

T. Times 366

Chapter 366: True Character Revealed

However, the good thing about officials was that they would not outright rob you just because your horse looked impressive, so the situation was still somewhat better than it was at Kunlun.

Well, at least they would not rob you openly.

Zhao Changhe could not be bothered to argue over the entrance fee and simply paid it to enter the city.

In a city that theoretically still belonged to the Great Xia, the Demon Suppression Bureau would have a presence. However, Zhao Changhe could not be certain if the local division of the Demon Suppression Bureau was still on his side.

Ying Five's people were much more reliable in such matters, but Ying Five's organization was semi-secret. In some key locations, it was easy to guess where their base might be as they needed to connect and trade information with others. Generally, they used gambling dens or houses. However, in some other places, they were highly secretive and rarely revealed their identities. For example, Lady Three ran an inn, and Chen One ran a restaurant.

With Lu Shiheng's presence in this city, it was likely that their base of operations here was not a gambling house. So, how was Zhao Changhe going to find them?

In the jianghu, it felt like he had friends everywhere, but in the mundane world, he found himself without connections. It was quite interesting to think about. It was no wonder it was so difficult for ordinary people to find mentors or masters, and it was why these organizations tended to only exist in legends for most people.

Zhao Changhe did not dwell on it and casually found a tavern for a meal. "Tavernkeeper, give me a hero's meal."

The tavernkeeper was puzzled. "What's a hero's meal?"

"Oh, two jugs of wine and a pound of cooked beef."

“The slaughter of cattle is prohibited here.”

Zhao Changhe was taken aback. He had found out about this issue when he first transmigrated, but after going around for so long, he had never encountered a place that did not sell beef, so he had long forgotten about it. It was only now that he ended up running into a place that did not offer beef.

This was actually a reflection of the abundance or scarcity of resources. Cattle were still regarded as valuable tools of production, and so they could not be slaughtered casually. If resources were plentiful, it would not have been this severe. This showed that the time had gone from “troubled times are approaching” to “troubled times are here.”

And this was an area where war was hitting the hardest.

Not only did the tavern not serve beef, but there were also very few customers. In the large tavern, only three tables were occupied, and it looked like they were barely managing to stay open.

Zhao Changhe did not insist and casually said, “Then just bring me a bowl of noodles.”

While eating the noodles, Zhao Changhe used his powerful senses, enhanced by his cultivation that was now at the Profound Mysteries, to secretly listen to the idle chatter of the few customers that were in the tavern.

His hearing was truly extraordinary right now. If he concentrated, he could even hear the breathing of people several zhang away. Combined with his Back Eye and Moonglade Sutra, the entire environment of the tavern’s main hall was in his view, and he could even hear the sounds beyond the tavern’s walls.

Having unlocked the Profound Mysteries, while his strength itself might not be significantly greater, his overall power was vastly different from that of ordinary humans.

It was very likely that if his senses continued to grow stronger, they could eventually become the legendary “divine sense,” but for now, they were still within the realm of mortals.[1]

“These days are tough... there’s no business at all,” a customer lamented.

“These days?” his drinking companion sneered. “The real problem will come in autumn! Right now, it’s spring plowing season, and the city lord is conscripting soldiers everywhere. The villages outside don’t even have enough people for spring plowing. What are they going to harvest come autumn, the northwest wind?”

“Aren’t the conscripts being sent directly to the fields?”

“The fields they’re working on produce military rations, but what about us? Are we supposed to eat the northwest wind and still pay taxes?”

“Hush, be quiet,” his friend sighed. “In the end, this is all because of the Maitreya Cult’s rampage. We can’t blame the city lord.”

The other man sneered and muttered, “It’d be better if the Maitreya Cult just won already. What are we even resisting for?”

“Shh!” His friend was alarmed. “You can’t say things like that.”

The man shut his mouth.

Was the cause of the dire situation here really the Maitreya Cult’s rampage, or were some people using this as an excuse to raise their own troops? It was difficult to say.

Right now, the immediate cause was indeed the Maitreya Cult, but if you were to trace back further, what was the true origin of all the problems?

The man finally could not hold back and cursed, “Damn, that foolish emperor.”

His friend, while having tried to stop him from welcoming the Maitreya Cult, actually agreed with this and echoed the sentiment. “He deserves to be childless. Even if he has a son, may that son be born without an asshole.”

“And may his daughter find a dog husband and give birth to a pig son.”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

These guys are just venting and cursing, nothing worth listening to.

However, the attitude of the people in Xiangyang could be glimpsed from this. While they openly cursed the emperor, they still considered welcoming the Maitreya Cult as something taboo.

Lu Shiheng's attitude was clear. Although he opposed the Maitreya Cult, he held no respect for the Great Xia.

One of them seems to be a merchant and the other a landlord with a farm. Both of them are middle class and they're full of resentment. From their words, it seems that the lower class must be having it even worse.

Zhao Changhe sighed again. No matter how he looked at it, even if the Maitreya Cult was taken down, Great Xia would still be in turmoil.

Now, the Four Idols Cult likely had two goddesses at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. They might have previously felt that they lacked top-tier combat power, but now they had it. If there was only one of them, the Four Idols Cult may have still been manageable, but with two, there were few who could withstand them. Xia Longyuan was tied up dealing with gods and demons, and he was unlikely to be able to deal with two Ranking of Heaven powerhouses.

Seeing the Blood God Cult's thousands of troops ready to move, Zhao Changhe felt that it was only a matter of time before the Four Idols Cult ignited a war in Jiangbei.

Huangfu Qing's father was still the Great Xia's strongest general, commanding the most elite border troops.

What will Wanzhuang do then?

As he pondered this, another table of customers happened to discuss Tang Wanzhuang. "Hey, Da Zhou, didn't someone say that First Seat Tang has already arrived in Jiangnan?"

"Yeah, it's been a while, hasn't it?"

“Why hasn’t there been any news? I thought she would lead the battle and counterattack, but there hasn’t been any movement.”

“War isn’t that simple,” Da Zhou said irritably. “Do you think it’s like some one-on-one duel in the jianghu, where she’d just call out Maitreya to have a fight and be done with it?”

“Tang Wanzhuang should know military strategy, right?”

“Actually... when it comes to war, she might only have theoretical knowledge. She might not even be as good as her nephew Tang Buqi.”

“Why do you say that? Tang Buqi has been quiet for even longer. I heard that in two months, he will reach the age where he’d leave the Ranking of Hidden Dragons.”

“He’s gone through plenty of battles, defending Gusu against countless sieges by the troops of the Maitreya Cult. If you haven’t seen those scenes, you wouldn’t understand...”

“You’re talking as if you’ve seen it yourself.”

Da Zhou did not respond to this but answered the earlier question about Tang Wanzhuang. “In my opinion, I don’t think Tang Wanzhuang came to Jiangnan to command the troops...”

“Then what’s she here for?”

“First, to confront Maitreya, and second, to unify the various factions. With her here, others won’t dare to act rashly. Even if she’s coughing heavily, if she wants to take someone’s head off at night, few can stop her. Besides, the Great Xia still has some residual influence here. Her position as the head of the Demon Suppression Bureau is significant, and Tang Buqi can’t replace her.”

“You’re just a guy who makes braised ducks; how do you know so much?”

“Screw you, I need to get back. I haven’t finished making today’s braised duck.”

Zhao Changhe was intrigued.

There's something off about this Da Zhou... For a braised duck maker, his knowledge of Jiangnan affairs is quite impressive. Moreover, he's even promoting the Tang Clan and the Demon Suppression Bureau, unlike the other customers.

Seeing Da Zhou pay and leave, Zhao Changhe quietly finished his noodles, got up to pay, and discreetly followed him.

If his guess was right, Da Zhou might be someone from the Demon Suppression Bureau. As for his praise of Tang Buqi, Zhao Changhe thought it was probably just flattery. After all, that nephew of his...

Just as this thought crossed his mind, a golden light suddenly flashed in the sky.

Zhao Changhe looked up in surprise:

Late into the first month, Tang Wanzhuang fought Maitreya at Taihu Lake, defeating him and forcing him to flee.

Tang Buqi, having gained experience in commanding troops and having reached the seventh layer of the Profound Gate, bypassed the Maitreya Cult's Celestial Maiden Bewitchment Array during the battle between figures on the Ranking of Earth. While he was crossing the array, he killed three of the Maitreya Cult's top celestial maidens, and led his troops to a great victory over the army of the Maitreya Cult at Taihu Lake. Maitreya's general Fa Chi escaped alone, while the rest fled in disarray. Countless warships were destroyed. The forces of the Tang Clan of Gusu advance south toward Hangzhou.

The Ranking of Hidden Dragons has changed.

Rank 9: Tang Buqi.

True character revealed amidst waves, a gentleman not to be constrained.

Chapter 367: Undercover Agents

Zhao Changhe admitted that his face had been slapped by the Tome of Troubled Times.

One moment he was saying that Da Zhou was overhyping Tang Buqi, and the next moment, the tome went on to praise Tang Buqi.

However, Zhao Changhe was not upset about being proven wrong. On the contrary, he was very happy and even took a big swig from his wine gourd.

He could still vividly remember Tang Buqi crying drunkenly in the past. Yet as it turned out, gold naturally sifted from sand, and his name now shone brightly above the world.

Furthermore, with Maitreya's defeat at Taihu Lake and Tang Wanzhuang launching a counterattack, would they still come to attack Xiangyang? The western and eastern fronts were different, and it was unclear what the impact of that battle would be.

Now, he was even more eager to communicate with someone from the Demon Suppression Bureau. He hoped that Da Zhou really was from the bureau. Logically, those from the Demon Suppression Bureau likely also wanted to communicate with their superiors, making it easier for them to discern the situation.

Zhao Changhe quietly followed Da Zhou through several twists and turns into an alley filled with the fragrant aroma of braised duck. The sight that welcomed him was not the small shop or workshop he had imagined, however; it seemed that the entire alley belonged to Da Zhou.

The entire city seemed bleak, and this place was no exception. It was relatively quiet, with few customers, but there was no need for direct sales. Da Zhou instructed his workers to pack some of the braised ducks and deliver them to various restaurants, taverns, and wealthy households.

With a fixed clientele, his business seemed to be less affected by the city's downturn.

Everything seemed normal, and Zhao Changhe waited patiently.

As night fell, Da Zhou finished his work, changed into more refined clothes, and swaggered out of the alley. Zhao Changhe suspected that this was the opportunity he was waiting for and followed him happily.

“Oh~ Big brother Zhou is here! Little Red Peach misses you...”

“I didn’t come here for Little Red Peach. I came to see fourth brother.”

“The fourth lord is in the first flower hall. He’s been waiting for big brother Zhou to join him.”

Zhao Changhe watched from a distance as Da Zhou was ushered into the brothel by the madam, feeling speechless.

Why is it always a brothel... Forget it, this time, I won’t be visiting it directly. Previously, I had to pose as a customer because my movement art was average and my saber was too big. But now, I can simply have Dragon Bird be stored in the ring and my movement art has already reached a level where I can sneak around much easier.

Zhao Changhe noted the flower hall Da Zhou entered, gracefully climbed onto the roof, and quietly hung down to peek through the window.

Sure enough, as he had expected, Da Zhou did not go to the brothel for pleasure.

Opposite him sat another man, probably the so-called “fourth brother,” and there were no women around. It was just the two of them drinking together in the private room.

“The bureau chief won against Maitreya, is there any more recent news?” Da Zhou asked.

As expected, he’s from the Demon Suppression Bureau.

Zhao Changhe felt his intuition was spot on. However, the title “fourth lord,” which the brothel madam had used to refer to the other man with Da Zhou, reminded him of Ying Five’s organization.

The fourth lord replied, “The battle just ended. Even if they send carrier pigeons, those wouldn’t arrive immediately. You’re more anxious than I am.”

Da Zhou said, “Seeing the Tome of Troubled Times flash made me excited... The chaos that Maitreya has been raining down upon Jiangnan is finally showing signs of being quelled. How could I not want to return to the old days, living peacefully, coming here to listen to music in peace? Now, everything is a mess, business is bad, and it’s hard to enjoy the music.”

The fourth lord was silent for a moment, then sighed. “That’s why the bureau chief thinks that we can’t deal with Maitreya. If their heavenly maidens come to bewitch us, we’d just follow them blindly.”

Da Zhou: “...The reason why I wasn’t sent to deal with Maitreya is that I’ve always been here doing business. It’s different from you. With so many brothels under your control, wherever you stay is the same. Why were you sent here?”

The fourth lord complained, “I don’t even like women. How would Maitreya’s heavenly maidens be able to bewitch me? The bureau chief understands nothing.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Da Zhou said, “Enough idle talk. From my observations over the past few days, Lu Shiheng is unlikely to side with Maitreya. Instead, he shows signs of wanting to establish himself independently, especially these days. He’s been taking advantage of the potential movements of the Maitreya Cult as an excuse to conscript soldiers without regard for spring plowing. His rebellious intentions are clear as day. Has this been reported to the Demon Suppression Bureau?”

“No, the reports all say that Lu Shiheng is actively preparing for battle and is loyal to the empire.” The fourth lord chuckled. “The bureau chief has long suspected the Xiangyang branch of the Demon Suppression Bureau to be unreliable, which is why we need extra intelligence from the secret investigation division. This confirms the bureau chief’s suspicions were correct. The Xiangyang branch has indeed been compromised. Anyway, I’ve already reported this to the bureau chief for her consideration.”

Zhao Changhe nodded to himself. Tang Wanzhuang might seem delicate with her constant coughing, but she was actually a ministerial figure who never needed anyone to worry about her. The Demon Suppression Bureau always had both overt and covert operations. For instance, Zhao Changhe himself was a secret agent. Judging by Da Zhou’s long-term business activities here, he must have been an undercover agent for years. No one would ever suspect that someone like Da Zhou, who had been making braised ducks for so long, was a spy.

Given the current situation in Xiangyang, Tang Wanzhuang had long faith in the branch of the bureau and had activated her covert network.

“Let’s report this matter first then,” Da Zhou said. “Damn, Maitreya hasn’t been subdued, and now others are starting to move on with their rebellious thoughts. When will this chaos end?”

The fourth lord replied, “Don’t think too far ahead... By the way, I have some new information from the west. Do you want to hear it?”

“What news?”

The fourth lord laughed. “Wang Daozhong went to Kunlun and, on the first day, visited a brothel. Then, he chased after a handsome young man after finding the women uninteresting. The news from Kunlun has been spreading for days and has finally reached this place. Should we report this to the chief?”

Da Zhou almost spat out his drink. “Are you sure that’s Wang Daozhong? Doesn’t he have a wife and children?”

“Got bored, I suppose. It’s quite common among aristocratic families...” said the fourth lord. “But that’s not the most important news. The real news is that Wang Daozhong helped the Four Idols Sect capture Yang Qianyuan from Kunlun, causing the stance of the Yang Clan of Hongnong to become ambiguous.”

Da Zhou massaged his temples and said, “If I were the bureau chief, I’d probably be coughing up blood by now.”

“However, it seems that because Wang Daozhong broke Kunlun’s rules by capturing Yang Qianyuan, he was later attacked by the people of Kunlun and had to flee in a hurry,” the fourth lord sighed. “Kunlun truly is a treacherous place. Even someone on the Ranking of Earth had to flee in a panic.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

The story of Wang Doazhong had been pieced together, forming a story worthy of a ballad.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. The fourth lord went to open it, and the person at the door whispered, “Fourth brother, we’ve received a carrier pigeon message from the bureau chief. She’s already on her way to Xiangyang and advised caution. With too many pigeon messages, there’s a risk of exposure. It would be best to stay hidden and avoid any actions, as well as withdraw.”

Both men were stunned, and even Zhao Changhe, who was eavesdropping outside, was equally shocked.

It sounded more like Tang Wanzhuang sneaking in alone rather than leading an army to support Xiangyang.

If she's deduced from various clues that the Maitreya Cult is planning to attack Xiangyang, she should have dispatched troops for reinforcement. Why is she coming alone?

Could it be because of Da Zhou and this "fourth brother" reported Lu Shiheng's rebellious intentions? Is that why she decided to come personally?

She might be able to do something about him, but doing that doesn't quite fit her style. If she personally ran to every place where she heard rumors of rebellion to act as a mediator, she'd tire herself to death.

What could be her real reason for coming here?

Zhao Changhe felt relieved that he had not headed straight to Gusu. Otherwise, he would have missed her. Now, regardless of her purpose, staying here would allow him to act as an advance scout.

Inside the flower hall, the two men were staring at each other with uneasy gazes. With the bureau chief advising them to stay hidden or even withdraw, how could they continue drinking and discussing matters?

Da Zhou hurriedly excused himself. "I need to go back and make arrangements. You can leave anytime. Since the bureau chief has said so, you should just leave quickly. The brothel is just a business. If it's lost, then so be it."

The fourth lord saw Da Zhou off and scratched his head in confusion. What could the bureau chief have learned that we haven't? She seems unusually tense.

While he was hesitating, there was a knock at the door. A scholarly-looking person walked into the room. He was a middle-aged man with an elegant demeanor and a long beard. He entered with a warm smile.

The fourth lord jumped in shock, cold sweat streaming down his face. “City... city lord?”

It was Xiangyang’s city lord, Divine Sword of Xiang River Lu Shiheng.

“Who would have thought that the Demon Suppression Bureau would have spies here? And it’s even more surprising that it would be our dear Mister Sian,” Lu Shiheng said with a chuckle. “Who would’ve thought? Who would’ve thought...”

Sian took a deep breath, “What are you talking about, city lord...”

Lu Shiheng replied warmly, “Nothing much... It’s just that I would like you to cooperate with Xiangyang in some matters.”

Chapter 368: The Mist Over Xiangyang

With things having already come to this point, Sian calmed down, shaking off the initial shock that he felt.

He sat back at the table, picked up the wine flagon, poured a cup, and said, “Since you’ve come, why not have a drink? We can discuss what it is that you want me to do over some wine.”

Lu Shiheng, who was ready to strike at any moment, was taken aback by Sian’s composure and laughed. “Mister Li, you’re truly an extraordinary figure.”

He casually sat opposite Sian, took the wine cup, and sipped it. “Why would someone of your stature be willing to be a mere spy?”

Sian relaxed and took a sip from his own cup of wine, “What do you mean by spy? Just because I’m on good terms with the Tang Clan? I have many business dealings with the Tang Clan. What’s so strange about being cordial? By the way, aren’t you and First Seat Tang colleagues? Why does your question make me feel as if there’s no camaraderie between you?”

Lu Shiheng laughed, but not a hint of a smile could be seen in his eyes. “It’s nothing much. Just ask any official if they enjoy being watched by spies. The previous dynasty tried that, and look where that got them. They were overthrown. His Majesty is magnanimous and never employs such

methods. First Seat Tang should not risk the world's condemnation. A carriage should not move backward."

Sian suppressed a smile and thought to himself, How do you know I'm a spy unless you have spies too? Who exactly is moving backward here? First Seat Tang's methods are wartime measures, not for times of peace. Moreover, she isn't in charge of monitoring officials.

What he actually said was, "City lord, you mentioned needing my cooperation in Xiangyang. What exactly is it that you need me to do?"

It turned out this man's surname is Li, so his full name is Li Sian. His title as "fourth lord" makes it sound like he belongs to Ying Five's organization, but it looks like that might just be a coincidence.

Zhao Changhe had heard of Li Sian before. He was rumored to be extremely wealthy.

His wealth primarily comes from a chain of brothels, and it now seems highly likely that his success was in no small part due to Tang Wanzhuang's support. She probably deemed the brothels suitable to turn into a spy network for the Demon Suppression Bureau. No wonder she stayed in the rear courtyard of a brothel back in Sword Lake City.

Just who was it that thought of using brothels as bases for intelligence organizations?

Lu Shiheng asked, "Are you truly willing?"

Li Sian laughed. "When someone with your honorable status asks, how can we, as people of Great Xia, not cooperate with the matters of Xiangyang City?"

Lu Shiheng nodded. "In that case, please stay at my mansion for the next few days. Let my people manage this Immortal Palatial Garden for a few days. Would you be fine with that?"

Although his words were phrased politely, the coldness in his eyes left no room for refusal, sending a chill down Li Sian's spine.

I'm getting detained, and he's going to take over the Immortal Palatial Garden? Just what is Lu Shiheng planning?

He asked slowly, "City lord, do you know what you're doing?"

"I do." Lu Shiheng smiled. "You have significant connections in the imperial court and across Jingchu[1]. If something were to happen to you, the trouble to follow would not be easy to handle. Rest assured, you will be treated with utmost hospitality at my mansion and won't be mistreated in the slightest."

Li Sian was silent for a moment before slowly saying, "I hope that you understand the implications of your words."

Eavesdropping outside, Zhao Changhe relaxed himself and moved his hand away from his ring.

Since there was no immediate danger, it seemed that he could wait a bit longer to figure out exactly what Lu Shiheng intended to do with this place.

It appeared that he intended to lay a trap for Tang Wanzhuang. But even Li Sian and Da Zhou had only just received the information that Tang Wanzhuang was coming. They had still been guessing as to why Tang Wanzhuang was even coming alone. So why did it seem as if Lu Shiheng knew in advance?

Furthermore, even if Tang Wanzhuang did come, what was his plan? Killing her would only provoke frenzied retaliation from the Tang Clan. Tang Buqi would likely even abandon the fight against the Maitreya Cult to destroy Xiangyang. How could a small county afford such an enemy?

Something's wrong... Zhao Changhe felt that something was off and decided to continue observing to better understand the situation.

Li Sian did not struggle and calmly followed Lu Shiheng's subordinate to the city lord's mansion. Lu Shiheng even instructed them, "Treat Mister Li well. He is to be given the best hospitality. He may freely enjoy any of the maids in the rear courtyard he fancies."

Once Li Sian was taken away, Lu Shiheng summoned another subordinate. "Proceed as planned."

"Yes, sir."

Zhao Changhe observed stealthily for a long while but could only see them replacing personnel to control the place. He could not discern much more at the moment.

He really wished he could have Yuxu's ability to see through people's cultivation. If he had such an ability, he could probably analyze these people's martial art styles to deduce some things. Unfortunately, even though he had broken through to the Profound Mysteries and his senses had become sharper, he was still far from reaching that level of insight.

He considered capturing a few people for interrogation but worried about alarming the enemy. Thus, he decided to settle for memorizing some faces before quietly retreating.

Since there was no point in watching further, he decided to find Da Zhou and check on him instead.

When Lu Shiheng arrived at the brothel, Da Zhou had already left. Logically speaking, Lu Shiheng should not be aware that the brothel and a braised duck business were connected so Da Zhou's place was likely safe. And sure enough, when Zhao Changhe went to check on the alley where braised ducks were being made, everything seemed to be operating normally, and people were still working.

Da Zhou was in his room, packing his belongings, seemingly preparing to flee.

Zhao Changhe observed for a while, confirming that everything was fine, and then suddenly appeared beside Da Zhou.

Swoosh!

Sensing something, Da Zhou swiftly slashed out with his sword.

Zhao Changhe sidestepped and presented a token to Da Zhou.

The token he brought out was for that of a high-ranking secret agent of the Demon Suppression Bureau.

Da Zhou broke into a cold sweat, both surprised and delighted. "I didn't know a superior was here... May I know your name, sir?"

Zhao Changhe hesitated for a moment then said helplessly, “Zhao Wangtang.”

Da Zhou did not ponder the significance of the name and whispered, “The situation in Xiangyang is strange. Everything was fine before, but suddenly this evening, everything became shrouded in mist. I don’t know what’s happening anymore. The bureau chief advised us to avoid attention and even retreat if needed, but I’ve been here for so long...”

Zhao Changhe said, “Leaving the Immortal Palatial Garden just in time, avoiding trouble. Now, you’re actually safe and can continue your business.”

Da Zhou: “?”

Why does this superior talk like we’re casual friends... Wait, did something happen at the Immortal Palatial Garden?

Zhao Changhe said, “Just act like nothing happened, and don’t look panicked. That would truly arouse suspicion. I need to investigate the city lord’s mansion. Do you have any connections?”

Da Zhou asked, “Are you wary of the risks of sneaking in?”

“I’m mainly worried about alerting them. The city’s mansion is a key location and is heavily guarded. There are definitely traps and alarms within. If I trigger something, I’m confident that I can escape, but many things will end up being covered up. At that time, it will be difficult to get firsthand information.”

Zhao Changhe had grown a lot from the past. Why else would he not have gone straight to the city lord’s mansion to investigate, opting instead to go to a tavern, follow Da Zhou, lurk around in a brothel, and make things so complicated? His time in the jianghu had taught him that being cautious was never wrong.

“Your considerations are thorough,” Da Zhou said after a moment of reflection. He clapped his hands and said, “Every evening, we deliver braised duck to the city lord’s mansion. If you are willing to disguise yourself as one of my delivery people, you can get into the rear courtyard where the kitchen is, but it will be difficult to get to any of the more crucial areas.”

Zhao Changhe was delighted. “That’s enough. If I can get to the kitchen, I have my ways.”

Having someone to help really is better than going solo... Zhao Changhe recalled someone had once made a comment about him, saying that he seemed like a loner but was actually more accustomed to being part of an organization. Judging by his recent actions, that assessment really did seem accurate.

Unfortunately, today's order of ducks had already been delivered, so they would have to wait until tomorrow.

He wondered if Tang Wanzhuang would arrive by then. Given her speed, she could reach Xiangyang within a day. For the first time, Zhao Changhe hoped that Tang Wanzhuang would not be so swift and decisive.

Chapter 369: Tang Wanzhuang Arrives

The next evening had arrived, yet Tang Wanzhuang had yet to do the same.

Zhao Changhe let out a breath of relief and changed into simple clothes. He covered his scar and went to pick up a basket of braised ducks. Then, he headed to the city lord's mansion, arriving in a very unassuming manner at its back gate.

The gatekeeper, seeing an unfamiliar face, did not question him and only casually asked, "Was there a change of personnel?"

Zhao Changhe smiled apologetically. "Yes, some people left."

The gatekeeper sighed in a resigned manner. "Hmm, it looks like there's a shortage of hands everywhere... Do you know the way? If not, just find someone inside to guide you. Oh, but make sure to mind your manners and follow the rules. Don't look around or run about. After you deliver the food to the kitchen, return the same way."

Zhao Changhe obediently agreed, and upon entering, he actually asked a servant for directions. He was then led straight to the kitchen to deliver the braised ducks.

Along the way, he kept his eyes and ears at full attention but found nothing unusual, though he did notice that the security inside the mansion was extraordinarily strict.

Just during this short trip to the kitchen, he encountered several patrols, and occasionally he could hear faint, steady breathing—a sign of experts.

It seems like some of these guys aren't just regular house guards.

From what he had seen alone, the muscle in this rear courtyard alone was enough for an ordinary gang to establish themselves.

Although it was understandable for a city lord's mansion to have strict security, having it at such a high standard where there was a post and a sentry every few steps was definitely out of the norm, especially with Lu Shiheng not even being in the mansion at the moment. So, just what were they guarding?

In the kitchen, a steward complained, "Why are the ducks so late today? Oh, a new face..."

Zhao Changhe smiled apologetically and said, "My apologies, I'm just new to this, so it took me a while to find my way around..."

"Leave them here," the steward said. "Tell Da Zhou to double the number of braised ducks for the delivery tomorrow. The guest is especially loving his braised ducks. Da Zhou is really helping us look good."

Zhao Changhe scratched his head and put on a simple smile. "Who in Xiangyang doesn't love our boss's ducks?"

"Hah, it isn't just Xiangyang, even guests from the north love them. This is what I call winning over both the north and south," the steward commented. He then waved him off. "Alright, go on back now. You should know the way back, right? Don't wander around. If you wander around and end up getting chopped up, no one will come to avenge you."

Guests from the north, eh?

Zhao Changhe slowly left the kitchen, then sped up and headed toward the guest courtyard as soon as he managed to get out of sight of the guards. Obviously, he never had the smallest intention to head right out; he had only delivered the ducks so that he could have an excuse in case something went wrong. If he got caught, he could just claim he had gotten lost.

Even if Wanzhuang doesn't arrive today, she'll definitely be here by tomorrow. If I don't manage to gather information today, I at least have to rescue Li Sian. If I just leave a hostage in your hands, it will be difficult for us to do anything.

Finding the guest courtyard where Li Sian was being held was easy; he could hear servants talking about Mister Li, who had been confined just the day before.

"I heard that the city lord permitted Mister Li to do whatever he wanted with the maids... He must be having a great time."

"I heard that he hasn't touched any of them, though. He sent all of the maids away... In fact, it wasn't just the maids. Isn't it common for powerful figures to exchange concubines every now and then? It's said that the city lord's eighteenth concubine was sent to accompany Mister Li. I wonder if he's going to send her away as well."

"Wow... I'd be fine with exchanging eighteen years of my life just to have the eighteenth concubine glance at me. I don't believe Mister Li would send her away."

"Do you think he's like you? He's the owner of brothels all over Jingchu. What kind of beautiful woman has he not seen?"

"I don't believe anyone could be prettier than the eighteenth concubine!"

As the servants chatted amongst themselves, Zhao Changhe slipped to the side of the guest courtyard. Under the watchful eyes of the guards, he quickly passed the blind spots of the courtyard wall, landing lightly behind a flower bush, silently observing.

From inside the courtyard, a seductive voice said, "Why are you so quick to refuse? The city lord doesn't mind it if you enjoy one of his concubines..."

Li Sian's voice responded, "But I do."

"While it might be fun to play with unclaimed women, isn't it more fun to play with claimed ones?"

“...I’ve never played with any women.”

“But you run brothels...”

“Yes, but I don’t like women. Madam, please leave.”

The door opened, and a stunningly beautiful woman was thrown out. She stumbled a few steps before regaining her balance.

The door slammed shut, and the woman, her face red with fury, cursed, “You wretched bastard!”

Zhao Changhe held his breath, his heart pounding.

While he might not be able to recognize the cultivation techniques of other forces, he was quite familiar with the traits of the cultivation techniques he practiced himself, cultivation techniques such as the Blood God Cult’s Vicious Blood Art and... the Maitreya Cult’s Pure Bliss Art. These cultivation techniques had distinct and recognizable traits that would not be present elsewhere.

A celestial maiden from the Maitreya Cult!

No wonder Lu Shiheng was so willing to offer her to Li Sian. If Li Sian slept with her, he probably wouldn’t even know when they put him under mind control.

But isn’t Lu Shiheng supposed to be against Maitreya? People here might dare to even curse the emperor, but welcoming the Maitreya Cult is still seen as taboo.

I even have reliable information that Maitreya is joining forces with the Blood God Cult to attack Xiangyang. I personally saw an envoy from the Maitreya Cult at the Blood God Cult. There was no mistaking it. Just what exactly is going on?

Zhao Changhe looked up at the sky. The sun had completely set.

The celestial maiden instructed her maidservants, “One of you go inform Lu Shiheng that we can’t afford any further delays. We need to take action now. We’re running out of time, so I’ll have to take the harder approach.”

*

Not long after Zhao Changhe entered the city lord's mansion, Tang Wanzhuang arrived in Xiangyang just as the sun was setting, travel-worn.

She did not enter through the city gates. Instead, she lightly scaled the high walls of the city and directly headed to the Immortal Palatial Garden.

Lu Shiheng did not expect Tang Wanzhuang to arrive so quickly. They ideally wanted to first control or convert Li Sian and use him to trap Tang Wanzhuang, ensuring greater chances of success.

This was also why he had not taken direct action against Li Sian. He needed him to cooperate.

However, Li Sian had remained unyielding, and by the end of the day, there had been no progress. Meanwhile, Tang Wanzhuang had already arrived in the city.

Fortunately, the Immortal Palatial Garden had long been prepared for her arrival, with personnel replaced and everything set. Tang Wanzhuang could not possibly recognize every subordinate in Xiangyang, so they believed they could deceive her for the time being.

The steward, arranged by Lu Shiheng, wiped the sweat from his forehead and greeted Tang Wanzhuang. "Bureau chief, what brings you here?"

Tang Wanzhuang looked around, slightly frowning. "Why are there so many unfamiliar faces? Where's Sian?"

"The fourth lord had some matters to attend to. He should be back by evening. Bureau chief, would you like to rest and have a meal first?"

Tang Wanzhuang squinted at him for a while, then suddenly smiled brightly, "Sure, get me something light."

Her smile sent shivers through everyone around.

Some said that if there were a ranking for the most beautiful woman in the world, First Seat Tang would likely top the ranking. Those who had not seen her might think that it was an exaggeration, but they would discover that, in person, her reputation was well-deserved. Instantly, everyone felt as if the supposedly beautiful women of Immortal Palatial Garden were but ordinary women. Even the Maitreya Cult's celestial maidens, known for their bewitching allure, paled in comparison to her.

The steward arranged a light meal, not daring to drug it. Someone who ranked third on the Ranking of Earth and could become the chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau was not someone who could easily be subdued with drugs. If they laced her food, it would only raise her suspicion.

Regrettably to them, Tang Wanzhuang had arrived too quickly for many of their plans to be properly set.

He arranged everything as usual, cautiously attending to her. "Bureau chief, what brings you here? Do you wish to see the city lord?"

Tang Wanzhuang sipped her porridge leisurely and smiled. "Mm-hm, inform the city lord to come here for a meeting with me."

The steward did not find anything unusual in her words, so he just smiled and left to report to Lu Shiheng. In fact, someone had already gone to report Tang Wanzhuang's arrival the moment she arrived at the brothel.

Tang Wanzhuang watched the steward's departing figure, her eyes flickering with a gloomy light.

Something's wrong...

Someone who was truly a part of the Demon Suppression Bureau would be shocked at the idea of inviting the city lord to their secret base, fearing it would expose years of secret operations.

However, the steward had failed to consider this.

It proved that either the place had been compromised long ago, and the undercover agents here had long since defected, or the steward was simply one of Lu Shiheng's men rather than Li Sian's.

Tang Wanzhuang's expression remained unchanged as she calmly drank her porridge, thinking that she was still a step too late. If Li Sian had been captured, her actions would be considerably constrained.

This is bad. There's no one who can help me rescue Li Sian... Even if I can secretly send a message to Da Zhou, he doesn't have enough strength to rescue Sian, and he'd only end up being exposed unnecessarily.

Haah, I'll just take things one step at a time. First, I'll meet up with Lu Shiheng and see what he's up to.

Soon, a knock came on the door, and Lu Shiheng entered with a hearty laugh. "First Seat Tang, why did you come to a brothel rather than the city lord's mansion right when you arrived at Xiangyang? It wouldn't look good on you if word got out."

Tang Wanzhuang smiled slightly. "It's nothing. It was just that Mister Li is an old friend of the Tang Clan, so I wanted to pay him a visit. Please have a seat, prefectural governor."

His official title was prefectural governor; the Great Xia Empire had no "city lord" position. However, Lu Shiheng insisted on being called city lord. Over time, people had forgotten that he was the prefectural governor of Xiangyang, thinking of him as the true lord of the city.[1]

Tang Wanzhuang's first words abruptly shifted the atmosphere, but Lu Shiheng seemed unaffected, naturally bowing with a smile. "First Seat Tang, you defeated Maitreya at Taihu Lake yesterday, and today, you're already in Xiangyang. Is there something urgent for you to have come here with such haste?"

"Indeed," Tang Wanzhuang replied coolly. "If I had been a day late, I'm afraid Xiangyang might no longer belong to the Great Xia."

Chapter 370: I've Been Letting You

Lu Shiheng maintained his composure, smiling as he said, "You must be jesting, right? I have been diligently preparing for battle, training soldiers day and night, and recruiting experts. Unless Maitreya brings a large army personally, it would not be easy for someone like Yu Cixiu to claim victory over Xiangyang with just his troops."

Tang Wanzhuang smiled. "Is that so? Then you truly are a capable minister, prefectural governor."

“I wouldn’t dare accept such praise,” Lu Shiheng replied. “If Xiangyang lacks anything, it’s sufficient funds and provisions. First Seat Tang, could you help transfer some supplies from Jiangnan? Oh, wait, the route is blocked, so how about transferring some supplies from Heluo[1] instead? There should be plenty of grain there.”

Tang Wanzhuang responded flatly, “I have no authority over Heluo.”

Lu Shiheng looked surprised. “Why not? I heard His Majesty granted you significant authority over the south...”

Tang Wanzhuang said, “The Yang Clan of Hongnong no longer follows orders. My authority has no effect on them.”

Lu Shiheng feigned a sharp intake of breath. “The Yang Clan of Hongnong has not made any large moves these past years. Could they have suddenly decided to rebel because Wang Daozhong helped them capture Yang Qianyuan? Is that really enough to cause such a massive change in their stance?”

“The specifics are still unknown to us. However, this matter is at most a pretext; the actual instigator for their insurgency may not even be the Wang Clan, but the Four Idols Cult,” Tang Wanzhuang’s beautiful eyes scanned Lu Shiheng’s face as she said calmly. “Therefore, if the Yang Clan moves south, attacking with the Maitreya Cult from different sides... or if Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise directly storm your mansion, are you still confident?”

Tang Wanzhuang did not know about Lu Shiheng’s collusion with the Maitreya Cult. She had rushed to Xiangyang out of concern that Lu Shiheng might join an alliance with the Wang Clan, Yang Clan, and the Four Idols Cult.

The reason was that Lu Shiheng had once been a subordinate of the Wang Clan, having been mentored by Wang Daoning in sword arts.

On the outside, with Lu Shiheng being in Xiangyang, he seemed to be detached from the Wang Clan’s machinations. However, his allegiance could easily change with a word if the alliance reached Xiangyang.

Such an alliance would be far more troublesome to deal with than the Maitreya Cult, mainly because they would not face the same resistance from local forces that the Maitreya Cult did. For

example, Lu Shiheng's attitude toward the Maitreya Cult and toward the Wang and Yang Clans would be entirely different.

Before the battle at Taihu Lake, Tang Wanzhuang had heard about the Yang Clan's upheaval and had wanted to rush to Xiangyang then. She believed that her presence could sway Lu Shiheng's allegiance, or at least that it was worth trying to do so. Therefore, she rushed over immediately after the battle ended, racing against time.

That was also why she had warned Li Sian and Da Zhou about the risk of too many carrier pigeons possibly attracting attention and exposing them. It was a hint specifically pointed at the city lord, for who else but him would be monitoring the traffic of carrier pigeons in the city? If Lu Shiheng switched sides, Li Sian and Da Zhou would be in grave danger.

Unfortunately, upon arriving, she discovered that the Immortal Palatial Garden had already been compromised and that Li Sian had been captured, exposing Lu Shiheng's betrayal.

She was too late. Alone, it was simply too difficult for her to mend all the fissures in the sky.

Lu Shiheng continued, "The troops from the north would need to cross the river to come south. It would not be easy for them to do so. If you're worried about that, bureau chief, why not contact the capital? If the Yang Clan makes a move, attack them from their rear. That way, the threat to Xiangyang would be resolved. I honestly still doubt the Yang Clan would have the guts to carry out such an attack."

The Yang Clan, indeed, did not have the guts. They wanted to take Xiangyang without having to fight. They wanted it to simply fall into their hands directly.

Tang Wanzhuang sighed. She was about to say something when her expression subtly changed.

Zhao Changhe had learned the Moonglade Sutra from her, allowing him to sense dangers around him, so how could she, as the one who taught him, not be able to do the same?

She clearly felt the presence of powerful individuals arriving at the Immortal Palatial Garden. The surrounding rooftops also quickly became filled with experts forming a formation. In barely any time, powerful bows and crossbows surrounded the brothel.

In the short time that Lu Shiheng had been chatting with her, he had arranged a thorough encirclement.

Was he just stalling to let me get surrounded? Where did he get the audacity to openly hunt the bureau chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau in Xiangyang? Even the Wang Clan would not dare do such a thing!

Does he think he has control over the entire city and can cover this up? The Tang Clan knows I'm here, so if something happens to me, whether the Tome of Troubled Times announces it or not, he won't be able to hide it from the Tang Clan. Just what is he thinking?

Tang Wanzhuang's mind raced as she pretended not to notice. She swallowed back her words intended to persuade him and leisurely sipped her tea. "Since the prefectural governor says so, it seems that I might have indeed been overthinking things. Your words are reasonable; perhaps I should head to the capital immediately."

Lu Shiheng leaned over to pour her more tea with a smile. "It's already quite late. There's no need to rush back overnight. Why not rest in Xiangyang for the night and set off tomorrow morning? In fact, you can even just send a message from here; there's no need for you to run around personally."

"I'm afraid that if I stay here for the night, my head might be hanging on the city gate by morning." As she said the last word, she abruptly launched an attack, aiming right for Lu Shiheng's throat.

Lu Shiheng, having just leaned in to pour her tea, barely managed to dodge. However, Tang Wanzhuang's strike was so swift that his shoulder still ended up getting hit, sending a wave of numbness through his body.

Lu Shiheng felt an immense wave of regret. He had known that Tang Wanzhuang who had formidable strength and acted decisively, yet he still let himself be deceived by her frail appearance. Every time he faced her, despite his prior caution, he was still not cautious enough. He should never have leaned in so close to her. It was pathetic that, despite being ranked forty-eighth on the Ranking of Man, he could not even block a sudden attack from her and was now rendered immobile by her acupoint strike.

Fortunately, he had finished setting up the trap. As soon as Tang Wanzhuang made her move, an ambusher burst right through the wall, their terrifying saber slashing toward her back.

Tang Wanzhuang was prepared. Her body moved gracefully as her delicate hand deflected the saber.

Both parties wavered slightly, and the saber was retracted, revealing the enormous, mountain-like form of Maitreya.

Tang Wanzhuang's face darkened.

She never expected it to be Maitreya!

How could it be Maitreya?

Tang Wanzhuang took a deep breath and coldly said, "So it's you. I never expected this... Prefectural Governor Lu, care to give me an explanation?"

"Why should I?" Though he was immobilized, Lu Shiheng appeared even calmer. "Didn't you see? He doesn't care about my life or death. He just wants yours. Using me as a hostage is meaningless."

Maitreya, having missed his first strike, did not launch another one in haste. He chuckled and said, "First Seat Tang, what a surprise, we meet again so soon."

Tang Wanzhuang frowned slightly. Maitreya had been injured at Taihu Lake but he seemed to have recovered quickly. Now, he looked completely unscathed, making her victory yesterday seem almost fake.

Is the dual cultivation technique of the Pure Bliss Art really so miraculous?

She took a deep breath and said coldly, "Maitreya, you might think you've won, but as a leader, you've entered enemy territory. This behavior... it's not only short-sighted but also turns you into someone else's pawn."

"Pawn?" Maitreya laughed. "This is just about taking the blame for your death in Xiangyang. Whether Wang Daoning or Yang Jingxiu hinders me from taking over this city, it doesn't matter. I'm not afraid of being blamed for your death, and the schemes of the Wang and Yang Clans might not succeed. After killing you, I can focus on playing chess with them."

Tang Wanzhuang asked, “Has the prefectural governor fallen under the control of your heavenly maidens?”

“Take a guess.” Maitreya laughed. “Including you... These aristocratic families, high and mighty, think that just showing their face will solve everything. Absolute bullshit.”

Tang Wanzhuang did not respond. She knew that there was some truth to his words. She had overestimated her influence, coming here alone. There were many more factors that she should have considered besides the value of her face. But even if she had considered them, the mind-controlling techniques of the Maitreya Cult and the Four Idols Cult rendered all of her considerations meaningless.

Maitreya chuckled. “First Seat Tang, in our previous encounters, I was always at a disadvantage. The first time at the Ancient Sword Lake, it was a conflict between us and the Four Idols Cult, and you intervened out of nowhere. I didn’t want to fight you. The second time at your Tang Clan. Zhao Changhe and Tang Buqi ruined my plans; the situation was not in my favor, and I didn’t want to engage. In yesterday’s battle at Taihu Lake, we were evenly matched, but Tang Buqi took advantage of my vulnerability and broke my formation. But today...”

He pointed around the room, pointing out the presence of the members of the Maitreya Cult in the surroundings, “Today, the situation is in my favor.”

He then pointed toward the city lord’s mansion, “Your right-hand man, Li Sian, who is also a significant source of funds for your spy network, is currently in the hands of our heavenly maidens. Not only is his life at my mercy, but his money will soon also belong to our holy cult.”

After saying this, he looked up and down at Tang Wanzhuang’s beautiful body, a strange smile surfacing on his face. “First Seat Tang, are you willing to abandon your right-hand man, Xiangyang, Jiangnan, your reputation, and your moral integrity? Do you still want them?”

Tang Wanzhuang knew his words were meant to unsettle her.

They had always been evenly matched. If one side’s mind wavered, that side would lose. Previously, Maitreya’s mind had wavered, and now it seemed that it was her turn.

Tang Wanzhuang slowly drew her Spring Water Azure Waves Sword, pointing it at Maitreya. Her expression was calm. “It seems you still don’t know.”

Maitreya smiled, “Oh? Please enlighten me on what it is that I don’t know.”

“The only reason it has seemed like we’ve been evenly matched... is that I’ve been letting you believe so.”

Maitreya’s expression changed slightly, and then he sneered. “Then let’s see who perishes first. Will you cough to death first, or will your outburst kill me?”