

T. Times 246

Chapter 246: Just You and Me

I used to think that I was teasing the little serpent, but now I realize that I've been getting toyed with by a thousand-year-old serpent demon all along.

Seeing her look at him as if she was playing with a child, Zhao Changhe finally sighed, "Big Sis Piggy..."

Huangfu Qing replied lazily, "What is it?"

She actually did not mind the nickname anymore.

Zhao Changhe continued, "You said before that the venerable would not give someone as valuable as you to someone else to play with, right?"

"Right."

"But you've also been explaining to me that your status as the imperial noble consort isn't actually real... So, does that mean that we shouldn't really care about what the venerable thinks? Does your identity not matter at all, and it all just depends on how we perceive it ourselves?"

Huangfu Qing blinked her eyes, and her smile became even more charming, "Your reasoning does seem to have some sense to it."

In fact, it had more than just some sense to it...

Why would she bother explaining the secrets pertaining to the imperial noble consort to him when he had not even joined the cult yet? This was originally a major secret of the cult. If it were not for the fact that she herself was Vermillion Bird, if it were instead the real Fire Serpent of Yi before him, she would not even have the right to decide to reveal such a secret. She would first have to report and request for permission.

Was this hurried explanation that she had given him because she was afraid that they would become distant and she would no longer be able to enjoy their adorable interactions when they had their pig masks on?

Huangfu Qing knew that the period when she laughed most freely and joyfully truly was when she was wearing the pig mask. It was then that she had been the most relaxed in her life. She did not want it to end like this, turning into a relationship that treaded on thin ice.

She felt like that would be a real shame.

But then Zhao Changhe sighed, “Now I understand why the imperial noble consort could leave the palace for so long... Originally, I thought that you were in such a hurry to come back because you were afraid that there would be a mess in the capital should it be found out that you were missing. But now it seems that nobody in the palace can control you at all. Whether you’re there or not doesn’t really matter. It’s just that you don’t want to be away for too long because you have important matters to deal with in the palace. Having been gone during these two months could mean missing out on a lot of key information...”

Huangfu Qing was taken aback. How did the conversation suddenly end up here? “That’s right. I can leave at any time, but it’s indeed not advisable to be away for too long.”

“But I’ll be leaving soon, are you sure you want to continue following me?”

Huangfu Qing was silent.

It was very important to observe what was going on in the palace. But observing the peculiar star chart that Zhao Changhe had shown was no less important. In a sense, it might even be more important....

Zhao Changhe continued, "You followed me originally to figure out the secret of my star chart, right?"

"Mm-hm..."

"I think following me won't help with that. Even I don't really know what's going on with it myself, so it's likely a waste of time for you to follow me for a year or two just because of that. How about this? I promise you that if I do figure it out, I'll tell you everything without reservation. What do you think?"

Although it seemed like a considerate gesture, Huangfu Qing's eyes once again flashed with the fierceness typical of Vermillion Bird. "You're tired of me, aren't you?"

"No, I just don't want you to follow me for that reason. Just like how I don't want to keep feeling a sense of yearning because of the thought of the venerable seemingly giving you to me," Zhao Changhe said seriously. "I can go back to being Zhao Changhe, and you can stay as Huangfu Qing..."

Huangfu Qing interrupted, "Childish."

Many things required one to make an excuse, and that excuse was used as a step to convince oneself. When that step was removed, one would find themselves experiencing a turbulent heart—what Zhao Changhe would term "cognitive dissonance," though she had no way of knowing those words.

Just like how she could freely laugh when wearing the pig mask, even though she was still herself underneath.

“Childish?” Zhao Changhe walked to the balcony, leaning on the railing to gaze at the rain falling into the lake outside. He spoke softly, “In fact, there’s not much of a difference. If you need an excuse to stay with me, I can give you one.”

Huangfu Qing’s interest was piqued. “Oh?”

“For example, as the imperial noble consort, you can support me as the prince and openly compete with Empress Wang. This kind of relationship is more straightforward and aboveboard. You can openly state your intentions to your brother, and I can do the same with First Seat Tang. I would not even need to reside in this secret residence of the Four Idols Cult. I could openly stay at the residence of your Huangfu Clan.”

Huangfu Qing smiled slightly and said, “But the premise for doing this is the prince becoming one of us... a member of the Four Idols Cult.”

“Won’t it be enough to have an alliance?”

“No.”

“I really don’t believe that to be the case. Ask Venerable Vermillion Bird.”

Huangfu Qing wanted to say that there was no need to ask, but then she just closed her mouth and smiled instead.

“It is not impossible for me to join the Four Idols Cult, but perhaps even Venerable Vermillion Bird can’t make up her mind right now. She likely still has to discuss it with Venerable Black Tortoise. After all, cults are different from sects, and my situation is too special”

“True.”

“If Venerable Black Tortoise also agrees, and I join the cult, becoming the Fire Pig of Shi or something like that, then we can openly be together. Would there be any problem with that at that time?”

After pondering for a moment, Huangfu Qing realized that there indeed was no problem with his words. The only issue was that the White Tiger Saintess might want to beat him to death.

Zhao Changhe turned his head and smiled brilliantly. “See, there are ways for us to be together everywhere you look!”

Huangfu Qing was no longer angry now. She asked curiously, “Why bother with such trivialities? Does it even really matter?”

“Because my purpose in coming to the capital was simply to understand the emperor’s situation, and now I’ve pretty much already gotten what I wanted. I don’t think I can uncover any deeper insights at the moment. I’ve made some big movements in the capital, and even if there were no reactions before, there should be some now. I should leave before they make a move. I especially need to be wary of the empress. I’m afraid that I won’t be able to handle things if she gets serious.”

Huangfu Qing smirked inwardly. Everyone thought that you came here to stir trouble, but it turns out that you just want to run away after causing some noise!

Zhao Changhe continued, “So I’m leaving. Will you come with me right away? Wouldn’t it be a bit awkward? Actually, there really is no need for you to follow me. Compared to the star chart and such, I’d rather you continue to figure out what’s going on with the emperor.”

Huangfu Qing chuckled, “The way you say it, you sound just like Venerable Vermillion Bird, assigning me missions and all.”

“Just do whatever you want. There’s no need to be tied down by the excuse of figuring out the explanation behind my star chart. I’ll just let you know once I’ve figured it out myself. There’s

no need for you to waste your energy.” Zhao Changhe winked. “Saying I’m giving you missions is like saying I care about you...”

“Tsk, spare me your attempts. Save those for Tang Wanzhuang instead. She’s the one who needs someone to care for her.”

Ignoring her comment, Zhao Changhe continued, “There’s another reason that I’m leaving, and I don’t know if you want to hear it.”

Huangfu Qing smiled and said, “Go ahead.”

“It’s because if I leave, then the mission Vermillion Bird assigned to you for you to accompany me will be rendered meaningless. In other words, it would just be me and you. This way, I can be sure that when you flirt with me, it’s not because Venerable Vermillion Bird told you to, but it’s because it’s your own intention. I don’t care if you call me childish, but I consider this very important!”

Huangfu Qing blinked rapidly three or four times.

So much for not being childish.

Certain things require the right atmosphere, but you’ve laid it all out so plainly that the atmosphere is all gone.

What’s the point of flirting with you now? With your approach, it’s no wonder you haven’t had many romantic encounters! It’s clear that you haven’t figured a lot of this stuff out yet!

As they exchanged glances, the atmosphere became unbearably awkward, with both of them wearing expressionless faces.

Zhao Changhe realized that not only was the other party not flirting with him anymore, but he could not even bring himself to say anything flirtatious now. The natural atmosphere they had before was now completely gone.

Sure enough, there were some things that could not just be laid out so plainly.

Huangfu Qing sighed, shaking her head as she turned around to go back inside. “I thought you were smart, but it turns out you’re just a fool...”

Before she finished speaking, the wind started blowing on the lake.

A fairy descended from the moon, dancing across the waves.

Seeing Zhao Changhe standing on the balcony, leaning on the railing and looking at the lake, Tang Wanzhuang breathed a sigh of relief and transmitted a message from afar. “That woman is full of secrets. No matter what promises she makes to you, don’t take them lightly...”

Before she could finish speaking, Huangfu Qing, who had been about to leave, suddenly stopped in her tracks. Instead, she gracefully wrapped her arms around Zhao Changhe’s neck, as if she was about to kiss him.

Tang Wanzhuang’s eyes widened. “You witch, let him go!”

Swish!

Spring water sword light shot straight toward them.

Huangfu Qing was, who had only been making a gesture to kiss him and had not actually done it, swiftly dodged the attack with a smile. “Oh, it’s the pure and virtuous First Seat Tang! What, did you come here to steal a man?”

Zhao Changhe’s face twitched, and he was left speechless.

It turned out that if the atmosphere was lost, it did not need to be meticulously recreated. There was no need to rack one’s brains on how to fix what was broken; sometimes, all it took was a new atmosphere.

Chapter 247: Walking in the Rain

Tang Wanzhuang treaded the water, gracefully making her way to the balcony.

Amidst the pouring rain, a faint mist enveloped her body, yet not even a single drop of water touched her. The mist scattered around her, resulting in her looking like a fairy moving on a cloud with ribbons fluttering behind her. Her beauty was beyond comparison.

Vermillion Bird could not help but feel irritated, yet she had to admit that the annoying woman before her really did look beautiful at the moment.

Think back to when we were teenagers, we were always like queen bees followed by a swarm of bees. I was hailed as the most beautiful in the capital, but weren’t there even more bees buzzing around you back then?

Do men just prefer to follow fairies?

Unfortunately, most of the men in our generation are worthless. Otherwise, why hasn’t any of them been able to take her to the bridal chambers?

One glance at the Rankings of Heaven and Earth made it clear that the men ranked around them were almost all middle-aged. It was hard to find anyone from their generation at all; there was hardly anyone among their peers who could match them. Both of them have secretly been competing against each other in various ways, such as who would be willing to start a relationship with a weaker party first, or find someone from the older generation only to be laughed at by the other for the rest of their lives.

After all these years of turmoil, both of them remained single. It was hard to tell how much of it was due to their own pride, and how much of it was because of their silent rivalry.

But for the sake of the bigger picture, she had to concede first. The fact that she had entered the palace to be the imperial noble consort, no matter how superficial, must have made Tang Wanzhuang laugh herself numb in secret...

As these thoughts raced through her mind, Tang Wanzhuang had already stepped onto the balcony, swiftly positioning herself between Huangfu Qing and Zhao Changhe, and urgently said, "Don't think that just because she's the imperial noble consort, she can just cooperate with anyone politically. This woman would never marry the emperor; she must have a hidden agenda! Come back with me!"

At this moment, Huangfu Qing simply was not sure what to feel.

However, there was a slight smile on her face. "Hah... Who are you to him? And who is he to you? What do you mean by telling him to come back with you?"

Facing Huangfu Qing, Tang Wanzhuang's expression was very calm. "He is Buqi's friend and a guest of mine."

"You're the inheritor of the Azure Waves Clear Ripples and the Water Treading Art," Huangfu Qing continued. "It seems that your ambitions aren't shallow. Are you aiming to perhaps become the imperial tutor? Or perhaps even the empress?"

Tang Wanzhuang's face remained expressionless. "Whatever it may be, it's much better than some people who, despite being married, still engage in intimate behavior with others. Huangfu Qing, have you no shame?"

"What's there to be ashamed of?" Huangfu Qing said leisurely. "There's no way you never suspected that I might be a witch of the Four Idols Cult. I just wonder, have you ever told him this?"

Tang Wanzhuang was stunned. She really had never told Zhao Changhe this.

This was because she always felt that if Zhao Changhe knew that Huangfu Qing was from the Four Idols Cult, he would get even closer to her, if anything, and she did not want to see that happen.

It was not out of jealousy. Instead, it was because she always felt that Huangfu Qing was shrouded in mystery and that she was dealing with matters that were too weighty. At the very least, they were matters that Zhao Changhe could not possibly handle the way he was now.

You've got some nerve to dare get so close to her, and it even looks like you dare to kiss her!

Seeing her seemingly admitting defeat, Huangfu Qing giggled happily, "The holy cult wants to recruit Zhao Changhe. While the saintess is unsuitable for a task such as this, there's nothing stopping me from taking it on. Anyway, I'm already married, unlike some people who pretend to be pure all day. If you've got the guts, why don't you make a move on him too?"

Zhao Changhe could not even muster a thought, let alone say anything.

Unable to compete with the shameless witch, Tang Wanzhuang simply ignored Huangfu Qing and glared at Zhao Changhe. "Does her identity excite you more? Do you want to die?"

Huangfu Qing sneered, "What, are you going to openly have a man stay at your place overnight? You used to care so much about reputation, but now that suddenly doesn't matter anymore?"

Tang Wanzhuang said calmly, "Duty matters more than personal reputation."

Zhao Changhe, who did not know what to say throughout the exchange, finally sighed and interrupted Huangfu Qing, who was about to make another sarcastic remark, "Alright... I'll go with you."

Huangfu Qing closed her mouth and watched Tang Wanzhuang relax completely. She could sense the radiance emanating from her as she smiled as if a burden had been lifted off of her shoulders.

Huangfu Qing crossed her arms and looked sideways. At this moment, she did not feel any displeasure about losing to Tang Wanzhuang in this round. Because despite their seemingly trivial conversation just now, they had already exchanged the necessary information, and even discussed some of their next plans. Zhao Changhe would likely leave during the night, and she would not be following him anymore. So why cling to him any further? It was simply not worth the time, as they had agreed upon earlier.

Anyway, he doesn't have much of an inclination for romance. His attempt to move the conversation to serious matters really ruined the pleasant atmosphere. What a terribly boring man.

He probably still has some things to say to Tang Wanzhuang, but I don't know what it will be.

Come to think of it, it seems that Tang Wanzhuang is the most confused and pitiful one. Despite being the chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau, she might not even have as much information as Zhao Changhe, and he just arrived in the capital.

She has been desperately trying to maintain this empire, yet the empire barely gives her anything back in return. It's as if the whole world is antagonizing her.

Huangfu Qing could tell that Zhao Changhe held sympathy for Tang Wanzhuang.

Sympathy for a woman who is countless times stronger than him...

“Pah, she's such a strong woman, why is she pretending to be weak? How shameless!”
Huangfu Qing angrily kicked the bathtub in the room, then suddenly burst into laughter.

Zhao Changhe had been wanting to bathe since earlier, but ended up not being able to bathe anywhere.

Surely, he wouldn't take a bath together with Tang Wanzhuang, would he?

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Zhao Changhe had gone drinking and caused some trouble, made a name for himself in the capital, and visited a gambling den and lakeside hideout of a cult. Many things had happened, yet in reality, it had only been two or three hours since he left the banquet hosted by Huangfu Shaozong. It was not even midnight yet.

The rainy night streets were deserted. Tang Wanzhuang held an oil-paper umbrella, quietly accompanying Zhao Changhe on their walk home.

There was a good height difference between them, and so she looked a bit strained as she raised the umbrella to cover them. It looked quite adorable. Zhao Changhe glanced at her and reached out to take the umbrella from her hands.

Tang Wanzhuang hesitated for a moment, but she ultimately let him take it.

The impression of who was taking care of whom suddenly reversed. If there were bystanders at this moment, they would have to admit that this scene looked more proper, a picture-perfect moment even.

However, in reality, Tang Wanzhuang's clothes were not wet and she did not actually need an umbrella.

They walked on the capital's pavement stones with their differing strides. Each of their steps was incredibly clear in the night, and they gradually synced up, forming a rhythm similar to a heartbeat.

"Have you noticed..." Tang Wanzhuang suddenly spoke, breaking the silence between them.

"Hm?" Zhao Changhe seemed to have just woken up from some deep contemplation.

"Huangfu Qing took you back, right? While you're still damp, she's dry."

"Can't those at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate not do this?"

"They can, but my instincts are telling me that her cultivation is higher than that. Back then, she was so talented and outstanding. How could she possibly be stuck at such a level without making any progress all these years?" Tang Wanzhuang said and sighed. "But as the imperial noble consort, she has not engaged in combat for years. No one knows her true strength. Only by confronting her directly would I really be able to find out, but it is simply inappropriate... The imperial noble consort is still the imperial noble consort. As a subject, I was already out of line earlier when I acted out of anger."

"Hm..."

“Speaking of which, I would also like to remind you that even the Tome of Troubled Times may not be entirely reliable. After all, it only reflects one’s achievements. There are many people without achievements who are still incredibly strong. When you encounter someone who is not on the rankings in the future, don’t act as arrogantly as you did in the restaurant today. Just because they aren’t on the rankings does not mean that they are weak.”

“Mm-hm. However, I believe that people without actual combat experience have limited strength. They’re the kind of people who can be challenged by even those with cultivation below theirs.”

“That is not necessarily the case,” Tang Wanzhuang whispered. “Anyway, speaking of Huangfu Qing... Regardless of her actual strength, it makes sense to assume that she is associated with the Four Idols Cult. Don’t trust the Four Idols Cult too much just because of your relationship with Xia Chichi. Xia Chichi is Xia Chichi, and the Four Idols Cult is the Four Idols Cult. Her personal relationship with you will not affect the cult’s inclinations. If Vermillion Bird wants to kill you, she won’t hesitate just because of Xia Chichi’s feelings for you.”

“I know.”

“Was there a reason you acted so arrogantly in the restaurant?”

“Yes, the bigger the disturbance I cause, the more Xia Longyuan is likely to notice. And if he notices, others will be less likely to act. What could have led to trouble when I came to the capital has simply disappeared just like that. Everything became simpler.”

“I’m afraid it’s more than that. You wanted His Majesty to meet with you, right? Unfortunately, it’s Empress Wang who summoned you.”

“Mm-hm...”

“Do you really dare to meet His Majesty? With your current attitude of calling him by name?”

“Well... I doubt he’d actually care. But now I’m even more afraid to see him. I learned some things at Anle Gambling House, and I feel that my previous assumptions were somewhat off. Now I think that it would be better not to rashly meet with him.”

Tang Wanzhuang did not ask him what he had learned in the gambling house, and just said, “It seems you understand His Majesty even better than I do.”

“Because you are his subject and I am not.”

“You have your own judgments. It seems I was too anxious. Did I disrupt your plans by pulling you away?”

“No, actually, I’ve already finished my business with the imperial noble consort. I’m glad that you were worried about me.”

Tang Wanzhuang fell silent.

The lanterns hanging from the buildings to their left and right swayed in the rain, casting long shadows of their figures on the long streets on this rainy night.

As they walked and talked, their tones were very calm. They chatted casually as if they were an old married couple taking a post-dinner stroll, and it all seemed so natural.

It was completely different from the interaction between Zhao Changhe and Huangfu Qing just now, and even different from the interactions between him and Tang Wanzhuang back in Gusu.

Zhao Changhe understood why there was such awkwardness between him and Huangfu Qing.

Besides lacking the sedimentation of time, they lacked sincerity and common interests.

“If you’re planning to leave, don’t go right away,” Tang Wanzhuang finally said. “Come and rest at my place first. I’ll arrange for some diversions for you by having it look like you’re leaving in different directions.”

“Afraid of the empress?”

“No...” Tang Wanzhuang’s voice was so soft that even she could barely hear it. “I’m afraid of His Majesty.”

Zhao Changhe suddenly felt that Tang Wanzhuang actually knew quite a lot. At the very least, he felt that she knew no less than the people in the gambling house. Unlike what Huangfu Qing said, it wasn’t that she was completely unaware.

She just did not want to know.

Chapter 248: Would You Like to Have a Drink With Me?

At Tang Wanzhuang’s home.

The guqin-carrying maid stood guard outside the guest room, her face blushing with embarrassment.

What just happened? The young lady brought home a man, who then went to take a bath while she quickly ran away. In the end, I’m the one who is left here to serve him. Thankfully, he looked disdainful of me and even drove me out. Otherwise, would I have had to serve him while he was taking a bath?

Wait, how dare that stinky bear look down on me? He hasn’t even compensated me for the time he broke the strings yet!

Tang Wanzhuang appeared in front of her. “Why are you standing here?”

The guqin-carrying maid murmured, “Didn’t you ask me to serve him?”

Tang Wanzhuang pinched her brow and said angrily, “I asked you to arrange for people to fetch him some water. After that, you can go and do whatever you want. What is going on in your head? It’s almost been an hour, do you think he’s pickling vegetables in the tub?”

“...I can soak in the tub for that long.”

“You’re just a pickled vegetable!” Tang Wanzhuang glanced at the door and lowered her voice with some anticipation. “Have you been standing outside all this time? Did you hear any music come from inside?”

“No,” The guqin-carrying maid said. “Miss, he’s just a stinky bear.”

Tang Wanzhuang explained to her, “This just isn’t the right time. No one would play the guqin at this time.”

The guqin-carrying maid looked at her sideways and said nothing.

Tang Wanzhuang coughed lightly and knocked on the door.

Zhao Changhe’s voice came from inside, “Come in.”

Tang Wanzhuang pushed open the door and saw Zhao Changhe sitting by the window in his robes, pen in hand, writing something.

Outside the window, rain whispers its tale; upon the table, a verdant lamp glows pale.

Clad in robes, a pen held with care; in the depths of night, to toil and dare.

Tang Wanzhuang's heart could not help but skip a beat, feeling like this scene was something that she had seen in her dreams. For some reason, it tugged at her heartstrings even more than when she thought he had been playing the guqin.

Unfortunately, instead of bringing him a bowl of hot soup, she was here to ask him when he was leaving.

"What are you writing?" she asked as she slowly approached, quietly taking a peek over his shoulder.

It turned out to be a manual.

"It's part of the agreement I had with Sisi. I have to continue providing her with manuals on the Sword Emperor's techniques. The last set of content I gave her was not much, it was only until the level of the Profound Mysteries. I feel like that won't be enough, so I'm preparing more," Zhao Changhe replied as he wrote. "We had an agreement, after all... I did not have a chance to write much during my travels, but seeing a pen and paper here reminded me of it."

Tang Wanzhuang subconsciously blurted out, "Is it because it's Sisi? What if it was a man instead?"

Zhao Changhe turned to look at her strangely. "When I made the appointment with Han Wubing, I traveled thousands of li while being hunted down to fulfill it. He is not a woman, yet I still went to such lengths. What does her being a woman have anything to do with my fulfillment of agreements?"

Tang Wanzhuang realized that she had lost her composure and quickly looked down at his writing. "I'm just saying. Hmm... Does this set reach the Profound Mysteries?"

"No, it's just another set at the same level. I also need to produce multiple different sets of techniques. After all, they're a group, not just one person."

"Hmm..." Tang Wanzhuang breathed a sigh of relief seeing that she had successfully averted the discussion.

In any case, Zhao Changhe did not have the inclination to talk much. He was rushing to finish this manual and then leave. It would not be good for him to delay his leave until dawn.

Tang Wanzhuang stood aside quietly by his side, just like in the past in Gusu, habitually reaching out to grind ink for him.

The lamplight flickered, while the room became quieter in the rain.

His calligraphy has been getting better and better. Although he has not gotten to practice much, the wild and sharp edges have become more restrained, and the weight and grandeur have become more prominent. Yet, upon closer inspection, there's still a hidden sharpness, ready to burst out of the paper at any moment.

His writing is just like him right now.

It was unclear how much time had passed, but the guqin-carrying maid's voice eventually came from outside the door. "Miss, Yang Yaowu and the others just came to report that they are all ready. At least eighteen Zhao Changhes are ready to go. Young Master Zhao's horse is also in the rear courtyard, ready to go at any time."

The tranquil night was suddenly shattered.

Zhao Changhe stopped writing, and Tang Wanzhuang came back to her senses.

The two looked at each other and smiled slightly.

“Alright,” Zhao Changhe handed over the manuscript. “I guess it’s time for me to say goodbye.”

Tang Wanzhuang felt slightly regretful in her heart and said softly, “Don’t be so reckless next time. Ultimately, it’s not the right time.”

“Mm. If I had your strength, I could flip the capital upside down. All these constraints are really annoying.” Zhao Changhe stood up, stretched, and suddenly smiled. “Coming to the capital, going to so many places in one night, I don’t really even know what I was doing... In the end, I found it most relaxing by your side, not having to think about anything else.”

Tang Wanzhuang rolled her eyes. “Weren’t you busily writing secret manuals?”

“Compared to everything else, this is as leisurely as it gets.” Zhao Changhe picked up the saber leaning against the table. “But actually, I don’t really want it to be like this.”

Tang Wanzhuang paused, “Huh?”

As Zhao Changhe turned to leave, he said, “Next time, I hope that when I’m around, you don’t have to think about anything.”

Tang Wanzhuang watched his departing figure intently, neither seeing him off nor saying anything.

He had always been doing this—setting an example with his actions just to spare a few extra worries for someone.

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As if by the will of the heavens, when Zhao Changhe rode away from Tang Wanzhuang's home, the heavy rain that had been pouring suddenly stopped, leaving only a light drizzle, as if bidding him farewell.

At the same time, the sound of horse hooves rose loudly as eighteen other Zhao Changhes scattered in all directions. Eighteen identical horses, eighteen identical sabers, almost indistinguishable from one another, exited through the four gates of the capital, moving toward various directions.

Tang Wanzhuang suppressed the urge to climb up to a high vantage point and watch him leave, fearing that her gaze might inadvertently reveal the real Zhao Changhe.

Meanwhile, Huangfu Qing stood on high ground with great interest, scanning the scattered Zhao Changhes as if testing to see whether she could recognize him among any of them.

Her gaze ultimately settled on the figure heading south. He was quite easy to recognize, actually. It would have been difficult to find so many white-socked black horses in such a short time. Most of the horses they used simply had the areas around their hooves painted white, and it was impossible to completely disguise a person's face to look exactly like Zhao Changhe's. Of course, at a glance, it was hard to tell the difference, but it failed to stump Huangfu Qing, who was well-prepared.

Hah, that guy still deliberately headed south, when he could have just gone through the west or north gates. Heading south will require him to take a detour. Well, I guess this is to be expected of him.

Watching his departing figure, Huangfu Qing sighed softly.

This trip to the capital had completely deviated from her expectations. In fact, the whole situation completely deviated from expectations. The original plan was for her to sneak in quietly, silently take care of palace affairs, visit her brother, and then leave the capital again. She would then accompany him as he headed to the Grasslands.

However, his cover had been blown at the city, causing a stir. He could not hide, and he did not want to hide. Everywhere he went felt like a rush, and he could not accomplish anything. And since he left the capital at night like this, it would be inconvenient for her to accompany him again. She had just returned, and there was still a lot of unfinished business for her to attend to.

Although she knew that he was right, and it was right not to follow him anymore, Huangfu Qing still felt somewhat regretful.

She had been the one to lead him to the capital, but it was not the right time. Perhaps if they had not gone to the capital so soon, she could have enjoyed more carefree moments like back in Sword Lake City, heading north together with him with ease and freedom.

His figure soon could no longer be seen from the city. Huangfu Qing took out the pig mask, her delicate hand trembling slightly as if she wanted to crush it.

However, her hand remained stiff, and after a while, she put it back in her pocket.

One of her trusted aides whispered, "Your Majesty, a letter from the Grasslands."

"Hm?"

"Venerable Black Tortoise said that he's received the message. If he goes to the Grassland, the venerable will contact him."

“That’s good.” Huangfu Qing extended her delicate hand to catch the drizzle. Suddenly, she whispered softly, “He’s still not strong enough... His boldness is just a façade. Inwardly, he’s weak, unable to withstand the storm. I wonder, when he breaks through the Profound Gate, unlocks the Profound Mysteries, and returns to the capital, what storms will he face?”

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe arrived at the southern outskirts of the capital in the light drizzle, about ten li away.

The sky was already beginning to brighten. There was a pavilion at the ten-li mark, with a postal station nearby. Outside the station, there was a breakfast stall where people were eating porridge and steamed buns in small groups.

Zhao Changhe dismounted and decided to have some breakfast before continuing on his journey.

As soon as he got to the stall, a skinny old man caught his eye.

He was drinking alcohol.

He was drinking wine this early in the morning, while others were drinking porridge, throwing a peanut into his mouth after every sip of wine. He looked very content.

His robes were exquisite, and he had an elegant demeanor. He looked like a high-ranking official. But a high-ranking official would not be alone, without any attendants.

Zhao Changhe’s gaze seemed to prompt a response from the old man. The old man turned to look at him and smiled faintly, “Little brother, your wine gourd looks good... It seems that we share a similar taste. At this time of the autumn, when the heavy rain has just stopped, would you like to have a drink with me?”

Zhao Changhe found it rather difficult to believe this was just a chance encounter. However, if it was not, meaning that the old man was specifically waiting for him here, then that might be even more surprising and impressive.

Before dispersing together with the different body doubles, he himself had not even known which gate he would be leaving the capital from. He had chosen it completely at random. So, had this old man been able to predict his movements? Or had he simply followed him and just arrived at the breakfast stall before him, meaning that he was able to move even faster than Snow-Treading Crow?

Unable to figure it out for the moment, Zhao Changhe simply decided to treat it as an ordinary encounter. He sat down across from the old man and said, “Although I also enjoy a drink or two, it’s not good to drink on an empty stomach in the morning.”

“Who said I’m drinking on an empty stomach? Look, there are some peanuts here.” The old man pushed the peanuts toward Zhao Changhe. “Want some?”

Zhao Changhe snapped his fingers at the waiter and said, “Bring some steamed buns over here.”

Soon, steaming hot steamed buns were served, and Zhao Changhe pushed some toward the old man. “Have some to properly fill your stomach.”

Not bothering with any politeness, Zhao Changhe grabbed a steamed bun and took a few bites. Then, he leisurely poured himself a cup of wine to wash down the bun.

The old man also took a steamed bun and ate slowly. As he watched Zhao Changhe devour his food without pause, amusement glinted in his eyes.

It was not until Zhao Changhe finished one bun that the old man said, “You’ve got a good appetite. A powerful-looking person with a powerful-looking saber.”

Zhao Changhe picked up another steamed bun and looked at the old man. “Do you recognize the saber?”

“A unique saber such as this? Even if I did not recognize it or see it before, I would still take a second look.”

“Are you a high-ranking official?”

“Sort of.” The old man sipped his wine and asked, “Do I not look like one?”

“Not quite; at least, I’ve never seen a high-ranking official without any attendants.”

“In that case, little brother, what do you think of this kind of official?”

Zhao Changhe squinted his eyes and looked at him for some time before slowly replying, “Whether an official is good or not, you can’t tell from a place like this.”

“Then how can you tell?”

Zhao Changhe pointed to a sleeping beggar curled up in a corner near the postal station. “We’re quite close to the capital, meaning that we’re right under the emperor’s feet. Don’t you find such people quite unsightly?”

The old man said, “I mean, if you find him to be unsightly, then why not kill him?”

Zhao Changhe’s gaze turned sharp, but the old man acted as if nothing happened, continuing to pour and drink his wine.

Zhao Changhe laughed and said, "I find the barbarians more unsightly. Why don't you kill some of them?"

The old man smiled and said, "Indeed, that can be done."

"What if I find you disagreeable? Shall I slit your throat myself?"

"In that case, little brother, please go ahead and do it yourself."

"Is there anyone or anything that can't be killed?"

"It's all about perspective. For example, if you want to eradicate beggars, first you need others to listen to your thoughts. If you can only ask others, you'll only get their thoughts. Even if you disagree, it won't matter because you have no authority."

Zhao Changhe nodded slightly. "True."

"Where are you headed after leaving the capital, little brother?"

"Yanmen."

"The beggars can only be dealt with in the capital."

"The barbarians can only be dealt with at Yanmen."

"Is that so?" The old man chuckled. "Just like killing some beggars won't make them disappear, killing some barbarians won't make them disappear. To solve the root of the problem with the barbarians, you'll have to be in the capital, not Yanmen."

Zhao Changhe was silent for a moment, then said slowly, "As you said, even if I express my thoughts in the capital, it won't matter since I have no authority."

"Were you intending to intervene?"

Zhao Changhe squinted at him, absentmindedly nibbling on the steamed bun as if trying to fill himself up and be ready to face any unexpected circumstances.

The old man chuckled softly and changed the subject, "Little brother, last night at the Zhang Family Restaurant, you drank wine and beat people up. When the jar of wine was emptied, everyone was in awe. Why did you leave in such haste before dawn? It seems like you still had some unfinished business, no? Well, since we've chanced upon each other, may I inquire about the reason? "

Zhao Changhe said cautiously, "I just came to the capital to have some fun, and when I felt there was nothing left to do, I left. What would be the point of staying any longer?"

The old man smiled and said, "Such an abrupt departure. Are you not leaving with regrets having left some matters unfinished?"

Zhao Changhe simply asked, "Did you come here and wait for me to help me finish this unfinished business?"

"You can see it that way."

Zhao Changhe almost choked on the steamed bun.

What was his unfinished business?

It was to meet Xia Longyuan with his own eyes.

Both Tang Wanzhuang and Huangfu Qing had seen through the fact that he had made all that commotion at the restaurant just to attract Xia Longyuan's attention and get an audience with him... Given that he had inherited Xia Longyuan's Six Harmonies Art and Dragon Bird, it was impossible for Xia Longyuan to be unaware of his intentions. Zhao Changhe thus believed that he could get an audience with Xia Longyuan and converse with him.

There was also a high probability that Xia Longyuan was well aware of everything between him and Xia Chichi. Since he was already at the capital, Zhao Changhe felt it was better to meet directly rather than hide or conceal himself.

But then, when he went to the gambling den to gather information, he was frightened. If Xia Longyuan had really killed his own son, then it was possible that he had some mental problems. The consequences of meeting him had thus become unpredictable. Combined with the information he received from Huangfu Qing, it was unlikely he would even get to meet the real Xia Longyuan. Most likely, he would encounter the fake, which would be worthless. The fake might even be more inclined to kill him, if anything.

Tang Wanzhuang knew this, and this was why she was afraid of what the emperor might do.

The situation was not as he had expected, so it was best for him to leave. This was why the trip had ended in disappointment, with him having to sneak away in the dead of night. He had completely abandoned the thought of meeting Xia Longyuan.

But now, this person in front of him claimed to be here to help him complete his unfinished business.

Fuck! Don't tell me this is Xia Longyuan!

Not only is it Xia Longyuan, he's probably even the real one! And even if he isn't, he must be someone sent here by the real Xia Longyuan.

However, Zhao Changhe felt that there was little significance in sending someone in such a situation. Finding a subordinate more loyal than even Tang Wanzhuang was not easy. She would have been the best mouthpiece, and there would have been no need to send anyone else. Therefore, if Xia Longyuan was willing to come and meet him, then it would probably be him in person.

Even though Zhao Changhe had considered countless possible identities that the old man might assume, he never thought that he would encounter Xia Longyuan in such a situation, sitting here by the side of the road, chatting like an ordinary old man with a smile on his face. He was completely unprepared.

If this guy wanted to kill him, he might as well finish his wine and then off himself. There was no point in trying to resist.

Hoping for a stroke of luck, Zhao Changhe cautiously probed, "After talking so much, I still have not even gotten to ask you for your name."

The old man smiled ambiguously, "Whoever you think I am, that I am."

Fuck.

Zhao Changhe decided to be straightforward and said, "Someone as capable as you, why bother pretending to be some high-ranking old man and play these games? Does it serve any purpose? It's just lowering your standards for no reason."

Xia Longyuan said calmly, "It does. For many, many years, nobody has treated me differently because of who I appear to be. They just see an old man; they would advise me not to drink on an empty stomach, tell me to eat something, and even buy me steamed buns to eat."

Zhao Changhe: “Is this how experts like you like to test people?”

Xia Longyuan: “...”

“I don’t believe that someone like you would judge others based on such trivial matters. In your eyes, this should all be irrelevant. From your perspective, everyone is quantified based on their strengths, weaknesses, and uses.”

“Is this how you see Xia Longyuan?”

“Is that not the case? When I pointed out the beggar, your reaction was to kill him.”

After a moment of contemplation, Xia Longyuan suddenly chuckled. “Perhaps you’re right. Well, at least I wouldn’t kill you because of the kind gesture you’ve shown me by buying me a steamed bun.”

“So you haven’t killed me, but why really is that?”

“Don’t you think I’m already being particularly kind to you?”

“What?”

“Look, I know you’re here with regrets, so I came here specifically to fulfill your desires for coming to the capital, to ensure your trip is a success and not in vain. Don’t you think I’m treating you really well?”

Zhao Changhe replied slowly, “That’s true.”

Xia Longyuan sipped his wine leisurely and continued, “My martial arts and techniques, my daughter, my most loyal subject, and my imperial noble consort—they’re all yours. Have I ever caused you trouble? If I’m not good to you, then who in this entire world is good to you? The blind woman?”

Zhao Changhe felt his heart skip a beat.

This Xia Longyuan was really different from what he imagined... Of course, that was because they had not delved into deeper topics yet. The big shot was still just teasing him at the moment.

But no matter how much he teased, Zhao Changhe finally encountered the only person in the world who could casually converse with him about the blind woman.

He had originally thought that coming to the capital was a mistake, and it had been a meaningless trip, so he had left.

But unexpectedly, the purpose of his trip awaited him here.

“You should have come earlier. They’re like a bunch of little kids, making wild guesses, frightening themselves. It’s laughable. Who would have the patience to deal with a bunch of little ants who think too highly of themselves?”

Zhao Changhe did not reply.

Xia Longyuan emptied his cup, stood up, and said, “Autumn is perfect, and even just the morning sun puts one in a positive mood. Care to accompany your father for a walk?”

Zhao Changhe’s jaw dropped.

Wait, just a moment ago, you mentioned your daughter, meaning that you know about everything. How can you just suddenly refer to yourself as my father?!

While the martial prowess of the world's strongest might not be visible at the moment, Zhao Changhe had to admit that the man's wit was certainly right up there. He thus took a deep breath and hurried to catch up, saying, "I never acknowledged that, so don't casually claim yourself as my father."

"Isn't your father-in-law still your father? Suit yourself, don't call me that if you've got what it takes."

The world's number one was indeed the world's number one. Just one sentence and it was a one-shot kill.

Chapter 250: Family Matters

The sun was rising, yet the drizzle continued falling. Two seemingly contradictory natural phenomena occurring simultaneously, yet not seeming out of place to observers.

It was a sunshower.

An old man leisurely walked along the main road with his hands behind his back, while a young man led a horse behind him, following closely.

The scene looked much like a father and son going out to work.

It was only after the old man stood up would one realize just how tall he was. Even though age had definitely taken its toll, and his muscles were no longer well-defined, one could still see traces of youthful vigor from his frame. Though old, he remained upright, sturdy as a mountain, with a dignified bearing that only served to enhance his aura.

And then there was the tall young man, carrying a broad saber, appearing somewhat aggrieved as he led the horse. They gave off the impression that they were indeed a family.

In terms of facial features, they did not actually look too similar. But if one were to search for commonalities with a predetermined mindset, one would inevitably find some similarities, at least in terms of their dignified and handsome appearances. It could easily be imagined that the old man was also quite the handsome young man in his younger days, but now he appeared more restrained, while the young man behind him exuded more vigor and boldness.

While Zhao Changhe was leading his horse, he could not help but think about how Chichi truly did carry the old man's genes, especially when she dressed up as Luo Qi.

Only a handsome old man could have such a beautiful daughter. Although in terms of age, he could probably be considered Chichi's grandfather at the very least.

Who would have thought that this old man would proudly claim the status of my father-in-law? Zhao Changhe had considered thousands of different scenarios for meeting Xia Longyuan, but he had certainly not foreseen this one, so he could only follow along with an honest heart.

Xia Longyuan, on the other hand, seemed quite relaxed. He surveyed his surroundings wordlessly as he walked on the main road as if admiring his empire.

Zhao Changhe eventually could not hold back any longer. He had countless things he wanted to ask Xia Longyuan about, but he had to find a way to broach the subject. He decided to start with what seemed like a relatively light-hearted family matter, "So, you know Chichi is your daughter."

"What's weird about that?" Xia Longyuan pondered for a moment, then tapped his head. "Oh, I guess others might indeed find it hard to figure out. Suddenly there's someone like you, and Chichi willingly gives her identity to you, with both of you misleading countless eyes... If I were in Tang Wanzhuang or Cui Wenjing's shoes, I might be at a loss too, haha..."

Zhao Changhe had no expression on his face.

I don't get why you're laughing. Didn't a lot of this mess end up happening because your daughter doesn't want to recognize you as her father? But it seems that you just find it amusing to have everyone running around in circles...

"But those two are also cunning foxes," Xia Longyuan said with a smile. "Do you really think they believe that you're my child? Once they set their sights on you, it doesn't matter who you really are. They can make you out to be whoever they want you to be. If Chichi were to stand before them and claim her rightful identity, they would probably kill her."

This was considered a blatant deception of the ruler, yet the emperor spoke of it with a smile, as if it did not concern him at all. Zhao Changhe's heart was pounding as he cautiously probed, "That won't happen. You're overthinking it."

"Why deceive yourself?" Xia Longyuan replied. "Wenjing's choice could be considered selfish, but Wanzhuang's isn't. Even if I were angry at Wenjing, I would not even be mad at Wanzhuang. You don't need to be so fearful."

I'm terrified just thinking about what might happen if you truly were angry at Cui Wenjing. If you and him were to take your feud to extremes, then you might just become the Bloodthirsty Asura instead of me.

Zhao Changhe had a lot on his mind, but he did not know how to articulate it. Xia Longyuan knows everything, so why isn't he doing or saying anything? Does he just see everything as a game?

Xia Longyuan continued, "Isn't it strange? I don't know what you and Chichi have discussed, or rather, I don't know what Chichi and her mother have discussed... They probably see me as the ultimate scoundrel. It would be better to hear both sides' perspectives."

Zhao Changhe: "???"

What are you trying to say with this...

“Did her explanation leave out a key premise, specifically why Chichi’s mother wanted to assassinate me?” Xia Longyuan smiled. “The Four Idols Cult’s doctrine is unacceptable to any ruler or monarch, and anyone in power would label them as heretics. But back then, they were still young. They had not even laid the foundation for breaking the dimensions to allow for the gods to descend to our world. They were merely a bunch of fools who were dreaming aloud, and there was nothing really wrong with that. In other words, although we opposed each other, there was not any fierce conflict just yet. So why would she suddenly attempt to assassinate me? Have you ever thought about that?”

Zhao Changhe scratched his head. “I can’t say I have. At the time, I just thought that it was normal for those from demonic cults to want to assassinate the emperor. I was more confused about why she had the confidence to assassinate the most powerful person in the world.”

“She did not start out with assassination in mind. She disguised herself as a maid from the Luo Clan to get close to me. She simply infiltrated the palace on behalf of the Four Idols Cult. It’s not much different from what they’re doing now,” said Xia Longyuan. “Originally, this kind of mission should not have fallen to a saintess of theirs. The Four Idols Cult could have sent anyone, like a serpent or a pig. However, she took matters into her own hands because she was the princess of the previous dynasty, and she intended to kill two birds with one stone.”

“...Damn.”

“So later, she did not dare to go back to the cult after failing the mission. Her unauthorized actions, coupled with her defilement and childbirth as a saintess of their cult, would have made her death even worse. In the end, she fell ill and died, and the cult had no idea what happened to her. This caused a lot of problems, as many responsibilities were left unattended. For example, the exploration of Beimang was put on hold, leaving the Four Idols Cult in a predicament.”

Zhao Changhe suddenly became enlightened. The lingering doubts about why Chichi had not returned to the Four Idols Cult when her mother was still alive, nor had been brought back by anyone from the cult, finally made sense.

“I actually had no interest in her.” Xia Longyuan smiled. “I mean, just think about it. The crown prince was already ten years old at that time. Why did I not have another son? I had already severed all worldly ties for seven or eight years at that time. Where would I suddenly gain the interest to bear another child?”

Zhao Changhe commented, “I previously guessed that you deliberately wanted to cause a rupture in the Four Idols Cult.”

“I already told you, you all think so highly of yourselves, thinking that you’re worth scheming against. Was the Four Idols Cult back then even worth scheming against? Are they even worth scheming against right now?”

“...”

“I was simply intrigued by the Night Emperor revered by the Four Idols Cult, and I also came to wonder whether my techniques were actually of the Azure Dragon’s lineage. I wondered if I could replace the Night Emperor, since I was so powerful. So I wanted to give it a try, and the best way to try was through dual cultivation, as only then could we peer into each other’s deepest secrets. Since she had been trying to seduce her way into the palace anyway, it all just happened naturally.”

“...Did you figure anything out?”

“It was ambiguous. The will of an emperor is generally just aligned with the will of the Azure Dragon. After all, the ancient Azure Dragon was also an earthly emperor. To be honest, the doctrine of the Four Idols Cult is somewhat lacking. If I really claimed to be the reincarnation of the Azure Dragon, it would not have been impossible to succeed. In fact, Chichi’s mother even seemed to genuinely believe that to be the case, and she was ecstatic,” said Xia Longyuan. His tone finally became tinged with some regret as he said, “At that time, she really thought that she could recruit me into joining the cult, and then everything would have been perfect just like that.”

Zhao Changhe considered his words carefully and said, “Actually, it’s not a bad idea. You could deceive her with good intentions, and who knows, maybe you could even subdue the entire Four Idols Cult.”

“If I could truly embody all the four idols, then I would not have minded becoming the leader of the cult just as the Night Emperor once did. Unfortunately, after trying, I found that it was not feasible. I could not accommodate the White Tiger Divine Art, so even if I did join the cult, I would have only become a venerable at most. That is simply not what I want.” Xia Longyuan suddenly smiled. “Why have you consistently refrained from joining the Four Idols Cult? Is it also because you don’t want to be tied down? If you could be the leader, would you join it?”

Zhao Changhe was silent.

“We’re the same.” Xia Longyuan laughed. “And actually, I believe you might just be able to do it...”

Zhao Changhe shook his head, avoiding the topic, and he instead asked, “After you found out that she was pregnant... Since these matters had nothing to do with the child, why didn’t you bring her back? Was it because of their bloodline being of the previous dynasty?”

“At first, it was indeed because of that. You could easily guess what the consequences would be if officials from the previous dynasty, like those of the Huangfu Clan, were to find out about this. Furthermore, the empress’ views on the matter would only complicate things unnecessarily as her appearance would conflict with the crown prince, and could destabilize the empire. So, I just left her a jade pendant, both as a token and a legacy. If it was a boy, he would inherit my techniques and be able to roam the world freely without having to get involved with the affairs of the palace; if it was a girl, it would not be much of a problem. I would welcome her into the palace and personally guide her in cultivating a more suitable cultivation technique rather than predetermined ones that may ruin a perfectly good seedling.”

Zhao Changhe was dumbfounded.

I thought he favored sons over daughters. But according to this explanation, it's actually the opposite! So when he told Chichi's mother that he would come to pick her up, he actually meant it. But why did he not come?

“Are you confused about what happened later?” Xia Longyuan smiled slightly. “At that time, my mindset was still that of an emperor who was considering the empire's interests. But shortly after, some things happened, and my perspective changed. If I was even considering whether to kill the crown prince, why would I bother bringing back a daughter?”

Zhao Changhe's heart skipped a beat, realizing that for them, discussing family matters would inevitably evolve into discussing matters of the empire.

Damn it, did you really kill the crown prince yourself?