

T. Times 111

Chapter 111: Real and Fake Yue Hongling

Not only did she look the part, but her demeanor, tone, the carefree way she poured herself a drink, and her familiar attitude all screamed that she was Yue Hongling.

It was impossible to achieve this effect by relying solely on makeup and acting skills. He was so familiar with Yue Hongling that anyone else impersonating her would have been immediately exposed. However, he really could not tell if the person right in front of him was really Yue Hongling or not.

The only explanation that he could come up with was that the Maitreya Cult's illusion art was truly extraordinary. He could not sense the illusion taking effect at all, yet he had already fallen under its spell without even being aware of it. It was truly remarkable.

"I actually thought that the Maitreya Cult would find someone to impersonate you, but I never expected that you would actually come here, Miss Yue. Is this the surprise that Abbot Fa Yuen was referring to?" Zhao Changhe pretended to be surprised and sat next to her. "I never would have thought that... You were actually a celestial maiden of the Maitreya Cult."

Yue Hongling rolled her eyes. What nonsense is this guy saying? Can he really not tell whether or not I'm actually a part of the Maitreya Cult?

Oh, wait... He probably thinks that I'm the celestial maiden of the Maitreya Cult pretending to be myself. He probably does not want the Maitreya Cult to find out about our true relationship, so he's deliberately pretending to be unfamiliar with me.

Yue Hongling did not come here to role-play. She intended to discuss important matters with Zhao Changhe, but she also did not want to see someone impersonating her and using her identity for romantic encounters. Just the thought of it made her feel sick.

And so, she directly said, "I am Yue Hongling."

However, how could Zhao Changhe believe her just like that? He chuckled and said, "Of course, Miss Yue, back when you saved me at the Zhao Village, you left a deep and unforgettable impression in my mind. I would never mistake you for someone else. I just didn't think that Abbot

Fa Yuan... No, the great Buddha would really send Miss Yue to enlighten me on Buddhist teachings. This is truly wonderful...”

Yue Hongling really felt like kicking him right now. The real person is right in front of him, yet this fool still insists on thinking that I’m a celestial maiden from the Maitreya Cult merely making use of makeup and illusions. Do I really need to prove myself?

In the eyes of the world, the only connection between them was when they encountered each other in the Zhao Village. Zhao Changhe’s words, which were intended for the fake Yue Hongling, were precisely why others firmly believed that he secretly had a crush on Yue Hongling. However, only the real Yue Hongling knew that their interactions extended far beyond that, with their relationship deepening during the time that she had acted as his stronghold mistress. The more Zhao Changhe emphasized Zhao Village, the more it proved that he believed that she was just an impostor.

So in fact, as long as she mentioned their interactions in the bandit stronghold, she would be able to immediately prove her identity.

But just as she was about to say something, she suddenly stopped herself as her ears twitched slightly.

Someone is eavesdropping.

She had no choice but to swallow down her words and put up an act while thinking of a solution. “It is precisely because you and I have such a connection that the Abbot has sent me here to guide you... Our Maitreya Cult and you are a perfect match. We can take the place of the backing that you lack, and we have a way to improve your meridians, and... there’s also me...”

As she said this, she gave herself a thumbs up. This is exactly what the celestial maiden who would be acting like me would have said! Heh, it turns out I do have some talent in acting!

However, she began to regret what she just did in the next moment.

Zhao Changhe looked like he could no longer wait and eagerly approached her, with a foolish grin on his face. “I understand! Wise people do not beat around the bush. The Maitreya Cult just wants to recruit me, right? They should have just said that you are a member and I would have joined immediately! Oh, but of course, I still need you to show me some sincerity for that to happen... Ah, Miss Yue, please don’t blame me for being so straightforward. I’m just so utterly captivated by you...”

As he said that, he even attempted to put his arm around her waist.

Of course, Zhao Changhe was deliberately portraying himself as a fool, creating the image of a rough and clueless man. He believed that the more the other person looked down on him, the more likely they were to inadvertently reveal some deep secrets. For instance, exactly what the Maitreya Cult was planning on doing in Yangzhou.

As for the technique that would place him under their control, he was confident that the other party would not immediately jump into bed with him, so he had to stay cautious. After all, since they were impersonating Yue Hongling, it would be too suspicious if she acted too promiscuously.

As expected, the “flower-picking celestial maiden” pretended to be reserved and kicked him angrily. “Zhao Changhe! Is this the only thing on your mind?”

Zhao Changhe endured the kick without dodging. He deliberately allowed himself to be kicked to the ground. He quickly rolled over and got up, saying with a smile, “This is just how we bandits are. There is that saying that goes like ‘don’t let the falcon loose until you see the hare,’ right? If you were to really teach me Buddhist scriptures, I won’t understand a thing. By the time I do, it will be in the distant future. But if that were to happen, the Maitreya Cult’s important matters would remain unresolved, wouldn’t they?”

Hearing this remark, Yue Hongling completely understood what he was trying to do. He was trying to trick the celestial maiden into speaking. However, Yue Hongling could not help but blush furiously from his words.

I’m not the celestial maiden! How am I supposed to play along with this! Who the hell is listening outside? Why haven’t they left yet?! If they don’t get out of here soon, I’m just going to stop pretending altogether!

Suddenly, she received a voice transmission. “Why did you hit him?”

Yue Hongling responded coldly, “That’s what Yue Hongling would do.”

Outside, there was a thoughtful pause, but when they felt that she did seem to be right, they simply said, “You should sweeten the pot a bit and lead him in slowly. Don’t get too carried away with the act.”

At that moment, Zhao Changhe approached her once again and pleaded, “Big sister Yue, I know you are not just an ordinary celestial maiden, but could you at least give me a hug? If you give me a hug, I promise to seriously listen to your teachings!”

On one hand, he called her “Big sister Yue,” and on the other hand, she had to sweeten the pot. Yue Hongling found herself in a dilemma, unsure whether to avoid him or not. Before she could decide, he had already firmly embraced her, and he even leaned in to smell her neck.

Yue Hongling had goosebumps all over her body and her muscles grew taut. She resisted the urge to slap him into a spinning top. Instead, she took a deep breath and immediately sent a voice transmission to the person outside. “We’re about to start. Are you really going to continue listening?”

The status of the flower-picking celestial maiden was not something that ordinary believers could touch. The person outside, feeling that Zhao Changhe had been completely captivated by the celestial maiden, chuckled and replied, “I was just being cautious and making sure to keep you safe... Since this guy seems like he’s completely captivated, I guess there’s no need for me to listen further. I will be taking my leave now.”

When Zhao Changhe held the soft and fragrant figure in his arms, he was genuinely astonished. How could everything, even her scent, be exactly the same as Yue Hongling’s? It even seemed as if she was as tense as a young, inexperienced girl. Could something like this really be achieved through an illusion art?

However, he continued with his pretense, skillfully steering the conversation in the direction he desired. “Big sister Yue, I finally got to hold you in my arms. You don’t know how long I’ve waited for this day... As long as you tell me to do something in Yangzhou for you, I will do it immediately, even if it costs me my life...”

“Is that so?” Yue Hongling sneered. “You want to hug me that badly? Since when did you start feeling this way?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “It started back when I first sat behind you on your horse...”

“Oh? Then why didn’t you take the opportunity to be frivolous with me when I was in your room injured?”

“That’s because I respect...Huh?” Zhao Changhe froze for a moment, and his eyes suddenly widened.

He cautiously withdrew from the intimate position he had adopted, looking at her with an apprehensive expression. Yue Hongling said with a sneer, “You’re really good at acting, I’ll admit that. So why did you expose yourself just now?”

“Ah, no, no, big sister, please let me explain!”

Bang!

Yue Hongling stood up, grabbed Zhao Changhe’s arm, and turned for a shoulder throw, smashing him ruthlessly onto the floor. “You said that you would do anything even if it cost you your life, right? Then how about you go die right now?!”

Zhao Changhe covered his head in defense. “Damn! Why are you here?! I’m innocent, I swear... I was just saying all that to deceive the impostor and find out what they were planning to do in Yangzhou... Ow, don’t step on me! That hurts! Those were all lies. I never—”

His words suddenly got cut short.

The furious stomping on his back also ceased.

The room became deathly silent, with only the sound of Yue Hongling’s slightly rapid breathing filling the room.

The sound of faint footsteps could be heard approaching from outside. The person outside transmitted in a hushed voice, “What’s going on? We heard a noise... Huh? Is that heavy breathing I hear? Did that guy resort to violence again? He’s really impatient.”

The room was so quiet that even Zhao Changhe’s senses could pick up on the movement outside. His mind raced, and he exclaimed loudly, “The Maitreya Cult’s Buddhist arts are truly profound. Is this posture of the Bodhisattva sitting on a lotus? I have been enlightened...”

The footsteps outside faded away into the distance again.

Zhao Changhe stood up, lowered his voice to a near whisper, and said, “Don’t take those words to heart... If there is anything that has been on my mind since our time in Zhao Village, it’s the hope of one day being able to ride and fight alongside you in the jianghu. Today’s events may have started off quite embarrassingly, but I am honored. My thoughts from back then may really just come true.”

Yue Hongling looked at him quietly and did not answer for a while.

Both of them knew that Zhao Changhe had left something unsaid when he cut off his sentence earlier, and he was not willing to continue.

Chapter 112: So You Know Their True Nature

He had wanted to say “I never liked you,” but his words got stopped halfway, and he would rather get beaten than finish the sentence.

Did that mean... he actually liked her?

He himself had no idea.

And Yue Hongling had a feeling that might actually be the case.

“Since when did you start wanting to hug your big sister Yue?”

“It started back when I first sat behind you on your horse.”

“Then why didn’t you take the opportunity to be frivolous with me when I was in your room injured?”

“That’s because I respect you.”

Could what he blurted out actually be a lie he made up to trick the celestial maiden? That’s very likely... You stinking bandit, you actually weren’t an honest person even back then.

It doesn't matter, as long as he says it's fake, I'll just pretend as if nothing happened, and we can continue as usual, as friends. But it feels so difficult....

In the air of silence between them, there seemed to be something lingering, something they could not quite discern.

Zhao Changhe let out a long sigh, then chuckled self-deprecatingly. He took a seat, poured himself a drink, and said, "You know, I was thinking just now... Maybe when I was acting so eager earlier, it wasn't entirely an act. Perhaps I'm naturally a bit lustful deep down, and I wanted to take advantage of a celestial maiden."

In reality, he was now starting to doubt whether he had chosen that approach because the person before him had looked so much like Yue Hongling. After all, there were so many other ways to extract information without coming across as an overly eager fool. Could he have done that because he wanted to satisfy some inner desires? He could not help but wonder... However, even with him saying what he said, Yue Hongling probably would not think too much of it.

Sure enough, Yue Hongling did not seem to dwell on it too much. She casually sat down next to him, and took a sip of the wine she had just poured herself. She coldly snorted and said, "If you're lustful, then you're lustful. It's no big deal. You're a grown man. Just make sure not to go astray."

Zhao Changhe said, "You mean following the Maitreya Cult?"

Yue Hongling nodded. "So you really do know their true nature. It even seems like you're already taking steps to deal with them. It seems that it was really the right choice to look for you."

"Did you also come here to deal with the Maitreya Cult?" Zhao Changhe laughed. "What a coincidence. I heard that you were spotted in the vicinity of Yangzhou before, and I was thinking about looking for you. I had no idea how, but here you are."

"Why did you want to look for me?"

"I feel that the situation in Yangzhou was extremely weird. I really think there's something strange at play...as if everyone here is just an actor on a stage, acting according to a script. From when I first met Wan Dongliu, until now, that's all I felt."

Yue Hongling thought to herself that he had hit the nail on the head. She also felt the same way about Yangzhou. That was why she had wanted to find him to discuss what steps they should take next. After all, two heads were better than one.

They involuntarily locked eyes for a moment, and then they both quickly looked away at the same time.

Yue Hongling lowered her head, gazing at the wine in her cup. She could not understand why such a simple conversation had suddenly become so awkward. They hadn't even really begun discussing things, yet it felt so hard to continue.

Is it because of that hug earlier?

She forced herself to change the topic, saying, "What's wrong with Wan Dongliu?"

"He just gives me a very strange feeling. He seems to be part of the Maitreya Cult, but he also seems to have other motives. In any case, the Cao Gang appears to be his top priority. Once something goes wrong with the Cao Gang, it could spell chaos for this entire region," Zhao Changhe said. "My primary target is the Maitreya Cult because they are more open with their misdeeds. However, deep down, I value Wan Dongliu, who is keeping to himself, much more."

Yue Hongling pondered and said, "Is it fair to say that no matter what the Maitreya Cult plots, as long as the Cao Gang does not fall to their side, the situation won't get too bad?"

"That's roughly what I think."

"Well, as a local figure, Wan Dongliu often hosts young talents who come to Yangzhou. This is also a form of courtesy in the jianghu. He has even invited me to a banquet in the past, but I politely declined. If he sends me another invitation, I will go and meet him."

Zhao Changhe recalled how Wan Dongliu had hosted him previously and how he hosted Tang Buqi today. He realized that there might be more such banquets to come. He nodded and said, "It's possible that he might invite me too..."

After a pause, he added with a peculiar expression, "He might even invite both of us together. After all, many people are eager to see what would happen if I were to meet the real Yue Hongling..."

Yue Hongling hesitated and said, “Should we first discuss how we are going to act when we meet in front of others?”

This was actually quite an amusing situation. The two of them had no such relationship at all. It would have been enough for the two of them to meet up in public to clear up any misunderstandings. However, that was before. Now, thanks to the Maitreya Cult’s interference, they would have to continue acting, or they might end up exposing the cult’s actions and that would cause all sorts of unstable factors to arise.

Zhao Changhe then said, “So... should I really pursue you?”

Yue Hongling’s heart inexplicably skipped a beat, and she turned her head away before saying, “If I reject you, that would be the end of it, right?”

Zhao Changhe sighed in resignation. “Yes.”

After a moment of silence, Yue Hongling spoke softly, “But that’s unfair to you... You never intended to pursue me at all, yet you tarnished your reputation and became a laughingstock, all to cover up the fact that I was your stronghold mistress to protect my image...”

Zhao Changhe interjected, “I’m willing to do it.”

The atmosphere fell silent once more. Yue Hongling averted her gaze. She then bent down to retrieve the fake Yue Hongling from under the bed and said, “Let’s not dwell on this matter. For now, we should focus on figuring out more things about the Maitreya Cult.”

Her ability to change the topic so abruptly is really impressive. Zhao Changhe was immediately pulled back from his messy self-reflection and he asked, “So you didn’t kill her?”

Yue Hongling rolled her eyes at him. “Why would I kill her? I was actually worried that there would be no one I could ask about the Maitreya Cult. She’s a lone high-ranking member of the cult who practically fell on my lap!”

Zhao Changhe looked at the flower-picking celestial maiden. Sure enough, though she did resemble Yue Hongling after putting on some makeup, he could tell that she was a fake. She might have been

able to fool those who did not know Yue Hongling well, but anyone who was somewhat familiar with the real person would be able to tell that she was a fake.

Seriously, I can't believe I actually thought they were able to fake the truth so well that I ended up embarrassing myself in front of the real Yue Hongling.

Yue Hongling had already woken up the flower-picking celestial maiden. The celestial maid opened her eyes, quickly grasping her situation and saying with a bitter smile, "I never thought that you two were actually a couple. Even the Abbot was fooled by you two..."

Yue Hongling: "?"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Yue Hongling did not bother exchanging nonsense with the celestial maiden. She took out her sword and placed it against her neck. She then asked coldly, "How strong is Fa Yuan?"

This was the reason she had been hesitant to act rashly earlier. Without having a clear understanding of her opponent's abilities, attacking blindly would be incredibly risky.

To her surprise, the fanaticism of the celestial maiden toward the cult far exceeded her expectations. The celestial maiden actually closed her eyes defiantly, preferring to die rather than answer.

Zhao Changhe, however, squatted next to the celestial maiden with a knowing smile and said, "Do you perhaps think that by dying for your faith, you'll attain rebirth in the Pure Land of Bliss, entering the Realm of True Void?"

When she heard the words "Realm of True Void," the celestial maiden's expression changed slightly. She realized that Zhao Changhe, who appeared ignorant, might actually have more knowledge about their beliefs than even Yue Hongling. This phrase was unique to the White Lotus Sect. Even someone well-versed in the knowledge of the previous era might not recognize it. Yet, Zhao Changhe seemed quite familiar with it...

"Whether or not you really will be able to enter the Realm of True Void, and whether or not the Unborn Venerable Mother[1] will reward you for dying like this, I truly can't say," Zhao Changhe said with a sly smile. He took a pair of scissors and gestured near her face. "But let me ask you this: if I were to cut you into pieces, strip you naked, and hang you from the Twenty-Four Bridge with

the words ‘Maitreya Cult Celestial Maiden’ written all over your body, do you think the Maitreya and the Unborn Venerable Mother will still reward you for your loyalty?”

Yue Hongling could not help but smirk. This guy really has a way with words...

The celestial maiden, showing signs of panic, opened her eyes wide and protested, “The abbot will know that it’s not my fault!”

“Are you so sure about that?” Zhao Changhe said with a smile. “How about we make a bet? When that time comes, the Maitreya will still show me mercy and allow me to convert. Meanwhile, you, their so-called ‘celestial maiden,’ who has dirtied the Maitreya’s reputation, will be trapped in the Animal Realm[2], unable to return.”

The celestial maiden bit her lower lip and stopped talking.

Zhao Changhe said, “To be honest, it’s still possible for me, and even big sister Yue, to join the Maitreya Cult. Your previous methods were simply too crude, and you underestimated me. If we have a proper discussion, and you explain to me exactly how powerful the Maitreya Cult is, I can still weigh the pros and cons and maybe join. After all, there is no enmity between us. In fact, we seem to even share some kind of connection, don’t we?”

Regardless of whether the celestial maid believed his words or not, this was a clever way to have her openly share information about the Maitreya Cult without pushing her to her death. Yue Hongling looked at the celestial maiden, who had disguised herself to resemble her, with some admiration. She wondered how the celestial maiden would choose.

After a long moment of hesitation, the celestial maiden asked softly, “Is it really possible for you to join the cult?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “Of course, why wouldn’t it be? Up to this point, besides your misguided attempt to deceive me, do we really have any enmity?”

The celestial maiden finally said: “The Maitreya tested Abbot Fa Yuan’s power and said that he was powerful enough to be on the Ranking of Man. However, they were afraid that news of this would spread through the Tome of Troubled Times, potentially revealing their secrets, so they never let him fight with anyone. To others, it appeared as if Zhang Banfo only reached the sixth or seventh layer of the Profound Gate.”

“That’s quite impressive. How many more people are like Fa Yuan and conceal their actual strength in the Maitreya Cult?”

The celestial maiden’s eyes once again sparkled with fervor as she replied, “Countless.”

Zhao Changhe nodded, not revealing whether he believed her or not. He suddenly said, “Since Abbot Fa Yuan is so powerful, why do you need my help? It should be a simple matter for him to assassinate the magistrate of Yangzhou, right?”

Yue Hongling realized that she might not be needed anymore.

After she answered the first question, the celestial maiden seemed to only become more eager to share more information, with no intention of holding anything back.

Chapter 113: Asura Phala

“What would be the point of assassination?” The flower-picking celestial maiden continued smoothly, seemingly truly intent on showcasing the cult’s strength and persuading Zhao Changhe to join them. “The Maitreya Cult has a strong presence in Jiangnan. The majority of the officials in Yangzhou have already joined forces with us. Even most of the Cao Gang’s members are our believers. We even have celestial maidens inside the magistrate’s residence.

“With a simple command, not only Yangzhou but the entire Jiangnan region would be under our control. If the two of you join us, you can both become Bodhisattvas in the future.”

“With that being the case, what is the cult still waiting for?” Zhao Changhe asked. “Are you perhaps waiting for your cult leader to start another movement elsewhere before coordinating things here?”

The flower-picking celestial maiden shook her head and said, “I honestly don’t know about this... I was simply tasked with spreading our teachings to you. I have not been informed about any specific tasks that will be given to you. My only concern is recruiting you into our ranks. If there are indeed tasks that you need to perform, I believe they would probably involve drawing the attention of the Four Idols Cult. After all, you have a feud with them, so you are the best bait. At the moment, that’s the best I can come up with.”

Zhao Changhe was momentarily taken aback. “Is the Four Idols Cult also carrying out their operations here? Have they been acting in even greater secrecy than you?”

Yue Hongling said softly, “The Four Idols Cult has always been known for their secrecy. Unlike the Maitreya Cult, which aims to expand its number of followers, their goals lie elsewhere... At most, they might recruit some affiliates to carry out tasks openly on their behalf like the Blood God Cult. But most of the time, you wouldn’t even know who among those close to you is actually a member of the Four Idols Cult.”

Zhao Changhe scratched his head. “I suppose that makes sense...”

Even the flower-picking celestial maiden could not hold herself back from responding, “Considering your background as a subordinate member of the Four Idols Cult, it’s only natural...”

“Fair enough,” Zhao Changhe said. “I’m still relatively new to cultivation, and yet you hold me in such high regard just because of my connection to the Four Idols Sect?”

“It’s not just that. In our cult, killing leads to enlightenment. Killing one person grants you the status of a One-Abode Bodhisattva while killing ten people elevates you to a Ten-Abode Bodhisattva. With you being known as a bloodthirsty murderer, you are a perfect fit for our cult. The title ‘Asura’ is not just a random nickname, it’s also the Abbot’s expectation of you. In the future, you may even attain the Asura Phala.”^[1] As the flower-picking celestial maiden spoke, there was a look of expectation and admiration on her face. Her mission to seduce Zhao Changhe was sincere from this angle.

“...Then why don’t you go recruit the Blood God Cult? They’re all bloodthirsty murderers.”

“We would love to,” the flower-picking celestial maiden replied with a hint of frustration. “But the Four Idols Cult is really annoying. It’s just four ancient beasts, what’s there to worship?”

Zhao Changhe chuckled and said, “So are you saying that you can actually improve the state of my meridians as you mentioned earlier?”

The flower-picking celestial maiden glanced at Yue Hongling cautiously. Yue Hongling had been quietly listening to their conversation, only occasionally providing explanations. It was as if she were letting her man take the lead.

The celestial maiden secretly marveled, and said softly, “It is indeed true. Our Pure Bliss Art can benefit both the celestial maiden and the target. Many adult converts who have joined our cult have

experienced rapid progress in their cultivation thanks to the infusion of true essence. They naturally do not have any problems with regard to their meridians... If you're willing, I..."

"Don't trust her so easily!" Yue Hongling, who had been sitting there and acting like a quiet wife, suddenly interjected. "They are merely using forbidden arts to harvest power, using people as furnaces to bypass years of bitter cultivation. While it may seem like you're making rapid progress, such a way of cultivation will be of no help to the issue with your meridians. Moreover, the power they harvest is impure and chaotic, leading to superficial cultivation. You must not be tempted... Furthermore, once you fall for it, you will never be able to break free from their ability to control people..."

"Alright, that's enough," Zhao Changhe said, noticing Yue Hongling's anxious expression. He instinctively reached out to pat her head, but then he remembered that she was Yue Hongling, not Cui Yuanyang. As such, he could only awkwardly pull his hand back.

Yue Hongling stared at his hand as it stretched out and then retracted, letting out a harrumph.

The flower-picking celestial maiden was eager to convince them, saying, "We do not solely rely on harvesting other's power. We also have celestial maidens who engage in dual cultivation with Bodhisattvas for mutual benefit! Otherwise, how would our high-ranking members cultivate? Prolonged dual cultivation really does have a certain positive effect on the meridians. If I'm lying, may I never return to the Realm of True Void!"

Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling exchanged glances. Since she had made such a solemn vow, it was likely that there was some truth to her claims; they had initially assumed that she had something else in mind for Zhao Changhe, merely wanting to make use of him

Zhao Changhe was genuinely intrigued this time. He thought to himself that such arts were typical for a protagonist to possess in these kinds of stories. Although it may not resolve the root issue, it should at least improve his current situation, right? He asked, "Do you have this art?"

The flower-picking celestial maiden hesitated, not sure if she should reveal the truth. In the end, she said, "I can only have a superficial understanding of this art. You must join our cult, and Maitreya himself will impart it to you."

Yue Hongling hesitated for a moment before beginning to search the celestial maiden's body.

Zhao Changhe turned to look at her with a rather strange expression.

Is big sister Yue trying to help me look for the dual cultivation technique? Does she plan to find someone for me to practice it with?

Yue Hongling was indeed searching for a dual cultivation technique for him. She carefully searched but did not find anything. She sighed and said, “Unfortunately, we do not possess soul-searching or mind-controlling arts. Otherwise, we might have been able to find something...”

The flower-picking celestial maiden also found Yue Hongling’s actions quite strange. Are we really the ones from a demonic cult or are you? Aren’t you a heroine? Or could it be that you took the chance to touch me first to prevent him from touching me?

At this moment, footsteps approached from outside the door, and someone said, “Are the two of you... enjoying yourselves?”

Zhao Changhe glanced at the celestial maiden. She knew all too well that if someone found out that there were celestial maidens in the magistrate’s residence, she would be in immense trouble. If she was discovered, even being skinned and tortured would be considered lenient. At this point, she naturally knew how to play her part and quickly said in a charming voice, “Changhe, you’re so passionate.... My whole body is still aching....”

Yue Hongling was still body searching the celestial maiden, and when she heard that, the corner of her mouth twitched.

It’s really hard to bear seeing someone impersonate me right in front of me. Also, what’s with the way you addressed him?

The person outside chuckled and said, “I apologize for interrupting. However, Young Gang Leader Wan has sent me here to extend an invitation to join him for an evening banquet.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “Where?”

“Bright Moon Tower.”

“Tell him that I’ll be there.”

The person outside responded, "Very well, I won't disturb you any further. Have a great time."

The flower-picking celestial maiden let out a timely soft moan, apparently as a result of Yue Hongling's touching.

Yue Hongling: "..."

Trying to maintain his composure, Zhao Changhe suddenly took out a pill that radiated rich blood qi and stuffed it into the celestial maiden's mouth. "This is the Vicious Blood Pill of the Blood God Cult. If you do not take the antidote within ten days, your blood and qi will rampage, your body will split apart, and you will die a miserable death. Don't expect Maitreya to save you, everyone has different systems of cultivation."

In reality, it was just a regular Blood Settling Pill used to suppress the effects of the Vicious Blood Art temporarily. Zhao Changhe was using this ruse to intimidate the celestial maiden, making her believe that she was poisoned with a deadly substance.

The flower-picking celestial maiden sensed the presence of something in her bloodstream and sighed. "There was actually no need for you to make use of such a malicious substance. I have no choice but to continue with the act. It has to be me who is seen in an intimate situation with you today. I know how to handle them. As for your true relationship with Yue Hongling, no one will ever find out..."

Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling exchanged a glance and nodded in agreement. Yue Hongling said, "I'll go out in public and see if Wan Dongliu tries looking for me."

After saying that, she slipped out of the window and disappeared in the blink of an eye.

From the beginning to the end, neither of them felt the need to clarify on whether or not they were truly a couple... It actually felt nostalgic in a ridiculous way; after all, when she was the stronghold mistress, they had already experienced a similar situation...

The flower-picking celestial maiden sighed again. "The Maitreya Cult does not regard you as an enemy, which is why they were deceived so easily. Once someone discovers the truth, you will be in grave danger. I can't understand why we can't just be on the same side."

Zhao Changhe did not attempt to change her perspective of the world. This celestial maiden was already deeply indoctrinated, and it was futile to argue with her. Besides, their plans of placing him under their control were not indicative of them being on the same side. He simply replied, "We can talk about this later."

He sat for a moment, waiting for Yue Hongling to get far away, before boldly opening the door and walking out with large strides. He encountered the guard outside the door and patted him on the shoulder. "I hope you don't think her disguise could fool me, but I have to admit that this play was amazing. It was truly a delightful surprise. I must thank the abbot for his kindness."

After saying that, he left the Xiaoxiang Pavilion.

The guard hurriedly entered the room. The flower-picking celestial maiden's face was flushed and her eyes were filled with a seductive allure as she languidly adjusted her clothes. She sighed and said, "He found out. I told you that it would be difficult to hide the truth once he got close enough... But fortunately, he's understanding, and it seems that he found the whole thing enjoyable."

The guard nodded in agreement, "Did you manage to place him under control?"

"With my cover blown, I didn't dare to use that. He's not a fool. Let's take our time. I think he can definitely be won over. Patience is key, and who knows, he might truly become addicted to my taste..."

Chapter 114: Gathering of Heroes

Zhao Changhe was aware that playing with the Maitreya Cult like this was akin to walking on a tightrope. The celestial maiden was right in saying that those in the cult were no fools. Their intention had only been to recruit him into their ranks. They never had any malicious intentions toward him. It was precisely because they were not taking the matter on the same level that such an interesting situation had come about.

I have no idea if Fa Yuan actually has combat power rivaling those on the Ranking of Man, but even if he isn't at that level, he should still at least be on par with Yue Hongling. And the part where she mentioned that they have many followers in Yangzhou is probably true. Once they realize that they have been tricked, I might not even know how I end up dying.

But this is simply what a secret agent does... If I didn't have to worry about being controlled by some secret mind-controlling art, I might have actually considered joining the cult and playing along. My reputation as a traitor is already well-known throughout the world, and I could easily just

renounce the cult later on. Unfortunately, I really don't want to be placed under their control, so I have no other choice but to take this risk.

To be honest, this is actually pretty thrilling...

In any case, he had at least gotten some results. Now, he knew that the majority of the Cao Gang were followers of Maitreya, and there were even celestial maidens around the magistrate. Judging from this situation, it was possible that the magistrate himself had become a follower of Maitreya, or was at least under the control of the cult.

Zhao Changhe could not help but feel a little worried. Based on this information, the Maitreya Cult could unleash a rebellion at any moment. Furthermore, this rebellion was something that even the Demon Suppression Bureau in the city would not be able to stop. He wondered what exactly they were waiting for. Before coming here, he had thought that the empire was not yet facing an imminent collapse into chaos, but now he could see how it could start at any moment.

While he did say that he did not want to be the prince, and that the matters of the world were none of his business... The Maitreya Cult was seriously just up to no good. Their sinister doctrines only led people further into the abyss, all the while serving the selfish desires of the upper echelons of the cult.

If Chichi launched a rebellion, Zhao Changhe felt that he might not care about it too much. Anyway, he believed that the world was destined to be hers. After all, she was the rightful heir to the throne...

He walked ahead, lost in thought, when Dragon Bird suddenly vibrated lightly.

Zhao Changhe was startled.

Dragon Bird was warning him!

Ever since the episode at the Ancient Sword Lake, he had not encountered any difficulties or dangers. This was the first time in a good while that Dragon Bird was giving him a warning!

Where's the threat?

His eyes quickly darted around, and he soon discovered a cold glint on the rooftop in the distance. Then, he heard the soft creak of a bowstring being stretched taut.

Zhao Changhe swiftly spun around, avoiding the arrow just in time. He then adjusted his posture, and with a powerful leap, he charged toward the location of the attacker.

The attacker appeared incredibly surprised. They did not seem to expect that Zhao Changhe would be able to avoid their fatal arrow, much less move as if he had foreseen it. Seeing Zhao Changhe rushing charging toward them, they swiftly moved from where they were, disappearing into a bustling area resembling a market. They weaved through the crowd and vanished from his sight.

By the time Zhao Changhe got to the spot where the attacker had been, he had completely lost track of them and he had no way of going after them.

He stood outside outside the market, observing a group of foreign merchants and tourists, his brow furrowing deeply.

During the brief encounter, he had noticed that the attacker was wearing a mask that was dazzlingly blue. However, their movements were too fast, so he had not been able to see anything else clearly. It was evident from this that the attacker was cautious, even going to the extent of wearing a mask despite clearly expecting to succeed. They made sure to take all measures to prevent anyone from recognizing them.

This was not the style of the Snow-Listening Pavilion. Those from the Snow-Listening Pavilion had never been afraid of others knowing that they were assassins. In fact, they often took pride in leaving a sign behind wherever they fulfilled a mission. They never used masks, and their usual approach involved disguising themselves as merchants before launching sudden attacks.

If they aren't from the Snow-Listening Pavilion, then who could be behind this attack? I'm honestly confused. These foreign merchants gathered in the market... Could they be related to foreigners? But when have I offended any foreigners? I don't think I've ever even interacted with them at all.

There's no way that it could be Tang Buqi, right?

Zhao Changhe carefully went through his list of potential enemies in his mind and was left perplexed.

Seeing that it was already getting quite late, he decided to grab a passerby to ask for directions to Bright Moon Tower.

Perhaps the Cao Gang's forces could help him find some clues... He wondered if it could be Wan Dongliu. But that did not make any sense, Wan Dongliu was currently hosting guests. It wouldn't make any sense for him to leave and attempt an assassination. Could he have sent someone? But what would be his motive?

*

“The spring breeze brings three thousand guests to paradise beneath Yangzhou's bright moon.”

Regardless of whether it was a trap or not, the Bright Moon Tower remained a top establishment of Yangzhou. The bright lights made it look like it was midday despite it being dusk. Laughter and joy filled the air as servants and waiters made their way around.

Seeing Zhao Changhe walking slowly, someone shouted loudly: “Young Hero Zhao has arrived!”

Zhao Changhe momentarily shifted his thoughts away from the assassin and found the way he was addressed somewhat amusing. This seems like the first time I've been addressed as “young hero.”

It seems quite difficult to get this title... Although it's just a show of courtesy, it feels much better than being called a bandit.

He cupped his hand and stepped inside.

Despite having chosen a prominent establishment like the Bright Moon Tower for the gathering, neither the host nor the guests had gone upstairs at this time. They were all seated in the lower hall, engaged in conversation.

As Zhao Changhe entered, all eyes turned to him, and Wan Dongliu greeted him with a hearty laugh. “Brother Zhao, you're here! Please have a seat!”

Zhao Changhe glanced around and did not see Yue Hongling anywhere. He wondered whether she had not arrived yet or Wan Dongliu had simply not invited her.

In the main seat, there was a middle-aged man he did not recognize. He thought that the man was probably Wan Dongliu's father.

Zhao Changhe cupped his hand and said, "Greetings, everyone. Brother Wan, can you introduce me to everyone?"

Wan Dongliu led him over to the middle-aged man and said, "Brother Zhao, this is our esteemed Magistrate Qian! Hearing about how the hidden dragons of the jianghu are gathering here, Magistrate Qian came specially to meet all of the outstanding individuals."

Zhao Changhe's thoughts were suddenly disrupted. Who the hell has the patience to entertain some official? How are his celestial maidens at home doing?

Despite having such thoughts, he cupped his fist casually and said, "So it's the magistrate, it's a pleasure to meet you."

Magistrate Qian observed Zhao Changhe and sneered, "You're indeed a bandit."

Zhao Changhe maintained an expressionless face and glanced at Wan Dongliu.

Wan Dongliu discreetly tugged at him, signaling him to step aside, and he then said softly, "Brother Zhao, this is my fault. I don't know why the magistrate suddenly decided to join our gathering. It's not like he came here to socialize. Sadly, I can't just refuse him, so it's quite a nuisance."

Zhao Changhe patted him on the shoulder and said, "I understand. Let's not bother with him. Could you introduce me to the others?"

Wan Dongliu led him to the other guests and said, "You've already met brother Tang... This is Daoist Priest Xuan Chong of Taiyi Sect. He's ranked twelfth on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons."

Zhao sized up the young daoist in front of him. He looked quite ordinary, with no striking features. However, seeing as he had achieved such a ranking at such a young age meant that he was the real deal. Chichi was only ranked thirteen. Additionally, similar to Wan Dongliu, these people had been at the same place on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons for a while now, so who knew what level they were really at now?

Zhao Changhe did not look down on Daoist Priest Xuan Chong, and he politely cupped his hand while saying, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

The young daoist reciprocated the courtesy, and his next words actually surprised Zhao Changhe. "It is also a pleasure to meet you. By leaving the Blood God Sect and defeating leader figures of the demonic cult, you have truly eliminated significant threats to the jianghu. Many of our generation here share this sentiment."

Zhao Changhe blinked his eyes, silently realizing something... Ever since he had left Beimang, he had been pursued by authorities, hunted by demonic cults, and targeted by assassins, but from the beginning to the end, he had never been confronted by members of the orthodox sects. It seemed that they viewed his actions as righteous and did not want to create any problems for him.

Sure, they're known as orthodox sects, but it seems like they're not too concerned about the imperial court's arrest warrant. It seems like the situation of the Demon Suppression Bureau is even more complicated than I initially thought.

Regardless, these words lifted Zhao Changhe's mood quite a bit, considering he had just survived an assassination attempt only to meet that dumbass official. He asked, "What about the others?"

"These are outstanding talents from Yangzhou. This is the Jade-Faced Divine Sword, Little White Dragon Su..."

Before Wan Dongliu finished speaking, laughter erupted from outside the door as a voice proclaimed, "Introductions? What's the point of introducing a bunch of losers?! It seems that the hidden dragons of the Central Plains[1] have an undeserved reputation. The so-called heroes of Jiangnan are a load of nonsense!"

As the voice trailed off, the door slammed open, and the two guards at the entrance were sent tumbling aside and onto the ground, groaning in pain.

Wan Dongliu, who had been constantly jovial and welcoming, suddenly had a grim expression on his face. He muttered, "Who is the river-crossing dragon that dares cause trouble in the territory of the Cao Gang?"

A group of a dozen men barged in through the door, all of them with exotic hairstyles and foreign clothes. It was clear from first glance that they were not natives of the Central Plains.

Zhao Changhe's curiosity was piqued.

It seemed like the person who had attempted to assassinate him earlier had sought refuge among the foreigners earlier. Now, a group of foreigners had intruded on Wan Dongliu's turf...

He turned his head and glanced at Magistrate Qian. He could not help but wonder about the real reason the man was here today.

Chapter 115: A Brimming Hall With Three Thousand Guests

Everyone was looking at the foreigners who had just barged in.

Two individuals led the group, one tall and one short. The taller one stood at an imposing nine chi tall, with an exposed upper body revealing bulging muscles. His biceps were so massive that they could rival an average person's thigh. He carried an unusually large saber on his back, and he basically looked like a larger version of Zhao Changhe.

Zhao Changhe craned his neck to size up the man, realizing that he would barely reach the man's chest. However, the size of the tall man's saber did not seem to surpass that of Dragon Bird, so the proportions did not make him appear as extraordinary... He could not help but sense Dragon Bird feeling quite proud of itself and eager for a fight. Its saber qi was nearly surging out.

Damn, just because you're a bit bigger, you're acting all proud and haughty...

The shorter man was only shorter in comparison to the giant beside him. In reality, though, he stood at over seven chi tall, which was a fair bit taller than the average person. He had a certain air of sophistication about him.

Hearing Wan Dongliu's questioning tone, he replied with a polite smile, "We heard that in the Central Plains, martial arts are flourishing, and although we are here to do business, we also admire your prowess. We heard that the young master of the Wan Clan has invited renowned heroes of Yangzhou to gather at the Bright Moon Tower. We felt that it would be a grand event and we were eager to come and take a look. Could it be that the heroes of Yangzhou are afraid of us merchants?"

Wan Dongliu sneered and said, “We are friends gathering for a drink. We did not gather here to compare our martial arts! You come and disturb our gathering, and you still want to do business in Yangzhou!”

Suddenly, he drew his sword and called out, “Members of the Cao Gang, here...”

The shorter man chuckled, interrupting him, “See, this is exactly what we were talking about. The hidden dragons of the central plains truly do have an undeserved reputation. Despite there being so many heroes listed on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons present here, none of them dare to engage in a one-on-one fight and instead plan to gang up on us. How can they still have the gall to boast of their martial prowess? It’s ridiculous, truly ridiculous!”

Wan Dongliu was about to respond when he suddenly heard the voice of Magistrate Qian come from behind him. “Dongliu, what he said is not entirely wrong. There’s no harm in a friendly contest to demonstrate the might of the Great Xia Empire.”

Wan Dongliu frowned, and Xuan Chong, Tang Buqi, and the others shared his concern.

This is too risky. Who knows what level the opponents are at? What if there’s someone from the Ranking of Heaven or Ranking of Earth mixed in among them? Are we supposed to just entertain them?

But then, the man on the other side laughed and said, “We, the heroes of the Grasslands[1], do not play any of those fancy tricks of yours. Hidden dragons will only face hidden dragons.”

The nine-chi-tall man next to him shouted thunderously, “Batu is here, who dares to fight me?!”

Whispers and murmurs filled the air among the bystanders.

The Tome of Troubled Times enveloped the world, so the Ranking of Hidden Dragons was naturally not limited to the characters of the Central Plains. This individual appeared to be a genuine hidden dragon—the 99th Hidden Dragon, known as Batu the Wild Lion.

Tang Buqi could not contain himself any longer and exclaimed, “I’ll take you on!”

The 120th hidden dragon had been looking for someone stronger to hone his skills. When he challenged Zhao Changhe, it was partially for that reason. Batu, who was the 99th hidden dragon, was a much more suitable match than Zhao Changhe. He still could not help feeling angry every time he looked at Zhao Changhe. There was no better time to fight than now!

Swish, swish, swish!

As soon as he went forward, Tang Buqi unleashed a famous move from the Spring Water Sword Art called Infinite Parting Sorrow.

One sword turned into three, and the three turned into infinity. In an instant, Batu was surrounded by countless glimmering sword lights.

The spectators nodded slightly, feeling that this would be an intense battle. After all, the Ranking of Hidden Dragons was not an absolute indicator of strength, it could only be used as a reference. The gap between the ranks 99 and 120 was actually quite small, and the Tang Clan's Spring Water Sword Art was not to be underestimated...

However, Zhao Changhe shook his head slightly, not holding high hopes at all.

While Tang Buqi did have decent strength, he lacked the experience of life-and-death battles. The day the young man challenged him, he could not even impose a hint of pressure. On the other hand, the tall man Tang Buqi was facing was a completely different story...

Before Zhao Changhe could finish his thoughts, a furious shout reverberated as Batu drew his saber and swung it fiercely.

Tang Buqi's sword lights were already nearing Batu's throat. However, Batu's slash did not discriminate, nor did it care which of the sword lights was real. He confronted Tang Buqi directly with the intent of exchanging blow for blow!

Though clearly possessing superior swordsmanship and having the initial advantage, Tang Buqi was forced to evade, dodging to his right

However, Batu's seemingly heavy downward slash effortlessly turned into a horizontal slash, chasing directly after Tang Buqi!

Caught off guard, Tang Buqi had no choice but to block the attack by holding his sword vertically. However, did his longsword really have any chance of blocking such a saber?

Clang!

Fortunately, Tang Buqi was at least using a treasured sword of the Tang Clan. It bent, but it did not break. He narrowly pulled his sword back and retreated.

Batu took another step forward, relentlessly pursuing Tang Buqi.

“Stop!”

A cold light shot directly toward Batu’s face. Daoist Priest Xuan Chong was afraid that Tang Buqi was really going to be cut in half, so he took action urgently.

Clang!

A dark red scimitar suddenly appeared in the path of Xuan Chong’s sword path, mysteriously diverting his sword away. Xuan Chong could not withstand the peculiar dragging force of the scimitar and staggered back two steps before he could finally regain his footing. He turned around in shock and exclaimed, “Spirit Fox Blade! You’re Fox Spirit Chi Li!”

It was the very man who had used words to provoke a one-on-one battle. He nodded with a smile. “Indeed, that’s me.”

The entire place was in an uproar.

It was Chi Li. First on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons!

Moreover, he had reached first place at the age of twenty and had been holding the position firmly for two years. He was still only twenty-two years old!

There was nothing wrong with hidden dragons facing hidden dragons, but him being first on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons completely changed things!

Amidst the shock and awe, Chi Li turned his head and glanced at Tang Buqi.

When Xuan Chong attempted to save Tang Buqi, Chi Li had stopped him. However, Tang Buqi had not been sliced in two by Batu's slash. A scar-faced man was now in front of Tang Buqi, seemingly protecting him. He was carrying a saber even larger than Batu's, but he had not even drawn his saber yet.

Batu seemed somewhat wary of the scar-faced man, and he had halted his pursuit.

Is the scarface Zhao Changhe? I missed what happened just now, so I have no idea how he managed to save Tang Buqi from Batu. He even managed to make Batu feel wary...

Right after Chi Li had this thought, he watched as Tang Buqi, feeling both embarrassed and angry, pointed at Batu and said, "Based on your strength and speed, you should already be at the fifth layer of the Profound Gate. You aren't at the fourth layer like you were when you were ranked 99th on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons! This was an unfair victory!"

Batu looked at him as if he was a complete moron. "Just because the Tome of Troubled Times said that I was at the fourth layer of the Profound Gate eight months ago doesn't mean that I still have to be at the fourth layer now. If I hadn't made any progress in eight months, then how would I be worthy of being called a hidden dragon? If anything, I think my progress is pretty slow!"

Tang Buqi, whose strength was overwhelmingly inferior and now even had his intelligence mocked, felt so ashamed and angry that he wanted to dig a hole and hide inside.

Chi Li chuckled lightly and looked at Xuan Chong, "Daoist priest, it seems that the outcome of their battle has been decided. Shall we continue?"

Xuan Chong frowned.

He knew that he was no match for Chi Li.

First Hidden Dragon... These three words could leave those of the same generation breathless.

Chi Li glanced at Zhao Changhe, but his gaze showed no intention of fighting against someone who was ranked in the 80s. He then looked at Wan Dongliu. “Mister Wan, would you like to have a match?”

Wan Dongliu said indifferently, “I am no match for the First Hidden Dragon.”

Chi Li looked up to the sky and laughed, “This is exactly why I said that the hidden dragons of the Central Plains have an undeserved reputation. Your heroes truly are nothing special! Batu, let’s go.”

The bystanders all fell silent, and everyone glared at Chi Li with fiery eyes, clenching their fists tightly.

However, within this silence, they heard the sound of hooves approaching rapidly on the blue stone tiles. Chi Li’s laughter gradually stopped, and his gaze held some surprise.

In actuality, his laughter was not mere laughter—it was intended on and fully capable of sowing shadows in these people’s hearts. And yet, the mere sound of this horse’s hooves had prevented him from doing that. Could it be some renowned master from the Ranking of Man?

The sound of horse hooves ceased, and a clear and melodious female voice sounded from outside the door, “Who said that the hidden dragons of the Central Plains have an undeserved reputation?”

Following these words, a woman in a red dress strode in through the door. Her sword qi was already surging into the sky before she even made it through the door.

Her stunning beauty eclipsed the bright moon, causing all of the beauties in the building to feel ashamed.

Her captivating eyes swept over Chi Li, and the first person they landed on was actually Zhao Changhe, who gave her a faint smile in response.

The newcomer then politely greeted Wan Dongliu, “Pardon me for barging in, Young Gang Leader Wan. I came here to ask you for a drink.”

Wan Dongliu laughed loudly, “My best wine is waiting for you!”

Chi Li looked at the newcomer with a somewhat solemn expression. He did not expect that the person who put such pressure on him was actually a brave and beautiful woman. The guest list he had seen did not include this person.

He spoke slowly, "May I know who you are?"

The newcomer finally glanced at him and replied indifferently: "I am Yue Hongling of the Central Plains!"