

T. Times 136

Chapter 136: Afterglow of the Jianghu

Zhao Changhe headed to Gusu together with Tang Buqi. However, he rode on Snow-Treading Crow behind their huge caravan, while Tang Buqi hid inside his own carriage, drinking wine and munching on grapes fed by the fair hand of a young maid.

Zhao Changhe felt really jealous of him. In the end, he simply chose to move further away so that he would not get the urge to punch the kid.

This eldest nephew of his had left home to get experience in the jianghu. Although Zhao Changhe had no idea why this brat, who was already twenty-four, married, and the 120th Hidden Dragon, was only at the fourth layer of the Profound Gate. It seemed pointless for him to be seeking experience...

It would be better for him to just wait another year or two, secure a position in his family's business, and stop occupying a spot on the rankings.

In fact, Zhao Changhe had a good idea of how this situation had come to be. Namely, Tang Buqi must have reached the fourth layer of the Profound Gate a good while before he turned twenty-four. It was highly unlikely for him to make it onto the Ranking of Hidden Dragons if he had only reached such a cultivation at twenty-four. He had probably gotten the ranking fairly early on, but he had simply not bothered to raise it in recent years.

Starting out with youthful ambitions but then becoming complacent due to overprotection from the family, as well as the lack of experience in the outside world, often led to such stagnation or even regression. This was fairly common for children from large clans.

It was true that the Tang Clan could not match the power of the Cui Clan. However, they still had Tang Wanzhuang on the Ranking of Earth and Tang Buqi on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, so in comparison to other clans, this already placed them on a high pedestal. There were many clans who had nobody on the rankings at all, and those clans were only going further and further down the road of decline without realizing it, still indulging in the glory of their ancestors.

In a way, the Tome of Troubled Times was not entirely useless. It could often serve as a wake-up call for these kinds of people when there was nobody in their clan ranked anymore. Without the encouragement from that shabby tome, I'm afraid that the Tang Clan and Cui Clan may have also begun declining.

In fact, Tang Buqi's situation was still fairly promising. With the solid foundation that he had, if he were willing to work hard once again, he could still achieve great things. This journey for experience was probably for that very purpose.

Unfortunately, while that may have been the goal of this trip of his, they had not even left Yangzhou when news of Zhao Changhe planning to head to Gusu came. Tang Buqi thought about it for some time, and felt that this may end up having some impact on his family. As such, he decided to return with Zhao Changhe.

On the surface, he claimed that he did this to show hospitality to a distinguished guest like Zhao Changhe. However, in reality, he had not even said a word to Zhao Changhe this entire time.

Zhao Changhe was irritated but knew that he would need the Tang Clan's assistance on this trip to Gusu, so he could not just beat Tang Buqi up. He could not help but feel like it truly was a huge mistake on his part to give Tang Buqi the opportunity to boast like this.

Hmm... Maybe it would be better for me to just leave the group and go on my own before this idiot nephew of mine causes me to die of rage?

Just as he was thinking this, a figure flashed in front of him, heading straight for Tang Buqi's carriage.

Zhao Changhe spurred his horse and drew his saber, racing over, subconsciously intending to lend a hand. Despite his irritation, he had to admit that the guy was actually capable enough.

However, he was quite a distance from the caravan just now. As soon as he got close, the figure had already walked out of the carriage, waving a dudou in his hand as he strutted away with a big smile on his face. "Hehehe! The dudou worn by the young master of the Tang Clan should fetch a good price!"

Tang Buqi rushed out of his carriage in frustration, holding up his pants. "Ji Chengkong! When did I offend you?!"

"You're a friend of Zhao Changhe and Wan Dongliu, and while I can't afford to offend them, I can't say the same about you."

Tang Buqi: “?”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Facing Tang Buqi’s furious gaze, Zhao Changhe silently drew his bow and arrow. A moment later, an arrow nailed itself into the tree trunk right in front of Ji Chengkong.

Ji Chengkong broke out into a cold sweat and said angrily, “Zhao Changhe, do you really want to become mortal enemies with me?”

Zhao Changhe sighed speechlessly. “Hey, was I the one looking for trouble with you that day? Who told you to get greedy for my stuff? You can only blame yourself for getting punched and thrown into the river. Even now, I shot that tree when I could’ve put the arrow through your head instead.”

Ji Chengkong leaped up, somersaulted in the air, and somehow fell lightly on the shaft of the arrow. He said coldly, “Yeah, and I just took his dudou rather than stabbing him.”

“So neither of us bears a grudge against the other, can’t we just write off all scores? Also, I don’t know if Wan Dongliu told you, but I even asked him to let you go back then.”

Ji Chengkong hesitated for a moment. When Wan Dongliu released him, he had actually mentioned Zhao Changhe’s request, implying that it was thanks to Zhao Changhe that he was being released. He had initially doubted it, thinking that he was being released because Wan Dongliu was simply afraid of the Thieves Guild and did not want to lose face.

But now, hearing Zhao Changhe say so himself, it seemed to actually be true rather than Wan Dongliu merely making up a random excuse.

The truth, as it often happens, was somewhere in between: Zhao Changhe had indeed said something along those lines, but Wan Dongliu had in fact released Ji Chengkong because he was wary of the Thieves Guild behind him.

He hesitated slightly before asking, “We’re strangers, and as you said, I was the one who provoked you first. Why would you speak up on my behalf?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “Firstly, it was because I had just arrived, and I had no idea who you were, so how could I judge who was in the right? Maybe you were the good guy and Wan Dongliu was the bad guy... Secondly, if I say that it’s also because I’m interested in remarkable individuals and wanted to make friends with you, would you believe it?”

Ji Chengkong was even more surprised. He then pointed at himself and said, “Me? A thief? I’m a remarkable individual?”

Zhao Changhe chuckled and said nothing.

In the modern world, if he were to encounter a thief, he would only want to beat them up, especially if they had touched him.

But in this martial arts fantasy world, his criteria seem to have subtly changed.

After all, there also existed thieves like Chu Liuxiang[1]. Such characters were often not the antagonists of their story; rather, they were righteous characters who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. This made Zhao Changhe feel that the thieves of this world were different from the thieves he knew in the modern world.

Of course, he was also well aware that most of them were probably about the same. However, he really found this Ji Chengkong quite interesting. This time was a great example of that, with the man stealing a dudou

of all things, out of nowhere.

Seeing Zhao Changhe’s attitude, Ji Chengkong was really surprised. He laughed and said, “Interesting, interesting. I didn’t expect the Bloodthirsty Asura to be such a person. Now that our grievances are settled, I’ll treat you to a drink when the I have the chance!”

After saying that, he casually tossed the dudou, which spun in the air and flew back. While Tang Buqi was distracted trying to catch it, he swiftly disappeared into the distance.

His movement art is truly formidable... If I had not interfered back then, I feel like Wan Dongliu really might not have been able to catch him. Tang Buqi returned, holding his dudou resentfully, and said with a sullen face, “Just because I ignored you along the way, you’re going to buddy up with the thief who stole my underwear?”

Zhao Changhe retorted, “Even if I were to help out, would we really be able to catch him? Even Wan Dongliu doesn’t want to offend the group behind him to the point of no return. They come and go without a trace, so they’re a massive headache for anyone who goes against them. What’s wrong with resolving such minor grievances?”

“Indeed, your words are very reasonable and make a lot of sense,” said Tang Buqi expressionlessly. “However, I have no grievances with him, yet why was it my dudou that ended up getting stolen?”

“...” Zhao Changhe tilted his head slightly. “That’s because Wan Dongliu detained him for so long, and you have a fairly good relationship with him.”

“Huh? Well, what about you?” Tang Buqi sneered. “I don’t care what your relationship is with the Demon Suppression Bureau, but I want to remind you of something. Ji Chengkong and his master, Ye Wujiang, are both wanted criminals in the eyes of the Demon Suppression Bureau. Do you still intend to make friends with such ‘remarkable individuals’?”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

“Regardless of what these thieves originally plan to do, even if their motives are noble or whatever... You still have to choose one side between the officials and the thieves,” Tang Buqi said seriously. “Do you really think that you can just stay in the middle? In the eyes of the officials, you’re no different from a thief, and in the eyes of the thieves, you’re meddling.”

Zhao Changhe looked at him in surprise. Is this actually Tang Buqi? It isn’t Tang Wanzhuang disguised as him, is it?

Tang Buqi said calmly, “In the world of books, everyone admires the heroes. However, in the current jianghu, at least among the younger generation, there is only Yue Hongling. Why is her sword intention said to be like the setting sun? That’s because she represents the last rays of light in the jianghu.”

Zhao Changhe stared at him in surprise for a while, then suddenly laughed and said, “Then when the magistrate was assassinated, why did you say that the real culprit was not worth investigating because what they did was a righteous act anyway?”

Tang Buqi was taken aback and fell silent.

Zhao Changhe patted him on the shoulder. “Chivalry is still alive, and even you yourself are proof of that sometimes.”

He rode his horse forward for a while, then suddenly chuckled. “Remember not to say such serious things next time, it really doesn’t suit you. It’s incredibly weird to hear you spout that kind of wise musings.”

“Fuck!” Tang Buqi angrily threw his dudou back into the carriage, then leaned out and shouted, “Don’t ride out there on your own. Come in and have a drink.”

Chapter 137: Tang Clan of Gusu

“Although the Tang Clan may be in Gusu, we don’t actually own the place like the Cui Clan owns Qinghe.” Inside the carriage, Tang Buqi leaned against the arms of his little maid, leisurely sipping wine as he briefly explained the situation in Gusu to Zhao Changhe. “The Tang Clan isn’t comparable to a top-tier noble clan like the Cui Clan, so I suggest that you keep your eye on Cui Yuanyang. You better not think about anyone else.”

Zhao Changhe leaned against the wall of the carriage, speechless. He was already upset at seeing how Tang Buqi was behaving, but the young man’s words only served to further agitate him. “Weren’t you introducing Gusu to me? Why did you suddenly bring up the Cui Clan?”

Tang Buqi felt quite happy with himself. “Wouldn’t it be easier for you to understand the general situation if I were to make direct comparisons?”

“There’s no need for that. Everyone has heard of the Cui Clan of Qinghe, but has anyone actually heard of the Tang Clan of Gusu? What are you acting all like a cocky rooster for?”

“...At least the Tang Clan has a seat in the current dynasty! We have contributed to the imperial court! How could others not have heard of us? How dare a Beimang bandit like you call us cocky roosters?”

“Honestly, it’s just because you have Tang Wanzhuan, who is ranked in the top three of the Ranking of Earth at such a young age and became a high-ranking official. If not for her, your clan would have already collapsed a long time ago. If everyone was like you... Hmph, in the future, even the swallows under the eaves of the Tang Clan’s mansion would have ended up flying into the homes of bandits. It really isn’t that hard to imagine.”

Tang Buqi glared angrily. “Every clan has scholars, you know? It’s not like governance relies solely on martial arts!”

“Is that so? Then why was your aunt so eager to increase her cultivation that she ended up injuring her lung meridian? I sincerely suggest that your clan think about it carefully. Don’t fucking rely on someone else’s desperate efforts while leisurely enjoying grapes handfed by a little maid. All of you are practically drinking her blood.”

Tang Buqi was taken aback. His anger gradually faded away as he stared at the wine in front of him in a daze. He fell into deep thought and stopped talking.

Zhao Changhe looked at him for a while, ultimately deciding not to further push that topic. He went back to what they were initially talking about, “So there are quite a few small and large families in Gusu, right? By making use of the fact that the chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau is someone of the Tang Clan, your clan should have some considerable local influence, right.”

“...That’s right.”

“By the way, what about the Murong Clan of Gusu[1]? I believe they’re more famous than the Tang Clan?”

“I’ve never heard of them. Where did you hear this nonsense?”

“Do you have any clues about the suspected place with vicious qi? Is it the Tiger Hill Sword Pond?”

Tang Buqi was somewhat surprised. “Hey, how do you know so much about Gusu? Haven’t you been in the north all your life?”

“Hmm, did I guess right?”

“Guess right my ass! The Tiger Hill Sword Pond is right behind my clan’s mountain!”

“Damn.”

“But speaking of that, a long time ago...well, maybe I should say in the previous era, there were indeed rumors about there being an issue with vicious qi at the Tiger Hill Sword Pond, possibly due to a cursed sword hidden within. However, my clan has already investigated the area thoroughly for generations, and we have never found anything there. This matter should have nothing to do with it.”

Zhao Changhe rubbed his chin in thought. It might not necessarily be irrelevant. Based on my experience in the Ancient Sword Like, there might be a hidden space, but it's just that his clan has set a perimeter of strong individuals and closed it off.

“Has there been any news of hauntings within your clan? Has anyone experienced an outbreak of vicious qi? Could your aunt's illness be related to this?”

“I know what you are thinking, but that's not the case. My aunt's illness started last year in the capital, not at home.”

“Hmm...”

Zhao Changhe still felt that the possibility existed. Based on his experience, rumors related to the “previous era” were beyond what ordinary martial artists of this era could comprehend, so it would be perfectly normal for them to be unaware of certain things or confuse the matters.

Of course, this was just one possibility and did not necessarily reflect the truth. He still had to explore around Gusu to get a better picture of how things worked.

“What about other rumors? How did Fa Yuan determine that it's more likely to be in Gusu?”

“How would I know how Fa Yuan made that judgment? The letter wasn't even finished.”

As they were discussing, the maid who had been feeding Tang Buqi grapes seemed to hesitate about something, and after a few moments, she decided to open her mouth. “Actually, young master...before we left, there were some rumors. There was someone who suddenly went crazy and began attacking people in the southern part of the city. He was killed on the spot by the young master of the Lu Clan, who was passing by. Originally, it was thought to merely be an accident, but later on, Young Master Lu himself suddenly went crazy as well. There were people who said that he probably experienced cultivation deviation. After that, we left and I don't know what happened next.”

Tang Buqi was startled. “What young master of the Lu Clan? Are you talking about Lu Shaoxiong? We’re actually friends, even though we aren’t that close, so why didn’t I hear about it?”

The maid glanced at him cautiously before saying, “Young master...at that time...you were drunk in Xunhua Lane for five days. The young mistress was crying at home... When you came back, the clan head scolded you and sent you out to gain experience in the outside world.”

Tang Buqi’s face suddenly turned red.

Zhao Changhe turned his head and took a glance outside of the carriage window.

Silence filled the carriage for the rest of the journey. The conversation had been completely killed off.

Incidents of people going crazy and cultivation deviation were quite commonplace, so they generally did not mean anything. However, since these two recent incidents were related, and in the context of the Maitreya Cult’s search for a location with vicious qi, it finally appeared to be something worth investigating.

*

Yangzhou and Gusu were not far from one another, so when the group hastened their pace, they quickly arrived.

However, the closer Zhao Changhe got to Gusu, the lighter the eerie atmosphere of the Maitreya Cult felt. He never saw any scenes of people worshipping the Maitreya Buddha, nor did he even hear anyone talk about Buddhism along the way.

And while they did pass by some temples, they were all deserted.

It seemed that even though the Maitreya Cult had spread throughout Jiangnan, they did not dare easily show themselves in Gusu, Tang Wanzhuang’s base camp. Even if they did exist, they were likely developing and infiltrating in secret rather than openly operating. It wasn’t ideal, of course, but it was a far better situation than in Yangzhou.

However, Zhao Changhe still intuitively felt that the Maitreya Cult would not simply wait until everything was ready.

The upheaval in Yangzhou must have been a huge blow to the Maitreya Cult. With the list of names and information seized during the crackdown, their many years of development near Yangzhou were in jeopardy. It was highly unlikely that their leader, Maitreya, would sit idly by and allow this situation to continue. There was a significant possibility that he would launch a preemptive strike.

During the upheaval in Yangzhou, Maitreya had been in Jinling searching for the vicious qi treasure, unaware of everything going on in Yangzhou. However, by now, he had probably gotten news of it, and it was likely that he had already returned to their headquarters to prepare their next move.

The trigger for this would probably be the information that Chi Li brought back. Once the northern barbarians moved south, the Maitreya Cult in Jiangnan would surely take action.

This was the logical deduction, at least on the surface.

In this process, the Maitreya Cult would definitely not overlook Gusu, a sanctuary surrounded by Jiangnan yet untouched by their cult. They would undoubtedly make a move on Gusu, and if appropriate precautions weren't taken, the Tang Clan would go through tough times, and it could even meet its downfall.

At this moment, Gusu was likely the last bastion of tranquility.

Zhao Changhe didn't know whether Tang Wanzhuan thought of this after receiving the report from Yangzhou. But as things stood, it seemed that neither Tang Buqi nor the Tang Clan had even thought of the possibility of such a thing happening.

When they arrived at the Tang Clan, there was not even the slightest hint of the ominous atmosphere of an impending storm. Servants came and went, and when Zhao Changhe's group entered, the distant sound of a zither and a flute drifted from above. A large group of people immediately came and surrounded Tang Buqi, offering him warm greetings.

"The young master is back?"

"The young master must have had a tough journey... Oh, look at how tanned he is."

“I heard that the young master single-handedly defeated the northern barbarians, solved the case of the magistrate’s assassination, and thwarted the Maitreya Cult’s conspiracy in Yangzhou!”

“The young master has truly bolstered our reputation!”

If Zhao Changhe were not around, Tang Buqi would have definitely held his head up high and basked in the adulation. But sensing Zhao Changhe squinting next to him with a smirk, Tang Buqi only wanted to cover his face. “Alright, alright, it was no big deal. Prepare a guest room and attend to my guest.”

The servants looked at Zhao Changhe. They clearly knew that he was the 38th hidden dragon and that he was far stronger than anyone present, but they could not help but reveal hints of contempt in their eyes.

The young master really can get along with anyone. He once suspected an old beggar to be a peerless master and even invited him home as a show of hospitality. In the end, it turned out the beggar was actually nothing more than an old beggar, and that left the young master incredibly angry. This time, he brought home a bandit from the jianghu...

Of course, none of them dared to show such an attitude in front of Tang Buqi. They all knew that he could be quite temperamental.

A steward nodded and bowed, “Young Master Zhao, please follow me. We have prepared a quiet guest room for you to stay in.”

Zhao Changhe took in all of their expressions and smiled slightly.

Noble families... So this is the clan being held up solely by Tang Wanzhuang.

He could not be bothered with these matters and simply said, “Any accommodation will do for me. I just need my horse properly taken care of. Other than that, I would like someone to take me to the back of the mountain. I want to take a look at the Tiger Hill Sword Pond.”

Chapter 138: Tiger Hill Sword Pond

The Tiger Hill Sword Pond was an important place for the Tang Clan.

Originally, it was highly valued due to the legends from the previous era. The pond was treated very seriously, even being designated as a forbidden area. However, after decades and centuries passed without any discoveries, it naturally lost its significance. While it still held its nominal status as a forbidden area, many young members of the Tang Clan would even swim and play in it without anyone paying them much attention. The guards stationed around the pond were very lax.

Of course, the Tang Clan was still a noble clan and; ordinary guests could not visit the place even if they wanted to, and even ordinary servants were forbidden from going there. But with Tang Buqi having spoken, there was no problem with Zhao Changhe being allowed to visit.

Tang Buqi had just returned and, as per etiquette, he needed to meet his parents first before Zhao Changhe could be taken there. But when he saw Zhao Changhe's impatience, he thought about it for a moment and then handed him a token, saying, "If you take my token with you, no one will stop you. Is there anyone here who knows the way? Please take Brother Zhao there."

The servants all exchanged glances, and after a while, a maid hesitantly stepped forward and said, "I'll bring Young Master Zhao there."

Tang Buqi did not pay them any more attention and waved his hand. "I'm going to see my parents first. I'll take you to a nice place tonight... Uh, actually, never mind. Forget I said that."

He had habitually invited Zhao Changhe to a "nice place," but as he was speaking, he seemed to suddenly have some concerns and stopped himself. He then left with a somewhat gloomy expression.

Zhao Changhe watched his departing figure and felt that this eldest nephew of his might just be undergoing some changes in his mindset... If he actually starts working hard again, it would be a good thing. He really isn't that bad, just a bit spoiled and naive.

Although he had merely expressed interest in Tang Wanzhuang in jest, never having any serious intentions toward her, when he saw her wrapped in a cloak, coughing while working at her desk, resembling the Imperial Chancellor Zhuge[1], he could not help but feel a sense of respect and admiration toward her. Because of that, when he faced her, he could never bring himself to say anything too harsh.

If I can, I'll help out a bit more. In any case, I've already pretty much fulfilled my responsibility as a secret agent, so I can just hand the role over the next time we meet.

As he walked, Zhao Changhe let his thoughts wander. By the time he arrived at Tiger Hill at the back of the mountain, he could not help but feel a bit uneasy.

Why hasn't she said anything this entire time?

Even if your noble family looks down on us martial artists from the jianghu, you should not be so impolite. At the very least, I'm a guest personally brought here by your young master. Shouldn't we have at least exchanged a few pleasantries, talked about the scenery, or discussed the legends concerning the Tiger Hill Sword Pond?

Just as he was thinking this, the maid finally spoke, "Young Master Zhao, you seem to have a good relationship with our young master."

This is more like it. What were you doing just now? Zhao Changhe did not think much of it and casually replied, "It's alright."

The maid paused for a while as if searching for something to talk about, then finally said, "Tiger Hill is a famous scenic spot in Gusu. It is said that an emperor of the previous era was buried here. Has Young Master Zhao been here before?"

"This is the Tang Clan's backyard. Who would be able to come here so easily? If you don't know how to chat, don't force it."

The maid lowered her head and fell silent.

Zhao Changhe did not know whether to laugh or cry. He picked up the conversation himself. "It's impossible for anyone to know everything about the previous era. I only know a small part of the legends, and I'm not very familiar with this area. Do you know what kind of emperor was buried here?"

In his mind, he could not help but think about the legends in the modern world. According to those legends, it should be King Helu of Wu[2], but he had no idea if that was also true here.

But he heard the maid say, "It's said to be a sword emperor."

“So was Yuchang[3] buried here?”

“I don’t know, I’m just a maid.” “...”

“Anyway, our Tang Clan has been searching for a long time, whether an imperial tomb or a sword, but we never found anything. In the earlier years, some people tried to comprehend the way of the sword by the Thousand People Rock nearby, but they did not understand anything. Nowadays, people only dry their quilts there.”

“What is the Thousand People Rock? Did someone kill a thousand people there or what?”

“It’s said to be the place where the sword emperor lectured about the sword.”

Zhao Changhe scratched his head. He wondered if there was a Thousand People Rock in the modern world... No matter how much knowledge a person had, without relying on search engines, it was impossible to know everything. But according to common sense, neither the tomb of King Helu of Wu nor the Thousand People Rock should correspond to any sword emperor.

Of course, there was no Night Emperor in the modern world either. It seemed that things from the previous era were very different from the history of the modern world. It appeared that each world’s history had taken different paths.

Sure enough, he saw a large stone platform on the way. He did not know if it could actually accommodate a thousand people. At this moment, there did not seem to be anyone drying their quilts on it. Instead, there were some members of the Tang Clan sitting around a table, drinking wine and composing poems while pointing at the surrounding scenery.

Zhao Changhe shook his head and ignored them, urging the maid, who was craning her neck to look at the young masters of the Tang Clan, to hurry up. “What’s there to see? You can flirt with whichever young master of the Tang Clan you like when you head back.”

The maid continued to lead the way reluctantly, pointing to a nearby mountain stream. “We’re almost at the sword pond.”

“Are you suggesting that I can go on my own?”

The maid fell silent again.

There was a guard at the sword pond, but he looked quite relaxed. When he saw the two of them coming, he stopped them casually. “The sword pond is a forbidden area. It’s not a place for boys and girls to sneak in for romantic affairs. Why are there always ignorant people like you?”

The maid’s face turned red, while Zhao Changhe pointed at himself and said, “Do I seriously look like I’m a servant of the Tang Clan bringing a servant girl to the back mountain for a romantic getaway?”

The guard scrutinized him for a moment, and then became somewhat cautious. “I can see the vicious qi around you. You definitely aren’t a servant. Who are you?”

The maid, with her hands on her hips, said, “He is the Bloodthirsty Asura Zhao Changhe! A friend of the young master! The young master gave him his token for passage!”

Zhao Changhe glanced at her, and now he felt that his reputation was actually a bit respectable. He did not bother to say anything more and simply pulled out the token that Tang Buqi gave him. After a moment’s hesitation, the guard let them pass.

Zhao Changhe went straight into the sword pond, while the little maid followed closely behind him.

“Hey,” Zhao Changhe glanced at her. “Your task is complete. You can go and do whatever you need to do. Weren’t you very interested in joining the young masters back there?”

The maid tiptoed along the edge of the pool and said, “It would be inappropriate if I were to leave like this; you would say that I’m uncultured and uneducated.”

Zhao Changhe did not know whether to laugh or cry and said, “Speaking of which, I didn’t expect the Tang Clan to be so lenient. Even when a servant and a servant girl are suspected of having a private affair, they aren’t beaten to death. That guard even dared to joke about it?”

The maid replied, “The Tang Clan still values elegance.”

Zhao Changhe felt like her response did not quite address his comment. Elegance and what he was referring to were two different things. Many families that valued elegance were much stricter and

harsher when it came to such issues. Anyway, he could not be bothered to ask about such trivial matters. He came here to see the sword pond.

Ignoring the maid, he circled the pond, lost in thought.

If there was any vicious qi in the pond, the gentle Spring Water Sword Intent of the Tang Clan was unlikely to be as sensitive toward it as he was. But after walking around the pond for some time, he really did not sense anything.

Zhao Changhe thought for a while, took out his silver notes and other things that could not be soaked in water, and put them aside. As for the golden foil and Dragon Bird, these were essential and could not be left behind. He would bear their weight no matter how heavy they were. If anything, they could help him sink faster. [4]

At the moment, his vision underwater was not as blurry as when he first fought underwater to protect Yangyang. His progress in the Six Harmonies Art was enough to allow him to focus his internal energy into his eyes, allowing him to see clearer and further. Additionally, he could now use his qi to protect himself underwater and hold his breath for longer periods.

However, after carefully looking around underwater for about half an incense stick's worth of time, besides a narrow water passage leading to the mountain stream, he did not find anything else. He did not find even the slightest hint of vicious qi.

It seemed like if he did not go deeper, he would not be able to find anything.

Zhao Changhe was not discouraged. He found this to be completely normal. The Tang Clan had been here for several generations and they had never found anything. Why should he expect to make a discovery right away? It was clear that this would take some time.

I'm afraid that diving deeper won't be of much use either. The Tang Clan would have already done that... If there's an alternate space, there might be a specific way to open it, just like the ceremony that the Four Idols Cult did... Besides, there's no guarantee that this is the right place.

As Zhao Changhe was in thought, he swam up. Just as he was about to emerge from the water, however, he was suddenly startled

Above, a pair of delicate feet were swaying in the water and nearly collided with his face. Upon closer inspection, it was the maid sitting by the edge of the pond, leisurely washing her feet and humming a little tune.

Zhao Changhe circled around her in annoyance and emerged nearby. “What are you doing here?”

The maid seemed to be startled by his sudden appearance. “Y-you’re back so soon?”

“This place isn’t that big. I’ve already been down there for half an incense stick’s worth of time,” Zhao Changhe replied irritably. “You know I went down and you still went and washed your feet here. Did you want me to drink your foot bath?”

“This pond wasn’t clean to begin with. Were you really planning on drinking the water in it?”

“...”

“It’s so hot today, with this cool pool here, who could resist soaking their feet in for a while?” the maid retorted confidently. “You went down for a dip yourself, yet you aren’t even going to let others soak their feet. How can you be so overbearing?”

“Okay, okay, it’s me who is being overbearing.” Zhao Changhe sighed and used his energy to dry himself. He then picked up the silver notes and the other things he had taken out and stuffed them back into his pocket. “I’m going to go look for Tang Buqi for dinner. You can continue soaking your feet in here if you want.”

How could the maid dare to leave him alone in a place like this? She reluctantly got up to wipe her feet and followed him back to the estate.

Watching Zhao Changhe’s figure as he walked ahead of her, the maid could not help but smile faintly, as if she found something amusing.

Zhao Changhe’s Back Eye perfectly caught this smile, and the corners of his mouth also curled upward.

Hehe, who said that there was nothing to be gained from going to this Tiger Hill Sword Pond? Haven’t I just made a discovery?

You told me that you're just an ordinary little maid. Are you trying to play me for a fool? Do you think I'm Tang Buqi?

penguin's thoughts: aaaaaaaaaand we have a foot fetish.

Chapter 139: The Great Waves Sift the Sand

The dinner was simple, held right in Tang Buqi's waterside pavilion. They had not gone to any sort of "nice place" as Tang Buqi had initially said, but Zhao Changhe felt that this was the nicest place they could have gone.

Tang Buqi had a large courtyard all to himself. The pavilion they were in was built on top of water and there was a winding wooden bridge that led to it. It was clean and elegant, and the sound of water flowing could be heard from all directions, along with the faint sound of woodwind instruments. When Zhao Changhe arrived here, he felt as if were seeing the Water Pavilion of Still Reminiscence[1] from his dreams come to life before his very eyes.

I really was asking around like a lost donkey, huh? I even asked if there was a Murong Clan of Gusu, but it turns out, Yanziwu was yours[2] this whole time.

The maid led him to the pavilion and made a slight bow. "I will now be taking my leave."

"Hey, hey, hey!" Zhao Changhe pulled his gaze away from admiring the scenery and called her back with a smile. "Your young master invited a guest to dinner, aren't you supposed to be serving him?"

The maid waved her hand and backed away. "Everyone has their own duties within the clan. It isn't my place to serve the young master."

"Then what is it that you do?"

"I'm just a servant girl in the guest house..."

"So you're here to welcome the guests, right? And that's why you're showing me around?"

“Yeah... Well, that’s not really it. I’m responsible for cleaning the guest house, and not welcoming the guests. It’s just that there wasn’t anyone else willing to go with you, and I wanted to slack off for a bit...”

Zhao Changhe found her quite amusing and was about to tease her again when Tang Buqi popped his head out from the pavilion and said, “Hey, who are you talking to? Tsk... Are you flirting with my maid?”

Zhao Changhe responded, “How can exchanging a few words with this little girl be considered flirting? Do you think everyone is like you?”

“Alright, alright. Who is that?” Tang Buqi looked at the maid, but she seemed unfamiliar and he could not recall her name. He did not dwell on it, however. There were too many servants and servant girls in their estate. He simply said, “You’re from the guest house, right? Well, since it’s technically your job anyway, you can join us for dinner and attend to Mister Zhao.”

After saying that, he popped his head back in.

The maid: “...”

“Hah...” Zhao Changhe nearly burst out in laughter. He then asked, “Hey, since we’re somewhat acquainted now, what’s your name?”

The maid hesitated for a moment before finally saying, “Sisi.”

Zhao Changhe smiled and said nothing else.

This does not fit the style of the Tang Clan at all. Look at the maid next to Tang Wanzhuang, whether it was carrying the guqin or listening to it... Anyway, the style should be similar. What kind of uncultured name is this?

He did not say this out loud, simply heading into the waterside pavilion together with “Sisi.”

Inside the hall, there was a small round table, and several maids and musicians playing gentle and soothing music on the zither and other instruments, creating an atmosphere of bourgeois elegance.

But at this time, Tang Buqi was no longer indulging in grapes hand-fed by a maid. He sat alone by the window, pouring wine in his own cup and looking rather preoccupied. Seeing Zhao Changhe come in, he casually gestured for him to come toward him, "Sit down, it's just us brothers. Let's have a meal and drink together."

"..." Hearing his eldest nephew change their manner of address to brothers made Zhao Changhe feel a bit weird.

However, Zhao Changhe also knew that referring to Tang Buqi as his eldest nephew was his own personal problem, and Tang Buqi definitely didn't see things that way. So, despite feeling a bit awkward, he sat down opposite Tang Buqi and asked, "Did you get scolded?"

"No," replied Tang Buqi. "My father actually praised me. He said that I did well in Yangzhou... Although I know that I didn't really do much, I was on the frontlines during the siege of the White Lotus Temple. So I can't say that I am completely undeserving of some praise."

"Not completely undeserving of praise, eh..." Zhao Changhe chuckled helplessly. "Then since you've been praised, why do you look so pensive?"

"What's the use of a few words of praise at home? Am I really going to live my whole life at home?"

Zhao Changhe was stunned for a moment.

"You and Wan Dongliu offended Ji Chengkong. He didn't dare to trouble either you or Wan Dongliu, so he came after me instead. My Tang Clan's influence is obviously larger than yours and the Cao Gang combined, but in his eyes, I'm the easiest target," Tang Buqi said softly. "When you scolded me for sucking my aunt's blood, I felt uncomfortable ever since. I wanted to refute you, but I couldn't find anything to say... Others respect me because I am a young master of the Tang family, and they respect the Tang Clan because of Tang Wanzhuang, not some ancestor who died who knows how long ago."

Zhao Changhe fell silent and poured himself a drink, then slowly took a sip from it.

Tang Buqi said softly, "I also know that when I went out to gain experience, I shouldn't have brought maids, I shouldn't have had a caravan, I shouldn't have stayed at Uncle Wu's house, and I

shouldn't have even settled in Yangzhou... I should have been like you, along with a sword, leaving Jiangnan. But..."

Zhao Changhe sipped his wine and raised his head to look at him.

"But I might have ended up dying if I did that. Even you may end up dying at any time, brother Zhao." Tang Buqi gripped his cup of wine tightly. "I can die... When there are still so many things I can enjoy..."

Zhao Changhe finally raised his cup. "Here, here's my toast to you."

Tang Buqi was taken aback. "You still raise your cup to me? Aren't you supposed to laugh at me?"

"Why would I laugh at you? Am I not afraid of death? It's just that, unlike you, I don't have much of a choice," Zhao Changhe said with a smile. "If we were to switch places, maybe you would be doing exactly what I do and I would be doing what you do. Then who would be laughing at whom?"

He did not say what should be done in such a situation...after all, it really wasn't something that he was supposed to say. Even so, his words were indeed very comforting.

Tang Buqi's troubled expression eased significantly, and he regained his previous carefree smile. "Thanks. By the way, it's quite strange that someone like you doesn't have many friends in the jianghu..."

"There will be more and more from now on." Zhao Changhe grinned. "Nobody can survive in the jianghu without making some friends. Dear nephew, you're a good person. But next time, don't knock on doors whenever you want. You're my friend now."

Tang Buqi made a face again. "I don't want to be friends with you."

Zhao Changhe was taken aback for a moment. "Why?"

"When you change the way you address me from 'eldest nephew' to 'brother Tang,' then I'll be fine with being your friend."

Zhao Changhe rolled his eyes, “Well, I think I’ll stick with calling you ‘nephew.’”

Tang Buqi rolled his eyes.

“Drink, drink, you talked so much that my arm is getting sore from holding my wine cup,” said Zhao Changhe with disdain. “I heard that you were drunk in Xunhua Lane for five days? It looks like not only are you terrible at fighting, but even your alcohol tolerance is garbage.”

“Fuck you!” Tang Buqi rolled up his sleeves, “If I don’t drink with you to death today, I will keep my mouth shut from now on!” This dinner, which should have featured a discussion about whether any discoveries were made at Tiger Hill Sword Pond and how they should go about exploring the mysteries of the Gusu area, did not touch upon the topic at all.

Sometimes, relieving worries with a friend over some drinks was just as important as discussing serious matters.

Both of them were martial artists with good physiques and high internal energy, so having a high alcohol tolerance was expected. But while Tang Buqi could indeed hold his liquor well, compared to Zhao Changhe, he clearly fell short. This was especially since Zhao Changhe suspected that the maids present could be dangerous, so he never really intended to get drunk. His internal energy was quietly working to dissolve the effects of the alcohol. After half an hour of drinking, Zhao Changhe was still perfectly fine, but Tang Buqi was already heavily intoxicated.

Then, he reverted to his old ways, embracing one of the maids who had been standing by and refilling his wine, “Qiqi, come here and give me a hug...”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

“Hey, you, whatever your name is,” Tang Buqi pointed at Sisi. “You, you, you, go accompany my brother!”

Sisi: “...”

Zhao Changhe’s heart stirred with the intention to test this woman. He pretended to be intoxicated and grinned as he embraced her with a smile, “Sisi...”

Sisi jumped back with a start and said, “Young master, it is against the clan’s rules to force a maid —”

“Tsk!” Tang Buqi waved his hands drunkenly. “Then let my father punish me. What’s the big deal?”

Sisi straightened her neck and said, “Then you can just beat me to death, young master!”

“Huh?” Tang Buqi looked at her drunkenly. “She isn’t much to look at, but she’s surprisingly spirited. Brother Zhao, if this kind of girl is fine with you, then go ahead. I can’t force her to do anything, but you should be able to deal with her.”

Zhao Changhe smiled slightly and said, “I won’t force things either. I’ve had enough to drink, you should rest. Sisi, would you mind accompanying me back?”

“That’s her job. Of course, she shouldn’t mind!” Tang Buqi waved his hand. “Go on, go on, serve my brother well!”

Zhao Changhe pretended to stumble clumsily, even knocking over his chair as he made his way to the door. Sisi hesitated for a moment, then went over to help him. Zhao Changhe leaned heavily on her shoulder, putting most of his weight on her.

Blushing, Sisi struggled like a little child carrying a big bear as she dragged him outside.

Zhao Changhe became even more confused at this time.

Weird, I originally thought that she might be that fake celestial maiden, the one who even casually kissed me. But now, it doesn’t seem like it...

Is she going so far in playing the role of a spirited maid? Or is this maid another person entirely?

Tang Buqi’s singing suddenly came from the pavilion, “With innate talent, I am bound to be useful...”

Then, he burst into laughter, followed by tears. “The morning breeze brews wine, laughing at the bright moon; the great waves sift the sand, but fail to recognize their true lord!”

Chapter 140: I Want This Maid

Sisi worked hard to carry Zhao Changhe, who was pretending to be drunk, back to the guest house. When she got there, she pushed him onto the bed.

However, Zhao Changhe was too heavy, and his arm instinctively wrapped around her, causing her to fall onto the bed together with him.

She angrily struggled and said, “I’m only here to do my job and help you into your bed, not to accompany you in bed!”

Zhao Changhe, still pretending to be drunk, intentionally pursed his lips and moved his face closer to hers, saying, “Don’t worry. I won’t treat you badly, little maid...”

Sisi tried to push him away, blocking his mouth with her hand. “I heard that you’re a hero! How could you harass a poor person like me?!”

Zhao Changhe, feigning confusion, responded, “Where did you hear that I’m a hero? Everyone in the world calls me a bandit...”

Realizing her mistake, Sisi continued to struggle while seemingly searching for another excuse.

Finding her amusing, Zhao Changhe teased, “Aren’t you maids always trying to seduce young masters... Why are you so fierce all of a sudden?”

Sisi said angrily, “Will you go to the young master and ask him to let me go and make me follow you in the future?”

Zhao Changhe was stunned for a moment.

Sisi struggled even harder. “While this might all just be fun and games for you, for us, this is not a game. Have you even spared a thought for our future?”

Zhao Changhe asked, “Oh, and what would happen to you in the future?”

“As maids, we must maintain our integrity and innocence. It’s fine if we are chosen by a young master in the future, or even if we get together with another servant by the main family. But if a guest casually plays with us, our lives are over. Would anyone still want me in the future? Will you take responsibility for me for the rest of my life?”

Damn, you really are dedicated to playing this role...

Zhao Changhe was left speechless for a moment. After a while, he continued pretending to be intoxicated, patted his chest, and said, “Then if I were to take you away, would you follow me?”

It was now Sisi’s turn to be stunned, and her struggling weakened. “Y-you can’t lie to me... If you can really take me away, I, I...”

Then, she gritted her teeth again and turned her head away. “But I won’t go with you! The Tang Clan is a refined and elegant family, which young master here isn’t charming and refined? Why would I go wander the jianghu with a boorish man like you? Let me go!”

“A’Zhu does think Qiao Feng is better than Murong Fu...”[1]

“...What?”

“It’s just a story from the jianghu. A’Zhu is a clever little maid who is good at disguise.”

Sisi’s eyes widened and she scoffed, “I’ve never heard of it! Other people’s stories have nothing to do with me! Let me go!”

She suddenly exerted an unexpectedly great force as she struggled. Zhao Changhe, who was playing the role of a drunkard, could not use his full strength for fear of her seeing through his act, so he was ultimately pushed aside.

Sisi leaped out of the bed and stood beside it, panting heavily. “Are all men like this? They pretend to be drunk and crazy just to take advantage of women!”

Lying on the bed sprawled out, Zhao Changhe mumbled, “Just you wait, tomorrow I’ll go look for Tang Buqi and ask him...”

Sisi: “...”

Before long, Zhao Changhe’s snoring filled the room.

Sisi bit her lower lip and watched him for a while, trying to figure out if he was really asleep or just pretending. She also could not tell if he had really been drunk just now or not.

It’s really hard to tell. Last time, when he pretended to be lecherous as he approached Yue Hongling, it seemed so convincing! Fortunately, Yue Hongling intervened and saved me from that fate. If Yue Hongling had not shown up, I would have been the one to suffer that fate.

Not only that, he had been suspicious of Wan Dongliu causing trouble with the northern barbarians from the beginning, but he never showed any sign of it until the dust settled. Those who really think that this guy is just a rough and reckless man will end up played to death by him.

After hesitating for a long time, Sisi reached her hand out toward his arms as if wanting to grab something, but she ultimately did not dare to go through with it. She withdrew her hand and sat down on the side of the bed, hugging her knees and looking pitiful.

She truly was quite pitiful. While pretending to be a maid, not only did she risk being forced to sleep with someone, but even if he didn’t do anything, she still had to remain by his side, ready to serve him at any moment, whether it was to clean his vomit or help him wash up...

It was really tough.

From Zhao Changhe’s perspective, his acting today was quite mediocre, mainly because he was not really in the mood for it.

Tang Buqi’s behavior left him feeling somewhat disappointed and uninspired, so he simply went through the motions.

If she was the fake celestial maiden, she should have already gotten violated if things had really gone as they were supposed to. She had merely been saved by the real Yue Hongling back then.

This time, she took on the identity of a maid whose duty was to serve guests, which really just seemed like karma coming full circle. It was as if she was destined to be violated. But at the same time, who told her to impersonate other people? If she stopped pretending to be someone she wasn't, then she wouldn't be in such miserable situations in the first place...

But Zhao Changhe was more confused than Sisi at the moment. He still was not certain if this maid was truly the fake celestial maiden or not, mostly due to how much she seemed to emphasize her innocence. If she was not actually the fake celestial maiden, then what he was doing to her was indeed inappropriate. That was why he decided to simply pretend to fall asleep and wait and see what her next actions would be.

Anyway, even with his eyes closed, he could still keep track of her movements with the Back Eye by just turning his head a little every now and then.

She did move her hand toward him at some point. It looked like there was something he wanted to take from him. But she hesitated and ultimately decided against going through with it.

Then, she sat pitifully at the side, hugging her knees. She rested against the bed, and gradually, her head drooped and she actually fell asleep.

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Now the one feeling aggrieved was Zhao Changhe. Whether or not Sisi had truly fallen asleep, he dared not sleep.

What if he fell asleep and she suddenly stole something or stabbed him? That would truly be tragic.

And so, while a little maid who should have been pitiful slept soundly, a man who was lying comfortably on the bed had a sleepless night.

*

When dawn came, Sisi's head was still bobbing up and down as she slept. Zhao Changhe could not bear it any longer and pretended to wake up from a deep sleep, stretching lazily as he got out of bed.

Sisi still did not wake up.

It looked like his acting was for nothing, as there was no one to witness it.

Annoyed, Zhao Changhe washed up on his own, and then he took Dragon Bird and went out to practice.

The sound of his saber ripping through the air finally awoke Sisi. Rubbing her eyes sleepily, she stood up in confusion. When she looked outside the window, she saw Zhao Changhe swinging his saber.

She silently watched him for a while, noticing that Zhao Changhe's saber no longer contained hints of Chi Li's Fox Spirit Saber Intent nor the Spring Water Sword Intent. He was still practicing the Vicious Blood Saber Art, with a hint of Yue Hongling's style in it. His saber art had become much more developed, and it looked like he was beginning to form his own unique style.

Although Zhao Changhe no longer used those intents, Sisi still could not wrap her head around how he managed to learn the others' sword and saber intents in such a short time. Even though he had indeed not grasped them to a deep level, that did not change the fact that those intents were not something that a normal person could just learn through such a short period of observation... There was also the Pure Bliss Art. She could not understand how he learned it so quickly.

I really want to steal his things! Trying to control him is probably not going to work. On the day when he had just learned the Pure Bliss Art, there might still have been a chance. But now, he might even be more proficient with it than me. If I try to control him now, it's hard to say who would end up controlling the other.

She had infiltrated the Maitreya Cult and accidentally learned about the treasure of vicious qi. It was then that she decided to come to the Tang Clan to seek it out. She never would have expected him to also show up.

Originally, she had disguised herself as a marginalized guest house maid in order to avoid attracting attention, but this identity truly did have its flaws. Her status was so low that she could not even enter the sword pond. In the end, it was only thanks to Zhao Changhe showing up that she managed to make use of him to visit the sword pond.

However, she did not dare dive into the water to explore things herself, fearing that she might end up alerting him. All she could do was linger on the periphery, dipping her feet into the water to see if she could sense any vicious qi.

Also, it allowed her to feel like she was letting him drink her feet water.

She wondered whether he had come to cause trouble for her or to help her...

Sisi was just about to say something to him when Tang Buqi's voice suddenly came, "I was so drunk last night. Oh, you're practicing the saber so early!"

Zhao Changhe put away his saber and said with a smile, "Didn't you say that you would shut your mouth if you couldn't make me drink to death? It seems that your mouth is still yapping like no other, no?"

Tang Buqi said, "Instead of that, how about I just let you call me Crybaby Tang for today?"

"?" Zhao Changhe rolled his eyes. "Why don't you just shut your mouth and let yourself be called Doggy Tang?"

Sisi could not help but laugh.

Zhao Changhe turned to look at her, and then said to Tang Buqi, "Hey, little crybaby, if I ask you for something, will you give it to me?"

Tang Buqi said, "As long as it isn't my aunt, it's possible. It still depends on the situation, though"

Zhao Changhe pointed at Sisi and said, "I want this maid. Can you give her to me?"

Sisi's smile froze on her face. Is he being serious?