

## T. Times 51

### Chapter 51: Saber Leaves Beimang

The unending spring rain pattered on the ground.

Amidst the rain, a traveler from far away, draped in a straw raincoat, wearing a bamboo hat, and carrying a saber on his back stepped onto an empty street in a small village.

“Empty” was not a completely accurate description, however. On a corner of the cold and desolate street, there was a beggar. He sat under the eaves of the buildings to take shelter from the rain.

The eaves were not able to block the spring rain and the thin blanket the beggar covered himself with was visibly drenched. He curled up more and more. The sight was extremely pitiable.

The traveler walked to his side. He lowered his head and, with a sigh, handed him a few coppers.

“Thank you, thank you...” The beggar’s hands shuddered, trembling as he accepted the coins.

The instant he reached out to take the coppers, a wrist blade suddenly flew out of the beggar’s sleeves into his hand and he thrust it toward the traveler’s stomach!

Under the misty rain, nowhere in the jianghu is safe.

However, the moment the wrist blade thrust out, a copper coin shot out of the traveler’s hands and dug itself into the beggar’s forehead.

Thud!

The beggar’s arm seemed to lose all strength and the traveler deftly caught his wrist. Looking at the bloody hole between the beggar’s eyebrows, he knew that the man could not be more dead.

“You were too anxious. The mud on your face was freshly smeared. It didn’t look like it was a result of not being able to wash your face for a while. Anyone careful can see that...” The traveler sighed and left.

The spring rain continued to pour and washed away the blood. The street was still cold and desolate. No one would know what just transpired here.

At the end of the street was a fluttering banner with the character “wine” printed on it. The raindrops hit the lanterns as they creaked and swayed. The traveler stood outside the door, listening to the clinking of wine goblets and shuffling of gambling chips. It was loud. A considerable number of people were taking shelter from the rain and drinking inside. The whole place was rather lively.

“Have you guys heard? A ruthless guy has appeared in the jianghu.”

“There are nothing but ruthless people in the jianghu. Which one are you talking about?”

“Obviously, the 91st Hidden Dragon, Zhao Changhe! Is there anyone who’s more well-known than him right now?”

The corner of the traveler’s mouth twitched.

This damn tome is really out to get me. Well, at least I have my own cool line now, but this rank is really embarrassing. 250 was one thing, but 91 Mr. Zhao[1]? Who’s the one writing this shitty tome?! How many more times are you going to make fun of me!?

Still, it felt awesome to hear other people talking about him.

Zhao Changhe pushed open the door and entered. “Shopkeeper, is there a seat? Give me a meal fit for a hero. Oh, also wine for two silver and a plate of cooked beef. Right, and fill up this gourd with two jin of wine.”

“No problem. Please take a seat, sir.”

The patrons who were conversing with each other took a look at him

He was a young, clean-shaven man. He looked like a brave young warrior. On his face was plastered a bright smile, and the scar on it, instead of ruining his complexion, made him look rather

cool. He looked a bit sorry after being caught in the rain, but they could see that this man drying his straw raincoat was quite lively.

Most of them stopped at that and continued chatting away.

“That said, Zhao Changhe is really ruthless. He mixed with the Luo Family Village and killed the Luo Village Lord. Then, he mixed with the Blood God Cult and killed their branch master. He’s a natural-born rebel, I bet he rebelled against his own mom before he was even born.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

I thought you people were talking about my glorious achievement of killing a fourth layer cultivator while I was at the third layer. The Tome of Troubled Times rarely praises people. Didn’t you guys see it say I “cut down” someone? There was even that cool line at the end! Didn’t you guys see it?! The fuck are you talking about?!

“Yeah. If he isn’t ruthless, then no one is. The empire put wanted posters up, so orthodox forces won’t take him in. The Blood God Cult also put a reward on his head, so demonic forces won’t take him in either. How many more days does he have to live?”

“The demonic cult is really generous. Two thousand gold pieces! What is the imperial court doing? They’re only offering one hundred taels of silver as a bounty and they haven’t done shit the past few months. They don’t give a damn about him at all. I went to the city yesterday and his wanted poster had been washed away by the rain. No one put up a new one. Now I can’t even find out what Zhao Changhe looks like.”

“When you put it like that, it seems like he’s not really in trouble. It’s gonna be tough to get away from the Blood God Cult, but it looks like the officials couldn’t care less about him.”

“Don’t be stupid, you think it’s gonna be that easy? The reward from the demonic cult is a lot. I have no idea just how many people will act for the money alone, I mean, when has the jianghu ever lacked murderers and bounty hunters? I’ve heard that someone from the Snow-Listening Pavilion is thinking of taking the bounty.”

“The top assassins?!”

“Yes...”

“He better wish for more luck. Wow, he better pray those guys don’t find him.”

“Why does it seem like you’re concerned for him?”

“Haven’t you guys heard? That fool secretly likes Yue Hongling. When he was still a stronghold master, he took someone who looked like Yue Hongling as his stronghold mistress. In the end, even that fake bitch left him. How pathetic. Don’t you think this makes him look kinda normal? Like you can get along with him...”

“Are you crazy? How does this mean I can get along with him? He’s competing with me for women! Forget about the bounty, if he dares show his face in front of me, I’ll cut off his little head! And the big head too!”

“Shut up, you idiot. You’re even more delusional than him.” A group of people burst out laughing. “Out of everyone on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, he’s the only embarrassment. Everyone else is high and lofty, the kind of people we can never hope to reach.”

“Indeed. If we met, I’d most likely treat him to a drink and ask how it felt like to lose his mountain mistress. Hahahaha...”

“Don’t die too soon, Zhao Changhe. I still want to see something fun. When will Yue Hongling meet with him? Hahaha...”

The whole bar was filled with a joyous atmosphere. Veins began popping on Zhao Changhe’s head.

I’m so very thankful for everyone’s concern.

What about my glorious achievements in battle? What about my killing of Fang Buping? What about my cool line at the end? How am I supposed to show off like this? Can’t you guys talk about what’s more important? Speak about proper matters! Right, who’s the one that called me a fool just now? I didn’t pay attention...

The waiter came to serve his food, smiling as he said, “Sir, your wine gourd is a little old. Our shop sells wineskins made of good cow leather! Do you want to swap it out for one?”

Zhao Changhe looked at his old wine gourd and grinned. He did not reply; instead, he bluntly asked, “Hey, isn’t it a crime to kill cows?”

The waiter shushed him. “Our leather comes from long-dead cows. We report what we do to the authorities. Don’t make any false claims.”

“Long-dead cows?” Zhao Changhe picked up a piece of beef and his smile broadened even further. “You mean long-poisoned cows?”

The waiter’s expression warped and a dagger suddenly appeared in his hand. Before he could stab Zhao Changhe with it, however, a chopstick had been driven into his hand, nailing it to the table.

The waiter’s cries of pain scared the entire bar into silence. Everyone was overwhelmed with shock as they looked over. None of them knew what to do.

“You’re someone from the underworld, alright. These lame tricks won’t do.” The shopkeeper slowly walked over from behind the counter, shaking his head as he sighed. “With how quick your hands are, you’re worthy of being the 91st Hidden Dragon.”

For a while, no one dared to make a sound.

The 91st Hidden Dragon? You mean that person everyone was talking about just now? We were talking about him for so long and it turns out he was listening beside us all this while!

The one who called him a fool had long since run away, and the one who said he would cut off Zhao Changhe’s heads had disappeared without a trace.

Prior to this, they thought Zhao Changhe looked rather lively. However, after listening to the waiter’s pained wails from having his hand nailed to the table with a chopstick, they now thought he looked like a terrifying demon.

Zhao Changhe kept his hand on the chopstick and leisurely said. “I actually have no idea about what tricks you people use in the jianghu. Someone tried to assassinate me outside just now, so I was a little more alert. I was just spouting bullshit to this guy here, I didn’t think I’d actually be correct...”

The waiter’s head was full of sweat from the pain. “Save—save me...”

Swoosh!

A saber flashed over. The shopkeeper actually severed the waiter's arm in a single stroke!  
"Useless!"

The waiter howled as he rolled over to the side, clutching his severed arm. Zhao Changhe could not tell if the waiter's expression as he looked at the shopkeeper was one of gratitude or hatred.

"The Snow-Listening Pavilion?" Zhao Changhe said indifferently. "Pretty fierce, I guess."

"Still, they can't compare to your rebellious slaying of superiors." The shopkeeper dusted his clothes and said sternly, "The Snow-Listening Pavilion is like the chasing wind. Mister Zhao, shall we..."

Before the shopkeeper finished his charade, a saber was already coming for his head. "An assassin has the sheer gall to tell me I'm rebellious? Do you think I'm stupid!? Die!"

The shopkeeper had never thought that Zhao Changhe, who was sitting calmly with a broad smile on his face, would suddenly disregard all codes of honor and attack. He also had not expected that Zhao Changhe's saber would be so fast. Before he could move, the edge of a saber was already at his throat!

He barely had time to dodge, and he was forced to drop the poison needle hidden in the fringes of his clothes.

He really was up to something with that act, dusting his clothes and whatever.

Zhao Changhe was very alert.

Codes of honor? Ethics? Who gives a shit about those things when they have to deal with people like these?

The shopkeeper lost the initiative and was forced to dodge left and right to avoid wave after wave of Zhao Changhe's attacks. Flustered and exasperated, he shouted, "Zhao Changhe, you are wanted by

both demonic and orthodox forces. There is no place in the world that will accept you and you still wish to offend our Snow-Listening Pavilion! Why don't you acquire some good karma, and leave some..."

Zhao Changhe said nothing more and rushed forward, immediately severing the shopkeeper's head. "Cut the bullshit already, will you?!"

"..."

The shopkeeper's parts fell to the ground, his face showing sheer disbelief.

The waiter clutched his severed arm and withdrew in terror. Zhao Changhe pointed his saber at him with a grim smile on his face. "I, Zhao Changhe, have left Beimang with my saber to challenge the world under heaven. If all men in the world are like you rats, then it'll be really damn boring!"

## Chapter 52: Cui Yuanyong

The waiter was relieved of his distress of losing an arm by also having his head removed.

The patrons had all run away. Zhao Changhe looked around and his mouth twitched. "There was even someone just now who said he'd treat me to a drink. He ran away faster than a rabbit."

He went to grab the unpoisoned food and drink at the other tables and feasted in the center of the inn. I'll just think of this as their treat.

Someone laughed heartily outside. "After a conflict in the jianghu with corpses strewn around, no normal person would dare sit down here to eat. How about I treat you?"

Zhao Changhe did not even raise his head to look at the newcomer. "So, Young Master Cui, are you abnormal as well?"

Cui Yuanyong sat across from him and smiled. "Maybe I am."

"So who's treating who now? For a child from a big family to freeload food—you really aren't a normal person." Zhao Changhe casually poured his interlocutor some wine. "Where's your sister?"

Why are you by yourself? She should be the one I'm treating. Treating you to a meal seems pretty odd."

Cui Yuanyong grinned. "What's wrong? Are you interested in her?"

"Now, now, stop right there. I have absolutely no interest in idiots." Zhao Changhe rolled his eyes. "However, that idiot is a cute little girl. She's nice on the eyes. Also, you're almost as handsome as me. I don't like that."

Cui Yuanyong could not help but break out in laughter. "Are you trying to stir something up because you suspect that there's some relationship between me and Yue Hongling?"

Zhao Changhe chewed his beef and sized up Cui Yuanyong for a while. He suddenly smiled and said, "I don't know if you like her, but I do know that she's not interested in you. There's no reason for me to stir up anything with you."

Cui Yuanyong was rather curious. "Oh? How are you so sure? Is it because you believe the person she's interested in is none other than yourself?"

"Nope." Zhao Changhe shook his head. "Her heart belongs to the jianghu. I have no idea if she'll ever have any thoughts about returning home. Anyway, she doesn't belong to anyone right now. Not you, not me."

Cui Yuanyong smiled. "Why do I feel like that's the case with you as well? Regardless of whether it's with Xia Chichi, or Yue Hongling."

Zhao Changhe put on a blank expression. "If the one to understand me this much was your sister, we might have been able to work something out. Why do you understand me so well? What are you planning? I heard you powerful families do this thing with their young daughters where they..."

Cui Yuanyong stared at Zhao Changhe's eyes. He did not know if the latter agreed with his judgment or if he was being perfunctory. Cui Yuanyong did not intend to find out and only smiled. "This practice isn't just limited to powerful families. A lot of mountain strongholds also do the same thing. Perhaps Stronghold Master Zhao is more familiar with this?"

"...Fuck."



Cui Yuanyong finally raised his wine cup. “Anyway, good to finally meet you. My name is Cui Yuanyong.”

“Nice to meet you.” Zhao Changhe raised his own cup to toast him as a show of friendship.

Prior to this, he had wanted Yue Hongling to recommend him to Cui Yuanyong. Zhao Changhe did not wish his interactions with everyone to be so tense. These powerful families were related to his future path of pretending to be the crown prince, and they were also closely related to unraveling the mysteries of this world. He hoped to be able to have friendly interactions with them, especially with someone like Cui Yuanyong, whom he truly did not dislike.

Cui Yuanyong fought nobly with Yue Hongling. Both of them knew when to stop and left having appreciated the other’s talents. When he thought that Yue Hongling slipped up and was captured by bandits, he even came to save her despite his injuries. And after learning that Yue Hongling was the stronghold mistress, he did not go around spreading rumors. Zhao Changhe had a good impression of him.

Furthermore, Cui Yuanyong helped him deal with something, whether intentionally or not. He rounded up everyone in the Beimang Mountain Stronghold, sent them to the government office in the city, then proclaimed that the authorities there accomplished a great deed by wiping out the mountain bandits.

This whole incident could, admittedly, make some people believe that Zhao Changhe was working with the Cui Clan and killed Fang Buping for them. All the same, however, the Cui Clan took the fall for his grand plan. The Blood God Cult and even the Four Idols cult now had their sights on the Cui Clan, and other people who wanted to deal with Zhao Changhe now had no choice but to consider how the Cui Clan would react.

Ever since he had stepped on this path, Zhao Changhe had only met scheming rats. Never had he bumped into any decent people—partly owing to the incident with Fang Buping and the Cui Clan. The matter regarding him being the crown prince, for now, only existed in his and Xia Chichi’s heads. Other people did not necessarily think that far. In reality, decent people were worried about the Cui Clan.

Currently, the whole world knew he set out from Beimang and were clearly aware of his position. If other people wanted to block him, they had to block the roads all around Beimang to catch him. This was why his journey so far had been so full of thorns. But the further he traveled, the less certain others were of his position. If he got Cui Yuanyong to help him cover his tracks, then he

would no longer have to be as tense as he had been the past few days. If he had to be this careful around every beggar or waiter he met, there was no way he would last.

If Zhao Changhe had not read so many wuxia novels and paid more attention to all this, he would have long since fallen into someone's trap.

That was why, in spite of Cui Yuanyong's self-introduction, this was not actually their first meeting. He and his little sister had been following Zhao Changhe for a few days already. Many times, Zhao Changhe was able to spot Cui Yuanyong's face with his Back Eye and did not know why the latter never approached him.

They clinked wine cups and gulped down their drinks. Cui Yuanyong took out a handkerchief and leisurely wiped his mouth. "We've been following you for the past few days, watching your battles of wit and strength as you cut your way through the thorns on your journey. Do you find it strange that we never approached you to talk and only appeared now?"

Zhao Changhe looked at his handkerchief and his mouth could not help but twitch. He could only reply, "Indeed, I am quite curious? What do you guys want?"

Cui Yuanyong sighed. "If I said it was to let my little sister learn a few tricks of the jianghu, would you believe me..."

The twitching of Zhao Changhe's mouth got to the point where it looked like he was having a seizure. He kept silent for a while before saying, "As a matter of fact...I really do believe you."

Cui Yuanyong laughed. "Well, that is the truth. When I brought her out, we never once had any encounter with danger. The only time something happened was when we were held at your blockade. In the end, you didn't even stop us and you let us go. From then on, we had favorable intentions toward you."

"...so the two travelers back then were none other than you two. I already forgot what they looked like."

"In my family, everyone in my generation is a guy. We only have one sister, so I think you can figure out that she's been pampered to no end since she was a child. She has never seen the dangers of the human heart or the evils of the jianghu. She's too naive. She's incredibly talented but doesn't want to put in the hard work and she only does what she wants to do. Obviously, nobody is willing to scold her like she deserves. She disobeyed me, selfishly went to attack the stronghold at night,

and ended up in your hands. It's fortunate that even though you are known as a mountain bandit, you're actually a person of noble character. She's lucky it was you and not someone else, otherwise she would have learned her lesson the really, really hard way."

Zhao Changhe took a sip of his wine. "Indeed... She's a bit dumb..."

"Stronghold Master Zhao, you upheld virtue and released her, and even received condemnation from the branch master after the fact. She was worried sick when your life hung by a thread." Cui Yuanyong smiled and cupped his fists. "I feel like she's grown no small amount after that one night. You've let her have an experience valuable to her growth. For this, I thank you."

Zhao Changhe could only say, "All this means that she's naturally pure of heart... I have to also thank her for the pill she gave me."

"Indeed. Though my little sister is more than a bit spoiled, she is good-natured," Cui Yuanyong said. "That's why after she saw you leave Beimang alone and in somewhat of a weak state, she kept pestering me to go protect you. I told her: a fierce tiger has left the mountain. A flood dragon is now entering the sea. How could it need anyone to protect it? Why would I protect you when I could let her broaden her horizons? If I told her to learn from anyone else, she'd probably groan. But since it was you, she was rather compliant."

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Cui Yuanyong drank another cup of wine and sighed. "Anyway, do you know why I've come to talk to you today without her?"

Zhao Changhe shook his head.

"She's seen you weather so much treachery on your journey. She's seen you encounter situations where if she was in your shoes, she would have died many times over. Yet, you've cut down every monster in your way like a god that descended from the heavens... Because of this, I feel like the way she looks at you has changed. If this goes on, I'm afraid she won't just develop her mentality and abilities, but also...something else. Long story short, I asked someone to drag her back home. She threw quite the tantrum about it."

Zhao Changhe coughed dryly and drank his wine in silence.

The Cui Clan had a good few masters on the Rankings of Heaven, Earth, and Man. Cui Yuanyong himself was at the eighth layer of the Profound Gate; he was the 3rd Hidden Dragon, known throughout the lands under heaven. For the daughter of the Cui Clan to look upon a brute at the trivial third layer of the Profound Gate as if he was some deity that just descended to the world of mortals.... Cui Yuanyong felt like puking blood. However, Zhao Changhe had done nothing wrong; on the contrary, he was even his little sister's benefactor. He could not cut Zhao Changhe down and even had to help him out a bit.

Cui Yuanyong felt that a great injustice had befallen him. While they were still on the topic, he finally sighed and said, "Since my little sister has returned, I feel that I should sit down and have a drink with you. Let's be friends and all that. I want to ask you, what are your plans for the future?"

Zhao Changhe said, "Don't tell me the Cui Clan really wants to recruit me?"

Cui Yuanyong shook his head. "Zhao Changhe belongs to no one. We both know there is no point talking about that. What we want to know is, what in the world is your relationship with First Seat Tang?"

#### Chapter 53: What Exactly Is the Relationship Between You and Tang Wanzhuang

Zhao Changhe did not know if Cui Yuanyong saying that he belonged to no one was a sincere compliment, or if his interlocutor was hinting at him being unwanted due to his naturally rebellious nature. After listening to the patrons talk about such irrelevant things, Zhao Changhe now felt like anything anyone said harbored some ridicule. It was a real pain in the ass.

What's an even greater pain is how I'm gonna answer this question. What relationship do I have with First Seat Tang? How the hell am I supposed to know!

"I'm a man she'll never obtain in her entire life. Does that count?"

Cui Yuanyong was speechless for a moment. "Brother Zhao... I'm not good at making jokes. Can we speak seriously?"

"Well, alright, let's be serious. I killed the person she was supposed to save right in front of her. After that, she personally ordered my arrest. Everyone knows this. Since she wants to arrest me, can't I proclaim that she'll never get me in her entire life? It might be a joke, but there is some truth in it."

Cui Yuanyong said slowly, “However...does she really wish to capture you?”

Zhao Changhe replied indifferently, “I guess you heard just now that one of the guys here saying that my wanted posters were washed away by the rain and were not replaced. The authorities here are pretty lazy, so that makes sense. They wouldn’t even give a shit if First Seat Tang died.”

“No... The reason a lot of criminals aren’t caught is because we have no idea about their whereabouts. However, she clearly knows you’re at Beimang, and yet she sent my idiot of a little sis—I mean, she sent that little inexperienced girl. I’ve never seen the Demon Suppression Bureau treat an arrest order with such indifference before.”

First Seat Tang was clearly well aware, just like everyone else, that Zhao Changhe was at Beimang. Yet, she had sent the little idiot of the Cui Clan to pursue him.

Since she knows where I am, why didn’t she personally come to capture me or at least send some elite troops? Why did she send a little idiot who’s never seen the jianghu?

Zhao Changhe indeed knew how inexplicable this whole matter was and did not continue joking. “Perhaps she thought that you would make a move?”

“Maybe. But you might not know something... I’m quite indifferent about this mission and didn’t even want my little sister to go, so I’ve been stalling for time and told her to break through to the third layer of the Profound Gate first. I managed to stall for two months and First Seat Tang didn’t say anything about it. Is this the attitude that a government official should show to an arrest order”

“...Why were you stalling for time?”

“I stalled for time because I felt that you were no ordinary bandit; we needed to observe you longer. However, First Seat Tang didn’t have any reaction to this. This made me feel that there really was something strange about the whole thing,” Cui Yuanyong said indifferently. “She shouldn’t be so apathetic to all of this! You are no normal criminal. On the surface, you only killed a little local despot, which is why the bounty on your head is worth only one hundred taels of silver...but we all know Luo Zhenwu was not just a little local despot. The consequences for what you did should be extremely grave.”

Zhao Changhe did not respond.

Cui Yuanyong finally got to the point, “If he really was the crown prince, then Tang Wanzhuang should have immediately come to personally capture you. For her to throw my little sister at this mission and allow me to stall for so long, I can’t help but ask, does she just not care about any of this? At the very least, this means that Luo Zhenwu wasn’t the crown prince. His death is unimportant.”

So First Seat Tang’s name is Tang Wanzhuang... Hmm.

Zhao Changhe sighed. “You’ve already figured out Luo Zhenwu wasn’t the crown prince a long time ago. If not, why would you be observing me? Shouldn’t you have immediately come to capture me? The Cui Clan is an illustrious family in the Great Xia with many clan members occupying positions in the imperial court. Why are you guys treating this as if it only concerns First Seat Tang?”

Cui Yuan Yong grinned and said nothing else. He only looked knowingly at Zhao Changhe.

Zhao Changhe’s whole body felt uncomfortable with his stare. He was a bit speechless. “What’re you look at me like that for? If Luo Zhenwu isn’t the prince, then he isn’t the prince. It means that it’s normal for my arrest order to not be taken so seriously. What’s so strange about it?”

“Well, you see...” Cui Yuanyong leisurely said. “For her to send my little sister to capture you, she’d have to be a complete moron not to figure out that I’d follow her and eventually face you. So the question is, does she really want to capture you? Why does it seem to me like she wants to kill you instead?”

Zhao Changhe’s eyes narrowed.

Indeed...

First Seat Tang could have only found out he was at Beimang after he defeated Vice Branch Master Huang and entered the Tome of Troubled Times. At that time, Wang Dashan intentionally leaked his whereabouts and attracted a group of idiots to come and challenge him for his place on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons. It did not make sense for the authorities not to know of this.

They probably didn’t dare to act alone, so they reported it to the Demon Suppression Bureau right away. Back then, I was only at the first layer of the Profound Gate and the little sister of the Cui Clan was at the second layer of the Profound Gate... Wait, this has nothing to do with strength. It doesn’t matter if First Seat Tang could predict that my strength would develop so fast in this short

period of time. That's not important. What's important is that First Seat Tang definitely knew how much of an idiot the little sister of the Cui Clan was. Even if she charged into a regular mountain stronghold with no masters, there was a high chance she'd be taken down.

Once Cui Yuanyong saw his little sister in danger, how could he not intervene? It was inevitable that Cui Yuanyong would face off with me. And with how strong he was, how would I be able to resist? Without a doubt, I would be the one to die!

But if First Seat Tang really wanted to kill me, then she could have just sent a trusted person to do the job. Why go through all these twists and turns? Because of the Cui Clan's status? If the Cui Clan were the ones to kill the prince, did she stand to gain anything? This would only benefit rebels. They'd be laughing their heads off at this. Could First Seat Tang be one such rebel?

Was she certain that Cui Yuanyong would absolutely refrain from casually killing me with my suspicious identity? Did she intend for us to meet with each other in order to confirm something? If so, then why didn't she come to confirm it herself and instead employed such an unpredictable method?

This doesn't make sense. Hell, nothing makes sense.

Zhao Changhe scratched his head and said truthfully, "Brother Cui, I'm not playing dumb with you. Right now, I don't understand the matter either. Could you tell me, from start to finish, how you two came to travel to Beimang? Is your little sister working under the Demon Suppression Bureau? It doesn't seem like it."

"No. I was the one that wanted to go to Beimang first," Cui Yuanyong replied. "I wanted to challenge Yue Hongling, so I had people follow her tracks and found out she was at Beimang. Once my little sister found out I was heading there, she could not stand being at home and kept pestering me to bring her along. I pondered for a bit and thought that at her age, it was time for her to go out and see the world. It would be beneficial for her to travel around, so I brought her along. The rest of the family also agreed with this."

This was all indeed normal. Zhao Changhe did not interrupt and poured him some wine. He knew Cui Yuanyong had more to say.

"Even though the capital isn't along the way for us if we travel to Beimang from our home, it's not that big of a detour, so I naturally brought her to see the capital and also visit First Seat Tang. To be honest, it is our greatest hope that she can imitate First Seat Tang's graceful bearing."

Zhao Changhe recalled the woman that night; her sword was like water. Even though her body was sickly, she faced off against a demonic cult by herself. She was beautiful in her silence and radiated a cold grace. Zhao Changhe could imagine her working at her desk while coughing and working her sick body to support this decaying empire... Even though what he imagined was probably not real, that was indeed his first impression of her.

If that little chick could pick up a sliver of First Seat Tang's demeanor, the entire Cui Clan had good reason to set off firecrackers in celebration.

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh. "And then?"

"In the end, my little sister does not admire First Seat Tang's elegance at all. On the other hand, she's very interested in the Demon Suppression Bureau. She's enamored with the idea of capturing criminals, wiping out bandits, and upholding justice in the world. Then she suddenly said she wanted to join them."

Zhao Changhe almost failed to hold back his laughter.

The duties of the Demon Suppression Bureau were a little similar to those of the CIA in the modern world. Of course, the status of the former was considerably higher. Because this was a fantasy world, the "demons" that this organization "suppressed" were typically people on the Rankings of Troubled Times and basically consisted of rebel leaders and heads of different clans. It was First Seat Tang's responsibility to deal with these sorts of people. As such, she was not simply the leader of a criminal investigation unit or the captain of a special forces division. She was the most important official in the imperial court—a first-rate position in the current dynasty.

For a little girl like her, who was pampered and spoiled since childhood, to want to join the empire's most skilled, blood-soaked criminal investigation unit...man, even if she did succeed, she would only be able to become a mascot. Did she really think they'd let her subdue demons or whatever?

Looking at Zhao Changhe's expression, Cui Yuanyong knew what he was thinking and could only sigh. "Everyone knows she's not reliable. Furthermore, to be honest, our clan does not wish to take up such a government office. It's not in line with our goals... First Seat Tang also doesn't wish for someone from the Cui Clan to join the Demon Suppression Bureau. If that actually happened, she'd probably have a huge headache on her hands. That's why she told my little sister that if she wanted to join, then she would need to complete a trial mission, and that after completing it, First Seat Tang would judge and see if she could join or not."



Zhao Changhe clicked his tongue. “Heh, so cunning. She didn’t say your little sister could join after completing the mission.”

“Exactly. I also felt that she was being perfunctory after listening to her words. She casually chose a mission that would let her know that capturing criminals and wiping out bandits isn’t easy and tacitly understood that I would not intervene to help her complete the mission.” Cui Yuanyong said, “While picking the mission, we spoke about the things going on around the Cui Clan. When she heard that I was going to Beimang... She was suddenly dumbstruck. She was actually lost in thought for a while.”

“After that, she decided to give your sister the mission to capture me?”

“She said that she had just received some news about a criminal being at Beimang and told my sister to capture him. That’s basically it. Otherwise, how would we have known where you were?”

It looks like First Seat Tang didn’t consider any of this. I don’t know what she thought would happen after hearing that Cui Yuanyong was heading to Beimang, but things have actually turned out to be in her favor after she gave the little chick of the Cui Clan this mission.

Zhao Changhe’s expression slowly turned perplexed. He suddenly had an absurd thought—if First Seat Tang could foresee that Cui Yuanyong would not kill me for no reason, then our meeting here today feels like a prearranged blind date.

No wonder Cui Yuanyong did not ask me about my identity but about my relationship with First Seat Tang!

Chapter 54: There’s a Secret I’m Wondering if I Should Reveal to You

Calling this a “prearranged blind date” was a joke; however, it was not that far from the truth.

What Xia Chichi said about the importance of his identity as the “crown prince” and how other people would treat him was, from start to finish, just her own wishful thinking. First Seat Tang had her own way of thinking, her own choices, and her own plans. And all these would change with how circumstances changed. She did not necessarily have to plant a fake crown prince, and even if she chose to do so, this fake crown prince did not necessarily have to be Zhao Changhe.

Moreover, till now, Zhao Changhe had no way of knowing what Xia Longyuan was thinking. Even if what Xia Chichi said made sense, she also completely lacked information about the current situation. It was extremely unlikely for everything to go according to what she thought.

However, there was still a chance that Zhao Changhe was the real crown prince. That was why the arrest order was still up. First Seat Tang did not rescind it for fear of arousing the suspicions of others, and neither did she dare to carry out the arrest, afraid that something might go wrong.

Fate had brought things to this point. With the status of the Cui family, they definitely knew a thing or two about what was going on, and so First Seat Tang wanted them to see if Zhao Changhe was “qualified.” It was also to allow him to properly make contact with an influential family. To the rest of the world, they simply thought the Cui Clan had accepted the mission to capture him and thought nothing more of it.

As for why she had chosen such an unpredictable way of doing things, the answer was probably that she never once had the intention of controlling how things went. What Zhao Changhe could do with this new path was something she wanted to observe as well. She wanted to know what he was like as a person and what sort of changes would be stirred up after he met with someone from a powerful family.

It just so happened that a little princess of the Cui Clan was also involved in all of this. Zhao Changhe was unmarried. Did the Cui Clan have other ideas? What if they were actually compatible?

Wouldn't that be a match made in heaven? Half of the Great Xia would be pacified in an instant!

Cui Yuanyong said two things at the start. “Are you interested in her?” and “Why do I feel like that's the case with you as well? Regardless of whether it's with Xia Chichi, or Yue Hongling.”

Putting two and two together, the implication is abundantly clear.

The two men looked each other in the eye. Both of them could make out the friendliness and amusement hidden in each of their gazes. This matter was not something they could talk about openly. Both of them could only hint at it.

Cui Yuanyong finally sipped his wine and leisurely said, “There's a secret I'm wondering if I should reveal to you. If I tell you, I'm afraid you might think I have a big mouth and will be afraid I can't keep Yue Hongling's secret under wraps...”

Zhao Changhe coughed dryly. “Everyone has some double standards. Please keep quiet about the matter surrounding Yue Hongling. What is this secret? Can you tell me?”

Cui Yuanyong chuckled. “You...”

“Hurry up and tell me. I’ve already treated you to a meal.”

“The imperial concubine died of an illness. Afterward, First Seat Tang discussed the possibility of marriage with the crown prince, but before they could be engaged, he passed away. Those with an understanding of politics all know the meaning of this marriage proposal. The Tang family is interested in marriage with the crown prince and cares not for whom the crown prince actually is. Since they’ve started aiming for this, if there is a new crown prince, they might be able to restart discussions of marriage.

“Pfft

!!” Zhao Changhe almost spat out his wine all over the table.

That’s why you want to know what kind of relationship I have with her?!

“Tang Wanzhuang probably has complicated thoughts about the matter.” Cui Yuanyong leisurely leaned against his seat and sighed. “Perhaps her move was also to gain more freedom for herself? She’ll be able to gain a few explanations out of this. Haha...hahaha...”

“Hey, you’re ruining your public image with how you’re laughing right now.” Zhao Changhe was amused and in a good mood. “You must really love to gossip. With that said...now I’m really worried about the matter regarding Yue Hongling.”

“Tsk. Weren’t you the one who asked me to tell you?” Cui Yuanyong wiped away his smile and lowered his voice. “It’s understandable that First Seat Tang has her own plans, but my Cui Clan is not a puppet for her to control. Don’t have any thoughts about my little sister. At the very least, it’s impossible right now.”

Zhao Changhe was speechless. “Let me repeat. I’m not interested in idiots. Let me remind you that, until now, I have not even asked for her name. I’m. Not. Interested.”

“Heh...” Cui Yuanyong once again leaned back on his seat. “Her name is not a secret. My generation of the Cui Clan is denoted by the character “yuan.”[1] Her formal name is Yuanyang. Her childhood name is Yangyang.”

“Hey. It’s enough for you to tell me her formal name. Why are you telling me what you called her when she was a kid?”

“Tang Wanzhuang has complicated thoughts about the matter. Why can’t I also have some complicated thoughts about it?” Cui Yuanyong finally stood up. “I’ve lost interest in this. We’ve spoken more or less about everything that needs to be discussed. What I want to see is you, Zhao Changhe, challenging the world under heaven with your saber. I don’t want to see you being tangled up by these meaningless affairs. You can continue your travels. I’ve already gotten someone to hide your tracks. At the very least, you can feel safe eating your next meal.”

Zhao Changhe also stood up and cupped his fists. “Many thanks.”

“There’s no need to thank me. This is something I should do.” Cui Yuanyong sighed. “I’m actually very curious what your next move will be, but it’d be a bit strange for me to follow you.”

“You sure like gossip, don’t you? You’re not willing to let your little sister follow me either.”

“In your dreams.” Cui Yuanyong snorted. “Alright, for the time being, I’ll wait for the next time the Tome of Troubled Times shines in the sky with your name. Work hard, man that Tang Wanzhuang will never obtain, hahahaha...”

“What are you laughing at! Who’s the one that said they’re not good at making jokes just now?”

Both of them, even until now, did not speak about Zhao Changhe’s identity. They only briefly mentioned whether Luo Zhenwu was the crown prince and about Tang Wanzhuang’s marriage arrangements.

However, with that, everything that needed to be discussed was discussed. Cui Yuanyong got his confirmation, and whether Zhao Changhe was the real thing or not was unimportant to him.

On the other side, Zhao Changhe managed to obtain a lot of unknown information regarding how everyone thought about the matter.

The Cui family indeed had an interest in Zhao Changhe but they would not directly admit it. They needed Zhao Changhe to show more of himself. If he died in the jianghu, they would simply shrug and that was that.

\*

Long after Cui Yuanyong left, Zhao Changhe suddenly gulped down his wine and laughed as he coughed.

“Fuck, I forgot to ask him about the histories of the powerful families and the significance of the eras. Fuck! As expected, when women are thrown into the equation, things get messed up!”

Zhao Changhe grabbed the saber he had put on the table and left.

First Seat Tang? The Cui Clan of Qinghe? One is superior, the other is faking it. Do you think I'll let you people observe and test me? In your dreams! If it wasn't because the position card was entangled with all these shitty matters regarding the crown prince, why would I engage in all this? If I offend too many people for no reason, I won't be able to travel freely.

What's my next move? What's there to be curious about? Obviously it's to further my training and cultivation! One day when I make it out of the Ranking of Hidden Dragons into the Ranking of Heaven, I'll pay you a visit to test you a little, just like you're testing me now. Let's see what you think then.”

Amidst the rain, a youth draped a straw raincoat over himself and strode away from the small village, carrying a saber on his back.

After he left Beimang, the lands he traveled through got more and more prosperous by the day. There was a city ahead which contained many sects, schools and martial arts families. All manner of strong people gathered there.

The evening sky got darker as the rain continued to pour.

In front of a martial arts school came a travel-worn man, braving the rain.

The gatekeeper raised his hand and gestured for him to halt. “Night has fallen. Little brother, if you wish to join us, please return in the morning.

The traveler grinned and spoke openly. “I’ve heard your honored school’s Roaming Dragon Eight Trigrams Saber Art is incredibly strong and that its footwork is masterful. I’ve specially come to see it for myself. Will your honored school’s master be so kind as to enlighten me?”

“You’ve come to challenge us?” The gatekeeper sized him up. “You’re still young. Don’t court death. Our master is at the third layer of the Profound Gate.”

“What a coincidence, so am I.” The traveler had a beaming smile on his face. “Could I trouble you to inform him, good sir?”

“...Tell me your name first.”

“Zhao Changhe from Beimang.”

Bang!

The gatekeeper could sit around no longer and ran into the school. “Master, master! A bandit has come to loot our school!”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

If Cui Yongyuan found out that his efforts to help Zhao Changhe hide his tracks were ruined by the man himself, Zhao Changhe did not know how he would feel.

\*

While Zhao Changhe issued his challenges, Cui Yuanyong traveled over land and water back to his home. After traveling for a little under half a month, he arrived home and was confronted by a senior. “Why did you come back alone? Where’s your sister?”

Cui Yuanyong was stupefied. “She isn’t back yet? Didn’t I send someone to bring her back?”

“She ran away along the way home. I sent someone to inform you. Didn’t you receive this information?”

“...”

Cui Yuanyong had used his movement art to take every shortcut available on the way home, so how could meeting with him be so simple? After listening to the elder, he retraced his steps in his head and knew where his little sister had run off to.

He stood where he was with a huge headache.

He knew the direction his sister ran off to; however, he had been on the road for so long. Only heaven knew where his little sister had run off to meet with her “god.”

## Chapter 55: Cui Yuanyang

Swoosh!

A blood-red saber swung over. The footwork of the man in the martial arts school was like that of a soaring dragon, and he dodged the fierce saber attack more afraid than hurt. Afterward, he counterattacked with his own saber and slashed toward the back of Zhao Changhe’s neck.

Zhao Changhe, who looked like he was out of any new tricks, suddenly used the Returning Slash he was exceedingly familiar with to pull back and block the oncoming attack.

His opponent’s footwork changed once again and, inexplicably, he appeared on Zhao Changhe’s left side. His saber swung toward Zhao Changhe’s waist.

Zhao Changhe’s Vicious Blood Saber Art also came with footwork, which included ways to dodge, twist, leap, and dash. Together with the Traceless Soaring Blood, he felt he could move even less unhindered. However, in the duel he was currently fighting, he felt clumsy and stiff, while his opponent was extremely slippery and hard to deal with.

Both of them were at the third layer of the Profound Gate, but Zhao Changhe’s opponent did not practice both internal and external arts. Yet, this battle was already not an easy one to fight. Strictly speaking, if Zhao Changhe lost, he would technically be losing to someone of a lower cultivation.

Everyone had their strengths and weaknesses. In the Blood God Cult, everyone trained in the same techniques and martial arts, and so they all roughly shared similar strengths and shortcomings. Once Zhao Changhe left to see how big the lands were, he knew that he would definitely find people he could learn from.

He already realized this when he trained with Yue Hongling: the vastness of the world under heaven, the strengths of each family and their martial arts—these were things he could never see in trivial Beimang.

Thus, Zhao Changhe, with his saber, had to challenge all under heaven!

It was a good thing that even though this school master's footwork was slippery, it was not as slippery as Yue Hongling's. After Yue Hongling's special training, Zhao Changhe could at least grasp the movements of enemies at this level. The longer he fought, the more he could understand how they moved. If it went on for long enough, Zhao Changhe would even be able to predict where his opponent would dodge.

Bang!

The school master fled to the right. Zhao Changhe suddenly stretched his leg and kicked him square in the face.

Taken by surprise, the school master fell to the ground. The first thought that popped into his head was, My head is gone.

If Zhao Changhe seized this opportunity to strike with his saber, his head would really be lopped off... Zhao Changhe kills wherever he goes—he's exceptionally ruthless. He might really just kill me right here...

The disciples of the school standing by the side all cried out in unison and were about to charge forward. However, they saw Zhao Changhe grab their master's hand and pull him up. Then, he retreated a step and cupped his fists. "Thank you for your guidance, school master. The Roaming Dragon Eight Trigrams Step is indeed a marvelous example of footwork. I've gained a lot from this battle today. Thank you."

Everyone in the martial arts school stared in disbelief as Zhao Changhe turned around and left. After a short while, he disappeared into the rain and could no longer be seen.



The disciples all looked at each other while the school master massaged his bruised ankle, muttering in bewilderment, “That’s really Zhao Changhe? How come he’s so different from the rumors?”

“I heard that Zhao Changhe has a full beard and looks both boorish and sinister.”

“I heard Zhao Changhe is eight chi<sup>[1]</sup> tall and has an eight-chi waist.”

“I heard that Zhao Changhe eats human flesh.”

Amidst the confusion, a man said weakly, “But he looks just like the drawing on the wanted posters. Haven’t you all seen them? Why do you believe dumb rumors like that?”

“...”

Silence.

It really fucking is Zhao Changhe. How did these stupid ass rumors spread?

The school master sighed. “Stop exaggerating. That’s definitely Zhao Changhe. His Vicious Blood Art and Vicious Blood Saber Art are both impeccable—he’s practically overflowing with vicious qi and his eyes are blood-red when using these arts. It would be strange if he wasn’t the real Zhao Changhe. Just how is he able to control such fiendish demonic arts so well... What’s more, he—he’s actually polite. If someone told me that he was from the illustrious Cui Clan or something, I’d really believe it.”

“That means he really was here to challenge us and learn more about saber arts? Not to seek glory or loot? How did the rumors surrounding him become like that...”

The people in the school felt like they were in a dream.

Unbeknownst to them, Zhao Changhe also felt the same.

As he turned around a corner, the first thing he saw was a young lady wrapped pitifully in a long coat of sable fur. She curled against the corner of two walls, shivering. Under the pouring rain, she

was completely drenched. She would have been better off without her sable coat—the wetter it got, the harder it would be for her to endure the cold.

Her hat revealed her round face.

Zhao Changhe rubbed his forehead. “Miss Cui, what’re you doing? Didn’t your brother ask someone to bring you back home? Why are you wasting your time begging for money here?”

“I—I don’t want to go back. And I’m not a beggar. I was waiting for you.”

“According to common sense, after learning that hard lesson from falling into the trap at the mountain stronghold, shouldn’t you have realized just how inadequate you are and return home to work hard and cultivate? Instead, you ran away to meet with a man. Just what are you thinking?”

“Are you cultivating as well?”

“Yes I am.”

“You’ve left Beimang with your saber to temper yourself by experiencing the hardships of the jianghu, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Then let me come with you. Won’t that also count as cultivating? I’ve already memorized all of the martial arts of my clan and I’ve stolen a good amount of medicinal pills. What use is there in training at home when I can follow you and learn from the jianghu?”

Zhao Changhe was dumbstruck. She had actually put together this whole plan with him at the center.

She’s not stupid at all. From a standpoint purely concerned with cultivation, there’s no way to refute her logic. Am I not doing exactly what she described? The problem is, why exactly do you trust me so much!? You should continue pestering your brother!

"I say, Miss Cui." Zhao Changhe put his hands on his hips. "Do you know what we call this sort of behavior of yours in my dialect? Feeding! [2]"

Cui Yuanyang blinked. The expression in her eyes showed that she had no idea what he meant.

"What is the most important thing one must guard against while traveling the jianghu

?"

Cui Yuanyang answered instantly, "The evils of man's heart. I understood that after watching you travel."

"Then what makes you believe that I'm not evil?" Zhao Changhe was utterly dumbfounded. "You're a pretty little girl; You've told me you've memorized all the martial arts of the Cui Clan. You have medicines, you have other resources, and you probably have a lot of money on you. What's stopping me from snatching what you have, forcing you to write down your Cui Clan's secret arts, and then having fun with you every day in eighteen different positions?"

Cui Yuanyang could not really take such blunt words. She lowered her head, her face slightly flushed. "You... you won't. If you were that kind of person, I'd have long since..."

"Miss. I was not in the mood back then, and it wasn't the right time. Once you give me a good opportunity to do so, I can't promise you I won't do all those things to you. Why the fuck do you trust me more than I trust myself? I'm a bandit! A bandit, do you know what a fucking bandit is!?"

Cui Yuanyang lowered her head and clutched at her clothes in silence.

Zhao Changhe looked around. The rain was still pouring and the streets were deserted.

He could not remain angry looking at her pitiful appearance, and he just sighed. "Alright. I don't even dare to chase you home, just in case you run away again like an idiot. What about this? In any case, I don't have any definite goal. I'm just wandering wherever I want to challenge people and train in the saber. I'll settle on a travel route today and take you in the direction of Qinghe."

Cui Yuanyang snuck a glance at his face. You say you're a bad person, but you're the spitting image of nobility. Why do you continue pretending like you're bad and uncouth?

She did not say something stupid like wanting to wander far and wide in the jianghu and she was also acutely aware she was troubling Zhao Changhe. He was different from Cui Yuanyong; with his cultivation, he couldn't even settle down somewhere. Moreover, he was wanted by both demonic and orthodox forces, and every step he took would be full of thorns. It was difficult enough for him to take care of himself. How could he bring along a brat?

If Zhao Changhe threw her to a government office in anger, they would definitely have to kiss her ass and escort her home. However, he clearly wasn't thinking that far. As long as he was willing to travel home with her, that was pretty good as far as Cui Yuanyang was concerned.

Everyone thought she was stupid, but when she really set her mind to do something, she knew exactly what to do.

“Get up. There's an inn there, let's check in first. If you stay in the rain any longer, you'll get sick even with your third layer cultivation. This is a low-level martial arts world, do you really think you're so fantastic?”

Cui Yuanyang followed him closely from behind. She felt extremely perplexed after listening to him muttering his strange words. It was not until a moment later that she realized they were about to stay alone together at an inn.

She initially thought that traveling the jianghu with him would definitely be fun. Unexpectedly, she never thought about situations like this arising.

The strange thing was, she was completely calm at heart.

He was truly a noble man.

\*

“Innkeeper, are there any rooms available? Don't tell me there's only one room left.”

“...Naturally, we have a few available. We also have private courtyards...” The innkeeper leaned on the counter, about to doze off. He continued impatiently, “...if you have the money.”

Zhao Changhe snapped his fingers at Cui Yuanyang to tell her it was her time to shine.

Cui Yuanyong's face was flushed as she took out a silver piece from her bag. "We'll have—have a private courtyard. Don't let anyone bother us."

Her crisp and sweet voice fully awoke the innkeeper. He suddenly raised his head and sized up the young lady, then sized up Zhao Changhe with an extremely weird look on his face.

My brother, how many years do you wish to be sentenced to?