

T. Times 106

Chapter 106: Ally of the Maitreya Cult

Not counting those times that he had gone to see Tang Wanzhuang, this was the first time that Zhao Changhe was entering a brothel.

He really, really had to thank Xia Chichi for granting him the experience of being with a woman. Although they had not gone all the way, the experience was close enough. If he had come to this brothel just a few days ago, he would have tensed up as soon as any of the girls approached him. Back then, his innocence had been apparent even to Han Wubing.

Han Wubing was a friend, so Zhao Changhe had no problem being teased by him. However, he could not afford to appear timid in front of outsiders. After all, he was the notorious Bloodthirsty Asura. If people found out that this so-called “fierce demon” was actually a novice who blushed at the mere touch of a woman, everyone would laugh themselves silly.

How was he going to make his way in the jianghu then?

“This is our Xiaoxiang Pavilion’s top courtesan, Ruyan,” Wan Dongliu said with a smile. “Ruyan, take good care of Mister Zhao here. If you satisfy him, there will be rewards for you.”

Ruyan assumed a demure and shy demeanor, gracefully seating herself right next to Zhao Changhe. She bowed her head and smiled innocently, making every effort to make herself look like a virtuous lady. Then, she nibbled on her lower lip bashfully, clinked her cup with his, and softly said, “I offer you a toast, young master. Your name is renowned throughout the world, and I have always admired you...”

A fragrant breeze brushed by, and her soft shoulder pressed against his body. If it were before, Zhao Changhe would have been all tensed up, but now he hardly had any reaction. He smiled and raised his own cup in reply, taking a big mouthful. He did not follow Wan Dongliu’s example of holding a courtesan in his arms, but he also did not avoid Ruyan like she was some venomous snake. He simply leaned back leisurely on the chair, appearing like someone who was all too familiar with such a routine.

He was not merely acting this way for the sake of appearances. He knew that those of the martial world were quick to judge people. If you appeared too innocent, you would attract all sorts of trouble. On the other hand, if you behaved like someone experienced, others would not dare to have any rash thoughts toward you.

As expected, Wan Dongliu, who was enjoying the embrace of his own courtesan, said with a smile, “Ruyan, brother Zhao used to be a stronghold master of a group of mountain bandits. He’s definitely seen his fair share of virtuous ladies. Why bother with all the pretense? Who are you trying to impress with that act?”

Zhao Changhe thought to himself that he might be in trouble. Wan Dongliu was not wrong in the slightest. Although Ruyan was indeed quite beautiful, she could hardly compare to Tang Wanzhuang. He had already developed a bit of an immunity toward such actions...

He waved his hand and said, “Eh, brother Wan, as you have said, I’ve been with many women, so these gestures mean little to me. Just having the right atmosphere is enough for me.”

Wan Dongliu laughed heartily, “That’s right, you must be eyeing someone like Yue Hongling or Cui Yuanyang, right? Compared to them, the pleasures that this brothel can provide are indeed lacking...”

Come on already, you asshole.

“But having said that, even if you do achieve such feats in the future, they won’t be able to provide the tender care and devotion that Ruyan can. After all, that’s something different altogether.”

“That’s true, that’s true.” Seeing the pitiful look that Ruyan gave him, Zhao Changhe could not bring himself to continue on this topic. He cleared his throat and changed the subject, “Brother Wan, I can’t help but find something strange. My reputation should be more well-known up north, and you people in the Jiangnan area should have only known of me through the Tome of Troubled Times. So... why does it seem as if the people here are more familiar with me than those in the north? You even know my nickname when I didn’t even know I had one myself. Can you explain why this is?”

Wan Dongliu calmly explained, “This place is a central hub for water transport, so information spreads more quickly here than elsewhere. It’s much easier for someone’s fame to spread here. That is one reason. Another reason is that the Maitreya Cult actually spread rumors about you. Although, from our analysis, there doesn’t seem to be much of a connection between you and them.”

Zhao Changhe was taken aback. “The Maitreya Cult? They boosted my fame?”

“That’s right,” Wan Dongliu said with a smile. “The Maitreya Cult and the Four Idols Cult are at odds with one another. Their enmity stems from their very doctrines. The conflict between them may even be more serious than the ones they have with righteous sects or the imperial court. Brother Zhao, you are known for defecting from the Blood God Cult, a subsidiary of the Four Idols Cult. You are also known for killing Luo Zhenwu, who was suspected of being a prince, and being wanted by the imperial court. It was only because you saved a member of the Cui Clan that the warrant for your arrest was revoked... In many ways, you might be seen as a worthy ally by the Maitreya Cult.”

Zhao Changhe almost spat out his drink.

He was making his way to where the Maitreya Cult operated with the intention of causing them trouble, but it turned out that they actually considered him an ally.

After giving it some thought, however, he could not deny that it did make some sense, especially with what had happened at the Ancient Sword Lake. In the Maitreya Cult’s eyes, he and Han Wubing had taken Xia Chichi hostage, which had caused a great deal of distress to the Four Idols Cult. As such, there was absolutely nothing wrong with the Maitreya Cult seeing him as the enemy of their enemy.

With this in mind, Zhao Changhe looked at Wan Dongliu with a hint of curiosity. Is he so welcoming toward me because he’s associated with the Maitreya Cult?

The Maitreya Cult was active in Jiangnan, and the Cao Gang was a local powerhouse here. It was impossible for these two forces to have no interactions with one another. In other words, either they were enemies or they were associates. And judging from this brothel, as well as what Tang Wanzhuang had told Zhao Changhe about the Maitreya Cult engaging in immoral activities, it seemed extremely likely that there were members of the Maitreya Cult present.

Hmph, of course this guy would know that I don’t have much of a connection with the Maitreya Cult. He’s probably in cahoots with them!

Wan Dongliu continued, “It’s completely normal for the Maitreya Cult to promote your reputation. You honestly should not mind the nickname of Asura too much. The Maitreya Cult probably found it quite appealing. Of course, the main reason why they boosted your reputation is to shame the Four Idols Cult.

“As far as they’re telling everybody, the new saintess of the Four Idols Cult is just another woman that you had grown tired of. They told everyone how you killed a branch master of the Blood God

Cult with ease, how the cult leader could not stop you even when he took action personally, and much more. And because they did their best to boost your reputation, your fame has reached great heights. That is why you're so well-known in this region..."

Zhao Changhe replied, "It seems that I really should thank them on behalf of Cult Leader Xue."

Wan Dongliu chuckled and said, "Let's not talk about the Maitreya Cult for now. I am much more curious about why someone like you has come to Jiangnan. Is there any way we can assist you?"

Zhao Changhe said, "I merely helped you catch a thief. Your passionate hospitality is honestly making me a little uncomfortable."

Wan Dongliu shook his head. "Merely helped us catch a thief? Do you know who that thief is?"

"I am ignorant of the figures in Jiangnan. Brother Wan, please do enlighten me."

"That was the renowned master thief Ji Chengkong."

Zhao Changhe thought for a while but could not recall any such name on the Tome of Troubled Times. He apologized, saying, "I'm sorry, but I don't seem to have heard of him."

"...In any case, he's a notorious thief in Jiangnan, and he is particularly known for not only liking to steal things but also prying into people's secrets. The thing he enjoys the most is stealing valuable secrets and spreading them." Wan Dongliu sighed. "Do you now understand why I, despite having some influence in the area, had such a hard time catching him on my own..."

Zhao Changhe could not help but inquire, "I take it that he has stolen some of your secrets?"

"Exactly. While this matter might seem trivial to you, it's nothing less than saving my life from my point of view. However, please forgive me for not divulging the specifics."

Zhao Changhe found this to be quite interesting. He realized that in the vast jianghu

, one truly could encounter all kinds of people. Ji Chengkong seemed to be rather intriguing. Zhao Changhe then asked, "How do you plan to deal with Ji Chengkong? Do you intend to kill him?"

“He has not caused any significant trouble yet, and I am not all that ruthless, really. However, I am concerned that he might relapse into his old ways, so I can’t just let him go. For now, I plan to lock him up for a while and see how things go...” Wan Dongliu then looked at Zhao Changhe as if pondering something and said, “Brother Zhao, is there something you want to do to him? I mean, he did try to steal your money.”

Zhao Changhe waved his hand and smiled, saying, “No, not at all. I just find the people in Jiangnan to be very interesting. I’m merely broadening my horizons. Come, let’s have a drink.”

Wan Dongliu laughed heartily and turned to Ruyan, saying, “Ruyan, it’s your time to shine.”

Ruyan, who had been listening to Zhao Changhe with admiration, finally broke into a smile and approached him. “Young master...”

Zhao Changhe did his best to play the role of an experienced gentleman, welcoming her with a smile.

However, although he was being friendly, he could not help but find the situation increasingly intriguing. He suspected that Wan Dongliu had some ulterior motives. It did not make much sense to him that Wan Dongliu was doing all this just because he had helped them catch a thief.

If Wan Dongliu really does have connections with the Maitreya Cult, then are they trying to recruit me?

As the evening progressed, the guest and host enjoyed their drinks, engaging in light-hearted conversation about the jianghu while mingling with the courtesans. By the time they finished, it was already dark outside.

Wan Dongliu brought his courtesan with him as he bid his farewell. “Ruyan, take good care of Mister Zhao tonight.”

Ruyan’s eyes were filled with allure as she bashfully lowered her head.

Zhao Changhe, too, appeared eager to experience the night’s pleasures as he held her close and headed to his guest room.

Once the door to the room closed, Ruyan looked at him and her cheeks blushed. “Young master... Would you like me to help you bathe?”

Zhao Changhe, unable to contain his excitement, lifted her and leaped onto the bed, saying, “There’s no need for all those pretentious things. I’ve been waiting for this since earlier!”

“Ooh, Young Master Zhao, please be gentle on me. Hehe, you’re so impatient...”

Outside the room, the person who was listening in on what was going on inside shook their head and left.

It was not wise to eavesdrop too much. Zhao Changhe was someone on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons and it was impossible for him not to have sharp senses. It would be bad if they were discovered.

Little did they know that as soon as they left, Zhao Changhe swiftly pressed a point on Ruyan’s body that caused her to lose consciousness. The next moment, she was out cold, and he sprang up from the bed.

His gaze suddenly became clear and alert, the hurried look on his face from earlier nowhere to be seen.

“Only idiots would do this kind of thing with a woman who might be a member of the Maitreya Cult. They wouldn’t even know how they might end up being under the cult’s control... And as Chichi said, such people are dirty.” Zhao Changhe quietly took out a set of dark clothes from his belongings, put them on, and then swiftly slipped out through the window, disappearing into the darkness.

My biggest problem right now is that someone might think I’m the kind of guy who can only last three seconds... But never mind, there’s a more pressing issue at hand.

His current objective was to follow Wan Dongliu.

Chapter 107: Heroes Gather

Originally, Zhao Changhe had gone to Jiangnan with the intention of finding something to do. Basically...he had run out of enemies.

The Blood God Cult seemed to have changed its stance toward him. They temporarily halted their hunt for him, and they even suspended the bounty on his head. This was good news for Zhao Changhe. He really did not want to be their enemy deep down. He did not have any genuine enmity with them. Instructor Sun was his teacher, and Cult Leader Xue was... really entertaining.

After the bounty was suspended, the high rewards that had initially attracted assassins and placed a lot of pressure on Zhao Changhe disappeared. However, he still could not be certain what stance some of the assassins organizations would take. Would they seek revenge for their failed missions? Were they planning something big? In any case, they seemed to be laying low for the time being.

Due to his role in escorting Yangyang home, he had offended some of the local figures in Hebei. However, these people were not likely to pursue him across the country, and with the threat of Cui Wenjing looming, they were probably forced to worry more about their own safety.

On the same note, when he got involved in the internal affairs of the Cui Clan, his actions also led to him offending Cui Wenjue and those who supported him. This was why he had been attacked. However, this matter had been put to rest. After all, Cui Wenjing would not let such a situation continue for long. He would have taken care of it by now.

Also, the imperial warrant for my arrest is gone, and I've now become an agent working for the Demon Suppression Bureau.

Looking at his current situation, Zhao Changhe was surprised to find that he was no longer facing the pressure to survive that he had felt ever since he first arrived in this world. In fact, this was quite normal. Nobody lived in constant conflict and danger unless they were actively seeking it.

However, this situation made him feel uncomfortable. He was, in fact, the kind of person who was naturally inclined to a life of banditry, and he felt like he was losing the environment that pushed him to constantly improve his martial arts.

In addition, since neither Cui Wenjing nor Tang Wanzhuang could help him improve his meridians, he had to seek a solution himself.

And so, he headed south, thinking that in the vast jianghu, there had to be more excitement waiting for him.

However, he could not help but feel lost as he wandered the world without a clear goal. Even though he said that he would make dealing with the Maitreya Cult his goal, he did not know where to start. As a result, he felt disheartened during his travels, and he had no idea what to do. It was almost as if he was conducting some social research project on himself.

Unexpectedly, just as he arrived in Yangzhou, he encountered the inexplicably warm welcome of Wan Dongliu, who seemed to have some relations with the Maitreya Cult. Zhao Changhe was pleasantly surprised to find that all the uncertainty and dullness he had felt during his journey had been instantly wiped away. His excitement and adventurous spirit were rekindled, and his blood began rushing through his veins once again.

Zhao Changhe truly could not help but see himself as a true-born bandit.

As it turned out, Wan Dongliu did not stay at the Xiaoxiang Pavilion, and he didn't take any of the women with him, either. He returned home alone.

After a short while, a figure approached him. It was one of the guards at the brothel.

“Young Master Wan, Zhao Changhe and Ruyan threw themselves onto the bed right away. Ruyan even scolded him for being too impatient.”

Wan Dongliu chuckled and said, “Well, he is a mountain bandit, after all. What did you expect? Did you really think that someone like him could appreciate the finer arts like music or painting? This is perfectly normal behavior for these people.”

The brothel guard also laughed. “That means he'll probably be easy to win over.”

Wan Dongliu shook his head, “It's said that he's got quite the rebellious streak. He might be easy to win over at first, but he might also turn against you later on. These small things are unlikely to keep him loyal.”

The guard said, “That must be why those from the Maitreya Cult think that it's better to control him instead. He does have good potential, so it isn't strange for them to want to pull him into their cult.”

Wan Dongliu mused, “We should stop here for now. Ruyan is just an ordinary member of the Maitreya Cult who has never practiced any secret arts. There should not be any major problems. Whether we can win his heart or not, we should at least establish a good relationship with him.

Ruyan is just a top courtesan of a brothel, we do not lose much by letting her take care of him. If we try to take control of him forcefully, we might only end up pissing him off, and no good would come out of that. Just remember what happened when the Blood God Cult tried to take control of him.”

The guard sneered. “Well, we’re definitely not like those weaklings from the Blood God Cult.”

Wan Dongliu smiled and said, “Of course not. The Maitreya’s vast divine powers and boundless teachings are in a league of their own. How can a mere bloodthirsty evil god compare to the Maitreya[1]? Alright, I won’t meddle in Zhao Changhe’s affairs any further. I only ran into him by chance.”

The guard said softly, “What about the matter you’re working on...”

Wan Dongliu shook his head. “This is not a suitable place to discuss that.”

The guard realized that they were still on the street, and while it was fine to talk about Zhao Changhe here, this was not a suitable place to discuss truly important matters. He whispered, “Alright, we’ll wait for your feedback.”

The guard hurriedly left, while Wan Dongliu strolled away leisurely. After taking a few steps, he suddenly sneered and swiftly disappeared, using his movement art.

Zhao Changhe, who was hiding on a distant rooftop, broke out in cold sweat and dared not follow any further.

He could not tell whether Wan Dongliu had been sneering at the guard, the Maitreya Cult, or him.

If it was the latter, then Wan Dongliu’s true strength was quite unpredictable. Due to his Back Eye, Zhao Changhe’s five senses far surpassed those of ordinary martial artists at the same level and even some of those with greater cultivation. This ability was the main reason he had been able to avoid so many assassination attempts and gain the upper hand multiple times in the past. But if Wan Dongliu’s five senses surpassed his own, even when he had the Back Eye, then just how strong really was that man?

However, if that was the case, why would Wan Dongliu sneer as a warning? Was he simply expressing the disdain of someone superior...

If Wan Dongliu had instead been sneering at the Maitreya Cult and the guard... Does that mean that Wan Dongliu is only a member of the Maitreya Cult on the surface, and he actually has other plans? If that's the case, then his friendliness toward me might have some other reason behind it...

Based on the conversation that Wan Dongliu had with the guard, it seemed that he did not harbor ill will toward Zhao Changhe. Well, it appeared that he did not hold Zhao Changhe in high regard, either.

On the other hand, the Xiaoxiang Pavilion was under the direct control of the Maitreya Cult. It was no wonder then that when he came on horseback, the madam of the brothel welcomed him so warmly... She was just like that madam of the Myriad Flowers Building in Sword Lake City. It was not that he was particularly handsome, but that their actions carried hidden intentions.

Damn it, they're all fucking actors.

Zhao Changhe thought for a while, then quietly returned to the brothel and slipped back into bed, staying right beside Ruyan.

Originally, he had not intended to go back after knocking her out like that. But since Ruyan was an ordinary person, he felt that there wouldn't be a big issue even if he did come back. How could ordinary people know just how inconsequential they were in the face of martial arts...

He lay quietly beside her and practiced the Six Harmonies Art. After circulating his qi for a while, he heard Ruyan wake up beside him.

Zhao Changhe wasn't meditating very deeply, so he quickly opened his eyes and smiled. "You're finally awake."

Ruyan appeared somewhat frightened and shrank back into bed. From her perspective, it seemed as if the ruffian before her had been too rough on her and knocked her out. She had no idea where he might have hit her.

Such customers were difficult to serve. If they were to continue, she feared that he might just accidentally kill her.

In line with her thoughts, Zhao Changhe laughed and said, “You’re so delicate. You fainted from the slightest touch. I didn’t even get to enjoy myself earlier. Shall we continue?”

Ruyan, scared to death, pleaded, “Please spare me, young master. I can use my mouth instead...”

“What’s the use of that?” Zhao Changhe’s eyes widened at her suggestion, and he retorted, “That’s like scratching an itch on your foot over your boots. I’d really rather not!”

Ruyan secretly thought that using her mouth would actually be more comfortable, but this rude man really did not seem to understand. However, she did not dare to argue with him and could only continue trembling in fear.

“Forget it.” Zhao Changhe got out of bed and took the flagon of wine from the table. “Accompany me for a few drinks. If you really want to use your mouth, I’d rather you use it to tell me stories. This is my first time in Jiangnan, and I’m pretty interested in what’s going on here. I don’t really find women all that exciting anymore.”

Ruyan was ecstatic when she heard what he said. Even uncultured ruffians have their good points every now and then! If he enjoys hearing stories, then I can chat with him all night if he wants!

She quickly filled Zhao Changhe’s cup, worried that he might change his mind, and asked, “What kind of story would you like to hear?”

“Is there a Twenty-Four Bridge in Yangzhou?”

Ruyan was stunned for a moment, cautiously eyeing Zhao Changhe with her beautiful eyes, wondering why he was asking about such poetic matters. He knows ancient poetry, is that why is he inquiring about the bridge? Oh, right, the meaning of the original poem has nothing to do with what he’s thinking. It’s just the poet feeling polluted by the worldly affairs in the midst of the bustling city. This guy definitely did not see it that way.

After gathering her thoughts, she replied, “Yes, it exists. However, I’m not sure if you are talking about that one bridge, as most people do, or if you are referring to the other meaning.”

Little did she know that Zhao Changhe was indeed curious about the bridge itself. He was not curious about its poetic symbolism, but rather, he simply wanted to know more about the local

geography. “Oh, is the Twenty-Four Bridge truly a single bridge, and not twenty-four different bridges?”

“There is that saying, that it was the total number of bridges inside the city, but with so many bridges in the city these days, it’s impossible to know which twenty-four they are referring to.”

“Hmm...” Zhao Changhe sipped his wine and nodded. “I should make some time to go and see them myself.”

With the conversation flowing more smoothly now, Ruyan was no longer as frightened as earlier. “Do you understand poetry?”

“Not really, I just used to hear women at brothels recite poetry.”

“...”

Zhao Changhe then changed the topic. “By the way, the Tome of Troubled Times has not given any updates about brother Wan for a while now. He was ranked 70th when he was at the fifth layer of the Profound Gate. Is he still at the fifth layer right now?”

“I’m not sure. Young Master Wan has not really fought with others in the past two years. No one in Yangzhou dares to provoke the Cao Gang.”

“Have there not been foreign experts coming to visit? This place is a hub for canal transportation, so there should be plenty of outsiders, right?”

“There are indeed many outsiders, but nobody dares to be so audacious. In fact, aside from you, there are also other experts on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons in Yangzhou.”

Zhao Changhe was intrigued. “Oh? Who else is here? I’d like to meet them if I have the chance.”

Ruyan hesitated for a moment and her expression turned strange.

“What’s the matter? If you know who’s here, then just tell me!”

“There is Daoist Priest Xuan Chong from the Taiyi Sect, and Young Master Tang Buqi from the Tang Family of Gusu...”

“Oh?” Zhao Changhe took a sip of his wine and looked forward to it: “So it seems that I came at the right time. There is a gathering of heroes... What were you hesitating for? I have no grievances with them.”

Ruyan paused for a moment before continuing, her expression turning strange. “There’s also... Yue Hongling from Luoxia Mountain Village.”

“Pfft!” Zhao Changhe could not help but spew out his wine in surprise.

Chapter 108: White Lotus Temple

No wonder Ruyan had been giving him those strange looks earlier. In other people’s minds, they probably saw him as someone who secretly had a crush on Yue Hongling, even going as far as getting a stronghold mistress who looked like her. Because of that, when she left him, the rumors began spreading like wildfire.

Countless people were likely waiting to see the spectacle of his encounter with the “real” Yue Hongling!

Zhao Changhe had not expected Yue Hongling to be in Yangzhou, but the coincidence was quite remarkable. Although they were truthfully not involved in some romantic drama as others imagined, he did find it pleasantly surprising that an old friend, whom he had not seen for quite some time, was in the same place. He wondered how she was doing now.

She was known for carrying out heroic deeds all over the jianghu. It was likely that she had chosen to stay in Yangzhou because, just like him, she had noticed the problems in the area.

Yangzhou is such a large city. I wonder where I can find her...

Lost in thought, Zhao Changhe was oblivious to how Ruyan was interpreting his reactions. In her eyes, she had basically just confirmed that he harbored a crush on Yue Hongling. She could not help but want to tease him, completely forgetting how much she had feared for her life just moments back. With a mischievous smile, she suggested, “It looks like you really do like Yue Hongling. You know, if you want, I can dress up like her...”

Startled, Zhao Changhe quickly shook his head, realizing what could happen if he really let Ruyan do something like that. He hurriedly waved his hands and said, “No, no! I’ve already had enough of playing with such impersonators.”

If you really do that and she finds out, I’ll be dead before I even get a word in.

Ruyan covered her mouth as she giggled. We all know that you didn’t stop because you were bored, you stopped because she ran away. “So are you saying that you’re after the real deal? Well, we aren’t sure where she’s staying, but we do know that she’s been spotted in the vicinity.”

As expected, Zhao Changhe blurted out, “What did she do when she appeared?”

Ruyan replied, “She killed an official.”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

Ruyan sighed softly. “The official she killed was someone who was involved in forcing men to dredge the river, and they even conscripted women and children for more manpower...”

As she spoke, her voice became softer and softer, “If I could have met Lady Yue back then... I probably wouldn’t have ended up where I am now...”

Zhao Changhe pursed his lips and said nothing.

It’s just like when I first saw her.

Ever since he had first seen her, she had constantly served as a reminder of the kind of person he aspired to be.

Ruyan added, “In any case, after Lady Yue killed the official, she probably left the area. Even if she is still in the city, it would not make sense for her to make her whereabouts known. So, if you want to find her, maybe you could just walk through the streets and shout, ‘I, Zhao Changhe, have come. I request a meeting with Lady Yue Hongling.’ That might just work!”

“You just want to see some drama, don’t you?”

Ruyan covered her mouth and chuckled.

Zhao Changhe could not hide his curiosity about Yue Hongling's current situation, but he still decided to steer the conversation back to the original topic, saying, "We've gone quite a bit off-topic, haven't we? I wanted you to tell me a story, right?"

"Well, you were asking about Wan Dongliu's current cultivation, and I genuinely don't know much about it."

Zhao Changhe nodded and pondered in silence.

In fact, the Ranking of Hidden Dragons was really bad as a reference. It mainly measured a person's potential based on the difficulty of their most recent achievement, but it never accurately depicted the overall strength or improvements that someone on the ranking had.

For instance, when Zhao Changhe himself reached the 88th place on the ranking, he was at the third layer of the Profound Gate, and that had become widely known throughout the world. However, no one knew that he advanced to the fourth layer of the Profound Gate within the confines of the Cui Clan just a few days after. His actual combat power had improved significantly since then, not only due to the increase in his cultivation but also due to the enhanced resilience of his meridians. Moreover, he now had Dragon Bird and he was getting increasingly proficient.

Han Wubing, who was ranked in the 70s on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons and at the fifth layer of the Profound Gate, was far superior to most of his peers. However, when compared to Zhao Change, he was not that much stronger. As such, if someone were to estimate the latter's abilities according to his ranking, they would be met with a deadly surprise.

As for Wan Dongliu, he had reached 70th place on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons at least a year ago. Actually, Zhao Changhe remembered that when he had first arrived in this world, Wan Dongliu had already been at the 70th rank. However, would it really be sensible to use his performance from back then to estimate his combat power today?

Not everyone was eager to demonstrate their power and compete for spots on the ranking. There were many who preferred to keep a low profile and improve their strength discreetly. Of course, it was also possible for some to have their power regress over time. This was not surprising. The world of martial arts was filled with complexities and uncertainties.

Since continuing on this topic could arouse suspicion, Zhao Changhe decided to shift the conversation to another topic.

He asked, "I recall Brother Wan mentioning the Maitreya Cult earlier. It seems like I have a certain connection with them...well, at least to the extent that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Unfortunately, I haven't had the chance to properly meet those of the Maitreya Cult yet. If I wanted to do that, where do you think I should go?"

Ruyan's eyes briefly displayed a hint of panic. She lowered her head and replied, "I don't know."

The Maitreya Cult was no longer in its early stages of establishing goodwill. It had openly declared itself an enemy of the Demon Suppression Bureau. While Wan Dongliu and Zhao Changhe could discuss such things openly, she did not dare reveal that she was a follower of the Maitreya Cult.

Zhao Changhe could sense her fear and chuckled. "I am a Buddhist myself. I merely wish to pay my respects to the Maitreya Buddha. Which temple should I visit in Yangzhou?"

Ruyan whispered, "When we wish to pay our respects to Buddha, we usually go to the White Lotus Temple ten li outside the city."

Zhao Changhe looked puzzled, "Are there no temples within the city?"

"The authorities do not permit it," Ruyan whispered. "Even the temples outside the city cannot openly worship the Maitreya Buddha."

Zhao Changhe nodded in understanding. Regardless of how rotten other branches of the imperial court were, the Demon Suppression Bureau, under the leadership of Tang Wanzhuang, was at least not bad. It was still quite difficult for demonic cults to openly show off.

But now, the Maitreya Cult was infiltrating all levels of society. Even the young gang leader of the Cao Gang, a large gang that had to have some relations with the government, was already likely a part of their forces. How long could Tang Wanzhuang's efforts hold against the million-strong workforce of the Cao Gang? If something were to go wrong...

Zhao Changhe felt shivers run down his spine just thinking about it.

The more he learned about the situation, the more he felt the need to find Yue Hongling to discuss what to do. He had a feeling that, with Yue Hongling around, he had a stronger sense of purpose and determination. Even Tang Wanzhuang could not sway him like she could. It was honestly a bit strange, considering that Yue Hongling was, in fact, younger than him.

“Alright,” Zhao Changhe handed Ruyan a piece of silver. “It’s nearly dawn. You served me well tonight. Make sure to tell your madam how many different positions we tried. Don’t talk about how we just chatted all night. I wouldn’t want for you to get punished. You can go now.”

Ruyan was stunned for a moment. Her expression shifted from curiosity to gratitude.

Not only did he not blame her for not serving him well, but he even tipped her. Furthermore, he was even concerned that she might get punished if someone found out that she did not serve him well...

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Early in the morning, ten li east of the city, White Lotus Temple.

Yue Hongling concealed herself up on a beam. Her gaze was cold as she observed the scene below her.

Villagers in ragged clothes who could not even afford to feed themselves were bringing their last scraps of food as offerings. They then left the temple afterward, feeling grateful.

Last night, she even saw some young girls performing certain rituals where they seemed to be brainwashing themselves. She knew what would happen next if she did not intervene. However, it appeared that the cult was waiting for something and did not conduct the expected “ritual” last night. As such, Yue Hongling decided to bid her time, planning to learn more about the Maitreya Cult’s practices before taking action.

Having spent most of her life in the northern regions, she had only recently come south. Similar to Zhao Changhe, she had never heard of the Maitreya Cult before. Thus, when she had first come down south and found out about them, she had initially thought that the Maitreya Cult was some kind of benevolent Buddhist sect that saved people from suffering. But after carefully investigating them for a while, she had realized that they were even more sinister than many bandit groups she had encountered in the past.

A few days ago, someone claiming to be a Buddha had even tried to trick her into joining the cult as a celestial maiden. That person's head now rested separately from his body. It was from that moment on that Yue Hongling's journey through the southern jianghu took a pause as she began focusing on uncovering the secrets of the Maitreya Cult.

Up to this point, Yue Hongling's knowledge of the Maitreya Cult was limited, and she knew only a fraction of the whole picture. The White Lotus Temple was a recent discovery of hers, and she intended to observe it further.

Yue Hongling had a straightforward and bold demeanor, which often gave people the impression that she was rough and arrogant. But in fact, she was more meticulous and astute than most.

This was actually very similar to how Zhao Changhe was. This was also why both of them could see a reflection of themselves in the other.

As she continued observing the temple, someone hurriedly entered the temple and whispered to the abbot, "Zhao Changhe stayed at the Xiaoxiang Pavilion last night, accompanied by the top courtesan, Ruyan."

Yue Hongling perked up her ears.

"Oh? Have you discovered something?"

"The servants below said that Zhao Changhe seemed to finish in just a few breaths."

Yue Hongling: "..."

The abbot chuckled, "Well, isn't that good? Many people who join our cult do it because they want to find a solution to that particular problem. We have our ways to ensure that he can maintain his prowess for as long as he wishes."

"But later, Ruyan mentioned that Zhao Changhe and her engaged in all kinds of positions throughout the night, and she even said that he was still quite vigorous toward the end."

"Oh? Why did his vigor rise again?"

“Ruyan said that she’s not sure, but he seemed to get really excited when she brought up Yue Hongling.”

Yue Hongling: “...”

After pondering for a while, the abbot chuckled again and said, “Have our flower-picking celestial maiden dress up as Yue Hongling and accompany him tonight instead of Ruyan. It seems that Zhao Changhe is even easier to win over than we initially thought.”

Chapter 109: Maitreya Cult

Yue Hongling felt so angry that her teeth started to ache.

Zhao Changhe, what in the world happened to you? It’s been a while since we last met, and now you’re spending nights in brothels? And that’s one thing, but what’s that about getting excited when they mentioned me?

She began to question whether or not there was something amiss. Back when she stayed with him, Zhao Changhe had shown her great respect and had gone out of his way to avoid any situation that might make her uncomfortable. If he truly had secret feelings for her, there had been numerous opportunities for him to make advances back then, especially considering the situation she created by posing as the stronghold mistress. At the very least, he could have addressed her as “wife” in public or something like that.

He never showed that he had any feelings like that, though. Could he have hidden his desires that deeply?

It’s been a few months since I last saw you and you’ve gotten worse... You’re even visiting brothels now when you were such an honest man in the past.

But no matter how much she gnashed her teeth, Yue Hongling really wanted to meet Zhao Changhe. The situation in Yangzhou seemed particularly strange and mysterious to her, and it was not just because of the Maitreya Cult. She wondered if Zhao Changhe coming to Yangzhou was related to some knowledge or information that he possessed.

Ugh... If you really have a crush on me, as long as you don’t say it out loud, I’ll pretend as if I don’t know anything and we can just get along as we did in the past...

Just as she was hesitating whether or not to go to Xiaoxiang Pavilion to look for Zhao Changhe, a monk arrived in haste to deliver a report, “Zhao Changhe has arrived. He claims he’s here to pay his respects to the Buddha.”

The abbot was not surprised and said with a smile, “Yesterday, Dongliu made it clear to him that we have good intentions toward him. If he does not reject us, he will naturally come to see us. After all, he does not have a particularly impressive inheritance and he definitely needs a strong backing. Invite him into the temple for a talk. Let’s not bother with all those messy matters for now; we can talk about them again later.”

“Yes.”

Yue Hongling soon laid her eyes on Zhao Changhe after months of not having seen him. He was walking briskly, escorted by monks, as he entered the temple.

Yue Hongling noticed that every time she saw Zhao Changhe, his demeanor would have undergone subtle changes.

The first time she met him, he was inexperienced and naive. But by the time they met again in Beiman, he had already become the stronghold master of a group of bandits. He had grown to acquire a rugged and domineering aura, reminiscent of the wilderness.

Now, after experiencing the trials and tribulations of the jianghu, as well as having some encounters with noble families, his sharp edges had softened quite a bit. He appeared more poised and composed, seemingly having regained some of the scholarly aura he had in the beginning. However, his wild and untamed spirit remained intact. As he walked with authority and charisma, Yue Hongling could not help but feel as if she were looking at a local hero, much like the formidable Wan Tianxiong, who ruled the southeastern region with a similar commanding presence.

The experiences of the jianghu can really transform a person. In just half a year, he has grown into someone... well, someone who can casually visit brothels.

As the thought crossed her mind, Zhao Changhe had already entered the temple. To his surprise, he found the grand hall empty, with only an abbot and a few monks waiting for him. Zhao Changhe seemed a bit taken aback and said, “I thought that this temple would have many worshippers, and countless monks... Did I perhaps arrive too early and miss everyone?”

The abbot smiled and said, “Benefactor Zhao, you may not be aware, but we encourage our believers to stay at home. Historically, our temple has never had a large number of monks. As for the worshippers, they leave immediately after they finish their prayers. After all, everyone still has their daily lives to attend to.”

Zhao Changhe’s thoughts stirred. No wonder this temple named itself White Lotus, it seems to have taken some influence from the White Lotus Sect[1], which had close ties to the Maitreya Buddha. Well, it makes sense. If the Maitreya Cult just engaged in acts of slaughter, there would be very few people here who would want to follow them.

It seemed that the Maitreya Sect had some ties with the White Lotus Sect, and that they came from the same historical roots in the previous era. Of course, it was also possible that they did not actually have a deep understanding of the so-called “previous era,” but rather just used some vague information to trick people, while their actual practices were the result of a combination of influences.

Unfortunately, I’ve long since returned my history books to my teachers, so my knowledge in this area is not much better than everyone else’s.

The abbot said, “Benefactor, please have a seat.”

Zhao Changhe sat down on the cushion in front of him, and a monk brought a teacup. The whole scene looked as if Zhao Changhe was here for a serious discussion on Buddhism and the abbot was about to enlighten him.

Zhao Changhe asked, “May I inquire about your Dharma name, honorable abbot?”

The abbot replied, “Fa Yuan, an obscure name. I doubt that you heard it, Benefactor Zhao. However, before I became the abbot here, I was but a layman, and I went by the name Zhang Banfo. I believe that you might know that name.”

Zhao Changhe seemed to recall something.

Back when the Four Idols Cult deceived Han Wubing into heading to the sword lake, just before Zhao Changhe spent several days looking for Chichi, he remembered Han Wubing mentioning the name Zhang Banfo. Basically, the Four Idols Cult were trying to make it seem as if they were inviting him to see the sword in exchange for hiring him to murder Zhang Banfo, so that their offer would be a lot more credible.

It was a mere pretext used by the Four Idols Cult, as Han Wubing was unlikely to be able to kill someone of that caliber. However, the fact that the Four Idols Cult mentioned his name as a bargaining chip proved that, at least in their eyes, this Zhang Banfo was a valuable enough target for assassination.

As the person in charge of the Maitreya Cult in a major region, it was likely that he was on Tang Wanzhuang's hit list. However, most people probably did not know that he had changed his identity to become that of a monk with the Dharma name Fa Yuan. It was quite unexpected for Zhao Changhe, who was merely an ally of the Maitreya Cult as a pretext, to learn about this situation.

"I feel like I've heard that name somewhere in the past, but I can't quite remember," Zhao Changhe smiled modestly and said. "I've only been in the jianghu for a short time, so there are many heroes whose names I do not know."

Fa Yuan did not take offense at what Zhao Changhe said, he simply smiled and replied, "Indeed, it is precisely your short time in the jianghu that makes your reputation even more remarkable."

Zhao Changhe pretended to be annoyed and said, "To be honest, the title of Bloodthirsty Asura does not sound that flattering to me."

Fa Yuan cupped his hand and chuckled, "I hope that you do not take offense from it, benefactor. Please understand that we had good intentions, even if it may not seem that way."

Of course, rather than goodwill, it was more like a side effect of the Four Idols Cult and the Maitreya Cult trying to preserve their own reputation. Of course, Zhao Changhe would not expose their motives and replied with a smile, "I never thought about it beforehand, but it seems that your faction has a connection with me. As you know, I was originally just a commoner from the countryside, with no knowledge of Buddhism. Since fate has brought us here, I wonder if you would be willing to enlighten me a bit? Perhaps I actually do have a connection with Buddhism that I am not aware of."

His statement implied that he had a genuine interest in understanding more about them in order to see if they were a force he could join. He delivered his intent in a very straightforward manner.

In reality, Fa Yuan and his associates had always considered this to be a very normal course of action. The Maitreya Cult was considered a cult and an enemy of the government, but for someone

like Zhao Changhe, who had been a wanted criminal in the past, that was irrelevant. In fact, it could even make him more inclined to get closer to them.

This was especially so after he had gone through all that hardship in order to bring back that young lady of the Cui Clan safely, yet he ended up driven away like a criminal. When Fa Yuan placed himself in Zhao Changhe's shoes, he felt that he would definitely have erupted in anger if that had happened to him. He would work day and night so he could trample upon the necks of nobility, seize Cui Yuanyang, and play with her to his heart's content.

Fa Yuan believed this to be what Zhao Changhe had in mind as well. After all, as far as he was concerned, asking Zhao Changhe to reach the Ranking of Man in three years was like asking him to reach the moon.

And this youngster with amazing potential was not only wanted by the government and banished by a noble clan, but also a defector of the Four Idols Cult and the Blood God Cult.

To the Maitreya Cult, if this was not a match made in heaven, then what was?! Their trust in him was so high that they had no reservations about him at all, and they considered him a prime candidate for recruitment.

Even Yue Hongling, who was peeping from above, had some doubts, but she continued to listen out of her trust in Zhao Changhe. She believed that deep down, Zhao Changhe was just like her, appearing lawless but actually upholding chivalry and justice. Joining an organization like the Maitreya Cult did not seem like a fitting choice for him unless he was completely unaware of the true nature of the cult and had been deceived. If that were truly the case, then she would find an opportunity to inform and warn him.

Fa Yuan continued, "Benefactor Zhao, you may have heard of this in the past... There was a time when Buddhism was widely spread throughout the world, and Buddhist monasteries and temples could be found anywhere. But over a decade ago, the emperor initiated a disastrous campaign to eradicate Buddhism that deeply upset the people. Within a matter of weeks, Buddhist pagodas were reduced to ruin, temples were razed to the ground, and monks were forced to return to the secular world, leading to the decline of Buddhism."

Zhao Changhe had seen this mentioned when he was reading, but he could not recall the exact details. It seemed like he had always subconsciously found it somewhat natural for someone like Xia Longyuan to launch a campaign to eradicate Buddhism.

He asked, “So, are temples being rebuilt now without any issues? I came across a few temples when I was traveling southward from the north. However, I haven’t heard of any prominent Buddhist warrior monks. Oh, I’m not really sure if your cult falls under that category or not.”

Fayuan shook his head and said, “After the public outrage and protests, the emperor had to ease his stance. The discontent grew, and the emperor could not insist on his will, which allowed Buddhism to make a gradual resurgence. However, before this resurgence, the Maitreya Cult had already been secretly developing for quite some time.”

“Is it because you operate under the guise of a social organization, practice in seclusion, and are difficult to target?”

“That’s correct... but more importantly, because we have the prophecy.”

“What prophecy?”

“It’s the prophecy of the Maitreya’s advent, of course,” replied Fa Yuan, his demeanor solemn and full of conviction. “As the Sakyamuni Buddha wanes, the Maitreya Buddha will rise. This prophecy appeared even before the emperor launched his campaign against Buddhism. Don’t the emperor’s actions of beating down Buddhism align perfectly with this prophecy? Moreover, our leader is the reincarnation of the Maitreya from the previous era, here to lead us to our pure land.”

The surrounding monks all began chanting with their hands clasped together, praying with fervent devotion.

These damn evil cults... Zhao Changhe could not help but feel exasperated. In his eyes, their claims were too far-fetched. Even when they were beaten down, they claimed that it was all part of their god’s plan. But if it really wasn’t a coincidence, then wasn’t Xia Longyuan the one who was really awesome here for being able to beat down Buddhism?

It truly puzzled him how they were able to so fervently believe in the Maitreya.

However, he had to maintain an appearance of keen interest and asked, “If that’s the case, then does your cult leader truly grasp ancient secrets?”

“Indeed. Who among today’s martial artists does not pursue ancient secrets? Every force claims to hold inheritances of the past, but only we, the Maitreya Cult, have grasped the secrets of the true Buddha.”

“How can you prove this?”

Fa Yuan smiled mysteriously and replied, “Take, for example, the issue with your meridians’ stagnation. I believe that no other force can offer you a solution, but we can.”

Zhao Changhe’s heart began beating violently, and he subconsciously held his breath.

He had never anticipated that he would hear about the issue that had plagued his entire martial journey here, let alone be told that there might be a solution to his issue!

Even Yue Hongling could not help but exclaim inwardly. She knew very well that this was indeed the most fatal temptation for Zhao Changhe, far more alluring than ten thousand fake Yue Honglings combined.

Seeing Zhao Changhe’s expression, Fa Yuan smiled complacently and continued to dangle the bait, “Of course, this is not something that just anyone can attain. Benefactor Zhao, please return and study the Buddhist scriptures first. Perhaps you will become a Ten-Abode Bodhisattva in the future.”

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath to regain his composure and said dully, “I’ve never read a Buddhist scripture in my life. How am I to study the scriptures?”

Fa Yuan’s smile became even more ambiguous as he said, “Our meeting was brought about by fate. We will have someone teach you the scriptures, and who knows, you might even find some pleasant surprises afterward.”

Chapter 110: Tang Buqi

Zhao Changhe rode his horse back to Yangzhou City in a daze.

His mind was preoccupied with thoughts of transforming his meridians. This matter was incredibly important to him, and it left his thoughts in disarray, causing him to daydream throughout his journey. It was not until he returned to the city that the hustle and bustle of the city reached his ears,

and he snapped out of his reverie. He chided himself silently, recognizing that he needed to remain more composed.

He reflected on how easy it was for people to be drawn into cults when they promised to fulfill their deepest desires.

In fact, upon further thought, even figures as influential as Cui Wenjing believed that such a feat was as unattainable as heavenly treasures. Furthermore, even Tang Wanzhuang, who controlled the empire's martial resources, avoided discussing the matter. With that being the case, how could resolving the issue with his meridians be something that a mere cult or sect of the jianghu easily solve? Even if it was possible, the price would have to be unbearable.

It was possible that they possessed some sort of unparalleled treasure, but they had to be absolute idiots to let him use such a valuable resource. Also, the possibility of that being the case was extremely low. It was much more likely that it was pure deception.

And if he took the initiative to ask for it, that would be offering them his weak spot on a silver platter. He would be slowly prying off his defenses, sliding step by step towards the abyss, unable to struggle anymore.

Zhao Changhe had overheard Wan Dongliu and the guard talking the previous night, and they had mentioned something about secret control techniques. With that in mind, it was almost certain that when the abbot mentioned that they would send someone to teach him about the scriptures, he meant that they would send a celestial maiden and provide him with certain stimulants. In that state, it would be much easier to control him.

This kind of secret technique that would make oneself stronger by making use of one's dual cultivation typically had soul-controlling effects or a way to make the target become extremely infatuated and unable to break free. This was most likely what they were trying to do.

Zhao Changhe chuckled self-deprecatingly, realizing that he still held some value to them.

While he was in thought, a shout suddenly came above and to his right, "Oi, you there riding the horse on the bridge, are you the Bloodthirsty Asura Zhao Changhe?"

Zhao Changhe turned his head and saw a restaurant that had no walls, doors, or windows. It was an open pavilion for guests to drink and enjoy the scenery. A young man stepped on the railings and gazed down at him disdainfully.

Wan Dongliu hurriedly ran up behind the young man and pulled him aside anxiously, “Brother Tang, brother Tang, an even temper brings wealth...”

It looked like Wan Dongliu had invited this young man for a meal, but upon seeing Zhao Changhe passing by on the bridge below, the latter had inexplicably decided to provoke him.

Zhao Changhe said calmly, “Yes, I’m Zhao Changhe, but not the bloodthirsty asura you mentioned. And you are?”

The young man said proudly, “I am Tang Buqi of Gusu.”

“Ah, I know you.” Zhao Changhe waved his hand. “Twenty-four years old, number 102 on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons. You would do well to learn more from your older sister. You should avoid going out to drink wine.”

“Older sister?” The young man choked for a moment. “First Seat Tang is my paternal aunt.”

“Cough, cough, cough...” Zhao Changhe almost choked on his own saliva. He suddenly thought of Cui Yuanyang. He secretly wondered why she did not have a higher-generation title. It would be amusing if a bunch of old men called her “aunt.” Well, maybe she did have such titles and it was just that he had not heard them.

His mind briefly wandered off, but then he snapped back and playfully said, “Be a good nephew and go back to drink your milk. Yangzhou is a place for adults to have fun, kids should stay at home.”

Tang Buqi became furious. “You insolent scoundrel! How dare you spout such nonsense?! Behold my sword!”

A stream of spring water descended from the sky, heading straight at Zhao Changhe.

The railing above was crowded with spectators, and pedestrians on the street stopped to watch.

This was a rare clash between heroes on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons! It was an opportunity not to be missed!

“Brother Wan,” someone in the restaurant said. “Why does Mister Tang’s sword look so slow? Even I feel like I could easily dodge it.”

Wan Dongliu smiled and sipped his wine, not bothering to reply.

In fact, there really was no need to answer because that person’s words were cut short. Zhao Changhe suddenly unsheathed Dragon Bird on his back and struck Tang Buqi’s sword. Although their weapons were visibly still several cun[1] apart, the crisp sound of metal colliding against metal rang loud and clear.

Upon closer inspection, it was clear that the sword and saber had actually made contact. It was as if Tang Buqi had instantly changed the path of his sword, which would have normally missed Zhao Changhe, and shifted the edge straight toward his throat.

Those in the restaurant erupted in a buzz of excitement.

This showdown between two people who were merely at the fourth layer of the Profound Gate surprisingly had very few spectators that could follow the action!

Tang Buqi was struggling in mid-air, so he was forced to retreat and landed gracefully back on the restaurant’s railing. He glared down at Zhao Changhe with a newfound seriousness. The disdain in his gaze had completely disappeared, replaced by intense focus.

This guy actually managed to see through the intricacies of the Spring Water Sword Art at a glance... no, wait a second. His saber move just now...did it contain a hint of the Tang Clan’s style? Am I seeing things?

The person who had asked Wan Dongliu about Tang Buqi’s seemingly slow sword move had fallen silent. He was fully aware that if he had been the one to face that strike, his throat would have been left with a bloody hole. He looked at Tang Buqi with a mixture of awe and respect, then softly asked Wan Dongliu, “Brother Wan, can you enlighten me about the clash between that sword and saber?”

Wan Dongliu smiled and replied, “The Spring Water Sword Art is elusive and incredibly difficult to read. If you can discern the sword’s path, then you are already at the level of those on the Ranking

of Hidden Dragons. Moreover, brother Tang has his own unique style of swordplay, and he already has the aura of a master. Even if it was me facing him, I would find myself in a bit of trouble.”

When Tang Buqi heard this, he turned around and nodded slightly, acknowledging the compliment.

After all, he had just been forced to retreat by Zhao Changhe’s saber, and everyone present knew that he had lost the earlier exchange. However, Wan Dongliu’s comment helped salvage his pride.

Wan Dongliu continued, “Brother Zhao’s saber cut straight through the illusions, going straight for the essence. This kind of combat instinct is honed through bloodshed and battles in the jianghu, and it isn’t something that ordinary people can comprehend. What is particularly remarkable about brother Zhao is that he seems to have glimpsed the path of combining hardness and softness. In my opinion, his current ranking of 88th on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons is too low. He will most likely move higher up on the rankings in the future.”

Zhao Changhe raised his head to look at him and smiled to show his appreciation.

He was well aware that this was just a bit of posturing. He did not really want to hurt Tang Wanzhuang’s little nephew. It was thanks to Wan Dongliu’s explanation that he did not need to display an even stronger saber move or posture further.

Although the last part of what Wan Dongliu said seemed to serve as a reminder to others that Zhao Changhe was not as malicious now as compared to before, it was difficult to really tell.

Zhao Changhe rode away with a smile on his face. “Little nephew, that move was not bad, but you still have a lot of work to do.”

Tang Buqi shouted angrily, “If I hear you disrespecting my elders again, I won’t rest until one of us dies!”

So this all happened because of what I said to his aunt in the past. This kid just wanted to challenge me to defend the honor of his elders.... Man, your aunt doesn’t even care about what I said, so what are you getting all worked up for? But your reasoning is still pretty valid, I guess.

Zhao Changhe waved his hand indifferently. He leisurely rode his horse across the bridge, disappearing into the streets in the blink of an eye.

Not long after his encounter with Tang Buqi, a middle-aged man stopped him at the end of the street. “A former wanted criminal, riding a horse through the busy streets, and engaging in armed combat... Sir, please come with me to the Demon Suppression Bureau.”

“...”

Did that damn Tang Buqi seriously run to the Demon Suppression Bureau and get them to bring me in right because he couldn't pester me any further? Am I in some weird TV drama?

Zhao Changhe could not help but feel exasperated.

He had initially planned on looking for the Demon Suppression Bureau to get a better idea of what the situation in the area was. However, openly asking about where the Demon Suppression Bureau was located would look too suspicious. But now, with the bureau having come to look for him first, things had become much easier.

Of course, he still had to be careful as he did not know if he could actually rely on the Demon Suppression Bureau in this area.

“My arrest warrant has long since been revoked, and I am now no different from an ordinary person. If I am to be arrested for engaging in combat with my saber, then what about Tang Buqi, who started the fight? Does the Demon Suppression Bureau belong to the imperial court or the Tang Clan?”

The middle-aged man became a little embarrassed. He looked left and right at the passers-by who were watching in the distance and said, “The cancellation of your arrest warrant was to give face to the Cui Clan. It does not mean that you have been acquitted. Besides, you are a bandit, why did you enter the city? It is our bureau's duty to seek clarity on such matters.”

Zhao Changhe retorted, “I came to this city for two reasons: to enjoy the scenery of Yangzhou and to meet the people of the Jiangnan region. Now that I've seen both, I can say that while the scenery is quite enjoyable, the people are rather ordinary.”

The middle-aged man sighed helplessly, then sent a secret message. “The Maitreya Cult makes use of spiritual illusion arts that can make you be more trusting of others. Be cautious and do not trust others too easily.”

Zhao Changhe was taken aback by the message for a moment, but he maintained his disgruntled appearance as he rode away without acknowledging the warning.

It appeared that this person was a trusted associate of Tang Wanzhuang, possibly aware of his identity as a “secret agent.” He had sought to communicate with Zhao Changhe but had difficulty finding the opportunity to do so, and it was only by complying with Tang Buqi’s extravagant request that he was able to meet with him.

As he continued to make his way through the city, Zhao Changhe could not help but reflect on how everyone, regardless of their affiliation to righteousness or evil, seemed to be merely playing roles in a grand theatrical performance.

Dark clouds gathered overhead, casting a shadow that left everyone in the city feeling suffocated.

Meanwhile, Yue Hongling followed Zhao Changhe all the way into the city. When Zhao Changhe clashed with Tang Buqi, she did not want to be discovered by Wan Dongliu and the others, so she pondered for a moment before finally deciding to head to Xiaoxiang Pavilion first.

After a brief investigation, she quickly discovered several women, who clearly practiced the cultivation techniques of the Maitreya Cult, playfully changing their attire.

Among them, one tall and particularly pretty woman stood out. She exuded a heroic spirit. Several old brothel madams smiled and draped her in a red warrior’s costume, tied her hair into a ponytail, and adjusted her clothes. “Look at this, isn’t our flower-picking celestial maiden a perfect replica of Yue Hongling?”

Yue Hongling could not help but admit that this so-called flower-picking celestial maiden did resemble her quite a bit.

The maiden said, “It’s mainly the heroic spirit that is difficult to imitate. We are not exactly the same in that regard... If I really get close to him, it will be difficult to keep him believing in the facade.”

“It doesn’t matter. Right now, his mind is filled with thoughts of refining his meridians. With the woman he has a crush on soothingly teaching him, he will only become more deeply infatuated. Furthermore, he wouldn’t know what Yue Hongling looks like in bed.”

Yue Hongling: "..."

This is unbearable. Not only are you pretending to be me, but you're actually planning on making Zhao Changhe think that he's having fun with the real Yue Hongling!

The celestial maiden sorted it out, looked at her reflection in the mirror, and said with a smile, "I really do resemble her. Even I can hardly tell us apart."

Everyone chuckled and said, "Besides, how well does he really understand Yue Hongling? Once the secret technique is used, with a bit of guidance, he won't be able to tell the difference at all. We just got news that he's currently engaged in a scuffle with Tang Buqi at the bridge. You might as well wait for him in his room. That way, when he opens the door, his heart will surely melt when he sees that the girl he has a crush on is sitting on his bed right in front of him."

With mischievous smiles, the old madams escorted the flower-picking celestial maiden into Zhao Changhe's room and then dispersed.

Inside the room, the flower-picking celestial maiden rehearsed several poses, trying to evoke the feeling of Yue Hongling. Suddenly, her vision blurred, and it seemed like another Yue Hongling had appeared in the mirror.

Startled, she turned to look around, but everything suddenly went dark as she lost consciousness.

Zhao Changhe returned to Xiaoxiang Pavilion burdened with all kinds of thoughts. He pushed open the door to his room mindlessly.

Yue Hongling was sitting at the table, pouring herself a drink. When she saw him enter, she smiled slightly and asked, "You're back?"

Damn, this illusion art is seriously convincing! Zhao Changhe's heart began beating wildly. She looks just like the real Yue Hongling!