

T. Times 66

Chapter 66: Endless Storms

Qi Bubi looked on in abject terror. His first reaction was that he wanted to run instead of risking his life to fight a lunatic.

This was one of the effects of Scattering the Gods and Buddhas—dread. It had no effect against Yue Hongling and her staunch will; it had no effect against Zhao Changhe who was naturally valiant... But against those who had weak wills, it could hardly be more effective.

Qi Bubi did not dare take this attack head-on. He lightly tapped the side of the saber with his folded fan in an attempt to deflect it.

Ding!

The fan spread open and he tried to cut open Zhao Changhe's wrist.

Swoosh!

One had no choice but to admit that this move of his was executed marvelously.

However, what came as a result of it was much less than marvelous. That feeble tap could only slant the path of the saber by one or two inches. As for Zhao Changhe, he was not the least bit concerned about Qi Bubi's attack and simply let the fan slice along his wrist. He was completely incapable of feeling any pain.

The power of Zhao Changhe's saber did not wane as it reached Qi Bubi's shoulder.

With that one move, Qi Bubi had lost the initiative. At this moment, how could he have time to try something else? He was also rich in experience and rolled on the ground like a lazy donkey, doing all he could to avoid the attack. As a result, his shoulder instantly broke from the force of the fall, but he kept his life.

He got up from the ground in a sorry state. When he raised his head to take a look at his opponent, his soul almost flew out of his body.

Zhao Changhe's blood-red saber looked like it was absorbing his blood into itself. Initially it was the vicious blood qi surfacing that made the saber look like it was covered in blood. However, right now, it really appeared as if it was merging with his blood.

Blood from Zhao Changhe's wrist kept on flowing toward his saber. His blade was like a starving demon that suddenly received nourishment. It gave Qi Bubi the illusory impression that it was jubilant.

However, it was clearly just a steel blade that cost around a few tens of taels of silver and definitely not a treasured command saber from the Blood God Cult!

Just what's happening?

Of course, all this was an illusion that arose from Qi Bubi's will falling under the influence of Zhao Changhe's saber art.

The malevolence of vicious blood qi was not something ordinary people could withstand. This applied to both the user and their enemies.

In Qi Bubi's mind, the illusion lasted for a long time; in reality, not even half a second had passed, and Zhao Changhe's second attack was about to hit its mark.

If Zhao Changhe's use of Scattering the Gods and Buddhas had been like a demonic god furiously cleaving the sky and its deities with power incomparably terrifying, then this next attack felt like the bleakness of a land covered in blood, devoid of life—not even Zhao Changhe, and most certainly not his enemy, existed there. This barren world was completely desolate.

This was the second of the Vicious Blood Saber Art's three ultimate techniques: No Man's Land!

Without entering this berserk state where Zhao Changhe lost all his sense of self, there was no way he could use this skill!

Qi Bubi was standing in a barren field.

The sky above was a bloody red, the ground was littered with corpses, and blood covered the wilderness, small streams converging into a giant river. He was the only living thing in this realm, faced with the obliterating might of the Dao of Heaven.

He did not belong there.

He was sentenced to death for his transgression.

A blood moon descended from the sky to enact the punishment of the gods.

Clang!

The sound of weapons striking each other woke up Qi Bubi. He realized there was no blood moon. That was Zhao Changhe's saber. He blocked the attack with his fan on instinct, but due to his will faltering from the illusion, his movements were weak and lacked power. His fan was deflected away.

Qi Bubi quickly retreated in terror. He no longer wanted to fight with Zhao Changhe. He had not even a sliver of interest in battling him.

Zhao Changhe had an average movement art. In his berserk state, he would not pursue Qi Bubi, so running away was actually quite simple. Some other man who's not afraid to die can come deal with this lunatic. I'm out!

As he thought this, he felt a sharp pain in the middle of his back.

Qi Bubi was at a loss as he turned around. Cui Yuanyang, who he did not even consider a person, had snuck up behind him and driven her sword through his heart.

That filthy little rabbit, at this moment, had a resolute gaze that even contained some ruthlessness.

How could she be a little girl without experience in the jianghu? In such a short span of time, she had already slain no small number of people...

As Qi Bubi realized this, there was a bit of regret in his eyes. Before he had time to open his mouth, a roar came from behind, and a steel saber landed on his neck.

His head flew up and blood gushed out.

Only the splattering blood separated Cui Yuanyang from Zhao Changhe as she looked into his eyes. The blood shined on him and made his eyes appear even redder. That ruthlessness and bloodthirst of his got even stronger as he panted like a wild beast.

Am I going to die by his hand here?

Cui Yuanyang did not know. What she did know, however, was that she could not just give up and abandon him here. Zhao Changhe had lost his mind and would continue fighting rather than running away. Once other people came searching for them, he would certainly die.

Both of them were at the third layer of the Profound Gate, so Cui Yuanyang knew she had a chance. She only needed to hit his acupoints.

He's used his ultimate techniques back-to-back. Right now, he should be like an arrow at the end of its flight. There'll definitely be a chance for me to hit his acupoints. I have to stay calm.

She took a deep breath, slowly and firmly raising her sword as she looked at Zhao Changhe's bestial expression.

She did not know how long they had stood face to face—perhaps it was only for an instant—before Zhao Changhe raised his bloody saber.

At that moment, a sharp screech echoed through the air as a sword, like a shooting star chasing the moon, appeared next to Zhao Changhe's neck.

Zhao Changhe's saber immediately changed direction and struck the blade. Then, he groaned, coughing out blood as he tripped backward a good distance.

His ambusher cried out in surprise. He had also underestimated the strength of Zhao Changhe's attack and was sent flying back in the air.

Wielding a heavy saber against a slender blade, Zhao Changhe, in his berserk state, unexpectedly did not have enough strength to withstand the strong impact of the attack. He was sent reeling backward and even spat out blood!

Cui Yuanyang's heart skipped a beat. From that single move, she had figured out who this new arrival was.

It was an assassin from the Snow-Listening Pavilion, and a Silver-rank one at least. From that one attack, she understood that this person had reached the fifth layer of the Profound Gate or even higher!

This was an opponent they had no chance against!

Cui Yuanyang's heart was exhausted. We're really done for now... At the same time, she felt like she was being mocked.

Prior to this, those people might have intended to snag Zhao Changhe's bounty while hunting for Cui Yuanyang, but the price on her head was higher. She was the main reason criminals swarmed to them like bees when they were sailing along the river. Zhao Changhe involved himself in this battle all to protect her. However, this assassin from the Snow-Listening Pavilion had been gunning for Zhao Changhe from the start. Now, she was the one who had dragged Zhao Changhe into this situation.

Furthermore, Zhao Changhe no longer had the strength to fight. The only one in any condition to do battle right now was Cui Yuanyang.

While the assassin was sent flying back, she did not waste time thinking and rushed to pick up Zhao Changhe, who had fallen on the ground.

The vicious qi that had rushed to his head had disappeared with that one attack. His eyes had cleared up. As Cui Yuanyang pulled him up, he said weakly, "Go in the direction Qi Bubi went."

Cui Yuanyang did not question why and carried him away in the moonlight without uttering a word.

Just minutes before, she had felt like she could not carry him, but at this moment, he was in her arms. It felt effortless.

A person's attitude and willpower could influence them to this extent.

After running only a few steps, she saw a horse pacing back and forth under the moonlight.

Cui Yuanyang quickly figured out Zhao Changhe's reasoning: Qi Bubi had definitely come here on horseback. There was no way he could have traveled across these lands at such a speed on foot, not where plenty of mountains converged. If they went in his direction, there would most likely be a horse!

Zhao Changhe was really too clear-headed.

"Just now, I had to rely on you to row the boat. Now, I need to rely on you to ride the horse. I don't know how to." Zhao Changhe weakly dug himself into her embrace and smiled, a little bit embarrassed.

Cui Yuanyang had no idea how Zhao Changhe was still in the mood for self-deprecation... Anyway, thank god I'm way fucking better at riding a horse than rowing a boat. She got on the horse in a single leap and sat Zhao Changhe down behind her. Whipping the reins, she urged the horse onward.

Behind, they could hear the billowing of sleeves. The assassin from the Snow-Listening Pavilion was already chasing them, and he was getting closer.

By a willow tree on the side of the road, numerous people had nimbly arrived and now stood on the treetops. They silently watched the chase unfold under the moonlight.

Someone asked in a low voice, "Saintess, do we move out now?"

Xia Chichi, who Zhao Changhe had not met for a long time, stood beautifully under the moonlight. Her clear eyes were filled with pain and bewilderment as she silently watched Zhao Changhe slowly unsling his bow.

Even now, he had no intention of quietly escaping. To her surprise, he still had the will to resist.

From the very start, he was steadfast and valiant. How could she not be enamored with him?

But do you wish to die with this vixen?

Chapter 67: Blood Stains Qinghe While the Night Is Still Young

Someone by the side said, “News of the battle on the river must have reached the ears of the Cui Clan. If the Cui Clan has not met with any accident, Cui Wenjing will probably... Actually, wait, it hasn’t been that long since the battle. It’s been about two hours?”

“The time between crossing the river and someone from the Cui Clan coming to their rescue after receiving the news is the most dangerous part of their escape. Once they get through it, they’ll be fine. It feels like it’s been ages because they’ve been through a lot of dangers, but it really hasn’t been that long.”

“From the looks of it, Cui Wenjing must be on his way. If we don’t act now, he might actually reach them.... Tsk. This Zhao Changhe is indeed impre—Eh.”

Halfway through his sentence, his expression turned strange. He suddenly recalled that Zhao Changhe had an ambiguous relationship with the saintess. It was rumored that when Venerable Vermillion Bird brought the saintess back, her lips were bleeding—she looked like she’d had a pretty passionate time.

Once he looked into it, he found out that the saintess had slept with Zhao Changhe in the same room from the very start. And this had gone on for two whole months. They’ve most likely played in all sorts of ways already.

The martial arts of the Four Idols Cult did not require one to remain chaste to practice them. There were beautiful women in the cult who liked to fool around with men and even marriages between disciples. Even so, it was not appropriate for a woman with a history of passion to become a saintess. On paper, those that the cult appointed as saints and saintesses had to dedicate all of their body and mind to worshipping their gods; they could not have any ulterior thoughts. One only needed at the painful lesson the previous White Tiger Saintess learnt to see what would happen if one took a single wrong step.

This was why Xia Chichi’s test to become a saintess was more rigorous than normal. The cult brought out the Twenty-Eight Star Constellation Array against her.

In the end, her test showed that she was really a natural-born saintess. In any case, she was now the saintess for two idols and she knew her place.

Moreover, there was no indication that she was thinking about men in her day to day life. They all felt that she knew what not to do and exactly who was important to her. Anyway, she was only seventeen this year; she was still young and her juvenile passion from before had quickly faded away. There was no problem.

As the few disciples of the Four Idols Cult watched Zhao Changhe go through this series of trials, they really wanted to give him a few words of praise and thought in their hearts that it was not at all strange for the saintess to be willing to sleep with him. If it was me... Eh. Anyway, he's pleasing to the eye.

However, they could not praise him even if they wanted to. What if their words set off some sparks in the saintess' heart and ignite old passions? Zhao Changhe was also a traitor to one of their subsidiary cults. They were supposed to kill him rather than give words of praise.

Everyone present knew what this disciple was thinking and laughed one after another. One person continued the conversation and said, "That's why if we wish to take care of this traitor, we must take the chance and act now. Time is of the essence. Shall we move out now?"

Xia Chichi had a blank expression. "What? When did we become the Blood God Cult's hunting dogs? Did we travel here from distant lands just to help them get rid of a traitor?"

"Eh..."

"Let me ask you. Why have we come here?"

"To go to Ancient Sword Lake and perform the sacrificial sword ceremony. But since we just happened to bump into them...."

Xia Chichi said indifferently, "Since we just happened to bump into them, we're going to enjoy a good show. Why should we involve ourselves in the internal affairs of the Cui Clan and the Blood God Cult? Does it have anything to do with us?"

No one answered. They only felt like she did not look as if she was enjoying the show. At some points, she looked like she almost could not hold back herself from jumping in to save them.

But Zhao Changhe's performance is just too good, so the saintess doesn't need to reveal her own intentions? Or is that her mood has been soured looking at how well he's getting along with that little rabbit? Whatever. I shouldn't guess blindly.

An elder standing by the side finally said, "What's so heroic about bullying someone that's injured? The saintess is correct. Why should we help the Blood God Cult wipe their asses? Wouldn't they be ashamed to need us to kill a traitor at the measly third layer of the profound gate? How absolutely useless."

Everyone nodded. Needless to say, it would be shameful for the protectors of the Four Idols Cult under the Azure Dragon and White Tiger, and that elder who was a master on the Ranking of Man, to take the chance to kill an exhausted enemy at the third layer of the Profound Gate. Furthermore, they could not, as members of a higher-ranking cult, run off to snatch a reward given out by their subordinates. They would end up as laughingstocks.

As they thought this, everyone sighed. "Then let's go. If not, once Cui Wenjing arrives, there'll be trouble for us."

At this moment, Xia Chichi suddenly said, "It's not like we can't kill a traitor. When the time comes, I'll let him pick how he wants to die. We'll leave it at that. Let's go."

Everyone was relieved upon feeling the rage in her words. The saintess knows what's right!

Xia Chichi turned around to look once more. The sound of clopping hooves had long since faded into the distance. Dust and sand kicked up in the horse's wake still spiraled in the air.

No one knew that the saintess had but one thought on her mind right now. Little wench. What's with that cute and pure act? You can't just hug a man like that!

Aren't you awesome, Big Brother Zhao? Traveling a thousand li to bring Yuanyang home—so goddamn heroic! Pfft! Just you wait for me!

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While the disciples of the Four Idols Cult chatted away, Cui Yuanyang urged on the horse with Zhao Changhe at the back. The assassin from the Snow-Listening Pavilion was getting nearer and nearer to them.

Zhao Changhe looked behind with his Back Eye and silently made some assessments.

This assassin's speed is greater than a horse... He must be a master at the fifth or sixth layer of the Profound Gate. At this level, his strength in battle must be on par with the Five Absolutes; or at least, his movement arts should be at about the same level. Zhao Changhe remembered that Duan Zhixing was complimented by the generals and soldiers at Xiangyang City for being able to catch up to a running horse[1]. Even though their horse was carrying two people, the assassin's ability to keep up with them was about as impressive.

Does this mean that Xia Chichi is actually on par with the Five Absolutes, while I'm at the same level as the Seven Immortals of Quanzhen and Mei Chaofeng[2]? Damn, to think that I pushed someone like her against the wall and kissed her! Zhao Changhe made a rather strange expression at the thought—there were so many things wrong with the analogy that he did not know which to point out first.

He took two deep breaths and quietly circulated Xia Longyuan's internal force to nourish his exhausted body. Then, he slowly unslung the bow around him that he had not touched since shooting down the sails of that ship.

What matters if you're on the level of the Five Absolutes? It's not like you're immune to weapons!

From behind, the assassin was watching him ready his bow.

There were only five to six arrows in Zhao Changhe's quiver. He took out one, nocked it, then turned around and shot.

With a metallic whistle, the arrow pierced through the air.

The assassin was stunned. Of course, he had expected an arrow, but he had never thought that Zhao Changhe could turn around and fire such an accurate shot without even pausing to take a look!

His speed dropped as he swung his sword to deflect the arrow. With this small hindrance, the horse once more fled far ahead.

The assassin could not help but admire Zhao Changhe in his heart. Not everyone could do so much while covered in wounds and out of supplies. Meh, is there any use to struggle like that? Just how many arrows do you have?

He caught up to them again, but the moment he entered Zhao Changhe's firing range, an arrow came flying toward him. The assassin had prepared for this and continued his pursuit after deflecting the arrow.

After four to five rounds of this, they got closer and closer to Wei County.

There was some hesitation in the assassin's heart.

He knew that they were extremely close to the Cui Clan's sphere of territory. News of Zhao Changhe and Cui Yuanyang crossing the river had definitely spread everywhere nearby. It was simply impossible for news not to have reached Wei County. This meant that someone could show up to rescue them at any moment. To continue pursuing was exceedingly dangerous.

However, they were within his grasp. Am I supposed to fail because of a few weak arrows? How laughable. Will I be able to sleep knowing this when I return?

He looked at Zhao Changhe drawing his bow; his hands were trembling and he could barely pull the bowstring all the way back.

Am I supposed to head back like this?

The assassin grit his teeth and continued chasing them.

As Zhao Changhe nocked his final arrow, he grit his teeth tightly. His hands trembled as he slowly took aim.

Cui Yuanyang, who had been wildly driving the horse forward without a word, suddenly shouted, "You're still looking! Still looking! If you keep doing that, then I'll ignore you from now on!"

Twang!

The final arrow flew out.

At the same time the bowstring roared, a sword descended from the nine heavens. Zhao Changhe had no idea how far away it came from. Before his arrow hit his mark, that blade had already pierced the assassin's heart.

That sword was faster than even the speed of sound.

Rank nine on the Ranking of Heaven, head of the Cui Clan, Cui Yuanyang's father—the Purple Cloud of Qinghe, Cui Wenjing.

The horse neighed as Cui Yuanyang reigned it in. She was panting, trying to pull herself together as she fixed her gaze on her father under the moonlight.

She really wanted to cry but realized that her face, at this moment, was stiff and could not put on any expression. She wanted to hop off her horse and hug her father, but she felt as if all her strength had faded away; she did not even have enough energy to dismount.

This journey filled with thorns and brambles was finally over.

Cui Wenjing silently watched his daughter. She was so filthy as to be almost unrecognizable, yet she remained quiet and did not complain or cry. Then, he sized up the man, half a head taller, sitting behind her. No matter how well he concealed himself, he would not be able to escape Cui Wenjing's gaze. The color of the dudou wrapped around his chest was simply too eye-catching.

Zhao Changhe had no idea what sort of emotions were behind this man's gaze. Is that appreciation or something else...

It was only now that Cui Yuanyang realized that her father's attitude toward Zhao Changhe would not necessarily be friendly. Her heart skipped a beat and as she was about to say something, a golden radiance suddenly lit up the night sky.

The Tome of Troubled Times was once again descending with a new page.

All three of them could not help but look to the sky.

Third month. Zhao Changhe traveled a thousand li to bring Yuanyang home, traversing mountains, crossing rivers, and killing his way out of a heavy encirclement. Countless people were slain; his clothes were steeped in blood; his flesh was cut; his quiver was empty; his bow snapped.

Cui Wenjing's gaze wavered as he silently watched Cui Yuanyang. Suddenly, tears started dripping from his eyes.

While heavily injured, he cut down Qi Bubi with Cui Yuanyang and escaped from the pursuit of a silver-rank assassin from the Snow-Listening Pavilion.

The Ranking of Hidden Dragons has changed.

Rank 88: Zhao Changhe.

Rank 213: Cui Yuanyang.

Blood stains Qinghe while the night is still young.

The appearance of the tome now was not like the previous two times... This time, the world under heaven was shaken.

Chapter 68: Zhao Changhe the Manslayer

Even if it was a dog that did it, being able to appear on the Tome of Troubled Times three times within five months was enough to shake the world. Before this, just who had managed to cause the tome to appear with such frequency? Not even Xia Longyuan could do this when he first began his rise.

Was this Zhao Changhe the son of heaven?

By involving himself with the daughter of a powerful family, going up against criminals from the underworld, traveling a thousand li, breaking an encirclement with his clothes bloodied, Zhao

Changhe was now inundated in legends and rumors. What little notoriety he had gained from taking Fang Buping's head could not compare to this!

And to the vast majority of people in the world, Zhao Changhe had also struck gold!

He was the grand benefactor of the Cui Clan! From now on, no one would dare lightly touch him. Was the arrest order from the imperial court really more important than the Cui Clan's face? If the Cui Clan said directly that they were protecting this criminal, First Seat Tang and her colleagues would have to pull back and lose face.

What's more, this did not simply concern matters of face. Zhao Changhe had a good chance of becoming Cui Wenjing's son-in-law...

Initially, when he decided to endure all sorts of hardships to bring the young lady home, it was out of a sense of virtue. However, throughout the journey, they braved through winds and rains hand-in-hand alone together. One was a girl in her teenage years; the other was a young and vigorous man. How could sparks not have ignited between them? Only an absolute idiot would believe that.

If they vowed to get married without consent from their parents, then they might have been separated by the Cui Clan. However, now the whole world knew of their "relationship." At the very least, Yangyang could no longer discuss marriage with other clans. Anyone who did so would be seen by the whole world as a cuckold before they ever got their reply.

The man involved this time could also be said to be supremely honorable and righteous. Ordinary people would shower him in praise if they met him, so how could the Cui Clan treat him with hostility? If they wanted to save face, there was no way they could do that.

It was very likely that Zhao Changhe was about to become a son-in-law. It was hard to come by any other alternative.

And to the few clever people, how things would play out after this was worthy of their consideration...

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Far away, at the capital, Tang Wanzhuang was high up on a tower, leaning against a banister. She peacefully watched the moon in the night sky and after a long while, she sighed softly. “I never thought...”

The image of that youth who had never trained in any martial art pointing a saber at her and loudly claiming himself to be “Zhao Changhe the Manslayer!” surfaced in her mind. Nobody could have predicted that today, not even half a year later, he would leave Beimang with his saber and make his name known everywhere under heaven!

“The Cui Clan—” Tang Wanzhuang muttered to herself before suddenly coughing.

From behind, a maid rushed over to drape some robes over her. “Young lady, it’s already late. Why don’t you go to rest earlier...”

Tang Wanzhuang replied quietly, “Pass down my orders. Withdraw the arrest order for Zhao Changhe.”

“...yes.”

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Cui Yuanyong, who had headed back to search for his sister, had arrived not too long ago at the city where Zhao Changhe and Cui Yuanyang stayed at an inn together and stole clothes. He was anxiously asking the officials here for all sorts of information.

“Zhao Changhe? He indeed came here and left. He even stole some clothes. Who was with him? Ah, there was a girl who looked pretty cute but turned out to be a who—” Before the man could finish speaking, the sky shone with gold.

The official stared in disbelief for a long while. His mouth twitched and he said no more.

Cui Yuanyong also looked up. His heart sank as he asked, “What the fuck did you say just now?”

“When Lord Zhao left the city, he looked magnificent! I thought, for that girl by his side to be so cute, she was definitely the honored daughter of a powerful family. So it turns out that she was

Young Lady Cui. It makes sense now! I just knew from the start that only the Cui Clan could raise such a pure and gorgeous young woman!”

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As she was about to leave, Xia Chichi took a wrong step and almost tripped.

“What’s wrong, saintess?”

“I suddenly regret not having killed that traitor just now. Will we make it if we head back now...”

“The Tome of Troubled Times has appeared. That means that Zhao Changhe and Cui Yuanyang have already escaped to safety. Cui Wenjing must have arrived. Saintess, I think you should forget about it.”

“I know the Tome of Troubled Times appeared! What I’m angry at is precisely because it appeared! Just who’s writing this shitty book? Does he even know how to write!?”

No one knew why she felt this way. Saintess, are you angry because you didn’t get such a great description when you entered the ranking? You’re already amazing enough, what’s the problem with that? And you’re ranked 13, you’re two-fucking-hundred ranks above that girl!

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Ten thousand li away, Jiangnan.

Yue Hongling sat alone on the eaves of a building, leisurely drinking from a wineskin. As the words flashed in the sky, Yue Hongling raised her head to look, then directly downed her drink.

Once the words were gone, so too was her wine.

Yue Hongling threw the wineskin away. “With things like this, how could one not be joyous!?”

Shortly after, she stood up and stretched. “Yes... But all the women you come into contact with seem to have their reputations...”

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Wei County, at the inner courtyard of the county magistrate’s mansion residence.

“Lord Zhao, do you really not want us to wash you?”

“I said I don’t. That means I don’t!”

“Lord Cui told us you might get the wrong idea, but this really isn’t a test...”

“I don’t give a shit if he wants to test me. I’m my own person! If I do it, I’ll be done in a minute. If I let you wash me, I have no idea how long you’ll take. Isn’t that troublesome? Go away. Just get me some clothes, actually. I’ll wash myself!”

The maid covered her mouth as she smiled and walked away. This Lord Zhao is really boorish.

Not only is he boorish, he’s so unromantic. No matter how you look at it, Young Lady Cui doesn’t belong together with him...

Whatever the case, even maids knew that it was highly likely that Zhao Changhe was about to become the son-in-law of the Cui family. For the clan to arrange maids to tend to him was really not a test. This was just how powerful families were. If it was up to Cui Yuanyang, she would do the same and Zhao Changhe could toy with any of those maids if he really wanted to.

Zhao Changhe was aware of this.

However, he was not in the mood to deal with any of it. He was too exhausted and was afraid he might just suddenly die if he could not wash himself or sleep. I don’t care if you’re a servant or not. Don’t interrupt my sleep.

After driving away the maids, Zhao Changhe finally soaked himself comfortably in his bathtub to ease away his exhaustion.

He fully understood the problem the Cui Clan was dealing with right now. He himself also did not want the Tome of Troubled Times to have such a big mouth. What'll Xia Chichi think when she finds out? I don't want to get myself this deep in with the Cui family.

To be honest, he also did not know if Yangyang had any interest in him. Zhao Changhe had really never had such crooked thoughts.

The reason for this was simple. Throughout the whole journey, when that young girl was cute, they were not familiar with each other, and Zhao Changhe even saw her as a hassle. After they got to know each other and he realized she was not that bad, she was as filthy as a beggar. What kind of generous god would show interest to a beggar!

This was why Zhao Changhe had really acted with noble and benevolent intentions and done a good deed. Looking back, this should have been a deeply moving experience, so how did things end up like this...

He did not write the Tome of Troubled Times. No one could stop the tome from talking. It was a real pain in the ass.

Still, in any case, the tome had rather good things to say about him this time. His hideous rank had also been lifted away by Yangyang; he was no longer 250 or 91 Mr Zhao. 88 was a number people would pay money for[1]! Now Yangyang was a 213[2]...

Zhao Changhe was also surprised he had managed to rank up. This time, he had not really defeated any people with a higher cultivation. Most of the people he had slain had the same cultivation as him or were small fry at an even lower level.

Qi Bubi did not count. If it hadn't been for Yangyang's ambush, Qi Bubi would have definitely been able to escape. Afterward, if he had started to play dirty and strike from the shadows, the one dead would have been Zhao Changhe. Thus, if he had been by himself, he would have definitely lost. The Tome of Troubled Times recognized this battle as a shared effort. Yangyang did not steal the kill from Zhao Changhe. There was a logic to this.

But it was precisely because of this that made Zhao Changhe wonder why he had moved up the ranks. Was it because I was still able to push back our enemies while being in that sorry ass state? Did the Tome of Troubled Times think that this was more impressive than killing Fang Buping?

As for the assassin from the Snow-Listening Pavilion at the end.... They had been running for their lives. Zhao Changhe had only shot those arrows to stall for time and wait for reinforcements to arrive, and he had never actually fought the assassin.

Moreover, Yangyang's achievements in battle were miniscule, so just how had she entered the ranking? And with a rank higher than Zhao Changhe's initial rank of 250...

Zhao Changhe actually felt unwilling to concede... From this, he finally understood why other people wanted to challenge him for his place on the ranking.

Ultimately he could only conclude that the Tome of Troubled Times did not just look at duels to decide the weight of one's achievements. Zhao Changhe managed to make it out of various schemes, encirclements, and being pursued while bringing along a little girl—this in itself was an outstanding achievement. Yangyang also entered the ranking because, throughout the whole journey, she had never once been a burden. On the contrary, she had excellent cooperation. For a spoiled little girl who had no real combat experience to be able to pull this off, anyone that looked into it would commend her. For example, if one picked ten thousand schoolgirls, how many of them could perform as well as Cui Yuanyang?

The Tome of Troubled Times recognized this as her potential. If she could work on her skills, it would definitely be clear to everyone that she was just an unpolished piece of jade. After all, the Ranking of Hidden Dragons looked at one's potential, not how great their might in battle was.

As he ruminated on all this, he had no idea if anything he thought was correct.

Zhao Changhe's consciousness got more muddled as he soaked in his bath, and after a while, he fell asleep.

He dreamt again, and in his dream, he met a familiar face—a woman floating amidst the serene darkness of the night sky, her eyes shut.

Chapter 69: Heaven and Man

Zhao Changhe did not impulsively rush to grab her like the last time. He very calmly asked, "What? Is it not enough for you to secretly peep at me through my entire journey? You want to blatantly reveal that you were watching me shower? Is it big? Right, were you also watching when I took a shit or piss? Did it smell good?"

The blind woman said, “You’re in a dream. There’s no shower.”

Zhao Changhe lowered his head and took a look. Indeed, he was still in the bathroom, but there was no bathtub. The clothes he wore, to his surprise, were the clothes he always wore in the modern world.

This was obviously a dream.

Are you taking the piss out of me now? Of course these things from the real world only appear in my dreams.

Zhao Changhe did not bring up anything about this, however. “So you’ve never once sneaked a peak at me while I was on the road?”

The blind woman shook her head. “Nope.”

“You’re really not the one writing the Tome of Troubled Times?” Zhao Changhe continued. “I feel that while everything looks prim and proper on the surface, there lurks a deep ridicule behind the scenes. It really feels like something you’d do.”

“...” The blind woman actually paused for a moment. It seemed that she was rather perplexed by what Zhao Changhe thought of her.

Soon after, she answered, “The Tome of Troubled Times is a name given to it by people in the world. It has its own name.”

“Hmm?”

“Its name is very simple. It’s just called the Heavenly Tome. To be more specific, what people know as the Tome of Troubled Times is only a single page of the Heavenly Tome, dedicated to recording the martial exploits of humans in the world.” The blind woman sighed. “So, everything is recorded by the heavenly dao. I have no control over it. If I really could control it, then I’d actually be the heavenly dao... What kind of heavenly dao would discuss such boring matters with you?”

Zhao Changhe replied coldly, “Where is this heavenly dao? Don’t give me some nonsense like ‘this heaven has no dao’ again.”

“The heavenly dao has perished.” The blind woman appeared indifferent as she responded. “Otherwise, how could everything it records in this world be randomly displayed for everyone to see? That’s why I said that this heaven has no dao. Is there anything wrong with what I said?”

Overwhelmed with shock, Zhao Changhe’s eyes went wide.

The heavenly dao has perished? What does that even mean!?

“Do you really believe that the Four Idols Cult and Xia Longyuan are really vying for these lands of the mortal world?” The blind woman smiled mockingly. “Perhaps if you compared them with the Cui Clan, the latter would conform more to the thoughts of ordinary men.”

Zhao Changhe was silent for a moment before slowly saying, “You’re the same.”

“Is that not the case for you as well? Until now, you’ve never thought of yourself as being a person of this world. All this time you’ve been lying to everyone saying that you’re speaking the dialect of the Zhao House, but just how much of that is due to you being too used to your modern way of speaking, and how much of it is because you’re intentionally drawing a line between this world and yourself?”

“...and you still say you’ve never peeped at me?”

“I’m the one that brought you here. What’s so strange about paying attention to you?” The blind woman sighed. “However, I never thought that you’d be able to continuously trigger the Heavenly Tome to appear. I really thought that it was an accident.”

Zhao Changhe said indifferently, “So, anyway, are you here this time because you think I’m talented and you want to give me more cheats?”

The blind woman did not answer and instead said, “Someone’s come to find you.”

Her figure then disappeared and the night sky shattered.

Zhao Changhe opened his eyes. The sky outside the window was already bright, but he was still in the bathtub. The water had gone cold for a while now.

He hurriedly stood up and wiped himself. Fuck, if I didn't cultivate I would have long since gotten a fever from soaking in water all night.

Even though Zhao Changhe's mouth was filled with sarcasm, he actually knew the reason the blind woman came to see him this time

If the Tome of Troubled Times was just a single page of the Heavenly Tome, then what about the other pages? The blind woman did not explain clearly. If anyone else heard what she said, they would be interested in searching for them. That was where the true treasure lay. It would be greater than any cheat code.... She was also hinting that the Four Idols Cult and Xia Longyuan were most likely concerned with this.

If the heavenly dao has perished, then who is master of this world?

This was the truth that all great powers in this world sought out. It seemed that the blind woman was trying to direct Zhao Changhe toward it this time.

What's her goal?

While he wiped himself, his head full of thoughts, the door creaked open and Cui Yuanyang skipped into the room. "Big Brother Zhao... Eh..."

Zhao Changhe lowered his head with a blank expression and looked at his peerless little brother. Then, he raised his head and stared blankly at Cui Yuanyang.

Cui Yuanyang retreated step by step before tripping on the doorstep. With an "aiya!!" she fell down on her butt.

Zhao Changhe, even with much on his mind, could not help but laugh. "If word got out that the 213th Hidden Dragon was like this, everyone's trust in the Tome of Troubled Times would collapse."

Cui Yuanyang covered her eyes. "Why are you naked first thing in the morning!?"

Zhao Changhe calmly put on his pants. “There was also someone who shouted ‘I haven’t put on my clothes yet’ when they were called to eat breakfast. Just who might that be~”

From both sides of the door frame, two servants stuck their heads in and stared....

Zhao Changhe: “...”

There’s no washing all this away anymore. I shouldn’t have made a joke like this to her... We’ve become too comfortable with each other.

Well, whatever. It looks like no matter what I do, it’ll be impossible to wash away the relationship between us.

Cui Yuanyang got up from the floor, her face flushed, and angrily said in a low voice, “What’re you two looking at? Piss off. I’ll bring in the food myself.”

The maids held back their laughter as they bowed. “Yes.”

Cui Yuanyang took the food trays the maids were holding and carefully walked through the door. Zhao Changhe had already put on his new clothes and smiled as he watched her.

He now wore a silk robe reddish-violet in color and had mountains and rivers embroidered on it; it looked grand and majestic. The material used to make it was extremely expensive—even the thread used in the embroidery was golden silk. It exuded an incomparably noble aura.

Zhao Changhe had never worn such expensive clothes before. Not in this world, not in the real world. Furthermore, these clothes were not made for warriors; rather, they had a scholarly air about them. It diluted that imposing and boorish temperament of his by a considerable amount and gave him a poised and gentle bearing.

Cui Yuanyang looked at him with sparkling eyes. She never thought that Zhao Changhe could have this kind of bearing or look this pleasing to the eye.

Zhao Changhe also looked at her with sparkling eyes, because right now, Cui Yuanyang was very beautiful.

Yes, she was no longer cute, but beautiful.

She was not wearing her furry rabbit hat, nor did she look like a filthy, mud-smeared beggar in tattered clothes... She had very light makeup on, a jade hairpin on her head, and wore a light green dress that emphasized how slim she was. It made her stand out. Even her face was not as round as before, and appeared more oval-shaped. She looked elegant.

She was clearly a beautiful young lady.

The only thing that reminded Zhao Changhe of her former likeness were the neat bangs on her forehead, which made her look like an adorable doll.

While the two of them stared at each other, both of them thought, So (s)he actually looks like this...

The next moment, they both smiled at the same time, as if what had just happened was a lifetime ago.

“Let’s eat. I have something delicious!” Cui Yuanyang happily moved the plates to the table. When she turned around, Zhao Changhe burst into laughter. Her butt was full of dust.

A lifetime had not passed. They were still the same people.

“What’re you laughing at?” Cui Yuanyang turned around and asked, annoyed. “We’ve had nothing good to eat throughout the whole journey. Why aren’t you eating yet? This is supposed to be my greatest use!”

Looking at this rich loli fret about not being able to provide for him, Zhao Changhe’s thoughts about what happened in his dream dispersed and he sat down at the table in a good mood. “Alright. What kind of cake is this?”

“This is a jade lotus cake from the Fragrance House. These are the eight delicacies. These are sesame paste snow-jade biscuits from the well-known Zhang family in the capital...” Cui Yuanyang

excitedly introduced each dish, and looked expectantly at him. “Which one is your favorite!? Let’s see if your taste is the same as mine!”

Yup, she was still a child.

Even after experiencing a whole journey of foul winds and bloody rain, she actually still retained some of her childishness.

Is it because she’s home? Eh, but this is Wei County, not Qinghe. There’s still some distance to travel.

Zhao Changhe tried each of the dishes and smiled. “This jade lotus cake.”

Cui Yuanyang looked incredibly excited. “I just knew we had the same favorites!”

Zhao Changhe smiled without saying anything. That’s because it was the first one you introduced.

He drank fresh milk while enjoying the exquisite pastries. As he looked at the silk robes he was wearing, he thought, If Cui Wenjing can allow his daughter to come running to find me first thing in the morning, that means there’re a lot of problems at hand. If I really wanted this kind of life, I might actually be able to achieve it with a few words. Then I’d really be able to live out the rest of my life like this.

A life of luxury with a cute wife, a father-in-law who was number nine under heaven, and the ability to travel to any province and county—all of this sounded amazing.

However, for some reason, Zhao Changhe felt like something was missing.

The blind woman’s words kept stirring within his heart.

If there was someone constantly watching a person, then everything they did was just a reality TV show to the observer.

There was a group of people who were currently seeking out the mysteries of the world with their swords pointed at the firmament and the firm wish to inherit the heavens.

The setting sun shone on the river surface, yet its vast reaches mark only the edge of this grand painting.

When Zhao Changhe scraped off his flesh with that steel saber he brought with him from Beimang, was the saber of his heart blunted?

“Big Brother Zhao.” Cui Yuanyang’s voice traveled over. “Why are you lost in thought while you’re eating? There’s no boatwoman harboring malicious intentions here.”

Zhao Changhe then came back to reality and smiled. “I’m not sure if there’s a little rabbit with malicious intentions here.”

Cui Yuanyang’s face reddened slightly. She lowered her head and muttered, “There isn’t.”

In that movement, her bashfulness sent ripples through his heart and almost shattered the sunlight shining on the river.

Zhao Changhe was a bit afraid to look at her bright red face. He lowered his head and said softly, “I wish to meet your esteemed father. There are matters I wish to discuss with him.”

If there was anyone else here, the first thing they thought after listening to this would be that Zhao Changhe was about to propose a marriage between him and Cui Yuanyang. But after she heard his words, the redness of her face slowly faded, and she stared fixedly at Zhao Changhe without blinking.

Zhao Changhe is bold and brave. If he wants to bring up our marriage, then why is he lowering his head and speaking so softly?

Chapter 70: Cui Wenjing

Cui Yuanyang did not say anything about it in the end and only said, “Father is appreciating the flowers at the pavilion in the back garden. I think...he’s also waiting to meet you, Big Brother Zhao.

Zhao Changhe raised his head to look at her. Her expression, which had been exceedingly easy to read so far, was now like it was shrouded in mist. All her thoughts were concealed.

However, she was still full of smiles. After seeing Zhao Changhe finish his milk and pastries, she was very ladylike and lightly lifted her skirt as she stood up. "I'll bring you over, Big Brother Zhao."

After Zhao Changhe got up, Cui Yuanyang naturally led him out of the building by his hand.

Zhao Changhe, on the other hand, felt that this was a bit unnatural. He turned to look at both sides of the corridor. "If you hold my hand here..."

Cui Yuanyang replied indifferently, "Whether I should or should not hold your hand, we've done it so many times. There is no need to deceive others or ourselves. Whether I'm here or elsewhere, I'm still Yangyang."

Zhao Changhe's pursed his lips and did not respond.

Cui Yuanyang led him along leisurely and said, "Actually, I'm not in a very good mood."

Zhao Changhe asked, "Because you found out who the spy is?"

Cui Yuanyang sighed. "Big Brother Zhao, if you could be a little bit dumber, you'd be so much cuter."

"Like you?"

Cui Yuanyang earnestly nodded. "Yes. Like me."

Zhao Changhe broke out into laughter.

Cui Yuanyang continued, "Of course, if you became dumber, you wouldn't be able to break through all sorts of hardships with me like a god. How troublesome. Why not...you be smarter to outsiders, and act a little dumber around me?"

Zhao Changhe did not know if he was being objective, but he suddenly felt that this girl in front of him was beginning to know how to talk.

What do you mean by outsiders? Who are the insiders?

He returned to the main topic. "So who on earth is the spy?"

"My third brother, Cui Yuancheng."

"The second son of the first wife?"

"Yes."

Zhao Changhe remained silent. This was her biological brother, her true blood brother from the same father and mother. He actually tried to take his harmless sister's life, all to ruin Cui Yuanyong's name with the failure to protect her. To make things worse, there was also no guarantee that doing such a thing would help him take Cui Yuanyong's place.

It was no wonder the Cui Clan's response to all of this was sluggish, and why even as an assassin tried to take her life, they still did not know of the situation. Furthermore, the people who pursued Cui Yuanyang all had a certain level of organization. This meant that the spy pulling the strings had some high position. This was not something a powerless bastard or the son of a concubine could pull off.

If Zhao Changhe was in Cui Yuanyang's shoes, he would be crying at this moment... Perhaps she had already cried for a long time last night?

"How...will they deal with him?"

"Father has locked him in the dungeon. For now, they won't do anything to him. I heard that my mother hasn't stopped weeping. She says that they must have got it wrong, that he was framed."

Zhao Changhe shook his head. It was hard to say.

Cui Yuanyang smiled once more. "However, I don't hate him."

"Hmm?"

“If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t have been able to meet my honorable and righteous Big Brother Zhao.”

“...”

“Y’know, I felt a lot of regret.”

“Regret for what?”

“For not choosing the first choice and leaving with you to Jiangnan and Mobei.” As Cui Yuanyang said this, her voice gradually became softer until Zhao Changhe could no longer hear her. She did not let Zhao Changhe hear her say, “Perhaps, we’ll never have such a chance anymore.”

Zhao Changhe did not need to hear the later half of her sentence, however. With just the first part, he could already fully understand the young lady’s feelings.

He tightly pursed his lips, not knowing how to reply.

Cui Yuanyang suddenly stopped. “We’re here.”

Zhao Changhe looked ahead. It was filled with beautiful flowers; countless of them were in bloom. A limestone path meandered across, covered by the trees and flowers. Zhao Changhe did not know how far it stretched.

“I won’t go with you...” Cui Yuanyang smiled then lowered her head bashfully. “I’m afraid that it might not be convenient for me to hear what you guys want to talk about.”

After saying this, she turned around and ran off, disappearing like a wisp of smoke. She ran behind the corner of the veranda and stared back. Her gaze was filled with what seemed to be annoyance...or hatred? Zhao Changhe could not make it out.

He stood there and watched. Only after that light green skirt disappeared beyond the veranda did he enter the garden in silence.

How strange. I didn't feel such an indescribable feeling when I bid farewell to Xia Chichi.

Deep within the garden, a stream flowed amidst the jingling of bells. Between the flowers, trees, and pond were the upward-arching eaves of a pavilion where a man stood, quietly gazing at the water.

Zhao Changhe walked up. There was a table in the center of the pavilion. It had wine on it. There were no servants present.

Cui Wenjing continued looking at the stream, not turning his head. He casually told Zhao Changhe, "Sit. I heard you like to drink. Pour yourself some wine."

Zhao Changhe did not sit down, but walked to his side and watched the waters with him.

This action was extremely impolite. Of course, if he was really arrogant enough to sit there and drink wine, it would have also been very rude. However, that fit with his boorish image. It was hard to describe what he was doing now that he stood shoulder to shoulder with Cui Wenjing.

Cui Wenjing glanced at him, a little bit surprised. His gaze landed on the scar on Zhao Changhe's face before pulling back. "What identity do you have that allows you to stand shoulder to shoulder with me?"

My daughter's benefactor? My daughter's husband? Or...the crown prince?

"A guest," Zhao Changhe answered casually. "A guest has arrived, yet the host doesn't even turn to look at him and continues to look at the water. The Cui family is a clan of immense repute. So as to prevent you from being denounced as rude, I can only stand here with you like this."

Cui Wenjing grinned, turned around unhurriedly, and gestured for him to sit. "I have some things on my mind and acted discourteously for a moment. I hope that you will be magnanimous enough to forgive me. Please, sit."

Zhao Changhe sat down and took the initiative to pour Cui Wenjing wine.

Cui Wenjing watched him pour wine with interest and suddenly asked, "You've learned proper etiquette?"

“Yes.”

Even though I’ve never learned the etiquette of your world, nor have we studied the same books, I really am an educated person by any standards.

The air of a scholar was something rather distinct.

As Zhao Changhe mixed in with the bandits, that scholarly air about him became less and less prominent. However, when confronting an entity like the Cui Clan, that air would naturally reveal itself. This was what made Cui Yuanyang feel that her impression of him had shattered. Zhao Changhe was not as boorish as these people made him out to be.

Of course, Cui Wenjing had a different idea as to why this was. “Someone from the Zhao House shouldn’t have been able to study etiquette.”

Zhao Changhe’s hand came to a gentle stop, and he placed the wine pot by the side. “The Zhao House is right next to the Luo Family Village. It’s not as out-of-the-way as people think.”

“So it’s normal for people of the Zhao House to work in the Luo Family Village, or for people of the Luo Family Village to stay at the Zhao House?”

Zhao Changhe did not answer.

Cui Wenjing looked at the wine in his cup and suddenly said, “Last night, I didn’t intend to intervene. I wanted to wait for the assassin to kill you first. I was confident that I would be able to save my daughter at the same time.”

“I know,” Zhao Changhe replied calmly. “That way, I would’ve died at the hands of that assassin from the Snow-Listening Pavilion, while you would have been just one step too late. To your deep regret, you would have only saved your daughter...and spared yourself some major headaches.”

“Do you hate me for it? You risked your life to bring my daughter home, yet you were met with such a response....”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t have done anything better. So I understand... In the end, you still intervened and saved us. What you were thinking beforehand is not important. But there’s something I’ve told Yangyang before. Understanding is only meaningful when it’s mutual.”

“Equal seniority is the precondition for mutual understanding, regardless of whether it’s with me or Tang Wanzhuang,” Cui Wenjing said indifferently. “It’s the same for every clan. One’s attitude toward a son-in-law living at their wife’s parent’s house cannot be the same as the attitude toward a son-in-law from a family of equal standing. Anyone would have done what I did. If you were in my position, I’m confident you’d do the same. That’s why I’ll ask again. What identity do you have that allows you to drink with me?”

With Cui Wenjing’s attitude, he was just short of saying “I’ve been backed into a corner by the Tome of Troubled Times. Now, there’s no other way to settle the matter between you and my daughter. The only thing we can decide is whether you’ll actually marry her, or if you’ll just live with her. If you’re the crown prince, it’ll be the former; if you’re just a bandit, then the latter. I’m waiting for your answer.”

Zhao Changhe suddenly thought that Cui Wenjing’s current attitude showed that he knew he was not the crown prince.

If he was actually the crown prince, then Cui Wenjing would be able to speak freely. He hesitated so much because he was clear that Zhao Changhe was a fake. After all, to support a counterfeit and push him to the throne, the investment Cui Wenjing would have to make was enormous. Was the Cui Clan willing to involve themselves so deeply in this matter?

This was why Cui Wenjing wanted Zhao Changhe dead. His death would mean the end of all these troubles.

However, after discovering that Zhao Changhe had studied and learned etiquette, he felt like there was once again something interesting about all this.

Perhaps he is beginning to lose confidence in his original judgment that I am not the real deal...

Thus, he wanted Zhao Changhe to reveal by himself that he was the crown prince. It would be best if he could take the initiative and show him a token of identification.

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment and suddenly shook his head, laughing.

Cui Wenjing sat there quietly and watched him, not saying a thing.

Zhao Changhe finally sighed. “That’s why I said understanding must be mutual. No one has ever considered what I think. Maybe only Yangyang has ever thought of this. She’s the only person that has ever thought of the problem from my perspective...”

Cui Wenjing said indifferently, “It wouldn’t hurt for you to explain clearly.”

“Bringing Yangyang back is something I did because I wanted to. Since I undertook this task until now, I have never had any thought of getting together with her, and I most certainly have never thought of using her as a tool to acquire the Cui Clan’s power.”

Zhao Changhe stopped for a moment, then said softly, “I have a lover... Even though I have no idea if she’s forgotten me yet, before she tells me we’re strangers, I must wait for her. Yangyang is very cute; the Cui Clan is truly grand. Naturally, she’d be a great wife and your help would allow me to rapidly rise up in the world. That is all true. But it’s also something that I, Zhao Changhe, have never once wanted.”

Cui Wenjing’s eyes narrowed.

Far away, on the porch, Cui Yuanyang was leaning against the banister. She sighed softly as she raised her head and looked at the shifting clouds in the sky.