is a coincidence. The mistake of a general from the distant

prehistoric past was the very first foundation stone for the steadfastness of a ten-year-old boy today, ensuring that in this final and most important performance, he would not take a wrong step.

I recalled the part where River told of how Gods from very high heavens, magnificent beings we cannot imagine, were earnestly pleading to be reincarnated into the human realm, even accepting to be a blade of grass or an animal just to be near the energy field of Dafa. Hearing this, a classic saying from a scripture I had once read involuntarily echoed in my mind: "A human body is hard to obtain, the Middle Kingdom is hard to be born in, a righteous Fa is hard to hear, an enlightened Master is hard to meet."

Before, I only understood this saying on a superficial level. But through River's account, I truly felt the weight of every single word. Each of those "hardships" is actually a great karmic opportunity that countless Gods in the universe are fervently praying for but cannot obtain. This makes me wonder, have we, the people living in this era, truly understood the preciousness of what we have?

My role as a transcriber ends here. River's stories have been recorded, but the story of each being's choice in this era continues its final pages... And I hope that each of us makes the right choice.

May God bless you!

Casey Vale

THE EPOCH MEDIA

* * *

ABOUT THE AUTHOR & THE EPOCH MEDIA PROJECT

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Casey Vale is an independent author, investigative journalist, and spiritual storyteller. She pursues themes of truth, conscience, and the destiny of humankind. Her works often originate from real interviews, recorded with honesty, rich emotion, and enlightenment.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

This book is part of a series published by THE EPOCH MEDIA – an independent publishing initiative with a global vision and a mission to preserve and spread timeless echoes. Without chasing the daily news cycle, we aim for books that can deeply touch the human consciousness.

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Thank you for taking the time to read this book!

May God and Buddha bless you on your journey of discovering the truth.