

## T. Times 121

### Chapter 121: The Magistrate Assassinated

Zhao Changhe felt that this big sister of his was becoming increasingly tsundere.

He was not the same inexperienced young man that he had been when he had first arrived in this world. He could somewhat sense and understand the turmoil in Yue Hongling's heart.

The atmosphere clearly indicated that they were now in a kind of situationship where he was pursuing her and she accepted that. Even though she had said "It's just the first step," now that she had expressed her hope of adventuring together with someone in the future, it was clear that, in a way, they were starting to work toward that goal. The feeling of suddenly entering such a relationship must have taken her by surprise, and it seemed that she had not been mentally prepared for it.

Heh... She looks really cute with her head tilted like that.

She was no longer the indomitable heroine that had been deeply rooted in his mind. At that moment, with her slightly flushed face and her bashful and evasive gaze, she was more like the clear moon in the water rather than the one high up in the sky—still bright and untouchable, but closer, and giving off a gentle, rippling radiance.

Zhao Changhe did not know how much of what he had said today was scripted and how much was genuine. He also had no idea if he would have the opportunity to make a few more advances...

After all, this was Yue Hongling. The person he respected the most in the world, the reflection of his chivalrous dreams.

Even though she was a little younger than him, he did not show the slightest hint of disrespect toward her and was even willing to call her "big sister." While he dared to talk freely in front of Tang Wanzhuang, he did not dare do the same with Yue Hongling. Without the teasing and the urging from those people, the words he had said earlier may have never been uttered.

But all he knew right now was that he really wanted to hug her.

“Weren’t you going to go look for a bow? What are you doing staring at me like that?!” Yue Hongling finally could not withstand the way he kept looking at her side profile, and she turned her head angrily. “I told you that it’s just the first step! We both clearly know—”

“I know, I know,” Zhao Changhe interrupted her rant before it started. “Let’s go and find Wan Dongliu... No, actually, let’s find Tang Buqi. I’ll borrow a bow from him, and I can also ask him to help us. Chi Li isn’t easy to kill, and those of the Tang Clan can command the Demon Suppression Bureau here, which would be a great help.”

Seeing that he was getting back to the matters at hand, Yue Hongling finally calmed down a bit. With her mind still in a bit of a mess, she asked, “Why not find Wan Dongliu instead? He’s the real local expert here. Besides, I saw that he really wanted to kill Chi Li just now.”

“Wan Dongliu is a bit unpredictable... It’s hard to say whether he wants to kill Chi Li because he’s a foreigner or out of revenge for creating trouble in his territory. With the magistrate overseeing things, he might not be willing to take action. On the other hand, I trust the Demon Suppression Bureau when it comes to matters involving foreigners and the Maitreya Cult.”

Yue Hongling playfully rolled her eyes and chuckled softly, responding with a soft “Mm-hm.”

Having someone to discuss things with is... quite nice.

It was not difficult to find the place where Tang Buqi was. He had his quarters nearby, in the mansion of the Wu family, a large local family in Yangzhou. At the moment, he was lying in the garden, with two young maids feeding him grapes, and he looked like he was having a pretty good time.

When he was informed that Yue Hongling and Zhao Changhe were visiting, Tang Buqi said, “Invite them in.”

He was in a great mood. He had actually been the one to tease and provoke Zhao Changhe the most during the banquet earlier. Zhao Changhe’s relationship with Yue Hongling was still unclear, but when it came to his aunt, he felt certain that there was absolutely no chance that Zhao Changhe would be in a romantic relationship with her. Aunt, this is as far as your nephew can help you.

The two were quickly led into the garden. Zhao Changhe felt sour when he saw Tang Buqi lying on the deck chair, being fed grapes by the young maids. Damn it, this guy is living the life! Meanwhile, the best thing I’ve gotten since reincarnating is the freedom to do whatever I want.

“Hey, little nephew, is this how you treat your guests? You just lie around like this even when they’re right before you? I want to eat some grapes too.”

Tang Buqi glanced at Yue Hongling and said leisurely, “Everyone has their own grapes. There are some grapes that even I would never dare to have any ideas about. I’d like to see if you have what it takes to get the good ones.”

Yue Hongling: “?”

Tang Buqi said, “Miss Yue, I’m four years older than this guy. Do you know the reason why he calls me ‘nephew’ all the time?”

Yue Hongling was stunned for a moment. “I don’t know. Is it a joke?”

Zhao Changhe glared at Tang Buqi, but Tang Buqi ignored him and said leisurely, “I have an aunt who is incredibly beautiful and talented. With him calling me ‘nephew,’ what do you think he’s up to?”

Zhao Changhe’s teeth were grinding against each other so hard that it sounded like they might just shatter. Damn it, I was just joking around to break the ice between us. He’s taking it too far!

Yue Hongling, on the other hand, paused for a moment and then suddenly burst into laughter. “How interesting! Your aunt must be... hoho, First Seat Tang herself! Well... they are indeed a perfect match! Perfect match, indeed!”

Tang Buqi’s eyes nearly popped out of his head when he saw how she reacted. He was so shocked that a grape got stuck in his throat, and he nearly choked to death.

Zhao Changhe could not bear watching and looked away.

A woman’s heart is as deep as the sea. You think she’s like Cui Yuanyang, but I think all she wants right now is to kick me away.

However, when Tang Buqi heard what she said, all he thought was, What a magnanimous woman! Where can I ever find a woman like her?

Tang Buqi was on the verge of tears as he finally managed to cough up the grape that got stuck in his throat. Gasping for breath, he asked, “What are you two here for? Do you want me to feed you grapes or what?”

Zhao Changhe asked, “Do you have a good bow?”

“Why?”

“We’re dealing with Chi Li. Do you want to help or not?”

Tang Buqi immediately jumped to his feet and ordered those around him, “Go find Uncle Wu and borrow the best bow he has!”

He hurriedly straightened his disheveled clothes and asked, “What’s the plan? Should I gather more people?”

“There’s no need to rush. Wait until it gets a bit later into the night. It’s still the dog hour.[1] Our dinner ended quite early,” Zhao Changhe said. “We suspect that they might be hiding in the magistrate’s residence. The Tang Clan and the Demon Suppression Bureau are not suitable for this task. We just need someone to provide us with support and cover on the outside.”

Tang Buqi hesitated for a moment. “You... You can’t just go and kill the magistrate.”

Zhao Changhe glanced at him. What can you possibly do with you this way?

However, he did not say a word. This was the difference between their thinking and that of the Tang Clan. Tang Wanzhuang had numerous matters that she had to deal with but couldn’t because of all kinds of considerations.

Zhao Changhe actually did intend to kill the corrupt official should the opportunity present itself. If Chi Li was not there, he did not want to return empty-handed. In that case, he would just kill the magistrate. It would be a swift affair.

“Alright, it’s still early. Do you have any quiet rooms you can lend us?”

Tang Buqi’s eyes flickered between the two of them. “What... What do you plan to do in a quiet room at this time? Hey, you—”

Yue Hongling could not bear it anymore and said angrily, “I need to take care of my injuries!”

“Ahem, yes, sorry.” Tang Buqi turned to Zhao Changhe awkwardly. “What about you?”

Zhao Changhe said expressionlessly, “I want my own quiet room. I got quite excited while you were enjoying grapes, and I might need to take care of things myself. So, keep this in mind, if there’s anyone who peeps into my room, our friendship is over.”

Yue Hongling tilted her head, while Tang Buqi said with exasperation, “Who would want to peep at you doing that stuff? Alright, follow me.”

Of course, Zhao Changhe did not actually plan to do anything indecent in the private room. Since they were going to be dealing with Chi Li, he wanted to review the scenes on the gold foil to gather information.

He trusted Tang Buqi not to spy on him. At the very least, he believed that he would not be bored enough to do so.

In the quiet room, Zhao Changhe took out the gold foil.

As expected, different scenes appeared on the gold foil.

There was a recording from the day before, showing Tang Buqi’s thrust and his counterattack with his saber.

There was a recording of his battle with Batu, which also included the moment when he intervened to save Tang Buqi from Batu’s saber.

There was also a recording of the duel between Chi Li and Yue Hongling, as well as the entire process of him throwing his saber between them. As for the earlier battles, they had been overwritten.

But some things were missing... For example, the battle between Batu and Tang Buqi, as well as the part when Xuan Chong saved Tang Buqi and was intercepted by Chi Li.

Clearly, only the parts where he participated would be displayed. The gold foil was not a video recorder, but rather his personal battle recorder.

In the battle between Yue Hongling and Chi Li, his intervention had a significant impact on the battle, so the gold foil probably considered him a participant in their battle and recorded it, even going as far as recording the entire battle. As for the battle between Batu and Tang Buqi, it had actually been disrupted by Xuan Chong. Since he had not actively participated in the fight, but only intervened to save Tang Buqi, it had only recorded that particular moment.

The internal logic of the gold foil was quite clear.

He had not been certain at first, but he now knew for sure that throwing his saber between them had been a great decision.

Watching their battle in slow motion allowed him to study and learn to his heart's content without the pressure of real-time combat. He knew that, sooner or later, he would catch up to them and even surpass them.

As he watched Yue Hongling's skillful and resolute swordplay, Zhao Changhe became deeply absorbed in learning whatever he could from the recording.

He also tried to understand the nuances of Chi Li's scimitar. He could not figure out whether the scimitar just had some illusory effects or if it was genuine spatial manipulation. The way the blade formed a circle seemingly instantly was incredibly mysterious.

It soon came time for them to begin moving.

There was suddenly a knock on his door, and Tang Buqi's voice sounded. "Why are you taking so long to rub one out?!"

“...”

Zhao Changhe put away the gold foil. “I’m almost done, you can go ahead.”

“What the fuck do you mean go ahead?!” shouted Tang Buqi. “The magistrate has been assassinated. Yangzhou is in chaos!”

## Chapter 122: Game of Chess

The assassination of the magistrate was a grave matter, only second in seriousness to the murder of the suspected prince. No, it was perhaps even more serious. After all, Luo Zhenwu was only rumored to be a prince, and the court had never made it clear if it was true or not. On the other hand, the person who had been assassinated this time was a genuine magistrate, a fourth-rank official, and he was even in charge of an important water transport hub. His status was far greater than that of a magistrate in whatever remote area.

This incident symbolized a blatant disregard for authority and an affront to imperial dignity, so no further explanation was needed—this was rebellion.

The Demon Suppression Bureau had established a cordon, locking down the area within ten li of the crime scene. The entire city was filled with tension, and the city’s defense forces were mobilized, sealing off all of the city gates.

Taking advantage of his status, Tang Buqi sneaked into the crime scene together with Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling.

The head of the Demon Suppressing Bureau in Yangzhou was named Gong Chaoqun. He was the middle-aged man who had previously warned Zhao Changhe about the Maitreya Cult’s illusion arts. Despite the seemingly trivial outcome of that incident, he held a high rank within the Demon Suppression Bureau, and he even surpassed Yue Hongling in cultivation level.

There were many people on the Ranking of Man who had reached the ninth layer of the Profound Gate. Meanwhile, those who were at this level of cultivation but were not on the ranking were often referred to as being “close to the Ranking of Man.”

However, in reality, the gap between those at the ninth layer could be massive. After all, even among the individuals on the Ranking of Man with a cultivation at the ninth layer of the Profound

Gate, there were differences in rankings, and the gap between those on the Ranking of Man and ordinary ninth-layer martial artists was often even more outrageous the gap between Zhao Changhe and Cui Yuanyang when they were both at the third layer.

For example, it was widely known that half a year ago, Yue Hongling had defeated a ninth-layer martial artist despite being at a lower level of cultivation.

For that reason, the words “close to the Ranking of Man” were really not worth much in general. Chi Li claimed to have killed many who were “close to the Ranking of Man” along his journey, but most of them were probably very far from it.

However, Gong Chaoqun was indeed close to the Ranking of Man, and he was genuinely recognized as such, making him one of Tang Wanzhuang’s highly regarded generals.

Upon seeing Tang Buqi come with Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling, Gong Chaoqun did not say much but subtly nodded to Zhao Changhe. In his mind, Zhao Changhe was a secret agent working for the Demon Suppression Bureau, and the chief had even given him secret instructions for Zhao Changhe. Since Tang Buqi was the chief’s eldest nephew, and he was even accompanied by the renowned heroine Yue Hongling, their presence could be considered a significant aid.

Little did he know that if the magistrate had not died half an hour earlier, they might have become the ones responsible for killing him.

Zhao Changhe, armed with a saber and a bow, had a somewhat displeased expression on his face. He had been looking forward to secretly infiltrating the magistrate’s mansion at night with Yue Hongling, plotting an assassination together. Just the thought of it was both thrilling and romantic, but now someone had beaten them to the punch. Regardless, he couldn’t just curse at the perpetrator either; what they had done could be considered a righteous act, at least from his perspective.

“Uncle Gong, have you discovered anything?” Tang Buqi asked.

“Magistrate Qian was killed by an arrow,” Gong Chaoqun replied. “As he was about to enter the courtyard of his concubine, he was shot in the back of the head by someone on the opposite rooftop. The arrow was extremely powerful, penetrating through the back of his skull. After shooting the arrow, the assassin made a clean escape almost instantly, they ran away before the guards could even gather around. It was an extremely clean and efficient operation.”



Zhao Changhe secretly thought that if he had been the one there, the magistrate would have probably met the same fate.

Gong Chaoqun glanced at the bow that Zhao Changhe was carrying and continued, "The long corridor from Magistrate Qian's residence to the concubine's chambers is covered in vines and has low visibility. The moment he paused to enter the door was the best opportunity. The shot was exceptionally well-executed, accurate and ruthless. The perpetrator is undoubtedly someone skilled with a bow and arrow. In fact, I believe they likely have archery skills superior to yours, Young Hero Zhao."

Zhao Changhe did not find the remark offensive in the slightest. After all, he did not often use the bow and arrow, and he had mainly practiced the saber lately, so there were obviously many people better than him. What crossed his mind at this moment was the memory of the blue-masked assassin who had shot an arrow at him. That arrow had been truly formidable. Without Dragon Bird's warning, he may have fallen to that arrow.

Could it be that person?

However, others did not know of the blue-masked assassin. Tang Buqi's first reaction was, "Since they're skilled with the bow and arrow, could they be a northern barbarian?"

It seemed unlikely for the northern barbarians to be the ones to have killed Magistrate Qian, but Tang Buqi was willing to pin the blame on them. In fact, nobody really knew whether or not Magistrate Qian had dealings with the northern barbarians, so if they spread the story that he was killed by them, both the common people and the imperial court might believe it.

This could be a way to close the case neatly while also potentially bringing more attention to the actions of Chi Li and the other barbarians who were causing trouble in the Central Plains.

Gong Chaoqun's expression took on a hint of amusement, and he asked Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling, "Both of you fought against the northern barbarians today. Do you have any thoughts on this matter?"

Zhao Changhe said, "What if I told you that a few hours ago, near the foreigners' market, someone nearly took my life with a bow and arrow?"

Yue Hongling's expression changed instantly. "Are you being serious?"

“Yes.”

Gong Chaoqun also appeared intrigued by what Zhao Changhe just revealed. He pondered for a moment and said, “If you had truly died from such a misfortunate event, we would definitely have placed the suspicion on foreigners... And if the magistrate were then to be assassinated in the same manner...”

Even though Gong Chaoqun did not continue, everyone understood what he was implying. It was clear that the perpetrator who had killed the magistrate was trying to shift the blame onto the foreigners, specifically the northern barbarians. They had laid the groundwork for tonight’s assassination of the magistrate by shooting at Zhao Changhe earlier, but they had not anticipated that Zhao Changhe would actually evade their attack.

As for why they targeted Zhao Changhe in particular, no one knew for sure. Could it be that they were aware of his identity as a secret agent of the Demon Suppression Bureau?

From this point of view, it seemed that the other party’s motive was rather complex. In any case, it was definitely not just the magistrate’s behavior at the banquet tonight. Originally, Tang Buqi had been a little suspicious of Wan Dongliu and Xuan Chong, but now it did not seem like it was them.

Tang Buqi thought for a while, then lowered his voice and said, “Uncle Gong, how about we just go along with the idea of pinning the blame onto the northern barbarians? It would provide a convenient excuse to eliminate all the barbarians in the area. The one who killed Magistrate Qian did a righteous... uh, I mean, well...”

You wanted to say that they did a righteous act anyway, right? In other words, you want to avoid a thorough investigation.

Zhao Changhe was beginning to appreciate Tang Buqi more and more. Even if this guy lives quite extravagantly, has no fighting experience, and keeps trying to pick a fight with me and provoke a conflict between me and Yue Hongling... at least... Wait, no. Damn it, this guy is horrible!

Yue Hongling spoke up, “If this were an ordinary situation, I would support your proposal. However, this time is different.”

Tang Buqi: “Hm?”

Yue Hongling said calmly, "They tried to kill Changhe."

Tang Buqi: "..."

Zhao Changhe was left speechless, tears welling up in his eyes. Look, this is a true ally!

Gong Chaoqun asked Zhao Changhe thoughtfully, "What are your thoughts on this matter, Young Hero Zhao?"

Tang Buqi gave Gong Chaoqun a strange look. He wondered why Gong Chaoqun had asked Zhao Changhe twice for his opinion. Just because he calls me nephew doesn't mean that he's actually my uncle, does it? Why do you care so much about his opinion?

Zhao Changhe said, "I'm fine with pinning the blame on the northern barbarians, considering the circumstances. However, since they tried to kill me, even if we do officially place the blame on the barbarians, I still must investigate and find out who the real culprit is."

Gong Chaoqun nodded.

With both the young master of the Tang Clan and the jade token undercover agent in agreement, he also found that framing the northern barbarians had many benefits.

But then, Zhao Changhe added, "Haven't we overlooked something?"

Gong Chaoqun, being an experienced investigator, immediately knew what Zhao Changhe was getting at. "Are you referring to that concubine?"

"Yes. If what I know is correct, there should be a celestial maiden from the Maitreya Cult by the side of the magistrate. According to the Maitreya Cult's manner of seducing people, I feel that the magistrate may just look for her every night. In other words, that concubine may very well be that celestial maiden."

Gong Chaoqun revealed a smile. "Indeed, we have already detained her. She's also quite unlucky. The magistrate died right at the door of her room, so she couldn't just run away. If she had, she

would have been suspected of assassinating the magistrate and fleeing. She could only stay there helplessly waiting for us to interrogate her. During our interrogation, we immediately found out her actual identity, so it's really unfortunate for her. She just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"So, technically, the magistrate died right in front of the celestial maiden's bed. Can we shift some of the blame onto the Maitreya Cult?" Zhao Changhe mumbled to himself. "We can say that the Maitreya Cult colluded with the barbarians to assassinate the magistrate, intending to launch a rebellion from both inside and outside the empire. The real culprit has already arranged an entire story for the Demon Suppression Bureau. Even the entire army within the city has been mobilized due to the magistrate's death, and they're ready to suppress the 'rebels' at any time... Meanwhile, the northern barbarians and those from the Maitreya Cult are clueless, thinking that they had nothing to do with the magistrate's death."

Tang Buqi was somewhat moved when he heard this. "So the timing of the magistrate's assassination was actually on purpose? They knew that the magistrate would visit the celestial maiden's chambers at that time!"

"Mm-hm, it appears to be a well-thought-out move by someone who understands the magistrate's daily routine." Zhao Changhe looked at Gong Chaoqun. "The question now is, should the Demon Suppressing Bureau cooperate and accept this 'gift' delivered to your doorstep by the enemy?"

## Chapter 123: Maitreya's Troubles

Gong Chaoqun simply could not find any reason not to accept this great "gift."

This "gift" would not only reduce his massive headache, but from a professional standpoint, it was also a great excuse to close the case while satisfying both the imperial court and the public. The story neatly fit together, and it was the type of narrative that would be readily accepted by the masses.

As for the overall situation, while it might not have a significant impact on the entire Maitreya Cult, at least the situation in Yangzhou would be brought under control for the most part. Gong Chaoqun feared that, if they continued not doing anything, he might just wake up one day to find Yangzhou filled with believers of the Maitreya Cult. He worried that even his own head might end up as a sacrifice if that were to happen.

However, the corrupt magistrate's connections with the Maitreya Cult had made it incredibly difficult for Gong Chaoqun and the Demon Suppression Bureau to investigate their activities. He had long wanted to kick that troublemaker of a magistrate to death.

Additionally, from a patriotic perspective, killing the barbarians was a righteous act.

No matter how he looked at it, this situation was perfect. It was even so perfect that Gong Chaoqun was tempted to give the real culprit a kiss for carrying out the crime so meticulously.

As for finding the real culprit, I won't even need to worry myself over that anymore. I'll just leave it to Zhao Changhe.

Seeing that Gong Chaoqun was clearly unable to refuse this "gift," Zhao Changhe smiled and said nothing more. After all, anyone would have made the same choice in his situation.

He actually had another thought in mind, something he did not say aloud because he knew it would not make a difference even if he did: Have you ever thought about why the real culprit is being so considerate? What benefit do they gain from this elaborate scheme? Why are they going to such lengths just to commit murder without getting caught? Even if they did not set things up this way, it would still be challenging to figure out who they are.

Gong Chaoqun, being an experienced member of the serious crimes division, could not possibly have overlooked these things. However, given the clear benefits of the given situation, he simply chose not to worry about it too much.

Yue Hongling did not have a better plan either. Whether it was dealing with the Maitreya Cult or those from the northern barbarian tribes, she found both equally appealing. As for finding the real culprit, she could just help Zhao Changhe with his investigations afterward. She finally said, "I recently discovered the Maitreya Cult's stronghold. It's located ten li to the east of the city at the White Lotus Temple."

"So it really is there! I've long suspected it, but the magistrate went to great lengths to cover it up," Gong Chaoqun exclaimed. "Today, we'll uproot the Maitreya Cult in Yangzhou!"

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The case of the magistrate's assassination was solved within the hour.

The magistrate's concubine was identified as a celestial maiden of the Maitreya Cult by the Demon Suppression Bureau. Under interrogation, she confessed to using the secret arts of the Maitreya Cult to control the magistrate and drain his true essence.

She also revealed that, under her influence and guidance, the magistrate had intentionally acted in various ways that resulted in the destruction of many households. Eventually, he had been taken in by the Maitreya Cult to strengthen their ranks.

Through all kinds of exploitation, they had managed to enrich not only the magistrate himself, but the Maitreya Cult as well.

Of course, none of these things was an invention. Everything was true.

Even those who had once forsaken their lives as courtesans to join the Maitreya Cult, like Ruyan, were drawn into this unfolding drama.

As soon as the news broke out, Yangzhou was in an uproar, and countless followers of the Maitreya Cult were left dumbfounded. Even Ruyan, who had been entertaining guests in the Xiaoxiang Pavilion when she heard the news, was in shock.

Of course, while this was the news that had spread, the magistrate's concubine had actually revealed even more shocking information.

She also confessed to noticing signs that the magistrate was breaking free from their control. When the Maitreya Cult got word of this, they grew to harbor malicious intentions and conspired with the northern barbarians, led by Chi Li, to assassinate the magistrate in his own residence.

While this narrative had logical gaps that required further consideration, it was seamlessly intertwined with the genuine information that no one could question. Gong Chaoqun was going to provide additional details when reporting to the imperial court.

For now, their immediate task was to convince the military commander.

Despite the long-standing laxity from the prosperity of the city, the military had actually not been infiltrated too deeply by the Maitreya Cult. This was actually a crucial factor that had prevented the cult from staging an outright rebellion thus far.

No matter how weak an army was, it was still an army. Just having a large number of people was very useful.

The Maitreya Cult had not yet formed a military organization, and they were still operating mainly as a secret society within random households. When the military began a massive citywide crackdown on followers of the Maitreya Cult, the cult was caught off guard, with little resistance to offer.

Even with all that going on, there was still some spare manpower, and hundreds of powerful bows and crossbows were distributed among them. Then, with the support of over a hundred elite personnel of the Demon Suppression Bureau, Zhao Changhe, Yue Hongling, and a few others, they headed straight for the White Lotus Temple, located ten li to the east of the city.

Fa Yuan was feeling a little restless in the temple today.

He was aware of the assassination of the magistrate, as well as the fact that the city was now under strict lockdown. However, the Demon Suppression Bureau had taken exceptionally extensive measures to keep information within the city, causing the outside world to still be unaware of the details of the assassination. Naturally, he had no way of knowing that the magistrate had died right before the door of their cult's celestial maiden.

In Fa Yuan's mind, this was certainly not the work of their Maitreya Cult. It was inconceivable that they would evacuate everyone just because of this incident. Instead, he was more concerned about the possibility of the magistrate's celestial maiden being discovered by the Demon Suppression Bureau. He was contemplating how to rescue her without drawing too much attention.

There were many other officials in the city who were followers of their Maitreya Cult. With their help, it would be relatively easy to safely rescue the innocent celestial maiden.

In Fa Yuan's view, assassinating the magistrate was an incredibly foolish move. Their Maitreya Cult had invested a considerable amount of effort into pulling the magistrate to their side, and now, that effort was wasted. He had not even been useful for a few years and he was already dead.

Fa Yuan could not help but start wondering just how much time and effort they would need to take hold of the next magistrate that the imperial court sent to preside over Yangzhou.

If the cult leader had already initiated his plans, then Fa Yuan would not have minded the magistrate's death. In that case, he could just raise his hands and command the followers to take control of the city. However, since their leader had yet to act, he was in a difficult position. He could not decide whether to advance or retreat.

Chi Li sat nearby, observing Fa Yuan's restless pacing. He said coldly, "You should just take my suggestion. Abbot, now is the time to act. You should immediately move to either occupy Yangzhou or evacuate."

Yes, it was Chi Li.

As it turned out, the Maitreya Cult really was collaborating with the northern barbarians. Chi Li indeed feared trouble after getting injured, but he did not hide in the magistrate's residence. Rather, he sought shelter in the White Lotus Temple.

Fa Yuan shook his head. "Your Khan has yet to dispatch his troops, and our cult leader has yet to say anything. How can I act out on my own in Yangzhou?"

"Then you should evacuate. Your celestial maiden is trapped in the magistrate's residence. The Demon Suppression Bureau is not to be underestimated. You should not even hope that you can rescue her. If you care to listen to me, I'm telling you to prepare for the worst. She has likely been discovered by the Demon Suppression Bureau and they have her now."

"Even if they find out that she's a celestial maiden of the Maitreya Cult, that should not be enough cause for us to immediately evacuate, right?"

In fact, Chi Li also did not believe the people of the Central Plains to be that ruthless. He did not think that they would simply disregard the real culprit and directly pin the blame for the assassination on him and the Maitreya Cult. In his mind, this incident had absolutely nothing to do with him. In addition, the magistrate was, in fact, someone from his side, so he was actually quite angered by the man's death.

However, the keen instincts he had developed through years of life and death experiences made him feel uneasy about the situation. He could not pinpoint the exact reason, but he had a strong sense that he had to act now or something horrible awaited him.

Seeing that Fa Yuan was unconvinced, Chi Li knew that he could not be persuaded, so he directly stood up and said, "Then we shall be on our way."



Fa Yuan was puzzled, “Why?”

Chi Li shook his head, “It’s just my intuition. I’m getting a feeling as if I were being stalked by a pack of wolves on the Grasslands. I’m getting goosebumps all over. If you believe me, then leave. Otherwise, we will just leave by ourselves. I can’t say anything to convince you, anyway.”

After saying that, he quickly left together with Batu and the others.

Just moments after they left, sounds of battle erupted outside. Hundreds of archers armed with powerful bows and crossbows surrounded the White Lotus Temple. The elite personnel of the Demon Suppression Bureau stormed into the temple, with Gong Chaoqun at the forefront, kicking open the temple gates and shouting, “Zhang Banfo, come out and face your death!”

#### Chapter 124: Realm of True Void

When they actually began their attack on the White Lotus Temple, Yue Hongling felt grateful that she had exercised caution when investigating the temple earlier and had not taken any direct action.

Although the temple appeared to only have a few hundred monks, each one of them was actually a formidable warrior. Fa Yuan and Gong Chaoqun were evenly matched, and to everyone’s surprise, despite being caught off guard and forced to defend hastily, they managed to hold their ground against the full-scale assault of the Demon Suppression Bureau! As they fought, they managed to gradually retreat toward the back of the temple.

If not for the hundreds of archers provided by the army for support, the Demon Suppression Bureau alone would not have been able to clean out this troublesome hideout. It was no wonder Gong Chaoqun often found his hands tied when dealing with the affairs of the Maitreya Cult.

Yue Hongling found it difficult to understand why the monks of the White Lotus Temple were so strong.

The Maitreya Cult was not like the major sects and clans that nurtured their disciples from a young age, nor was it like the Demon Suppression Bureau, which carefully selected talented individuals to join their ranks.

The Maitreya Cult’s recruits came from all walks of life. Some were criminals, while others were innocent civilians. Only a portion of them even had any martial skills before joining the cult. The

majority of them were poor farmers or fishermen, and many of them were already adults or even middle-aged when they joined. Despite that, they somehow managed to train these recruits from diverse backgrounds, with varying levels of talent, to reach at least the first or second layer of the Profound Gate. There were even a select few who reached the sixth and seventh layers.

Yue Hongling was completely baffled thinking of how they had achieved this level of cultivation in such a short time

Are all of them like Zhao Changhe?

Additionally, due to their doctrine of “killing to achieve enlightenment,” these monks were all extremely fierce and fearless warriors. Each one of them had shed blood and taken lives; they were not your average peaceful monks.

There were many more branches of the Maitreya Cult throughout Jiangnan, and it was reasonable to assume that they all had some measure of power. If they were to rise up and revolt, it would truly be a cataclysmic event.

Even just the White Lotus Temple alone made Yue Hongling doubt whether the archers outside could stop them if Fa Yuan decided to flee. Then...what about the entire Jiangnan?

Swish!

Yue Hongling slashed the throat of a member of the Maitreya Cult with her sword, but then she immediately winced and clutched her shoulder.

While the shoulder injury was no longer hindering her mobility much, it still affected her performance more than she had anticipated. Actual combat was proving to be more challenging than she expected.

She looked up to see Fa Yuan leading a few core monks, fighting while retreating up the mountainside under the relentless assault of Gong Chaoqun and the others.

It was late at night, so it would be easy for them to escape once they made it into the forested mountains. Zhao Changhe had plenty of experience in this regard, so he knew that very well.

We can't allow the key figure to get away!

Yue Hongling clenched her teeth, ignoring the sharp pain in her shoulder. She propelled herself into the air and thrust her longsword forward, aiming to stop Fa Yuan from escaping.

Fa Yuan was still engaged in combat with Gong Chaoqun. He knew that Gong Chaoqun was truly formidable, and he was not confident in coming out on top if they were to duel. They were in an incredibly difficult situation. Their opponent's momentum was overwhelming them, and their own side was in disarray. Regardless, Fa Yuan was confident that he could escape. With the cover of the night, as long as he found an opportunity to make it into the forest...

He raised his jiedao[1], and a dazzling light enveloped Gong Chaoqun. This was the Maitreya Cult's secret art, White Lotus Purifies the World.

Gong Chaoqun shifted his weight slightly backward, focusing on his sword vigilantly.

He knew how powerful this strike was. Thousands of illusions attacked simultaneously, with each lotus petal acting as a blade. He had to maintain a steady state of mind and break through the illusions to withstand the attack.

However, just as he took a half step back, the blade light suddenly disappeared, and Fa Yuan had already retreated. It was actually a feint!

"It looks like the Demon Suppression Bureau is nothing special! Hahahaha— Aaah!"

Fa Yuan's words were cut short as a sword descended toward him under the moonlight. Yue Hongling's figure appeared like the moon goddess under the full moon, striking down at Fa Yuan from above.

Clang!

Fayuan fiercely blocked the strike with his jiedao, forced to halt his escape. He cursed in anger, "Yue Hongling! You better not let yourself fall into my hands or I'll force you to kneel on the ground and beg me like a dog—"

Before he could finish speaking, an arrow shot through the sky like a meteor, accompanied by a terrifying whistling sound. The arrow pierced through the air, coming straight for his throat!

Fa Yuan did not have the time to finish his threat. He swiftly twisted his torso, doing his best to protect his vitals. In the end, the arrow grazed his shoulder, taking a large chunk of flesh with it. Blood sprayed from the grievous-looking wound.

Yue Hongling's lips curled into a faint smile. Nevertheless, she was unrelenting as she launched another strike at Fa Yuan.

Meanwhile, Gong Chaoqun was already behind Fa Yuan, and the tip of his sword pointed directly at Fa Yuan's back.

With attacks converging from three directions, how could Fa Yuan possibly dodge everything?

Blood sprayed from his left shoulder and back as Yue Hongling's strike landed. Fa Yuan stumbled to the side, shouting angrily, "The Maitreya descends, achieving enlightenment through slaughter!"

As he uttered those words, other high-ranking monks nearby who were resisting the Demon Suppression Bureau chanted simultaneously, "The Maitreya descends, achieving enlightenment through slaughter..."

"Unborn Venerable Mother, Realm of True Void..."

Just as Yue Hongling was about to deliver another blow to Fa Yuan, she saw a monk with bloodshot eyes rush at her like a madman.

Yue Hongling thrust her sword into the monk's chest, hoping to force him back. But to her surprise, the monk did not dodge at all. He allowed her blade to pierce his chest and then grabbed hold of her sword tightly.

He's gone mad...

Yue Hongling tried retracting her sword from the monk's torso, but she couldn't.

She turned to look around and realized that all the monks had gone mad.

Each of them used their own body to block the weapons of the Demon Suppression Bureau, holding on tightly and refusing to let go.

These individuals were no longer just fanatics; fanatics still knew pain, but these guys seemed to have lost even their ability to feel pain. No...they were barely even people. They were slaves, beasts whose rationality had been stripped away by some secret art, willing to sacrifice everything for their faith.

Was this their Realm of True Void, their ultimate bliss?

Well, from a certain point of view, it was bliss, since they couldn't even feel pain anymore.

As the members of the Demon Suppression Bureau tried to recover their weapons, Fa Yuan took advantage of the chaos and disappeared into the forested mountains.

Gong Chaoqun was naturally furious. "Search the mountains! He's heavily wounded! He can't run far!"

Yue Hongling grabbed her shoulder and took a few deep breaths. The clash with Fa Yuan had aggravated her injury. She had been suppressing the pain, but she could not suppress it any longer. Her wound reopened and began bleeding profusely.

When she thought of the timely support of that arrow, Yue Hongling felt some indescribable emotions in her heart. She raised her head and looked toward the temple, searching for Zhao Changhe.

Zhao Changhe had not participated in the siege because he had his own set of opponents to deal with—primarily the flower-picking celestial maiden.

When he fired the arrow, he had already restrained the flower-picking celestial maiden. He had only managed to provide long-range support, because he didn't have the time to rush over. By the time he could reach them, the situation had suddenly changed and Fa Yuan had already escaped.

Zhao Changhe pressed Dragon Bird down on the celestial maiden's shoulder, forcing her to kneel on the ground helplessly. He sighed and said, "Fa Yuan threatened Yue Hongling with such cruel words, yet you're the one kneeling now... Isn't it unfair? You aren't the one who caused all this mess, but you're still being punished."

Yue Hongling, who had been about to approach Zhao Changhe for a discussion, paused and looked at him with a complex expression, deciding to stay back temporarily.

In fact, Zhao Changhe did intend to take revenge on Yue Hongling's behalf, but that was not his sole motivation.

Based on their previous interactions, he felt that the flower-picking celestial maiden's faith was not as fanatical as the others. She had shown that she knew to act according to the circumstances, which indicated that she was not blindly devoted to the cult. This act of pinning her down was also a test. If she was as fanatical as those suicidal zealots, she would never kneel and instead choose to end her life with Dragon Bird.

However, she had chosen to kneel, indicating that she was not as irredeemable as those zealots. She could be persuaded to surrender.

But then, the flower-picking celestial maiden said, "Our cult has always treated you well. We simply wanted you to join us. Why do you resist us so strongly?"

Zhao Changhe replied, "Join you? You want me to send myself to my death like those beasts?"

The celestial maiden was startled and said softly, "No, you won't become like them... You're a hidden dragon with boundless potential. The cult would nurture you differently."

"Is that really so? They sent you, disguised as Miss Yue, to 'preach' to me. But your true intention was to take control of me."

The celestial maiden said, "Those things are completely different... Forget it, if that's how you choose to see it, there is no point in arguing."

Zhao Changhe said, "I do not want to argue with you. I think that you are different from them. You have not been brainwashed into a fool or a lunatic like them, and we can still communicate. Let me tell you frankly, with the injuries Fa Yuan sustained just now, there is no way he can escape Gong

Chaoqun's encirclement. If we can't find him, it means there must be hidden caves or tunnels in the mountains. I strongly suspect that everyone is still searching in the mountains, while he is already several li away by now."

The celestial maiden's gaze flickered with surprise.

Zhao Changhe said, "So I'm not wrong, am I? Come on, after all these years, there must be hidden caves or something like that in the area. As long as you tell me where the secret passage is, I can make the decision to spare your life. You can change your identity and live somewhere else in the future, never getting involved with the Maitreya Cult again. Seeing the fate of those people, do you really not feel any disgust toward the Maitreya Cult? You know you're just a tool for them. When things go wrong, they will send you to die without even blinking."

The celestial maiden found the situation incredibly strange. "You... You could have tortured me mercilessly, or at least said some harsh things to me as Fa Yuan did to Yue Hongling. Why are you choosing to spare me and even advising me to change?"

Zhao Changhe blushed a bit, and he whispered to her, "Well... You once helped me hug her for a moment and let me enjoy a bit of her fragrance."

The celestial maiden's eyes widened, and her frightened expression from being held as a captive nearly completely disappeared. She could barely hold herself back from bursting out in laughter.

Zhao Changhe, feeling embarrassed, threatened her, "Tell me quickly, or I'll really resort to torture!"

"There's no need for that," she chuckled. "Not only do I know where the secret passage is, I can even take you there right now."

Zhao Changhe asked in surprise, "Why are you so cooperative?"

"Because you're right, I don't want to end up like them in the future." The celestial maiden smiled. Then, she added playfully, "And... you're quite adorable. It turns out that the person that others see as the Bloodthirsty Asura is actually such a cute little brother... Plus, I'm definitely not just a tool."

"What does that have to do with me?" Zhao Changhe felt a little embarrassed and subconsciously looked around, only to be surprised to find Yue Hongling standing nearby, eavesdropping.

Zhao Changhe: "...When did you get here?"

"Just now." Yue Hongling walked over expressionlessly and, for whatever reason, kicked the flower-picking celestial maiden in the leg. "Where is the secret passage? Hurry up and tell us."

Did she really just get here?

Zhao Changhe tilted his head and acted like he didn't know anything.

The celestial maiden smiled and said, "Actually, there is an underground secret chamber and passage within the temple. It's used for secret rituals and as an escape route to the back of the mountain. Your arrival caught them off guard, so they did not have the time to enter the passage and could only retreat to the back mountain first. That being said, if he goes through the passage now, he'll come out inside the temple. If you solely focus on searching the mountain, he might escape from here."

Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling exchanged a glance, and the small embarrassment in their hearts instantly dissipated. The celestial maiden added, "By the way, there are many recovery items down there. The methods of recovery that our cult has far exceed your imagination. I suggest you not give him a chance and act as soon as possible."

## Chapter 125: Pure Land of Bliss

After arriving at the entrance of the secret passage, Zhao Changhe realized why Fa Yuan and the others had not been able to make it into the passage.

It turned out to be a small door behind the large Buddha statue, only wide enough for one person to pass through, that led to a narrow path below. If they rushed in one by one, the Demon Suppression Bureau would have arrived before they could let even just a few people in. If that happened, their situation would have gone from bad to terrible.

Even if Fa Yuan tried to escape alone, once the Demon Suppression Bureau arrived and found him nowhere, they would have naturally realized that he had used a secret passage. It would then not take them much effort to find the exit, block it from the outside, and make his escape even more difficult.



It can only be said that the Demon Suppression Bureau had arrived too suddenly this time, leaving Fa Yuan no room to prepare.

At this moment, Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling hesitated slightly. They were not sure what awaited them below, and there could be traps in the passage. Should they inform Gong Chaoqun first and wait at the entrance, or proceed cautiously?

However, they knew that Fa Yuan was seriously injured, and even Zhao Changhe was confident in defeating him. If they missed this opportunity to strike him while he was weak, complications could arise if Fa Yuan managed to recover rapidly using some secret method down inside the passage.

Neither of them were timid. They could see the determination in each other's eyes when they looked at each other. They both nodded. Zhao Changhe did not dare to release the flower-picking celestial maiden right then, fearing that she might cause trouble later on, so he pressed on a few of her acupoints and locked her inside a nearby monk's room.

The celestial maiden huddled inside the room, feeling aggrieved. She then said, "If you don't trust me, then you might as well let me go with you... If you go in and die at Fa Yuan's hands, and he comes out, I won't have a way out either... Not even mentioning him, if you were to take a bit too long inside and those big soldiers outside were to see a woman paralyzed here, they would—"

Zhao Changhe interrupted her, "Cut it off. I'll let you out when we're back out."

After saying that, he rushed ahead and entered the secret passage first.

Yue Hongling looked at the aggrieved celestial maiden, then pressed on a few more of her acupoints before following Zhao Changhe into the secret passage.

Based on how things go, I'll settle things with you when I get back later.

The passage was very long and very dark. Yue Hongling had a high level of cultivation and could see ahead decently well despite the darkness. She watched as Zhao Changhe carefully bent slightly as he walked forward. He carried his saber in his right hand to avoid being caught off guard. At the same time, he was holding his bow in his left hand, while having his quiver at his waist. He looked like a particularly cautious hedgehog.

He always seems mature and experienced in many aspects, almost like a veteran, but sometimes... he's still...

She hesitated for a moment, thinking about their journey. His larger build, which made him look like a big fluffy bear, gave her an inexplicable sense of security. She felt as if, as long as he was there in front of her, she did not need to do anything herself.

While she was lost in thought, Zhao Changhe suddenly stopped ahead of her.

The two of them were walking very close to each other, so as soon as he stopped, Yue Hongling unintentionally pressed up against his back. She quickly retreated, her face flushed.

Zhao Changhe: "..."

What was that soft touch on my back just now...

"Why did you suddenly stop?!" Yue Hongling, somewhat irritated, transmitted her voice to him. She suspected that he had done it on purpose, so she sounded pissed. "How about I lead the way?"

Zhao Changhe, who had not yet learned how to transmit his voice, could only whisper helplessly, "I heard a strange sound just now... But it's gone now. I didn't mean it."

Yue Hongling cast a skeptical glance at him, and then said, "You're not even capable of transmitting your voice. Just let me lead the way."

Zhao Changhe sighed in resignation, "The passage is too narrow, how are you going to get to the front?"

"Turn sideways."

"..."

Zhao Changhe pushed his back against the wall, pursed his lips, and signaled Yue Hongling to pass.

Yue Hongling looked awkwardly at the cramped space and could not help but regret her decision.

However, she had no choice but to carry it out, since she had let her mouth run already. She also turned sideways, then slowly moved step by step to squeeze past Zhao Changhe.

As they faced each other, their bodies came into direct contact while she was squeezing past.

Whatever sensation he had felt earlier was incomparable to this moment. This would have directly claimed the innocent Changhe's life in the past.

Yue Hongling was in the same boat.

When had she ever been in such close proximity with a man? As they were facing each other, she could feel his breath on her forehead, and electric currents seemed to surge through her body. Unable to move away, she felt herself growing weak.

She was ashamed and angry and forcibly quickened her pace, swiftly moving past him. Once she was in front, she released a sigh of relief, resting her hands on her knees as she caught her breath. "Okay, you better not... You better not even think about anything weird like you did when you were sitting behind me on the back of my horse! If you dare to get too close, I'll chop down your little brother!"

Zhao Changhe bowed his head and remained silent.

I did not have any weird thoughts when I was riding behind you... Oh, that's what I said to you when I thought you were an impostor...

But now, it's coming true.

Why do you think I'm bowing my head?

She smells so good...

Yue Hongling had only taken a few steps forward when she further regretted her stupid decision to move to the front.

This was because she could hear the sounds that Zhao Changhe had been hearing earlier. So he wasn't spouting nonsense just now. He really did hear something ahead.

Strange, how could his senses be so sharp? It shouldn't be possible. He's only at the fourth layer of the Profound Gate. No, considering that internal energy has a greater impact on the senses, his senses should only be at the third layer, actually. Has he made some sort of breakthrough in his qi cultivation recently? No, even if he did, he should still only be at the fourth layer... Perhaps his internal energy has some unique aspects to it.

Yue Hongling did not dwell on Zhao Changhe's situation too much for the time being. She slowed her pace cautiously and continued moving forward.

The sounds became louder and louder, and in addition to the sounds, there was now also a faint light.

It turned out that they had reached the end of the passage. The light had just been blocked by a curve in the tunnel. If not for the curving of the path, they would have seen it long ago. A small turn to the right and they could see a rather large hall ahead. The hall was illuminated by several luminous pearls. There were statues of Maitreya, Guanyin, and many angry-eyed Vajras all exuding an intense aura enshrined inside the hall.

Unlike the temple on the surface, this place was filled with silk and satin. The fragrance of flowers filled the hall, and the atmosphere was overwhelming. At this moment, there were numerous couples of men and women indulging themselves in amorous activities. The strange sounds they had heard before came from them.

Yue Hongling blushed but did not look at anything else. She specifically scanned the faces of the men present, but to her surprise, she could not find Fa Yuan among them.

Yue Hongling quickly realized that this hall was obviously closer to the temple. Fa Yuan had first escaped to the back mountain, then entered the secret passage from there. It would obviously take him much longer to reach this location compared to her and Zhao Changhe, who had come directly from the temple.

It seems that the people here who are engaged in their blissful rituals don't even have any idea what's happened on the surface!

Yue Hongling was quite dumbfounded when she thought of this, but she also felt extremely awkward.

If she were to take action now, she would be hitting the wrong target. If Fa Yuan sensed any disturbances here and chose to change his path, she might lose track of him entirely. The best plan was to wait here for Fa Yuan to arrive and launch a surprise attack when he attempted some kind of dual cultivation to heal up.

However, this plan also means that Zhao Changhe and I have to wait at this entrance, watching their erotic activities inside. Who knows how long we'll have to watch these people?!

Yue Hongling had no desire to see the activities inside at all. When she scanned the men's faces earlier, she avoided looking anywhere else. As soon as she finished, she immediately retreated and closed her eyes so that she wouldn't see any more of their shameful actions.

"What's going on?" Zhao Changhe leaned closer, concerned. "What's going on ahead? Why are you moving back... Oh..."

He was taller than Yue Hongling, so she could not block his view. He could see what was ahead with just one glance.

He quickly realized what Yue Hongling was thinking of. In all honesty, while this scene was probably shocking to her, it was no big deal to him. After all, he had seen countless such scenes in... films.

However, there was a significant difference between back then and now. Namely, back then, he did not have a stunningly beautiful female martial artist in his arms.

With her eyes tightly closed, Yue Hongling gritted her teeth and said, "Zhao Changhe, if you dare to take advantage of this situation to try and hug me, I'll... I'll chop you to pieces!"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Didn't you notice that you were the one retreating into my arms? Hold on, don't you feel that you are retreating into my arms now? Shouldn't you be telling me to move away rather than not hug you?

She had asked him not to hold her, but she was currently nestling herself into his embrace. Her words and actions seemed to be in contradiction.

Eh, something's not right... Zhao Changhe's nose twitched. He could no help but notice the unusual scent in the air

The poison resistance effect of the Six Harmonies Art was constantly surging, eliminating the faint toxins in his body. He became certain that the invisible and intangible poison in the air was an aphrodisiac designed to stimulate lust.

This was not some cult ritual, but rather an aphrodisiac was being used to exploit and manipulate the captured or deceived women in this underground hall!

Even Yue Hongling, despite her internal energy and resilience, seemed to be gradually succumbing to the effects of the aphrodisiac. It appeared that the poison resistance ability of the Six Harmonies Art was actually more outstanding than Yue Hongling's internal energy that crushed him. Zhao Changhe found himself growing more and more intrigued with the internal art he had acquired.

Yue Hongling's breathing grew increasingly rapid, and her body began to sway as if torn between her rational mind and the effects of the aphrodisiac. Her body seemed to be subconsciously pursuing comfort.

Zhao Changhe could not help but notice the blush on her face and the rosy tint spreading to her snow-white neck. His heart began racing.

He knew that if he hugged her and kissed her at this time, she would yield willingly.

However...

Zhao Changhe maintained his clarity of mind. He lowered his head and gently pressed his finger on Yue Hongling's back.

Yue Hongling's whole body trembled at the touch of his finger, but then she suddenly felt a gentle yet immense surge of true qi course through her meridians, dispelling the poison affecting her.

In that moment, she regained her senses, fully aware of what had just happened. She silently guided the strand of true essence within her body to restore her disrupted qi.

At this moment, Fa Yuan's weak and enraged shout came from the other passage that led to the hall, "Are you having fun? The temple has been destroyed yet you're all still here enjoying yourselves?!"

With his body covered in blood, Fa Yuan stumbled into the hall, kicking aside a monk and pinning one of the women to the ground, ready to commit a vile act. "I need to recover! Once I'm back out, I'll deal with Yue Hongling and she won't have a chance to—"

Twang!

Before he could finish his sentence, an arrow pierced through his head. It entered his mouth and exited through the back of his head, leaving a gaping hole in his skull.

Fa Yuan, utterly taken by surprise, let out a meaningless "hehe" sound before collapsing to the ground. His last sight was directed toward the other passage where he saw Yue Hongling, who he had mentioned just now, nestled in the arms of a man. In that man's hand was a bow with a bowstring still quivering. There was a cold murderous intent in the man's eyes.

Even in his final moments, Fa Yuan could not comprehend why, in this dire situation, the one who saw through everything was not Yue Hongling, whom he was afraid of, but the man he had dismissed as a frivolous womanizer, Zhao Changhe.

If Fa Yuan had the chance to choose again, he would never make any celestial maiden try and seduce Zhao Changhe.