

## T. Times 146

### Chapter 146: See the Essence Through Dense Fog

Although he said that he was going to continue exploring the secrets of vicious blood qi in the afternoon, Zhao Changhe went neither to Tranquility Hall to visit Lu Shaoxion nor to visit the third young master of the Gu Clan. Instead, he went to Tiger Hill Sword Pond again.

Watching Zhao Changhe pace around the edge of the pond, Sisi could not understand what he was doing here.

Anyone who analyzed the situation would also think that the Tiger Hill Sword Pond was unrelated to the issue. It seemed much more sensible for the true source of the vicious qi to be outside. With young masters from both the Lu Clan and the Gu Clan having been tainted, it made more sense to look for places that they had both visited.

In fact, at the moment, Tang Buqi was doing exactly that together with Gusu's Demon Suppression Bureau, which Susu saw to be one of the rare moments where Young Master Tang was actually acting in a reliable manner.

On the other hand, Zhao Changhe, who always gave others a very reliable impression, seemed to be working toward nothing at the moment. He kept wandering around the Tiger Hill Sword Pond, but after half an afternoon, he still had not found anything. Despite that, he was even chuckling to himself.

Those who did not know better might think that was just here for a walk with a maid.

Although the surrounding scenery was indeed beautiful, and there was a comfortable atmosphere with the presence of the pond and a cool breeze, Sisi was someone diligent. She felt like they were simply wasting their time here, and she had not been working so hard just to enjoy herself.

"Master," seeing Zhao Changhe crouched under the shade of a tree looking at ants, Sisi finally could not bear it anymore. "Master, should we go to investigate the case like Young Master Tang and the others?"

"Huh? Since they're already checking the places where both those young masters had been, why don't we just ask them about their findings later? What's the point in going and checking the same places they are?"

Sisi opened her mouth but could not find a response for a while. After a while, she said, “But there isn’t much of a point in sitting here and watching ants either.”

“Don’t underestimate ants. They are much more sensitive to crises than humans.”

Sisi rolled her eyes speechlessly.

While that might be true when it comes to ordinary people, you’ve already broken through the fifth layer of the Profound Gate. Wielding a saber weighing forty or fifty jin with one hand doesn’t even trouble you in the slightest! You’re no longer an ordinary person. Your senses should have already surpassed those of any creature in the natural world. What’s the point of looking at ants when you can just close your eyes and sense the surroundings yourself?

“Do you really think that this is meaningless?” Zhao Changhe chuckled. “But have you noticed...”

As he spoke, he tossed a piece of dessert leftover from lunch over toward the ants.

Some ants quickly crawled up to it.

“...Have you noticed that there are very few ants here?”

Sisi was stunned. “Could it be that the vicious qi really is here? But then why hasn’t anyone sensed anything at all?”

“If there really was vicious qi here that could force ants to move away, then there shouldn’t be any of them left here.” Zhao Changhe said, “Based on our common knowledge, what does it usually mean when ants move their nests?”

Sisi said, “It means that heavy rain is coming, which may flood their nest.”

“But there have been no signs of rain lately, and these ants should have moved their nests a long time ago, leaving behind only a small number of them here... Can we consider that they sensed something else that would flood their nests, prompting them to migrate much earlier?”

Sisi's eyes flashed with intrigue.

Although it seemed a bit far-fetched to extrapolate from the scarcity of ants in the area to such thoughts, at times like these, any small detail could potentially be a clue. Assuming this inference was correct, even if it did not prove the existence of vicious qi in the pond, it could indicate something else unexpected was going to happen, such as the water overflowing from the pond.

“Master... Did you really infer that from observing ants?”

“Well, actually, I suspected that there may be unexpected events related to the sword pond, so I came here specifically to look for something that could support my speculation. I guess these ants can barely be considered evidence?”

“...Just barely, but in the end, it is insufficient.”

“However, it's not like I'm closing a case for the government. I don't need ironclad evidence. I just need to verify my suspicions.”

“So what exactly is it that you suspect?”

“Well... Let me put it this way. Whether or not there exists a treasure of vicious qi in Gusu has always been a mystery. The sudden madness of the Lu Clan's young master does not prove the existence of such a thing. I could go mad too, but what would that prove? So, finding the source of the vicious qi is a secondary matter.”

Sisi's eyes widened in surprise. “Then what exactly is the main issue?”

“The main issue is that the downfall of the Maitreya Cult in Yangzhou will inevitably lead to some action from their leader, Maitreya. The Maitreya Cult is already prevalent throughout Jiangnan, and only Gusu remains like a pure land, untouched by their faith. If I were their cult leader, the next course of action would naturally be to target Gusu.

“With him already searching for the treasure of vicious qi, now that the clues lead to Gusu, this makes that course of action all the more likely. With these two things combined, whether Maitreya himself comes to Gusu or not, actions against Gusu are undoubtedly already underway, and the first target will definitely be the Tang Clan.

“So, while there may not necessarily be vicious qi here, there have definitely already been some changes in the Tang Clan. That is the main issue. The role played by this so-called vicious qi and its impact on this matter is what I am currently focusing on. It might help solve this imminent crisis. Searching for the source of vicious qi is likely a course of action that the other party wants us to take, and they’re leading us in that direction. In fact, the vicious qi might not even exist at all, and those on the case right now are just being led on a wild goose chase.”

Sisi: “...”

What they had been focusing on had been different from the start. No wonder she had always felt that Zhao Changhe’s attitude was peculiar. He did not seem like someone eager to find the treasure. Instead, he seemed more like someone solving a case. She initially thought it was normal; after all, solving a case could lead to clues about the treasure. In reality, however, that was not the case at all.

What she did not know was that the reason why Zhao Changhe was willing to involve her in this matter was that he knew she was not actually associated with the Maitreya Cult, and she might be able to help him.

As for her goal of obtaining the treasure of vicious qi, it might conflict with his own goal, but that was secondary to him.

After pondering for a while, Sisi suddenly asked, “Master, I heard that you practice the Vicious Blood Art. You’ve already reached the fifth layer. Is it true that further progress is limited by the finite blood and qi in the human body?”

“It’s not that exaggerated. It is true that I must nurture vicious qi as relying solely on drawing in pure energy is not sufficient. However, nurturing vicious qi does not necessarily require any treasures. It can also be done through killing. The Blood God Cult relies on that method. After all, where are they supposed to get so many treasures?”

“...In other words, if there were a treasure for nurturing vicious qi, you would desire it greatly?”

“Yes.”

“Then why are you still so calm, as if the treasure you desire doesn’t even exist?”

Zhao Changhe thought for a while, then laughed and said, “The treasure is indeed important, but the camaraderie in jianghu is even more important.”

“Camaraderie?” Sisi asked curiously. “Because you’re friends with Young Master Tang?”

“Yes.” Zhao Changhe looked at the sky and saw that the sun was setting. He then turned to descend the mountain. “Now that we drank together properly, isn’t Tang Buqi my friend?”

Sisi followed and muttered, “Men are so strange. Just over a drink?”

“Also, didn’t he even give you to me as a gift?”

“...”

Zhao Changhe chuckled. “There is one more thing...”

Sisi immediately said, “Could it be Tang Wanzhuang? Master, do you really have some sort of relationship with her?”

“Where did you get the idea? She did not even give me a glance. Do you really think I’m that desperate?” Zhao Changhe said leisurely. “No...it’s because I don’t want this beautiful Gusu to become another Realm of True Void of the Maitreya Cult. We’ve learned martial arts, and there are always things for us to do.”

“Don’t we learn martial arts to improve our own lives?”

“Do you see the afterglow of the setting sun?”

“Huh?”

“That afterglow is not only Yue Hongling, but also me, Zhao Changhe.”

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After leaving Tiger Hill Sword Pond and returning to the guest house for dinner, a figure flashed past. It was Ji Chengkong. He was right outside his door. “The guards of the Tang Clan are much more lax compared to the Lu Clan. It’s as easy to get in as a toilet. I was wrong to think that the Tang Clan would be more capable.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “Is the Lu Clan heavily guarded?”

“Yes. I nearly even thought that I was at the Demon Suppression Bureau. Luckily, although they do have a lot of guards, they are quite lacking in skill, so I was able to gather some information,” said Ji Chengkong. He sat down at the table as if they were old acquaintances, and continued, “Do you have any wine? After lurking around for so long, I’m parched.”

Sisi lowered her head and poured him a cup of tea.

Ji Chengkong glanced at her again. Her figure did resemble the person he was looking for. Although he did not recognize her face, the person he was looking for was a master of disguise... However, there were many people with similar figures. Even Yue Hongling had a similar figure to the person he was looking for. If he were to use that as a reason, he would only offend Zhao Changhe unnecessarily. With that in mind, he simply let her be.

He was not too bothered by it. He directly said, “According to my investigation, the Lu Clan has a forbidden area, with security much stricter than the so-called forbidden area of the Tang Clan. It can’t be entered merely with a token or some password. You need to be of the main lineage of the Lu Clan to be allowed passage. It’s quite strange indeed. They are far more secretive than a clan their size should be.”

Zhao Changhe smiled and said, “They have someone at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate right at home. That’s someone who has already gotten a glimpse of the Profound Mysteries. With someone like that, they can’t be considered a small clan.”

“If they aren’t on the rankings, then they’re just rubbish.” Ji Chengkong pointed at his own nose. “I’m at the sixth layer of the Profound Gate, and you were only at the fourth layer back then. Even then, I could not dodge a punch from you. This just goes to show the gap between someone who is on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, like you, and someone who isn’t, like me.”

“Brother Ji, your strength does not lie in combat. You said it yourself: if you were to suddenly use a dagger or even a poison needle, I dare not say that I would not fall in your hands.”

Ji Chengkong nodded slightly, feeling a little pleased with the comment. “That’s right, everyone has their own strengths. Anyway, I did not find anything useful, and there was no fun to be had. I’ve taken your deposit, and that’s already enough. I don’t have the face to ask for more. If there isn’t anything else you need, then I’ll be taking my leave.”

“Wait, brother Ji,” Zhao Changhe followed after him. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you...”

Sisi tensed up instantly.

#### Chapter 147: Prelude

She quietly moved to the window and looked out. She saw Zhao Changhe walk out with Ji Chengkong.

“As I wander the jianghu, the one thing I lack the most is a good movement art. While Traceless Soaring Blood can be considered somewhat adequate, when paired with my heavy gear, it becomes mediocre. As a result, I am unable to investigate things in secret by myself and I end up having to trouble people like you.”

Sisi sighed in relief as her shoulder slumped.

Ji Chengkong replied, “Isn’t that normal? How many people are truly versatile and good at everything? Besides, considering your relatively short time practicing martial arts, expecting you to excel in everything is just unreasonable. If you were good at everything, then would others still have a chance to live? Your Traceless Soaring Blood is indeed quite good. In the Blood God Cult, it’s considered a high-level movement art. That should honestly be enough...”

“Even if the cultivation techniques that the Blood God Cult practice do have great power, movement arts have never been their forte. What use is their so-called high-level movement art...” said Zhao Changhe. “If I wanted to learn the Thieves Guild’s movement art from your master, would there be a chance that I would be allowed to?”

Ji Chengkong scrutinized him as if he were observing a naive newcomer to the martial world. “Unless you’re willing to truly become a disciple, it is impossible. Are you willing to do that? Let me tell you, if you are serious about it, I believe my master would be more than happy to accept a renowned figure like you, who is on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons. It’s just that I doubt that you would actually be willing to join us.”

“Is there nothing else I can do?”

“No, that part is essential. How can it be replaced with something else... Especially since something happened not too long ago that caused my master to no longer want to take on any more disciples.”

Sisi held her head in her hands.

Zhao Changhe pretended to be stunned. “What happened? Oh, if it isn’t convenient to talk about, then it’s fine.”

“It’s fine. In fact, maybe you can even help with this matter.” Ji Chengkong sighed. “About half a year ago, a young girl joined our guild. The sweetest words always came out of her mouth, and everyone treated her like a treasure. My master quickly passed on our core arts to her, including our movement art, our sleight of hand skills, and our methods of disguise... But then, as soon as she learned everything, she disappeared without even a word of thanks.”

Zhao Changhe suppressed the urge to turn and look at Sisi. He cleared his throat and said, “So, you’re looking for this... traitor?”

“You could say that, but my master has not issued any orders to hunt her down. Instead, he’s even been joking about it, saying he’d been pecked by the geese he’d been hunting all his life. He’s basically been saying it’s just karma that after stealing his whole life, somebody finally stole from him. He found the entire event amusing and told us, his disciples, not to dwell on it.” Ji Chengkong shook his head. “However, we disciples don’t feel the same. How can we just let someone like that go? So we decided to go out and bring her back, then let our master deal with her.”

Then, he casually glanced at the window where Sisi was and said, “Actually, if she were to go back, admit her mistake, and apologize, our master won’t really hold a grudge about what she’s done. If you ever happen to encounter her in your travels, do let her know.”

Zhao Changhe said, “Could you at least give me a name?”

“There’s not much point in giving you her name, she’s probably using an alias anyway. She goes by Xiang Simeng, but she might call herself Sisi or Mengmeng or something like that. Maybe she deliberately even chose a name that evokes feelings of yearning[1]. Anyway, regardless of how she appears, don’t trust her. We are trained in deception, so if she puts on an act and you end up losing out, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”



Zhao Changhe asked, “Could it be that you had once been ensnared by her charms?”

Ji Chengkong smiled bitterly and said, “Maybe a little. Who didn’t fall for her back then? But in the end, she turned out to be a heartless little witch. It’s honestly quite embarrassing to even talk about it.”

Ji Chengkong then quickly disappeared from sight, leaving Zhao Changhe to return to his room with a playful smile, singing a little tune as he headed back, “It woke me up from my dreams, how pointless those thoughts seem...”

Sisi could not help but roll her eyes and said, “Why are you suddenly singing to me about dreams and whatever? Do you think I’m that person or something?”

“No, no, of course not. If that really were the case, then wouldn’t you have changed your name?”

Sisi immediately brightened up. “Of course, who would be that foolish to use the same name?”

“Yeah, a foolish idiot like that who was able to deceive the Thieves Guild, if she were to fall into my hands, she would bare all eighteen of her appearances.”

Sisi felt that there was something off about what he said. Why would I be a foolish idiot? Well, speaking of which... I never would have thought that you would be this familiar with Ji Chengkong!

She rubbed her temples, feeling a headache coming on. “Master, why were you still in the mood to gossip about internal matters of the Lu Clan when there were no results from Ji Chengkong’s investigation? Isn’t talking about such gossip pointless?”

“Who said there were no results?” Zhao Changhe retorted. “Didn’t he say there is a forbidden area that only members of the Lu Clan’s main lineage can enter?”

“So what? We don’t know what’s inside. Ji Chengkong can disguise himself, why didn’t you ask him to try impersonating one of the Lu Clan’s young masters and take a look inside?”

“He might be able to get in, but he might also have some serious problems getting out. Besides, he’s not my lackey. Why would he agree to do something as risky as that?” Zhao Changhe glanced at Sisi. “It’s a pity. If you were that Sisi that he was referring to, maybe you could have helped.”

“I don’t think that Sisi would have simply sent herself to her death either.”

“But what if I just needed her to help me alter my appearance?”

Sisi said, “Since you know it’s risky to go, why would you go in yourself?”

“I wouldn’t do it now.” Zhao Changhe turned profound as he looked out the window. “If I’m not mistaken, there will be a time... when there is barely anybody in the Lu Clan.”

Just as Sisi was about to ask him another question, Tang Buqi’s voice came from outside. “I’ve been out all day investigating the case. I was wondering where you were this entire time, but it turns out you’ve just been playing with your maid here all day.”

Sisi: “...”

Zhao Changhe said, “Isn’t this an opportunity for you to shine? Anyway, how was it? Did you find anything?”

“No.” Tang Buqi entered the room, picked up the tea on the table, and took a sip. “It’s really unlucky. The only places where they have both gone are the red-light district and whenever they visit each other... And speaking of visiting, they have both come to our estate as well...”

Sisi cautiously said, “Young Master Tang, a guest just drank from that cup, uh...a male guest...”

“Pfffft!” Tang Buqi sprayed out the tea he was drinking, trembling as he pointed at Sisi. “Sure enough, it’s true what they say, like master, like servant! The maid follows the master, no matter how disgusting the master is.”

Zhao Changhe knocked on the table. “Hey, I’ve really been wanting to help you investigate the case. Is that really how you see me?”

“Really?” Tang Buqi rolled his eyes. “I can’t tell.”

Zhao Changhe chuckled and said, “Well, then let me tell you something now. You’d better take it seriously and prepare yourself.”

Tang Buqi was startled. Zhao Changhe’s performance in Yangzhou still left a deep impression on him, and his words carried weight in his ears. “What is it?”

“If, and I’m saying if, the Lu Clan and the Gu Clan came to the Tang Clan and claimed that the vicious qi originated from the Tiger Hill Sword Pond, what would you do?”

Tang Buqi scoffed and replied, “There is nothing in the Sword Pond... Aren’t they just fooling around? The Tang Clan is not one to be trifled with.”

Zhao Changhe said, “Alright, but what if right at that very moment vicious qi really were to surge from the sword pond, what do you think would happen?”

Tang Buqi’s casual demeanor slowly faded, and he murmured, “Several families have already been affected by the vicious qi... If such a thing really were to happen, then Tang Clan’s reputation would plummet, and we might even be forced to face the wrath of those families... But the thing is, there really is nothing in the Tiger Hill Sword Pond...”

Zhao Changhe solemnly warned him, “Regardless of whether or not vicious qi does surge from the Tiger Hill Sword Pond, I will only give you this one piece of advice: immediately notify your aunt. If you have already informed her and she is on her way, then contact the military in Gusu and the Demon Suppression Bureau. It would be best if you could get them to gather around the Tang Clan and prepare themselves for battle.”

Just when Tang Buqi was about to say something, there seemed to be a commotion in the distance. Soon, a steward rushed over, panting heavily as he said, “Young master, young master! The four major clans of Gusu have gathered a group of people and they’re making a ruckus at the gate. They’re claiming that the vicious qi in Gusu originated from our sword pond and are demanding an explanation!”

Tang Buqi’s expression changed drastically, but Zhao Changhe grabbed him and said, “Let your father and the others handle things here first. You go to the military immediately, right now!”

## Chapter 148: Spiritual Illusion Arts

Tang Buqi decided to listen to Zhao Changhe's suggestion. He slipped out through the back door of the guest house, then quickly headed straight to the military camp outside the city.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe and Sisi stood on the rooftop of the guest house, observing the commotion at the gate of the Tang Clan from afar.

The major families of Gusu had gathered hundreds, if not thousands of people and were blocking the entrance to the Tang residence. Some had even already gone to block the other exits. It seemed that if they had delayed a moment longer, Tang Buqi would have had a much harder time getting out.

Every person looked furious, and curse after curse was echoing through the air. One could faintly hear shouts demanding accountability from the Tang Clan for the alleged leakage of vicious qi from the Tiger Hill Sword Pond that was harming the people of Gusu.

A middle-aged man with a long beard rushed out with a group of people. He was Tang Buqi's father, Tang Wanzhuang's brother, and the current head of the Tang Clan, Tang Wangsheng. Tang Wangsheng's father, the old patriarch, had long retired and went to spend the rest of his life in the capital, and his focus was probably on his daughter's marriage. As a result, all matters concerning the Tang Clan of Gusu were now overseen by Tang Wangsheng.

Not every family had a leader as capable as Cui Wenjing of the Cui Clan, who excelled in both military and political affairs. Zhao Changhe's impression of the Tang Clan was that they were closely following Tang Wanzhuang's political footsteps, but their abilities were limited, and they appeared to be in a state of decline. Tang Buqi's father was a reflection of the overall state of the Tang Clan, and his leadership played a significant role in their current situation. At least for the moment, he did not seem up to par for his role.

Therefore, despite staying in their residence. Zhao Changhe had no intention of paying respects to the family head. It seemed pointless to him, and he might ultimately just face ridicule or hostility. The only member of the clan he had any interest in, besides Tang Wanzhuang, was Tang Buqi.

Tang Wangsheng's voice echoed, resonant and forceful, "The Tiger Hill Sword Pond has been under the control of the Tang Clan for a century, and there have never been any incidents. This is known to everyone! If there truly was a leakage of vicious qi from the sword pond, then why has nobody in our family been affected? Don't be misled by rumors and hearsay!"

On the opposing side, one of the people leading the crowd said aggressively, “You have been keeping watch over the sword pond in your rear mountain this entire time. How could we outsiders really know what’s going on inside? My son went astray after visiting your sword pond, as did the young master of the Gu Clan! How can we take your word for it and believe that there’s nothing fishy about the sword pond you’re keeping from everyone else?”

Tang Wangsheng was speechless. “There are so many people who have visited the sword pond! I myself even went there a few days ago to play chess. How come I didn’t go mad?”

However, nobody paid attention to him. The crowd’s emotions surged, and the head of the Lu Clan said, “Do you really think mere words are going to be enough to convince us? How about you let all of us enter and investigate? We’ll believe what we see with our own eyes!”

Tang Wangsheng’s expression grew solemn, “Brother Lu, I understand your pain as a parent whose child has gone mad, but our residence is not a place where you can throw a tantrum as you please! Are we supposed to allow you to enter and investigate just because you say so? What do you think the Tang Clan is?”

Zhao Changhe pulled Sisi aside and said, “Let’s go. The Tang Clan still holds some prestige, the two sides will remain in a stalemate for the time being. That person surnamed Lu and the Maitreya Cult will need to continue to stimulate people’s emotions until a conflict escalates before they can take action. Before that happens, let’s go do our own thing. Besides, this kind of battle between thousands of people is not our business.”

Sisi whispered, “Is this what you were referring to when you said that there would not be many people in the Lu Clan?”

“Yes, I suspected that something was off from the moment I saw Lu Shaoxiong. I have been speculating about their intentions... I’ll tell you the details later. Right now, the strongest members of the Lu Clan are all here. There should not be that many powerful individuals among those guarding their forbidden area at the moment. We might still have a chance by acting now.”

Sisi forgot that as a maid, it was nowhere in her job description to accompany her master to such risky places. She followed Zhao Changhe as they rushed toward the southern part of the city where the Lu Clan’s residence was. At this moment, her curiosity and excitement were no less than anyone else’s.

The Lu residence located in the south of the city, far from the Tang residence, which was located in the northernmost part of the city. In theory, it seemed highly unlikely for the Lu Clan to be able to

do anything that may cause problems to arise at the sword pond in the Tang residence. After all, it simply did not make sense for them to dig a tunnel under the entire city. That would honestly be too incredible.

Despite the distance between the two estates, Zhao Changhe and Sisi quickly arrived at the Lu residence. As Zhao Changhe had expected, the Lu Clan's estate was almost entirely deserted at this time. The majority of their forces had gone to the Tang Clan, leaving only several guards and servants to patrol the grounds.

Although Zhao Changhe was not particularly skilled in stealth and infiltration, he was still able to deal with these ordinary guards. They were able to swiftly and covertly circle around to the back of the Lu Clan's estate, where there was a heavily guarded small hill. This was the forbidden area of the Lu Clan.

Zhao Changhe whispered into Sisi's ear, "I have some knowledge of the Maitreya Cult's spiritual illusion arts, though my skills might be a bit rubbish... I wonder if I would be able to trick these guards into letting me in? On the other hand, we could always just force our way through. I'm just worried about being blocked off from behind. That would be very dangerous."

Suppressing the itching sensation in her ears, Sisi hesitated for a moment before responding in a low voice, "Follow me."

With a faint smile on his face, Zhao Changhe followed Sisi as she led him to a small courtyard.

"Under normal circumstances, this would be the residence of a certain young master," Sisi said with remarkable familiarity as she jumped through an open window. She deftly knocked out a maid who was pretending to be asleep at the table, and then she rummaged through the cabinets until she found a set of clothes belonging to a young master of the Lu Clan. "Put these on."

Without saying a word, Zhao Changhe changed into the clothes he was handed. Sisi took out some jars and containers from seemingly nowhere, selecting some sticky substances to smear onto Zhao Changhe's face, saying, "This is just some simple makeup. We need to cover up your scar at the very least... Hm, that should be good enough. If you use your illusion art now, you should have a much better chance at fooling people..."

Zhao Changhe smiled slightly. "Alright."

Sisi rolled her eyes, feeling like she had already given herself away. At this critical moment, it was not appropriate to hide anything. Even if her identity as Sisi from the Thieves Guild were exposed, what difference would it really make?

Seeing no particular reaction from Zhao Changhe, Sisi wondered if he had already guessed who she was a while back. Perhaps he had suspicions from before, like from the bath, the teasing, and her foolish “servicing,” as well as from Dragon Bird’s reaction.

Blushing deeply from the embarrassment, Sisi decided to drop the act and directly applied makeup to her face until she resembled the maid she had knocked unconscious.

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Sisi urged, “What are you looking at? You already know, so what am I supposed to do? I also want to see what the Lu Clan is hiding.”

Zhao Changhe was stunned for a moment. “You’re going in too? It’s very dangerous.”

Sisi hesitated as if she had not even considered the possibility of not going in. After a moment, she scratched her head and said, “I want to go in and have a look...”

Zhao Changhe glanced at her thoughtfully and simply said, “Alright.”

They both averted their gazes from each other, then almost simultaneously leaped out the window, returning to the foot of the hill.

Zhao Changhe walked up confidently, and immediately, a guard stepped forward to intercept him, “Stop! This is the forbidden area... Huh? Second young master? Didn’t you head to the Tang Clan with the rest?”

Zhao Changhe stared at the guard’s eyes, his gaze rippling with hidden meanings, “Father asked me to come back and fetch something.”

Zhao Changhe had only learned the spiritual illusion arts contained in the Pure Bliss Art but had never actually used it on others. Now, using them for the first time, he felt a slight dizziness. He felt

that the power involved was very different from the internal and external systems he was used to. Strangely, it resembled the spiritual will he had when combating the vicious qi-induced madness.

However, this was not the time to dwell on such matters. At this moment, he just had to worry about the skill being enough to affect ordinary guards. Clearly, there were no actual strong individuals left here. They had all been dispatched to the Tang Clan. The remaining guards seemed even more confused than him. “Second young master, you can’t bring a maid in when fetching something...”

“Who says that I can’t take advantage of this time and play with a maid while I’m at it?” Zhao Changhe simply hugged Sisi and gave her a playful squeeze. “Come on, we’ll be out soon. Who cares about these things during such critical times?”

Normally, such a request should not have been entertained, but under the influence of the spiritual illusion arts, the guards relented. One of them merely rolled his eyes and turned to open the stone door, muttering to himself, “Who actually says that out loud in public? Isn’t it humiliating to let others know how fast you are...”

There was more than one guard present, and they were all secretly laughing at him. Zhao Changhe remained composed, still holding the smiling Sisi as they strode through the entrance

The stone door quickly closed behind him, and there was a soft light in front of them guiding their path forward. It was unknown where exactly the passage led.

Despite the absence of any sound, Zhao Changhe still tensed his muscles and let go of Sisi, reaching for the hilt of his saber.

Sisi, too preoccupied to tease him about being hugged and squeezed, urgently whispered, “Do you sense anything? Is there vicious qi here?”

“No... It would be better if there was. Everything would be clear then—the Lu Clan hiding vicious qi and attempting to frame the Tang Clan,” Zhao Changhe’s expression was grave as he whispered. “But the absence of vicious qi makes this much trickier. We have no idea what the Lu Clan is guarding. Going further in may lead us into a tiger’s den. Are you still willing to go?”

Sisi looked at his side profile, and her tone became calm, “You’re willing to risk it for the sake of camaraderie. Why would I not be willing?”



## Chapter 149: Lu Clan Forbidden Area

The two of them stopped talking and slowly walked further inside.

Zhao Changhe carefully observed the walls on both sides of the passage, coming to judge that they had been carved out many years ago. This meant that this passage was not a recent development, but, at the same time, it didn't seem like it had been dug out as far back as the previous era.

Sisi also observed the surroundings. She seemed to be much more knowledgeable when it came to judging these things than Zhao Changhe. As she scrutinized the walls, she furrowed her brow and commented, "This passage should have been excavated nearly a century ago, with signs of recent expansion. It seems that the Lu Clan has been continuously exploring the secrets here, perhaps ever since the founding of their clan, with each generation picking up from where the last left off."

Zhao Changhe was stunned. "Why don't I seem to see any new marks?"

"Here," Sisi stretched out her hand and lightly tapped a spot on the right wall, and then she gave it a gentle push. To their surprise, that section of the wall could actually be pushed open.

But then, both of them immediately covered their noses and backed away, their eyes widening in unison.

Behind the wall lay corpses too many to count, strewn about in disarray. Among them were garments that had yet to decay, revealing that they were common artisans and laborers.

"It looks like they hired workers to dig out this passage, then killed them all to prevent any leaks..." Zhao Changhe quickly deduced, his expression turning grim.

As frivolous as the Tang Clan may be, they held nowhere near this level of cruelty. They were actually much more endearing and compassionate compared to "noble" clans like the Lu clan.

The two silently closed the stone wall and continued walking further in.

The journey was long, and they did not reach the end of the tunnel even after walking for quite some time. This tunnel was far longer than the underground passage in the White Lotus Temple. In the end, while that secret passage had only been dug out in recent years, this tunnel had been subject to generations of exploration by a large clan for nearly a century.

Along the way, they came across many alternate paths that were clearly the wrong way. It was evident that these were the wrong paths as they had clearly been abandoned after the correct path was found. The correct path was paved with stone bricks and illuminated by bright pearls, while the alternate paths were dark and filled with cobwebs.

This actually made their exploration of this tunnel far easier, as they did not need to navigate through its entirety.

Furthermore, they even saw some stone houses further ahead. There were traces of people having stayed and cultivated there. However, at the moment, they were not there, presumably having gone to the Tang Clan... which also made it easier for the two of them to explore the tunnel.

The more Sisi saw, the more impressed she was by Zhao Changhe's deductions. On ordinary days, it would have been nearly impossible to make it through this place, but right now was an opportune moment. The Lu Clan had long since been plotting to deal with the Tang Clan. It appeared that they were mobilizing all of their forces to achieve a decisive victory at this moment, but they had probably never anticipated that a third party would sneak up behind their backs out of nowhere.

Their footsteps naturally slowed down as they made it further and further into the tunnel. The presence of the stone houses used for cultivation indicated that the core area was nearby and that there were likely benefits that could be gained from it. Otherwise, why would the members of the Lu Clan go all this way to cultivate? It seemed that the answers they sought in this investigation would be soon right before their eyes.

Finally, as they made it past the last corner of the tunnel, they indeed came upon a small hall. When they cautiously took a peek inside, they saw a bearded old man with white hair. He was sitting cross-legged in the hall with his eyes closed as he meditated deeply. The entrance to the hall was to his side as he faced a wall.

What surprised the two of them was that there were no other passages in this hall. This was the end of their exploration of the tunnel, yet the wall the old man faced showed no signs of anything unusual. It was just an ordinary stone wall. On the contrary, there were strange marks resembling sword marks on the wall behind the old man.

This scene left the two of them confused. If the old man is comprehending some ancient sword marks, then shouldn't he be facing them? Why is his back faced toward the sword marks? Moreover, the sword marks appeared to be relatively new... Could these sword marks have been left by the old man himself?

Sisi whispered, “That old man is approaching death. He probably only has one or two months left to live.”

Zhao Changhe did not know how she could tell this, but before he could ask, his chest and back began to vibrate at the same time.

On his back, Dragon Bird was vibrating, alerting him of imminent danger.

As for the vibration on his chest, it was the golden foil, but what was it vibrating for?

Zhao Changhe did not have the time to think. Dragon Bird alerting him of danger was a serious matter. He immediately grabbed Sisi’s hand and swiftly charged... forward.

Sisi: “?”

Just as Zhao Changhe began his charge, the old man opened his eyes and said, “I did not expect that while I was trying to catch a cicada, there would be an oriole[1]. Well, since you’ve come, why rush to... Huh?”

Just as the light of a blade flashed right before his eyes, Dragon Bird was already barely three cun above his head...

The old man revealed an expression with a mix of anger and amusement. He gently stretched out his hand and lightly pat the side of the saber, effortlessly deflecting Zhao Changhe’s lightning-fast attack.

“I truly did not expect that, rather than escaping as soon as you realized I discovered you, you would actually attack!” the old man clicked his tongue. “Such bravery, yet still unknown in jianghu...”

Whoosh!

A dagger quietly stabbed toward the old man’s back.

The old man's wry smile became even more pronounced. While seemingly sitting still, his upper body slightly twisted, and Sisi's dagger went past him without even grazing him. She failed to even touch his clothes.

A gust of wind rose around his waist, and Zhao Changhe took the opportunity to unleash a horizontal slash.

Finally, the old man was unable to maintain his nonchalant demeanor. He pushed out on the saber with his right hand and stood up.

Zhao Changhe took a few steps back, his fierce eyes staring at the old man unwaveringly. He then assumed a stance indicating his readiness to continue attacking without fear.

The old man sighed, "Such a figure... wearing the clothes of my family's descendants, yet unfortunately not one of our own... A pity, a pity indeed."

Zhao Changhe also said, "I could say the same to you. You definitely possess the strength to be on Ranking of Man, yet you have hidden it so well that you don't even seem to be on the Tome of Troubled Times."

The old man said calmly, "The Tome of Troubled Times ultimately recognizes figures based on their achievements... In fact, I have not fought anyone in a long time, and I don't even know myself if I possess strength that would merit a place on the Ranking of Man. How did you make your judgment?"

Zhao Changhe did not answer. Isn't it obvious? Yue Hongling and Chi Li definitely belong at the bottom of that Ranking of Man at the moment. Even if there was a slight difference, it would not be much. I'm not sure if they would be able to handle my strikes so effortlessly, but I have never really fought them for real, so it's hard to judge. Anyway, you are definitely on that level, perhaps even slightly higher.

Fortunately, he did not feel the same unavoidable sensation that he experienced with Tang Wanzhuang's attack back then. Otherwise, that meant that this old man might even be on par with those on the Ranking of Earth. At that point, he should just accept his death.

But even if the old man was at the level of someone at the bottom of the Ranking of Man, it was not something that Zhao Changhe could handle at the moment. However, he surprisingly found that he felt no fear at the moment at all. Instead, his mind was even clearer than ever before.

He slowly said, “Your family is doing something big, yet despite possessing such strength, you’re actually not participating. Are you not afraid of your family’s plans falling through and ultimately leading to your clan’s extermination?”

“Is that the reason you dare to come and explore this place?” the old man asked calmly. “Cult Leader Maitreya has arrived, and the Tang Clan is completely helpless against him. What else is there for me to do?”

Zhao Changhe’s heart skipped a beat, then he sneered, “But Tang Wanzhuang has also arrived, can Maitreya really defeat Tang Wanzhuang?” The old man’s expression changed slightly as he slowly said, “Thank you for informing me. Well then, I’ll just have to kill you two before heading to the Tang Clan.”

After saying that, he unsheathed his longsword.

Zhao Changhe suddenly burst out into laughter, “Stop bluffing, you definitely don’t have what it takes to participate in a fierce battle. You would probably be out of breath from just swinging your sword a few times. You only dare to act tough here. Otherwise, you would have killed us with a single strike long ago. Why bother spouting all this nonsense? I now understand why your family chose this time to launch their plan. It seems that it’s because you’re close to death...”

Whoosh!

The old man’s eyes flashed with ferocity as he stabbed directly at Zhao Changhe’s throat. “You don’t have what it takes to have a fierce battle with me!”

He was not bluffing this time. From just this single sword strike, Zhao Changhe could not see what he could do. He knew that no matter how he defended, this strike would pierce his throat.

However, he had no intention of defending against the strike in the first place.

Zhao Changhe grabbed Sisi’s hand and suddenly slammed into the stone wall the old man was facing. “But I know how to get you into a fierce battle!”

The stone wall that seemed to be a dead end suddenly rippled, and Zhao Changhe and Sisi disappeared at the same time.

The old man immediately became furious and anxious. He chased after them. “You’re dead!”

Light and shadows flickered, and dimensions shifted.

When their vision stabilized again, Zhao Changhe found himself inside an ancient and solemn tomb, with passages extending in all directions, exuding a myriad of auras.

The aura belonging to the previous era enveloped him once again.

There had to be a reason for the vibration of the golden foil. By combining various conjectures about cause and effect, the most likely conclusion he came to was that the stone wall the old man was facing led to a different dimension, and the sword marks on the wall behind him were caused by the sword qi that escaped from that space.

Zhao Changhe guessed correctly.

Before they could fully discern their surroundings, they were engulfed by sword qi and vicious qi. The fierce killing intent was a hundred times more terrifying than what they had felt in front of the old man.

In Sisi’s mind, a word she knew previously emerged: Sword Emperor.

This is the tomb of the Sword Emperor!

It wasn’t beneath the Tiger Hill Sword Pond, but within the Lu Clan’s territory?

But looking at Zhao Changhe’s expression, it’s as if he anticipated all of this... Did he guess all of this beforehand?

## Chapter 150: Detective Changhe

Unlike the conventional sword qi of regular cultivators, the sword qi here was incredibly sinister and bloodthirsty. It was to the point where the bloodthirst was tangible. It was as if merely touching

it would cause the bloodthirst to possess one's body and turn them mad. Sisi was immediately reminded of Lu Shaoxiong, who was bound by iron chains in the Tranquility Hall.

On the ground, one could even see skeletons and corpses lying around. It seemed that they were members of the Lu Clan who had entered and were killed by the sword qi here.

Sisi turned around and looked back. There was no sign of the way they came, only the roaring old man chasing after them, shouting fiercely, "You think you can hide from me by coming in here? Little do you know that once you come in here, you're trapped here forever! I only have a month left to live, so death is certain for me. But what about you? Haha... Hahaha!"

Whoosh!

Several streams of sword qi struck, and the old man's laughter ceased as he swung his sword to deflect the sword qi. However, rather than deflecting it at the two of them, the old man deflected the sword qi in a completely different direction.

It was like a bizarre drama that left everyone scratching their heads.

"Is this your idea of getting him into a fierce battle?" Sisi asked in confusion. "If we're all in this harsh environment, that old man will definitely have an easier time than us. And if he's fine, then we'll end up dying first... But why isn't he chasing after us anymore?"

Zhao Changhe dodged left and right to avoid the sword qi and replied urgently, "If your judgment about his lifespan is correct, then he'll inevitably weaken after fighting for a period of time. We're all still mortal. How can a person who is close to death maintain their peak combat strength for an extended period of time? It's simply impossible, at least until we become immortal cultivators!"

"So, all we need to do is stall and the harsh environment will eventually kill him?"

"Not only that, he must be guarding this place for a reason. He must be waiting for a signal. There has to be something that he has to attend to, and he can't afford to delay. Once he comes in, he knows that we can't leave, so he will naturally conserve his strength against the sword qi and go where he needs to. It's easy to understand." Zhao Changhe said hurriedly, "You seem to have some know-how when it comes to geomancy. Can you find a relatively safe place for us for the time being... Watch out!"

Dragon Bird swiftly cut through the air behind Sisi, blocking a stream of sword qi.

Sisi did not bother asking about whether or not they could go out for the time being. She quickly ducked to avoid another stream of sword qi and suddenly dashed to the right, heading toward a corridor where the sword qi seemed to be more concentrated. “Follow me.”

Swish, swish, swish!

Countless streams of sword qi pierced through the air. Sisi swiftly rolled on the ground, narrowly avoiding the sword qi that grazed her back and landed behind her.

Meanwhile, loud clinking sounds came from behind her as Zhao Changhe wildly swung Dragon Bird, directly resisting the rampant sword qi.

Clang!

A particularly powerful stream of sword qi shot toward Zhao Changhe. He repositioned himself perfectly to block it with his saber and have himself be sent flying backward toward where Sisi was.

Sisi pulled his waistband from behind and gave a strong tug, flinging him forward. Then, she darted ahead with astonishing speed, passing beneath him as he was still airborne. Her speed far surpassed Zhao Changhe’s even when he was using his movement art.

Zhao Changhe found himself awkwardly fending off several streams of sword qi mid-air, feeling amused and exasperated.

——Heh, it looks like she wants to show off a bit. It seems like she doesn’t want to look like dead weight, perhaps she even wants to come off as the main force! Well, she does understand a bit of geomancy.

“This way!” Sisi reached out to grab his waistband again and forcefully hurled him sideways into the corridor.

Zhao Changhe: “...”



He could only manage to protect his face with Dragon Bird before he was thrown against the wall with a resounding clang.

There was actually another passage behind the wall. It was unknown where it led, but the sword qi seemed significantly weaker here.

The two looked at each other, panting heavily. Sisi, despite her confusion, realized that she did not need to ask any more questions because everything became clear to her in that moment.

The entrance could indeed be considered a one-way passage. Once you entered through it, you could not exit. After pondering over the old man's words for a short while, Sisi quickly grasped the whole situation.

Due to the collapse of the dimension, the imperial tomb was indeed at the bottom of the sword pond, hidden in a separate space. However, its entrance had ended up in a completely different place.

That was why the Tang Clan could never find anything despite having searched the Tiger Hill Sword Pond for so long. It was because while the imperial tomb was indeed at the bottom of the sword pond, its entrance had never been there at all. Instead, the "teleportation array" was at the Lu Clan in the southern part of the city.

However, this array was a one-way road. Once you entered, you could only wander inside for the rest of your life, trapped inside forever. And even if they somehow managed to make it out of this dimension, the corresponding exit would be the Tiger Hill Sword Pond!

The Lu Clan had found the entrance, but never the exit. They lacked the ability to break out of the dimensional space, so they could neither return to the Lu Clan nor exit through the sword pond.

So, they had no choice but to build stone houses right outside in order to scratch the itch born from their curiosity. They attempted to comprehend the sword intent within the Sword Emperor's tomb, but unfortunately, their gains were shallow and practically useless. They guarded a treasure mountain in vain, gaining basically nothing.

As time passed, perhaps due to the continuous deaths of the members of the Lu Clan who went in or the slaughter of too many workers outside, or perhaps simply because of the passage of time...in any case, the reason was unclear, but something had definitely happened here. The vicious qi had grown

thicker and the sword qi had uncontrollably rushed out. It had begun to break out of the space, no longer confined to merely within the separate dimensional space.

The sword marks on the wall where the old man had stood served as evidence of this.

Zhao Changhe knew that Sisi was actually very smart and should have already guessed the whole story, so he said, "I figured it out earlier than you not because I'm smart, but because I understand Dragon Bird better."

Sisi nodded and asked, "Can you elaborate?"

"When I met Lu Shaoxiong, Dragon Bird went berserk. I was always puzzled by this because it should not have such a reaction to vicious qi. To Dragon Bird, vicious qi is just a low-level nuisance. After much thought, I came to the conclusion that the only thing in Gusu that could trigger Dragon Bird to move on its own was the legendary Sword Emperor. After all, swords and sabers have always been archenemies. This was the only explanation I could find for Dragon Bird's excitement"

Dragon Bird shook with joy.

Sisi gritted her teeth. Bullshit! How can you say that Dragon Bird only reacts to something of that caliber when it literally tried to slap me?

Zhao Changhe cleared his throat and said, "So Lu Shaoxiong did not actually get tainted after killing someone with vicious qi. He was probably simply struck by the sword qi from the forbidden area. Although the sword qi carries a strong vicious qi, his spirit was not actually invaded by it. The sword qi simply does not have that effect. His crazed appearance was completely an act. The broken iron chains prove that his parents never actually wanted to lock him up. Those chains were just for show. Why would someone pretending to be crazy behave obediently and let themselves be tied up? This only proves that he has not actually gone mad at all."

Sisi said, "So Dragon Bird wanted to chop him up, and he did not know where he had gone wrong, so he decided to put on an even more violent appearance to try and cover it all up? As a result, he accidentally revealed the fact that the iron chains were fake?"

"That's about it."

“But why would he pretend to be a madman?”

“Since the sword qi here has begun to spread outward, the Lu Clan will be unable to stay here sooner or later. Furthermore, they won’t be able to keep the secret either. Their only option is to shift the blame. Isn’t the Tang Clan’s sword pond the perfect scapegoat? If they can overthrow the Tang Clan through this incident, not only can they take the Tang Clan’s position in Gusu, but they can also occupy the sword pond, accomplishing their century-old goal.”

“So they staged a good show, bribing an ignorant person from the jianghu to pretend to go mad and attack people. Then, Lu Shaoxiong just so happened to pass by and directly killed that person, which then allowed them to make it seem like he had been tainted by vicious qi.” Sisi sighed. “So the first victim did not even know that the young master of the Lu Clan would kill him.”

“Yep. When I examined the corpse, I found no traces of vicious qi on their body. As such, I suspected that the vicious qi on Lu Shaoxiong was acquired first-hand. As for the third young master of the Gu Clan, he was likely tricked to visit Lu Shaoxiong, only to be secretly invaded by his vicious qi. After all, what kind of resistance can these dandy young masters possibly have against such energies? Once they’re tainted by a bit of vicious qi, they quickly fall ill. The Lu Clan then simply used this to create a false impression and guide the major families into looking for trouble with the Tang Clan. However, the illness that befell the third young master of the Gu Clan is actually nothing serious. It would soon dissipate on its own. That is why they had to act quickly and launch their attack in just one or two days.”

Sisi said, “But if they wanted to transmit vicious qi to the Third Young Master Gu and the others to incite a siege on the Tang Clan, they could have started days earlier. Why wait until after you arrive and solve the case?”

“You’re thinking too much. How can they possibly take me seriously? They never planned on taking on the Tang Clan by themselves. They must be colluding with the Maitreya Cult, and they were simply waiting for Maitreya to arrive before launching their attack,” Zhao Changhe said softly. “If that old man wasn’t bluffing just now, then Maitreya should be at the Tang Clan right now. Let’s just hope that the Tang Clan can handle it.”

Sisi sighed with relief, her face filled with the satisfaction of solving the case. The exhilaration from resolving such matters was no less than when winning a fight. It was very satisfying.

Despite the urgency of the situation, her tone became lighter, “So what are we going to do now?”

“The old man knows that he doesn’t have much time left, so he never intended to leave this place once he came in. They have been exploring for a long time, so they must have some way to make the vicious qi in this place overflow into the Tang Clan’s sword pond. Our mission is to stop him. Otherwise, if the vicious qi does surge, Gusu will fall!” Zhao Changhe glanced outside and spoke with urgency. “That old man has been wandering in that area filled with sword qi for quite some time now. He should be on his last breath now. As long as we know where he is, I’m confident in dealing with him.”

Sisi revealed a smile. “That’s easy. I know where he is.”