

## Immortal 541

### Chapter 541: Blind Confidence

Zu An was stupefied when he felt something soft against his back. This girl was really going for broke here!

"Xiao Tuo, what are you doing?" He could clearly feel the smoothness of her bare skin on his own.

Xiao Tuo bit her red lip, her cheeks burning up. Why did this stupid king have to pretend as though he didn't know? But she couldn't just stay silent, so she forced herself to say, "I... I am massaging my king."

Zu An had a strange look on his face. "Go on then."

This king is worthless! Xiao Tuo cursed inwardly. She was already being extremely proactive, and she had fully expected that this perverted ruler would not be able to hold himself back. She was expecting him to immediately violate her.

Once that happened, she wouldn't have to worry about the rest. She would just treat it as though she was being bitten by a dog.

But who could have expected that he would remain as steady as a mountain? He sounded perfectly calm, and she had absolutely no idea how she was supposed to follow this up.

She had already gone so far. If she still failed to achieve her objective, she would be too ashamed to keep on living.

A shudder ran through Xiao Tuo's entire body. She wasn't afraid of sacrificing herself, but she was worried that her sacrifice would be in vain. Even though they hadn't yet taken the final step, this alone was almost equivalent to losing her purity. If she couldn't make him take her as his woman, then all of her future plans would fall through, and even big brother Lian would find it more difficult to realize his dream.

She felt a wave of sadness when she thought of her big brother Lian. As matters stood, however, she was truly left with no other choice. Her only objective was to figure out just how she was going to seduce the man in front of her.

Unfortunately, she was inexperienced. Her hands groped around Zu An's body awkwardly, but she was so unsure about herself that she did not even dare to touch any of his key areas.

Zu An chuckled secretly. This girl really was charmingly innocent. Even though she was trained as a female spy, she was so uncomfortable with the role.

Of course, if she really had been proficient in this field, he might not have been in the mood to play around with her.

Zu An figured that letting this awkwardness continue was pointless, so he said, "Help me wash my back."

"Oh... okay..." Xiao Tuo sighed in relief. She was already on the verge of panic, unsure as to how to proceed.

She was just about to bring her hands back behind him when Zu An reached out his own hands to grab them. "Keep your hands in front of me."

Xiao Tuo's confusion was evident. "Then how am I supposed to wash your back, my king?"

Zu An smiled and said, "You don't need to use your hands to wash my back."

Xiao Tuo blinked, then stared blankly for a while. Her imagination regarding this was rather limited, and she couldn't figure out what he meant.

Zu An sighed. It looked like he was going to have to do some hand-holding.

He pulled her arms forward so that her body was pressed up against his back. "Like this..." he said, demonstrating what he expected from her.

Damn this perverted king!

You have successfully trolled Xiao Tuo for 567 Rage points!

Xiao Tuo was ashamed, angry, and shocked. How in the world was she supposed to know that such a thing existed?

She cursed him to death in her heart, but there was nothing she could do about it now. She could only wash his back in this manner, trembling all the while.

Her entire body shuddered as soon as she'd made contact with him, as though electricity had coursed through her body. For a pure young lady like her, such a shock was just too much for her body to handle.

Zu An closed his eyes, reveling in the comfort. Being an emperor really was great! No wonder people risked their lives to achieve such a position.

...

Meanwhile, in the High Priest's residence, Lian was gazing towards the palace with an extremely unpleasant expression.

His trusted aide, who was beside him, felt the urge to speak up. "High Priest, lady Xiao Tuo shares a deep affection with you. Isn't sending her to the palace a little too cruel?"

"Are you trying to tell me what to do?" Lian turned around, shooting him a ferocious look.

The trusted aide immediately lowered his head. "This humble one doesn't dare."

Lian snorted dismissively. "Those who wish to achieve greatness do not bother about the small details. I will remember her achievements, and I definitely won't mistreat her in the future. She will have her place in the chamber of imperial concubines."

The trusted aide scoffed secretly. Didn't you tell her to her face that she was going to become the empress? Now, though, it seems she's only going to become a concubine.

He considered his thoughts silently for a moment, but felt compelled to speak again. "That girl is kind-hearted by nature. Lady Xiao Tuo has remained pure all this while, ever since she was young. What if she ends up being confused by that good-for-nothing king...?"

“That won’t happen,” Lian cut him off confidently. “I am the one whom she loves. I know how she feels about me better than anyone else does.”

...

Right now, though, the girl whom he said was fully devoted to him was sitting in Zu An’s embrace, her body weak.

Xiao Tuo truly was a pure and innocent girl, and the unorthodox massage had left her entire body limp after just a short amount of time. She did not have the strength to continue on with it.

Zu An had decided to move her in front of him instead, so that he could examine this young lady up close. Either because of the heat from the hot springs, or because of her extreme embarrassment, her skin was a rosy pink. There was a special charm to her innocence, and she was truly a sight to behold.

He chuckled when he sensed something odd about her. “Xiao Tuo, you really look like you were just fished out of water.”

Xiao Tuo was stunned. Wasn’t I just inside a hot spring earlier? Of course I look like I just got out of water! However, she soon realized what he meant, and she somehow grew even redder.

The powerful aura of a man being this close to her was too much. She sighed inwardly, and then acknowledged her fate. “My king, please have pity on me.”

He knew that she was a spy, so there was no way he would show her any sympathy. He pressed down on her right away.

Xiao Tuo cried out, wrapping herself tightly around the man on top of her.

When he saw how frightened she was, Zu An couldn’t find it within himself to be forceful. He became much gentler...

...

After what seemed like an eternity, Xiao Tuo gradually woke up, to see that she was already lying on a bed. There was even a thin blanket covering her.

She tried to remember what had happened, and her face quickly turned red.

When she had planned out what to do earlier, she had decided that it would be better to pretend to moan a few times just to please him, and satisfy the man’s desire to conquer a woman.

She never would have guessed that there would be no need for her to pretend at all! Moans had emerged from deep within her uncontrollably, and she had lost consciousness soon afterwards.

As she recalled her disappointing performance—she didn’t even know when or how she was brought to this bed!—a thought suddenly flashed into her mind. Fu Hao is a really strong woman! She managed to withstand this man’s pounding for so long...

A million expressions flickered across her face as she looked at that sturdy figure sitting at the desk nearby. This man was the one who had stolen her first time.

He was still looking through documents, even this late into the night. Calling him an incompetent king really did seem rather unfair, but 'pervert' fit his description perfectly!

Just as she was clenching her fists in annoyance, he spoke. "Are you awake?"

Even though she hated his guts, Xiao Tuo didn't dare let any of it show on the surface. "Greetings, my king. Xiao Tuo is truly a good-for-nothing. I actually needed my king to take care of me earlier..."

She struggled off the bed and was about to kneel, but her entire body seemed strangely stiff, which made her frown subconsciously.

Zu An sighed. Although his soul was the only thing that had entered this trial, everything about it seemed as lifelike as the real world. It really was kind of crazy.

He slowly supported her back up. "There's no need for such formality. Your body has yet to recover. It's better if you get some rest first."

He helped her back into bed, then covered her up again.

Xiao Tuo was a little flustered by how caring he was. His current mannerisms were way too different from the mental image she had of this incapable king!

No, this won't do! I can't be deceived by his false kindness! I can't let down big brother Lian!

But she immediately recalled that she had given away her virgin experience to this man, and a dark shadow overwhelmed her heart. Pursing her lips, she turned her head to the side. Two sets of tears left streaks across her cheeks.

Zu An shook his head. This girl really thought that he wouldn't be able to see her crying just because she'd turned her head away? She was truly innocent and naïve, to a worrying degree.

For some reason, he suddenly thought of the movie 'Lust, Caution', and sighed. Honey traps weren't something to be carelessly laid! A strictly-trained female spy who specialized in such a lifestyle might be able to use her body as a weapon without any emotional repercussions, but many female spies who didn't have as much experience or resolve often ended up destroying themselves because of this.

However, if the high priest was hell bent on using her as his chess piece, then he would just have to beat him at his own game.

...

Several days later, the sound of something shattering echoed within the High Priest's room, followed by a man's furious roar.

"You incapable king! You tyrannical and incapable king!"

The red-eyed man storming about the room was none other than Lian. He had his men constantly watching for activity within the palace. The reports he received were always the same: the king, carrying Xiao Tuo in his arms, making music with her every single night.

Even though this was all part of his plans, the knowledge that his own childhood sweetheart was pressed up against his mortal enemy day and night still drove him mad with anger.

You have successfully trolled Lian for 1024... 1024... 1024...

## **Chapter 542: Cards on the Table**

His trusted aide waited until Lian's anger had passed before saying, "At least miss Xiao Tuo was able to give us some information. Because of that, we... aren't losing out."

He had a hard time finding the right way to phrase things. In the end, that was the most appropriate thing he could find.

Lian's expression sank. "Xiao Tuo has indeed been of great service to us. Have we prepared our countermeasures using her information yet?"

His trusted aide nodded. "We've already finished all of our preparations. We've even roped in many unhappy chancellors who had been deliberately suppressed by Wu Ding."

"Good." Lian's expression eased a little. "Oh, right. There is something else that needs to be done. I need you to make a trip."

"This subordinate won't hesitate to complete any tasks the high priest needs me to take care of!" his aide said right away, clasping his fist at his master.

Lian looked in the direction of the imperial palace. The image of Wu Ding pressing down on his childhood sweetheart made him clench his fists so tightly that his nails were about to dig into his skin. "Find a way to contact Fu Hao on the front lines. Let her know that this incapable ruler of hers has already begun playing around with other women from the moment she left, and that he is spending all his days messing around the palace."

His trusted aide's eyes brightened, and he said with admiration, "The High Priest's tactics are truly marvelous! By ruining their relationship, even if Fu Hao returns victorious, their relationship will never be the same again. The fiefdom under Fu Hao is powerful, which makes her one of Wu Ding's most powerful allies. If Fu Hao ever chooses to withdraw her support for him, he will be finished!"

He sighed deeply, full of admiration for what he was witnessing. He didn't fully approve of the high priest sending his own beloved woman into the palace, but now, he could see that the high priest really was someone with acute foresight!

Lian sneered as well. "There isn't a woman in this world who does not feel jealousy. Make it look natural. We don't want Fu Hao to grow suspicious."

The trusted aide clasped his fist. "I understand!"

"Go, and do what needs to be done." Lian waved his hand. He'd spent such a long time laying out his plans, and it was now about time to reel in the net. It was also time for that incapable king to feel some pain.

...

A few days later, Zu An was lying in Xiao Tuo's warm embrace, relaxing as she fed him grapes one by one.

Zu An was fully immersed in the enjoyment of this heavenly lifestyle when someone hurriedly brought in a report from outside the palace.

"It's already so late in the evening. What kind of secret report could there be? Leave." Zu An was slightly annoyed, and refused to see the messenger. He turned around and buried his head in Xiao Tuo's chest.

Xiao Tuo blushed and said in a gentle voice, "My king, these matters of state are extremely important. I'm sure he's come with important news, especially if he's bothering you so late."

She had already been contacted by Lian beforehand, so she knew what was going on. She had her own part to play.

Xiao Tuo sighed when she looked at the man who was resting comfortably in her embrace. From the time they'd spent together, she had begun to realize that this man wasn't as bad as she'd always thought he was. On the contrary, he actually treated her pretty well.

She had rejected him at first, but later on, even if her mind wasn't willing, her body instinctively welcomed him. In time, even she began to wonder if she was truly unwilling or not.

No! Big brother Lian is the one I love! I entered this palace for his sake. You cannot let this incapable king deceive you! She warned herself constantly.

She had secretly taken a look at many of the king's confidential documents during their time together, and she'd also overheard his conversations with his trusted aide, all of which she reported to Lian. She was already too deep undercover to back out now.

"Fine. Since Xiao Tuo is asking me to, I'll grant him an audience," said Zu An with a chuckle. He gestured for the messenger to come in.

Xiao Tuo felt slightly entranced by his smile. This man really did treat her quite well. She couldn't help but feel a little sorry for him.

In a few moments, someone entered and offered him a report. He was a mid-level commander in Wu Ding's army, and he had risked this trip back to inform him about the situation on the front lines.

Fu Hao learned that her husband had taken in a new woman soon after she had left. While she was braving dangers day after day on the battlefield, the king was playing around in the palace. This left her infuriated, and many of Fu Hao's subordinates were angered as well. All of them advised her to break away from him.

Many of the members of Wu Ding's own guard learned of this, so they sent someone back to let him know, as they were all worried that something might happen. That way, he could make some preparations himself. The best countermeasure would be to send another general to take her place before she truly made her decision to rebel.

After listening to the report, Zu An's expression grew thoughtful. He tapped his finger lightly against the table.

Xiao Tuo immediately rushed over and knelt down. "My king, this is all Xiao Tuo's fault! I've ruined your relationship with the queen! Please, send me to the queen and let her punish me."

Zu An's eyes grew cold when he heard what she said. She claimed to be begging for forgiveness, but in actuality, she was offering herself up as living proof of the discord between the king and queen. If it hadn't been him and Pei Mianman playing the roles of the king and queen, she might have truly accomplished her objective.

He turned to look at the commander. "Are you certain that you heard the queen voice her thoughts of rebellion?"

"The queen has not expressed any clear attitudes on the matter yet," clarified the commander.

"However, she is clearly uncertain, and her aides are inciting her against you. Respectfully, she might point her spears at you at any time. Once she returns to Yin Capital, she might start a huge rebellion!"

Zu An chuckled. "You're quite sharp. You knew that I wouldn't believe you if you said that the queen is rebelling. Instead, you worded your statement ambiguously to make me second guess myself."

The commander stiffened, and Xiao Tuo frowned as well. Things did not seem to be going according to plan.

"Someone drag this liar away and have him executed!" commanded Zu An.

According to the customs of the Shang Dynasty, it was well within his rights to turn this man into a human sacrifice as punishment. However, Zu An could not stomach such a decision, so he decided to let him have an easy death instead.

In a flash, two tall guards entered the room. They each grabbed the commander by an arm and took him away.

"I am being wronged, my king! Everything I said was true!" The man struggled frantically, but there was no way he could break free.

Zu An couldn't be bothered with him anymore. Instead, he marveled at the cultivation of these palace guards. That officer was quite strong himself, yet he was less than nothing before those two guards.

The skeleton warrior that had been guarding the gate seemed to share a similar build as them. No wonder it had been so ferocious.

The commander's anguished voice gradually faded, and the palace became quiet once more.

Xiao Tuo's expression was pale. She couldn't help but say, "My king, why did you have him put to death without even investigating if what he said was true? What if all the things he said really did happen? Also, if you sentence him to death straight after he rushed back from the front lines, wouldn't that decrease the morale of our loyal soldiers?"

"There is no way what he said is true," Zu An replied indifferently. "I trust the queen, just as I know the queen trusts me. There can be no betrayal between us."

What kind of joke was this? He knew exactly what kind of relationship he and Pei Mianman shared.

To a certain degree, they were both tourists in this world. They only had each other, and there was no way they would let themselves be deceived by the natives, let alone the fact that they were lovers who had already braved great dangers together.

He had wondered all along what the most dangerous part of this trial would be, and among the things he suspected, the difficulty of communicating across a great distance was a big concern. After all, rumors could distort the real truth. There were many examples of this that even junior high students knew about. That was why he had been careful to warn Pei Mianman about these dangers before she left.

"But then, given the way my king treats me, aren't you already betraying the queen to some extent?" Xiao Tuo said weakly.

Zu An fixed his stare on her. "You tried to seduce me while harboring ulterior motives, and I was merely playing your game, using you to mislead the one behind you. Why would the queen blame me for that?"

Even though this was what he said, he still felt rather guilty inside. However, he decided that Manman probably wouldn't mind whatever happened between him and an NPC.

Xiao Tuo felt as if she had been struck by lightning. She continued to deny it feebly, mumbling, "My king, what are you saying? I... I don't understand."

Zu An chuckled. "Xiao Tuo, I know you were sent by Lian. The two of you were childhood sweethearts, and shared a deep affection for one another. I didn't expect him to send you to the palace to serve me. That was truly a great sacrifice."

"You... you knew about everything." Xiao Tuo felt the last of her strength leak out of her. For some reason, however, she felt no fear. Instead, it was as though she had been released from an iron cage.

"That's right. I knew from the very beginning." Zu An walked over to her and looked at her. Then, he carried her and walked over to the bed.

Xiao Tuo finally snapped out of her daze, and began to struggle frantically. "No! Let me go!"

Zu An's voice was icy cold. "You've already served me many, many times. The two of us were practically glued together. Why are you suddenly behaving like this?"

"That was different!" Xiao Tuo began to sob. She could numb herself before with the thought that it was all for the sake of her mission, and that it was all part of her lover's plan.

Now that everything had been exposed, however, how could she continue to remain with this man?

### **Chapter 543: A Crumbling Heart**

"What's different?" Zu An carried her to the bed and sat down. He didn't go further.

Xiao Tuo turned her face away and tightly pursed her lips, offering no reply. She knew that, at this point, anything she said would be meaningless.



Zu An smiled. "Unfortunately, I'm a soft-hearted man who lets bygones become bygones. I won't hold anything against you, as long as you agree to become my woman."

"Keep on dreaming!" Even though Xiao Tuo was so scared that her entire body was shaking, she still summoned the courage to reject him. "Big brother Lian will be the only one that my heart belongs to. I will never give myself to an incapable ruler like you!"

Zu An chuckled. "Your love for Lian might be unswerving, but I fear that he doesn't trust you."

Xiao Tuo bit her lip, and then said, "I grew up with my big brother Lian. We understand each other. You cannot drive a wedge between us."

"Is that so?" A mocking look flickered across Zu An's face. "If the two of you really are childhood sweethearts, then why would he be willing to send you into the palace to serve another man?"

"Isn't it obvious? Both you and your father stole the throne that belongs to him. Since I love him, I would obviously do everything I can to help him," Xiao Tuo replied.

"You're even willing to give up your own chastity for that?"

"I am willing." By now, Xiao Tuo had already calmed down. She said coldly, "Feel free to punish me however you please. I don't want to hear any more of this nonsense."

Zu An was surprised. "What a heroic woman! Unfortunately, you've dedicated yourself to the wrong cause."

Xiao Tuo turned her head away. She didn't want to argue with him over this matter.

Zu An said, "When I said that Lian might not trust you, I wasn't trying to hurt you. Think about it. When you first entered the palace, you constantly exchanged information with him, yet as time went on, the intervals between your visits grew longer and longer, and eventually, it was almost a miracle that you two would meet up at all. Why do you think that is?"

"I..." Xiao Tuo choked for a moment. She didn't have a good explanation for this either. She hadn't even realized that she had done this.

Zu An chuckled. "It's because the longer we spent with each other, the more fond you became of me. You subconsciously felt like you were wronging me. Your actions were because of your guilt."

If it wasn't for the changes he'd notice in her behavior, he wouldn't even have bothered with explaining all of this to her. He could have just had an imperial guard lock her up. Even if he didn't sentence her to death, he could have her thrown into the inner prison.

Xiao Tuo's face paled, and she immediately retorted, "Nonsense! How could I possibly develop feelings for you?!"

"Anyone would develop feelings of attachment if they raised a kitten or puppy long enough, all the more so if they spent time with another human being. We've been together all this time, and engaged in activities even more intimate than what married couples do. What's so strange about an innocent girl like you unknowingly developing feelings for me?" Zu An replied.

"No... no way..." Xiao Tuo was still in denial, but her voice was already no longer as firm as before.

She was even beginning to doubt her convictions. Could it really be like what he said, that she had developed feelings for him?

But the one in her heart was her big brother Lian! Why would she suddenly become such a fickle woman?

Seeing her conflicted expression, Zu An continued, "No matter how good your relationship with Lian is, there is no way a man would let such a thing go. Even if he does succeed to the throne, he won't be able to accept the fact that you already slept with another man so many times. That's why, from the moment you agreed to the plan, your fate was doomed to become a tragic one, regardless of whether it was me or Lian who won out."

All color drained from Xiao Tuo's face. She'd considered such a thing beforehand, but she had always subconsciously told herself that big brother Lian wasn't that sort of person, and didn't let herself consider anything beyond that. Now that Zu An had laid all of this out, she knew that this was most likely the truth.

Zu An went on, "I doubt that he's okay whenever he thinks about what you are doing. Now that you're contacting him much less frequently as well, who could blame him if he begins to suspect that, after sleeping with me day after day, you've already developed some feelings for me? When you look at all of this together, it's simply one bad thing on top of another. There's no chance that the two of you will ever return to being how you were in the past."

Xiao Tuo took a deep breath. "I understand what you are saying, but so what? I've already agreed to help him. As long as he thinks well about me from time to time, I will be more than satisfied. I never planned for the two of us to be exclusive lovers."

"You expect him to think well of you?" Zu An laughed out loud. "You're too naïve! You'll be lucky if he doesn't loathe you! How could he possibly have any good thoughts when he thinks of you?"

"Nonsense! How could he possibly hate me?!" Xiao Tuo began to panic. This was the last strand of hope that she was desperately clinging onto. She did not want to let anyone take it away from her.

Zu An reached out his hand and lifted her chin gently, admiring her pretty face up close. "Since I already knew your objective from the very start, did you think that I would have taken no precautions?"

A sudden thought flashed into Xiao Tuo's mind, and her face warped with horror.

Zu An traced his finger across her face, feeling her soft and smooth skin. "I'm sure you've passed on all of the intelligence that you've obtained from me during this period. Even though you were always rather careful, I was already aware of your intentions, so there was no way I could let you achieve your goals."

"But I still obtained a lot of secret intelligence!" Xiao Tuo said quickly.

Zu An laughed. "Because all of that was false information that I deliberately let you have access to."

"False information?" Xiao Tuo felt something snap within her, and her soul seemed to leave her body. She completely forgot about the hand on her face... Of course, given the things they had done during this period, such a trifling thing was hardly a big deal.

Zu An nodded. "Actually, I feel truly grateful to you. It was rather difficult to get rid of those who opposed me, but by having you mislead Lian, I had him take care of many of his own trusted subordinates for me. Haha! He thought that those people that he removed had been bribed by me. Instead, the people he now trusts and placed in important positions are the ones that actually work for me.

"You've really helped me out and put him in quite the miserable position! Tell me, do you think Lian will still think fondly of you, or will he hate you?"

Xiao Tuo's body went ice-cold. "You're a devil!" she cried.

Zu An grabbed her hand. "Let me make something clear." he replied, his voice devoid of emotion. "You were the ones who plotted against me first. Who is the real devil here?"

Xiao Tuo's face went blank, and her entire body went limp. She began to sob.

The last of her faith had crumbled, and she finally realized that everything she had stood for was a joke.

She had given up her own purity and happiness, and ruined all of Lian's dreams in the process. All of this was just too much for her to take.

The man in front of her showed her no mercy, his fiendish voice continuing to batter her ears. "Once he realizes all of this, and he associates it with the grievance he has already been feeling all this while, his first thought will be that you somehow developed feelings for me, which will lead him to think that you betrayed him. He will believe that you plotted with me to fool him."

"No, he won't..." Xiao Tuo mumbled, frantically shaking her head. However, she knew just how powerless her words were.

"Why are you telling me all of this? Is it just so you can humiliate me even more?" Xiao Tuo looked at him, her eyes brimming with tears.

Zu An looked back at her, then reached out a hand to wipe away the tears dripping down her cheeks. "It's because I want you."

"You've already had me all along!" Xiao Tuo screamed. He had already toyed with her day and night! Don't tell me he's still not satisfied?!

Zu An shook his head. "No, I haven't."

Xiao Tuo was stunned. She was confused at first, but she slowly understood what he meant. He did not only want her body, he wanted her heart as well.

She sneered. "Do you think it's even possible?"

Zu An said indifferently, "If it wasn't because of the changes I'd seen happen in the way you treated me, as well as the hesitation and doubt you subconsciously felt whenever you leaked out information, I wouldn't have even bothered to say so much to you."

Xiao Tuo stayed silent. Could I have unknowingly...?

Zu An continued, "There's really no need for you to feel sympathy for someone who uses his lover's body to achieve his goals. Besides, putting aside your feelings for now, you still have your family and the people of the Tuo State to worry about. Do you truly wish for all of them to be chopped up into mincemeat and offered as human sacrifices just because of their relationship to you?"

Xiao Tuo's entire body began to tremble. "You really are a devil after all!"

Zu An shook his head. "I'm not saying all this to threaten you. You need to understand that, more often than not, decisions are not left up to the king alone. When it is time for Lian to stand accountable for his deeds, the court officials will examine both you and your family and the people within your state. This isn't something I can dismiss with a wave of my hand, even if I wanted to. If I did so, our entire country would be thrown into disorder.

"I'm only telling you this because I want you to choose a path that actually benefits yourself. Only if you willingly give yourself to me can I convince everyone that everything you did was a part of my plan. Only then can you, your family and the people of your state avoid that bitter ending."

When he saw her blank expression, Zu An lowered his head to kiss her cherry-colored lips.

Xiao Tuo subconsciously reached out to push him away, but her hands froze midway.

Zu An smiled. He interlocked his fingers with hers, and then he carried her to the bed.

Xiao Tuo's heart began to pound. Even though she had embraced him intimately on many occasions over the course of this period, for some reason, she felt extremely nervous. She might have been even more nervous than the first time.

She knew that, this time at least, her heart was awash with contradiction and hesitation.

#### **Chapter 544: Testing the Heart**

While she was hesitating, she suddenly felt a familiar feeling, and she instinctively embraced the man in front of her.

Noticing her subconscious actions, Xiao Tuo finally acknowledged her fate. It seemed that even her body was accustomed to this man.

"Look at me." A voice ordered beside her ear, which brooked no questioning.

She wanted to turn her head away, but Zu An turned her head right back.

Xiao Tuo felt extremely helpless as she caught sight of the satisfied smile in his eyes.

As they continued to gaze deeply into each other's eyes, though, she suddenly felt a spark of tenderness blossom within her. Even though it was faint, she knew that her actions were no longer a result of sticking to a mission.

...

After goodness knows how long, Xiao Tuo found herself huddled within Zu An's embrace, looking at him quietly.

He was already fast asleep. Even though Xiao Tuo was also exhausted as well, her mind was currently in a mess, and there was no way she would be able to follow suit.

Thoughts constantly raced through her mind, and as she observed them silently, she suddenly grew surprised. She noticed that her head was mostly filled with thoughts about this king and that she rarely thought about Lian at all.

Xiao Tuo looked at the man next to her, a complicated expression on her face. Could she really have developed feelings for him?

In the end, however, her exhaustion won out, and she gradually drifted off into the land of dreams. As she was dreaming, her brow furrowed, and her expression clearly mirrored her inner panic. She subconsciously moved closer towards Zu An. Only when she felt his body's warmth and sensed his heartbeat did she gradually calm down.

When Xiao Tuo awoke the next morning, she discovered how closely she'd curled up against him as she slept, and her face grew bright red. She hadn't expected to be so attached to him even when she was sleeping.

As she stared at his face—angular and strong, as though sculpted by a master—she blushed. This incapable king is pretty good-looking, I guess.

Her mind drifted off, absorbed by its own thoughts. Whenever she was with Lian, she found even breathing difficult, and most of her memories with him were filled with bitterness and suffering. Yet her memories of her time together with this man were much sweeter. Why was that? Could this be what love really felt like?

"I've heard that if one stares at someone for more than fifteen seconds, you will fall in love with them. You've been staring at me for quite a while." Zu An's teasing laughter echoed through the room.

Xiao Tuo's heart skipped a beat, and she recoiled away from him. "You... you were already awake?"

"I woke up when I heard a certain someone's heartbeat speed up." Zu An pulled her slender waist straight into his arms. "We're already a couple, there's nothing to hide."

"A couple..." A trace of warmth seeped into Xiao Tuo's ice-cold heart.

Before she could say anything, however, she felt his weight on her. "It's still early in the morning!" she cried out in alarm.

"So what if it's morning?" Zu An seemed utterly unfazed.

Xiao Tuo's pretty brows drew together slightly. She snorted, and then said, "You incapable king..."

She had always used this term as a way of cursing him, but now, there seemed to be a more ambiguous meaning behind it.

...

After they had played around for a while, Zu An called over his trusted aide. "Pass down the order that Manman... ahem, ahem... Fu Hao is to be granted the white banner and the yellow axe. She does not need to report to me first before making decisions regarding any military decisions."

In this age, the white banner and the yellow axe represented royal power, and had never been granted to any other subject before.

Xiao Tuo was lying within the inner chamber, a complicated expression on her face. It seemed the king truly favored his queen. Furthermore, the extraordinary trust they had in each other was truly a rare and precious thing.

She knew that all of Lian's efforts to drive a wedge between them and create unrest in Yin Capital had failed completely.

Zu An's voice sounded again. "Inform everyone that I am taking Xiao Tuo as my lady. Have Fu Shuo and the others sort out the formalities."

In the Shang Dynasty, the term 'lady' was synonymous with 'concubine'.

Xiao Tuo was well and truly shocked. She had always assumed that she was nothing more than a toy to him. After all, she had entered the palace with ulterior motives, and she had accepted that this alone was to be her fate.

However, he had now acknowledged her as his lady. In the future, no one could treat her as a maid anymore, and had to greet her respectfully as Lady Tuo instead.

Even though she wouldn't have as much authority as the queen, the difference was not terribly significant.

A sudden thought struck her. Even if Lian really had succeeded, this would be the best fate she could have been granted.

She was never a stupid girl. She knew that, by serving Wu Ding in the manner she did, none of the court officials would have ever agreed to her becoming the queen, even if Lian did not mind it.

Becoming one of his concubines was already the best she could have hoped for. What would have happened if Lian truly held her actions against her?

She had grown up with Lian, and she understood his temperament perfectly. She had just chosen not to think about this issue too deeply. However, having listened to Zu An's analysis the previous night, she knew that he was correct. There was nothing good waiting for her if Lian had succeeded.

Now, Lian had absolutely no chance of success, and both her family's lives and those of the people in her state were hanging on her decision.

She saw Zu An return to the inner chamber, and her expression grew complicated. "My king, Xiao Tuo doesn't deserve such honor. I feel too ashamed to accept this. Please rescind that order!" she said.

The king truly treated her well, but the more he did so, the more guilty she felt.

Zu An laughed heartily. "A king cannot go back on his word so easily. Since I have already granted it to you, all you need to do is to accept it. Of course, if you feel that you haven't done enough to earn it, there is something you can help me with."

"Something that I can help with?" Xiao Tuo was bewildered. She couldn't think of anything that the king couldn't do himself, but had to rely on her for.

Zu An handed her a bamboo slip. "Pass this on to Lian."

Xiao Tuo was shocked. She could read his intent even without looking at the contents. "No, I cannot harm him! My king, I will serve you with everything I have, but please do not make me personally do something so cruel!"

Even though she had given Lian some false information, she had only done so out of ignorance. Now that she knew that this was false and harmful information, how could she bring herself to deceive Lian?

Zu An smiled and said, "What's wrong? You still can't forget about him?"

Xiao Tuo remained silent. How could she let go of her childhood sweetheart so easily?

Zu An said coldly, "Xiao Tuo, there are times when we have to do things we don't want to. If you don't do this, how will I ever be able to trust you completely?"

Xiao Tuo bit her lip. She knelt in front of Zu An and begged for forgiveness. "Xiao Tuo knows that there is no way I can gain my king's trust, but I cannot do anything to betray big brother Lian either! My king, please grant me death."

"You cannot do anything to betray Lian?" Zu An laughed. "Haven't you already done so several times last night?"

Xiao Tuo immediately blushed a bright red. She had slept with Zu An before for the sake of her mission. Lian had been aware of it as well, which was why she was able to keep her conscience clean.

However, with all that had happened last night, she had abandoned her mission and romped around with the king. To a certain extent, she had already betrayed Lian.

Zu An continued, "How about this? Let's make a bet. Pass this information to Lian. If he trusts you and acts according to this piece of intelligence, then I will never force you to do anything again. I'll even let you leave the palace and return to his side."

"Really?" Xiao Tuo felt an initial burst of excitement when she heard this, but when she realized that this meant that she would be completely separated from Zu An, she hesitated.

"I'm not done yet." Zu An's tone changed. "If he doesn't trust you and doesn't act according to the information, then from today onwards, you will forget your past and fully devote yourself to me. What do you say?"

Xiao Tuo's mouth fell open. She had a million things she wanted to say in that moment, but only a single word came out.

"Fine!"

She was also curious as to what choice Lian would eventually make.

Zu An smiled when he saw Xiao Tuo processing the possibilities. He had never truly expected Xiao Tuo to have abandoned Lian completely.

If she had agreed to it without any hesitation, Zu An would not have been pleased. After all, how could he possibly trust a girl who would betray her childhood sweetheart so easily?

However, having her past lover on her mind was not ideal either. In fact, it would make it even harder for him to trust her.

As such, he decided upon this method of dealing with her. Even though Xiao Tuo was full of hope, he knew that there was only one possible conclusion.

The heart is best not tested.

### **Chapter 545: The End?**

Xiao Tuo passed on the information as planned. She had never been so nervous about her future before.

Unfortunately, no matter what she desperately wished for, the outcome of the test was obvious.

Zu An's suspicions were spot on. Jealousy had already cost Lian most of his reason. As information from the palace lessened and grew more infrequent, he couldn't help but begin to doubt Xiao Tuo.

Then there was news from the palace that Xiao Tuo had been granted the status of lady, which silenced him completely.

He knew that even if he ascended to the throne, that was the most he would be able to offer her.

Now, Xiao Tuo had chosen this time to pass him new information, but how could he dare to trust it? He tossed the information straight into the trash.

Xiao Tuo waited anxiously for three days, but there was no response from Lian at all. All of her expectations gradually sunk into the abyss. At the same time, though, she felt a sense of relief rising within her.

If he really acted according to the information she'd given him, she wouldn't have known how to face him.

Of course, all of this took place in her subconscious, and she was not truly aware of these thoughts or feelings.

Zu An, on the other hand, had already known that this result was inevitable. In reality, he had broken down her inner defenses a while ago, and only went through all of this trouble just to make it easier for her to accept reality, and to give her a reason for her to convince herself of the truth.

Zu An stopped behind her and gently wrapped his arms around her soft body. "It's already past the agreed time. Are you convinced now?"



Xiao Tuo sighed. She made her decision and turned around. She bowed towards him. "My king, from today on, Xiao Tuo will be fully devoted to you. I give my everything to you."

Zu An chuckled. "Pretty words are often not enough. Actions speak much louder."

Xiao Tuo looked at him with annoyance, and a shy yet charming expression glistened within her eyes as she slowly knelt down.

Zu An's breathing immediately sped up. Even though the two of them had spent so much time together and tried all sorts of things, he had never seen her be so proactive.

He had known that she was a spy all along, so he did not hold back, and taught her many ways of pleasuring him.

Back then, even though Xiao Tuo hadn't objected to what he'd put her through, she couldn't hide the shame in her eyes, nor prevent him from reaping the Rage points that she directed towards him.

He'd been quite nervous about letting her do such things before, because he was afraid that she had given up hope, and was willing to do anything to get revenge.

Even though only his soul had entered this trial, if it really was bitten off, there was no guarantee that his real body wouldn't also be affected.

This left him walking a tight line between ecstasy and anxiety.

This time, however, it was completely different. She showed no hint of resentment. Instead, she was gentle and caring.

This was the final act that made Zu An believe that she had come over to his side.

However, he suddenly saw a line of tears flowing down her cheek. Frowning, he helped her wipe them away and asked, "Are you still thinking about the past?"

Xiao Tuo sniffled, took a deep breath, then shook her head. "These tears are my final farewell to the past."

Zu An's heart welled up with sympathy when he heard these words. He took her into his arms, and then he walked towards the inner chamber. The atmosphere within the room gradually heated up.

...

Once Xiao Tuo switched allegiances, everything else followed along naturally. Zu An had already used false information to eliminate all of Lian's men around the capital.

Lian was now completely alone. He only had several family members left, and was surrounded by spies sent by Zu An.

Dealing with Lian's power base should have been extremely difficult. Not only was he the high priest, he was the son of a former king as well, and had a considerable amount of power.

However, Xiao Tuo was familiar with the resources at his disposal. With the information she provided, taking them down was a walk in the park.

When he had taken care of these matters, news finally arrived that Pei Mianman had been victorious. The Qiang Faction had suffered such a severe defeat that they had no chances of threatening the Shang State anymore.

When Pei Mianman returned with the army, Zu An personally set out with the court officials to greet her outside the city.

All of them agreed that such a move was appropriate. Not only was the king showing his love for his queen, such an act would also be a huge boost to the public's morale.

Only Zu An himself knew that he was doing this mostly because he missed Pei Mianman. She had already been gone for several months. If it wasn't because he had a lot of things to take care of within Yin Capital itself, he might have already run off to join her on the front lines.

Soon after they set out, an army appeared on the horizon. The one leading them rode on a white steed, and was dressed in beautiful golden armor. In the radiance of the morning sun she shone like a divine goddess.

"The queen really is pretty."

"She is probably the number one beauty in our Great Shang State."

"She isn't only our number one beauty, she is also the number one war goddess!"

"Her chest really is massive, though!"

"Do you want to die?"

...

Many of the common folk had followed them outside the city to greet the returning heroes. Zu An wasn't annoyed by their whispers, but smiled instead. This was also his first reaction upon seeing Pei Mianman again.

They had been separated for so long, and she was already his woman. He was in a good mood, so he didn't mind their comments.

In the past, Pei Mianman had always had a flirtatious charm about her, which made her stand out amongst other women. But now, she exuded a heroic spirit that he knew could only be forged by the blood and flames of the battlefield.

These two characteristics melded together to give her an entirely unique aura.

Pei Mianman was also happy to see him, and immediately urged her horse over.

"All of you, stay here," Zu An ordered his subordinates. "No one is allowed to come close to us."

There were many things he and Pei Mianman had to discuss alone, which they couldn't allow others to hear. Since the two of them were greatly honored individuals, none of the officials raised an objection.

"Manman, you're finally back." Zu An said with a sigh, holding her hand tenderly.

Pei Mianman snorted. “The palace might have burned down if I hadn’t returned. Do you know how many people were hounding me about how close you were to that Xiao Tuo girl?”

“I’m being wronged! That was all a scheme that the high priest came up with to separate us!” Zu An complained.

Pei Mianman looked amused. “So they were lying, then? There’s nothing going on between you and Xiao Tuo in the palace?”

Zu An was embarrassed. “That... was my way of beating them at their own game. I had to sacrifice myself to bring Xiao Tuo over to my side! If not, it would have been almost impossible to deal with the high priest!”

He explained the events that had transpired in the capital while she was gone.

Pei Mianman’s expression finally eased a little. “Only you could make being perverted sound like such an upright thing! I think you’re just abusing your authority.”

Zu An knew that she was still bitter about it, and that any further words would not help. Instead, he gave her a big hug. “Manman, thank you for your efforts.”

He knew even without asking that she had gone through a lot in order to defeat the savage Qiang Faction.

Pei Mianman’s voice softened. “You’ve been through a lot as well. At least I knew who my enemies were on the front lines. You had to face an unknown enemy inside the city, and had to constantly arrange for the necessary logistical support for our army. I received your yellow axe and white banner of authority. If not for your firm support, I might not have been able to accomplish what I needed to do so smoothly...”

The two of them poured out their hearts to each other as time ticked by. The other officials couldn’t help but become impatient, reminding them several times that they were still outside the city.

Pei Mianman pushed Zu An away in embarrassment, and the two of them led the throng back into the city.

Zu An used this victory to snuff out the final pocket of dissenters who had been making use of the chaos of the Qiang Faction invasion to stir up rebellion.

Lian was obviously one of his targets, and he had more than enough documentary proof to bring him down. Even without this proof, no one would have questioned Zu An and Pei Mianman, given their current authority and status within the state.

After Lina had been dealt with, Fu Shuo enacted their earlier plan to make Pei Mianman the high priest. All divine authority was now in the king’s hands.

As a reward for Pei Mianman’s achievements, the court decided to cast an owl statue and a jade phoenix for her. The jade badge that had previously belonged to Lian also went to her, as she was the new High Priest.

The two of them could both feel the ki flowing through these three articles, which had meticulous formations engraved on each of them. Every single artifact was unique and exceptional, and would have been considered priceless treasures in the real world.

Unfortunately, only their souls had entered this trial, and there was no way for them to extract these items into the physical world, so they didn't grow too attached to them.

They had defeated the invading enemy from without, and quelled the dissent within. This should be enough to satisfy the requirements of the trial, right?

However, the sun continued to rise in the east and set in the west. As the days passed one after another, they still did not see any sign of the trial ending.

#### **Chapter 546: Buried in Work**

One after another, the days passed, and the two of them grew more and more restless. Even though they were the king and queen of this dynasty, they both knew that this was not the real world.

Pei Mianman finally couldn't stand it anymore. "Ah Zu, what is going on?" She asked Zu An, dragging him away from Xiao Tuo in the process.

Afraid of her status as the queen, Xiao Tuo did not say anything.

Zu An was rather embarrassed. He put his clothes on and said, "I have no idea either. I suppose it's no wonder those past trial participants never succeeded either. I thought that it was because they were too dumb, but it looks like I've underestimated those heroes."

He had managed to expose Xiao Tuo as a spy and root out the hidden boss, the high priest Lian, and he shared an exceptional bond of trust with Pei Mianman. All of this had made him extremely cocky. Now, however, it dawned on him that there surely were other stunning candidates who had participated in this trial before. It wasn't unreasonable that some of them would have gotten this far as well.

"Then what should we do now?" Pei Mianman asked nervously.

Zu An's tone grew serious. "I've been thinking about this issue constantly these past few days. We must have overlooked something. We have to carefully go over the details of what happened, and see if we can figure out the key to this trial."

This kind of open world trial really was a pain in the ass, since it gave him no clues as to what he was supposed to do. He had to dig up every bit of information on his own, and he wasn't even given any feedback as to whether he was doing well or not.

Pei Mianman bit her lip, her voice clouded with worry. "Won't this be extremely dangerous for our real bodies outside the trial, though? We've already spent a few months in the trial. Who knows..."

An ordinary person would have died a long time ago without sustenance. Even though the bodies of cultivators were tougher, there was still a limit.

Zu An replied, "I'm not too worried about that. If my suspicions are correct, the flow of time inside this trial should be different from outside. A few months in here might only be an instant outside. If this weren't the case, this trial would be impossible to complete, and that would render it meaningless."

To borrow a phrase from ancient mythology, 'a day in the heavens above is a year on earth'. It wouldn't have surprised him in the least if time flowed differently in different worlds.

Pei Mianman was calmed by his words. "Even so, we can't stay here forever."

Zu An frowned and said, "I've gone over everything that's happened so far, but I don't think I've overlooked anything..."

A sudden thought occurred to him, and he quickly turned Pei Mianman. "Tell me everything that happened in your battle against the Qiang Faction again. Don't leave out on even a single detail."

Since this was a joint trial shared by both a man and a woman, whatever happened on her end would also be vital.

"Didn't I tell you exactly what happened already?" Pei Mianman grumbled, but she still went on, "Those Qiang people were quite tough, and every single one of them was courageous and battle-hardened. However, their civilization lagged behind ours in terms of technology. We had war chariots, and made use of formations as well, while they fought more individually... Even so, they were still quite valiant. We were trapped and surrounded during one of the battles, but fortunately, a nearby tribe rushed over to help us. That was why we were able to defeat the Qiang Faction."

"A tribe?" Zu An was surprised. "Do you know which tribe they are?"

Pei Mianman's brows furrowed. "I believe they called themselves the Zhou tribe. They reside in the west, and seemed to have been oppressed by the Qiang Faction for a long time. That was why they came to our aid."

"The Zhou tribe?" Zu An suddenly straightened. "This is it, this is it! The Shang Dynasty was wiped out by the Zhou Dynasty! I believe this trial has something to do with these Zhou people."

"But the Zhou tribe was also rather behind in terms of technology. There's no way they are a match for our Shang State!"

"They might not be able to match us now, but what about a few centuries later?" Zu An's mind moved quickly. "Could the objective of the trial be to cut off this problem before it even develops?"

As he spoke, he grew more and more convinced that this was the case. He quickly summoned Fu Shuo and shared his thoughts.

"What? My king wishes to wipe out the Zhou tribe?" Fu Shuo was shocked. He quickly said, "I absolutely advise against it! Not only is their land worthless to us, they even helped us in our battle against the Qiang Faction. If we turn around and attack them now, we would be seen as dishonorable! How would the other factions treat us then? We can't have all of them turning against us!"

Pei Mianman shared his views as well. After all, she had fought side-by-side with the Zhou tribe not too long ago.

Zu An knew that there was a good reason for his conclusion, but there was no way he could explain his true reasoning to Fu Shuo. He could only put on a stern expression and say, "I've already made up my mind. There is no room for discussion. Prepare to mobilize the men."

Fu Shuo was about to try to dissuade him again when a messenger arrived with an urgent report. "Reporting! The ruler of the Zhi State has sent an emissary requesting aid. The Earth Faction has invaded their territory, and they are powerless to stop them. They have requested that my king provide them with reinforcements."

"The Zhi State? The Earth Faction?" Zu An was bewildered. Why had these two powers suddenly popped out of nowhere?

Fu Shuo was quick to offer an explanation. "The Zhi State is a small country to the north, and we have always shared a cordial relationship with them. Their country has publicly acknowledged their status as our vassal state. They are a natural barrier against any incursions from the north. The Earth Faction is a powerful barbarian tribe further north. They are probably taking advantage of the disorder that the Qiang Faction invasion has caused to launch their own invasion."

Zu An finally remembered that the Earth Faction had been mentioned in some of the documents he'd read. The Earth Faction occupied territory around Shanxi and Hebei, and were a powerful enemy of the Shang Dynasty.

He hadn't paid them too much attention earlier on because he didn't think they had much to do with his trial.

Even now, he did not believe that these factions were related to his trial. He could send any random military officer to aid them, while he maintained his focus on the west, and the Zhou tribe.

However, Fu Shuo and all the other court officials opposed this plan. "We cannot do this! The Zhou tribe is weak, and does not even border our Shang Capital! Attacking them makes no sense, and will instead turn the rest of the states against us! We must focus on the Earth Faction. They are at least as strong as the Qiang Faction. Once they break through our northern defensive line and march south, our Great Shang State will be in huge danger!"

Zu An was stunned. Was the threat they posed really that serious?

As they deliberated, more emissaries showed up one after another, all hailing from the Zhi State, with each message sounding more urgent than the last. It was easy to see how precarious the situation in the north had become.

Pei Mianman pulled Zu An to the side. "Ah Zu, if the Shang State is wiped out, wouldn't that spell the end of the trial?"

"Of course." Zu An knew what she was trying to say. The Shang people had set up this trial. If he let the Shang State be destroyed by the Earth Faction, then he wouldn't have to worry about the Zhou people at all. All of it would be over right there and then.

Faced with no other choice, he decided to destroy the Earth Faction first, and then find a chance to deal with the Zhou people afterwards.

The court officials were overjoyed, and praised him for being wise and brilliant.

Zu An wasn't in the mood for idle chatter. He immediately gathered all of the chancellors to discuss military strategy. The more mundane matters were easy enough to handle, but the key was to elect a leader for the troops.

All the chancellors threw their weight behind the queen. After all, she was held in such high esteem, and she had already proven herself in the battle against the Qiang Faction. There was no one more qualified than her.

Zu An's head began to ache immediately. He obviously didn't want to be separated from Pei Mianman again, and neither did she.

However, the two of them examined the situation carefully, and concluded that this might be yet another part of the trial. In the end, Pei Mianman took the initiative to volunteer.

As for Zu An, he had to remain behind in Yin Capital. It hadn't been too long since he'd dealt with the high priest, and several of that traitor's old subordinates were still in hiding. If he left, the capital might descend into chaos. Moreover, while the strength of the army and its generals were essential for war, so were the setting up of supply lines and other forms of logistics support. Victory and defeat hinged on the robustness of these logistics.

Only with Zu An taking care of the logistics in Yin Capital would Pei Mianman be able to wage this war without undue amounts of stress.

This whole situation left Zu An feeling rather strange. Everyone was used to hearing about the man going out to work while the woman managed the household chores, but in this case, the roles had been completely flipped. Despite this, he did not object to it, since it was what the trial demanded of him. He did not want his pride to get in the way of their goal.

...

Having experienced the war with the Qian Faction, both Pei Mianman and Zu An were clear on their roles and responsibilities. Three months later, Pei Mianman returned victorious.

Zu An thought that they could now turn their attention to the Zhou tribe, but not a moment had passed before the ruler of the Tang State pleaded for help. This time, it was the Eros Faction, invading across the northern banks of the Yellow River.

When they had finally dealt with the Eros Faction, the even more powerful Ghost Faction marched across the Mongolian Plateau to challenge them. Zu An and Pei Mianman were completely overwhelmed, and could not spare a moment to deal with the western Zhou tribe.

#### **Chapter 547: Dream, or Reality?**

Zu An stiffened when he heard the name 'Eros Faction'. Why the hell would a people choose such a name? This word had an entirely different meaning in his previous world...

The Eros Faction was a nomadic group who roamed modern-day Inner Mongolia, around the Great Bend of the Yellow River. They were slightly weaker than the Qiang Faction, but were certainly no pushovers.

Pei Mianman lead her soldiers to battle again, and it took a long time for her to finally repel their advance.

Unfortunately, this was all they could do. These nomadic tribes were mobile and adaptable, and although fighting them off was relatively easy, wiping them out was almost impossible.

From time to time, these nomadic factions came back to attack them, forcing Pei Mianman to lead the troops and put out the fires.

Zu An couldn't stand these long periods of separation, and began to select officers from among the court to take over Pei Mianman's role.

These years of constant battle were the perfect stage for these officers to showcase their talent. Zu An ended up promoting Bird, Feather, Elephant, Sparrow, and many others to higher ranks.

He mocked them in secret even as he promoted them. These ancient people really were absolutely terrible at names. What kind of names were these? It sounded as though they were raising chickens or something.

Out of all these promoted officers, one of them stood head and shoulders above the rest: Ya Zhang!

It was none other than the dried-up corpse general in the tomb who had guided them to this trial.

He was originally the young master of the Zhang clan, which was to the south. The Zhang clan served Shang, which was why he had been sent to Yin Capital and given an official post.

However, this fellow hadn't been satisfied with obediently doing his job. Instead, he stole secrets about the spinning, weaving, and metallurgical technologies of the Yin Capital. He wanted to bring this knowledge back home in order to improve the lives of his clan.

Unfortunately, he was caught doing this, and was about to be executed. Thankfully for him, Zu An just happened to be passing by. When he heard Ya Zhang's name, a strange look came over him, but he still stepped in to spare him.

Ya Zhang was moved to tears, and willingly offered to fight on the front lines in order to make up for his crimes.

As a result, his military contributions grew and grew, elevating him above the other generals, and almost reaching the level of Fu Hao.

Zu An had tried to obtain some clues regarding this trial from him, but Ya Zhang had absolutely no idea about it. He had clearly been given the task of guarding the dungeon only later on.

After spending several years dealing with the Eros and Earth factions, the Shang Dynasty encountered another powerful enemy: The Ghost Faction!

The Ghost Faction roamed the Mongolian Plateau, and were very likely the ancestors of the Huns. Their men were innately stronger than those of the Earth and Eros factions.



Thankfully, after years under Zu An's management, the political situation within the Shang Dynasty had already stabilized, and their nation was stronger than ever. Together with their well-trained army and the maturity of the other generals, there was no need for Pei Mianman to lead the troops personally.

This war continued for several years, and Zu An and Pei Mianman were hard-pressed to set up and maintain the logistics support.

In the cruelty of war, both sides suffered massive casualties, and even a seasoned commander like Ya Zhang was killed in battle.

Because of the chaos that reigned on the battlefield, by the time the soldiers of the Shang Dynasty retrieved his corpse, his body was covered in blade wounds, and his severed arm had been lost amidst the carnage.

Zu An was stunned. Remembering the bronze hand he had seen in the tomb, he ordered craftsmen to make an identical one so that it could be buried with him, allowing him to be buried as a whole person. This order earned praise from all levels of society. Such a gesture was truly the mark of a benevolent king.

Confusion clouded Zu An's mind. He began to wonder whether he had made the decision because he had seen the bronze hand on Ya Zhang's corpse, or if it was because he had given this order that the bronze hand had appeared. As he turned this puzzle over in his mind, he grew more and more perplexed.

Sometimes, he even felt as though this trial was the real world, while the world beyond it might have been the imaginary one.

When they had finally put down the Ghost Faction, the Shang Dynasty desperately needed time to recover after years of war.

They were not given the opportunity, however, because the Ba Faction from the southwest began to encroach on their lands.

Zu An was pissed. "Motherfuckers... Do you think this is a public restroom? Do you think you can all come and go as you please?!"

The constant parade of intruders had left him hopping mad. He finally couldn't hold himself back anymore. Now that the country was stable, he decided to set out together with Pei Mianman.

The two of them were perfectly coordinated. Zu An lured the Ba Faction's army to where Pei Mianman was waiting, successfully executing the first encircling ambush.

By now, a decade had already passed, and Zu An felt some things beginning to slip his mind. However, he was currently the ruler of a country, and watching it prosper under his rule was immensely satisfying. This task left no room for any other idle thoughts.

Not only did he have Pei Mianman, the charming Xiao Tuo was also by his side, serving him. He had no complaints about living such an extravagant and luxurious lifestyle.

After some time, more good news arrived.

Pei Mianman was pregnant!

It wasn't a surprise that she would become pregnant after a decade of marriage. However, Pei Mianman had been constantly away, fighting on the front lines, which meant that they couldn't spend as much time as they would have liked. It was only recently that they had begun to spend more time together as a couple.

Both of them were stunned when they heard news of the pregnancy. Was it even possible for souls to get pregnant?

However, this was merely a fleeting thought, and was quickly replaced with overwhelming joy.

They had already spent way too long in this world. Everything around them was so real that they had gotten used to it. It was easy for them to believe that their previous world was one that they had somehow dreamed up.

She carried the child for ten months, and Zu An took great care of her during this period.

Unfortunately, a problem arose.

Pei Mianman went into an extremely difficult period of labor.

The midwives of this age knew no other way of easing the delivery, aside from encouraging the pregnant woman to exert more force. The doctors of this age were more akin to witch doctors and shamans, and to a certain degree, they were no different from religious nuts.

Even though Zu An offered all types of suggestions and methods, he was not an obstetrician, and had no practical experience when it came to childbirth. In the end, he could only watch as she lost her life to the complicated delivery.

In the final moments before Pei Mianman closed her eyes for the last time, Zu An felt as if his body was struck by lightning. He didn't dare to believe that this was really happening.

However, everyone else seemed accustomed to such a situation, and did their best to console him.

Because of the limited development of science and medicine in this age, humans had short lifespans, and it was common knowledge that pregnant women would always face such dangers during delivery.

Even though the queen was an extremely capable individual and enjoyed special status in society, she was no different from any other ordinary woman when it came to this.

This was not easy for Zu An to accept, and it was a long time before he could breathe normally again. All the while, Xiao Tuo stayed by his side, gently comforting him.

Even though the king fell into depression, the court continued to operate normally. Fu Shuo and the other important ministers handled the queen's funeral arrangements.

Because of her immense importance to the king, as well as the queen's miraculous contributions to their country over the years, they arranged for the most solemn funeral, and built the most majestic tomb to house her.

There was no way Zu An could delay the queen's burial indefinitely. He could only personally oversee the burial ceremony and send her off one final time.

After Pei Mianman's death, Zu An wandered around aimlessly, an empty husk with no soul. He was often either found drinking in a corner of the palace or playing with Xiao Tuo and the concubines. This seemed the only way for him to numb himself and make him forget about those painful memories.

Thanks to the efforts that he and Pei Mianman had put into growing the country, the other nations surrounding them could do little to harm them. His country only continued to grow in power, and the organization of the court and the personnel within it matured as well. Despite his absence from government affairs, the country was more or less able to run itself.

Just like that, time seemed to fly past. In the blink of an eye, several decades went by, and Zu An was now an old man. In this period, it was a miracle for someone his age to still be alive.

He watched as Fu Shuo and the other important ministers passed on, one after another. Even Xiao Tuo had passed away a few years ago. Many other concubines—most of whom he couldn't name—passed on before him as well.

Many days, after he had numbed himself with pleasures, he would find himself alone in the palace in the dead of night. He always felt as though he had forgotten something, yet he just couldn't remember what it was that had slipped his mind.

This troubled him at first, but as time went on, he slowly forgot about these conflicting emotions.

These past few days, however, something seemed to speak to him within his mind. He could sense the encroaching shadow of death, and knew that he didn't have much time left to live.

Despite this, he felt at peace. He had already served as the king of this country for more than half a century, and had enjoyed everything there was to enjoy. What else was there to be unhappy about?

One day, unable to sleep, he took a stroll around the palace, and unknowingly found himself in front of a tattered house. His entire body froze.

He vaguely recalled that he had resided in this very place in his earlier days, and he couldn't remember why he had insisted that it be preserved.

He pushed open the door and went in. The interior of the house was covered in dust.

Previously, the palace maids had known how much the king cared about this place, and they kept it meticulously clean, since he would visit from time to time.

As time went on, however, the king gradually stopped coming by, and they slowly stopped bothering with cleaning it altogether.

Zu An sat down by the bedside, wrapped in his own silence. Just as he got up to leave, he saw a glint of light.

Something was reflecting the moonlight that was seeping in through the window.

He glanced over and noticed something wedged in between the bed and the bed frame. It was in an extremely tricky spot, so not even the maids who cleaned this place before had noticed it.

It was a pendant with a flame insignia.

As the ruler of a country, he was accustomed to all sorts of treasures. Outwardly, this pendant was hardly special.

However, his entire body trembled the instant he laid eyes on this pendant. He finally remembered what he had forgotten about all these years. He remembered the reason why he had come into this world!

This was the black flame pendant that Pei Mianman had given him.

Perhaps they had had too much fun together in this room before, and this pendant had accidentally fallen into this little nook. With the two of them busy dealing with the country's affairs, they had most likely forgotten about it.

"Manman." In that instant, tears trickled down the old man's weathered face.

Suddenly, his vision grew blurry, and the world began to warp. When Zu An woke up, he discovered that he was in another world.

#### **Chapter 548: Reincarnation**

"Big brother, big brother!" A bright and clear voice called into his ear. Zu An was still in a daze. He hadn't yet reacted to the world suddenly changing around him. A cute little girl was in front of him, spreading her arms. "Big brother, carry me!"

Zu An was perplexed. What's going on?

He couldn't ignore the adorable little girl in front of him, though. Her hair was tied up in lovely pigtails, making her look just like a doll.

He instinctively spread his arms to welcome this cute little child.

"You're the best, big brother!" The little girl got on her tiptoes and planted her lips against his cheek. Seeing the trail of saliva she'd left on his face, she dissolved into a fit of laughter.

Zu An was left speechless.

Before he could feel annoyed, a horrifying fact struck him. He wasn't much older than this little girl, who seemed about ten years old. In fact, his arms and legs were as small as hers. He was a scrawny teenager himself!

Did I somehow become young again? Zu An was stunned. He remembered that he was Wu Ding just a moment ago, an old man with one foot already in the grave. How did he suddenly become a child?

Also, where is this place?

He looked around him. The surroundings looked both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

While the surroundings seemed similar to his old palace, the houses and rooms seemed somehow different.

He had sat on the throne for more than fifty years, so there was no way he wouldn't recognize his own palace. These rooms were clearly different from those of his time.

"Big brother, you meanie! You're ignoring me!" The little girl in his arms puffed up her cheeks and pouted.

"Big brother?" Zu An's mind finally returned to the present. Looking at the cute little girl in his arms, he froze for a moment, then asked, "Manman?"

He had experienced Pei Mianman dying in his previous life. Since this scene was clearly another part of the trial, he wondered if Pei Mianman had somehow followed him here.

"What Manman? You're a meanie! Big brother doesn't even remember my name! I'm San Cai!" The little girl pinched his cheeks. Even though she was angry, she was still so young that it didn't hurt at all. In fact, it actually felt rather good.

"San Cai...?" Zu An was momentarily stunned, but all of a sudden, memories began to pour in. His name was Xian, the son of the Shang King Wen Ding. As for this Wen Ding, after searching his memories, he concluded that Wu Ding was Wen Ding's great great grandfather.

He began to curse. He'd actually become the son of his grandson's grandson! What kind of nonsense is this?

His memories informed him that he had two younger sisters. The younger one was the cute little girl in his arms, San Cai. He had another sister, who was slightly older, named Mu.

Only now did he realize that there was another young lady standing at the railing. Even though she was younger than he was currently, he could tell that she was a beauty in the making. She had pretty curved brows and snow white skin, and waves of black hair flowed behind her like a waterfall.

Her eyes were the most attractive part of her. They were enchanting, gleaming like the most precious of gemstones. From time to time, they seemed to ooze a slight, seductive charm.

Bloody hell, she's only ten years old, and she's already such a devilish beauty. What will she be like when she grows up?

That young lady looked at him, and her expression grew slightly strange. However, she still bowed and spread her cherry-red lips to greet him. "Big brother..."

Zu An felt his heart tremble. The girl's voice was so soft and beautiful, and even he, a king who had seen all manner of beauties, couldn't help but be enamored by her. She truly was an enchantress!

"Hello, sister." He replied. He pushed aside his distracting thoughts about her. He was trying to figure out just what the heck was going on. What was this section of the trial about? And where did Manman go? There was no way that she had really died in the previous part of the trial, right?

His eyes grew red when this possibility occurred to him, and his heart felt so pained, it seemed about to burst. He could rely on alcohol and women to numb himself before, but so many memories returned

when he'd found Pei Mianman's pendant. The pain, which had been suppressed over several decades, surged so powerfully that he could no longer keep it under control.

"Big brother, why are you crying?" San Cai noticed that something was wrong, and she quickly helped him wipe away his tears. Unfortunately, there was only so much that her little hands could do. She quickly called out to the other girl. "Big sister, what's wrong with big brother? Did I make him mad at me?"

The other young girl—Mu—walked over to him, bringing with her a subtle, elegant fragrance. "Big brother, are you okay?" she asked gently.

Zu An froze. In that instant, it felt as though it was Pei Mianman asking him that question. Unfortunately, he had buried her with his own two hands in the previous world, so there was no way she could be the young lady in front of him.

"Big brother, let's play a game together," San Cai said with a smile, trying to cheer him up in her own way.

The young girl named Mu tugged on his hand as well.

Zu An's heart had been shattered by what he'd experienced in his most recent life—how could he possibly be in the mood to play games with two little girls right now? However, he couldn't get away from their constant coaxing and pestering, and eventually agreed to play with them.

As he watched these two charming girls and heard their innocent laughter, the shadows looming over his mind gradually began to dissipate, and he managed a faint smile.

Right now, at least, he could distract himself from the pain in his heart.

San Cai was still a little girl, after all. After playing for a while, she fell asleep in Zu An's arms. Her innocent and pure expression was extremely adorable.

When he saw drool dripping from the corner of her mouth, Zu An couldn't help but curve the corners of his own lips upwards in a smile.

Beside him, someone snorted. "You really are nothing but a good-for-nothing pervert. You won't even let such a little girl pass you by."

Stunned, Zu An looked at the girl beside him. These blunt words did not sound like they belonged on the lips of such a young girl.

When she saw his expression, the girl named Mu sighed deeply. "Ah Zu, aren't you usually quite sharp? Why do you look so stupid now?"

Zu An felt his heart explode with joy when he heard her address him in that way. "Manman!"

He subconsciously stood up to hug her, forgetting all about the little sister fast asleep in his arms.

With a thud, San Cai fell to the ground. She immediately cried out in pain, and tears began to stream down her face as she wailed miserably.

Both Mu and Zu An were left speechless.

Mu glared at Zu An, then quickly helped San Cai back to her feet, patting her gently to comfort her.

San Cai was a little girl, and had been fast asleep just a moment ago. After pouting and crying for a bit, she fell back to sleep.

Zu An sighed. "She's a pig. How can she go back to sleep after that?"

Mu snorted. "Weren't you the same when you were little? It's your fault for being so careless and dumping her on the ground. If she hurt herself from that fall, things would have been bad. I can't believe that you fathered so many children in your past life, yet you still don't know how to hold a child!"

"What do you mean, 'I fathered many children'?" Zu An smiled in embarrassment. "I was just too happy to see you again."

"Really?" Mu sneered. "I've been looking over the Shang monarch's records. After Fu Hao's death, Wu Ding took in many wives and gave birth to many children."

Zu An was taken aback by this sudden accusation, and hurriedly tried to defend himself. "That was the Wu Ding from history, not me! After you died, I was completely heartbroken, and I had to rely on drinking to numb my pain. I was nothing more than a walking corpse. How could I remember anything else?"

"Hmph, it probably wasn't just alcohol. You probably indulged in other pleasures to drown out your sorrows too," Mu said accusingly, but her expression softened. "I thought that you'd already forgotten about me. Why else didn't you recognize me, even after such a long time?"

Zu An could hardly feel more wronged. "You still kept your original appearance during the previous trial! But you look so different now, and you already died once. I wasn't able to put it all together so quickly."

Pei Mianman pouted. "What do you mean I look different? This is what I looked like when I was younger! Those who truly know me would have easily recognized me, but my lover somehow couldn't. I can't believe it."

"This is what you looked like when you were younger?" Zu An exclaimed, pleasantly surprised.

#### **Chapter 549: I Want to Try it too!**

"What, do you have something against how I look?" Pei Mianman said with an angry huff. Despite her words, she clearly still cared about what he thought about her, even in this form. She subconsciously caressed her own cheek and said, "Do you think I look ugly?"

Zu An burst out laughing. He reached out and wrapped his arms around her. Her body was rather soft, and very comfortable to hug. "Someone who doesn't know you might think you're just fishing for compliments. If this is what is called ugly, then there are no attractive people in this world."

Pei Mianman bit her lip. "Then what about Chuyan?" she said with an ambiguous smile.

The two of them had already lived out an entire lifetime in the previous trial as husband and wife, and it was very difficult to distinguish between what was real and what was not.

The name 'Chuyan' seemed to call to him from a different life, but it helped to remind Zu An that all of this he was experiencing right now was merely a trial.

Zu An chuckled as he looked into Pei Mianman's hopeful eyes. "I have no idea what Chuyan looked like when she was a kid. Either way, you're the prettiest girl I know at this age."

Pei Mianman snorted. Her eyes swirled with a charm that didn't match her current age. "You're always so crafty."

Zu An's heart stirred when he saw her beautiful smile. He could no longer hold back his decades of pent-up feelings, and slowly moved in to kiss her.

Pei Mianman bit her lip. She said guiltily, "Stop, you're my big brother now."

Zu An was speechless. "Are you really taking all of this seriously? We aren't true brothers and sisters."

Pei Mianman blushed. "Whatever the case, all of this is just too realistic! It doesn't feel different from the outside world at all. Whoever managed to make such an incredible trial must have been a genius... It's like something straight out of a fantasy story."

"It truly is extremely realistic." Zu An said, fear still lingering within him. "I was almost trapped in the previous world. If I hadn't accidentally stumbled upon your pendant, I might have truly lost touch with reality."

He proceeded to tell her everything that had happened in the previous trial. Pei Mianman listened to it all, sighing constantly.

"Manman, do you know how much despair I was in? You died from a miscarriage, and I couldn't find a way to complete the trial on my own. I could only numb myself to run away from the past... I had to make myself believe I was Wu Ding, treat everything else that had happened in the real world as a dream. That was the only thing that could make it more bearable." Zu An's tone was somber.

Pei Mianman's hand gently caressed his cheek, and embraced him. "Ah Zu, I thought that dying before you did was painful, but from what you've said, it seems like the one who lives on is the one who truly suffers. If our roles were swapped, I wouldn't have been able to take it... Thankfully, all of this is already in the past. Now that the two of us are back together, we'll overcome this trial!"

Given how things were, it was safe to assume that they had passed the first trial. Even though they didn't know what exactly was being tested, they at least found themselves at a new and most welcome beginning.

"Manman, I feel more motivated and at peace with you at my side." Zu An shivered when he recalled Pei Mianman's previous death.

Pei Mianman's face turned red. "I feel the same way as well."

Her pure and beautiful expression tore down the last of Zu An's barriers, and he kissed her.

The two of them had been separated by death. Pei Mianman couldn't hold back the emotions that welled up within her at this reunion, and kissed him just as fiercely.



The two of them lost themselves in their affection, gradually growing more and more passionate. It was as if each of them were scared that the other person might vanish all of a sudden.

"That's gross! Are you two eating each other's spit?" A soft voice interjected.

Zu An and Pei Mianman separated at once, as if shocked by an electric current. San Cai had already woken up, and was staring at them while pointing at their mouths.

Pei Mianman pinched Zu An. "It's all your fault!" This was just too embarrassing!

Zu An didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. How is this my fault? It's this brat's fault for spoiling our fun!

"San Cai, I think you've made a mistake. We were just hugging each other," Zu An said hurriedly, trying to cook up an explanation. "Don't I always hug you as well?"

"Do you think it's easy to trick me just because I'm a child?" San Cai said, blinking. "I saw what you were doing!"

"Um..." Zu An felt a headache coming on. It was rather dangerous to have done what they did earlier. If this brat ended up telling anyone about it, it might erupt into a huge scandal.

He didn't really care about his reputation in the world of this trial, and being shunned socially didn't really matter to him either.

He was only afraid that it might influence the results of the trial, and cause him to fail.

That was why he squatted down beside the little girl and said, "San Cai, as your big brother and big sister, do we treat you well?"

San Cai nodded. "Big brother and big sister treat me really well."

Zu An sighed. Thank goodness they were close. That made things easier. "Then what happened today will be our little secret. I'll play with you every day and buy you delicious things to eat."

"Yay!" San Cai's eyes lit up. "But I don't want to eat all these delicious things, I want to eat something else."

Zu An smiled when he heard her response. "What do you want to eat? I'll bring it to you!"

San Cai blinked. She pointed at his mouth and said, "I want to eat your saliva as well. I bet it's delicious, that's why big sister was secretly eating it!"

Zu An and Pei Mianman shared exasperated looks.

Zu An could feel himself sweating. He said quickly, "I don't think that's too good. That's something that only a boy and a girl who are really close can do. We're siblings, so we cannot do that."

"Aren't we really close?" San Cai tilted her head. She didn't understand at all. "Also, if my big sister can, then why can't I? I hate this! You guys are being mean..."

Her sadness grew and grew, and eventually, she began to cry.

Zu An gave Pei Mianman a pleading look. What were they supposed to do?

Pei Mianman rolled her eyes. "You created this problem. Deal with it yourself."

Despite her words, she was clearly in no mood to let news of this spread, so she tried her best to cajole San Cai as well. Unfortunately, the little girl continued to cry and complain no matter what they said.

Zu An and Pei Mianman frowned. Even though the two of them knew the other's real identities, and that all of this was fake, they were still siblings in this world!

If their 'father' in this world found out, he might just break their legs in a fit of anger.

Eventually, Pei Mianman was the one who stumbled on a solution first. A sudden flash of inspiration struck her, and she said, "San Cai, you're still too young. It's not good for you to get so close to a boy. When you become as old as me, big brother will let you try it, okay?"

"Really?" The little girl was instantly happy again.

"Of course! Let's make a pinky promise." Seeing that she had managed to convince the young girl, Pei Mianman exhaled in relief. Once this girl grew up, she would understand it on her own, and she wouldn't be dumb enough to bring up this event from her past.

Now that they had successfully appeased San Cai, the two of them really wanted some time alone, but they just couldn't find a way to ditch this little girl.

Finally, several maids appeared to escort her back in for dinner, and to prepare her for bed.

Other maids also escorted Zu An and Pei Mianman to their respective chambers.

Zu An still had a lot of things he wanted to say to Pei Mianman, as well as many questions for her. How could he wait until sunrise to see her again?

He snuck out in the dead of night and entered Pei Mianman's room.

He had ruled from this palace for fifty years, and was eminently familiar with its layout. Even though the interior had been remodeled slightly, it wasn't too difficult to navigate once he got used to it, especially since he'd asked Pei Mianman where her room was earlier on.

When a stranger suddenly entered her room, Pei Mianman jumped with fright. She was just about to fight back when she recognized Zu An. She let go of the breath she had been holding, becoming embarrassed and nervous instead. "What are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

"We've been apart for so long, and I have too many things I want to say to you." Zu An took in her blushing face and chuckled. "We're already a seasoned old couple. Why are you getting all embarrassed?"

"Things are different now!" Pei Mianman had many things to tell him as well, but she still felt embarrassed when she thought about their current appearances and identities.

"What's different? You'll forever be my Manman." Zu An dove straight under her covers.

Pei Mianman's face immediately went beet red. However, she embraced him without another word. The two of them had been apart for too long, and she didn't want to go through that ever again. "Ah Zu, I've really missed you too."

### **Chapter 550: Shooting Oneself in the Foot**

Both of them poured their hearts out to each other. Clearly, they had been separated for far too long in the previous segment of the trial.

The separation was worse for Zu An, who had to spend decades without Pei Mianman after her 'death'. He could only smile like an idiot and stare at this girl in front of him. His wounded soul had finally received nourishment again, blooming like a desert after a rainstorm.

He had originally come to talk about important matters, but the well of emotions was too great, and they didn't talk about anything else, only expressing their deepest feelings for each other.

They spent the time extremely close to each other, their minds and bodies touching, and the temperature in the sheets gradually rose.

Pei Mianman's breathing began to hasten. Her eyes started to blur, and a light blush suffused her cheeks. Even though Zu An knew that she was beautiful, she had a different look to her this time, which took his breath away.

Her face grew red. She quickly grabbed his hands and said, "You beast! I'm so young, yet you still can't let me go."

Zu An laughed, clearly in a good mood. "How long have we been together? What's the point of saying all this right now?"

Pei Mianman remembered their days spent in the palace as king and queen, full of love and affection. Her body softened, and she took the initiative to lean into him.

...

A few moments later, a sudden peal of laughter came from under the sheets. Pei Mianman was laughing so hard at her lover that her entire body was quivering.

Zu An's face was as dark as charcoal. It had finally dawned on him that he wasn't his old self right now. Sigh...

"Enough, let's put this aside for now. I'd rather just talk with you quietly." Pei Mianman pressed her cheek against his chest. It felt wonderful to lean against him like that.

Zu An couldn't help but smile as well. His mind slowly grew calm again, and he began to talk about the things that had happened after they had been separated.

The night flew by in an instant, and Zu An left quietly, just before daybreak. If he were to be discovered, the consequences would be far worse than just having his legs broken. There were many terrifying forms of punishment during this age.

After that night, the two of them were inseparable, sticking together like glue. Everyone around them was amazed by the affection that these two siblings shared.

In order to avoid suspicion, they always brought their little sister San Cai with them whenever they went out in public, so that no one who saw them could have impure thoughts about their relationship.

San Cai was obviously happy to play with her big sister and big brother. Unfortunately, she was still too young to realize that she was a third wheel.

This day was the same as any other. After they had brought San Cai around the palace and played with her for a while, they tricked her into playing with the mud by herself after the maids left.

Going off to the side, Zu An and Pei Mianman began to converse. The childishness and immaturity they displayed in front of others completely disappeared, replaced by a mature seriousness.

“Ah Zu, what do you think is going on in this part of the trial?” Pei Mianman looked worried. Even though she knew that only moments had passed in the real world, this trial had already spanned several decades.

They didn’t want to be trapped in this trial forever, which was why, after several days of pouring out all their feelings and affection for each other, they gradually let their logical minds take over again, and began to discuss the main issue.

“I believe that the people of Zhou are still the key to this,” Zu An said in a serious tone.

“The people of Zhou?” Pei Mianman was momentarily shocked, but her memories started to return. She gradually recalled that, in the previous world, Zu An had been planning to deal with the people of Zhou, but they had become distracted by other matters, and eventually forgot about them entirely.

“Indeed. Even though I don’t have any concrete proof, I believe that I am right. Since the Shang State was destroyed by the Zhou Dynasty, this trial will most likely have something to do with the people of Zhou.” Zu An replied.

Pei Mianman was confused. “This trial was set up by the Shang State. If your suspicions are correct, doesn’t that mean that they had foreknowledge of their defeat at the hands of the people of Zhou? In that case, why didn’t they act earlier? Also, they wouldn’t have had the time or resources to construct a grand project like this trial after they were wiped out by the Zhou Dynasty.”

Zu An shook his head and said, “Many believe that Di Xin was the last monarch of the Shang State. After the Shang people were defeated in the Battle of Muye, King Di Xin and Daji committed suicide by self-immolation, and the people of Zhou took control of the Central Plains. However, that was not the end of the Shang. King Di Xin’s crown prince succeeded as the Shang monarch and continued to carry out the Shang Dynasty’s traditions. Besides him, both the Song State and what was later known as North Korea[1] were established by people from the Shang Dynasty, which is why they had the ability to create a trial like this.”

Pei Mianman nodded, then asked out of curiosity, “Did you end up dealing with the people of Zhou in our previous world?”

Zu An seemed embarrassed. "Back then, all the other powers surrounding the Shang Dynasty were stronger than Zhou. No one considered the people of Zhou a threat, so what could I do to them? After you died from the miscarriage, I was more dead than alive inside. I wasn't in the right frame of mind to deal with them at all."

Tenderness seeped into Pei Mianman's expression, and she gripped his hands tightly in her own. "Ah Zu, you've really gone through a lot."

Zu An gave her hands a squeeze and said with a sigh, "You had it worse. You had to go through death."

Pei Mianman's eyes went red. She bit her lip and said, "I was really scared back then. I don't even think I can bring myself to give birth again."

"You don't have to if you don't want to. Don't we already have a cute young one right here?" He glanced over at their little sister, who was covered in dirt, and they both laughed.

Even though they were siblings in name, their souls were that of mature adults, and this little sister of theirs was like a daughter to them.

As if she could sense that they were laughing at her, San Cai turned around. When she saw them snuggling up against each other, she immediately ran over, still covered in mud. "Big brother, big sister, I want a hug too! I want a hug!"

...

Another decade passed by in a flash, and Pei Mianman became more and more stunning, while Zu An recovered his usual handsome and confident appearance.

Even San Cai, who used to be constantly covered in mud and drool, grew into an elegant young lady.

To Zu An, time had passed by awfully quickly. Ten years should have been a long time, yet he felt like it had flown by in an instant.

It was just like the TV shows in his original world. A young main character would be happily jumping and running around in the fields, then in the middle of all of that, a line of text would appear across the scene: 'Ten years later...'

In an instant, that kid would transform into a mature male lead.

Zu An shook his head and threw this absurd thought out of his head. Even though these years had passed quickly, he and Pei Mianman hadn't wasted them idly, but spent the time studying the people of Zhou as much as they could.

During Wu Ding's reign, even though Fu Hao had led an army of thirteen thousand men and defeated the Qiang Faction, she did not have the ability to completely eradicate them.

After years of war against the Shang Dynasty, the Qiang Faction split into several tribes which continued to harass the northwestern territories of the Shang Dynasty from time to time.

The Shang Dynasty employed their vassal states to help deal with these tribes, and the Zhou state was one of these vassal states.

After decades of war, the people of Zhou gradually set themselves apart from the other vassal states. With the Qiang Faction scattered, a power vacuum developed within the Shaanxi and Gansu regions. The Shang Dynasty was too far away to exert any meaningful control over this area, and so the territories of the Qiang Faction were slowly swallowed up by the Zhou State.

Of course, the people of Zhou weren't the only ones eyeing this territory—other vassal states coveted this land as well. However, the leader of the people of Zhou at the time was named Ji Li. He was a powerful and domineering figure, leading his people in battles all across the region and seizing control of this massive territory for himself. He forged political marriages with the nobles from the Shang Dynasty and maintained excellent relations with the other vassal states. It was said that he excelled at both war and diplomacy.

Eventually, the ruler of the Shang Dynasty named him leader of the western vassal states.

Both Zu An and Pei Mianman were worried to see that the people of Zhou, who had once been so weak, had now grown into a powerhouse. They continued to advise their 'father' Wen Ding to act against the people of Zhou.

Perhaps because of their interference, or perhaps because he himself started to fear the influence and power of the Zhou state, Wen Ding summoned Ji Li to the capital city under some vague pretense, then fashioned an excuse to have him executed.

Zu An and Pei Mianman were both left speechless by this sudden turn of events. They hadn't expected Wen Ding to be so direct and ruthless! The people of Zhou were already so powerful, and merely killing their leader did little to dent their strength. Instead, it cost the Shang Dynasty the support of their remaining allies. The world of the Shang Dynasty was littered with vassal states, all which naturally sympathized with Ji Li after seeing how he had been dealt with.

Zu An knew that even though Ji Li was an exceptional figure, the Zhou state still had even more formidable kings, King Wen and King Wu, who were yet to make an appearance.

Wen Ding, on the other hand, wasn't terribly concerned. Even the entire country, from the court down to the military leaders, did not consider the killing of a vassal state's ruler that big of a deal. This was what the Shang kings had done throughout history—crushing any vassal state who refused to submit. If their leader refused to obey, they would be dealt with. If the people of the state grew disgruntled and rebelled, then they were met with war.

The fierce warriors of Yin Capital were constantly ready to teach those vassal states how to behave. At the same time, the Shang Dynasty required regular wars, as they needed large amounts of slaves to function. People were needed for both hard labor and as sacrificial offerings.

But soon afterwards, it became apparent that they had miscalculated. The Yi people to the east of Huai River launched a powerful invasion.

The vassal states that served as the Shang Dynasty's eastern barrier crumbled under the assault. No one knew whether it was because Ji Li's unjust execution had drained these people of the will to fight, or because they just weren't up to the task. Either way, the people of Yi were closing in on the Shang Dynasty.

Bad news came from the west as well. The people of Zhou were infuriated by the sudden death of their innocent leader, and had taken to arms. Now that they had risen up in rebellion as well, the Shang Dynasty was about to be pincerred from two sides.

Even though the Shang Dynasty was powerful, the eastern invasion was too great a threat. If the people of Zhou attacked from the west as well, they might just be overwhelmed.

At this time, the court ministers came up with a proposal. Since the relationship between the Shang Dynasty and the Zhou state had always been good up until Ji Li's death, it would be possible to appease them by offering a political marriage as compensation. This way, the imminent threat from the west would be easily avoided.

Meanwhile, Princess Mu had always been a stunning beauty, and there was no better candidate.