

Chapter 51 This Is What I'm Capable Of

She had to shrug it off and not let it affect her, especially since Wen Dongni's impressive performance had been enough to send most of the other actresses auditioning for the role of Hong Yao into a panic. The stronger-willed actresses were only feeling mildly upset, but the weaker-willed ones had been badly affected and could not remember how to act.

"Good day to all of you, Mr. Director, ladies, gentlemen. My name is Yan Huan," she said with a friendly smile. "I'm auditioning for the role of Hong Yao."

Yan Huan had a pretty face, some would even say that she was extraordinarily beautiful, but a pretty face only went so far in the entertainment industry. It was not a guarantee for success. You had to be good-looking to be famous, it was true, but acting skills, connections, and luck were much more important in the grand scheme of things. Yan Huan was the perfect example of this; she had not been particularly lucky in the industry so far, which meant that to get the role of Hong Yao, she would have to give everyone present a performance that outshone Wen Dongni's in every conceivable way. At that moment, she had no advantage over Wen Dongni to speak of; she was just a nobody with barely any acting credits, after all.

Everyone in the room visibly lost interest as soon as they heard that Yan Huan was also auditioning for the role of Hong Yao. Although they did not say it out loud, they had already decided that Wen Dongni would be getting the role. Even Jin Hailiang, the director, was now absent-mindedly tapping the table with his pen, his thoughts clearly elsewhere.

This was a heavy blow. Any outward display of boredom or lack of interest was enough to crush the self-confidence of an aspiring actor. Yan Huan lowered her lashes; her eyelids drooped over her clear eyes as she felt the remnants of her previous existence settle into her weary bones.

She pulled a chair over, sat down, and calmly adjusted her clothes. In an instant, Jin Hailiang's pupils dilated; Yan Huan's simple action had caught his full attention. It was the same for everyone else, but no one could explain why.

The woman on stage was very young, most likely in her twenties. She did not look directly at her audience; instead, her face was turned to the side as her slender fingers caressed an imaginary object on her lap. Was it a cat? Perhaps a White Persian? Her exquisite red lips, carefully painted, curved slightly as a wispy fog began to gather in the depths of her clear eyes. She appeared to be thinking about something. The smile on her lips grew wider, even as the fog continued to pool in her eyes.

The thickening fog had almost turned into tears when, with a sudden blink, the fog dissipated without a trace. Her eyes had reverted to pools of gentle, shallow water—a calm lake without a ripple in sight.

She lowered her head as her fingers continued to caress the imaginary cat in her lap. The cat jumped away with a meow, but she made no move to chase after it. Her lips curved into another smile. She turned slightly, and propped an elbow against the table beside her. That was all she did, but the fleeting look in her eyes, the slow linger of her gaze, and all her tiny gestures spoke eloquently of her hedonistic lifestyle. She was neither a proper lady nor a prostitute; she wavered constantly between sultriness and dignity.

It was true that Wen Dongni was a good actress. She had portrayed a seductive prostitute, a whore who could send every man's pulse racing—but that was not Hong Yao.

Hong Yao was originally from a wealthy, distinguished family. She had been raised in a loving environment, and had been tutored by her own father. She was a lady of culture who had read her fair share of poetry and books. Unfortunately for her, someone sabotaged her family, and she was subsequently forced to work as a prostitute in the red-light district just to survive. Her body had been defiled; in fact, everything about her had been defiled. Everything but her soul: deep down, she was still the pure and noble girl her father had raised her to become.

Chapter 52 You're the One

Many would call such a woman a dirty whore, but Yan Huan did not agree. Hong Yao, in her opinion, was still pure and noble, she was a woman who knew right from wrong, and always served the greater good. She could be nasty and mean, but she was not hateful. She was selfish, but not self-serving; she emptied the pockets of men, but she donated whatever she earned to the soldiers fighting on the front line. Her money bought them rice, noodles, and clothes.

Knowing all that, Yan Huan did not find Hong Yao's role as a prostitute to be disgusting in any way. Hong Yao, in her opinion, deserved only sympathy.

She lowered her long lashes and leaned back in the chair, crossing her legs as she did so. If she had been wearing a cheongsam then, this simple action would have shown off the sultry curve of her thigh and delicate calves. It would have been extremely seductive. She moved to pick something up from the table. Though she was not actually holding anything, as she was only acting, everyone in the room immediately knew from her body language that she now had a cigarette in her hand.

She put the cigarette in her mouth. The movement was practiced, but lazy. She began to smoke, one small drag after another. She did not say a word, but the expression on her face and her body language spoke volumes: this was a woman with a heart of gold, who now had to sell her own body because life had treated her unfairly.

At that moment, she was living and breathing her role. She was no longer Yan Huan. She was Hong Yao.

As Hong Yao, she cast a derisive, self-deprecating eye on her present situation. She gazed longingly upon her past, but little did she know that her future held nothing for her: the life she was living now was all she would ever have. She was human trash, and she would spend the rest of her days eking out a pitiful existence as such. She was hopelessly tangled up with all the men around her, and, eventually, she would be forced to destroy her only ray of hope.

Yan Huan's eyes fluttered close. She opened her eyes, stood up, and looked around: everyone in the room was still entranced by what they had just seen, and had not yet returned to reality. Their hearts ached for the woman who had had her life tragically cut short, the pure woman who had had to sink to a life of filth, the selfish woman who had, in the end, turned out to be selfless.

"You're the one." The scriptwriter for Love and Tribulations suddenly stood up. There were tears brimming in his eyes. "You're the Hong Yao I want, the Hong Yao I've always imagined her to be."

Yan Huan smiled demurely at his compliment.

Truth be told, she had expected as much. She knew that this was Jin Hailiang's Hong Yao; it was also her Hong Yao, the Hong Yao she believed in. A good actor, aside from being able to act convincingly, had to have a deep understanding of his or her role.

In fact, the first time Yan Huan read the script, she could already tell that the scriptwriter had a special spot in his heart for Hong Yao. Hong Yao did not have many scenes—she wasn't even important enough to receive third billing in the credits—but she was the heart and soul of the story. A careful reading of her brief appearances throughout the story had led Yan Huan to conclude that the show's success largely depended on a flawless execution on the part of Hong Yao.

It was not unheard of for a single actor or actress to carry an entire show.

In Yan Huan's previous life, she had carried many shows on her own. She was an actress who outshone everyone else in every scene she was in. No role had been too difficult for her. And now she had a profound understanding of Hong Yao's character thanks to her acting experience in her previous life. Some would say this was one of Yan Huan's special talents.

Some people were born to act. Yan Huan was one of them.

Yi Ling saw Yan Huan walk out of the audition room. She quickly ran over to Yan Huan and handed her a drink. Her eyes were wide as saucers; she was bursting with curiosity but did not dare ask the important questions: how was the audition? Was it a bust? Had they rejected her? Had Yan Huan somehow put on an embarrassingly bad performance in front of everyone?

Yan Huan accepted the cup. She removed the lid and drank slowly.

Yi Ling noted Yan Huan's silence and immediately assumed she had failed the audition. "It's okay, Huanhuan. There are other opportunities waiting for us." She continued in a soothing tone, "We should look at this from a different angle. I mean, did you see that smug look on Wen Dongni's face? I overheard her telling her assistant that she had the role of Hong Yao in the bag. Well, so what if we didn't get the part? There's still the role of Xiao Tao, right?"

Chapter 53 She Did It

Xiao Tao, whose uninspired name translated literally to "Little Peach," was the female lead's maid.

"They're not asking for much for this character. I'm sure you'll be able to get the part with your looks alone," Yi Ling said helpfully.

Yan Huan took another sip of water as she listened to Yi Ling repeat what she had overheard: Wen Dongni had told someone over the phone that she had already been chosen for the role of Hong Yao. Yan Huan found this amusing, yet somewhat disconcerting at the same time.

Yi Ling had to have extremely sharp ears if she was able to hear Wen Dongni from that distance. Yan Huan's thoughts began to stray: Was Yi Ling able to hear their neighbors—the married couple next door—whisper to each other at night?

"Are you saying you were able to hear everything she said?"

Yan Huan walked to a chair nearby and sat down. Her fingers continued playing with the cup in her hand, like a child playing with a beloved toy.

“Of course.” Yi Ling thumped her chest. “Who do you think I am? I have perfect hearing. In fact, here’s a secret...” She looked around furtively, and when she was sure they were entirely alone, she moved closer to Yan Huan and whispered into her ear. “You know our neighbors, the couple next door? I can hear everything they say to each other at night.”

Pffffffttt! Yan Huan spat out the water in her mouth.

“Huanhuan, that is so disgusting. Did you have to wash my face? Really?”

Yan Huan cleared her throat. She turned away and continued sipping at her water, sincerely glad that her ears were not as sensitive as Yi Ling’s. She had never overheard the couple next door, and had never been forced to listen to the sounds of their nightly activities.

The two of them went back home. Yi Ling was feeling very depressed.

“Huanhuan, it’s okay. So what if we didn’t get a part this time? We’ll just look for other roles.” Yi Ling couldn’t help but feel like she had wrecked Yan Huan’s chances during the audition. She had not kept a careful eye on the time, so Yan Huan had missed the audition for the role of the maid. Now there were only tiny parts left, but she had heard that production had already hired all the extras they needed. Yi Ling was now seriously considering going over to Hengdian World Studios and camping there to see if she could beg for some acting roles for Yan Huan.

Yan Huan had been lost in thought. She snapped out of her reverie and blinked quizzically at Yi Ling. “Yiyi, didn’t I tell you?”

“Tell me what?” Yi Ling’s head drooped dejectedly as she began to plan her stake-out at Hengdian World Studios. She would go that evening, and bring her blanket along so she didn’t freeze to death.

“I got the part of Hong Yao.”

Wait a minute... Yi Ling’s head shot up, her eyes wide as saucers. “What did you just say? Are you talking about the traditional medicinal bandages? You bought ‘gao yao’?”

“That’s not what I said.” Yan Huan kneeled down and scooped up Little Bean, who began meowing affectionately, her delicate ears flicking forwards and backwards. Little Bean licked her master’s fingers before settling into Yan Huan’s lap to sleep. The kitten had put on quite a bit of weight, and was now a very beautiful cat.

“I will be playing the part of Hong Yao. Once we wrap up the shoot, we may be able to move into a bigger house, and Little Bean here will have a lot more space to play in. Isn’t that right?” Yan Huan rubbed the kitten’s tiny pink nose. Little Bean began to lick her paws, her large, dewy eyes flickering towards Yan Huan every now and then. The kitten reached out a paw to bat playfully at the loose clothing Yan Huan wore. She was an intelligent and well-behaved cat; she kept her claws retracted, for fear of hurting her master.

It took a long moment for Yi Ling to process what Yan Huan was saying. When she finally understood, she let out a long, bloodcurdling scream that resounded throughout the tiny room.

“Huanhuan, you got the part! Oh my god, you did it!”

“Yes, I did it.” Yan Huan picked up the script for Love and Tribulations and began leafing through it.

Chapter 54 We Can Hear You

Production was officially slated to begin the day after tomorrow. It would start with a makeup test; all the actors would be photographed in full costume and makeup. This was Yan Huan's true debut: her face would be shown on-screen, and her name would appear in the credits.

That night, all was quiet when suddenly, Yan Huan began to hear strange noises, noises that were loud enough to be distracting. She listened for a moment, then blushed when she realized what was going on.

The married couple next door appeared to be doing... things.

"Keep your voice down, someone may hear us."

"Don't worry. No one can hear us."

They went at it, loudly and shamelessly. Yan Huan sighed inwardly. She picked up her script and continued reading. She did not have many lines, but her role required solid acting skills. She had no doubt that this role would, under normal circumstances, prove to be too difficult for a young, inexperienced actress like herself. But she had been given a second chance at life, and she was going to make full use of it. She did not have cheat items capable of making her life easier, but she could stop herself from repeating the same mistakes. She would save the people who were important to her, and protect the ones she had to protect. And— and this went without saying— she would make sure to stay away from scumbags this time.

After what seemed like an eternity, her neighbors fell silent. She could finally read her script in peace now. Although she had her experiences from her previous life to fall back on, she had not acted in several years. She had let her acting skills go to waste, and she wasn't entirely sure she would be able to get back in the game. What if she had lost her touch?

She had only just gotten to the midway point of the script when her neighbors started up again.

"Lower your voice, someone may hear us," said the wife in a hushed voice. Yan Huan's arms broke into goosebumps. She rubbed her arms as she thought to herself, Once I'm rich, I'm going to find a new place to live in. Yes, we're definitely moving out of here.

"Like I said, no one can hear us..."

Just as the couple were getting hot and steamy yet again—bam bam bam!

The furious knocking on the wall was quickly followed by Yi Ling's loud, impatient shouting. "Your wife told you to keep it down! Are you deaf? What do you mean, 'no one can hear us'? What do you think we are, chopped liver? You're so loud not even my cat can sleep in peace!"

There was a loud shriek, followed by a few scattered thuds from the other side.

Yan Huan tossed the script away. She pulled the blanket over herself; all noise had finally ceased. The married couple next door did not make another sound for the rest of the night. In fact, Yan Huan did not see them the next morning. She idly wondered whether they had died of embarrassment, or moved away during the night.

Three days later, all the main actors gathered at the studio for the makeup test for Love and Tribulations. Yan Huan and Yi Ling arrived at the set early. This was their first time inside a bigger studio, but the size and scale of the production did not scare them. They had been part of the entertainment industry for some time now, after all, and had nerves of steel.

Su Qiao, a hugely popular young actress, had gotten the part of Shen Qingqiu, the lead female role in Love and Tribulations. Qi Haolin, a popular young actor, played opposite her as the male lead. The story was set during the Republic of China, and Shen Qingqiu was the eldest daughter of a warlord. She was a forward-thinking woman who loved her country. The lead male character was a young, highly-educated officer in the National Revolutionary Army. He had studied abroad and had received formal training in military tactics. But this was just a disguise— he was actually a spy.

Love and Tribulations told the story of how the two leads, who were from similar backgrounds, first met one another, how they grew close, and how they eventually fell in love. It was a long journey fraught with difficulties, but their love continued to grow deeper even as they struggled to survive the war. In the end, it was not the war that proved to be the ultimate test of their love, but the choices they each had to make. They had to choose between country and family, between self-interest and the greater good, between sacrificing themselves or their fellow countrymen.

It was a difficult choice for the male and female leads to make.

It was a choice between life and death.

Chapter 55 Makeup Test

In Yan Huan's previous life, Love and Tribulations had been a huge hit; it had remained in the top spot for audience ratings for an astonishingly long time. Su Qiao's popularity skyrocketed thanks to the show, and many producers subsequently offered her a role in their projects. Qi Haolin became the hottest, most buzzworthy actor at the time, and their combined popularity naturally resulted in rumors of the two stars being an item. Were the rumors true? Who could tell? The line between truth and baseless gossip was always blurred in the entertainment industry.

Qi Haolin later disappeared from the industry for a very long time. Su Qiao, on the other hand, remained active, but was unlucky with her career. She acted in several leading roles, but the audience was less than enthusiastic about them. She was eventually overshadowed by younger actresses, and quickly faded into obscurity. Yan Huan had suffered the same fate in her previous life.

Yan Huan walked into the makeup room. She was careful to be respectful and polite towards the makeup artists; she was a newcomer, and newcomers were expected to be obedient and play by the rules. She had learned from her previous life that being modest and generous with smiles would be the best way to protect herself this time around.

The lead actress had her own dressing room and makeup artist. This was understandable, as Su Qiao was, after all, already famous. The actresses with second and third billing also had their makeup done in a separate room. Yan Huan, however, was in the makeup room for all the supporting actors. The makeup artists attending to her were just as skilled as the others, though; the producers had made sure of that when they secured their more-than-generous budget for the TV drama. A lot of money and effort

had gone into the costumes, makeup, and cast— if the show flopped, there would be no one to blame but the director.

But there was no way the show would flop, because Jin Hailiang, the director, was renowned for having a good eye and artistic integrity. He had a shockingly bad temper, but his movies and TV shows were always a massive hit with the audience. Unlike other directors, he did not insist on using famous actors for his projects. Instead, he preferred to pick actors he felt he could work with. His reputation was one of the reasons why Yan Huan wanted his TV show to be her acting debut this time around.

Yan Huan recalled how she had become a top actress in her previous life: she had first acquired fame as a “nude star” after filming *Return*. After that, she had painstakingly clawed her way upwards as a “proper” actress, despite her damaged reputation.

This time around, she had declined the role offered to her for that movie. This meant that from here on, her journey would be entirely different from that of her previous life. The projects she participated in would begin to diverge from her last life. This was the new beginning of her life, her new starting point.

The makeup artist picked out a dress for her: it was a blue cheongsam. Blue was an especially difficult color to pull off. Amongst the prostitutes working in Rouge Pavilion, Hong Yao, whose name literally translated into “red medicine,” stood out because she loved to wear blue, despite the “red” she carried in her name. It was a very bright shade of blue, one that only someone with the right skin tone and figure would be able to wear without looking tacky or gaudy.

“Try putting it on. It’s a little on the small side. If you can’t wear it, we’ll have to alter it for you.” He pulled the costume rack towards him and began counting the costumes on it. Hong Yao did not have a lot of screen time, but she had a lot of costumes: more than a dozen, in fact, and all of them were different cheongsams.

Yan Huan suddenly remembered: when *Love and Tribulations* first aired on TV, the lavish costumes sparked a cheongsam boom throughout the country. She would be a fashion icon this time, way ahead of the curve, instead of being a fashion disaster who was woefully out of the loop.

She walked into the dressing room with her cheongsam and changed into it. It did not feel particularly tight. In fact, it felt a little loose on her. It wasn’t unusual for actors to find their costumes to be too big for them, but the situation was actually surprising for Yan Huan because the costume designers had deliberately knew this cheongsam was one size smaller than usual. They knew Hong Yao was supposed to be a slender, petite lady, and there was no better dress to accentuate a woman’s slender waist and delicate curves than a cheongsam. This was especially true for prostitutes such as Hong Yao, who had to flaunt their figures to attract customers.

Chapter 56 Stunning

The makeup artist’s eyes lit up when he saw Yan Huan emerge from the dressing room.

The cheongsam had not been particularly beautiful to look at when it had been hanging on the clothes rack, it had been left to gather dust, as it was too small for most actresses. The makeup artist was therefore surprised to see that Yan Huan had been able to put it on; he had been prepared to have to alter it for her, or to get a different cheongsam, but that was no longer necessary. The actress was a

perfect match for the dress. He could not help feeling impressed: what an incredibly thin waist! How does she do it?

“Have a seat.” The makeup artist gestured to the chair beside him. He rubbed his hands with glee— he was determined to create the perfect Hong Yao.

Yan Huan sat down. She placed her hands on her knees as the makeup artist studied her facial features.

“You have a very photogenic face.”

Yan Huan simply smiled in reply. The woman in the mirror was young and beautiful; she was a flower that had just begun to bloom.

The makeup artist obviously knew what he was doing. He did not use a lot of makeup on Yan Huan as she was young, naturally pretty, and had good skin. Her exquisite features and perfectly symmetrical face meant that he did not have to use makeup tricks to alter the shape of her face, either.

Yan Huan enjoyed watching herself in the mirror. She loved watching the makeup artists turn her into different characters: seductive, glamorous, innocent, charming. All of these characters were her, yet at the same time none of them were actually her. Now, her eyes twinkled merrily as her red lips curved into a small smile; there was the scent of the night jasmine, the ye lai xiang in Chinese, on her breath.

She gently hummed the classic song Ye Lai Xiang as she stood up. From the very moment she put on her costume she was no longer Yan Huan, but a strong-willed prostitute who refused to resign herself to her fate.

She now exuded the unmistakable aura of a woman who sold her body for a living.

When she emerged from the makeup room, Su Qiao and Qi Haolin had already finished taking their full-costume photos. The two lead actors had other things to do and excused themselves.

There were now very few people left on set to watch Yan Huan’s photo shoot. As soon as the lights were on, she was already in position without the photographer having to remind her. The subtle smile on her lips was mirrored in her clear, merry eyes.

Click! The photographer had already snapped a photo. Yan Huan changed her pose; she crossed her arms, hugging herself, and turned sideways, accentuating the perfect curve of her waist. It was far and away the most beautiful curve on a woman. The expression on her face had changed: there was now a faraway look in her misty eyes.

The photographer continued to snap away. He had never met an actress half as professional as Yan Huan. Wasn’t she supposed to be new to this? He couldn’t believe it. Actors who were just starting out tended to be nervous and awkward, but she was neither.

“That’s the last photo. Well done.” The photographer finally had to stop, after having taken at least a hundred photos of Yan Huan. He had thoroughly enjoyed himself, and was sorry his tight schedule did not permit him to take a few more shots of the actress.

“Thank you.” Yan Huan bowed politely to the photographer. The photographer squirmed awkwardly, a little embarrassed by how polite she was being.

“I have a feeling you’ll be a star someday,” said the photographer as he looked over her photos. Yes, she was definitely star material. Her face was unbelievably photogenic, it was as though it had been made specifically for the camera.

Yan Huan smiled shyly in reply, even as the light in her eyes grew dim and cool. Yes, she was going to be famous. She knew she was going to be a star. She would reclaim the position she had lost in her previous life, along with everything else she had let slip away. She would not forget who she was, this time.

“Huanhuan, Huanhuan, your full costume photos are out...” Yi Ling had kept a zealous watch over her computer for the last several days. As soon as the photos from the makeup test were out, she immediately began shouting like a madwoman.

Yan Huan lowered the kitten in her arms to the floor. She patted it on the head, encouraging it to go play by itself. Little Bean meowed in reply before running off to its nest to sleep.

Yan Huan walked over to Yi Ling and draped herself over her back as she peeked over her shoulder. Yi Ling had not been pulling her leg: the full-costume photos for Love and Tribulations were really out. The production had a massive budget, which meant that the marketing department did not have to skimp on early promotional material; they had already announced the cast, and the latest press release included the full-costume photos from the makeup test.

Chapter 57 Why Is She Here?

Yi Ling clicked through the photos one by one. Qi Haolin was dressed in full military uniform for his photo, and he looked exceedingly handsome in it. The look of steadfast determination in his eyes had Yi Ling swooning and gushing as she cupped her face giddily in her hands.

“Huanhuan, you have to get his autograph for me. He’s so dreamy I can barely keep myself from licking the screen.” Yi Ling squeezed Yan Huan’s arm as she said this, her eyes filled with stars. If this were a comic book she would be buried under a mountain of girly flower effects by now.

Yan Huan grabbed the mouse and continued clicking through the photos. As soon as she saw her own photo, she smiled.

Her full-costume photo was difficult to describe.

It was, to put it simply, stunning.

The marketing team had selected the photo of her standing sideways. Only her profile could be seen; a stray curl fell gently across her forehead, ending at her lashes. It was obvious that she was a prostitute, but at the same time she exuded the aura of a cultured woman from a respectable family, the woman she was inside. There was something about the mysterious half smile on her red lips that captured the hearts of all who set eyes upon her.

It was highly unusual for her photo to be included in the press release. Hers was just a supporting role, and her full-costume photo had only been taken for internal use. Perhaps the marketing team had been struck by how stunning the photo was, and had decided it would be a waste to keep it to themselves.

The internet had begun to discuss the photos.

Yan Huan turned off the computer. She would not look at the comments nor think about them. She reached across the table for her script, walked to a nearby chair, and sat down. She wondered if it was time for her to sign with an agent. But which one? She had not decided yet. Perhaps it was better to wait.

She turned her head to the side. The light filtering in from outside fell upon her face, warm and comfortable. She closed her eyes, and...

...fell asleep.

Love and Tribulations was slated to begin shooting five days later, once the production team was satisfied everything was in place. The first scene they would be shooting was Hong Yao's. The night before, Yi Ling had been so excited she tossed and turned in bed, unable to sleep. In the end, she gave up on sleep and spent the entire night playing with Little Bean instead, much to the kitten's dismay. The poor kitten remained at Yi Ling's mercy until dawn, at which point it crawled into its nest and fell into a sleep so deep not even Yi Ling's boisterous shouting could wake it.

Yi Ling took Yan Huan's hand and tugged her along as they ran to the studio. They had woken up before dawn to prepare for the big day: it was the first time Yan Huan would be playing a role important enough for her name to appear in the credits. She was not the lead actress nor the second female lead, but the fiery, sharp-tongued Hong Yao was unmistakably the heart and soul of the story.

They made sure to be on the set early because they understood Hong Yao was no ordinary supporting character. It would be a disaster if they turned up late for the shoot.

When they reached the set, they were surprised to see that they were not the first to arrive. Some of the production crew and cast were already there, busy preparing for the day's shoot.

Yi Ling put a hand to her chest in relief. "It's a good thing we set out early."

Yan Huan entered the makeup room. She had just seated herself when someone rudely barged into the room without knocking. She turned around to see who it was, and immediately frowned.

Why was Wen Dongni here?

Wen Dongni smiled as she looked Yan Huan up and down. It was clear that it was a disdainful, contemptuous smile.

"What, did no one teach you any manners, little duckling? You're supposed to offer your seat to others."

Yan Huan knew Wen Dongni was deliberately trying to pick a fight with her. Yan Huan wasn't stupid; she was fully aware that it was common for veteran actors to bully newcomers on the set. She was ashamed to admit that she had also bullied new actors in her previous life.

Wen Dongni walked over and planted herself steadfastly before Yan Huan. She said haughtily, "I can't wait to see how you're going to play the part of Hong Yao." The disdainful smile had not left her face, but there was now a tinge of frosty resentment to it.

Wen Dongni had been certain that the role would be hers, but this newcomer had appeared out of nowhere and snatched it from her. No, she wasn't even a newcomer— she was just a lowly stuntwoman who had even doubled for her in the past.

Wen Dongni had bragged on her Weibo that the part of Hong Yao was hers, that she had been born to play the part. She was so confident she had gone so far as to turn down other offers as she eagerly waited for production on Love and Tribulations to begin. But then the audition results came out, and she had been forced to eat her words. This was a massive slap in the face for her, and she was not happy.

Chapter 58 You Won't Fit in It

Wen Dongni thought to herself: Well then, let's see what's so amazing about this stuntwomen's portrayal of Hong Yao. There must be a reason why the director insisted on giving her the part. Still, it doesn't matter how good she is, because everyone will soon realize that I'm the one perfect for Hong Yao.

She walked over to the clothes rack to pick out something suitable for herself. She had a keen eye for fashion, and immediately picked out the blue cheongsam meant for Yan Huan. Wen Dongni's lips curved into an arrogant smile as she walked into the dressing room with the dress. Yan Huan, who had been watching her antics, ran a hand around her slender waist.

"Silly girl, you won't fit in it..."

Sure enough, Wen Dongni immediately marched out of the dressing room and tossed the blue cheongsam aside. "What an ugly dress!" She picked out another dress and was about to go back into the dressing room when the costume designer and makeup artist ran into the room.

The designer flipped her hair over her shoulder, in too much of a hurry to tie it up properly. She seized the blue cheongsam and pressed it into Yan Huan's hands. "Change into your costume quickly. Director Jin will be here any minute now. He has a short fuse, he'll yell at you if you're late."

Wen Dongni's eyes bulged out at this. She looked like a ferocious tiger, waiting to pounce on Yan Huan and rip the cheongsam out of her hands. She had not been able to squeeze into the cheongsam; she therefore refused to realize Yan Huan might be able to. Her massive ego prevented her from even considering the possibility that she had not been able to put it on because she had a flabby waist, or that there were women out there who had bodies smaller than hers.

It did not occur to her that the clothes she couldn't even squeeze into could very well look amazing on someone else.

Yan Huan emerged from the dressing room in the blue cheongsam; it fit her like a glove, hugging the perfect curve of her waist. On her, the cheongsam seemed to come alive, like a dull pearl that had been polished. Woman and dress complemented each other: the cheongsam made her complexion glow, and her fair skin brought out the vibrant color.

The makeup artist busied himself with the makeup for Yan Huan and Wen Dongni. This was when Yan Huan finally learned that Wen Dongni was actually a part of the production: she was playing the part of one of the prostitutes in the Rouge Pavilion, Hong Yao's rival. This rival actually had more screen time than Hong Yao, but her character wasn't half as important or memorable.

Yan Huan realized she should have seen this coming. Anyone would be furious and resentful if the role they thought they had in the bag suddenly went to someone else. This was doubly true for Wen Dongni,

who was already a diva even though she wasn't anywhere close to being a star. She wasn't a complete nobody in the industry, but she wasn't that famous.

Yan Huan knew what would eventually become of Wen Dongni.

Her acting career would come to an abrupt end six months later, right when she was at the peak of her popularity. From what Yan Huan could remember of her previous life, Wen Dongni had apparently angered someone she shouldn't have, and whoever it was had destroyed her by telling everyone that she had a sugar daddy and that she gambled and did drugs. It didn't matter how talented she was, or how many hit TV shows she had been a part of; the news of her drug abuse had been enough to ruin her reputation forever. Every door in the entertainment industry was closed to her after that.

Yan Huan decided not to waste her time squabbling with someone who was going to self-destruct anyway. She was reminded of a saying: "he who laughs last, laughs longest." Yan Huan was determined to have the last laugh this time around.

The stage was set for Hong Yao's first scene: night time, along the banks of the Qinjiang River. There were many "flower shops" along the riverbanks, but they were not in the business of selling actual flowers. They were in the business of selling bodies and time. In other words, they sold the lives of women.

Many a young woman had sacrificed the best years of her life on this particular stretch of the Qingjiang river. Amongst all the brothels in the area, Rouge Pavilion was the most famous. Every night, prostitutes emerged from its doors to attract customers. The way they stood, the way they sat, the way they smiled, the way they looked at a potential customer—it did not take much to snare the men who were looking for some excitement.

Chapter 59 I'll Out-Act You

Hong Yu adjusted her clothes. She smiled as she walked up the stairs, her hips swaying seductively with every step. The camera focused on her thin waist and hips; a number of men on the set stared, entranced. The actress playing the part of Hong Yu was, in fact, Wen Dongni. She reached the top of the stairs and folded her arms across her chest as undisguised contempt flashed through her eyes.

Wen Dongni was giving the role everything she had.

This was it—she was determined to crush the silly, naïve newcomer with her amazing acting skills.

When shooting a scene, it was extremely cruel for veteran actors to deliberately out-act new actors instead of working with them. It was a form of bullying on the set.

"Hong Yao! Mr. Zhang, the eldest son of the Zhang family, is here. You should go downstairs and entertain him, since you're the most popular. Don't forget that you're a filthy prostitute now, and not some noble young lady from a wealthy family." There was a disdainful gleam in Wen Dongni's eyes as the nasty, barbed words rolled easily off her tongue— she was obviously a jaded, mean-spirited prostitute.

Jin Hailiang frowned, but allowed the camera to continue rolling.

The door creaked open. A young woman with exquisite features entered the room, a small smile on her face. She was wearing a blue cheongsam, a pair of black heels, and a white fox fur wrap. The slit of her cheongsam extended to her upper thighs. There was something oddly sophisticated about the woman.

Hong Yu was gorgeous, but the woman who had just entered the room was more than that: she was both fire and ice.

The woman stepped over the threshold and walked towards Hong Yu. The brief look she gave Hong Yu as she passed her by was cool and detached.

Hong Yu froze in place. Her red lips parted, but she could not remember how to speak. She struggled to breathe, feeling as though someone were strangling her.

That look... it was Hong Yao. Hong Yao was real.

It was all there: the seductive beauty of Hong Yao, the noble sophistication of Hong Yao, and all of her natural charms. Her courage and her couldn't-care-less attitude towards life in general had been encapsulated in that split-second look. She was a woman who could stare death in the face and not even blink.

Hong Yao held her fur wrap securely around herself. Her eyes twinkled as her red lips curved upwards, ever so subtly. It was an ambiguous, mysterious expression: it was both a smile and not a smile.

She hummed a little song. It was a traditional Chinese ditty, but there was something haunting about the quiet, hushed way she sang. It tugged at the heartstrings of everyone present. It was only a short section of the song, but it made everyone long for more, like an itch they could not quite scratch.

The camera lingered on her retreating back as she walked away, fading into the distance. That was the end of the scene.

"Cut!" shouted the director. He was extremely pleased with the take.

Was this really a new actress? Everyone on the set finally snapped out of their trance. They could not believe what they had just seen: it simply wasn't possible for someone new to acting to pull off such a flawless performance. Everything had been perfect, from the way she positioned herself to the timing of her walk.

Acting was a tricky thing: it was abstract, with no strict rules, and the only way to judge it was to compare one actor with another. Wen Dongni was fully aware of this, which was why her face had gone deathly pale; not even the thick makeup on her face could disguise the fact that she was now as white as a sheet.

That look from Yan Huan—no, not Yan Huan. The way she moved, the look in her eyes... it had been Hong Yao from Rouge Pavilion, in the flesh. No one else on the set realized it, but Wen Dongni had broken out into a cold sweat during the scene. She had even forgotten her lines.

Chapter 60 What We're Selling

No, she thought as she shook her head. She still wasn't convinced: Yan Huan was just a stunt double, there was no way she knew how to act. She vowed to destroy the newcomer in the next scene, and have

her removed from the production. She, Wen Dongni, would be Yan Huan's recurring nightmare for the rest of her life.

After a short break, they began shooting the next scene.

Inside Rouge Pavilion, the customers were having a merry time feasting and engaging in acts of debauchery. The fragrance of the women's perfumed powder mingled with the stink of sweat from the men; it was a distinctive smell, and it pervaded Rouge Pavilion.

Hong Yu sauntered from man to man, flirting with her customers wherever she went. She was in her element. She cast a smug look towards Hong Yao; it was part of the script, but Wen Dongni was feeling smug and confident herself. She was flaunting her acting skills: look at me, I'm such a convincing prostitute.

But her eyes widened with surprise when she saw Yan Huan. Yan Huan was sitting in a chair, taking long drags from the cigarette in her hand. Her fur wrap had slipped away, exposing one of her smooth, beautiful shoulders. Her thighs peeked out from under her cheongsam, sleek and alluring. She worked in a whore house, but she was not a whore.

Hong Yao breathed out another cloud of cigarette smoke. She was staring fixedly at the door, as though watching for something but not expecting anything. The noble, faraway look in her eyes seemed to elevate her above everyone else. Nothing mattered to her. Her expression spoke of the sorrow and suffering that came with being a prostitute.

Other people sold things. The women here sold their bodies and their lives.

This was not the life they had envisioned for themselves.

Wen Dongni's Hong Yu was vulgar and despicable. Yan Huan's Hong Yao was much more complex: she was someone who inspired love and hatred, resentment and sympathy.

Wen Dongni felt her blood run cold. Her mind went blank: she forgot what she was supposed to do and say next.

"Cut!" yelled the director. "What are you doing, Wen Dongni? Where are your lines? Your actions?"

Wen Dongni stared stupidly at him before turning a bright shade of red. She had, once again, found herself frozen in place, awed and overwhelmed by Yan Huan's performance. Yan Huan had not deliberately tried to intimidate Wen Dongni with her acting, but the subtle, evocative look in the newcomer's eyes had been enough to pull Wen Dongni into a different world. It was not her world, nor was it the world of Love and Tribulations— it was Yan Huan's world.

When they finished shooting the scene, Jin Hailiang smiled happily at Yan Huan. "That was some fine acting. Keep it up!"

"I will, Mr. Director. Thank you," Yan Huan replied shyly, like an innocent child who had yet to see the world. But her portrayal of Hong Yao had been entirely different: it was as though a real-life prostitute from an earlier time had been walking among them on the set.

Yan Huan had brought Hong Yao to life. It was amazing—there was simply no other word for it.

Jin Hailiang could not help marveling at his luck: what he had initially assumed to be an unpolished stone had turned out to be jade of the highest quality. He thanked his lucky stars he had picked such an incredible actress for the role. Yan Huan had guessed correctly: Hong Yao was the heart and soul of the story, the sudden splash of life and color that Jin Hailiang hoped would wow the viewers. Everyone was now waiting with bated breath to see whether Yan Huan would be able to bring out Hong Yao's true potential.

Yi Ling rushed over and handed a cup to Yan Huan. "Huanhuan, you were amazing! You had me under your spell. That look in your eyes— I thought I was in the presence of a real queen!"

Yan Huan accepted it and began drinking it in small sips. She did not dare drink too much, afraid that she would be distracted by the urge to pee when the camera rolled again. Being an actor wasn't easy.