

T. Times 176

Chapter 176: Shouldn't I Live for Myself for a Day?

The plucking of strings reverberated through the room.

Zhao Changhe sat there in earnest, playing the guqin.

The maid stood nervously by the side, looking like she was ready to pounce at any time to save her precious guqin. If this bear shows even a hint of violence, I'll kick him through the wall and I won't let him three zhang from the guqin ever again.

However, it was very strange. Even though he had clumsily broken a string the last time he played, and he had not practiced playing the guqin these past few days, his posture now was inexplicably gentler and more relaxed. His current movements were devoid of the former stiffness that he had.

So, when he touched the strings, although his movements did still look relatively rigid, he could actually play it. Back then, the string had broken not because it was too tight, but because he was too tense. How could a martial artist who could even use a broad saber to shave his beard not be able to control his strength and end up breaking a string?

In comparison to back then, he was much calmer and relaxed.

The only issue now was that he had never learned any songs. He was simply following the piece that Tang Wanzhuang had played for him the other day, plucking each string to produce the corresponding notes, before plucking them in reverse. Ultimately, it sounded quite boring.

But it seemed like every beginner started this way. The maid recalled when she was just five years old and had started to... Oh well, forget it.

It was boring indeed, but Tang Wanzhuang simply leaned back against the headboard, and her eyes slightly closed. She looked like she was enjoying herself. After listening for a while, she even closed her eyes as if she was dozing off, resting comfortably.

The maid's eyes enlarged into two full circles. She could not find anything pleasant in these repetitive and boring notes. There isn't even a hint of rhythm! It would be pretty good if you don't

start feeling irritable after listening to it for a while. How can you actually relax while listening to this?

After playing blindly for a few minutes, Zhao Changhe himself became impatient with his own playing. He began to think of ways to play simple melodies.

When he thought of simple melodies, the first thing that came to mind was “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” He tried plucking the strings to the melody of the lullaby, and surprisingly, he actually managed to do it. Zhao Changhe could not help but grin, finding it quite fun!

But then he got stuck, and he could not figure out how to play the Fa note... Helplessly, he turned to the maid for assistance. “Hey...”

“My name is not ‘hey.’ I’m referred to as the guqin-carrying maid. And no, you can’t call me that. You must address me as ‘miss.’”

“Oh, Miss Carrier...”

The maid glared at him. “My surname is not Carrier!”

“Shh!” Zhao Changhe shushed her. “Your young lady is resting. Don’t get loud.”

The maid lowered her voice. “What do you want?”

“I’m humming a piece. Can you teach me how to play this note?” Zhao Changhe hummed the melody of the lullaby. “Where are the first two notes?”

“Your humming sounds terrible. I never thought that someone’s humming could sound like the squealing of a pig.”

Zhao Changhe rubbed his fists. The maid stood up and took a half step back.

“That’s a modified tone. You’ll need to use your left hand to change the tuning to play it. You can’t play it with just one hand.” Tang Wanzhuang’s leisurely voice came from the bedside. “Demonstrate it for him.”

The maid reluctantly moved closer and demonstrated with her small hands. While using her left hand to press down on one side of one of the strings, she used her right to pluck it. She played the note he was looking for.

Tang Wanzhuang closed her eyes and said softly, “This is not actually as complex as it seems. It simply requires coordination between both hands. It’s quite difficult for normal beginners, but for a martial artist like you, it should be relatively easy, especially since you have the habit of swinging your saber with your right hand while preparing to throw stones from your pocket with your left.”

Zhao Changhe was speechless. You know a lot, don’t you? I bet you once had a pile of investigation reports about me on your desk.

Tang Wanzhuang smiled faintly and said, “Alright, give it a try. I look forward to hearing the proper and complete piece by the end of today.”

The maid said, “Isn’t this just a nursery rhyme, young miss? What’s there to look forward to...”

“What’s wrong with nursery rhymes? I happen to want to listen to songs for children.” Tang Wanzhuang’s voice grew softer and softer. “My mother never played any for me...”

The maid fell silent.

Zhao Changhe also remained silent. He was focused on learning the fingering methods that the maid used earlier to play the right tones. After fiddling around for a while, he finally figured it out and continued playing the piece.

After clumsily finishing the nursery rhyme, he glanced at Tang Wanzhuang, who was leaning against the headboard of her bed. Her tense brow gradually relaxed, and she seemed to have loosened up quite a bit. This time, she really appeared to have fallen asleep.

Not daring to continue playing, Zhao Changhe shushed the maid one last time before quietly leaving the room.

The maid hesitated for a moment, then quietly followed after him, and stopped him at the door. “Um, is there something special about that melody? I’ve played many soothing melodies for the

young miss to help her relax, but none of them have had this effect... Meanwhile, your playing was awful, yet it was actually able to produce such an effect..."

"Can't you speak more tactfully?"

"Isn't honesty important?"

"Why are you asking this? Are you trying to help your young miss?"

"Yes..."

"In that case, there's probably no hope." Zhao Changhe sighed. "It's not really about the song; she just enjoys seeing me follow the path she envisioned, and that brings her some peace of mind. Her other troubles are beyond her control. She can only look from the side, helpless. She doesn't know when they'll end. I've simply become something she can anticipate, something concrete to hold onto, nothing more."

"But...why does she suddenly like nursery rhymes? It's not like nobody has played them for her before. Even I have played them in the past while practicing."

"It's not that she has never heard nursery rhymes, it's just that nobody has played them specifically for her. In people's minds, she's formidable. Even though they worry about her injuries and fatigue and they tell her to take care of herself, they never think to tell her that she can stop handling her affairs or that they will help share her burden. They only ever hope for her recovery so that she can go back to supporting the world."

The maid was left speechless, unsure of what to do.

"It's a shame. I can only really say the first part to her as well. I simply don't think I can share her burden in supporting the world." Zhao Changhe patted the maid on the shoulder, then turned and walked away. "Take good care of your young miss, don't let her catch a cold."

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Back in his guest house, Zhao Changhe took a long bath before taking out the golden foil and the sword seal again to continue studying.

After fulfilling his promise to Sisi, it was time to focus on his own research.

What he had given to Sisi was the sword art suitable for activating the first Profound Mystery. Zhao Changhe could recite the key points and mimic the movements, but in reality, it was just a façade. He could not unleash its true power. His understanding of sword arts was only really at the Profound Gate. Anything beyond that was beyond his grasp.

In fact, although he had comprehended Profound Gate sword arts, he could not even unleash those to their fullest potential, much less the Profound Mystery one. The same went for the ultimate technique of the Vicious Blood Saber Art that was created for the eighth layer of the Profound Gate; he had yet to even try it.

Therefore, his current goal was very clear: to find special ultimate techniques that he could reasonably use to their fullest potential right now and attempt to integrate them into his saber art.

Although having a sword in his left hand and a saber in his right might look cool, it would be really inconvenient. It was better for him to focus on his saber art for now.

At this time, the Heavenly Tome seemed to have unsealed and evolved further.

Not only could it create an illusory space where he could watch the Sword Emperor preach firsthand, but now he could also control this illusory space like a lucid dream, showcasing whatever content he desired. For example, at this moment, he only wanted the Sword Emperor to demonstrate the techniques that could be used between the fifth to seventh layers of the Profound Gate, and the Sword Emperor would comply, allowing him to choose from the various techniques of the emperor's sword arts.

I wonder, as the Heavenly Tome becomes more and more sentient, will it eventually try to kill me? Eh...whatever, that's a concern for another day. For now, I've got too many sword arts to consider to be thinking about anything else.

There were only too many such sword moves demonstrated by Sword Emperor for the fifth to seventh layers of the Profound Gate.

What he had given Sisi was just one kind of sword intent and one set of sword arts. As the so-called general outline of sword arts, how could the sword seal only have one system or category of sword

arts? There were countless types of sword intent and sword arts, all of which needed a lifetime of study to be fully understood. Just at this level alone, there were already at least a hundred different kinds of sword arts, and even a casual selection could yield hundreds of moves worthy of being called ultimate techniques.

Most of them were not suitable to be integrated into his saber art, as they simply did not fit a saber or Zhao Changhe's style. Thus, after carefully sifting through them, he narrowed it down to about a dozen options.

After eliminating some that had relatively redundant effects, Zhao Changhe finally settled on three of them.

All his thoughts now focused on how to integrate these three sword arts into his saber art. When he achieved this, would it finally be time for him to depart?

Just as this thought arose, Zhao Changhe shook his head.

Why am I starting to think like this again? I need to slow down and calm down... I should not rush to finish things just for the sake of it.

There was nothing that required his urgent attention. Patience was key.

Knock, knock, knock~

The sound of knocking interrupted his thoughts

Zhao Changhe withdrew his focus from the Heavenly Tome and realized that he had spent the entire night choosing from the sword arts. It was already dawn.

When he opened the door, he saw Tang Wanzhuang standing outside with a smile. "Now that you don't need to write the manual anymore, am I still welcome here?"

"Are you feeling better?"

“I need some more rest, but I’m fine. It’s been a long time since I slept as peacefully as last night. Thank you for your nursery rhyme.”

“So, are you also going to take things easy? You aren’t planning to deal with the Maitreya Cult today?”

“I think I won’t. Shouldn’t I live for myself for a day?”

“In that case, I’d like to make a request...” Zhao Changhe said. “How about spending today helping me instead?”

Tang Wanzhuang tilted her head in puzzlement.

Without any embarrassment, he said very naturally, “I’ve chosen three sword arts, and I’m considering how to integrate them into my saber art. Since you’re a grandmaster, could you give me some advice?”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled. “Certainly, as you wish.”

Chapter 177: Master...

As a so-called grandmaster, her understanding of martial arts had long surpassed the limitations of weapons.

While Tang Wanzhuang did use a sword, she probably had a better understanding of the saber than ninety-nine percent of all saber users in the world. Transforming sword arts into saber arts was as easy as eating and drinking for her.

Zhao Changhe even wondered whether the three that he had selected would appear no different from ordinary techniques in Tang Wanzhuang’s eyes.

“The techniques of the Sword Emperor are indeed vast and profound. His understanding of the sword encompasses everything. These three sword techniques can almost be regarded as belonging to different systems. It was as if they were taught to you by three different masters. It’s difficult to imagine that they came from a single inheritance,” Tang Wanzhuang exclaimed. “If I were to face such techniques, even I would find them quite troublesome.”

Zhao Changhe was very surprised. “But for you, these should only be considered low-level techniques. Why would they be troublesome?”

“That only goes to show your lack of understanding. For one, you should not underestimate your own technique Scattering the Gods and Buddhas,” Tang Wanzhuang said. “If an ultimate technique is only considered a good technique at the third layer of the Profound Gate and it becomes useless at higher levels of cultivation, then it does not deserve to be called an ultimate technique at all.”

Zhao Changhe humbly asked for advice. “Can you explain it in more detail?”

“The reason something can be regarded as an ultimate technique in the first place is that it has something that makes it fundamentally different from ordinary techniques. The true significance of Scattering the Gods and Buddhas lies in teaching you how to actively manifest your vicious qi to create a sense of suppression and fear, rather than merely what angle you should slash with your saber at or whether it must be executed while leaping in the air like a frog.”

Zhao Changhe was speechless.

“At the moment, jumping up in the air is indeed necessary for you because of your low cultivation. It’s only by doing so that you can maximize your utilization of power and facilitate visual and psychological suppression. But once you grasp the meaning it contains, then any strike you make in the future can be like Scattering the Gods and Buddhas. The only reason why it is regarded as an ultimate technique of the third layer is because that is the necessary cultivation for its effects to be achieved. It does not mean that its value is limited to that level of cultivation.”

Zhao Changhe had a sudden revelation. It was as if a lightning bolt had struck his mind.

So that’s how it is.

This was something that the Heavenly Tome’s dissections and slow-motion demonstrations could not provide—actual explanations from a true master.

“A saber art or sword art becomes a true system because it guides you in laying a foundation step by step from when your cultivation is still low, helping you understand its full significance until you can return to the basics and integrate everything you’ve learned into your saber intent. At that point, even a simple chop won’t be so simple anymore.”

This was how the Sword Emperor ultimately managed to produce such immense power with such simple horizontal and vertical slashes. In the end, he had already gone so far down his sword path that he was already at the point where countless sword paths converged.

Zhao Changhe bowed sincerely and said, “Thank you, First Seat Tang.”

Tang Wanzhuang’s beautiful eyes lingered on his face for a moment before she said leisurely, “You’re still addressing me as First Seat? Isn’t that too formal?”

“...Miss Tang.”

“Ha...” Tang Wanzhuang did not continue to dwell on how he addressed her. Instead, she drew her sword. “Now, let me show you how to modify the three moves... The difference between the sword and saber lies only in the way it manipulates or carries energy. While one is light and agile, the other is heavy and forceful. However, you should have known long ago that a saber can also move lightly, and a sword can also be forceful. Now, watch closely...”

Swish!

Sword qi shot up and pierced through the sky.

In Zhao Changhe’s eyes, it was as if the sword qi was the arrow that Hou Yi shot at the scorching sun, which then transformed into the battle axe in Xingtian’s hands. [1]

Meanwhile, the delicate fairy before him suddenly seemed to turn into Lady of the Nine Heavens[2], heroic and awe-inspiring, commanding tens of thousands of troops.

The sword light flowed continuously, spreading throughout the universe, while the saber descended like swarms of locusts, raining down.

The saber and sword could be interchanged.

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The sword arts that should have taken a lot of effort to modify and understand were completed and thoroughly understood within an hour.

With the guidance of a master who was third on the Ranking of Earth, Zhao Changhe was saved from countless trials and errors.

Ever since coming into this world, he claimed to have relied on his own efforts, claiming to have never had a brilliant master or teacher, and simply using the Heavenly Tome as a substitute. But in fact, he had always had wonderful teachers.

Instructor Sun was an excellent teacher who helped him lay his foundations. Although his cultivation was not high, his foundation was extremely solid and he was also extremely responsible. Even though he could no longer beat Zhao Changhe now, Zhao Changhe still regarded him as his teacher in his heart.

Then, there was Yue Hongling. When she was in the mountain stronghold, she had also taught him a lot, mainly in terms of combat experience, various routines, and how to handle different situations. This greatly contributed to his combat abilities, marking the beginning of his leap in combat power. If it was not for her guidance, he would have just remained a rough and inexperienced figure in the mountain stronghold.

However, Yue Hongling did not have a deep understanding of saber arts. Although she wanted to teach Zhao Changhe more, her own abilities were limited. When it came to the application of more advanced saber arts, Zhao Changhe had indeed always relied on his own exploration after what Instructor Sun had taught him.

But now, there was Tang Wanzhuang.

When she was in Sword Lake City, Tang Wanzhuang actually intended to become his master, but she could not help but be wary and did not dare assume the role of an imperial tutor. Moreover, Zhao Changhe had been unwilling to accept her as his master.

But today, those disinclinations had been thrown out the window by both of them. What did it matter if one was a master or not? Couldn't friends teach each other as well?

Even though Tang Wanzhuang inwardly still saw this as nurturing the prince... But if he wasn't the prince, would I still be willing to teach him? Yes, I would. That settles it.

“It’s only halfway through the morning.” Zhao Changhe put away his saber and wiped his sweat. “I thought that this would take me many days to figure out. Thank you, master.”

Just a moment ago, he addressed her as “Miss Tang,” but now he referred to her as “master,” albeit in a joking tone.

Tang Wanzhuang chuckled, “Oh? Are you implying that you’ve finished your learning and it’s time to move on?”

“I actually thought about that last night. I’m not going to be leaving just yet,” Zhao Changhe said leisurely. “I’ll leave when I start feeling tired of hanging around here.”

“When do you think that will be?”

“I don’t know. But for now, I’m not bored of this place just yet. Unless the Tang Clan thinks that I eat too much and wants to kick me out, I’d at least like to learn how to play the guqin.”

Tang Wanzhuang was somewhat surprised. “You really intend to learn the guqin now? I recall you being quite reluctant about it before, considering it only as a way to calm yourself down.”

“Well, it’s because I suddenly thought that it would be quite fun to play the songs in my mind last night, hahaha.”

“You’ve got songs in your mind? Are they nursery rhymes?”

“I know plenty of songs! But to your ears, they might not be nursery rhymes, but rather folk songs. They aren’t worth mentioning.”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled and said, “Then go ahead and learn. I’d like to see how many songs you’ve got.”

Throwing the towel back into the basin, Zhao Changhe glanced at her for a moment before suddenly asking, “Why does it seem like you’re the one who’s always rushing around these days?”

You've been preaching to me about calming and slowing down, yet you always seem to feel the need to do something yourself."

Tang Wanzhuang was startled. "Well, people always have goals in mind for their actions, don't they? Otherwise, what would they do, just idle away their time?"

"Can't we just do things purely for leisure or entertainment sometimes?" Zhao Changhe asked. "If you're spending the day helping me, then does that even still count?"

"It does," Tang Wanzhuang replied, a bit annoyed, thinking to herself that if he dared to tease or flirt with her, then she would splash ink on his face again.

But then Zhao Changhe continued, "I've been in Gusu for ten days now, and apart from initially going out to investigate for the vicious qi case, I haven't really gotten to go around. As they say, the heavens above, Suzhou and Hangzhou below[3]. I've come to such a renowned tourist destination, but I've yet to see its many sights. Looking back now, it seems quite foolish. I want to stroll around Gusu or ride a boat on Taihu Lake. Master, what do you think of being my guide?"

Tang Wanzhuang's expression turned somewhat strange. "Riding a boat on Taihu Lake..."

"Yeah," Zhao Changhe said. "Riding a boat on Taihu Lake, playing the guqin in the cabin, the sunlight reflecting on the water, music drifting in the clear sky, the mind calm and expansive. Wouldn't that be wonderful? First Seat Tang, it seems like it's been a long time since you've experienced such a scene. But in my heart, that's how I see you."

Tang Wanzhuang stared at him blankly, her heart stirred by the scene he described, feeling a sense of longing.

Yes, it had indeed been at least ten years since she had experienced something like that.

It was a time when she had a carefree smile—a smile now lost in the storms of life, nowhere to be found.

Despite knowing that the storm of the Maitreya Cult was looming nearby, and it was particularly awkward to be leisurely boating during such times, especially with a man...

But... couldn't she live just for herself for once in this lifetime?

Tang Wanzhuang could not bring herself to refuse. She was unable to utter the words of rejection. It was as if she had detached from her own body as she saw herself softly say, "Okay."

1. Hou Yi is the archer that shot down eight of the nine original suns because they were scorching the earth. Xingtian is a kind of titan who fought against the Supreme Deity. When he was beheaded, he kept fighting using his nipples as eyes and his belly button as a mouth. Yes, you read that right. He has thus become a representation of indomitable spirit. 📖

2. Also known as Jiutian Xuannü. She is the goddess of war, sex, and longevity in Chinese mythology. 📖

3. Two major cities in China. Gusu is actually a part of Suzhou 📖

Chapter 178: Boating on Taihu

"This is Taihu Lake..."

The small wupeng boat[1] drifted aimlessly on the lake. Zhao Changhe lay at the bow, basking in the sunlight, unfazed by the warmth.

The breeze from the lake brought a refreshing chill.

Or perhaps it was simply because his heart was truly calm at the moment?

Looking at the vast expanse of the lake, the clear water revealed even the fish below. There were also other boats in the distance, accompanied by the melodious songs of boatmen carried by the wind, which were incredibly soothing to listen to.

For a man from the north who had never seen the sea, this felt like the ocean, yet it was surely calmer than the vastness of the sea, or the rushing currents of a river. It was more delicate, serene, and gentle.

Just like Tang Wanzhuang.

It was as if all the beauty of the world had gathered in her, encapsulating the essence of Jiangnan at a glance.

People often compared Xi Lake to Xi Shi[2], and the same could be said for Tang Wanzhuang. Whether lightly adorned or heavily covered in makeup, she always looked beautiful.

She sat in the cabin, leisurely playing the guqin, playing melodies that Zhao Changhe had never heard before.

In ordinary circumstances, these tunes might have seemed slow and uninteresting, impossible for someone like him to appreciate. But at this moment and in this setting, they rippled through his soul like water, brushing against his cheeks like the gentle breeze on the lake, leaving him unwilling to think about anything else, simply intoxicated by the serene lake and the clear breeze.

In this moment, the glare of blades, the moments of life and death, the troubled times that plagued the world, all of it seemed distant. It was as if they were in a different realm altogether.

Zhao Changhe reached for his old wine gourd and took a big gulp of liquor.

The jianghu that Yue Hongling dreams of... isn't this it?

Wandering the jianghu carrying sword and gourd, indulging in women with slender waists and delicate hands... Indeed, this is it.

It's just that the slender waist doesn't really belong to me, but it's close enough, right?

Tang Wanzhuang's beautiful eyes fell on Zhao Changhe as he was lounging at the bow, drinking leisurely, and there was a hint of annoyance in her eyes.

She initially thought that he would play the guqin for her, but it turned out to be the other way around. He lay there drinking, looking as if he had invited a girl from the bamboo pavilion of the Myriad Flowers Building in Sword Lake City to accompany him.

Tang Wanzhuang found it somewhat amusing. She felt that his attitude was really casual.

In the past, he would always think carefully before speaking, but now he seemed so relaxed, as if nothing was holding him back anymore.

“Hey!” she finally could not help but call out. “Are you letting me rest, or are you making me your personal musician to accompany your leisure?” From outside the cabin, Zhao Changhe’s voice came faintly amidst the lake breeze, “Didn’t you just tell me to live for myself?”

Tang Wanzhuang was both amused and annoyed, “You’re quite good at turning the tables, aren’t you. Is it because Sisi left and you’re short of a maid now?”

“No way, how could that be? You’re my master,” Zhao Changhe laughed. “But why bother about who plays for whom? I’m just taking it easy. Don’t you feel content right now?”

Tang Wanzhuang actually wanted to agree with him but decided to put on a stern face instead. “You play, I lie there and drink. I’ll be content that way.”

“How stingy,” Zhao Changhe leisurely got up and slipped into the cabin. “I’m still not that good at the guqin. Master, can you continue teaching me?”

In order to create a relaxed atmosphere, they deliberately did not use the Tang Clan’s large boat, opting for a small, simple boat instead. Zhao Changhe, being as big as he was, felt like he took up half of the cabin as soon as he entered.

Tang Wanzhuang reluctantly shifted to make room for him before gesturing for him to sit by the guqin.

But as soon as he sat down, it felt cramped, and their arms were nearly touching.

Tang Wanzhuang glanced sideways with an expressionless face while Zhao Changhe stiffly focused on the guqin.

“Never mind,” Tang Wanzhuang decided not to dwell on it and began teaching, “Playing the guqin involved fingering techniques. It’s not just a matter of plucking the strings to make a sound. Watch carefully...”

Her white, jade-like fingers danced on the strings, graceful and elegant as they pressed and pinched the strings. She was clearly demonstrating the finger techniques, but Zhao Changhe ended up getting captivated by the movements of her hands rather than paying attention to the technique.

How beautiful.

“Alright, why don’t you give it a try?” Tang Wanzhuang nudged him with her shoulder, slightly expectant.

After a moment of hesitation, Zhao Changhe lowered his head and said, “I didn’t get it. Can you demonstrate it again?”

Tang Wanzhuang said with curiosity, “When you were learning such complex ultimate techniques in the morning, and even though they contained countless sword intents and endless variations, you mastered them after just practicing them a few times. This fingering technique should be very simple for you in comparison, especially since you have experience with Yue Hongling’s hidden weapons techniques. Why are you suddenly acting stupid?”

Zhao Changhe lowered his head and muttered, “I was just watching your hands...”

Tang Wanzhuang was speechless.

Zhao Changhe also shut his mouth, well aware that he had put his foot in it.

Tang Wanzhuang expressionlessly held her hands in front of his eyes. “Have you seen enough yet? If not, you can keep looking for another hour.”

Before Zhao Changhe could say anything, her hand suddenly moved and swiftly smacked him in the face. “Don’t be shy, I can even let you feel it!”

“Fuck...” Zhao Changhe’s face stung, not from the slap, but from embarrassment.

Tang Wanzhuang glanced at him for a moment before saying, “Actually, if you learn this, you can develop it into a set of acupoint manipulation techniques. The time you’ve had to practice martial arts is incredibly short, and most of your skills are with the saber. When it comes to barehanded combat, you are far behind. This could be a great supplement for that.”

Zhao Changhe instantly felt energized. “Quick, demonstrate it again! I only need to see it once and I’ll get it!”

Tang Wanzhuang simply did not know where to laugh or cry seeing his reaction.

But it was true. Once Zhao Changhe linked this to his understanding of martial arts, he indeed learned it after just watching it once. Although he was relatively unfamiliar with it, his understanding of the movements was really thorough, and he did not require a third demonstration.

“Now let me teach you how to slide your fingers along the strings...”

The small boat floated leisurely on the lake. The male disciple and the female master sat closely together in the cramped cabin. A refreshing fragrance filled their noses, and their shoulders occasionally brushed against each other as they whispered softly, exchanging words intimately.

A passing boatman could not help but smile at the heartwarming scene.

What a wonderful scene. When I get home, I’ll remind that stinky brat to go and look for a wife. He’s already grown old enough, yet all he does is fool around every day.

As the sun set, the lake’s surface shimmered with golden light. Occasionally, fish leaped out of the water, sending ripples across the lake’s surface. In the distance, the songs of boatwomen could be heard, in the tender speech of Wu[3], soothing the heart more than the songs Zhao Changhe had heard around Qinghe.

Leaning against the cabin, Tang Wanzhuang held a small and exquisite wine flagon in her hand, sipping leisurely from it.

Her poor disciple was still inside, familiarizing himself with the finger techniques. As for whether he could really turn them into a set of acupoint manipulation techniques, she had no idea. That was something she had simply made up on the fly.

He’s the one who was supposed to be playing the guqin from the start anyway. Did he really think that I was just some girl he got from the bamboo pavilion behind the Myriad Flowers Building in Sword Lake City?

However, Tang Wanzhuang was actually formulating a set of acupoint manipulation techniques in her mind, tweaking her own techniques and incorporating some finger techniques from the guqin into it. When the time came, she could teach them to him and present them as a complete set.

Did he think that I can't trick people just because I'm the chief of some official bureau? Anyway, the set of techniques I'll impart to him at that time won't be that bad; they might even end up becoming renowned throughout the world...

Songs sung by boatwomen rose and fell melodiously on the lake, most of which were love songs. Tang Wanzhuang could not quite decide on how to feel about that.

In the past, she had actually been somewhat afraid of such scenes and songs, fearing that they would distract people from their duties with their soft melodies. Today, however, they seemed fitting, apart from the fact that love songs didn't exactly suit the two of them.

"Hey," Tang Wanzhuang took a leisurely sip of wine and called out at the cabin. "You said you had some songs in mind. Why don't you join the atmosphere and sing a song yourself?"

"Aren't these ladies' songs quite nice? Their voices are great too. I even feel like giving them a tip. Why would I want to interrupt them?"

"Are these soft, gentle songs suitable for a man like you? How about a song from the jianghu? I'd like to hear what powerful words the Bloodthirsty Asura has."

"But this atmosphere is not suitable for forceful songs at all. Are you trying to detach yourself from this soft mood?"

Tang Wanzhuang fell silent and drank without saying a word.

He's so sharp. How does he understand me so well? It's really strange how he does that when we've hardly had any interaction.

Zhao Changhe suddenly asked, "Forget about forceful songs, do you want to hear a woman's song?"

Tang Wanzhuang came back to her senses and asked curiously, “Aren’t the people singing around us women?”

“There are plenty of women in the world, how can they all be attuned to the lasting romance between men and women?” Zhao Changhe plucked a few of the guqin’s strings. The sound of his playing shifted from the stiffness when he was practicing to something more free-spirited.

Tang Wanzhuang glanced back at the cabin. She then heard an unfamiliar-sounding voice sing, “No matter how cold the wind is, I don’t want to escape. No matter how beautiful the flowers are, I don’t want them. I drift about...”

Tang Wanzhuang stared blankly at the setting sun in the distance, intending to say, “This song seems to suit Yue Hongling more, not me.” However, as she listened, she gradually became entranced, and those words never left her mouth.

1. Traditional boat with black awning. 📖

2. One of the Four Beauties of China, four women in Chinese history whose beauty gave them influence over kingdoms. 📖

3. Wu Chinese, and particularly its prestige dialect, the Suzhou dialect, are considered soft and soothing to the ear. 📖

Chapter 179: Wind Rises in Yanmen

As the setting sun sank beneath the horizon, the small boat drifted ashore. The two of them enjoyed a leisurely meal consisting of an entire fish at a fisherman’s house by the shore before returning home in high spirits.

Days such as today had been truly rare for him ever since he had transmigrated into this world. Now that Zhao Changhe looked back, he slightly regretted not having stayed a few more days at the Cui Clan’s residence.

Although he did accompany Yangyang at their horse ranch, it had been primarily to learn equestrian skills rather than to enjoy some time with her. As he thought back to the regretful look in her eyes back then, he could not help but feel some regret.

After being separated for so long, he could not help but wonder how she was doing now, and whether she had already forgotten about him... In fact, he still believed that Yangyang's so-called liking of him had mostly been born out of reliance and gratitude during times of peril, rather than being genuine love. After so long, he believed that those feelings should have already dissipated. Cui Wenjing had likely felt the same way, with that also being the reason for the three years he had set.

If only he had been more decisive back then and planted a kiss on that little girl's rosy lips, then perhaps he would not have to even ponder about these things right now.

At that time, despite being called a bandit, he had been too pure and naive.

Is it the same now? Zhao Changhe glanced at Tang Wanzhuang, who was walking quietly beside him, and sighed.

No, this is different. She's only comfortable with getting close to me because I clearly expressed no interest in her. A few playful remarks may be fine, but if I developed genuine feelings, it's almost guaranteed that our relationship would collapse.

It's a pity, she really is incredibly beautiful. Especially right now, with that hint of melancholy in her expression. She truly looks like Xi Shi furrowing her brow. It's a shame that I'm not skilled at painting and won't be able to capture this beautiful moment.

Between men and women, there's no such thing as pure friendship. Even if there were no intentions of that nature initially, when faced with such exceptional beauty, natural attraction would take over.

"What are you thinking about?" Zhao Changhe found himself asking.

"I'm thinking about your song. It's a shame that I can't smile at this world. Perhaps when I'm looking back years later, I might be able to."

Maybe you will. You know, that song really was not for Yue Hongling. Yue Hongling is still young, so how could she have these feelings? Perhaps in the future... if you really let go of everything, you might just be able to be free.

Perhaps Zhao Changhe's advice to her to be more carefree was what she secretly hoped for herself in the future.

Who did not want to sing freely and enjoy good liquor, enjoying everything as it came?

It was unfortunate that she could not do that at the moment, and even more unfortunate that she might not be able to do that at all in the future.

Even just by stealing this single day to enjoy the experience of a fleeting life, Tang Wanzhuang felt a sense of guilt, suddenly having a bad premonition for the future.

When the two of them were leisurely returning to the Tang residence, it was already getting quite late and the sky had already begun to turn dark. Wu Weiyang of the Demon Suppression Bureau hurriedly went to Tang Wanzhuang's waterside pavilion and saw the guqin-carrying maid sitting on a stone, hugging her knees and lost in thought.

"Miss Guqin, is First Seat Tang resting at the moment? Please inform her that Wu Weiyang has come to seek an audience with her."

The guqin-carrying maid looked up blankly and said, "The young miss is not at home."

Wu Weiyang said, "Oh, where did the bureau chief go to do work? I'll go look for her."

"...Must the young miss always be doing work?"

Wu Weiyang was dumbfounded: "Huh?"

The guqin-carrying maid, with her chin resting on her knees, muttered, "I don't know if this also counts as official business for the young miss. But to think that she didn't even bring me with her... Does this mean that she won't be needing me in the future anymore..."

Wu Weiyang: "?"

At this moment, Tang Wanzhuang just got back and stepped into the courtyard, "Weiyang, why are you here? What happened?"

“Chief!” Wu Weiyang stepped forward and lowered his voice. “There’s an urgent report from the border. The northern barbarians have stationed troops at Yanmen Pass, causing a stir in the capital.”

The guqin-carrying maid was startled and raised her head, but Tang Wanzhuang simply stood there quietly, saying nothing for a long time.

Wu Weiyang also cautiously glanced at her expression, but found that there was nothing but calmness on her face.

There was no anger nor anxiety as he had expected, rather there seemed to be... a hint of regret?

After a while, Tang Wanzhuang sighed softly and said, “Chi Li originally came to Jiangnan to communicate with Maitreya. Since the northern barbarians have begun moving, Maitreya should also start moving soon.”

“Yes, this is precisely why I came to find you. Maitreya is likely raising troops at the moment in response to these movements. We’re currently in Jiangnan, what should we do?”

Tang Wanzhuang shook her head slightly. “During the past few days, we’ve already had our bureau’s undercover agents within Maitreya Cult’s forces handle matters covertly. In the future, we will be cooperating with them in secret. As for other matters, there isn’t really much more that we can do within the confines of our responsibilities.”

She paused for a moment, then added, “I will immediately go to Jinling to oversee the situation. As long as Jinling still stands, Jinling and Gusu can support one another. There is also still support from Yangzhou in Jiangbei, so the situation isn’t that bad. In fact, if Maitreya really tries to raise troops now, he’s unlikely to succeed, because the timing isn’t right.”

Wu Weiyang nodded and said, “Yes, thankfully the affairs in the Gusu and Yangzhou were handled well...”

Lowering his voice, he added, “That we didn’t foresee this is one thing, but I’m afraid even he never expected that casually solving two cases would turn out to be so important. It’s truly providence.”

Tang Wanzhuang said calmly, “Be careful of what you say.”

Wu Weiyang pursed his lips and whispered, "Maitreya's actions, with the timing not being right, might still be manageable... However, once this starts, the thieves will rise up, the aristocratic families will seize opportunities, the sects will go into seclusion, and chaos will ensue."

Whether it was purely out of worry, or whether he was instigating the Tang Clan to seize control of Jiangdong[1], Tang Wanzhuang recalled Zhao Changhe's words from yesterday and sighed softly. She did not respond right away. Instead, she said, "Before going to Jinling, I still need to make a trip. There are some matters that have yet to be concluded and must be settled. Go to my elder brother... No, go look for Buqi instead, he should be in secluded cultivation at the moment. Have him come out and assist in the management of Gusu."

Wu Weiyang saluted and accepted the orders, "Yes."

Tang Wanzhuang said no more. Her figure flickered, and a moment later, she was at the guest house.

*

At this time, Zhao Changhe was still lying on the bed, watching the Heavenly Tome.

This time, instead of watching the Sword Emperor, he was looking at Tang Wanzhuang when she was helping him modify the ultimate techniques.

He knew that it was just a phantom, but it felt just too real. Even the admonishing gaze in her eyes when she was correcting his movements were faithfully reproduced. The same went for the familiar fragrance from her body that permeated the air. The slowed-down movements allowed for a closer look, and he could even see the tiny hairs on her hand.

Zhao Changhe could not help but feel that with how slow she was moving, he could easily move over and kiss her.

But in the end, this was just a phantom. It was untouchable. Am I a pervert for thinking about this stuff?

It was quite tragic. He had clearly intended to review the ultimate skills in the Heavenly Tome, but he had ended up not practicing a single move and instead daydreamed.

It seems that it's really gotten quite pent-up... Zhao Changhe even had the thought of taking care of it himself. He could not just keep waiting for Chichi. Furthermore, she had even told him not to hold himself back and encouraged him to look for someone else to take care of it when needed. But he hadn't found anyone else to help him with it, so was he supposed to just do it himself?

But then he felt that it was too pathetic to do it on his own at this stage of his life. If the Heavenly Tome saw him resorting to self-pleasure at such an age, he would feel embarrassed to the point where he'd want to move on to a different world...

While he was struggling internally, he heard Tang Wanzhuang's voice, "Mister Zhao..."

Zhao Changhe was stunned. "What the hell? Am I starting to hallucinate because of my perverse thoughts?"

Tang Wanzhuang's voice sounded strange: "What's perverse?"

Wait, it's coming from outside! Zhao Changhe suddenly realized and he abruptly withdrew from the illusory world of the Heavenly Tome. He stuffed the golden foil into his pocket and hurried to open the door.

Sure enough, the real Tang Wanzhuang was standing outside. She looked at him suspiciously as she asked, "Mister Zhao...what kind of hallucinations were you having?"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

It's over. Anyone who heard that would think that I was dreaming of Tang Wanzhuang!

"Uh, nothing..." Zhao Changhe was extremely embarrassed, so he dodged the topic and instead asked, "Why are you here at this late hour?"

Fortunately, Tang Wanzhuang was not in the mood to inquire whether he was having wet dreams or not. "The northern barbarians are invading, and Maitreya is likely to start his uprising at this time. You don't need to leave right away, but I do."

Zhao Changhe's heart suddenly skipped a beat and he pursed his lips.

Tang Wanzhuang said, "It's a pity that you've only just started learning the guqin. I wonder if you'll still be in the mood to practice the guqin when you roam the jianghu in the future..."

Zhao Changhe could only say, "I'll practice if I have the chance. By the way, are you implying that I should leave as well? You don't plan on having me stay here to help out?"

"There's a large army here, so there's no point in you staying," Tang Wanzhuang said. "You should leave Jiangnan as soon as possible and seek enlightenment elsewhere. I've come here tonight to fulfill a few promises."

Zhao Changhe had forgotten what promises she was referring to, "What promises?"

"Initially, I asked you to focus on your mind and take it easy... First, it was to prevent you from constantly squeezing your potential and rushing for quick results. Second, it was to eventually teach you the Tang Clan's Moonglade Mantra, help you stabilize your spiritual platform, and help you eliminate the impurities within the bloodthirsty bead so that you can absorb the vicious qi contained inside it. It was never really about teaching you the guqin, that was just an auxiliary method."

Tang Wanzhuang handed over two manuals. "Unfortunately, time is running short now, so I can only give you these secret manuals and I won't be able to teach you in detail."

Zhao Changhe had completely forgotten about this. He had been feeling that practicing calligraphy and playing the guqin lately was enough... It was only now that he remembered they had indeed discussed how he could make use of the bloodthirsty bead, and it had been by cultivating his heart and mind through a mantra.

Fortunately, Tang Wanzhuang still remembered everything clearly.

He took the two manuals without hesitation and said, "Thank you, but why are there two manuals?"

Tang Wanzhuang said, "If you learn the mantra, you can also use our Tang Clan's Water-Treading Movement Art. This is one of your shortcomings, and this movement art should help you out in that regard."

Zhao Changhe was silent for a moment and sighed. “You said your mother never played children’s songs for you, but I feel like even my mother never treated me like this. By doing this, you’re making it even harder for me to leave.”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled slightly in response. “You should know why I’m being so good to you. You don’t have to treat this as a debt or favor. If you truly feel grateful, you know what I want. You don’t need to waste your time here”

Unable to hold back, Zhao Changhe asked, “If it were someone else who was the prince, would you also treat them like this?”

Tang Wanzhuang instinctively wanted to say yes, but her words got stuck in her throat, and she found herself unable to say anything.

The two of them stood silently in front of the moonlit house, exchanging wordless gazes.

Chapter 180: Azure Waves Clear Ripples

It was not like she had not met any other princes before. The recently deceased crown prince had not only been a prince, but also the true heir to the throne. However, their interactions had been purely for official business.

A few years ago, when the crown prince had not gotten married, Tang Wanzhuang had just joined the Demon Suppression Bureau. While they did have interactions, it had been strictly business.

At that time, the crown prince had some inappropriate thoughts toward her, but she simply did not bother with it and never took any action. She did not have a good impression of the crown prince; in fact, she even felt repulsed.

Fortunately, at that time, the Tang Clan had not produced any prominent figures, and their status was ordinary. Because of that, they never even entertained the thought of marrying into the imperial family. Later, when the crown prince got married, he could no longer afford to have any improper thoughts about Tang Wanzhuang. As a result, their interactions only became more formal.

Eventually, when the crown prince’s wife died, the Tang Clan finally produced a prominent figure... and that figure turned out to be Tang Wanzhuang herself.

It was quite ridiculous when one thought about how messy a situation it was.

When her thoughts reached this point, she realized that her thoughts had diverged too far. The past was not important, what was important was that the precedent had been set. The fact of the matter was—and Tang Wanzhuang knew it very well—that she would not treat just any prince this favorably.

Because not every prince would care for her and tell her not to worry about so many things, or play nursery rhymes for her, or advise her to enjoy life.

A prince, and especially the crown prince, would only hope that she would do more to protect their empire.

After a long while, Tang Wanzhuang slightly tilted her head and said, “There’s one more thing. The guqin fingering art that I promised to give you. There isn’t a manual for it, so I’ll have to teach it to you right now.”

As for the question that Zhao Changhe had asked just now, she skirted it as if he had never asked it at all.

Zhao Changhe did not push her either. Her silence was an answer in and of itself.

“How do I practice the art?”

“It’s actually a set of acupoint manipulation techniques, and it’s elusive and difficult to defend against. Once you’ve sealed your enemy’s acupoints, this technique is special in that it is difficult to undo its effects using conventional acupoint techniques. Watch closely...”

Tang Wanzhuang’s slender fingers moved as if picking flowers or swaying willows, like someone playfully brushing their hand over their lover’s chest.

With the subtle movement of her fingers, the acupoints on Zhao Changhe’s chest had been sealed without him even noticing.

Tang Wanzhuang's mind wandered slightly as she casually asked, "Did you see how I executed that move just no—huh?"

Before she could finish speaking, her wrist was suddenly caught in Zhao Changhe's grip. "Being absent-minded like this can lead to trouble, you know?"

Huh? Why does he seem to not be affected at all?

Tang Wanzhuang was shocked, and a distinct possibility appeared in her mind. He can't possibly be thinking about making advances right now when we're about to part ways, right? Could his mind have been affected by the dream he had just now?

However, just as she was about to pull her wrist out, she suddenly felt a gentle and vast aura enter her meridians, flowing upward along her Taiyuan acupoint to her Taiyin lung meridian.

Tang Wanzhuang was no stranger to the nature of his true qi. It was produced by the Six Harmonies Art, with its quality at the fourth layer almost matching the quality of others at the sixth layer. It was as vast and inclusive as the heavens and the seas, embodying an imperial will.

But the way he's using it is quite peculiar, it's as if... he's having it blend and exchange with my own aura, going back and forth? Hey, wait a moment.... Is this dual cultivation?!

"Technically speaking, this is actually dual cultivation. It's probably not something you'd do normally, but I hope you will not refuse me this time," Zhao Changhe said calmly. "For so many days, I've only seen you thinking about official affairs, other people's affairs, and my affairs. You never seem to have paid any care to your own condition. Well, you might ignore it, but I don't want to. This bit of true qi is only at the fourth layer of the Profound Gate, and it might just be a drop in the ocean for someone at your level, but doing this, even if it's of little use, makes me feel a bit better."

Tang Wanzhuang, who had just been about to retract her hand, let him continue.

She silently observed as his true qi moved toward her lung meridian, trying to aid her. However, just like drops of rain falling onto a burning mountain, it would completely evaporate instantly. It was indeed a drop in the ocean.

Nevertheless, he kept pouring it in. He continued tackling the problem head-on with a solution that barely did anything, yet he remained persistent, unwilling to give up.

Tang Wanzhuang bit her lower lip tightly, feeling a slight sourness in her nose for some reason.

“This is really useless...” Tang Wanzhuang spoke softly, her voice a little hoarse. “Dual cultivation is just an auxiliary thing, it’s not some all-powerful divine technique. If you had peered into the Profound Mysteries and you had the assistance of a masterful doctor, then you might have been able to do something. But right now, what you’re doing is no different from wasting your true qi.”

Zhao Changhe did not say anything, continuing to stubbornly waste his true qi.

Tang Wanzhuang stopped talking and silently observed his true qi.

The quiet summer night became even quieter.

On this summer night, a man was holding a woman’s wrist while she had her head lowered. From a distance, it looked exactly like that cliché scene in dramas where the female lead wanted to break up but was pulled back by the male lead.

The sound of footsteps shattered the night, and Tang Buqi’s anxious voice sounded, “Brother Zhao, I... Uh...”

The two of them turned their heads at the same time and saw Tang Buqi slowly retreating outside the courtyard until he eventually vanished into the darkness.

Tang Wanzhuang said slowly, “Come in. It’s unbecoming to be so flustered and lack composure at this age. You’re not a child anymore, yet you still don’t know how to remain calm.”

Tang Buqi cautiously peeked his head in through the courtyard gate.

You’re still holding hands? Aren’t you planning to let go?! Actually, as far as the Tang Clan is concerned, this is not even a problem. It’s just that...didn’t you, bastard, make me tell my father that you refuse the marriage alliance?!

Zhao Changhe finally let go of Tang Wanzhuang's wrist. "You've come out of seclusion? Have you reached the fifth layer of the Profound Gate?"

"Mm..." Tang Buqi uttered an inarticulate sound, not knowing at all why he had been told to come here and what to say. It was as if he had been made to come out of seclusion specifically so that he would see them brag about achievements.

Tang Wanzhuang said calmly, "You came here to inform your friend of Maitreya's uprising in hopes that he could help you, right? No chance. I've already told him to leave. What is there for him to stay here for?"

It's obvious that you were trying to drive him away, and then he grabbed onto you like a stubborn mule, and now you're wavering. Well, that was what Tang Buqi thought, but he did not dare to say any of this aloud. This happens quite often to young masters when they're out chasing girls outside. It turns out that my aunt is also a woman, who would've thought?

Tang Wanzhuang added, "Actually, now that I think of it, you came just in time. I was actually going to look for you to talk to you about something. Recently, while exploring the Sword Emperor's tomb, I managed to decipher some restrictions and obtain some ancient pills, medicine, and treasured swords. They are all of high quality. Sisi only took a small amount of medicine, and I've also set aside some to be distributed to the public. The rest belongs to our Tang Clan. After all, the tomb is located in our back mountain. It would not be fair for our clan to not receive anything from the tomb at all."

Tang Buqi was overjoyed. "I wanted to talk to you about this too! I was afraid that you would be too focused on serving the public and end up giving everything away. If you did that, then we would have suffered a huge loss! Why must we give everything away? Those things were obtained from our property!"

Tang Wanzhuang said angrily, "I'm not a saint, and I still have my own selfish desires. The portion that's left for the Tang Clan isn't any less than the portion that will be given to the public, and it may even be more useful. Also, Changhe has compiled some sword arts. You can ask him to see if he's willing to share them with the Tang Clan. We ultimately must take care of our own future, we can't just rely on external help."

Tang Buqi said, "That should not be a problem. Aunt... Brother Zhao will definitely agree..."

Zhao Changhe nodded in agreement.

Tang Wanzhuang's beautiful eyes finally focused on his face again, but amidst the flicker of her gaze, it was impossible to discern what emotions were hidden within.

After a long time, she whispered, "Buqi, if you're done speaking, then leave. We still have things to discuss."

Tang Buqi felt like crying.

I came here to talk about serious matters, but you just stuff my mouth with food and kick me out the door. You two scoundrels!

Zhao Changhe, who had been filled with the sorrow of parting, could not help but laugh and say, "Buqi is really amusing."

Tang Wanzhuang smiled charmingly and said, "He's always been funny ever since he was a child."

After they exchanged these words, the atmosphere returned to normal. Tang Wanzhuang smiled again and said, "Alright, I really don't have much time, so I must get to teaching you the acupoint art right away."

Zhao Changhe also stepped back a bit and said seriously, "Please instruct me."

"Remember, this is one of the Tang Clan's ultimate arts. It's called Azure Waves Clear Ripples, meaning that when a person is in the water, ripples move in all directions. While the ripples appear gentle and harmless, they cover all of the vital acupoints of the body, carrying a concealed killing intent, invisible and traceless..."

Zhao Changhe took a while longer to learn this set of acupoint techniques compared to the ultimate techniques for the saber or sword.

This was because his martial path had indeed been largely focused on the saber, and he lacked unarmed combat skills. This set of acupoint techniques was not just ways to poke people with his finger, but a complete set of unarmed martial techniques. With his weak foundation and the fact that the style was completely opposite to what he was used to, it naturally took him longer to learn.

It was also that...there could be some hidden intentions behind the slow teaching and clumsy learning.

Nobody knew for sure.

The only thing that was certain was that in the midst of teaching and learning, their arms intertwined and their gazes locked, creating a strange and indescribable atmosphere.

If someone were to ask Zhou Botong and Ying Gu[1], they would definitely say that such delicate grappling skills should not be taught between master and disciple of the opposite sex, especially when they involved acupoints.

This was because it would be hard to tell if they were really practicing martial arts or feeling each other up.

By the end of the lesson, whether it was because of heat or something else, Tang Wanzhuang's face, which was usually pale, was flushed with a tinge of redness. She hurriedly left as if escaping for her life after saying, "This...this technique really isn't that suitable for you. If you have the chance, you should look for a more aggressive style of barehanded martial arts... I... I have to go to Jinling. Farewell."

Before her words even reached Zhao Changhe's ears, she actually jumped over the wall and left, not even bothering to open the gate.

Zhao Changhe looked up at the wall that she had just jumped over and saw the sun beginning to rise above the horizon.

He looked down at his own hands, still carrying her scent.