

T. Times 161

Chapter 161: Exchange

This conversation with the blind woman might have been the longest that he had had with her, and a lot of things were no longer as vague as before. He had finally gotten an idea of some of the more particular details.

Zhao Changhe was not surprised. It made no sense for this woman to bring people from the modern world all the way here just to watch the show. She must have had a purpose in mind. As long as he showed enough value, she would continue to reveal more and more vital information, slowly unveiling her ultimate goal.

In theory, the Back Eye was his greatest cheat, as it seemed to be harboring the potential to transform into something like clairvoyance. However, Zhao Changhe had never deliberately honed this skill, content with just sneaking a peek at others while bathing. The main reason he had not been honing it was because he saw it as something given by the blind woman, and he felt that if he relied on it too much, he would be in a heap of trouble if it was just suddenly taken away.

She knew every single one of his actions. However, was it because of the Tome of Troubled Times overlooking the world, or was it because of some other means?

Just thinking about it sent shivers down his spine.

In any case, he still harbored a strong wariness toward the blind woman, and there was no way she didn't know that. Does she really not care? Does she really believe that the future will go the way she wants? Who knows? Only time will tell!

Zhao Changhe stretched lazily, feeling that the injuries on his body were no longer as painful as they had been the day before.

This ointment that was used even by the imperial family was truly impressive, it was much better than the Cui Clan's. The sword qi wounds that riddled his entire body no longer seemed as serious after they were treated with ointment and allowed to recover overnight. By contrast, when Yue Hongling injured her shoulder, it continued to affect her combat prowess even after several days.

His situation seemed to be far better...at least, as long as he did not engage in the playful game of who would apply the medicine between his maid and the head of the Demon Suppression Bureau.

Zhao Changhe sighed and glanced outside. He saw Sisi standing quietly by a cluster of flowering trees, gazing at the flowers.

Whether it was as the fake Yue Hongling, the fake maid, or her true appearance that she had revealed yesterday, they were all very lively and charming types. But right now, as she stood alone and admired the flowers, she exuded a serene and graceful aura, tinged with a sense of desolation. The contrast between her persona before and now was striking, even more apparent than when she changed disguises.

Zhao Changhe looked at her still-exposed waist, pursed his lips, and decided not to comment on it. He approached her and asked, "Why are you standing here alone admiring the flowers?"

Sisi sighed, "Other than you, who else can I talk to here? You're the only one I am somewhat familiar with, and that says something. It's pretty good that they don't bother me about the fact that I disguised myself as a maid... Anyway, I'm fine being alone."

"Uh... Where did you sleep last night? You didn't have anywhere to sleep before, you just leaned against the wall and dozed off."

Sisi finally turned to look at him and smirked mockingly. "What a surprise. You even care about where your maid sleeps."

Feeling a bit apologetic, Zhao Changhe said, "I was just too tired last night, with all the injuries and my mind was foggy... I should have mentioned it to the Tang Clan..."

Sisi's gaze swept over him, recalling his appearance yesterday covered in blood and with hardly a piece of good flesh left. She decided not to be petty with him, considering his condition, and said, "When you're away from home, there's not much you should be fussing about... I was originally thinking of sleeping on your bed, but then you'd accuse me of being flirtatious again, so never mind that."

After a moment of silence, Zhao Changhe suddenly said, "Then I'll be frank with you."

Sisi: "?"

“Don’t expose your waist anymore, okay?”

Sisi suddenly smiled and said charmingly, “Do you think I dress like this to please you?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “No...”

“It’s true,” said Sisi. She then came up to his ear and whispered softly, “Master, does it look good?”

This time, it was Zhao Changhe’s turn to be stunned.

“Want to touch?”

“...”

“Hmph, so you’re just a lecherous man, after all. Why bother acting all proper all day long?” Sisi’s expression suddenly changed. “I show off my waist to whoever I want to. Who do you think you are? Do you really think you’re my master?”

Zhao Changhe said helplessly, “If you’re so concerned about me perceiving you as flirtatious, why aren’t you concerned about others’ opinions? To others, forget about flirtatious, you might even seem like a demonic witch, but you don’t seem to care.”

“Because others are others, and you are you,” Sisi replied briefly. However, realizing that her words might have come off weird, she quickly turned to look at the flowers again. “Okay, since you said so, I’ll change into a different outfit later. But I still feel...”

“What?”

“I feel like you just don’t want others to see me like this and you found an excuse to make me change.”

Zhao Changhe remained silent.

With a mischievous smile, Sisi said, “Actually, according to the standards of the Central Plains, I am indeed quite flirtatious. Master, if you work harder, you might just be able to play with your maid tonight.”

Zhao Changhe said with a straight face, “I’ve seen more waists than you can imagine, and kissed more lips than you’ve seen. They all appeared to be innocent goddesses. Your behavior is nothing compared to them.”

Sisi asked curiously, “You’ve seen many like me?”

“Mm-hm,” responded Zhao Changhe. “But that’s not the point.”

“Then what is the point?”

“The main problem between us is that you tried to control me. That’s why I am acting like this toward you.”

Sisi opened her mouth, and then she lowered her head as if just realizing that she really was the one who had started things.

The two of them suddenly fell silent and awkwardly looked at the flowers together.

After a long while, Zhao Changhe spoke up, “Alright, I’ll overlook those things because you tried to block Maitreya’s attack. We’re friends now.”

Sisi said, “Then tell me about Dragon Bird. I’ve already fulfilled the condition you gave me to show you my true appearance.”

“Is this really your true appearance?”

“Yes.”

“Dragon Bird is the founding saber that the emperor used to establish the empire. It contains his imperial dominance and martial spirit. It is also something that commands respect. If you speak to it politely and flatteringly, it will cooperate with you, and it won’t easily turn hostile. As for why I

was able to learn so many different kinds of intent, this really has nothing to do with it. Also, I've already given up on most of them now."

"The founding saber..." Sisi murmured to herself. "The emperor truly is remarkable. He has already stepped into the realm of gods and demons. With such an emperor, why has the empire become so chaotic..."

Zhao Changhe said, "Do you have a deep understanding of the realm of gods and demons?"

Sisi glanced at him, but she did not answer, nor did she continue to ask questions. Would flattering words be enough to make Dragon Bird let itself be wielded? Perhaps it would let me hold it, but getting it to unleash its power through such means is impossible.

After all this time, both sides still concealed their true intentions.

Sisi sighed, suddenly feeling disinterested, both with herself and with Zhao Changhe.

Zhao Changhe suddenly said, "By the way... You want to learn the martial arts of the Central Plains, and I also want to learn something from you. Shall we carry out an exchange?"

Sisi asked curiously, "What do you want?"

"Your movement and disguise arts."

Sisi smiled faintly, "You seem to know a lot, but at the moment, I'm only interested in the Spring Water Sword Intent and the Fox Spirit Saber Intent. Do you dare exchange the Spring Water Sword Intent with me?"

"No, but I can exchange the Fox Spirit Saber Intent."

"Well, we can do one for one. You can choose between the movement arts and the disguise arts."

Zhao Changhe did not hesitate and said directly, "The disguise arts."

Sisi was a little surprised. “I thought you would choose the movement arts. Isn’t it more important than disguise arts?”

“There are many sources from which I can learn movement arts, but your incredible disguise arts are unique. Besides, the movement arts are the foundational technique of the Thieves Guild. Even though the Thief Saint is generous to you, that does not mean he’ll just allow such a valuable technique to be spread around. As for the disguise arts, they’re not as important,” explained Zhao Changhe with a smile. “Actually, if I had to give you another reason, there is one.”

“What is it?”

“The bit of the Fox Spirit Saber Intent I know is just superficial. Exchanging it for the movement arts would not be fair. I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

“If we’re talking fairness, then the bit of the Fox Spirit Saber Intent that you know isn’t enough to exchange for the disguise arts either,” Sisi said. “Can you add something else?”

Zhao Changhe sighed helplessly and asked, “What else do you want?”

“You mentioned something about someone named Murong, as well as the maid who can disguise herself, quite a few times. I want you to tell me that story.”

Chapter 162: A Rare Moment of Rest

Zhao Changhe thought that now with Gusu and the Tang Clan in disarray, with neither the aunt nor nephew of the Tang Clan having time to come over, and with him still yet to fully recover from his injuries, there was indeed nothing else to do at the moment.

He wanted to chat more with Sisi, but it was not appropriate for him to directly ask her about the situation of the Ancient Spirit Tribe. They were clearly both hiding things from each other, which made the situation quite awkward. It seemed like going back into the room to tell a story was not such a bad idea.

It was a rare moment of rest since his arrival in this world. The pace of the past half year has indeed been too fast. Looking back, he felt really exhausted.

Seeing Zhao Changhe agree, Sisi was very happy and quickly disappeared with excitement.

When she reappeared, she was dressed as the little maid once again, completely covered up, showing not a hint of her skin.

She happily pulled him to sit by the table and presented him with various bottles and jars as if she were presenting a treasure. “This disguise is actually nothing special, it’s just a special material formulated from a secret recipe. When you apply it to the face, it looks just like real skin! With practice, you can even create different skin tones. It’s the foundation for my disguise. If you don’t want to impersonate someone else, you can also just use it to cover scars and whatnot. Once you learn the recipe, you’re all set.”

Zhao Changhe leaned in to take a look. “It doesn’t smell like anything. Are the ingredients difficult to find?”

“They’re fairly difficult to find, but with the Tang Clan backing you, do you really need to worry? You can get whatever you need,” Sisi replied confidently. Then, she abruptly stopped and stretched out her delicate hand. “Give me some money.”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

Sisi said confidently, “I’m out of money. Do you know how hard it was for me to resist taking the silver notes you left in front of me several times?”

Zhao Changhe chuckled and said, “If I give you money, does that count as sponsoring you or paying my maid’s salary?”

Sisi’s eyes shimmered, and she said in a seductive tone, “Now that my identity needs some explaining to the Tang Clan, how about I really do become your maid? However, my services are quite expensive...”

Zhao Changhe took out a thousand-tael silver note and placed it in her hand, “Is this enough for ten days?”

Sisi grabbed the silver note and grumbled, “Only ten days... Oh, and with the back pay for the last three days, you have seven left.”

Zhao Changhe really did not know whether to laugh or cry, “Hey, do you realize that you’ve really become my maid? Don’t you have any dignity?”

“What’s wrong with being a maid? Master, besides flirting with your mouth, what else can you do?”

“...I think you’ve forgotten some painful memories.”

Sisi straightened her neck stubbornly and said, “I don’t remember! Alright, let’s get back to disguise arts. Do you just want to change your appearance so that you can’t be recognized when conducting secret activities, or do you plan to disguise yourself as someone else?”

“I don’t want to live with someone else’s face, that’s just silly...” After he said that, Sisi’s gaze suddenly turned dangerous. He hurriedly corrected himself, “Uh, I meant, very smart, very smart...”

Sisi glared at him, and Zhao Changhe raised his hands in surrender.

Sisi snorted, “Disguising oneself as someone else is the highest achievement of disguise. It’s not enough to just have good makeup skills; you also need to be good at imitating other people’s mannerisms. It’s an art, and it’s not inferior to martial arts in any way. Do you really think it’s silly?”

Zhao Changhe laughed and said, “Now I understand why Ye Wuzong didn’t get angry even though you stole from the Thieves Guild. I think you’re the true heir to his legacy. Ji Chengkong clearly doesn’t hold the same level of passion as you do toward his arts.”

Sisi was taken aback, her eyes showing a hint of hesitation. After a moment, she said, “So why do you seem to look down on it?”

Zhao Changhe said lightly, “I just feel that no one has the right to make me impersonate them.”

“...” The corners of Sisi’s mouth twitched, too lazy to bother with him any further. What the hell is with this saber and its master? They both think that they’re the best in the world.

Sisi felt like there was a term for it... and, indeed, such characters were generally termed “chuuni” in the modern world. Unfortunately, that term did not really exist here. Yet.

“Okay, okay, I’ll just give you the recipe for the material that will help you conceal your features. Shouldn’t you start telling me the story now?”

“...Sure,” Zhao Changhe could not help but find it absurd that, in this transaction where he had exchanged a saber intent and a story for a disguise art, she actually prioritized obtaining the story over the saber intent.

Sisi could not sense his sarcasm. Seeing his agreement, she eagerly brewed tea, her eyes sparkling as she leaned on her hand, waiting for him to start telling the story.

Zhao Changhe found this quite amusing. She looked exactly like a naive girl who had never seen the world. Well, considering that she probably lived most of her life in the Ancient Spirit Tribe, how big of an area and how many people could she have really come across? They probably have stories of ancient gods and demons that were passed down from generation to generation, but they could not possibly have the rich and diverse culture of the divine land, let alone modern novels.

“This story starts with a man surnamed Duan...” Zhao Changhe did not intend to tell the story in its entirety, it was simply too long. He planned to just briefly tell Duan Yu’s story.

But to his surprise, Sisi attached great importance to Duan Yu’s story. “The Duan Clan of Dali, recorded in the previous era.”

Zhao Changhe was taken aback, only then realizing that the previous era included figures like the Three Sage Rulers—Yao, Shun, and Yun. There was also the Cui Clan of Qinghe and the Wang Clan of Langya. There were also various classical poems and writings that circulated in this world, creating a strange mix of history and...fantasy? So, the fact that there was also a Duan Clan of Dali in this world was not that surprising at all.

Sisi muttered to herself, “That place... is where we once resided...”

She stopped halfway through as if she suddenly came to a realization. However, Zhao Changhe understood that the Ancient Spirit Tribe might be descendants of the Miao of the southwest from the previous era. As for refining gu...

The reason for Sisi's interest in the story of the Duan Clan now became much clearer. Zhao Changhe's plan of lazily telling the story had to be abandoned, and he had to recount the story in detail from the beginning.

It turned out to be quite troublesome. It was not until noon that he reached the part where Jiumozhi captured Duan Yu and took him to Yanziwu.

Oddly enough, Zhao Changhe found that his memory improved the more he spoke. He had read the original work, *Eight Books of the Heavenly Dragon*[1], and since then, he had read a lot of similar works and fanfictions, especially the spicy ones... He should have already forgotten the specific plot details by now, but as he spoke, the story flowed more smoothly, and various details that he had once forgotten naturally emerged from his mind.

Sisi listened attentively.

Only when Zhao Changhe mentioned Duan Yu refusing to learn his family's martial arts and running away did she squint her eyes slightly. After that, she remained expressionless, quietly brewing tea for him and not uttering a single word throughout.

Even when A'Zhu, the maid who was proficient in the art of disguise, appeared in the story, Sisi's expression did not change at all. Zhao Changhe began to wonder if she was distracted and could not help but ask, "Hey, are you still listening?"

"I am."

"It's tough to tell a story when your audience doesn't react in the slightest..."

Sisi smiled faintly and said, "The story is very good. As long as you don't always fantasize about aphrodisiacs in the dungeon..."

"I don't fantasize about such things."

"You suspected my origins and you actually went through the trouble of fabricating such a story. Your literary talent is truly remarkable," Sisi teased with a growing smile. "But I have to admit, you did guess a lot of things correctly."

Zhao Changhe was dumbfounded. “Oh? Which parts are you talking about”

“Duan Yu is me, A’Zhu is me, and Jiumozhi, who steals various martial arts, is also me. You put so much effort into insinuating things, wasn’t it exhausting?”

“Huh?”

“Do you still expect me to kowtow to you a thousand times before you teach me your martial arts? Brother immortal, you’re so shameless.”

Zhao Changhe’s eyes opened so wide that they turned into circles.

Thankfully, you didn’t interrupt me while I was telling the story. Otherwise, how could I have continued telling the story? You’ve twisted it so much that I’ve forgotten what the original was like... I really can’t go back now...

“Hey, Murong Fu hasn’t appeared yet, but you’ve already portrayed him as extraordinary with exceptional martial arts. Could he be Tang Buqi or Tang Wanzhuang?”

“Stop, if you continue like this, the Tang Clan will be ruined by you. The Murong Clan are rebels.” Zhao Changhe was on the verge of tears. “I won’t continue telling you the story, okay? I was wrong. I’ll teach you the saber intent, just stop.”

“Oh? You don’t need me to kowtow to you a thousand times?”

“No, there’s really no need...”

“Hehe...” Sisi blew into his ear and whispered, “Brother immortal...”

Zhao Changhe really wanted to kill himself right this moment.

But then Tang Wanzhuang’s voice came from outside the window, “Mister Zhao, what’s the name of the story?”

Zhao Changhe composed himself and said, "It's called Eight Books of the Heavenly Dragon."

"In Buddhist terminology, Asuras are one of the eight parts... If we're to relate this to the story, who is the Asura? Is this Asura bloodthirsty?"

Zhao Changhe covered his face.

Tang Wanzhuang said again: "That prince who lives in that world has many beauties, and most of them are evil. Are they really all sisters?"

Are you and Sisi going to fight to decide who Duan Yu is? Can you guys stop going off on tangents? I'm really getting confused and forgetting the original now.

As expected, Sisi became unhappy and stood up with her hands on her hips. "We, master and servant, are enjoying a story. What's a dignified official like you doing eavesdropping outside?"

Tang Wanzhuang chuckled and said, "It's already noon. I have set up a banquet in my courtyard. I came here to invite Mister Zhao to discuss important matters. If you'd be so kind, young lady, I would like to borrow your brother immortal for an hour."

Chapter 163: Slow Down

Sisi was very angry. Her story time had been interrupted. They had only gotten to the point where the maid who could disguise herself was introduced, and now her "brother immortal" had been snatched away by someone else.

What really frustrated her was that she could not even follow along, even with her identity as Zhao Changhe's maid.

Her disguise as a maid of the Tang Clan had long been exposed. The real maid had already been rescued from the woodshed, where she had been starving for two days. If it was not for Zhao Changhe telling them about it, she might have actually starved to death. The main reason the Tang Clan did not give Sisi much trouble was that they knew that she had helped out in the crisis earlier. However, that did not mean that they would just let such a suspicious character eavesdrop on Tang Wanzhuang and Zhao Changhe when they were discussing important matters.

Fortunately, Zhao Changhe knew how to be tactful. Instead of going directly with Tang Wanzhuang, he first taught Sisi the Fox Spirit Saber Intent, so that she had something to do while he was gone.

The portion of the saber intent that Zhao Changhe knew really was just a small bit of it. However, after Sisi began practicing it, she could not understand how Zhao Changhe had comprehended it so quickly. Of course, she did have to admit that it was very suitable for her to use. It was a great complement to her martial arts and benefited her greatly.

Sisi suddenly thought that Zhao Changhe's story was probably intended to advise her. Whether it was the Murong Clan or Jiumozhi, they both seemed to be on the path to becoming villains. And perhaps collecting martial arts from various schools was not really that meaningful. Only what suited oneself was best. In the future, she should not lurk around and steal things from everywhere... That seemed to be what he was hinting at.

Sisi sighed.

No matter how smart and capable Zhao Changhe was, he still seemed to have misunderstood some things.

But how could she explain it to him?

As she practiced, she subconsciously looked through the door and at the bedside. The bloodthirsty bead had been casually left there. She remembered Zhao Changhe's casual attitude the night before. When it came to treasures, she could take them if she wanted, and if she did not want them, he would keep them. That was the basic rule that he had set.

However, it was exactly because the bead wasn't suitable for just anyone that he could leave it like that.

The treasures in the Sword Emperor's tomb might not be the same. There were simply some things that everyone would want. And even if he was willing to let her have it, the Demon Suppression Bureau might not necessarily agree. This was no longer a matter that was merely between the two of them.

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Tang Wanzhuang's waterside pavilion was like no other.

The maid who had been carrying the guqin stood there vigilantly, her eyes shifting up and down as she scrutinized Zhao Changhe, focusing on his scar. She then pursed her lips.

No matter how she looked at it, she felt that the young miss and this guy had nothing in common.

Although the man appeared slightly more restrained than when they first met in Sword Lake City, no longer seeming as reckless—perhaps due to having solved the cases in Yangzhou and Gusu—dense vicious qi still loomed around his body. Due to the vicious qi, he exuded an intense bloodthirsty aura. His confident strides gave the impression of a tiger that was about to pounce.

On the other hand, the young miss moved gracefully, walking lightly as if she was drifting on clouds. The contrast between the two of them as they walked side by side created a stark juxtaposition between movement and stillness. While the tiger roared fiercely, the mountain breeze blew gently, creating a strong feeling of incompatibility.

“Please, have a seat.” Tang Wanzhuang gestured, and the two sat opposite each other.

The dishes on the table were simple, even simpler than what Tang Buqi had served as a host. However, Zhao Changhe felt quite at ease and did not hesitate to start eating. He asked between bites, “What important matters do you want to discuss? The tomb of the Sword Emperor?”

“We’ll leave that for when you’ve fully recovered from your injuries. There’s no rush,” Tang Wanzhuang said with a smile. “You’ve been rushing around all this time, doing one thing after another. Don’t you ever feel the need to slow down and take a break?”

“I do. Wasn’t I just enjoying some storytelling and tea with my maid when you suddenly brought me away to discuss important matters? As for what those important matters are...”

“Not everything that constitutes an important matter requires you to head out...” Tang Wanzhuang said. “For example, have you thought about the bead from yesterday?”

“Yeah, it’s filled with impurities and various negative emotions that have gathered together. You’re right, it really is not suitable for me to use. It might be more suitable for practitioners of demonic arts who cultivate techniques that rely on negative emotions. What, do you have a method to filter out these impurities and extract only the vicious blood qi?”

“Yes, this is the important matter I was referring to,” Tang Wanzhuang said. “I could not come up with any ideas yesterday, but after thinking it over all night, I’ve come up with some methods.”

Zhao Changhe inwardly acknowledged that if the blind woman said Tang Wanzhuang wasn’t weak, then she probably did have some means. It’s quite impressive to be praised by the blind woman. That at least indicates that her understanding of martial arts should be beyond Maitreya’s. Perhaps the only thing holding her back is her injuries. If she recovers, would she be able to reach the Ranking of Heaven?

He humbly asked for advice, “I did come to Gusu mainly for this item that I believed would help me nurture vicious qi. If I want to progress in my Vicious Blood Art in any significant way, I can’t do it without such items. Since Maitreya pretty much handed it right over to me, it’s quite disappointing that I can’t use it. What are your ideas, First Seat Tang?”

Tang Wanzhuang asked, “Do you remember when I mentioned that if you were willing to learn to play the guqin and paint, it would benefit you?”

“Um...”

“You’re powerful and aggressive in battle, like a fierce tiger, which is advantageous in combat but detrimental to cultivation. At present, your cultivation seems unstoppable, and you appear to be the fastest cultivator in the world. However, the result is that there are hidden dangers in your foundation, and it’s not as stable as it should be. Despite that, you are still eager to continue nurturing vicious blood qi, pushing forward blindly. Forgive my bluntness, but if you continue like this, you will inevitably hit a painful obstacle at the eighth or ninth layer because you lack both depth and accumulation. This accumulation is not merely referring to cultivation itself, but also other techniques.”

After a moment of silence, Zhao Changhe sighed and said, “Actually, deep down, I also know that I’ve been too hasty and I lack depth. But many things were pushed forward and came one after the other, so I did not have the time to settle down and consolidate myself.”

Tang Wanzhuang slowly sipped on a bowl of lotus seed soup. “After the incident in Sword Lake City, you could have stayed longer to cultivate. Han Wubing is your good friend, and you could have sharpened yourselves together, mutually bringing each other to new heights. Why did you leave in such a hurry?”

Zhao Changhe paused for a moment and scratched his head.

He had forgotten why he had left in such a hurry back then. It seemed like he had felt the need to leave as soon as possible, as if something was nipping at his heels...

Or perhaps he had simply been avoiding Tang Wanzhuang, not wanting to see her more than necessary?

Oh, it was probably because he had just acquired the golden foil and did not want to linger in such a troublesome place for much longer?

Regardless, he had now forgotten what he was thinking at that time. In any case, he had left in haste, as if something was biting at his backside.

Perhaps it could be said that it was just because of his restless mentality, which made him unable to stay in one place for too long.

Tang Wanzhuang said leisurely, "If I had not mentioned it this time, would you have hurried away again after exploring the Sword Emperor's tomb?"

Zhao Changhe could only say, "I don't remember what I was thinking at that time. Besides, wasn't it you who gave me the mission to move around?"

He's actually passing the blame to me... Tang Wanzhuang could not help but laugh, "You actually listen to my instructions? Then this time, I'll give you a task. Regardless of the outcome of the Sword Emperor's tomb, you must stay here for an extra ten days. What do you think?"

Zhao Changhe asked curiously, "Stay here? Why? Do you want to become more familiar with me? What are you thinking? Shouldn't we just sever ties?"

Tang Wanzhuang sighed helplessly, "Personal reputation is nothing compared to official matters. No matter how you view it, in my eyes, you're just an official matter."

After a moment of silence, Zhao Changhe asked, "So why are you keeping me here?"

“To learn the guqin, go, painting, and poetry with me.” Tang Wanzhuang smiled faintly.

“Although...maybe you don’t need to learn poetry and the classics anymore, you are already quite eloquent, after all. I’d like to continue hearing your stories as well. It’s a pity to see someone so knowledgeable appear so crude.”

Zhao Changhe felt helpless. “What’s the point of me learning these things? Even if I were truly a prince, I wouldn’t necessarily need to learn them. Learning these won’t be useful. Haven’t you heard about Zhao Ji[1] and Li Yu[2]?”

Tang Wanzhuang said earnestly, “Your spirit needs rest, and these things can help you do that. Concentrate your mind, cultivate your sentiments, dispel restlessness.”

Zhao Changhe really was not keen on learning these things, so he said, “You mentioned having ideas for the bead, is this it?”

“This is just one of the methods I thought of. Why do you think negative emotions like hatred, resentment, and hostility can affect your temperaments or thoughts? It’s because your mind is not at peace at all. I want to teach you the essence of the Tang Clan, so that no matter how the winds blow or the waters flow, it will only cause a ripple. At that time, your mind will be self-contained, clear as water, bright as the moon, free from inner demons.”

Zhao Changhe’s eyes widened. “I sneakily learned a bit of your sword intent, and your nephew already went and picked a few fights with me. Are you really going to teach me the essence of the Tang Clan? If, at that time, he calls me Uncle, it’s on y—”

“Listen, are you willing to learn or not?”

Zhao Changhe scratched his head. “Do I need to become your disciple?”

Tang Wanzhuang lowered her head, delicately stirring the soup with a small spoon. After a while, she said, “If you’re willing to do so, then that would be best.”

On this summer afternoon, it was hot and windless, and even the surrounding waterside pavilions seemed scorching hot, without any hint of coolness.

But as she lowered her head and gently stirred, it was as if the coolness of the lotus seeds in the bowl seeped out, bringing a refreshing chill to the summer afternoon, like the blossoming of water lotuses.

His mind and heart calmed down.

Chapter 164: Calm Your Mind

Zhao Changhe lowered his head and sipped from his bowl of lotus seed soup. “I don’t want to become your disciple, and I recall that you were averse to such a relationship previously. Why don’t you seem to care now?”

“Martial arts are different from the guqin, go, calligraphy, and painting...” Tang Wanzhuang said softly. “If I were to take you in as a disciple in martial arts, it would be presumptuous and I would not be qualified... But there’s no issue when it comes to the four arts. Why are you unwilling?”

“I’ve been calling Tang Buqi eldest nephew all this time. If I were to suddenly be in the same generation as him, well, it just wouldn’t sit well with me.”

Seeing Tang Wanzhuang’s eyes suddenly widen, Zhao Changhe abruptly realized the implications of his words and hurriedly corrected himself. “No, I mean, I was just joking. I did not actually mean to say that I was or wanted to be his uncle... It’s just that if I become your disciple, I’ll lose the right to joke around with him. Besides, I’m younger than him. If I have to start calling him big brother... Ugh...”

The guqin-carrying maid turned her head as if to avoid the embarrassing sight. Is this man a child?!

Zhao Changhe’s face turned red under the strange gaze of the guqin-carrying maid, feeling embarrassed. “I’m just saying, you continue to entertain the assumption that I’m the prince, but if you find out that I’m really not, would you still feel the same way?”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled and said, “What’s the big deal? I just don’t want to see a junior in the jianghu become more and more impatient, following in my footsteps... Besides, you’ve done the Tang Clan a huge favor, so why can’t I lend you a hand?”

“Your footsteps... Doesn’t that mean that the four arts are actually useless? You hurriedly broke through and you still damaged your lung meridian.”

“But have you considered that, if I had not done so, the damage might not have just been limited to my lung meridian?”

“Well...”

Tang Wanzhuang’s expression became somewhat melancholic. “Perhaps the four arts are indeed useless... But as I said, they are simply meant to calm your mind and alleviate your restlessness. Would you prefer to recite Buddhist scriptures? That is also an option.”

“...Then I’ll learn the four arts.” Zhao Changhe hesitated for a moment, unsure of how to address her at the moment.

It was really strange. Yue Hongling was two months younger than him, but he had no problem addressing her as “big sister Yue.” Tang Wanzhuang, on the other hand, was eight years older than him, but he could not bring himself to call her big sister for some inexplicable reason.

Perhaps it was because their interactions always carried a sense of formality, and they had never evolved into any sort of personal relationship. Even teaching him the four arts was an official matter in her eyes. Saying that it was to help out a junior in the jianghu or the benefactor of the Tang Clan was just an excuse; she was really only helping him out because she saw him as the prince, and they both knew that.

Zhao Changhe still had no sense of belonging to Great Xia; if anything, he even somewhat resented it due to all that he had seen and experienced along the way. He wondered how Tang Wanzhuang would feel if he chose to overthrow the empire in the future.

In fact, they had never truly been on the same path. The feeling of camaraderie that he shared with Yue Hongling was completely different from what he felt with Tang Wanzhuang.

Perhaps it was also because... Seeing her pale complexion, looking like she could collapse with a gust of wind, always made people forget that was actually a formidable martial artist. The feeling of pity he held for her outweighed his respect for her, making him feel like she was the one who should be taken care of like a younger sister.

Anyway, the feelings he held for her were incredibly complex and contradictory.

Tang Wanzhuang's beautiful eyes gazed at him for a moment, as if guessing what he was thinking. In the end, she decided not to ask, simply turned to the guqin-carrying maid, and said, "Give me the guqin."

The guqin-carrying maid bowed slightly and placed the guqin on the table in front of Tang Wanzhuang.

Tang Wanzhuang gently stroked the strings of the guqin and said softly, "It's true that I exhaust myself with worry, and my thoughts are tangled and chaotic, which is not conducive to the Dao. However, your heart seems to bear even greater turmoil, and your thoughts are even more chaotic... Let this melody serve to calm your heart and mind."

A wisp of music began to play, gentle and soothing.

It was like on this hot afternoon, a gentle breeze wafted by, brushing over the pond, carrying with it a fragrance.

It was as if a dragonfly had skimmed the water and silently departed, leaving behind a ripple that gradually spread out. Ripples rhythmically appeared amidst the chirping of insects and cicadas around.

A lotus leaf gently tilted, and a drop of water slowly fell, landing in the water with a soft drip.

Thus, within the tranquility, there was liveliness, and the vision expanded. The refreshing water splashed onto his face, and overhead green shades swayed, blocking out the blazing sun. A beautiful woman stood beneath the vines, smiling gently, while a little maid giggled in the distance, running after a dragonfly. One could see the vast sky, with white clouds drifting leisurely, laughter seemingly coming from a distant place. It appeared like a distant scene, yet also like the melody in a dream.

Lying back on the reclining chair in the courtyard, one listened to the crisp laughter in the distance, and a smile involuntarily crept onto their lips.

The jianghu receded, the blood-colored clamor, the whistling of blades, they all drifted away with the crisp laughter of children as they raised kites in the distance.

The sound of the guqin gently ceased.

Zhao Changhe realized that he was leaning back in his chair and had nearly fallen asleep.

He rubbed his eyes in confusion. His mind was still blank for a moment. He had completely relaxed to the point where he could not gather his thoughts for a while.

Tang Wanzhuang looked at him with a hint of pity in her eyes. “You... are too tired. I’ve seen you thinking even when you sleep, at least that was the case last night.”

Zhao Changhe: “Uh...”

Indeed, last night... I was talking with the blind woman in his dreams, so did I really get to sleep?

Tang Wanzhuang continued, “And it’s not only your daily rest, but your cultivation is also too tense. Your blood and qi have been squeezed to the limit. Did you activate the state where vicious qi enters your mind at the tomb of the Sword Emperor? The vicious qi continues to boil, continuing to erode your flesh and blood, but you’re unaware of it... If this continues, it would be no different from overdrawing your body excessively in your youth and becoming feeble before you reach middle age.”

A corner of Zhao Changhe’s mouth twitched. “Did you really have to say it like that?”

“Isn’t it the same?” Tang Wanzhuang said calmly. “Ultimately, the human body is all the same. You need to consolidate your foundation. Stop blindly pursuing breakthroughs.”

Zhao Changhe checked his own state for a moment and he indeed felt the dissipation of vicious qi within his flesh and blood. He had been unable to sense it as it had been gradually eating away at him before, but under this melody, all of the vicious qi vanished, as if by magic.

Tang Wanzhuang could see what he was thinking and sighed. “This is not some sort of celestial magic. However, the music of the guqin is also a form of martial arts with its own special effects... But I don’t suggest that you focus on learning this.”

Zhao Changhe nodded and said, “I understand.”

“Is your mind calm now?”

“Yes.”

“Want to learn?”

Zhao Changhe stood up and bowed sincerely. “Miss Tang, please give me guidance.”

Miss Tang...

Is this the answer to your earlier dilemma on what to call me that lasted so long?

Tang Wanzhuang pondered for a moment, then suddenly smiled and said, “Come here, I’ll start by teaching you the basics, the notes of each string, and the basic fingerings.”

The eyes of the maid that had been carrying the guqin widened. “Y-Young miss...”

Tang Wanzhuang gave her a sharp look, “What’s with that expression on your face? Young Master Zhao is a genius. He can learn other people’s sword and saber intents with just a single look. Playing the guqin is just a matter of coordinating one’s fingers. He won’t need me to personally guide him with my hands. A demonstration or two, and he’ll naturally get it.”

The maid: “Oh...”

She carefully watched as Zhao Changhe sat next to Tang Wanzhuang, their shoulders nearly touching. She could not help but feel that it was inappropriate for them to sit so close to each other. It seemed too intimate. Her mind had not even shifted to the idea of hands-on guidance yet. Could the young miss be feeling bothered with this as well?

In fact, even when Zhao Changhe sat right next to Tang Wanzhuang and was enveloped in her fragrance, there were no ripples in his heart and mind.

The music that had played just now had calmed his mind completely, leaving no room for distractions in his mind. At this moment, all he wanted to do was to learn the guqin, knowing that it would be extremely beneficial for him.

Throughout his journey, vicious qi filled his body as bloodthirst filled his hands. Zhao Changhe had long worried about whether it would affect him in the future and cause him to eventually become a bloodthirsty maniac. However, in the past, he had underestimated the value of things like the four arts. But today, he discovered that they were truly useful.

They could gradually scatter the thoughts of swords and sabers, distance him from bloody madness, and leave him with nothing but the sights of the beauty that the jianghu held, as well as the tranquility of summer.

In this world, music was inherently a form of martial arts. Even if Tang Wanzhuang wanted him to learn something else, the principle would be the same.

Tang Wanzhuang's jade hands demonstrated the techniques before him, and it looked very simple... They were nothing more than bodily movements. Compared to her highly complex and difficult Spring Water Sword Intent, this was really simple.

It was also very beautiful. This was the first time that Zhao Changhe realized that just by looking at a pair of hands, one could feel the meaning of beauty.

It was also very elegant, and Zhao Changhe could not help but imagine himself playing the guqin gracefully in the future, just like Linghu Chong[1], playing Laughter on the Blue Sea. He felt that it would be so cool.

"It doesn't seem that difficult. Can I give it a try?" Zhao Changhe asked.

Tang Wanzhuang stepped aside in anticipation. "I trust in Young Master Zhao's comprehension ability..."

Before she finished speaking, Zhao Changhe stretched out his two arms toward the guqin, like a zombie extending its two claws, and one of the strings of the guqin broke.

Tang Wanzhuang: "..."

The maid who had been carrying the guqin squatted down to the ground and sobbed. “Wuuu.... I spent three hours tuning the strings yesterday... Waaah, young miss, is this your so-called genius? Why are you trying to teach a bear how to embroider flowers...”

Chapter 165: Crouching Dragon Phoenix Chick

Zhao Changhe’s face turned as red as an eggplant from embarrassment.

Did you really think that you’re someone who can learn sword and saber intents with a glance? Making a fool of others is one thing, but this time you’ve made a fool of yourself!

Did you really learn those things on your own? It was really thanks to the golden foil that slowed down and demonstrated those scenes dozens or even hundreds of times so that you could imitate them!

Besides, being talented at martial arts doesn’t mean that your talent translates to music. Understanding how it’s done in your mind is one thing, but executing it yourself is a whole different matter.

“Um... I, I’ll come back another day? I, I need to go and finish telling my maid a story first...”
Seeing that the string was broken and the guqin could no longer be played, Zhao Changhe found a poor excuse and fled as if his life depended on it.

Tang Wanzhuang watched him leave with a straight face, not taking her eyes off him until he turned the corner of the waterside pavilion and disappeared. Suddenly, she chuckled softly and murmured, “No wonder he gets along so well with Buqi, they’re both clearly big children.”

The maid was crying softly. “The string...”

“Come on, don’t cry, don’t cry. Tomorrow, I’ll help you teach him a lesson.”

“Young miss, are you really going to be with that stinky bear...”

“No, of course not. Zhao Changhe is a man that I can never have. Come on, don’t cry, your face is wet with tears now.”

The maid raised her head, tears welling in her eyes. “But, young miss, do you really want to have him?”

Tang Wanzhuang was taken aback for a moment, then chuckled softly. “You’re overthinking it. It’s not so much that I want to have him, it’s more like the Great Xia wants to have him, but it’s best... not to speak too soon.”

After saying that, she rose from her seat and prepared to leave.

The maid asked curiously, “Young miss, where are you going?”

“There are still many things left unfinished in Gusu...” Tang Wanzhuang sighed wearily. “He rushes around, never having peace of mind, and the same goes for me. You know, this fleeting half a day, where I listened to his story and he listened to my music...whether it was for him or for myself, I just can’t tell.”

*

Zhao Changhe returned to his guest house in a flash, but he paused at the door.

Sisi was sprawled out on his bed, sound asleep without a care in the world.

Zhao Changhe recalled the casual question he had asked in the morning. Perhaps she really didn’t have anywhere to sleep last night and actually just sat and meditated somewhere.

Judging from her beauty, she’s unlikely to be an ordinary person in the Ancient Spirit Tribe. She’s clearly well-nourished and she looks like she’s been spared manual labor. She thought she was Duan Yu, and she did not deny it when I called her a little princess before, so that might really be the case. But why would a little princess come out here to suffer?

Her lack of propriety is not just in terms of manners and modesty. Back at the White Lotus Temple, I forced her to kneel and she actually did it. That seems inconsistent with her identity as a little princess. What kind of princess would have so little dignity?

But no matter what, we’ve fought side by side and we’re basically friends now. It would be better to just let her tell me about her background in her own time.

Zhao Changhe stopped dwelling on such thoughts. He placed a thin blanket over her, then sat by the window to read.

The effect of that guqin was really good. I feel really calm even now. Before, I couldn't even concentrate when reading and I could never finish a book...

Looking back, he had been doing more than just rushing around. What he had been doing was practically exhausting himself to death.

Take things slow... Haste makes waste.

The vicious blood qi entwined around his body and spirit gradually calmed and became like a tranquil lake. Zhao Changhe even felt that the next attack would be delayed significantly.

Sisi, who was lying in bed, opened her eyes and glanced at the thin blanket covering her. She looked at Zhao Changhe quietly reading by the window.

Initially filled with resentment, she found herself inexplicably calmed, and she just silently watched him read for a while without speaking.

"You up?" Zhao Changhe turned over a page of the book. "Did you read this book before going to sleep?"

Sisi peered over and saw that it was the beginner's guide to couplets. She replied, "Yes, it's about the culture of the Central Plains. I wanted to learn it before, but I felt that martial arts were more important and I did not have the time to explore it further. It was only after listening to your story that I found the interest to pick up this beginner's guide for servants and maids."

"How was it? Did you find couplets interesting?"

"They're somewhat interesting, but they aren't that meaningful," Sisi lazily sat up, revealing her slim and beautiful figure. When she noticed that Zhao Changhe had not even glanced at her, she felt slightly annoyed and flirtatiously asked, "Hey, are you finding couplets more interesting than me?"

“I used to find them quite boring as well, but now that my mind has calmed down, I find them to be quite fascinating,” Zhao Changhe mused. “In the jianghu, there is wine but no poetry. It does feel like something’s missing... In the Great Xia, Tang Wanzhuang fills that gap.”

Sisi was shocked. “You actually have the gall to mention Tang Wanzhuang when talking to me?!”

Zhao Changhe chuckled helplessly. “I’m talking about the poetic and artistic representation that she embodies, not her as a person. You’re even less cultured than I am.”

“Of course, the beauty of a little foreign girl like me naturally can’t compare to the beauty of First Seat Tang, which is admired by the entire Jiangnan!” Sisi gritted her teeth. “This boring stuff like poetry and couplets, you can learn with just a glance. They’re nothing special!”

Zhao Changhe was astonished. “You can learn it with just a glance? Isn’t that like me thinking that playing the guqin is easy?”

Sisi retorted, “Isn’t it just finding antonyms and synonyms? What’s so difficult about that? Like you, Zhao Changhe, I heard that you killed a traitor named Wang Dashan. Don’t you feel that the two of you are a perfect match?”[1]

Zhao Changhe fell silent. “I also think that he and I match quite well in a couplet. Is my cultural level really at the same level as a foreigner?”

Sisi smirked and said, “See, isn’t it simple?”

“You’re indeed able to use ‘long river,’ but what about something more difficult? Like... the boatmen on a river?”

“Ham.”[2]

Zhao Changhe: “?”

“How about that? Isn’t it clever?” Sisi proudly stood with her hands on her hips. “Let me test you then, so that we can see if you’re as smart as me. Hmm... Let’s go with intelligent and wise, what are you going to pair it with?”

After a long silence, Zhao Changhe slowly replied, “Idiot?”

Sisi: “?”

They stared at each other, both with serious expressions.

Sisi finally realized that it was not as simple as she thought. Refuting defeat, she straightened her neck and said, “What’s the use of couplets anyway? Those people just give me a headache with their flowery language and complex expressions. In the end, it isn’t even as interesting as your Eight Books of the Heavenly Dragon. Come on, finish the story. It’s rare to see you with the free time to chat nonsense with me. If you don’t finish the story, some old hag might come and interrupt us again. It’s frustrating when a story constantly gets interrupted.”

“I’ve already been tortured enough by you guys. The story is just a story. There aren’t any hidden meanings behind it. I’m not some ‘brother immortal,’ and you’re not Jiumozhi. If you continue to listen with this train of thought, the original meaning of the story will be completely lost, and it won’t feel right even if I continue telling it to you.”

“Then at least finish telling me the part about the maid who can disguise herself?”

“Well, first, you have to agree that it isn’t about you. Otherwise, I really would rather not continue telling the story.”

“Okay, okay, it’s not about me,” Sisi assured, nudging his shoulder. “Come on, master, hurry up and continue.”

“Well then, it’s said that Duan Yu encountered a formidable man in the tavern...” Zhao Changhe finally resumed telling the story, although he had initially been hesitant. The love story between the maid who could disguise herself and a valiant and powerful man made Sisi feel like Zhao Changhe was really messing with her

And he’s even so shameless. He’s making it out as if the guy is some heroic and noble god of war. Anyone who listens to him would think that he’s boasting about himself. There’s even a Beggar’s Sect and Qiaofeng of the North? Why don’t you directly call it the mountain stronghold of Beimang?

Despite that, Sisi was surprisingly patient as he told the story, never interrupting him. She just rested her chin on her hands, her big eyes filled with admiration as she eagerly waited for the next part. But who knew what she was actually picturing in her head?

It was not until Zhao Changhe got to the part where Qiao Feng mistakenly killed A'Zhu and voided their alliance that Sisi's expression changed. Her gaze toward Zhao Changhe seemed to be filled with a desire to strangle him to death.

Zhao Changhe sighed and stopped telling the story, then he said, "So, as I said, this isn't some allegorical story that I just made up. I don't have that kind of skill, and I also don't have any reason to fabricate such an ending for you. This is just someone else's story."

"Is that why you don't want to disguise yourself as someone else?"

"Well... There are certain factors, I suppose."

Sisi thought for a long time and murmured to herself, "Regardless of whether it's a story you made up or not, you do have a bit of resemblance to Qiao Feng in my eyes... But unfortunately, aside from being able to disguise myself, I have absolutely no resemblance to A'Zhu. If you want a maid who is understanding and compassionate like her, you'd better ask Tang Buqi for a replacement. Anyone would be more suitable than me."

"Hey..."

Sisi smirked provocatively, "I never said that you were making it up. Do you dare to say that you don't want a little maid like that? It's just a pity that the one by your side isn't someone like that."

"You're not done? Why do you keep thinking that they're you?!" Zhao Changhe clenched his fist and threatened to hit her.

Sisi quickly put up a defensive stance.

Just as they were about to engage in a playful scuffle, Tang Wanzhuang's sigh interrupted them from outside. "Apologies for disturbing you again, Mister Zhao, but I'm afraid our leisurely break is coming to an end."

Zhao Changhe was startled. "What's going on?"

"The guards from the Tang Clan stationed at the exit of the Sword Emperor's tomb urgently reported tremors coming from below. It seems that something has happened," Tang Wanzhuang explained, her tone tinged with helplessness and weariness. "It's only been a day, and your injuries haven't fully recovered yet. You've just started to find some peace of mind. I really don't want you to be involved in another mess again so soon, but if I didn't tell you...you'd probably be rather displeased, right?"

Sisi's mood for playfulness vanished instantly, and her expression once again became solemn.

Zhao Changhe also felt that the world was deliberately urging him onward. He could not help but be a little suspicious of the blind woman. It seemed that there was no respite, no moment of leisure. Just as he started to enjoy the tranquility of storytelling, learning music, and teasing his maid, trouble came knocking in less than a day...

It made him wonder if his previous hectic life also bore the mark of orchestrated fate.

Was it pushing him to grow, regardless of the potential risks and exhaustion it might bring? If Tang Wanzhuang had not pointed it out, he may have never realized.

But dwelling on it would not change anything. In troubled times, there was hardly any leisure.

With this in mind, he chuckled lightly and said, "Why force action and stillness? When things come, just deal with them; when they're done, take a break. Once I understand my issues, I'll naturally address them. Besides, we'll have to explore the tomb sooner or later. Let's finish this task, and then you can teach me the guqin afterward."

After saying that, he turned around and picked up Dragon Bird from next to the window, slung it over his shoulder, and strode out. "Let's go. I might be like a bear attempting embroidery when I try playing the guqin, but now, it's time to release the bear into the woods!"