

T. Times 651

Chapter 651: It's Time to Get Down to Business

Vermillion Bird had never imagined that she would one day share a man with another man, much less compete with her side by side. If someone had suggested such a thing to her years ago, they would have undoubtedly faced her wrath and ended up torn in half.

But if she had to accept someone, if there was no other choice, perhaps it could only be Lady Three.

After Xia Chichi's mother died, Lady Three became Vermillion Bird's closest friend... her only friend, in fact.

When Vermillion Bird first debuted in the world, she was just a young girl. At that time, Lady Three was already an experienced woman, skilled in martial arts and full of stories. She was a spirited, carefree figure who had seen much of the world. Her laid-back demeanor and readiness to defy convention made her instantly appealing to Vermillion Bird.

Back then, the leadership of the Four Idols Cult was utterly inadequate. The primary reason for this was that most of their members were remnants of an overthrown dynasty. They were a ragtag collection of exiles. The cult was in a state akin to the remnants of the failed Southern Ming dynasty[1]. Xia Chichi's mother, a former princess, was merely above average in terms of ability and intelligence, yet that had been enough to make her a pillar of the cult.

Vermillion Bird, however, was different. Huangfu Yongxian, her father, had been a general of the fallen dynasty. Unlike many others of the previous dynasty, he had already pledged loyalty to the Great Xia and wanted nothing to do with the cult's doctrines. Yet, after a few years of witnessing Xia Longyuan's shortcomings, he turned a blind eye as his young daughter was "coaxed" into the cult—leaving an escape route for the future.

It was thus no surprise that someone of military lineage and immense talent like Huangfu Qing would stand out in the Four Idols Cult like a crane among chickens. As soon as her excellent leadership qualities were revealed, responsibilities came to be piled onto her shoulders. As the feeble previous generation of the Four Idols Cult fell to infighting or imperial purges, and the former White Tiger Saintess perished at Luo Family Village, the burdens on the young Vermillion Bird only grew heavier and heavier.

Lady Three's arrival was like a shot of adrenaline for Vermillion Bird. One pushed forward while the other held the line. One handled warfare while the other managed internal affairs. They were

both selfless, making them a perfect pair. The cult's rise over the past decade was due to these two stars shining brightly. The Four Idols Cult rising to become the most formidable cult of this time was not Vermillion Bird's achievement alone. Black Tortoise, though seemingly without any legendary achievements, was invaluable.

Lady Three's reputation for idleness was mostly misleading. She simply disliked power struggles and preferred to focus on her own tasks. In fact, her efforts at funding the cult alone were equivalent to ten Vermillion Birds. Furthermore, Lady Three's martial prowess, though understated, surpassed even Vermillion Bird's. When she did get serious, the results were earth-shattering, scattering enemies in awe and terror. Countless times, she had quietly averted crises for the cult.

Her value truly was beyond measure.

Vermillion Bird had gone from a blossoming maiden to a magnificent woman. Yet, just as it had been back then, whenever she found herself overwhelmed, whenever she encountered a dilemma she could not solve, the first person that would come to her mind was always Lady Three. She was the unshakeable pillar Vermillion Bird relied on most. If there were ever a word to describe the Black Tortoise in her heart, it was "steadfast."

Who knew that steadfast pillar would one day turn into this...

When Vermillion Bird beat up Lady Three that morning, she did so with genuine fury. However, she was now unsure whether Lady Three conspiring with a man to conquer her or Lady Three daring to steal that same man away enraged her more.

And yet, here they were, sharing the same man. To her surprise, Vermillion Bird found herself more emotionally accepting of this outcome than she had originally anticipated. At the very least, she felt that it was better than sharing Zhao Changhe with Chichi, and definitely far preferable to sharing him with Tang Wanzhuang. She even began to understand the mischievous delight Lady Three took in this arrangement.

She found that watching the usually carefree, ever-smiling Lady Three reduced to soft, trembling sighs under a man's touch was actually... kind of entertaining.

Unable to resist, Vermillion Bird reached out and gave a gentle squeeze to Lady Three's quivering softness.

She knew full well this might provoke unintended consequences... but she simply could not help herself. As expected, the man misread the gesture as an invitation, and in the next moment, Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise were entangled together.

After more than a decade of unwavering sisterhood, they now faced each other, bodies intertwined. Each bit their lower lips, heads turned away from one another, unable to meet the other's gaze.

* * *

“How are you enjoying yourselves, dear venerables?”

No one knew how much time had passed before Xia Chichi sauntered onto the platform, hands clasped behind her back, her steps small yet deliberate.

Her posture betrayed a readiness to bolt at any moment. Ironically, the one who was now least willing to be around the two venerables was Xia Chichi herself.

It was not just a matter of Vermillion Bird being her master, there was also the title of Empress Dowager layered atop it. On the one hand, while they had never formally established a master-disciple relationship, they both acknowledged that relationship and acted accordingly. On the other hand, while the motherly role that Vermillion Bird held was in title only and they had never acknowledged that relationship for a single second, the title was there nonetheless. For all her mischievous bravado, Xia Chichi could not help but feel uneasy. Especially when that shameless Master-Mother had stolen her man.

The satisfaction of having Vermillion Bird serve her tea had long faded, replaced by a growing sense of frustration the more she thought about it.

Thankfully, the “battle” had long concluded, along with whatever unspeakable acts had followed. Zhao Changhe was now discussing serious matters with them. As Xia Chichi approached, all three faced her with composed expressions, utterly unbothered.

They asked in unison, “Finally done with the ceremony, Chichi?”

Xia Chichi took half a step back, adopting a guarded stance.

“Cough... What’s with that look?” Zhao Changhe asked helplessly. “We’re all dressed properly now...”

“It’s not as if you can’t just strip again. You’re quite good at that, after all.”

“...I’m not some lustful ox.”

“Oh, really? Then let me share some news that might come as a surprise to you. Not only did I finish the ceremony, but I’ve also attended the morning court session.”

The three of them exchanged glances, their heads nearly dropping to their chests in embarrassment.

Zhao Changhe wisely avoided any excuses and cut straight to the matter at hand. “We’ve been discussing the steps that Qing’er should take in order to break through to the Profound Control Realm. She needs more than these indirect attempts. It’s best for her to travel to the extreme south and witness the fire firsthand. But with so many critical matters at hand, we’re debating whether she can afford to leave. The deterrent power of a Profound Control Realm cultivator is immense, so delaying some tasks for this breakthrough might be worth it. What do you think?”

“No,” Xia Chichi replied firmly.

Vermillion Bird was surprised. “Why not? The most immediate tasks of stabilizing the internal affairs and reforming the cult’s administration are already complete. I don’t see many urgent matters left. Compared to everything else, breaking through to the Profound Control Realm is far more important, isn’t it?”

“Because things aren’t just about you. The ones who need to leave the soonest are Changhe and Aunt-Master,” said Xia Chichi with a sigh. “For the past few days, Changhe has been busy forging weapons and taking control of the Imperial Ancestral Temple’s secret realm. These are all critical tasks. Frankly, maintaining our alliance with Tang Wanzhuang is of utmost importance. That’s why neither I nor First Seat Tang—I mean, Tang Wanzhuang—have interrupted you. In fact, we’ve even been supportive of your efforts.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Vermillion Bird blinked. Wait, did she just imply that she and Tang Wanzhuang are on the same side now? Well, since she’s the empress, I guess that makes sense....

This just went to show how quickly one's priorities could shift. Vermillion Bird would not be surprised if Xia Chichi one day decided to turn against the veterans of the Four Idols Cult should it be necessary. Still, given their current dynamics, the situation transforming into such a scenario seemed unlikely—after all, the ultimate authority lay with Zhao Changhe, whether for the Four Idols Cult or for Tang Wanzhuang.

Xia Chichi, unaware of her master's musings, continued, "Externally, we're still on shaky ground. The movements of the tribes to the north remains the greatest cause for worry for both me and Tang Wanzhuang. Aunt-Master spent a long time at Huangsha Market and is most familiar with the situation at the border, so it would be best if she could go there and take charge."

Lady Three raised an eyebrow. "Isn't that what Batu and Uncle Huangfu are there for? What can I even do to help?"

"The problem is that we don't really know where General Huangfu's loyalty lies. Just two days ago, troops from Jinzhong arrived in the capital, though Shaozong repelled them. Things are now far more critical than when the Shanxi merchants were merely smuggling grain. And to the west, with Li Gongsi dead, we need to consider what the Li Clan will do. The northern barbarians have already raided Guanzhong once, so can they now bypass it entirely and strike us directly? We need more than just intelligence from Huangsha Market. I also hope you can make contact with Ying Five, since he has deep roots in the northwest."

Lady Three fell silent.

Xia Chichi sighed and added, "We can at least take some comfort in two things. First, Bo'e is injured, and tensions between him and Timur have been prompted by the Tome of Troubled Times. Second, it's the dead of winter. Heavy snowfall makes any campaign incredibly difficult. However, we can't afford to be complacent. We must still prepare for any unexpected strikes. Just because there's been no movement recently doesn't mean that they're idle. The silence can simply be due to a delay in intelligence. After all, despite the chaos we've been navigating, only a short time has really passed. A lack of news is perfectly normal... At worst, Batu might already be dead."

Zhao Changhe: "..."

"Moreover, it's not just General Huangfu's loyalty that's uncertain. There are still other uncertainties internally. The Cui Clan in the south has been unsettlingly silent. They have not even made a formal declaration. We must also consider our next step with regard to the Wang Clan that has retreated to Langya. And further to the south..."

“Alright, alright,” Zhao Changhe sighed and rubbed his temples. “I get it. It looks like I really do need to visit the Cui Clan.”

“If both you and Aunt-Master leave, then the only powerful figure left in the capital would be Tang Wanzhuang, and she alone is not enough of a deterrent force to keep everything in order in the capital. First, Lu Jianzhang and his faction can’t be entirely trusted. Second, the unknown god or demon that Changhe repelled with an arrow might return. The name of Venerable Vermillion Bird alone is a symbol of stability, especially now that you’ve made progress toward the Profound Control Realm. For the time being, we can’t afford for you to leave. If you find yourself idle, the best course of action would be to investigate that unknown god or demon’s origins and whereabouts.”

The three exchanged glances, taken aback by Xia Chichi’s words. They found it hard to believe that this was the same woman who, not long ago, had been sulking over her master stealing her man. Yet at this moment, all three remembered the words she had spoken when she decided to take the throne.

—I won’t just take the reins; I’ll settle his debts with the world.

Perhaps she truly was the person best suited for the position, far more so than Zhao Changhe himself.

Zhao Changhe’s thoughts drifted to the dragon throne from his summoning draw. That had been a location card, marking the starting point of his journey and its link to the throne. He had once thought it was because Xia Chichi was of Xia Longyuan’s blood, that his path had been destined to revolve around this location. But now, it seemed the card had been pointing to Xia Chichi herself.

If that were true, had the blind woman who sent him to her side truly glimpsed the future?

Xia Chichi concluded, “If you’re planning to leave, then make sure you see Tang Wanzhuang before you go. She’s not just someone for you to win over. She’s the Great Wall of this empire.”

1. The Southern Ming Dynasty refers to the remnants of the Ming Dynasty that resisted the Qing conquest of China. It is considered a failed effort due to internal divisions, weak leadership, and the overwhelming military strength of the Qing. 📖

Chapter 652: The Foundation of an Aristocratic Family

When Zhao Changhe saw Tang Wanzhuang, she was working in the office of the Demon Suppression Bureau.

This was the first time that Zhao Changhe had ever seen Tang Wanzhuang seated in an office reviewing documents. Despite the solemn atmosphere of the office, there was an inexplicable sense that she was in a serene waterside pavilion in Jiangnan, composing poetry or painting landscapes.

It seemed as though wherever she sat, the scenery of Jiangnan would follow.

Baoqin stood by her side as always, preparing tea and grinding ink as needed. She actually held an official administrative position in the Demon Suppression Bureau, akin to a modern-day assistant or secretary. When she saw Zhao Changhe come in, she shot him a glance filled with faint grievance and frustration, then lowered her gaze and continued grinding ink.

Pouring tea had always been her duty. It was not that she had any extreme desire to fulfill that task, but she found it ridiculous for a supposed emperor to be snatching such mundane tasks away from a maid.

Unlike before, Tang Wanzhuang's complexion now glowed with vitality. Gone was the pallid, paper-like pallor and the occasional coughing fits. Her cheeks were rosy, and when she caught sight of Zhao Changhe, joy blossomed across her face as if spring had returned to the land.

Even when she was pale and frail, people called her the most beautiful woman in the world. Now, with her complexion more radiant than ever, that title seemed inescapable—not that anyone would want to take it away.

The surrounding secretaries of the Demon Suppression Bureau stole glances at their chief. Whether they were married or unmarried, their eyes betrayed a hint of longing, accompanied by clear admiration.

She was simply too beautiful. Unfortunately for them, the joy she radiated was clearly meant for only one person.

Tang Wanzhuang teased with an unusually playful smile, "Is everything finally secure in Your Highness's chambers?"

Zhao Changhe cleared his throat, glancing around at those present. Tang Wanzhuang got what he was hinting at and waved her hand, saying, “Everyone, leave us.”

The secretaries left reluctantly, their heads lowered and their hearts filled with envy.

Zhao Changhe watched them go, clicking his tongue. “If a rebellion ever happens out of jealousy, you might be to blame for it.”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled faintly and did not respond to his quip. Instead, she stood up and moved to a tea table nearby, her delicate hands gracefully brewing tea. The fragrance of the tea curled through the air as steam rose between them, and Zhao Changhe watched her through the mist. The restless thoughts that had filled his mind these past days began to settle.

He had to admit that his current demeanor owed much to Tang Wanzhuang’s influence. Her beauty made one unconsciously desire to align with her wishes, to become someone worthy of her grace. The memories of his past self, cursing as a bandit in the mountains, felt strangely distant now.

Tang Wanzhuang handed him a cup of tea. Then, after glancing around to ensure that they were alone, she lowered her voice and said, “Dear, please have some tea.”

A slight blush colored her cheeks as her head dipped. Zhao Changhe’s heart skipped a beat at the sight, ripples spreading in the calm lake of his heart as if disturbed by a gentle breeze in spring.

Zhao Changhe accepted the tea, feeling somewhat embarrassed by his own behavior. Bowing his head, he muttered, “These past few days...”

Tang Wanzhuang smiled gently and said, “It was me who encouraged you to do so, so why feel ashamed?”

Indeed, Tang Wanzhuang had wanted Vermillion Bird to treat him just as she did.

Tang Wanzhuang continued, “I already knew about Vermillion Bird since our time with the Yang Clan, so this outcome doesn’t surprise me. What did surprise me, though, was that it happened with Lady Three as well...”

At this point, her expression turned somewhat peculiar. “Did you know? I used to fear the Black Tortoise far more than the Vermillion Bird. Long ago, she even gave me a beating. My resolve to leave the sheltered life of poetry and music in the Tang Clan to venture into the jianghu was, in large part, thanks to her. The pressure from our encounter drove me to hastily attempt a breakthrough, which ended up injuring both my spirit and lungs. I always thought she was unfathomable, as deep as the sea. Now I realize... I was overthinking it. I’ve been fighting against an imaginary foe this whole time.”

Zhao Changhe found himself unsure whether to laugh or cry at that.

“I thought that even if you managed to sway Vermillion Bird, Black Tortoise would remain an issue. Yet... Hehe.” Tang Wanzhuang chuckled, her tone light and relaxed. “So why should you feel ashamed? From my perspective, you’ve far exceeded expectations.”

Zhao Changhe sighed. “It shouldn’t feel like some sort of mission...”

Tang Wanzhuang’s gaze softened. “As a minister of the court and chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau, coming up with such a scheme feels a bit shameful. But it’s simply the most practical approach, and it’s the result of the seeds you’ve sown—moving with the tides rather than against them. The process might have been messy, but the outcome aligns the interests of every faction under our new regime. With no hidden dangers left, we can finally join hands to do what must be done.”

Zhao Changhe hesitated for a moment, then said softly, “Wanzhuang, from my perspective, this isn’t something that should be measured like that. I’d rather you scold me for being a heartless womanizer than see you treat them as...”

“They see me the same way, so we’re even.” Tang Wanzhuang smiled. “How the women in your inner circle bicker and view each other as rivals is our business. You really don’t need to worry about it.”

Zhao Changhe blinked at her. “...So, does this mean you view Yuanyang the same way?”

“Cui Yuanyang?” Tang Wanzhuang shook her head slightly. “She doesn’t get a say in this. Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise are leaders of the Four Idols Cult, and I hold one of the highest positions in the empire. Cui Yuanyang is far from having such a status. Whatever I said about the others doesn’t apply to her.”

Zhao Changhe said, “Well, that’s precisely what I came here to discuss with you. When it comes to the affairs of aristocratic families, you’re much more knowledgeable than Chichi or Qing’er. I’m really unsure of what to do with the Cui Clan.”

“Qing’er... Heh...”

“...”

Tang Wanzhuang cleared her throat, feigning seriousness. “Take, for example, the Wang Clan’s daughter, who married Cui Yuanyang’s elder brother. Now, she sits in isolation, and all she can do is cry. The former empress herself was executed by the late emperor without even leaving a final word. When it comes to us daughters of aristocratic families, we’ve never had much autonomy in such matters. We’re merely tools for our families to further their goals. I’m fortunate that I had the highest status and greatest martial prowess in my family. That is what allowed me to carve out my own future. As for Cui Yuanyang... her opinions hold no weight. The one you must deal with is still Cui Wenjing.”

After a brief pause, she added, “In fact, your dealings with the Cui Clan have always been with Cui Wenjing. Cui Yuanyang has always been a mere bridge between you.”

Zhao Changhe nodded. “That’s true.”

Sometimes, even he was not sure if he was courting Yuanyang or negotiating endlessly with Old Cui, who seemed to overshadow everything.

“But having such a bridge is an advantage that sets your relationship with the Cui Clan apart from others. Cui Wenjing can become one of your in-laws, which is something he has likely been aiming for all along,” Tang Wanzhuang said. “However, the primary issue now has shifted to the conflict of interest between imperial authority and aristocratic families. The late emperor severed their roots, which led to widespread rebellion. Cui Wenjing didn’t participate directly but ceded Qinghe Commandery, signaling his intention to distance himself from the rebellion. Now, with Her Majesty establishing the Han Dynasty instead of continuing the Xia, Cui Wenjing is watching closely, gauging how Her Majesty’s stance on the aristocratic families compares to the late emperor’s.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Cui Wenjing is the most insightful among the heads of the aristocratic families, but his thinking is still very much in line with the typical mindset of those from such families. If he sees Her Majesty

following in the late emperor's footsteps, the likelihood of him collaborating with the Wang Clan will surpass any chance of him submitting to Her Majesty. Never mistake the Cui and Wang Clan's feuding for irreconcilable enmity. Family interests are national interests as far as they're concerned, and when it comes to these interests, there are no permanent friends or enemies. For now, the Cui Clan's silence is merely due to our reforms to the imperial examinations not yet being fully disclosed and our ongoing discussions on the new dynasty's tax policies. These policies, which target the monopolization of population and land by aristocratic families, will be a significant challenge for them. Once announced, the Cui Clan's opposition will be inevitable."

Zhao Changhe finally said, "I understand the reasoning, but how do we achieve a scenario where everyone wins in such a fundamentally opposed position? Sweet-talking Old Cui won't work, he's too cunning for that."

"In the past, their strength lay in the Qinghe Sword, a relic of ancient knowledge. Their martial arts and cultural heritage were passed down through the sword spirit, unlike ordinary families who relied on written records. Written texts require comprehension, and talentless descendants might fail to learn, but the sword spirit allowed direct transmission of insights, granting the Cui Clan unparalleled and consistent progress in cultivation. However, with the sword spirit dormant in recent years, the family has visibly declined. In a way, the reliance on the sword spirit has proven to be a double-edged sword, funny though it might sound. If the sword spirit falters, the family's momentum stagnates, leaving them worse off than those accustomed to relying on texts."

Zhao Changhe nodded. "That's true."

"And with the sword now broken, this is an irreversible fact. Clinging to the past, obsessing over whether the sword can be restored, or harboring grudges is futile. What they need now is great wisdom and determination—someone to lead the family out of its old ways and adapt to the new era. Does Cui Wenjing possess the foresight and resolve to do so?" Tang Wanzhuang mused. "I believe he is already contemplating it. Only those who ride the waves at the forefront can secure the greatest benefits in a new era."

Zhao Changhe asked, "Am I supposed to act as an envoy, then? Should we offer them something more tangible?"

Tang Wanzhuang rose from her seat and offered a deep bow. "Wanzhuang humbly requests a favor for personal reasons... a formal title for my nephew, Buqi, as the Marquis of Wu. It would be an honorary title with no real authority, limited to being hereditary, but a gesture of solidarity with the empire."

Chapter 653: Returning to the Jianghu

In the annals of history, hereditary titles are a legacy of the earliest aristocratic systems where titles and authority are intertwined. In fact, it is this very concept that gives rise to aristocratic families.

Of course, during the course of dynasties, inherited titles are bound to be slowly reduced. Within a few generations, some of the titles even disappear entirely; maybe they are replaced by others, maybe not. And if one wants to obtain a title, they have to earn it through their own merit.

There are also monarchs and dynasties that experiment with such systems as honorary titles and hereditary nominal titles. As it turns out, these systems usually start off as harmless, due to the small number of recipients, but over time, they result in the court supporting a swarm of idle parasites, a state far from ideal.

But every solution has to be evaluated within the context of the problem.

Given the current circumstances, this was perhaps the most suitable and quickest way to stabilize the empire. In all fairness, if such titles ultimately led to a group of entitled nobles who only fed off the system, that could actually turn out to be beneficial to the court. As for the risk of such titles multiplying uncontrollably, the young generation was... well, still very young, and therefore capable of making adjustments step by step.

Tang Wanzhuang had mentioned Buqi, but in reality, she was referring to the Cui Clan. If even the Tang Clan could have a marquis, then what about the Cui Clan?

Even if the titles were nominal and lacked the grandeur of the past, at the very least, they secured a stable livelihood for future generations—an ironclad safety net ensuring they would not go hungry as long as the empire stood.

And the point of offering such a safety net was gauging whether the Cui Clan would be willing to let go and fight in the new era, competing with ordinary people and religious followers in the imperial exams and embracing a new land tax system.

Their sword had already been broken, and restoring it to its former state was impossible. With that being the case, would they be willing to take a step back and bow before the new rulers, or would they not?

If they were willing, then they needed to act quickly. Hesitation would only serve to reduce the merits that they could stand to claim.

Compared to Li Shentong's ruthless strategy of slaughtering nobility mercilessly, this approach was far more lenient. The only exception to this, of course, was if they were determined to establish a new dynasty altogether—in which case drastic measures were to be expected.

Zhao Changhe pondered the proposal, running scenarios through his mind. He concluded that while this might not sway someone like Yang Jingxiu, it could work on the Old Cui, at least enough to start negotiations. If all else failed, he could always run off with Cui Yuanyuan.

With that in mind, he sighed and said, "I'll give it a try."

Tang Wanzhuang's beautiful eyes remained fixed on him. In a soft voice, she said, "Dear, when you leave the capital, you must be cautious... Things are different now. You've always been famous one way or another, but you were never considered an actual central figure. No one would resort to extreme measures to deal with you. But now, even blind people can see you are the keystone holding this new dynasty together. Even the gods and demons. Their attention was once fixated on His Late Majesty, but now, they will now turn their gaze to you, especially since you hold the Heavenly Tome."

Zhao Changhe laughed heartily. "It's been far too long since I felt the kind of pressure I experienced when I first roamed the jianghu. Well, that's more or less since I first roamed the jianghu. Anyway, I can't help but feel restless now. What's the big deal about the gods and demons? If I can kill one, I can kill another!"

Tang Wanzhuang looked at him as his fighting spirit overflowed. There was a hint of reproach in her gaze, like watching a reckless boy, but deep down, she could not help feeling a profound affection for him.

Although Zhao Changhe had changed in many ways, the untamed defiance buried deep in his bones had never wavered. It was this irrepressible spirit, this ability to draw strength from adversity, that had captivated Cui Yuanyang, as well as herself.

Now, Zhao Changhe seemed to hold the highest authority in the dynasty. Yet, in truth, this regime was as fragile as a newborn. Whether in terms of overall reach or elite martial strength, the pressures it faced were far greater than before. It was the truest form of adversity, with collapse looming at any moment.

Tang Wanzhuang had fiercely supported Xia Longyuan in the past, and this was one of the key reasons. While it was true that the Old Xia had sown chaos, his mere existence prevented complete anarchy. Now that he was gone, the world had plunged into utter turmoil. If the chaos had not yet reached its peak, it was only because Zhao Changhe was holding much of the world together, and this was something no one had foreseen. No one, except Tang Wanzhuang, had glimpsed faint traces of this possibility.

At this time, Zhao Changhe was the person in the most danger in the entire world. Yet unlike Xia Longyuan, he could not hide under the Imperial Ancestral Temple. There was simply far too much that he needed to do.

“You... when it’s necessary, disguise yourself. Don’t let your pride get in the way of your safety,” Tang Wanzhuang finally said. Rising gracefully, she walked around the tea table to Zhao Changhe’s side. She leaned gently into his arms, pressing a soft kiss to his lips. “I will work with your Qing’er to support Her Majesty. When you return, you’ll see a prosperous and stable homeland.”

Zhao Changhe embraced her, teasing, “Are you sure you and ‘my Qing’er’ won’t just end up fighting?”

Tang Wanzhuang’s eyes sparkled with a seductive glimmer. “She and I have been rivals for fifteen years. Looking back, it seems our battles in the first half of life were nothing more than a rehearsal for the second half. We’ll likely be at it for a lifetime...”

She leaned closer, her breath warm against his ear, and murmured softly, “Remember to come back safely. When you do... She and I... will compete on the bed, just for you.”

That line did more to motivate Zhao Changhe than any heartfelt plea for caution ever could. He swore to himself that even if the Heavenly Dao itself descended upon him, he would cut it down and crawl back to the capital if needed!

* * *

That very day, he departed from the capital.

As Xia Chichi had said, though the recent days seemed filled with debauchery, they were crucial for internal stability. But once things were somewhat stabilized, there was no room to indulge further in the comforts of the boudoir, no time to sample every possible permutation of companionship.

The current state of affairs was far too urgent; there was no opportunity to become a debauched monarch.

Tang Wanzhuang's temptation was, in reality, a promise—a hope for a future where the world was truly at peace. When that day came, she would indulge in any folly by his side.

Lady Three had already left ahead of him, returning to Huangsha Market to hold a position she had once taken on with curiosity, only to abandon out of boredom.

Although Lady Three had not spent long as the chief of the market, her influence remained. It was clear that Huangsha Market was still a northern stronghold for the Four Idols Cult, managed by elite members of the cult who were well-acquainted with the region's dynamics. They also maintained a mobile force ready for deployment at any moment. The return of the Four Idols Cult's Black Tortoise would undoubtedly stir the winds and clouds on the frontier.

After all, in the eyes of others, she was still a fearsome and enigmatic figure.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe had reverted to his early disguise as a weathered, yellow-faced man, riding Snow-Treading Crow toward Qinghe.

While Snow-Treading Crow could now fly, Zhao Changhe did not dare to do that. It was simply far too conspicuous. His departure from the capital was still under wraps, and flying on his horse would be tantamount to holding a massive billboard saying "Zhao Changhe is here."

For the sake of a future where he could see his Wanzhuang and Qing'er compete on the same bed one day, he had to exercise caution.

Qinghe was only about seven hundred li from the capital, with no significant mountain ranges to obstruct his journey, just flat plains. Zhao Changhe, accustomed to observing the landscape during his travels, noted a marked change this time.

The atmosphere in Hebei was tense, like never before.

Previously, on the way to the capital, the route from Qinghe to the capital was prosperous—an area right within the grasp of the emperor, after all. While there had been vagrants and beggars, the roads bustled with merchants, and well-maintained inns dotted the path. Now, many inns lay abandoned, and the once-busy route was eerily desolate.

Passing through cities and towns, Zhao Changhe noticed fearful looks on people's faces. It was only when they saw he was a lone rider that they seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.

* * *

“We thought it was the start of a war...” someone explained.

A nearby patron, sitting at the next table, added, “Brother, with that fine horse of yours galloping like mad, if you're not rushing to fight in a war, then you must at least be out to pass orders, right?”

Zhao Changhe remained composed. “Why would Hebei and the capital go to war?”

“Isn't it obvious? The late emperor severed the roots of the nobles, or so they say. Do you think that the Cui Clan of Qinghe would just sit and take it? Tensions have been high for a long time.”

“But the Cui Clan doesn't represent all of the states of Yan and Zhao[1].”

“They pretty much do. The late emperor only liked playing with swords and didn't do much of anything else. After all these years, nearly every major noble clan has taken complete control of their territories. They're practically local overlords now. Saying that Cui controls two-thirds of Zhao isn't much of an exaggeration. The rest belongs to the Lu Clan...”

Another patron chimed in, “Hey, do you think the Asura King being made King of Zhao[2] has anything to do with this?”

“Are you saying that the Cui Clan's territory is being given to the Asura King?”

“That’s what it sounds like is happening, doesn’t it? But doesn’t the King of Zhao have a marriage arrangement with the young lady of the Cui Clan? Well, I guess given the current tensions, I doubt that’s happening...”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

The title of King Zhao had been a spur-of-the-moment decision, forced on Xia Chichi by Tang Wanzhuang in a public political gambit. There had been no time to consider the political implications of even a single word. It was a makeshift solution, nothing more. Yet, in the hands of those inclined to speculate, this offshoot narrative gained a certain credibility—especially within the Cui Clan itself.

This mission seemed to hold complications he had not anticipated. The Wang and Li Clans, among others, would not want the Cui Clan to reestablish any connection to Zhao Changhe through marriage. They would likely stop at nothing to sabotage the idea.

If that were the case...

“Your wine, sir!” The inn’s waiter approached cheerfully, setting down a tray of hot wine and meat. “Apologies for the wait, sir.”

Zhao Changhe looked at the steaming wine, a faint smile tugging at his lips. He murmured to himself, “It’s been so long since I encountered the classic assassination trope of being served poisoned food. I kind of missed these classic jianghu things. Who’d have thought the Snow-Listening Pavilion still hasn’t improved its tricks after all this time? How disappointing.”

Chapter 654: Eighteen-Year-Old Yangyang

The expression of the cheerful waiter, who had been smiling just a moment ago, instantly changed. Without hesitation, he flung the pot of hot wine straight at Zhao Changhe’s face.

At the same time, the patrons who had been chatting amiably moments before suddenly pulled out daggers and viciously thrust them at Zhao Changhe’s kidneys.

But the next moment, everyone froze, their eyes wide with shock.

The steaming wine meant to douse Zhao Changhe's face seemed to hit an invisible wall. Not only did it fail to reach him, but it rebounded entirely, splashing back onto the waiter's own face. The man let out a blood-curdling scream as his face melted into a ruined mess. He writhed in agony for only a brief moment before he collapsed lifelessly to the floor.

"Hoh, how poisonous. You're truly quite vicious," Zhao Changhe said with a chuckle. With a casual wave of his hand, the daggers reversed their course, plunging back into the hearts of their wielders.

In the blink of an eye, the inn became littered with corpses. A few genuine patrons cowered against the walls, eyes wide and breaths stuck in their throats, too terrified to move.

Zhao Changhe cast a glance at them, then calmly sat back in his seat. With a flick of his hand, he pulled over a nearby wine flagon, pouring himself a drink and sipping it leisurely. "I know not all of you are actual patrons. Some of the rats are still hiding. But I can't be bothered to figure out who's who, so just do me a favor... Pass on a message to Snow Owl for me."

No one dared respond.

"You wish to assassinate the imperial court's envoy to the Cui Clan and sabotage the negotiations? Save yourselves the trouble. The Cui Clan isn't stupid, and neither is the empress. If you're going to ambush an envoy, you better send someone capable. If a big shot like Snow Owl himself doesn't show up, it's pointless. But honestly, even he doesn't have the guts to come for my throat."

Still, no one spoke.

In truth, the assassins were not targeting Zhao Changhe specifically. No mortal force had the capability to assassinate Zhao Changhe anymore unless the likes of Timur or Snow Owl personally intervened. Their ambush had been laid for a generic envoy dispatched from the capital to Qinghe. The plan was simple: kill the envoy and ensure both sides blamed each other, causing the talks to collapse before they even began.

How could they have known that the first envoy they would encounter would be the Asura King himself? If they had known, they would not have bothered coming at all...

Who would believe that Zhao Changhe, now such a high-profile figure, would still dare roam the jianghu

alone? Even harder to believe was that Xia Chichi, Tang Wanzhuang, and Zhao Changhe himself all thought this was perfectly normal; if he did not dare to venture out to the jianghu, then who would? Even now, the assassins had no idea who this yellow-faced man was.

“This is my message for Snow Owl,” Zhao Changhe said, finishing his wine and setting the flagon down with a sharp clink. “Find a woman and lose your virginity. Maybe then you’ll develop a bit more manhood and stop obsessing over other men’s asses all the time.”

With that, Zhao Changhe rose and strode out of the inn.

The attempted assassination was nothing more than a minor episode for Zhao Changhe. It was less harrowing than his earliest days in the jianghu, yet it quashed his intentions to observe and gather information along the way. After all, this attack might not have been orchestrated by the Snow-Listening Pavilion.

Although Zhao Changhe named Snow Owl, his words were a deliberate feint, intended to mislead everyone. The true culprits were more likely the Wang, Yang, or Li Clans—or maybe even the Cui Clan itself. Even if the Snow-Listening Pavilion was involved, they were merely hired hands.

This meant that there was no time to waste. The Cui Clan’s direction was not solely determined by Cui Wenjing; he could not ignore the collective will of the other family members. The tides of circumstance pushed everyone along, with no exceptions.

As Zhao Changhe galloped through the snowy night, he glanced back over his shoulder, feeling an unexpected pang of nostalgia.

The jianghu used to be... entertaining.

Now, even the mental effort to unravel schemes seemed unnecessary. His Qi Observation Technique clearly revealed the cultivation levels and malicious intentions of those around him. What had been gained in safety had come at the cost of excitement.

Maybe I’m just a glutton for punishment.

* * *

As Zhao Changhe rode through the night, he passed several cities along the way, all with their gates firmly shut. While it was normal for city gates to be closed at night, the heightened vigilance of guards on the walls and the tall watchtowers was anything but ordinary.

They were clearly ready for war; they were facing north, prepared to defend against anything that came from the capital.

Zhao Changhe did not attempt to enter the cities. Instead, he rode around them, his mood growing heavier with each passing moment.

The Cui Clan was clearly fully prepared. This situation appeared to be rapidly heading toward the worst-case scenario. In essence, he was no longer visiting his fiancée's family to discuss a marriage alliance; he was stepping into the tiger's den.

He could not help but wonder how Yangyang was faring in such a tense atmosphere... Was the little bunny crying her eyes out?

* * *

By morning, snow was falling heavily.

Snow-Treading Crow trudged through the thick drifts of snow, carrying Zhao Changhe to the outskirts of Qinghe.

At least the city was not sealed during the day, and civilians were still allowed entry. As Zhao Changhe rode up to the gates, a group of guards stepped forward to block his path. "Dismount! Show your travel permit! Uh... you..."

During the journey, Zhao Changhe had kept a low profile, concealing his identity. But now, there was no need to keep hiding who he was. A mere envoy would only face unnecessary obstacles, delays, or outright denial of entry. And if things escalated, his identity would be exposed anyway, making such precautions pointless. It was better to reveal his hand upfront.

Long before reaching the gates, Zhao Changhe had removed his disguise.

The guards stared at his scarred face, their grips tightening on their spears as they instinctively stepped back in unison. “Zhao...”

The weight of his name—and the reputation behind it—was clear. Yet none of them could bring themselves to utter it. After an awkward pause, what finally emerged was, “King Zhao...”

Zhao Changhe pulled on the reins, his whip held casually in one hand. “Am I permitted entry?”

The guards exchanged nervous glances, cold sweat beading on their foreheads despite the biting snow.

This was the newly crowned King Zhao, widely acknowledged as the most powerful figure in the nascent dynasty. Alone, on horseback, in the dead of winter, he had ridden a thousand li to stand at the gates of Qinghe...

What do we do?! We haven’t received any orders on how to handle something like this!

Let alone the ordinary guards, even the commanding officer on duty wasted no time sending a personal messenger racing to inform Cui Wenjing.

Watching the chaos around him, Zhao Changhe laughed heartily and raised his voice, projecting it with the full power of a figure worthy of the Ranking of Heaven/ “Zhao Changhe has come to fulfill his marriage agreement. I am here to marry the young lady of the Cui Clan, Cui Yuanyang!”

The sheer force of his voice reverberated across the city, startling birds from their nests and echoing through the snow-covered streets.

The entire city of nearly three hundred thousand people heard the proclamation. Countless mouths hung half-open in astonishment, eyes wide in disbelief. Snow fell steadily, blanketing the city in silence.

Suddenly, the stillness was broken by the chaotic clamor of guards within the city. Hoofbeats echoed from the inner streets, accompanied by frantic voices. “Young miss, you can’t—”

“Piss off!”

A sharp whinny pierced the air as a steed's hooves struck the stone path. A young woman astride a white horse swept through the falling snow like a whirlwind, charging out of the city gates.

At the gate, she pulled her reins sharply, her mount rearing before coming to a halt. She sat there, quietly gazing at the man who had arrived.

It was none other than Cui Yuanyang, looking like a winter fairy—white horse, silver cloak, silver saddle. Beneath the snow-laden gates, she looked like a vision from a poem, a painting brought to life.

A carved bow hung diagonally across her back as though she had been preparing for a hunt when she heard Zhao Changhe's proclamation. She had raced here so quickly that she had not even grabbed her quiver.

She had grown taller... Her long legs hugged the horse's flanks, and her posture was upright and proud. The baby fat on her face had begun to fade, leaving her features more defined and mature.

Her spirited oval face still held a trace of sternness from scolding the guards, but as her gaze settled on the man before her, her sharp expression softened. A radiant smile broke across her face, her eyes sparkling with joy.

This was a young woman who, during the siege of Puyang, had led troops on a daring night raid against the Wang Clan's encampment. Months of war had forged her into someone unrecognizable from the naive little rabbit she once was. Gone was the childish impulsiveness of the girl who had run away from home years ago.

This was Cui Yuanyang... at eighteen years of age.

The young couple gazed at each other across the snow for a long time. Then, as if connected by the same thought, they both smiled and spoke in unison:

"I've been waiting more than two years for you to say this."

"My little Yangyang... has grown up."

They laughed again, this time with warmth and affection, their laughter carrying over the snow-covered plain.

From within the city came Cui Wenjing's voice, also projected through the air. "Since you've come to discuss the marriage, come inside so we can discuss it."

Chapter 655: Do You Want a New Sword Spirit?

It was the same garden pavilion as last time, and Cui Wenjing was still standing by the edge, hands behind his back, gazing at the flowing water.

The difference was that, back then, Cui Yuanyang had not even dared to enter and listen. This time, despite the cries of "Young miss, please don't go in!" and the heavy presence of guards trying to bar her way, Cui Yuanyang simply kicked them aside with almost palpable fury and stormed into the garden, dragging Zhao Changhe behind her.

Zhao Changhe wore a smile the entire way. He had been faintly worried that Cui Yuanyang might have been confined and left crying in frustration, but now it seemed he had underestimated his little rabbit. The pitiful girl who once sat in the rain, hugging her knees, had improved much since then.

And rightly so. While the scions of many aristocratic families showed signs of decline, the siblings Cui Yuanyang and Cui Yuanyong, both recognized by the Qinghe Sword, were rare exceptions. Furthermore, with proper experience in the outside world under their belts, they were treasures of their lineage, pillars of their clan for the next few decades. With their father as the clan leader, it would not be easy for anyone in the family to marginalize or mistreat them.

They may very well already be stepping into the inner circles of their family's power. No matter what, they were certainly not figures to be trifled with.

Cui Yuanyang did not say much to Zhao Changhe on the way. She simply held his hand, dragging him along with a fierce determination that made it seem less like she was escorting a suitor for a proposal and more like she was staging a wedding raid. Zhao Changhe found it hard not to laugh.

As for Cui Wenjing, who had once radiated the elegance and grace of a jade-like nobleman, his figure now seemed faintly stooped as he stood by the pavilion, his back to them. From behind, one could see streaks of white threading through his hair.

Hearing the two approach, Cui Wenjing spoke calmly without turning around, “After a battle at Yanmen, Yuanyong came back cursing like a wanderer of the jianghu and earned himself months of confinement to fix his ways. He finally improved, only to be thrown back into military life. Now, it’s not just Yuanyong’s mouth that’s beyond saving, even Yangyang has turned into a whirlwind of fire and fury. Truly, it’s a family tragedy.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Cui Yuanyang bristled with indignation. “Oh, stop it! If I weren’t a little fierce, I would’ve been thrown into confinement myself! What did I do wrong to deserve that, huh? If I didn’t beat them senseless, I—”

Cui Wenjing cut her off, his tone still light. “If you dare finish that sentence with ‘I’m not surnamed Cui,’ we’ll see whether your father dares to lock you up or not. Do you really think I’m dead or something and you can just act without consequence?”

Cui Yuanyang: “Big brother Zhao’s here with me. I wouldn’t say something so rude.”

Finally, Zhao Changhe could not hold back his laughter.

“Sit down. There’s tea on the table. Pour some for your ‘big brother Zhao.’”

Cui Wenjing still had not turned around.

Cui Yuanyang pouted but obediently dragged Zhao Changhe to the stone table in the pavilion.

Zhao Changhe, however, shook his head, motioning for her to sit while he approached Cui Wenjing, standing shoulder to shoulder with him to gaze at the water.

It was the same scene from years ago when this pair of prospective father-in-law and son-in-law had first spoken. Back then, Cui Wenjing had asked him, “What identity do you have that allows you to stand shoulder to shoulder with me?”

Now, as Zhao Changhe stood there, the servants and guards watching from a distance saw it as entirely natural. Putting aside all other titles, just by virtue of the Ranking of Troubled Times, Zhao Changhe had every right to be there. He was now second on the Ranking of Earth. Even though he

and Cui Wenjing were technically still in different rankings, the actual gap was just three places; they were clearly in the same league.

Moreover, few doubted Zhao Changhe's qualifications to ascend to the Ranking of Heaven. Most believed that he likely just lacked a pivotal battle—one that might very well take place here, against Cui Wenjing himself.

Cui Yuanyang, sitting quietly with her chin in her hands, seemed completely absorbed in this picture of her lover and her father. For once, she refrained from saying anything and simply listened.

Zhao Changhe was the first to speak. "Uncle, it seems you're still unwell."

Cui Yuanyang blinked in surprise. Father is still unwell?

She had not noticed anything amiss.

Cui Wenjing sighed. "I've healed, but such a near-fatal wound is bound to leave a mark. Even after recovery, it's undeniable that the body feels older. My vitality diminished."

Zhao Changhe nodded thoughtfully before letting out a soft sigh and saying, "I understand... My father used to think of himself as indestructible, yet after falling seriously ill once, his decline was visibly apparent."

Once, people thought his father was Xia Longyuan. Now, with this remark, some might think he was referring to a casualty of the conflict at the Zhao House. In any case, Cui Wenjing did not find the comment out of place. Instead, he sighed deeply and commented, "Who would have thought a small place like the Zhao House could produce a genius like you?"

Zhao Changhe didn't say anything, but he scoffed on the inside.

The Zhao House isn't as small as you think.

Cui Wenjing continued, shaking his head, "People say daughters are supposed to be close to their fathers. In times of need, they're supposed to be by their father's bedside, attending to their every need. But mine? She was nowhere to be seen. In fact, I could only hear her sometimes, and all I heard were complaints. I don't know where she learned such brazen disrespect."

“...I was at war,” Cui Yuanyang muttered, her voice suddenly much softer.

Even though she had been at war, it was true that she had not shown much concern for her father’s visible aging afterward. She had not even noticed it... Scratching her head, the little rabbit began to feel a bit guilty. But I only got back two days ago, and the battle just ended...

Cui Wenjing said, “Do you think you absolutely had to be on the battlefield? Do you think the Cui Clan had no one else to send?”

Cui Yuanyang froze, her father’s words leaving her stunned. He continued, “I was deliberately cultivating a personal guard for you—one under your absolute control. Because there may come a time when... your father can’t fully stand by your side. You’ll need a foundation to assert your voice, even if it’s against me. If the Qinghe Sword was still here, you’d have been much more secure. With it in your hands, no one would dare force your hand.”

Cui Yuanyang sat there, completely speechless, her mind reeling.

“Furthermore, if the Cui Clan ever finds itself falling out with a certain someone, you’ll have the means to leave the family and pursue your own path without being easily oppressed.” Cui Wenjing smiled faintly. “Of course, if that happens, your life won’t be easy either... just like Yuanyong’s wife, who now lives under constant scrutiny. There’s no helping that.”

Cui Yuanyang blurted out instinctively, “Can’t we just avoid a falling-out?”

Cui Wenjing did not answer her question directly. Instead, he continued, “I’ve spoken to Yuanyong about this. His wife had nothing to do with these larger matters, thus there’s no need to involve her. Their relationship has improved somewhat. They even shared a room just the other day. Some interpret it as a signal that I am reconciling with the Wang Clan, some think that Yuanyong was punishing her. How shallow. When everything is viewed through gains and losses, the most basic human bonds are often forgotten. If aristocratic families lose that, then what separates us from any ordinary group huddling together for warmth?”

Cui Yuanyang sat hugging her knees, once again feeling like a timid little rabbit.

“I trust that no matter what becomes of the Cui Clan, Zhao Changhe is someone who values emotions. He won’t mistreat you,” said Cui Wenjing, his tone still calm. “It’s the same with Zhao

Changhe himself. As long as this family doesn't obstruct him in matters concerning you, the relationship between us won't deteriorate beyond repair."

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh. "Old Cui, are you trying to lecture me like your children? Telling me that no matter what happens with the Cui Clan, I should always treat Yangyang well?"

Cui Wenjing replied indifferently, "I'm simply stating facts. Even if I didn't say it, you wouldn't mistreat Yangyang. If anyone bullied her, you'd defend her. That's just who you are. I trust in your nature."

Zhao Changhe could only nod. "Indeed."

Cui Wenjing let out a derisive chuckle. "In truth, your so-called proposal to marry Yuanyang won't face any objections. If you want her, take her. In today's circumstances, your marriage won't impact broader events, just as the Wang Clan marrying off their daughter didn't prevent their impending campaign. Your dramatic proclamation at the city gates may have sounded grand, but it was honestly rather childish."

"Hmph. It does send a signal to the outside world, though, doesn't it?"

"It does." Cui Wenjing offered a faint smile. "But the nature of that signal depends on how we conduct the wedding ceremony. I'm guessing you're not well-versed in such matters?"

"... Damn it."

Cui Wenjing sighed. "So let's drop the pretense of proposals and promises. If you want her, take her to the bridal chamber. No one will stop you; in fact, I will be the one to open the door for you. But for now, let's focus on the matters that truly need discussing."

After a moment of silence, Zhao Changhe reached into his belongings and drew out several broken fragments of a sword. "This is the Qinghe Sword. Every shard is here, not a single one missing."

Cui Wenjing's pupils constricted as he stared at the fragments of the Qinghe Sword. There was a trace of unspeakable sorrow in his eyes, and his face appeared even more aged.

Zhao Changhe said, “I believe you can reforge it, and even revive its spirit. I won’t lie to you, I recently forged a divine sword myself. I understand how sword spirits are formed. Do you want my help?”

Cui Wenjing stared at the fragments for a long time before finally sighing softly. “It would no longer be the same Qinghe Sword...”

“True. Even if reforged, it would be a new sword with a new spirit, entirely different from the original essence of Qinghe tied to the mountains and rivers. But if you’re seeking to pass on a legacy, and this is what you’re seeking, it’s still possible. It would simply be a different kind of legacy. It doesn’t seem incompatible with your needs. Are you interested, Uncle?”

Cui Wenjing fell silent.

“Are you troubled because the core issue isn’t the legacy itself, but rather that the original four swords of the mountains and rivers influenced the qi veins of the land?” Zhao Changhe continued, pointing out the truth that the aristocratic families had long tried to obscure. “What you’ve truly lost is the ability to counterbalance imperial authority, isn’t it? It seems that Xia Longyuan really did hit you where it hurts the most.”

Cui Wenjing did not deny it. “You’re right.”

“Even so, with the breadth of your vision, shouldn’t you be embracing this new era without the four divine swords? Shouldn’t you be striving to lead in the tide of change? Yet you hesitate, and you’re even preparing for war against the capital. Could it be that some god or demon has promised to restore your former power or bring your clan to its former glory?”

Chapter 656: Offense and Defense

Cui Wenjing did not immediately answer the question. For the first time, he shifted his gaze away from the flowing water and turned to look at Zhao Changhe.

Zhao Changhe said, “Uncle, when you watched the water a long time ago, I felt it was a tactic to put me in my place or intimidate me. But today, I sense something deeper in it. Could you explain?”

Cui Wenjing replied, “Why don’t you think that I’m also trying to intimidate you today?”

Zhao Changhe said, “Because, aside from unknown gods and demons, among the known humans on this land, no one can intimidate me anymore.”

Cui Wenjing’s mouth twitched. “I hope you haven’t become arrogant because of your progress these past two years.”

“I’ve always been arrogant. There’s no need to hide it. And I’m not just talking about you, Uncle. This includes everyone on the Ranking of Heaven, whether it’s the Great Shaman of Tngri or the Khagan of the Golden Horde. Sure, I may not be able to face them head-on just yet, but I can guarantee you they’d have to pay a significant price to kill me. It’s a risk they might not be willing to take.”

Cui Wenjing blinked, mouth half-open. He speaks of the Great Shaman and the khagan, but not of me. Does that mean he already considers me as his peer?

But he did not voice this thought. Instead, he said, “Even Xia Longyuan, as powerful as he was, could not withstand the joint hunt of the world’s strongest. Are you so confident you can?”

Zhao Changhe chuckled. “That’s precisely why I’m here. I intend to break the cycle of joint hunts. At the very least, I certainly don’t want you among my enemies.”

Cui Wenjing was momentarily taken aback before letting out a soft laugh.

Zhao Changhe continued, “What I’m about to say might sound unpleasant, but I still want you to hear it. Xia Longyuan’s target has always been the gods and demons, and so is mine. Uncle, you dismiss those speculating about Yuanyong’s marriage as having a narrow perspective. But, with all due respect, your focus on the Cui Clan’s tiny patch of land isn’t much broader.”

Behind them, Cui Yuanyang could not suppress a little chuckle.

Cui Wenjing turned to glance at her, and she hastily composed herself, wiping the smile off her face as she sat primly.

“Back then, when I faced you, my palms would sweat as you led me into your narrative, trapping me into that ridiculous three-year agreement. But things are different now. People only revere what is vastly beyond them, worshipping it from afar. Once they stand on the same level, that reverence

fades. That's why I'm puzzled. You're nearly at the Profound Control Realm, so why would someone of your stature still buy into the allure of gods?"

Cui Wenjing was silent for a moment before speaking slowly, "If I were the type to buy into the gods' promises, I wouldn't have resisted the Sea Emperor so firmly and decisively back then."

Zhao Changhe countered, "And now you believe other gods won't be like the Sea Emperor? You believe they won't pose the same threat to our survival?"

"So far, none have shown to pose the same threat."

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment and pointed to an ant nest near the pavilion, turning to ask Cui Yuanyang, "Yangyang, if you heard those ants calling your name, asking for your help, would you help them?"

Cui Yuanyang smiled and replied, "If the ants called my name, I'd definitely want to see what they were saying, and if I could help, of course, I would. If a whole group of ants were calling for you, wouldn't you be happy?"

"And if there was something you needed the ants to do, you'd pick one or two suitable ones to carry out your request, right?"

"Right! And I'd even reward them with a piece of candy!"

"But if your house was overrun with ants and they climbed onto your pastries, wouldn't you throw in water laced with arsenic and destroy the nest?"[1]

"Of course."

Zhao Changhe said, "That's the relationship between gods and mortals."

Cui Yuanyang: "..."

"You all felt that Old Xia was an evil dragon because his thinking was akin to these gods. He viewed every being in this world not as peers but as entities beneath him. When he struck, not

caring if you got hurt, it was precisely because of such a mindset. After all his efforts, he finally fished out the ant he despised most and, with a single finger, crushed it without hesitation. Why would he care to recognize another ant that might have been closer to him?” said Zhao Changhe. “Personally, I feel a certain closeness to Xia Longyuan, but I understand why people rebelled against him, especially you, Uncle. In fact, I even warned him about it, and he failed to listen. I understand your anger and have no desire to debate it.”

Cui Wenjing remained silent, knowing what Zhao Changhe was leading to.

Zhao Changhe asked, “But the question is, given all this, why did you oppose Xia Longyuan only to welcome another who’s potentially more dangerous? You risked everything, even the threat of annihilation, to slay the dragon—and for what? To replace it with a tiger? Are you serious?”

Cui Wenjing smiled faintly but still said nothing.

Zhao Changhe continued, “Was it to restore your sword? Let’s not even discuss whether that god truly has the ability to do so or if they’re just stringing you along. Even if they could, have you not considered that the same being who helps ants build a nest can destroy it at will?”

Cui Wenjing finally laughed heartily. “Your barrage of questions is quite fierce... but it seems you’ve overlooked one crucial point.”

Zhao Changhe was taken aback. “What?”

“On what grounds can you guarantee that you’re any different from them?”

Zhao Changhe opened his mouth but was momentarily at a loss for words.

Cui Wenjing smiled. “From the current state of the Four Idols Cult, it’s clear that many already consider you the reincarnation of the Night Emperor. Even if they don’t, they see you as his earthly representative. You stand here, righteously speaking from our perspective about broader horizons, but have you considered that if anyone needs to be watched carefully, that would be Zhao Changhe himself? You say you’re not like the gods, but who would believe you? Your cultivation speed is unprecedented, save for the primordial gods and demons who claimed to be born alongside heaven and earth in the previous era. Even Xia Longyuan’s progression through cultivation wasn’t as extraordinary as yours.”

Zhao Changhe: “Fuck.”

“The current state of the world is nothing but the chaos following the absence of Xia Longyuan, with gods and demons extending their influence without wanting to be the first to draw all the attention. They seem reluctant to be the first to stand out and become the target of everyone’s ire, so they’re all operating through proxies,” Cui Wenjing explained. “For each family, the question isn’t one of principles but of which proxy to align with. The distinction you’re trying to make doesn’t exist.”

He took a deep breath, he added, “You might say it’s absurd that I opposed Xia Longyuan only to align with something similar. But humans have emotions. No one thinks as coldly as a blade. If, back then, Xia Longyuan had tried to kill you instead, I doubt you’d be so magnanimous. Hah, I bet you’d have fought back even harder than me. I know your temper. You wouldn’t have calmly swallowed your pride for the greater good. It’s ridiculous to urge generosity when the blow didn’t land on your head.”

“Uh...”

“Of course, you saved me back then,” said Cui Wenjing, his tone softening. “Whether it’s because of your feelings for Yangyang or the fact that you saved me, the entire Cui Clan leans toward you emotionally. Unfortunately, feelings can’t decide much in this situation. We know you dislike aristocratic families, so we’re inherently in conflict. You say others can build an ant nest and also destroy it at a whim, but Changhe, you’re already dismantling our nest. How do you think the Cui Clan feels about that? If you could promise that everything would remain as it was—even without the Qinghe Sword—the Cui Clan would follow you without hesitation. But I’ve waited all this time and seen no sign of such a promise, not even a hint.”

Zhao Changhe pondered for a long while before finally speaking up. “What I can promise is this: First, I can reforge the Qinghe Sword. While it’s impossible to restore the sword’s original connection to the land’s qi veins, it can still serve as a symbol of lineage and a powerful family heirloom. To be blunt, the god you’re trusting likely can’t do more than this either. They’re simply deceiving you.”

“What makes you so certain?”

“Uncle, you know better than anyone what kind of purple qi the Qinghe Sword had, and what kind of master it recognized. There is no such thing as the qi of the land itself, it’s always been the manifestation of the will of the people. No god or demon could forge such a sword. If there’s anyone in this world capable of recreating the original Qinghe Sword, it would be those of your

family, specifically Yuanyong and Yangyang, who have fully earned the sword's recognition. If your family can truly accomplish this, I'd be glad to see it and I would gladly provide the forging expertise necessary. I give you my word that the god you trust is unable to achieve more than this. And my word is much more reliable than theirs."

Cui Wenjing's heart stirred slightly.

Indeed, if Zhao Changhe was willing to make such a promise, it was enough to overshadow any other offer. Even if it was merely an optimistic vision, was the god's promise not the same? The difference was that Zhao Changhe's commitment was genuine. If there was any chance of success, he would not go back on his word.

Feigning indifference, Cui Wenjing asked, "Since you said that's the first promise, is there another?"

"The second is this: I do not support the idea of eternal hereditary family dominance. Such a system would be a regression for the world as a whole. The Qinghe Sword itself wouldn't approve either. Even if reforged, it would likely return to slumber. Watching you gaze at the water, I couldn't help but think you were reflecting on the passing of time. What's gone is gone. The water may look the same, but it's no longer the same stream it once was."

Zhao Changhe looked in Cui Wenjing's eyes for a moment, then continued, "Uncle, deep down, you've already prepared yourself to embrace change. I suspect you had this thought even when you loaned out the Qinghe Sword. Why try to hide it from me?"

Chapter 657: Three Bargaining Chips

For the first time, Cui Wenjing's expression shifted slightly. He looked at Zhao Changhe with an odd curiosity. He seemed amazed at how Zhao Changhe could see through him so thoroughly.

Since he already saw through the considerations I made when loaning out the sword, why has he bothered with everything up until now? What have all these debates and struggles been for?

In the entire world, perhaps Zhao Changhe was the only one who dared make such an assertion about Cui Wenjing.

Even Cui Yuanyang, resting her chin on her hands, found herself wondering, Just who is big brother Zhao really courting here? He seems to understand Father even better than I do. Ever since he's

arrived, he's barely spoken to me. How come he's said more to Father in this short time than all of our conversations combined?

And the strangest part was that he was entirely correct.

Long ago, Cui Wenjing said, "If I, Cui Wenjing, admit that I'm not worthy of wielding the Qinghe Sword, how many in the clan can really proclaim themselves to be worthy? None of them have ever thought about why the spirit of the divine sword has faded away. Instead, they wish to use the sword for the very evil purposes it so despised: a bargaining chip to vie for political power. If the sword's spirit was still here, it'd be weeping!"

While others were disqualified by their petty scheming, Cui Wenjing had always stood apart. His conduct was far nobler, and his demeanor was that of a crane among chickens. Yet he, too, considered himself unworthy of the Qinghe Sword.

Why was that?

Because deep down, he understood that the Qinghe Sword was not a legacy for any one family. The ideals represented by the sword inherently conflicted with the goals of an aristocratic family's inheritance. Zhao Changhe's quip about a tiny patch of land was not entirely inaccurate. Even if Cui Wenjing's actions were more honorable than the actions of most other nobles, they could never truly align with the spirit of the Qinghe Sword. As long as the family's focus remained on itself, it would inevitably be at odds with the divine sword.

His children, Cui Yuanyong and Cui Yuanyang, had earned the sword's recognition because they had acted in defense of the land. But this was not the Cui Clan's usual behavior. Their temporary worthiness would eventually fade—whether in the next generation or the one after that. Losing the Qinghe Sword was only a matter of time.

Cui Wenjing had been pondering how to navigate a future without the Qinghe Sword for a long time.

He often sat by the pavilion watching the flowing water, sometimes for an entire day. But he was not really watching the water. He was contemplating a world that seemed unchanged yet had already become fundamentally different.

This was an era of resurgent gods and demons, a period of unprecedented upheaval. Every moment brought the possibility of earth-shaking transformation, and in such a world, the Qinghe Sword no longer resonated.

His graying hair, perhaps, was not merely a symptom of age or illness.

“A single sword can protect a single family at best. To restore the old balance of power, you’d need all four swords together. Do you think the four families could still carry out a mission such as that? They can’t. And if you’re left with just one sword, it’s reduced to a mere heirloom, one no different from the relics of a sect like the Divine Brilliance Sect—perhaps even less. Even if someone offered to restore your old privileges, could you really hold onto them? And as for whatever god or demon promising to help... What good are they?”

Cui Wenjing did not say anything.

“Since you also view me as the representative of a god, then let’s weigh the scales equally and lay everything out piece by piece. First, regarding the restoration of the Qinghe Sword, I can offer a promise equivalent to theirs. Does that count as equal?”

“It does.”

“Second, the new dynasty promises to maintain your title as Marquis of Ji as it was before, with the right of hereditary succession in perpetuity, tied to the nation’s fate. In exchange, the role will bear none of its previous responsibilities. It will be a hollow title, merely symbolic, with an income attached to the title’s name. In short, as long as this court stands, the Cui Clan’s descendants will always have a livelihood.”

Cui Wenjing was momentarily stunned, but Zhao Changhe continued, “That’s where the guarantee ends. As for influence or power, that’s up to you to fight for. With your family’s substantial foundation and your head start on the new order, this puts you ahead of anyone else. I’m no expert in family management, but you are. If you can’t capitalize on this opportunity, then what right does the Cui Clan have to boast? Relying entirely on a single sword? If that’s the case, then whether it’s today or tomorrow, your fall is inevitable. I trust you’re well aware of this.”

The words Cui Wenjing had been about to say got caught in his throat.

He had originally intended to ask about future power. But upon giving it a little bit of thought, he realized he did not have the standing to ask that. If future generations failed to live up to

expectations, how much longer could their ancestors intervene? The influence of a virtuous family wanes after five generations, or so said the ancient. Guaranteeing a livelihood alone was already more than sufficient.

No matter how grandiose the promises of others might seem, Cui Wenjing knew deep down that such assurances could not be upheld.

But his personal agreement was not enough for such matters.

For his vast family, a group that thrived under the old system and could prosper without lifting a finger, such a future was unthinkable. They would cling to promises, however unrealistic, that maintained illusions of past glory.

His children were promising, but what about everyone else?

He had a title, but what about the rest of them?

At times, Cui Wenjing found himself... utterly exhausted.

If a family was likened to an empire, then even Xia Longyuan, with all his strength, could not make an entrenched system conform entirely to his vision. Likewise, Cui Wenjing faced a similar challenge. Some things had to be torn down completely before they could be rebuilt. Imposing change from the top down was a monumental task.

Feeling drained, he said, "It's not enough."

Zhao Changhe tilted his head, studying him for a moment, before suddenly asking, "Uncle, do you know what happened to me on my way here?"

"What?"

"I was ambushed."

Cui Wenjing froze, his brow furrowing tightly.

The assassination attempt itself was trivial. It was not even enough to even delay Zhao Changhe for a full minute. But the implications it carried were far more significant.

The assassination attempt had been aimed at whatever envoy came from the capital, and Zhao Changhe could not be sure whether Cui Wenjing had ordered it. It was not the kind of accusation one could bring up directly. However, observing Cui Wenjing's demeanor, it became clear that he was weighing his options, carefully evaluating both sides' offers. If that was the case, it was unlikely he would sanction an assassination of a court envoy at this juncture. Therefore, the order clearly did not come from him.

But if it wasn't Cui Wenjing, then who's trying to make a mess of things? Is it the Wang, Yang, or Li clans? Or was it someone else from within the Cui Clan?

Given the short distance from the capital to Qinghe, it was unlikely that outsiders could have acted so decisively without the Cui Clan being made aware. The Cui Clan's influence in the region was too strong for external factions to easily interfere. This meant the most probable culprits were members of the Cui Clan itself.

Yet if it was indeed someone within the Cui Clan, it raised even more troubling questions. Could it be that, beyond Cui Wenjue's earlier faction, a new splinter group had emerged? Perhaps certain individuals, impatient with Cui Wenjing's indecision, had already aligned themselves with other forces. In that case, was the assassination attempt their way of forcing their clan leader's hand?

Cui Wenjing was known for his resolute nature and would not be swayed by a few words, but others within the clan might not share his resolve. Once they came to accept another faction's promises, they would naturally fear that the patriarch's personal feelings for Zhao Changhe might tilt the balance. With such knowledge, it was highly likely for them to take extreme measures to eliminate the possibility altogether.

Zhao Changhe smiled. "This proves two things. First, the other party knows their promises are shaky at best. They don't have the confidence to directly compete with me for your favor, which is why they have resorted to such underhanded tactics. On this point alone, uncle, you could already dismiss them outright."

Cui Wenjing smiled faintly. "Indeed."

"Second, I'm currently in danger. Now that they know I've reached Qinghe, they'll definitely come for me. Once I'm dead, all their problems disappear."

“And?” Cui Wenjing asked. “Are you asking for my help?”

“Not at all. All you need to do is pretend you don’t know anything.” Zhao Changhe’s voice grew cold. “There are some within the Cui Clan who are no longer loyal to you. Of course, this might not yet qualify as betrayal in your eyes, making it difficult for you to act. So leave it to me. If they’ve plotted to assassinate me, they will pay the price.”

Cui Wenjing narrowed his eyes but gave no reply.

Zhao Changhe continued calmly, “Since we’re treating this as a game between gods and demons, then we should act accordingly. This is the first battle of this kind, and words alone won’t suffice; it all comes down to whose fists are stronger. There are decisions you might find hard to make, and you should know they’re eager to make them for you. Unfortunately for them, so am I. Uncle, you’re free to wait until the outcome is clear before making any declarations. After all, power is the third bargaining chip on the scales.”

Cui Wenjing’s gaze locked onto Zhao Changhe’s, his eyes sharp. Zhao Changhe met his gaze steadily, unflinching. The atmosphere, which had been one of sharp verbal sparring and mutual respect, suddenly turned tense and fraught with latent hostility.

Cui Yuanyang, still trying to process the exchange, only caught fragments of the conversation. She understood that Zhao Changhe was in danger, that gods and demons might target him, but the sudden shift in mood left her bewildered.

Her heart skipped a beat, and she instinctively said, “Father...”

Cui Wenjing interrupted her abruptly. “Yangyang, go inform the elders that I’m unwell and instruct Wenwei to host King Zhao for lunch. You will not accompany them. As a bride-to-be, it’s improper to meet your fiancé before the wedding. Do you think this is some backwater clan? Running to the city gates to meet your betrothed like a common girl? Have you no sense of decorum? Since when has a daughter of my Cui Clan had to be so desperate? Ridiculous!”

Cui Yuanyang’s little jaw dropped.

Why am I suddenly being scolded for no reason?

She turned to Zhao Changhe for support, her eyes pleading. But Zhao Changhe simply smiled gently and said, “Yangyang, go and prepare for the wedding. I told you before that I won’t elope with you. I’ll marry you with honor and dignity.”

Chapter 658: Which God Dares Try?

To those in the Cui Clan, it appeared that the conversation between the clan head and King Zhao had taken an abrupt downturn. Cui Wenjing had inexplicably claimed ill health and delegated hosting the lunch to someone else. This basically screamed of a negotiation that had collapsed. Otherwise, such a bald breach of etiquette simply would not make sense.

Given this blatant disregard, Zhao Changhe ought to have stormed off in a fury, yet he remained, cheerfully accepting the alternative arrangement.

Because he wants to marry Yangyang, of course...

Some saw this and thought, This man is so smitten he’s willing to forgo even the bare minimum of dignity—and perhaps even his life.

That said, Yangyang was truly stunning these days. Once a petite, delicate girl with adorable features, she had grown into a rather tall and elegant young woman, with a most graceful and shapely figure. Her facial features had matured, retaining traces of her youthful cuteness while gaining a commanding vitality that captivated anyone who saw her.

Word had it that King Zhao had an ambiguous relationship with Tang Wanzhuang, suggesting he preferred mature, sophisticated women. But then, why had he been drawn to the younger, undeveloped Yangyang in the past?

Are you really that undiscerning? As long as she’s beautiful, you’ll go for her? Well... I guess so would we, so I suppose that’s fair.

If not for the existing engagement with Zhao Changhe, the Cui Clan’s doors would have been worn down by matchmakers clamoring for Yangyang’s hand. But now, no one dared.

To most in the Cui Clan, Yangyang remained an incredibly valuable asset. Back when the marriage agreement was first proposed, Zhao Changhe had been a promising figure, potentially even the crown prince. It had been a calculated investment with little risk. But now? If tensions between the Cui Clan and Zhao Changhe were to escalate, proceeding with the marriage as originally planned

would feel like squandering a prime opportunity. Instead of securing another advantageous alliance, they would simply be throwing away a valuable resource.

It doesn't matter. As long as Zhao Changhe dies, everything will naturally return to its rightful course.

Cui Wenwei, the younger brother of Cui Wenjing, was far closer to him than Cui Wenjue had ever been. He had always been Cui Wenjing's steadfast ally, his unwavering right-hand man. When Cui Wenjing was gravely injured and brought back to Qinghe to recover, with his children away at war in Puyang, the Cui Clan remained remarkably stable. This was thanks to Cui Wenwei, who managed the family's affairs with the utmost dedication, protecting his elder brother's authority and showing no sign of disloyalty or personal ambition.

This exemplified one of the key advantages aristocratic families held over ordinary sects: a genuine sense of shared prosperity and downfall. The strength of the Cui Clan was the source of power for all its members, and Cui Wenjing's prestige was the foundation of Cui Wenwei's security. In this time of upheaval, ensuring the survival of a clan head who was on the Ranking of Heaven was far more critical than engaging in internal power struggles. In a typical sect, internal discord would have likely scattered the ranks. Within the Cui Clan, however, it only strengthened their unity.

Even so, some in the Cui Clan felt a twinge of disappointment in Cui Wenjing's subsequent handling of events.

The Cui Clan did not lack connections within the capital. Word from figures like Lu Jianzhang had made it clear that the new dynasty was continuing Xia Longyuan's policies. This was hardly surprising. No imperial authority would willingly revive the old system of aristocratic checks and balances. Xia Longyuan had risked his life to dismantle the foundation of the aristocratic families' power. Why would his successors undo that work and shackle themselves with the same constraints? The chances of a reversal were slim to none.

The Cui Clan's choice, therefore, could not be to support this new Han dynasty. Instead, their path lay in establishing a new court dominated by the aristocracy. If necessary, Cui Wenjing himself could claim the throne. When Xia Chichi's proclamations were sent across the land, the Cui Clan was the first to receive them. Yet they were also the first to ignore them and instead actively pursue reconciliation with the Wang Clan, with whom they had recently been at war.

On the surface, Cui Wenjing appeared to have made up his mind, balancing reconciliation with the Wang Clan while maintaining military preparedness against the capital. However, the members of the Cui Clan could see the truth: Cui Wenjing had not gone all the way. If he were truly committed

to rebellion, the logical move would have been to capitalize on his proximity to the capital, exploiting the instability of the Four Idols Cult before they could fully establish themselves. He could have delayed Huangfu Shaozong's return to the capital or even ambushed and absorbed his forces, marching on the capital himself.

By failing to take this step, he had missed the critical window of opportunity.

Cui Wenjing was not someone prone to hesitation or indecision. The only explanation for his inaction was that he did not want to act. This single decision made it clear that Cui Wenjing was not merely weighing options. Deep down, he was already inclined toward Zhao Changhe. While maintaining a façade of readiness for conflict, he was, in truth, waiting for Zhao Changhe to make good on his old promise and present some new promises in turn.

Many within the clan obviously asked themselves as to why Cui Wenjing had such bias toward Zhao Changhe. Was it just because of his engagement to Cui Yuanyang and the fact that Zhao Changhe had saved his life, leading to an unwarranted level of hope for this son-in-law?

Most of the Cui Clan could not understand. Cui Wenwei, in particular, found it incomprehensible. To him, this was a classic case of sentiment clouding judgment, something he never thought he would see in Cui Wenjing. A certain divine being had promised things that the new Han dynasty could never provide. There should not have been any hesitation.

Furthermore, the sheer power of the gods and demons was overwhelming. Opposing the new dynasty, rooted in the Four Idols Cult, was still within the realm of possibility. Opposing a god, however, brought a suffocating sense of inevitability. Just a glance from such an entity could make one break into a cold sweat, stripping away all will to resist.

The choice was then obvious, was it not?

If the clan head's emotions had led to undue hesitation, then the rest of them would make the decision for him. After all, Zhao Changhe himself often used the tactic of killing envoys to sever a host's options, and everyone had to admit that it was an effective move. Why could it not be used against him?

What they had not expected, however, was that the envoy to come would be Zhao Changhe himself.

Does he really think that he's invincible? Pft. This makes things much simpler. One move and all the problems will be solved.

“King Zhao, your esteemed arrival is a great honor to our clan. I apologize for the lack of proper preparation. It is a grave oversight on our part. With your status, you should have sent word ahead so we could make suitable arrangements.” Cui Wenwei greeted Zhao Changhe warmly, leading him toward the banquet hall.

“I’m used to the ways of the wilderness,” Zhao Changhe replied, his tone carrying a subtle edge. “I’ve never thought of myself as a king or whatever.”

Cui Wenwei smiled and said, “Being a king... it’s not something one necessarily needs to learn. As long as you are one, you’ll figure it out.”

“What I meant was that in the future, I will renounce the title myself.”

Cui Wenwei froze mid-step, his foot halting as he entered the hall. The room fell utterly silent, the many Cui Clan members present left staring in disbelief.

Zhao Changhe chuckled. “I have no desire to rule anyone, nor do I wish to leave behind hereditary titles for my children.”

Cui Wenwei said, “Surely you’re jesting, King Zhao. You’ve fought your way to this point, braving death countless times. Was it all merely for amusement?”

“Of course not. It was to shatter this cage of a world, to ascend the nine heavens, to grasp the sun, moon, and stars, to see how vast this universe truly is.” Zhao Changhe strode to the seat of honor, casually taking his place without waiting for an invitation from the host. “If my descendants have ambitions for earthly accomplishments, that’s fine. But what I wish to leave them is not a title of nobility but a world of clarity and prosperity.”

Dozens of people in the hall were left speechless for a long time.

His words were grandiose... Yet, coming from Zhao Changhe, they felt entirely natural.

He was, after all, cut from the same cloth as Xia Longyuan, his gaze fixed beyond the confines of mortal affairs. And the latter half of his statement? That was evidently from Tang Wanzhuang’s influence.

Cui Wenwei managed a strained smile. “King Zhao, your aspirations are lofty indeed, far beyond the reach of us ordinary mortals. Allow me to offer you a toast!”

Zhao Changhe picked up the wine cup before him, weighing it thoughtfully in his hand. With a faint smile, he asked, “If I were to smash this cup to the ground, what do you suppose would happen[1]?”

Cui Wenwei forced a laugh. “Surely, King Zhao jests. What executioner could possibly take your head? That would be a futile gesture, wouldn’t it?”

“Not necessarily. According to the Tome of Troubled Times, I’m still merely in the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, third on the Ranking of Earth. A cultivator at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries would not survive a coordinated assault, especially with a comparable opponent leading the charge. I mean, that’s how He Lei met his end.” Zhao Changhe’s smile remained warm and serene. “Poor He Lei died too soon, but the lesson remains vivid in people’s minds.”

Cui Wenwei’s smile began to falter, his unease growing. Why does he keep circling back to this topic? He forced himself to reply, “Surely, a man like you cannot be judged as an ordinary cultivator at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries. Your Highness is, after all, a godslayer...”

“Indeed. I slew a god while at the second layer, though many think it was thanks to mere luck. But I wonder, if I were to reach the third layer, what would happen? Even I am curious.” Zhao Changhe raised his cup and drained it in a single motion. “Dragon Bird has been reforged, and River of Stars newly forged, and neither has tasted blood since. Which god dares try me?”

Chapter 659: The First Performance of River of Stars and Dragon Bird

The atmosphere in the banquet hall was unbearably heavy, and it was deafeningly silent.

This was unmistakably a Hongmen Banquet[1]. Every attendee carried malicious intent. There were no hidden executioners, but that was not because no execution was intended; it was simply that no executioner was strong enough, and their presence would have only served to reveal their intent. The wine was laced with a potent poison, and those present lay waiting to strike the moment it took effect on Zhao Changhe.

No one anticipated, however, that even after he drank the wine, the poison had absolutely no effect. And it was not just any poison, but one crafted by a god!

Cui Wenwei instinctively stepped back from the table, his heart pounding in terror.

None of them had expected Zhao Changhe not only to attend the banquet but also to disregard decorum entirely. He did not bother easing into the conversation or pretending to play along. He simply walked in and, without hesitation, overturned the entire metaphorical table.

The brazen demeanor of a real man of the jianghu made the Cui Clan rather uneasy. The most absurd part was that he had walked into an obviously hostile banquet completely alone as if fully intending to flip the table from the start.

It was not just that he dismissed everyone in the room. He did not even seem to care about the gods and demons themselves.

For a moment, silence reigned in the hall, until a deep, low voice echoed through the air, “King Zhao, your decisiveness makes our secrecy seem almost petty.”

As the words faded, a cool breeze swept through the room, and a hooded figure appeared. The figure was emaciated and gaunt, its appearance beneath the hood terrifying, reminiscent of a desiccated corpse.

Indeed, many of the remaining gods and demons now existed only as souls or partially revived corpses. Incomplete resurrection often left them resembling desiccated remains. It was a logical consequence of their current state, and it explained their reliance on proxies. Directly engaging posed considerable risks, as demonstrated by the fall of the Sea Emperor.

While Xia Longyuan might no longer be around, the gods held no less malice for one another.

That did not mean, however, that they truly feared someone like Zhao Changhe. Even if he had slain a god, it was only by capitalizing on Xia Longyuan’s heavy damage to the Sea Emperor. Without Xia Longyuan weakening the god, what chance would Zhao Changhe have had? Even now, at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, he was still far from the Profound Control Realm.

Zhao Changhe glanced at the figure, nonchalantly pouring himself another cup of poisoned wine. He took a sip as if it were nothing out of the ordinary and remarked, “Too ugly... But aside from choosing wives, I don’t judge anyone by their appearance. To you, I offer this toast as a gesture of goodwill.”

With a casual wave of his hand, he sent the wine flagon hurtling toward the figure.

Cui Wenwei and the other bystanders had expected at least some preamble, perhaps a verbal sparring match to set the stage. Instead, they realized the main act had barely begun before they were relegated to mere extras. The tension between the two was so palpable that there was no room for anyone else to interject, much less act.

The members of the Cui Clan exchanged glances, wordlessly retreating to the edges of the hall. The clever ones had already begun slipping away, leaving the confrontation to unfold on its own.

To the surprise of the onlookers, what seemed to be an aggressive throw of the wine flagon turned out to be nothing more than a casual toss. The hooded figure caught it effortlessly, raised it to his lips, and took a sip. With a chuckle, he said, "Wine offered by Zhao Changhe—indeed, it has a unique flavor."

Zhao Changhe replied coolly, "Likewise. Without your poison, this wine wouldn't be nearly as flavorful. But to my knowledge, aside from the Spirit Tribe, no ancient gods or demons are renowned for their expertise with poison. Would you care to reveal your identity?"

The figure chuckled again. "A nobody, lucky to have survived. I'm nothing compared to the likes of the Sea Emperor, whom you have slain."

Zhao Changhe's tone remained calm. "Let's skip the wordplay. Do you seriously think that I'm actually interested in your name?"

The smile on the figure's face vanished.

Zhao Changhe's voice turned cold as he continued, "The reason I ask for your name is simple. I don't kill nameless foes. When people ask in the future who was the first person slain by the reforged Dragon Bird, I need a name. Otherwise, it'd be embarrassing. Dragon Bird would definitely scold me about it, at least."

The hall fell silent.

Dragon Bird was delighted.

“If you won’t say it, then don’t! Hiding like a coward, how can you call yourself a god?” Zhao Changhe suddenly slammed the table and launched himself into the air. Dragon Bird appeared in his empty hand as though summoned from thin air, descending in a violent arc toward the hooded figure’s head.

Many onlookers felt something was off.

It was not necessarily that the figure was unwilling to reveal his name; rather, it was customary to make light conversation first. However, Zhao Changhe had deliberately cut the other party off, denying him that opportunity.

The natural order of such encounters dictated that the god or demon should stand above, delivering cold and overpowering strikes to suppress the insolent Zhao Changhe. The figure likely calculated this outcome as part of his entrance—a display meant to subdue Zhao Changhe and, by extension, cow the Cui Clan.

Instead, Zhao Changhe dominated the confrontation entirely. He stood tall as though he were the divine figure, while the hooded opponent seemed no more than a nameless assassin; his presence was almost negligible.

If Zhao Changhe had orchestrated this dynamic intentionally, then it was clear that the concept of momentum had become an intrinsic part of his martial path. His words, actions, and control of the battlefield all served to bolster his martial presence.

This was the essence of his third layer of the *Profound Mysteries*: the blood-soaked might of a godslayer, the grandeur of the mountains and rivers, and the momentum to challenge gods and demons alike.

Clang!

The figure’s desiccated hand shot up, blocking the descending blade. The sound was not the sickening sound of metal cutting flesh, but the sharp sound of metal striking metal.

An immense force surged through the saber. Zhao Changhe nearly lost his grip as his palm tingled with pain and his blood and qi churned wildly within him.

This was the power of the Profound Control Realm. Even if the figure had not fully recovered, his strength was still on that level. For Zhao Changhe, the gap in their cultivation levels was vast—an insurmountable threshold at this moment.

Yet, none of this showed on Zhao Changhe's face. He flipped backward and, before he even landed, swept his saber horizontally to preempt a follow-up attack. To the onlookers, the exchange seemed like a standard clash between equals, with Zhao Changhe perhaps at a slight disadvantage at most.

The onlookers could not discern the full exchange, but the hooded figure certainly could. His steel-like hand batted aside Dragon Bird as it swept toward him, then shot straight for Zhao Changhe's heart. A sinister laugh escaped his lips as he said, "You may have all the clever tactics in the world, but raw strength speaks for itself. If you don't have enough, you don't have enough. My name isn't something I need to conceal. You may call me Desolate Calamity, as they did in ancient times. When you meet the King of Hell in the underworld, don't forget it."

Clang!

Dragon Bird intercepted the attack, deflecting the hand that sought Zhao Changhe's heart. Using the force to propel himself backward, Zhao Changhe laughed aloud. "So it's you. You've been siphoning energy from the earth to sustain yourself, leaving desolation in your wake. I was wondering who would dare boast about reforging one of the four divine swords of the mountains and rivers. If it's you, I suppose it makes sense... But you're nothing more than a star of calamity cast out by the Azure Dragon, a defeated, hunted wretch. Now, in this new era, you call yourself a demon god? How laughable!"

No one knew that Zhao Changhe's knowledge of this ancient figure came from just several days earlier, when he had been punished by his wife and forced to copy the texts of the Four Idols Cult. Before that, he had not even heard the name.

It turns out copying texts really is the best source of knowledge.

Desolate Calamity was visibly shaken by how much Zhao Changhe knew. Having his past exposed in front of the Cui Clan was a clear humiliation. His expression darkened further, and he sneered. "I know your tricks now... But if I'm unworthy, what makes you any more worthy? Die!"

Rumble!

The ground began to tremble violently as an overwhelming surge of earth energy erupted from below, aimed directly at Zhao Changhe. At the same time, Desolate Calamity's hand extended unnaturally, lightning-fast and spear-like, stretching toward Zhao Changhe's heart.

His profound control—his dominion—seemed to be over the power of the earth itself!

In an instant, the banquet hall collapsed. The crushing force unleashed caused the members of the Cui Clan to collectively vomit blood and scatter in terror.

All the earlier exchanges had been mere probes. This was the real deal—the power of a god, an unstoppable pressure against which mere mortals had no defense.

How could Zhao Changhe, caught in the eye of the storm, possibly defend against it?

Yet, even as he retreated, a faint smile curled at the corner of his lips. His left hand flicked, and a dark, unassuming divine sword plunged into the ground. The erupting energy of the earth was instantly suppressed, silenced completely under the blade's influence. At the same time, the Dragon Bird in his right hand swept backward, intercepting Desolate Calamity's outstretched hand.

Where previous clashes had resulted in metallic ringing, with Dragon Bird seemingly unable to pierce Desolate Calamity's hardened flesh, this time the saber gleamed faintly with a blood-red light. It cleaved into the extended limb effortlessly, drawing forth green blood.

What had seemed like an unstoppable onslaught—a god's apocalyptic strike—was neutralized entirely by a single sword and saber. Only the scattering dust remained as evidence of the attack.

Desolate Calamity recoiled in pain, his expression one of shock and disbelief. "What sword is that?!"

"Its name is River of Stars, the Night Emperor's sword. Its power is beyond the understanding of a small fry like yourself." Zhao Changhe said as he raised Dragon Bird, charging forward with renewed ferocity. "Using an ancient divine sword to deal with you is no accomplishment. Let's see how today's mortal blade compares to the relics of old!"

Clang!

Desolate Calamity struck heavily against the side of Zhao Changhe's saber, attempting to deflect it as before. But instead of the expected result, it felt as though his hand had plunged into an endless expanse of barren sand. All it stirred was invisible dust, the force within the saber vast and inexhaustible. His strike bore no effect at all.

Desolate Calamity, having slept for an entire era, could not comprehend what was going on with this saber. Alarmed, he frantically tried to pull away.

Suddenly, the sword embedded in the ground—the one suppressing the earth's energy—flew into the air, hurtling directly toward his back.

There was nowhere left to retreat!

He glanced up, only to see Zhao Changhe's eyes glowing a vivid, blood-red hue. The man surged through the billowing dust, descending with an earth-shattering slash that seemed to eclipse the sun and moon.

Scattering the Gods and Buddhas!

Clang!

Desolate Calamity's figure disappeared in a blur, a sound echoing through the air as his voice, tinged with pain, lingered in the space he had vacated, "Godslayer... Asura King... This blade of the mortal world. I have been humbled!"

Zhao Changhe did not pursue him. In truth, he was utterly drained.

The seemingly straightforward strikes and thrusts had pushed him to his limits. His body lacked the raw strength to match the Profound Control Realm, and his victory was entirely reliant on the transcendent power of River of Stars and Dragon Bird. To say he had defeated Desolate Calamity would be inaccurate—it was more that Desolate Calamity had failed to comprehend the unprecedented might of these two divine weapons.

But that did not matter, because no one else knew.

Zhao Changhe stood motionless, forcibly suppressing the blood threatening to rise to his throat. With his saber pointed forward, his voice rang out, cold and commanding. “Second Lord Cui, perhaps you’ve misunderstood something all along. I am not here to discuss terms; I am here to give you orders. Submit... or face execution.”

Chapter 660: The Rabbit Has Grown Up

Cui Wenwei and the others stared dumbfounded at Zhao Changhe, gulping instinctively.

Though Zhao Changhe was clearly at the end of his rope, his imposing aura remained so powerful that no one dared test that. Cui Wenwei, a ranked warrior, stood alongside countless elite family members in his own territory, yet not a single one of them dared lift a finger.

The terror of a slaughterer of gods lingered in the air; while his fearsome presence had not affected Desolate Calamity, it was most certainly echoing through the hearts of all others—an aftershock of psychological pressure now also carrying the weight of the god’s defeat.

In this moment, Zhao Changhe seemed invincible in their eyes.

If the choice between Zhao Changhe and a demon god was previously influenced by considerations beyond clan interest, those considerations pertained to the fear-inducing disparity in strength.

When confronted with a terrifyingly powerful demon god who could annihilate an entire clan alone, one instinctively believed in their promises—“He has no reason to deceive me.”

Subconsciously, it offered an excuse for their fear—“I am cooperating purely for the benefit of the clan.”

And also admiration for strength—“Following him ensures success.”

Such is human nature.

The faction of Zhao Changhe had never evoked such an overpowering sense of awe. The Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise might be formidable, but they were no stronger than Cui Wenjing. Zhao Changhe, despite his impressive achievements, might not have been able to withstand the combined might of the Cui Clan elites—after all, beyond the likes of Cui Wenwei, they still had Lu Ya, a guest warrior on the Ranking of Earth.

Even from a military point of view, there was no evident superiority. The strength of the new Han dynasty and that of the Cui Clan were comparable. There was no overwhelming advantage that compelled them to submit.

From the moment he entered, Zhao Changhe had deliberately created this psychological pressure, constructing the illusion that he stood on par with or even above the gods. And the moment he defeated Desolate Calamity, this awe-inspiring power truly engraved itself into the hearts of every member of the Cui Clan.

Cui Wenwei had no doubt that, without intervention from his elder brother, Zhao Changhe could indeed annihilate the entire Cui Clan. If only the Qinghe Sword were still present—at least then, they wouldn't feel this utterly powerless...

Come to think of it, where is Elder Brother?

“You may be my son-in-law, but if we go by the rules of exterminating the rebellious, you yourself belong to the condemned.”

Cui Wenjing's voice echoed from afar as he approached leisurely.

Zhao Changhe: “...”

The members of the Cui Clan lowered their heads, saying nothing. Whether it was executing three generations of one's family or nine[1], it had nothing to do with a son-in-law... Their patriarch was teasing the ignorant rogue prince, but none dared expose him. To be fair, Zhao Changhe was shrewd—he probably understood but decided to take the hint.

It was ironic—earlier, some believed that Yangyang, as a valuable asset, should marry into a better alliance. Yet here they were, relying on her relationship with Zhao Changhe to save their family from extermination!

Cui Wenjing reached them, his gaze sharp as he looked around and said coldly, “Grown up, have we? Acting without orders and attempting to assassinate an envoy was one thing, but instigating Desolate Calamity to attack my son-in-law—who gave that command?”

It was evident to everyone that Cui Wenjing had allowed Zhao Changhe to fight this battle. It not only allowed Zhao Changhe to establish his prestige but also gave Cui Wenjing a chance to gauge his son-in-law's current power. In other words, the father-in-law and son-in-law were both aware of Desolate Calamity's presence from the outset and they could have simply chosen not to come. In other-other words... they had baited Cui Wenwei and the others.

It was a complicated scenario, difficult to fully unravel. Yet, given the current situation, someone needed to bear responsibility.

Cui Wenwei spoke decisively, "Elder brother, it was my doing. The poisoned wine served to King Zhao was at my command. I alone shall take responsibility for this."

With those words, he brought his sword to his throat, intending to end his own life.

But as the blade touched his skin, Cui Wenjing caught his wrist.

Cui Wenwei looked up, stunned. "Elder brother, you...?"

Cui Wenjing stared at him for a long moment, then suddenly turned, falling to one knee before Zhao Changhe. "The Cui Clan is willing to surrender. I, Cui Wenjing, will fully support the reforms of the new dynasty. All I ask is mercy—spare their lives."

Zhao Changhe had never imagined Cui Wenjing would kneel to him, and was taken aback, instinctively moving to help him up. Cui Wenjing gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head and shot him a meaningful look.

Zhao Changhe hesitated for a moment, then complied. Slowly, he said, "Out of respect for my father-in-law... I will spare them the death penalty. However, they will not escape punishment. I leave it to the Cui Clan to decide the penalty. I trust you will know what to do."

He then turned and left, adding as he departed, "Desolate Calamity is a primordial demon god. He may be ranked quite high, but he is a god of calamity. It's in the name, how could you not see that? Whatever collaboration he proposes is certainly treacherous, and the so-called reforging of a sword is nothing but deceit, ultimately leading to a trap. You were willing to trust a harbinger of disaster, yet unwilling to forsake the old shadows and forge your own future... And that is the so-called honor and wisdom of noble families? How utterly laughable."

As he spoke, he walked farther away. He was genuinely unwilling to engage with the Cui Clan any longer, lest he lose control of his urge to kill.

If not for Cui Wenjing and Yangyang, Zhao Changhe would indeed have been inclined to wipe them out. He could well understand Li Shentong's desire to kill off these obstinate fools—it was the only way to rebuild from scratch. Compromising with the noble families would only bring about the same stagnation that plagued Xia Longyuan's early years, a situation increasingly resistant to change.

However, drowning them in the Yellow River and gaining a reputation for brutality was not ideal either. Perhaps this outcome was the best balance. Cui Wenjing had cast aside his pride and knelt, signaling that this was not a partnership, but a forced submission—a defeated rebel was spared execution and was now fully compliant. Many entrenched traditions could be torn down.

It required Cui Wenjing's determination to cooperate, and Zhao Changhe was not well-versed in the intricacies of such matters. He lacked knowledge of the regional power structures, let alone the complex internal distribution of power and interest within the Cui Clan. This was a task best left to Cui Wenjing. Just as Zhao Changhe had said, he surely knew what to do.

But while Cui Wenjing could be trusted, others could not. This approach was only feasible for the Cui Clan.

Zhao Changhe turned eastward, contemplating the Wang Clan—it was time for them to be erased from the world. The difference in treatment between the Cui and Wang Clans would convey a clear signal to all the observers.

“Big Brother Zhao!” A little rabbit's face suddenly appeared before him.

Startled, Zhao Changhe couldn't help but reach out and ruffle her hair. “Hey, you're a grown-up now. Still acting like a bunny... Aren't you worried about being laughed at?”

Cui Yuanyang huffed. “You like it this way; I don't care what others think.”

Zhao Changhe chuckled, “I liked Little Yangyang this way—I didn't say I liked grown-up Yangyang like this.”

“I see, so you don’t like the rabbit head; what you really like is Little Yangyang!” She stomped her foot. “Now that I’ve grown up, you don’t like me anymore!”

Zhao Changhe couldn’t help laughing, “Where did you get that idea...?”

Cui Yuanyang pouted. “When you see me, you always have only a few words to say—nothing compared to all that you said to my father!”

Zhao Changhe was at a loss for words. “Hey, do you even know why I came here this time? I am literally here to wipe out your family. If it wasn’t for you, that banquet hall would have been bathed in blood.”

Cui Yuanyang rolled her eyes, “You’re out of strength—you couldn’t make anyone bleed.”

Zhao Changhe was shocked. “You... How could you tell?”

Cui Yuanyang smirked. “I know your temperament well... My uncle tried to poison you and intended to kill you. You would have retaliated with equal severity, executing the main culprit to intimidate the rest. You wouldn’t have spared my father’s pride. The only reason you didn’t strike was because you were bluffing—you’re out of strength.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Cui Yuanyang sighed softly. “Don’t worry. Father will give you a satisfactory resolution. Uncle will pay dearly for this.”

Zhao Changhe was puzzled, however. “You see everything clearly, so why still act so carefree? How can you only care whether I like you...?”

“First of all, even without me, with Father’s relationship with you, you’d never consider wiping out the Cui Clan. I’m not worried you’d do anything drastic to my family; rather, I was worried you’d suffer because you’re alone.” Cui Yuanyang puffed out her chest. “Do you think I was preparing for the wedding? I was hiding here, ready to rescue you!”

Zhao Changhe stared at her, dumbfounded. He looked at the carved bow still strapped to her back, imagining her lying in wait on some distant rooftop, bow drawn to rescue her beloved. He couldn't help but laugh.

"Second..." Cui Yuanyang bit her lip, her tone soft and tinged with bitterness, "You don't like me being so insightful—you like the little rabbit. So why would I trouble myself with heavy thoughts? I'd rather stay carefree."

"But Yangyang..." Zhao Changhe finally couldn't help but ask, "This time, my position was truly opposed to the Cui Clan. No matter how nicely it's put, the Cui Clan will never regain its former glory. As a member of the Cui Clan, how do you feel about that?"

"No matter what I feel, the tide of destiny is unstoppable. I can't change it." Cui Yuanyang tilted her head. "Since, in their eyes, Cui Yuanyang is only a resource for political marriage, why should Cui Yuanyang worry about their future? What does it matter to me? Who cares about preserving their wealth and nobility for generations? Big Brother Zhao, don't you know? What I desire is to elope with a random bandit to the northern wastelands, to roam the world freely."

She reached out her hand to catch a snowflake, watching as it melted in her palm. Softly, she said, "Do you remember? The ruined temple in the storm, and the thugs from the Cui Clan before us..."

Zhao Changhe nodded. "Yes, I remember. In fact, those who came to kill you back then were from your own family."

"To this day, it's still the same... You might show mercy for my sake, but they will never spare you because of me. Big Brother Zhao, this thing called a noble clan... It might as well vanish. To me, aside from my father and elder brother, there's nothing worth clinging to. I only regret that my cultivation is still too shallow; otherwise, I'd deal with it myself."

Zhao Changhe scratched his head.

Weren't you just struggling to understand my conversation with your father...?

Cui Yuanyang turned her head back and smiled radiantly. "So there it is, Big Brother Zhao—you only like little rabbits."

Zhao Changhe chuckled. "I like big rabbits too."

Cui Yuanyang winked mischievously. “Well, they’re not so small anymore.”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

I meant you, what are you referring to?

Cui Yuanyang looked around, biting her lip, then suddenly cast him a flirtatious gaze. “King Zhao conquers Qinghe, and the Cui Clan bows in submission... Shouldn’t you be thinking about having them offer their wives and daughters to serve you, as the true spoils of conquest?”

Zhao Changhe’s heart thudded heavily, and every alarm bell started ringing in his mind.

Vermillion Bird and the other demonic witches would never have imagined that, aside from Sisi, the most enticing one all along had been this little rabbit.