

T. Times 661

Chapter 661: Such Is the Fate of the Defeated

This little rabbit had been daring even as a young girl. She had dared to whisper provocatively in his ear, coaxing him to hold her and tease her, acting as if she were bolder than he was. Perhaps it was that rebellious phase of adolescence when curiosity about such matters was both hazy and thrilling.

And yet, in spite of her education, she had no real understanding of such things back then. Her innocence and purity remained untainted, giving her an irresistible allure—the perfect mix of innocence and desire.

What a damn trap. Zhao Changhe inwardly groaned. At the time, I wasn't even thinking about it! That would've been asking for trouble! But now...

Taking a wife was one thing—Chancellor Cao[1] teaches us that fooling around with other people's wives and aunts leads to disaster. But as for taking a maiden...

Zhao Changhe's eyes roved over her, and he saw clearly that his little rabbit was indeed no longer so little. Her chest, emphasized by the tight strap of her carved bow, formed a rather attractive curve that subtly trembled with her movements.

Is she bigger than Chichi? Poor Chichi, stunted by malnutrition...

Noticing his wandering gaze, Cui Yuanyang's face flushed with embarrassment, yet there was also a trace of smug satisfaction.

Her upbringing made it difficult for her to utter anything too provocative, but this time, the rabbit had a sense of crisis. She had a nagging feeling that Zhao Changhe's interest in her was waning, that the situation with the Cui Clan mattered more to him. If given the choice between a candle-lit conversation with Cui Wenjing and one with her, Zhao Changhe would most likely choose the former.

That's goddamn unacceptable.

But now that she had made her suggestion, she could see Zhao Changhe's interest rekindle—his demeanor unmistakable.

The little rabbit inwardly huffed, finally grabbing Zhao Changhe's hand and leading him toward her bedroom. "Last time you were here, I wanted to take you to see my room, but those gossipy busybodies wouldn't let you. Now, we'll go in openly, and we can even have them bring us wine and food... You haven't had lunch yet, have you?"

He had been thinking about "eating" her, but how did the conversation turn to eating a meal instead...

Zhao Changhe felt a ticklish warmth in his heart, but he was too embarrassed to voice his thoughts. He followed her obediently, head down, suppressing a grin.

As they walked, the servants and maids along the way bowed nervously, keeping to the sides. Zhao Changhe recognized a few faces—they had not changed much over the past two years. What had changed, however, was their demeanor. Once full of wary disdain, they now fawned obsequiously, their attitudes transformed entirely.

Once, he had been barred from entering a maiden's room. Now, there wasn't a corner of the Cui Clan's estate that could bar his entry. Those who had once blocked his way were now bowing as they brought wine to serve him.

This must be what they mean by "thirty years east of the river, thirty years west."

What was truly fortunate for the Cui Clan was not merely the affection forged through hardship between Cui Yuanyang and Zhao Changhe, but the insight of their clan head. It was Cui Wenjing who had a vision far beyond the norm and had never underestimated that young man he'd first met in difficult circumstances. His wisdom had influenced his children, Cui Yuanyong and Cui Yuanyang, shaping them into people of integrity.

Beyond that, the Cui Clan was not much different from any other aristocratic family.

Outside the bedroom, the maids hurriedly set wine and dishes on trays. Zhao Changhe, embracing Cui Yuanyang's slender waist, entered her room.

This was Zhao Changhe's first time stepping into a young maiden's private chambers.

Unlike most young ladies, Cui Yuanyang's room had no items related to the four classical arts. Instead, her desk was occupied by a small pile of books, with the top one being a paper edition of the Tome of Troubled Times. Zhao Changhe could not help but wonder what the blind woman's opinion would be on pirated copies of her work.

There were no swords or bows either—nothing that might be found in the home of a military family. Instead, the decor was overwhelmingly cute. The bedding was pink and fragrant, with plush toys scattered about, snacks lying around haphazardly, and a vanity table adorned with an array of cosmetics and an almost glass-like mirror made from a rare reflective material. The room had an air of a modern girl's space—though Zhao Changhe had no firsthand knowledge of modern girls' rooms, he felt that this one was not far off.

The most distinctive feature was a saber hanging on the wall.

It was a rather crude and plain saber, the scabbard old and scratched and with dark red bloodstains all over.

Zhao Changhe walked closer and gently ran his fingers over it, drawing the blade slightly.

There were many notches along the edge and scratches on the flat, and the thick steel blade had essentially lost its practical use.

It was the saber he had used when escorting Cui Yuanyang home long ago, the one he'd won in a duel with the vice branch master in the stronghold of the Blood God Cult in Beimang. He could barely remember the man's name now. Due to the intensity and frequency of the battles, the blade had been badly damaged, prompting Cui Wenjing to gift him Dragon Bird, which he carried to this day.

He had almost forgotten he had once owned such a blade... but here it was, carefully preserved in Yangyang's room. To him, that journey had merely been another adventure along the road, a good experience among many of the same kind. But to her, it was clearly etched into her heart.

Guilt crept into Zhao Changhe's heart. He had always thought of Yangyang as too young to understand her own feelings. But now, it seemed her emotions had always been ardent and genuine, whereas he always had trouble separating her from the larger context of the Cui Clan's politics.

Suddenly, a pair of arms wrapped around his waist, and Cui Yuanyang leaned against his back, her voice soft as she asked, “What are you thinking about?”

Zhao Changhe whispered, “I was thinking that... perhaps we’ve spent too little time together.”

Cui Yuanyang mumbled, “If you know that, then why are you staring at the saber instead of turning around to look at me?”

Zhao Changhe turned, and Cui Yuanyang bounced on her toes, her lips puckered. “Kiss me.”

It was clear she was frustrated. Despite having grown taller, she still couldn’t reach him, even on the tip of her toes. It was a pain, really.

She hooked her arms around his neck, tugging him downward with all her strength. Zhao Changhe obliged, lowering his head slightly and allowing the little rabbit to finally land a kiss on the big bear’s mouth. Content, she playfully extended her tongue.

People might say that the daughters of the Cui Clan were Zhao Changhe’s spoils of conquest, but somehow, it felt more like he was her prize—a huge teddy bear from a shooting game at the county fair.

Refusing to be outdone, Zhao Changhe reached out to measure, thinking to himself, Now this is what a proper trophy should look like... Wait, are these actually bigger than Chichi’s?

Zhao Changhe’s hand slipped inside her robe, but it didn’t take long before he froze and chuckled in disbelief.

This little rabbit was actually wearing a traditional dudou under her clothes.

Cui Yuanyang, caught up in their kiss, immediately sensed his amusement. Her own boldness began to waver as her little heart filled with indignation. She stomped her foot in frustration. “Other people wear a dudou to be seductive, but when I wear one, it’s funny? I’m grown up! I’m an adult now!”

Zhao Changhe could not hold back his laughter, pulling out a small fruit and pressing it into her mouth.

Cui Yuanyang blinked in surprise, mumbling around the fruit, “What’s this?”

“A fruit from the far east, rich with the vitality of plants and trees. It’s said to have remarkable effects for preserving youth.” Leaning in close, Zhao Changhe whispered into her ear, “Yuanyang, don’t grow up anymore. You’re perfect as you are now...”

Cui Yuanyang blinked again, her cheeks tinged pink.

Zhao Changhe sat down on the edge of her bed, setting her onto his lap. His voice grew softer, with a teasing lilt, “You were right... Little Yangyang is the most fun...”

From within the ring on his finger, the voice of a young girl rang out angrily, “You damn pervert! Don’t fall for his tricks!”

But Cui Yuanyang could not hear this spectral interjection. Instead, she beamed with delight. “That’s exactly why I’ve been cultivating!”

Dragon Bird: "..."

I stayed with your family for so long, so I only thought it right to give you a piece of advice, but I never expected there would be someone so ridiculous. This is truly a disgrace to the time I’ve spent here.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe suppressed Dragon Bird’s voice in his mind. “Shoo! What does this have to do with you? You’re a saber—what could I even do to you, perverted or otherwise? Stay out of it... Wait a second, when did you start developing opinions on human relationships? You’re just a weapon.”

Dragon Bird did not bother replying.

After I became sentient, I’ve seen more of these embarrassing bedroom antics than I’d care to count. Where do you think these thoughts come from? You’re all revolting.

Cui Yuanyang happily nibbled at the fruit, her face lighting up as she finished it. “Will this really keep me young forever?”

“Well, no... but it can significantly slow aging. For the next few years, you probably won’t grow much older. And if you really advance with your cultivation, there’s a real chance you might keep that face for a long, long time.”

Cui Yuanyang froze, realization dawning on her. “Wait... something like this is a priceless treasure! If word got out that you had this, every noblewoman in the world would go mad. And you’re using it to... to... to make me more fun for you?”

Dragon Bird: “See? Now you understand what makes him a pervert.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Cui Yuanyang bit her lip, then leaned softly against Zhao Changhe’s chest, her voice as light as a whisper, “Then... why aren’t you playing yet?”

Dragon Bird: “?”

Zhao Changhe leaned down, pressing a kiss to the side of the little rabbit’s neck, stealthily unfastening her robe like a thief. His hands played over the fabric of her dudou. Even Dragon Bird, observing from its ethereal perch, had to grudgingly admit that this was genuinely entertaining.

“M-Miss...” came the trembling voice of a maid from outside the door. “T-the food is here...”

The scene inside the room was utterly scandalous, like a tale straight out of a commoner’s drama about noble ladies captured by bandits. The poor young miss... Those stories weren’t lies, after all

Cui Yuanyang’s eyes were half-lidded with a sultry glow as she leaned weakly against the man, her voice trembling. “Bring it... bring it in... I want Big Brother Zhao to feed me...”.

The maid: “?”

Wait, this story isn’t unfolding like it should...

Whether the narrative was accurate or not, to anyone outside the room, it fit the plot perfectly. In fact, back at the ruins of the banquet hall, someone was reporting to Cui Wenjing: “Patriarch, King Zhao has been in the young miss’s room for an hour... and hasn’t come out.”

Cui Wenjing’s expression remained stoic. “You’ve all seen it, haven’t you? If we had cooperated earlier, would things have come to this? Now, as the defeated party, we are at the mercy of the victor, and we can only accept it. I must endure this humiliation, so why should any of you be exempt?”

The members of the Cui Clan hung their heads in shame.

Although Zhao Changhe was Cui Yuanyang’s fiancé, for a man to so openly enter her private chambers before the wedding was, to their deeply ingrained sense of propriety, a thorough humiliation for everyone involved.

Cui Wenjing’s tone grew colder as he continued, “Do as I instructed. Divide the lands. Retain the core ancestral properties, but relinquish all land annexed in recent years and return it to the court. Register the concealed households and hand over their records. Incorporate the private army into the formal military. From now on, there are no longer Cui Clan soldiers—only the Han army of Jizhou. Do you understand?”

Chapter 662: The True Heritage of the Aristocratic Families

Zhao Changhe could hardly remember what he had eaten during the meal, so enchanted and distracted by the languid atmosphere that he had paid no attention to the food itself. He could only recall that the little rabbit’s soft, warm curves had been remarkably similar to the rabbit-shaped steamed buns on the table. In the end, he could not tell which one he had devoured.

In any case, both were delightful.

But in the end, nothing truly improper happened. It was not the right time or place.

For all the talk of being a “conqueror,” he was just one man, and not in peak condition. At a time like this, Cui Wenjing was not going to expend effort protecting his safety. Within the vast Cui Clan, how many dissenters were lying in wait? Could someone try to assassinate him while he was distracted? Might Desolate Calamity return to make another attempt? These uncertainties lingered.

Flirting and teasing was fine, but indulging completely? That would be foolish. A single misstep, and he'd find himself in the afterlife exchanging notes with his dear Chancellor Cao. This was no way to handle things.

Patience was key. When the wedding came, the Cui Clan's elite would undoubtedly stand guard to ensure the bride's safety as she was "consumed."

The issue of a main wife had once been a headache, but the current circumstances made it less pressing. The Cui Clan's position was weaker, leaving them with little leverage to demand prestige. Still, even without titles, the order of marriage alone was a problem.

Tang Wanzhuang, ever the loyal minister, had openly argued with the empress about their relationship. If those women found out he had held a wedding elsewhere first, it was not a question of whether they would cut him to pieces, but of who would get the biggest piece.

Nevertheless, Zhao Changhe suspected that a wedding would not be happening anytime soon. With Desolate Calamity injured, it was an opportune moment to rally the Cui Clan and the Cao Gang to launch a swift assault on the Wang Clan's territory and eliminate them as a threat. The looming pressure from the northern barbarians left no time for indulgence. Besides, Yangyang was not going to "grow up" any time soon.

By the time Cui Wenjing finished making arrangements and strolled to his daughter's residence, the so-called "scoundrels" were sitting primly in the courtyard, sipping tea as though nothing had happened.

The first words he overheard were: "How many troops does the Cui Clan currently have?"

Cui Wenjing's jaw dropped. He was shocked they were even discussing at all, let alone such matters, and decided to stay outside for a moment and listen.

Cui Yuanyang's voice was serious, "We have more than 30,000 armored soldiers and around 5,000 to 6,000 warhorses. Including auxiliary forces, we could muster as many as 200,000 troops. Of course, by law, only a small portion can truly be considered ours; most should be considered part of the official military forces of the various administrative districts of Great Xia. However, we've managed to maintain control through various means... As for supplies, we'd need a detailed assessment, but I don't think we're short."

Cui Wenjing found himself torn between pride at his daughter's understanding of their family's military assets and exasperation at her willingness to spill their entire inventory to an outsider. Traitorous little rabbit, he thought, selling out the family secrets so easily....

Then again, he had already decided to relinquish the Cui Clan's control over these forces to the court, so it hardly mattered now.

Zhao Changhe, on the other hand, did not seem unimpressed by the figures. He no longer viewed a few thousand cavalry or thirty thousand armored soldiers as insignificant. In fact, it was quite the opposite; he recognized their strength. For context, the once-mighty Maitreya Cult had boasted a million followers sweeping across Jiangnan, yet among them, only a few thousand could be considered properly armed and armored, even at their peak. Their true cavalry? Likely under a thousand.

By that measure, the Cui Clan's forces were formidable indeed.

Men could be trained, but resources and equipment were not so easily obtained, and with the adequate supplies they possessed, the Cui Clan's terrifying foundations became clear. In times of chaos, such a foundation could quickly transform into a major power vying for dominance.

Back when Cui Yuanyang did not fully understand Xia Longyuan's strength, she had once offhandedly remarked, "We might not even fear him." Cui Wenwei, too, did not think much of the new court's strength. Their confidence stemmed from the undeniable fact that their family was genuinely powerful. Without the presence of Profound Control Realm-level forces to shift the balance, the Cui Clan indeed had no reason to fear anyone under normal circumstances.

The Wang Clan, raising their banner of rebellion, found themselves facing the stalwart resistance of an equally matched Cui Clan. For the Wang Clan, this had likely felt like a cruel twist of fate. Against any other opponent, they could have swept through unchallenged, yet here they were, struggling for months to take the relatively small city of Puyang.

This disparity is precisely why emperors have historically chosen to compromise and cooperate with such families. It was also why Zhao Changhe needed to break this first stalemate. Once it was resolved, the balance of power would tilt decisively in his favor. Conversely, if the aristocratic families united against him, the effects would be disastrous.

Tang Wanzhuang had remarked to Xia Chichi not long ago that Zhao Changhe's fateful connection with Cui Yuanyang two years prior seemed almost like a sign of destiny. Only someone like Zhao

Changhe could bring together the disparate forces of the Cui Clan, the Tang Clan, and the Four Idols Cult and attempt to unify a fractured and chaotic realm.

Cui Wenjing lingered outside, choosing not to enter just yet and listen instead.

Inside, Zhao Changhe was asking, “What’s the situation with the Yang Clan? Do you know?”

Cui Yuanyang replied, “We haven’t communicated openly. No one’s sent envoys, at least officially. As for what’s happening behind the scenes, I’m not sure. You’d have to ask my father... No, wait, don’t keep running to him!”

Her tone suddenly turned wary. “You always run off to ask him. Ask him some other time, if you really must. If you leave to look for him right now, don’t expect me to talk to you again!”

Cui Wenjing: “...”

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh. “Your father’s busy right now. I’m just asking you for what you know.”

Cui Yuanyang grumbled, “Even if you have a bit of goodwill with the Yang Clan, that goodwill was tied to the Lianshan Sword. Now that the sword’s been destroyed, that goodwill doesn’t mean much anymore. Even if you promise to reforge it, it won’t help. Both you and Desolate Calamity can make similar promises, but with your stance on aristocratic families and Xia Chichi’s identity as the former emperor’s daughter, Yang Jingxiu will never side with you. If you made yourself emperor, maybe the Yang Clan would hold some hope, but Xia Chichi? Why would they accept her?”

“Chichi has her own minor ties with the Yang Clan, but by this point, positions are fundamentally opposed. Any lingering goodwill doesn’t matter anymore,” Zhao Changhe said, sipping his tea. “I don’t intend to treat the Yang Clan the same way I’m treating yours. There have to be distinctions.”

Cui Yuanyang brightened immediately. “What do you plan to do?”

“For now, the most pressing enemy the Han dynasty needs to crush to establish dominance is the Wang Clan. Turning our attention to the Yang Clan first would be putting the cart before the horse. I need the Cui Clan to help me keep the Yang Clan in check.”

Cui Yuanyang was momentarily stunned. “You don’t need us to send troops against the Wang Clan? I’ve been wanting to give them a good beating for a long time now.”

“To be honest, what concerns me most is the prospect of your families uniting. As long as that’s prevented, taken individually, the Wang Clan is nothing more than a hollow shell to me.”

“They may have been held back at Puyang, but their forces are still considerable...”

Seeing the frustration and eagerness on Cui Yuanyang’s face, Zhao Changhe could not resist reaching out to pinch her cheek. “Well... you could just come with me.”

Cui Yuanyang’s eyes lit up instantly. “Really?”

“Of course,” Zhao Changhe said. “But before that, I’ll help forge you a sword. It’s something I promised your father, and besides, my dear Yangyang deserves to make her debut on the Ranking of Man.”

Cui Wenjing, unable to stay silent any longer, finally stepped into the courtyard. “Wait, wait. You mean you can forge the sword now?!”

Cui Yuanyang spun around in surprise. “When did you get here?”

Cui Wenjing gave her an exasperated look. “I knew you wouldn’t want me intruding on your time with your sweetheart, so I stayed outside to avoid disturbing you. Satisfied?”

Cui Yuanyang protested, “That’s not true! I’m always happy when you’re here, Father.”

Cui Wenjing could not fathom how he had raised such a shameless little scoundrel. Ignoring her, he turned to Zhao Changhe. “What do you need from the Cui Clan?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “First, I need you to send a message to the capital. I have plans I need to discuss with Chichi and Wanzhuang.”

Cui Wenjing nodded. “I was going to make a formal report to the court anyway. Write your message, and I’ll have Yuanyong personally deliver it.”

“Good. Besides that, I don’t need much. I’ll need a fire strong enough to melt and reforge the broken sword, and most importantly, I need a secure environment where we won’t be disturbed.”

“If anyone dares to interrupt us while reforging Qinghe, they’ll face my damn fist!” Cui Wenjing declared vehemently.

Zhao Changhe: “?”

Yuanyang: “?”

The declaration of “my damn fist” had such uncharacteristic ferocity that it caught them off guard. Was this still Cui Wenjing speaking? Or had his wild son somehow taken his place? Suddenly, Yuanyong’s infamous crude outbursts made more sense...

“Ahem.” Cui Wenjing cleared his throat, quickly regaining his usual calm demeanor. “Anyway... You mentioned that to awaken the original sword spirit, either Yuanyong or Yuanyang needs to be involved. Would Yuanyang alone suffice, or do we need Yuanyong as well?”

“One person should be enough. As long as the intent aligns with the sword’s spirit, one person will do. It doesn’t require advanced cultivation. But do you have a suitable fire? It doesn’t seem like it’s something your family specializes in. If all else fails, I might have to ask Venerable Vermillion Bird for help.”

There was a hint of unease in his tone. Vermillion Bird was not in the best position to leave the capital right now, though Qinghe was close enough that it would not cause too much of an issue. The real concern was whether Vermillion Bird might... tear Yangyang to pieces.

Cui Wenjing could not help but chuckle. “You think our ancestors chose to settle in Qinghe just to claim some grand name as an ancient aristocratic family?”

Zhao Changhe’s instincts flared. “There’s a secret realm here?”

Cui Wenjing stroked his beard with a smile. “Not just here—every major family has one. It’s time for you to see what truly forms the foundations of these aristocratic families. And I suspect this particular secret realm could be of immense value to you.”

On the side, Cui Yuanyang sat with her chin propped on her hands, sulking as she sipped her tea. I knew it. Once these two start talking, it's all 'I know what you're thinking,' and 'You know what I want.' Meanwhile, I'm just the outsider...

I even knew about the family's secret realm! Why didn't I think to sneak Big Brother Zhao in to show him first?

Chapter 663: The Ancient Puzzle Long Unresolved

It was immediately clear that the entrance to the Cui Clan's secret realm was located within their ancestral hall. The bronze hall that once housed the Qinghe Sword and the Dragon Bird lay nearby, making this something of a homecoming for the Dragon Bird.

Regrettably, Dragon Bird seemed entirely uninterested in revisiting its old dwelling. It remained silent, curled up in the ring like a sulking tortoise. Beside it crouched River of Stars, like a curious child sitting next to an elder sister, gazing inquisitively at the surroundings.

As for why a saber and a sword quietly resting in Zhao Changhe's ring could evoke such vivid imagery for him—well, it was not because he was a deviant. It was due to the aftermath of the battle with Desolate Calamity. The manifestations of the two weapons' spirits had become increasingly vivid, their presence so tangible that Zhao Changhe could almost see the human-like silhouettes overlapping with the physical blades—a surreal illusion resembling two children peering out.

At this rate, he wondered if he would ever have the heart to pit them against another blade in combat again. This was especially so for River of Stars, as it resembled nothing more than an infant.

Whoever came up with the concept of weapon spirits was a real lunatic.

Still, reflecting on the ultimate form of a spirit, such as the blind woman—a spirit fully independent and capable of stirring storms on her own—it made a bit more sense. Perhaps he was breaking new ground in this domain, going even further than Xia Longyuan. Was this due to his prolonged interactions with the blind woman?

These thoughts flitted through his mind as Cui Wenjing opened the entrance to the secret realm. As the sensation of spatial distortion rippled through him, the environment shifted dramatically. What had been the serene, tranquil surroundings of Qinghe Commandery gave way to an eerie subterranean cavern.

The cavern was vast and sinister, its jagged rocks jutting like fangs from the walls, creating a menacing, chaotic atmosphere. The air was thick with almost palpable malice, suffused with a violent aura that sent shivers down one's spine. Walking through it reminded Zhao Changhe of his own blood-soaked killing intent. This place clearly bore the essence of an ancient, malevolent presence. It reminded Zhao Changhe of his own vicious blood qi. It seemed almost certain that the lingering vicious qi formed through the slaughter of countless beings, lingering undiminished through the ages.

Setting aside his innate inclination honed through the inheritance of Lie's martial arts, Zhao Changhe could not help but think that this presence was a perfect embodiment of bloodthirst and brutality. If anything, it was more fitting to call this presence a blood demon rather than a blood god.

And buried here was undoubtedly a classic representation of such a demon.

Yet, layered atop this malevolence was a profound and righteous qi, permeating the air and suppressing the malice. It prevented the vicious qi from harming those who entered or leaking out into the world beyond.

As they ventured deeper, the temperature steadily rose, resembling the oppressive heat at the heart of a volcano. By all rights, the cavern should have felt like a scorching furnace. However, thanks to the balancing influence of the righteous qi, the heat was almost pleasant; it was like stepping into an air-conditioned room on a hot summer day.

This righteous qi was the intent of the Qinghe Sword—the will of the mountains and rivers, warding off evil. Its presence had not faded, even though the sword itself had been broken. The essence of the land it symbolized still endured, calming the malice and illuminating the darkness.

At a crossroads further below, a few elders were seated cross-legged. They appeared to be the senior members of the previous generation of the Cui Clan, guarding the family's core secret ground and cultivating using the energy of Qinghe that permeated the area. The Lu Clan of Gusu had its own dedicated training ground; it was unthinkable that the Cui Clan's cultivation resources would be the same as those available to ordinary people on the surface. The "test" Yangyang had once mentioned passing likely referred to this very place.

These elders, though absent from the Rankings of Troubled Times, were all clearly cultivators who had unlocked the Profound Mysteries. Perhaps due to years of isolation and lack of competition, they had no recorded achievements to place them on the rankings. Nevertheless, their strength was

evident—likely equivalent to those on the Ranking of Man. After all, the hundred or so individuals on that list could not possibly represent every formidable figure in the world.

This was the fearsome foundation of a top aristocratic family.

Of course, the rarity of top-tier masters remained. Such individuals could not simply be produced by resources alone. Foundations ensured that the clan's core strength would not falter, but the birth of truly elite experts required a unique confluence of factors. In a world without immortality, it was simply impossible for the Cui Clan to suddenly produce an ancestor-level figure out of nowhere.

When Cui Wenjing arrived with Zhao Changhe and his daughter, the elders clearly recognized their guest. They rose slightly from their seats and inclined their heads in respect. "Greetings, King Zhao."

It seemed that what had transpired on the surface had already been communicated to this hidden place. Even these aged guardians, long removed from worldly affairs, obeyed the family's decision.

Cui Wenjing asked, "Is everything inside as usual?"

"The purple qi of Qinghe has grown weaker. Without the Qinghe Sword, it will dissipate entirely within a few decades."

Cui Wenjing nodded. "We are reforging the divine sword. Guard the passages well. Any intruder is to be considered an enemy and killed on sight!"

The elders' eyes glimmered with excitement, and they bowed deeply. "As the clan head commands."

The elders stepped aside, clearing the path. Zhao Changhe followed Cui Wenjing down a narrow trail that soon opened into a vast, startling sight.

Ahead lay a fiery hellscape of molten rock, with bubbling lava emitting bursts of heat and flame. Within the lava, fragments of broken skeletons were visible, still not entirely consumed despite the passage of countless ages.

At the center of the lava was a small island-like mountain. A cavern within the mountain radiated an ominous presence, its jagged edges and dark recesses marking it unmistakably as the ancient lair of a demon god. The malice Zhao Changhe had sensed earlier emanated from this very place.

Above the rivers of lava flowed a dense purple qi, like the essence of Qinghe itself, calming the roiling lava into a silent stillness. The qi was most concentrated at the mouth of the cavern, where it formed a dense barrier, sealing it shut.

Cui Wenjing gestured toward the scene and explained, “We’ve constructed various family trial grounds here, though I won’t go into detail. As for the cavern itself, it’s not overly complex. Long ago, an ancient demon god was slain here by the Qinghe Sword. After discovering this site, our ancestors buried the remains, retrieved the Qinghe Sword, absorbed much of the ancient inheritance, and established the clan here.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “Where are the remains buried?”

“In the depths of the lava,” Cui Wenjing replied. “Most of the remains in the lava belong to those slain by this ancient demon. That he himself was buried there feels fitting. I understand your concern about a possible resurrection, but you can rest assured. This one is truly dead, well beyond recovery.”

Zhao Changhe nodded. Based on how secret realms typically form, this one was likely created by the Qinghe Sword rather than the demon. The demon was almost certainly dead and had likely perished before the collapse of the previous era. What puzzled Zhao Changhe, however, was the question of the sword’s original owner. According to Cui Wenjing, there was no mention of the original owner. Where had they gone?

Cui Wenjing seemed to anticipate his confusion. “The Qinghe Sword’s original owner is indeed unknown. According to our ancestors’ records, the sword recognizes its master directly—it seems to have never had an original owner to begin with.”

Zhao Changhe nodded thoughtfully and did not inquire further.

Something about this place felt oddly familiar. He made a mental note to later consult the Atlas of Mountains and Rivers to see if there were any records from the ancient Black Tortoise.

Exploring the ancient mysteries was, after all, tied to his overarching quest. However, he had approached it so haphazardly that he had yet to piece it all together. This secret realm of the Cui

Clan gave him a sense that unifying the world was inherently part of completing this quest—just another way to walk the path Xia Longyuan had charted, albeit through unconventional means.

The blind woman crossing paths with Xia Longyuan was truly an encounter for the ages.

Cui Wenjing continued, “In any case, our ancestors settled here to cultivate and expand the family. While they did so in part to cultivate in the area’s rich spirit qi, it was primarily out of a sense of responsibility. They feared the potential chaos should the demon ever revive. It was quite literally living atop a volcano, and their vigilance was admirable. I imagine this sense of duty is also why the Qinghe Sword accepted our lineage. At present, the possibility of the demon reviving is non-existent, though what will happen once the residual purple qi dissipates remains uncertain.”

The three of them traversed the air above the lava, heading directly to the cavern. Inside, the space divided into various sections, but they wasted no time, heading straight for the core area.

There, the heat of the earth fire rose in waves. All around were signs that the area had once held weapons and treasures, though these had long since been taken by the Cui Clan. And at the center stood a solitary forge.

It was immovable due to its direct connection to the earth fire. It had thus been left in place, and this room now served as the clan’s own smithy. The signs of recent use made it clear that this was no forbidden ground but a cherished resource, frequently used by the clan.

The irony was not lost on Zhao Changhe. The ancestors had been worried about a potential demon revival, but that concern seemed to have faded over generations, leaving the area a prized asset instead. Only after the Qinghe Sword was broken did the clan grow uneasy, fearing the possibility of cascading repercussions.

Cui Wenjing gestured toward the forge. “What do you think? Is the fire sufficient?”

It was clear that he saw Zhao Changhe as the expert, but in truth, Zhao Changhe was really not that knowledgeable in this respect. As he stared at the forge, he was silently consulting his guide. “Hey, blindie, is this fire enough?”

The blind woman did not respond.

Zhao Changhe sighed inwardly. No reply? Fine, looks like I’m on my own for this one.

So, he sought a different guide. “Dragon Bird, could this fire melt you?”

The lazy Dragon Bird suddenly jumped up in indignation. “This shabby candle?! It can’t even melt the tassel hanging on my pommel!”

Zhao Changhe looked up at Cui Wenjing and confidently replied, “It will do.”

Chapter 664: The Qinghe Sword's Original Master

There was no need to overthink things. In order to figure out if the fire in the forge could actually be used to melt Dragon Bird, Zhao Changhe did not actually need to listen to anything she said, he just needed to observe her reaction. If Dragon Bird could truly not be melted in this forge, she would have simply scoffed dismissively and lazily boasted. But seeing as she got worked up, then it was clearly hot enough.

Still, it was curious. Xia Longyuan had used the Southern Li Fire, yet this fire, seemingly of an entirely different nature, was also strong enough to work. What exactly was this fire’s origin and properties?

Forget it. A test will reveal the truth...

Cui Wenjing watched intently, practically holding his breath, as Zhao Changhe drew out the fragments of the Qinghe Sword. The usually composed and refined patriarch now looked visibly tense, his features slightly contorted—a far cry from his usual dignified self.

Zhao Changhe cast him a sidelong glance. “With all due respect, Uncle, your presence here might actually be a hindrance. You weren’t present when the four divine swords of the mountains and rivers turned on their supposed masters, but trust me, if you had been, you’d probably have gotten cut down too. My guess is that’s why you didn’t go yourself. You must have already suspected as much.”

Cui Wenjing remained silent. He had indeed refrained from going precisely because of such premonitions. While others deluded themselves into thinking the swords belonged to their families, Cui Wenjing had always been clear-headed: the four divine swords no longer recognized their so-called masters. What confidence did anyone have in claiming ownership? If the swords saw Xia Longyuan as a destructive force, why would they not see the four aristocratic families the same way? Sword spirits did not play favorites.

“Since you know the sword spirit isn’t exactly fond of you, it’s best you don’t stick around here. This doesn’t require particularly advanced cultivation to handle. If we’re comparing it to Dragon Bird, I managed that one on my own back then. It wasn’t as troublesome as forging River of Stars...”

Dragon Bird: “?”

Realizing his slip, Zhao Changhe immediately pressed his finger to the ring, suppressing Dragon Bird’s burgeoning outrage. “Anyway, Yangyang being here is enough. Uncle, you should go attend to the family matters. There’s a mountain of things for you to deal with. Hey, hey, stop hopping around! You’re higher-level than River of Stars, okay? Isn’t that enough for you?”

Cui Wenjing: “...”

Zhao Changhe sighed with mock sorrow. “Previously, your Qinghe Sword was dormant. You don’t know its true nature. I suggest you temper your expectations, because once it’s fully active, you might want to wring its neck... uh... its hilt.”

Cui Wenjing glanced impassively at his daughter. “That’s fine. I’ve raised something like that before.”

Before Cui Yuanyang could stomp her foot in protest, he turned and left, his parting words echoing behind him: “I’ll guard the ancestral hall personally and wait for your good news.”

As her father disappeared from view, Cui Yuanyang shrank slightly, her voice uncertain. “Am I really enough for this?”

It seemed her earlier silence had been due to self-doubt.

“These things always seem mysterious and daunting until you actually deal with them. Once you’ve created a couple of them, it’s as routine as laying eggs.” Zhao Changhe deftly placed the broken fragments of the Qinghe Sword into a crucible, watching as they began to heat and glow red in the fire. “It’ll take a while. Don’t rush. I’ll meditate in the meantime.”

Cui Yuanyang nodded and obediently said, “I’ll keep watch over the fire.”

Zhao Changhe patted her head with a contented smile, but his focus quickly sank into the Heavenly Tome. “Hey, blind woman...”

“?” The blind woman replied with an exasperated tone, “Are you serious? You just told Cui Yuanyang you were going to meditate, and now you’re calling me? If she finds out, what do you think I’ll look like in her eyes?”

Zhao Changhe was genuinely shocked. “Wait, you actually care about that?”

The blind woman replied icily, “What can I say, your reputation precedes you. Who wouldn’t be cautious around you?”

Zhao Changhe’s expression turned strange as he stared down at the fire without responding.

It was normal for others to be wary of him—but not for her. She was essentially the spirit of the Tome of Troubled Times, a manifestation of the Heavenly Dao. With her being representative of the Heavenly Day, she should be far removed from mortal concerns. She should not care about human relationships or opinions. After all, people curse the heavens all the time, shaking fists and blaming storms for their bad luck. Should she really worry about her reputation?

Besides, isn’t she just a book? Who the hell cares about a book’s reputation?

He could not deny, though, that the blind woman was becoming more human. She used to be an untouchable presence—a figure suspended in the celestial void. Now, there was a certain... groundedness to her. Whether that was good or bad, he was not sure.

The reason for her transformation was obvious. As the Heavenly Tome grew closer to completion, she grew stronger as well. In truth, the blind woman was likely the most powerful entity Zhao Changhe had ever encountered; indeed, it was not Xia Longyuan, but her. She was the endgame of Xia Longyuan’s ambitious quest for ascension. And now, as this “boss” became even stronger, he could not help but feel uneasy, especially knowing it was his own actions driving her growth.

He stayed silent, but the blind woman spoke again, her tone cold and sarcastic, “You’re hiding in this secret realm, free of danger, yet you’re not using this downtime to devour your little rabbit. Instead, you’re wasting time pestering me. Why?”

Zhao Changhe, surprised, asked, “Wait, how did you know the reason I didn’t act before was me being wary of danger?”

Her response was deadpan. “I’ve been with you for over two years. Do you really think I don’t know your character? I probably understand you better than the little rabbit beside you.”

Zhao Changhe paused and then said, “But look at this place. There’s no bed, and the atmosphere isn’t great. At the very least, I’d need some grass or something to work with. What even is this mess?”

The blind woman was speechless.

Alright. Maybe I don’t know you as well as I thought.

Zhao Changhe said, “You probably already know why I called you. Just now, I scanned through the Atlas of Mountains and Rivers and came across something resembling this place. It referred to the Abyss of Infernal Flames, Dwelling of Infernal Oblivion. Could Infernal Oblivion be the name of the demon here? But what struck me was that the way it’s recorded is different from the usual styles of the Spirit Tribe or the far east. Typically, those records describe specific regions within the same world, but this one reads more like it’s describing a secret realm.”

The blind woman replied, “So what?”

“Does this mean there were secret realms in ancient times too? Or is it referring to another world, perhaps a celestial or heavenly realm?”

“Of course there were,” The blind woman said, sounding genuinely surprised. “Are you telling me you still haven’t noticed that this world doesn’t have any missing bits? The geography here is identical to your so-called hometown, the Zhao House or whatever. So where do you think those so-called spatial fragments fit in?”

Zhao Changhe was speechless. “...”

The blind woman continued, “You know that in ancient times, the Azure Dragon was the human emperor, ruling over the Central Plains, while the Sea Emperor ruled the oceans. But where do you think all the other gods and demons resided? Sure, some lingered in the mortal world, but do you

think they all just found caves to squat in? Do you think the Night Emperor was hiding in some palace like you, napping in the empress dowager's quarters?"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

"Naturally, there are other realms, many of them, where gods and demons resided, with environments entirely different from the mortal world. The reason our history is a mix of regular human history and the history of gods and demons is that, after the collapse of the previous era, the records of these realms got mixed together. Is that so difficult to understand?"

The blind woman sounded thoroughly exasperated.

"I thought that after wandering around for two or three years, you might have developed some profound insights into the world. But no, instead you've come up with this ridiculous, ignorant question! Have you left your brain somewhere during your trips?"

"Uh... could you slow down on the insults?" Zhao Changhe asked cautiously. "Then why is it that other realms ended up so fragmented, while the mortal realm remained so intact?"

"Because I protected it."

Zhao Changhe: "..."

In just a few short moments, he had been rendered speechless three times. Zhao Changhe began to suspect that he had really forgotten his brain somewhere.

The blind woman coldly added, "Otherwise, this world would have long been reduced to nothing—there would be no talk of revival from the ashes. Now, what else do you want to ask?"

"Nothing..." Zhao Changhe muttered. He had called her to confirm his suspicions, and it was worth the scolding. This revelation was critical. It expanded his understanding far beyond the narrow confines he and Xia Longyuan had previously believed in. This realm was just a fragment of a greater whole. In some sense, the entirety of the divine land could even be considered one massive secret realm.

Xia Longyuan had only scratched the surface of secret realms, never connecting them into a larger narrative. His inability to break through to greater heights was undoubtedly linked to his incomplete understanding. Now that Zhao Changhe had grasped this broader view, even if it came with harsh rebukes, it was not too late. After all, knowing too early would not have been useful anyway.

With this perspective, Ying Five's efforts to piece together secret realms suddenly seemed far more intriguing. Of all people, Ying Five likely had the most comprehensive knowledge of and the most insight into these matters.

"Big Brother Zhao," Cui Yuanyang's voice interrupted his thoughts. "It's melting... It's working!"

Zhao Changhe opened his eyes and focused. The broken fragments of the Qinghe Sword had been completely melted, blending and reforming within the crucible.

Without hesitation, Zhao Changhe grabbed Cui Yuanyang's hand. She opened her mouth to question him, but before she could speak, her mind was overwhelmed by a sudden roar. Her consciousness was swept into the metal, guided by Zhao Changhe's presence.

In the next moment, it felt as if the two of them had traversed endless time and space, ultimately finding themselves standing hand in hand by a vast, rushing river.

This was Zhao Changhe's third time forging a blade or sword, and just like the previous two times, it was a unique experience. Dragon Bird already possessed a spirit and the spirit only needed to grow. River of Stars had no spirit and required one to be born. Qinghe's spirit was extinguished, demanding a complete reconstruction. Each situation called for a different approach.

In principle, a sword spirit never truly died. A spirit was born from intent, and if that intent was rediscovered, the spirit could reassemble itself. For this reason, only Cui Yuanyang and her brother could complete this task, though their understanding lacked the fullness needed to truly revive the sword. To make up for any gaps, there was a supplementary method: the Heavenly Tome's page of karma, which could trace the origins of the Qinghe Sword's creation.

This approach served two purposes: to revive the Qinghe Sword, and to allow Zhao Changhe to glimpse the ancient history he sought.

Before them, the vast river shimmered with purple qi. Within the haze of the qi, a faint humanoid figure flickered, ethereal and elusive.

“Is this the original master of the Qinghe Sword?” Zhao Changhe murmured, astonished.

He squinted at the figure in the distance, and his heart skipped a beat.

Why... does it look an awful lot like Yangyang?

Chapter 665: Mystical Mountains and Rivers

The river before them was vast and boundless, stretching so far that its opposite bank was lost to sight. Suspended at its center within the purple qi was a woman, her features indistinct but bearing an undeniable resemblance to Yangyang.

The young couple exchanged bewildered glances, each scratching their heads.

Since this was a karmic trace—a vision of the past—the figure in the mist was unaware of their presence. Seeing no harm, they moved closer to get a better look.

The woman floated cross-legged above the river, her eyes closed as though in deep meditation. Her resemblance to Yangyang was indeed uncanny. The difference lay in the overwhelming aura she radiated, an immense presence that suggested she could effortlessly defeat a hundred Yangyangs.

Could she be a reincarnation?

A vision such as this one was not the kind to provide unnecessary details, and soon, a streak of light shot toward the scene.

The newcomer was a familiar figure. It was none other than the ancient Azure Dragon. Zhao Changhe had encountered his image at the bottom of the Ancient Sword Lake and later confirmed his death when he lay within the coffin in Beimang. Yet, his presence in historical events loomed large, as befitting someone known as the Human Emperor.

Azure Dragon approached the woman, frowning. “Piaomiao, you seem unusually carefree.”

The woman called Piaomiao opened her eyes. “Why should I be uneasy?”

“The world is changing. Can’t you sense it?”

“You are the human emperor. Protecting the mountains and rivers is your responsibility.”

“...You are the spirit of the mountains and rivers. If the world collapses, it will mean your end as well. How is that not your concern?”

“If it’s not your concern, then why are you here and so worried?”

Azure Dragon was rendered momentarily speechless.

Piaomiao smiled faintly. “Be direct. Why have you come? What do you want from me?”

“I intend to relocate Beimang, make it a secret realm of its own, merging the dragon veins of the mountains and rivers. Even if the world collapses and all life perishes, as long as Beimang remains, I will have a chance to return. And with my revival, so will you. I need your help to achieve this.”

“You...” Piaomiao hesitated, then continued slowly, “While contemplating this plan, did you ever think about Shuanghua, who’s waiting for you at Sword Lake?”

Azure Dragon replied, “I’ll bring her along.”

“No, you will not. You have no intention of taking her. The actions you plan will destabilize the world’s qi veins, something you’ll certainly conceal from the Night Emperor. Shuanghua is his trusted guardian. You do not dare to let her know.”

Azure Dragon said, “Once my work is complete, not even the Night Emperor can interfere.”

Piaomiao didn’t argue the point. Instead, she asked, “And have you considered bringing the people under your rule with you?”

Azure Dragon replied bluntly, “That place can only hold so many.”

Piaomiao sighed softly and said, “People call me the spirit of the mountains and rivers, but they often misunderstand, thinking I am merely the essence of the land. Yet the true essence of the mountains and rivers lies in human civilization. I am not a god of mountains or rivers—I am the spirit of the qi veins of humanity. Even if no one else understands this, how could Your Majesty also fail to?”

Azure Dragon stated coldly, “All I know is that no one wants to die, and neither do you. If you work with me, we will at least have a chance at survival. Why dwell on such details?”

“At the moment, Your Majesty holds dominion over these lands, and I can help you. But know this—things may not turn out as you wish. Instead of seizing control of the qi veins of the land, you may lose it entirely. Not only will you fail to revive, but you may even find your grave plundered. And the ones to do it? It will either be Shuanghua’s successor or the successor of the Night Emperor. I suggest leaving a simple inheritance behind, at least to ensure your body is treated with respect.”

Azure Dragon fell silent, visibly discomfited.

Piaomiao continued, her voice carrying an edge of sorrow. “We are both beings born of the innate spirit of the world, but Your Majesty must be aware that with the collapse of the heavens, there will also emerge symbols of the world’s demise—forces like endless desolation, an inferno that burns the world, or a boiling sea of blood, any of which could take form as a demon god. I have foreseen that the abyss of infernal flames has already taken shape, with the flame of oblivion emanating from within.” She glanced at him and added, “I thought it might be because you couldn’t handle the situation, but now I see that you simply have no intention of dealing with it.”

Azure Dragon retorted dismissively, “If the world is doomed, what meaning do such things have?”

Piaomiao sighed deeply but refrained from further arguments. “Very well, Your Majesty. Call for me when you need my assistance.”

Azure Dragon departed. Piaomiao remained by the river, standing in place for a long time, lost in thought. Finally, she shook her head, loosened her robes, and stepped into the water to bathe.

Zhao Changhe: “?”

Cui Yuanyang: “?”

The scene abruptly shifted, like a film skipping ahead. Whether it was interference from some external force or something else, Zhao Changhe had the sudden urge to grab the blind woman by the collar and demand she stop fast-forwarding. But what he saw next left him speechless.

It was the twilight of the previous era.

Everywhere, scenes of apocalyptic destruction unfolded. Rocks tumbled wildly, the earth fractured, and flames engulfed the sky.

Zhao Changhe recognized this vision. It mirrored the chaos he had seen in Lie's story, the final moments of a collapsing era.

Piaomiao still stood atop the great river, watching the chaos engulf the world. Suddenly, she raised a delicate hand and pointed somewhere into the distance.

The river beneath her roared to life, surging forth in a torrential flood. The waters poured out, endless and unstoppable, cleansing everything in their path before plunging into the depths of an abyss.

As the river flowed, it began to take on the shape of a sword, growing sharper and deadlier as it coalesced. Finally, the blade shot forward with relentless fury, piercing through space toward an unseen target.

In a cave in the depths of the abyss, lava roared and flames raged, only to be subdued as the water's misty vapor and purple qi filled the air. The lava cooled and the flames were extinguished.

A burly figure emerged from the cave, his expression one of alarm as he took in the scene. Before he could react, a divine sword broke through the void, crashing down with tremendous force. The blade plunged straight into his chest, pinning him against the cavern wall.

This single strike drained the river almost entirely. It also left Piaomiao's form faint and blurred, as though her very existence had begun to wane.

She gazed at her handiwork and murmured softly, "To entrust the future of humanity to a human emperor may have been a mistake—perhaps one day that will inevitably change. I shall divide

myself into four swords, embodying the will of the mountains and rivers, to be wielded by future heroes. These swords shall protect the land while also keeping the power of future emperors in check. This sword, embodying boundless righteousness, purging all darkness and evil, shall be named Qinghe.”

The man impaled by the divine sword looked down at it, his expression one of utter disbelief. Shaking his head, he spoke, “Killing me accomplishes nothing. I am merely the manifestation of the flame of oblivion. Even if you destroy me, this world is doomed to perish.”

Despite being across a divide between realms, his voice still reached Piaomiao’s ears. She responded in a low voice, “I’m helping someone. Together, we will protect the mortal realm.”

“You won’t succeed...” the man sneered. “The death of the Heavenly Dao wasn’t meant to lead to the collapse of the world. This state of ruin came because, in its dying moments, even the Heavenly Dao deemed this world unworthy. You’ll soon realize how laughable it is to protect this world.”

Piaomiao’s response was calm, “Perhaps.”

As if to confirm the man’s words, not long after their exchange had ended and Piaomiao had split her essence to forge the four divine swords of the mountains and rivers, a spectral demonic hand descended from the heavens, striking her with terrifying force.

Piaomiao’s eyes widened in disbelief. “It’s you...”

The woman had always maintained an air of serenity, yet now, in her final moments, she displayed a flicker of venomous resentment. “You won’t be able to consume my spirit. A fragment of my true spirit will reincarnate into the mortal realm. As long as humanity endures, someday my great vengeance will be carried out... even if by then... I am no longer myself.”

The vision ended.

Zhao Changhe frowned deeply, his thoughts racing.

Cui Yuanyang, wide-eyed and slack-jawed, looked utterly stunned.

The vision had not revealed the identity of the attacker. Whether it was interference or simply left ambiguous, the spectral hand gave no clues about its origin. All they could discern was that Piaomiao had recognized the attacker and had been shocked by them killing her.

There had long been speculation about whether Zhao Changhe might be the reincarnation of the Night Emperor, confirming that reincarnation existed as a concept. However, no one had ever encountered a clear instance—until now. It seemed likely that Yangyang was in fact the reincarnation of Piaomiao, the spirit of the qi veins of humanity and the mountains and rivers.

The similarities were striking, from her physical appearance to her connection with Qinghe. The reason she was not exactly identical in appearance was likely that she was born naturally to human parents, inheriting most of her features from them. It was enough to suggest her lineage but not a perfect replication.

Piaomiao's final words also hinted that her reincarnation would not involve the overwriting of personalities or memories. At most, it might lead to the awakening of past memories, but it would not turn Yangyang into a completely different person. Still, the implications were staggering. Even if Yangyang chose to ignore this legacy and live a simple life, the weight of this karma would inevitably find her.

And what would happen if the one who had struck Piaomiao down was still alive and encountered Yangyang?

The resemblance alone might spark recognition, and with Yangyang inheriting the intent of the Qinghe Sword, could she truly avoid such karma?

Moreover, Piaomiao's final moments and her cryptic final words hinted at a vast conspiracy behind the collapse of the era. It was not simply due to the death of the Heavenly Dao, as many believed. Unraveling this thread seemed to hinge on Yangyang, whether she liked it or not.

As their consciousness withdrew from the Qinghe Sword, Cui Yuanyang stared at Zhao Changhe, dazed and overwhelmed. Her wide eyes swirled in confusion as she stammered, "I... I just came to observe the sword's intent. How did it turn into this?"

Chapter 666: Rebirth of the Sword Spirit

Zhao Changhe himself was caught off guard by the weight of the revelations they had just witnessed, leaving him with more questions than answers. Naturally, he could not adequately

explain things to the little rabbit, so he could only offer some clumsy reassurance. “That was ancient history. What does it have to do with you?”

“But... She, she looks just like me!”

“There are plenty of people who look alike. Ever heard of celebrity look-alikes?”

“What’s that?”

Zhao Changhe paused, realizing there was no point in trying to explain modern references. Logically, if reincarnation truly was real, witnessing the past should have triggered some sort of reaction, perhaps even the awakening of some memories. But judging by Yangyang’s current state, it did not seem like anything had surfaced. Perhaps this was what Piaomiao meant when she said that it would no longer be her even if she did manage to reincarnate, and this might actually be a good thing.

Still, dismissing it entirely did not feel right either. Leaving Yangyang unprepared for the karmic ties she might inherit did not sit well with him. After a moment of thought, he said, “Even if you are connected to her somehow, it’s not a big deal. For one, we don’t know if her enemies even survived the collapse of the era. And if they did, they’re likely hanging on by a thread. Honestly, Piaomiao seemed like a pretty admirable person. If you ever get the chance, helping her settle her grievances might even feel rewarding.”

Cui Yuanyang immediately perked up. “I’d love to avenge her! She seems like such a good person!”

Zhao Changhe tilted his head, giving her a thoughtful look. There were some things that could not be explained in terms of good and evil. It often came down to opposing perspectives and circumstances. However, he saw no need to bring that up now.

Yangyang’s sense of justice had always been strong. He could not tell whether her quick, instinctive response was due to her inherent righteousness or some subtle influence from the connection to Piaomiao. Regardless, this quest for vengeance seemed like a karmic burden she was destined to face. Tackling it proactively would be far better than being forced into it later. At least this way, she could plan on her terms and thereby stay in control.

“If you want to avenge this big sister of yours, the first step is to inherit the Qinghe Sword. Did you feel the intent of the sword just now?”

After all, they had just witnessed the Qinghe Sword's creation and its original intent. To awaken a spirit akin to the original Qinghe, comprehending that intent was crucial. Zhao Changhe himself could not do it—this was not his area of expertise. But for Cui Yuanyang, who had been specifically trained in it, seeing its origins up close could foster a resonance and understanding that would be transformative, perhaps even equivalent to Xia Chichi's experience at Skyrim Island.

Sure enough, Yangyang did not disappoint. She nodded confidently and replied, "I felt it. I understand what kind of intent it is."

"Good." Zhao Changhe took out the crucible, cooled it down, and took out the fresh ingot. He placed it in the forge and guided Yangyang's consciousness toward it. "Use your consciousness to project the intent you witnessed earlier. Don't stop throughout the forging process. If all goes well, the spirit should reform within the sword as it takes shape."

Clang!

The first strike of the hammer rang out, and Zhao Changhe stole a glance at Cui Yuanyang. She sat quietly, her eyes closed, focused entirely on guiding the sword's intent. Her serene expression bore an uncanny resemblance to Piaomiao's.

Zhao Changhe's lips twitched, but he suppressed the urge to comment, and he returned his attention to forging.

He could not directly perceive the sword's intent. Unlike when he was forging River of Stars, this was not something he was taking the lead in. Instead, he had to rely on the feedback from the forging process to sense whether things were progressing smoothly.

As the blade gradually took shape under the rhythmic pounding of the hammer, Zhao Changhe could faintly sense the reformation of the sword spirit. He let out a silent sigh of relief. With the Qinghe Sword's spirit returning, his first promise was fulfilled. The Cui Clan, for now, would remain stable and should not stir up any further trouble.

Cui Wenjing likely understood that the intent of the Qinghe Sword and the family's legacy did not fully align. The rebirth of the sword spirit did not fundamentally benefit the Cui Clan—it was more akin to a nuclear deterrent, a formidable artifact for the wielder. But in the long run, the sword spirit would not recognize the family as its permanent home.

Still, most of the Cui Clan would not delve that deeply into the implications. Simply having the sword in their possession was a source of immense reassurance. No matter the concessions they had to make, with the family subdued, they would quietly endure.

The Cui Clan was thus secured.

Clang!

With the final strike, Cui Yuanyang's consciousness perceived a purple mist within the sword, its shape faintly resembling the form of a sword.

This was the natural appearance of a typical sword spirit. Qinghe and the upgraded Dragon Bird were of the same grade. Dragon Bird's humanoid form was a result of its appearance being shaped by its master's will. Since Cui Yuanyang had not imposed any specific image on the Qinghe spirit, it manifested in its default sword-like form.

The sword spirit's consciousness resonated clearly with Cui Yuanyang's mind, "Master."

Cui Yuanyang scratched her head. "Why does it feel like you're a little reluctant?"

"...Not at all. I've always acknowledged that you have the potential to be my master. But a sword can only have one master, and I hadn't decided between you and your brother. Now that you've revived me, naturally, I choose you." Beneath the words lay a subtle implication: You're still too weak. Your brother seemed stronger and thereby worthier...

Cui Yuanyang protested, "But it was Big Brother Zhao who revived you!"

"...Him?" The sword spirit seemed to glance at Zhao Changhe, who was inspecting the newly forged blade, his grin broad with the satisfaction of completing an important task. After a moment, the sword spirit simply said, "He is... excellent."

Cui Yuanyang beamed at the compliment but could not resist asking, "Hey, you should be able to sense whether I'm connected to Piaomiao, right?"

The sword spirit hesitated. “It’s difficult to say. Your family has been studying my sword intent for generations, and that is also Piaomiao’s sword intent. Since you’ve mastered it well, your mastery naturally aligns with her intent. That similarity makes it difficult for me to make a clear judgment.”

“But I look just like...”

“In my eyes, all humans look more or less the same. It’s like how you might view two swords—they’re just swords to you.”

Zhao Changhe, who had been eavesdropping on the latter part of this conversation, nodded in agreement. Finally, something that makes sense. This sword spirit’s indifference makes much more sense. It’s Dragon Bird who’s really odd. I really wonder where she even got her sense for human aesthetics.

But this means that Yangyang won’t be able to awaken her memories due to her resemblance with Piaomiao alone. That’s troublesome. Do her memories require more time to surface naturally, or is there a specific key needed to unlock them? Could it be tied to her cultivation?

Zhao Changhe wondered. Yangyang’s spiritual cultivation had always been lacking. She had been stuck at the threshold to the first layer of the Profound Mysteries for ages. Her soul was too weak, which was why he had to guide her consciousness into the sword earlier. But now...

Just as he was musing over it, Yangyang’s aura began to surge. The familiar sensation of the opening of the bridge of heaven and earth unfolded right before his eyes. The purple qi that filled the cavern danced joyfully, swirling around her. Some of it was absorbed through her meridians, merging into her dantian.

Cui Yuanyang had finally reached the first layer of the Profound Mysteries.

And her cultivation did not stop advancing there. She continued to absorb the qi in the cave, and soon it was as if her experience bar was already halfway full.

Zhao Changhe let out a relieved sigh. Before forging the sword, he had boasted that this process would help Yangyang achieve a breakthrough. To comprehend the Qinghe Sword’s intent, forge a divine weapon, and revive its spirit—if all that did not lead to a breakthrough, it would be beyond strange. Technically, this experience should have been enough to push her toward the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, but Yangyang’s accumulation was not quite enough. That was not a

problem, though. With the purple qi of Qinghe saturating this place and the Cui Clan's wealth of resources, they could simply power-level her further.

Cui Yuanyang opened her eyes. For a fleeting moment, they lacked their usual lively sparkle, replaced by a faint, serene clarity. But the look passed quickly, and her usual spirited demeanor returned. She spoke earnestly, "Big Brother Zhao, I suddenly remembered something."

Zhao Changhe's heart skipped a beat.

"It's about the Wang Clan... Their secret realm might be fundamentally different from ours."

"I don't care about the Wang Clan right now. I want to know—are you okay?"

Cui Yuanyang smiled faintly. "I'm completely fine... It's just that it's like I had a strange dream last night. When I woke up, there were hazy images in my mind—fragments, hard to grasp unless I really focus. Are you worried I'll turn into someone else?"

"Uh..."

"Wasn't Piaomiao beautiful? I saw how wide your eyes got when she took off her clothes."

Zhao Changhe gently pulled her into his arms. "I don't care who she was or how beautiful she might have been. The person I want is Yangyang, and no one else."

Chapter 667: Repayment in Knees

When Cui Yuanyang emerged from the secret realm, holding the resplendent Qinghe Sword, the elders waiting outside were overcome with a mix of joy and reverence. Without hesitation, they all dropped to their knees.

The aura emanating from the sword was unmistakable—it was Qinghe, the same divine sword etched into their collective memory, but now it felt far stronger than anyone recalled.

The change was not because Qinghe had grown stronger; rather, it had never truly demonstrated its full power to the Cui Clan before. Even in the early days, the sword had been reluctant to engage with the family. When Cui Wenjing wielded it across the land, it never truly revealed its full might.

Later, when Xia Longyuan stole half of its soul, it fell into a deep slumber. By then, its aura was weaker than even the developing Dragon Bird's. When placed beside Dragon Bird, any sense of killing intent came solely from Dragon Bird.

But now, Qinghe radiated an overwhelming and majestic presence, capable of illuminating specters and exposing demons. Anyone harboring hidden malice felt a visceral chill, their hearts gripped by terror. This was the true majesty of an ancient divine sword. Even without a master, Qinghe was unquestionably at the pinnacle of Earth-grade swords. In the hands of someone as strong as Piaomiao, it would undoubtedly rank among Heaven-grade weapons.

It was painfully clear why, when four swords of such level formed a unified array, they had been able to jointly challenge Xia Longyuan and the other clan heads. During that chaotic battle, the sword array had posed a greater threat than any of their human opponents. Xia Longyuan, even at his peak, had only managed to sever the four swords during his brief resurgence as the strongest. That feat cost him his life due to backlash. In his weakened state, he would not have even been able to attempt it.

Now, only Qinghe was intact. The other three swords remained fragments.

Zhao Changhe's River of Stars was still in its infancy. It had not yet undergone the honing of battles or drunk the blood of worthy opponents. Its potential was undeniable, but for now, it was nothing more than potential. Outside of it, Qinghe was likely the strongest sword in the world.

And Qinghe recognized only Cui Yuanyang as its master. Even if Yangyang were just a decorative "attachment" to the sword, the sheer power of Qinghe meant she could likely hold her own against those on the level of the Ranking of Earth—someone like Wang Daozhong, for instance. And if Yangyang ever reached the heights of Piaomiao...

Well, that was a thought for the distant future.

For now, this moment solidified Zhao Changhe's position in the eyes of the Cui Clan. Not only had he fulfilled his promise to reforge the divine sword, but he had seemingly elevated its power to new heights. To them, this was irrefutable proof of his divine or demonic origins—this was not the work of a mere mortal ranked second on the Ranking of Earth.

As the couple walked out of the secret realm together, their path was lined with kneeling figures, bowing as if they were wheat being harvested. Zhao Changhe could not help but feel that even when he'd stridden into a palace or another, it had never been this surreal.

The only one who remained seated was Cui Wenjing, waiting in the ancestral hall. When the two emerged, he greeted them with a sardonic remark, “Should I kneel as well, respected King Zhao?”

Zhao Changhe leaned in and whispered, “You might want to maintain appearances—your current persona is beginning to crumble a bit.”

Cui Wenjing’s face remained impassive. “According to family tradition, I should step down as the head of the family right now. Yangyang is now to take over as the clan head.”

Cui Yuanyang: “Huh?”

Cui Wenjing nodded. “But since you suggested otherwise, I’ll pass it onto her eventually.”

Cui Yuanyang: “Huh?”

Growing serious, Cui Wenjing asked, “Do you... feel anything unusual?”

Cui Yuanyang hesitated for a moment but shook her head.

Cui Wenjing turned his gaze to Zhao Changhe, who also shook his head and said, “As of now, there’s nothing out of the ordinary. I’ll keep a closer eye on things moving forward.”

Cui Wenjing sighed. “I don’t trust this girl. Your word is good enough for me.”

Zhao Changhe said, “The earth fire in your secret realm is no ordinary flame. If I’m not mistaken, it should be linked to the flame of oblivion, capable of giving rise to a demon. While it’s been subdued by Qinghe and suppressed, preventing it from spreading, this fire is still a latent threat. The flames that ravaged the outside world might have originated from a similar source. This place remains a critical point. Should another apocalyptic calamity arise in the future, this could become a key source. Your ancestors were wise to keep it under control—it’s not something that can be left unchecked. If someone like Desolate Calamity were to exploit it, the consequences would be catastrophic.”

Cui Wenjing furrowed his brow, pondering. “If Desolate Calamity could harness that flame, does that mean we could use it as well?”

“You might want to write to Venerable Vermillion Bird to ask for her input...”

“There’s no need to hide anything in front of me. You mean the empress dowager, don’t you?”

Cui Yuanyang: “?”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

“I’ll write to the empress dowager for guidance,” Cui Wenjing said calmly. “In addition, by convention, I should also consult her about Yangyang’s official status. Oh, right, is she considered Her Majesty’s elder or has she entered the fray herself?”

Zhao Changhe looked to the sky, and Cui Yuanyang stared at the ground.

“A mother and daughter serving the same man, a master and disciple sharing a husband—heh, such absurd palace intrigue is unparalleled in history. If there were historians recording this reign, the dynasty might go down in infamy before it even properly begins.” Cui Wenjing’s tone was emotionless. “At first, we found this quite entertaining and were enjoying the show. But now that my own daughter is wading into this mess, it’s suddenly not so amusing anymore.”

Zhao Changhe cleared his throat awkwardly. “How about we change the subject?”

“Change it to what?” Cui Wenjing shot back. “The Wang and Li clans are probably already writing booklets about this. For all we know, those little booklets have already circulated nationwide. What can you do about that?”

Zhao Changhe’s face was expressionless. “It’s fine. Their reach is limited. I have a solution.”

For the first time, Cui Wenjing looked intrigued. “Oh? And what is your solution? Burning books and burying scholars?”

“No, I know someone who writes really well. Everyone is captivated by whatever she writes, and the whole world loves to read her writing. If I have her write a good novel and it spreads widely enough, the narrative of that novel should overwrite everything else. I can spin it however I like.”

The blind woman snapped. “Get lost. If I write, I’ll record the unvarnished truth.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Cui Wenjing abruptly changed the subject. “I didn’t expect you to forge the sword so quickly... The memorial to the court has only just been sent, and your letter to Her Majesty should have just reached the capital. Are you going to wait for Her Majesty’s reply, or do something else in the meantime?”

Zhao Changhe glanced outside. It was early evening. It had not actually been that quick. It seemed that it had taken him a bit over a day to reforge the sword.

“I still need to wait for Chichi’s response,” Zhao Changhe said. “I’m planning to deal with the Wang Clan and need some cooperation from the capital.”

“Then tonight...”

At this point, the conversation stalled.

Cui Yuanyang’s cheeks visibly flushed, and she bit her lip, saying nothing.

It was clear that Cui Wenjing had not really changed the subject after all.

Where would Zhao Changhe stay tonight? If he stayed here, even if they formally arranged a guest room, custom would dictate assigning someone to serve him. But who would that be?

In truth, there was no need to make any arrangements at all. He had already spent so much time in Cui Yuanyang’s room earlier, and everyone assumed what should have happened had happened. In fact, most of the family likely thought that whatever needed doing had been done two years ago.

He could simply stride back to her room and stay there openly. Who would dare object?

Cui Wenjing's expression remained impassive. "Time is tight. Let's keep things simple and hold a small, informal wedding. When I kneeled to you before, I was putting my dignity aside to help lift your status. Don't make it seem like a conqueror barging in to openly claim my daughter. Even if that's what this little troublemaker wants, it's still inappropriate."

It was plain that all the earlier talk about palace drama was not just idle chatter. Cui Wenjing was setting the stage for his daughter to assert her place. His meaning was clear—whatever else happened with others, at least make this official and legitimate for Yangyang. Even if it felt futile, a father could only do so much.

Zhao Changhe turned to Cui Yuanyang. Her face was as red as an apple, and she turned her head away, mumbling, "If you don't agree now, and someday I end up becoming someone else, don't regret it."

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath. "I agree."

* * *

The so-called simple wedding was indeed simple.

Compared to the usual elaborate ceremonies of aristocratic families, it cut out nearly everything. It was even simpler than a modern-day courthouse wedding. Cui Yuanyong, the older brother and nominal head of the next generation, was still en route to the capital and could not attend. Only a handful of the Cui Clan's elders were present. Cui Wenwei, the second uncle, remained locked in a cell and reportedly received daily lashings.

But even under these circumstances, the presence of these elders was enough to formalize everything. And in this moment, Zhao Changhe had taken one more step toward solidifying his alliances and Yangyang's place by his side.

In the center of the modest ceremony, Cui Wenjing and his wife sat at the main table, presiding over the proceedings. A local master of ceremonies announced the steps with ceremonial flair, but the entire affair was simple—just a couple of bows and a handful of guests at no more than eight or nine tables. It felt more like a rustic village wedding than a grand event befitting an aristocratic family.

Yet beneath its simplicity lay meticulous preparation, revealing just how much effort Cui Wenjing had poured into this single day. Despite claiming to be “on guard” over the past day, he had clearly been busy behind the scenes. The bride and groom both wore exquisitely tailored wedding garments—clearly custom-made, though no one knew when they had been tailored. But the most surprising touch? Seated in the elder’s seat for the groom’s side was none other than a serene and smiling Instructor Sun, stroking his beard like the esteemed elder he thought himself as.

Even if Xia Chichi arrived with twelve imperial edicts shouting, “Stop the wedding!” she would be too late.

“First bow to heaven and earth~“

The master of ceremonies’ call echoed through the hall as the red candles flickered. Zhao Changhe, holding Cui Yuanyang’s hand under her red veil, knelt with a strange mix of emotions swirling within him.

Standing in front of him, the blind woman folded her arms, watching with a grin.

Zhao Changhe: “?”

The Blind Woman smiled mischievously. “Well, there’s no need to pretend anymore. Tell me, do I count as heaven and earth?”

“You...”

“Well? If you have the guts, refuse to bow and cause a scene. It’s your wedding, after all,” she teased him. “I’ve been waiting for this moment for a long time.”

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath, reluctantly bowing. But as he did, he muttered darkly, “Just you wait. One day, I’ll make you kneel in return, exactly as I say.”

“Second bow to the parents~“

Facing Cui Wenjing, Zhao Changhe saw the elder’s expression. It was a facade of dignified benevolence barely concealing the glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

It dawned on Zhao Changhe that this moment had been in the works for days. Cui Wenjing's public kneeling two days ago? That had probably been part of this calculated exchange all along.

“Third bow to each other as husband and wife~“

Now, Zhao Changhe faced Cui Yuanyang, her face hidden beneath the red veil. But he could already imagine the deep blush on her cheeks, redder than any apple, and the soft, tender gaze of her eyes beneath the veil.

For a moment, all thoughts of the blind woman's antics or Cui Wenjing's schemes disappeared.

The weight of familial politics, the chaotic state of the world, and his many mixed motives for this marriage—all of it melted away. In front of him was a girl whose feelings for him had always been pure, untouched by outside influence or calculation.

In the clear, untainted gaze beneath that veil, there was only the memory of a young man who once held her hand and led her safely through a treacherous and dangerous world.

Chapter 668: Blood Stains Qinghe While the Night Is Still Young

“Ahem.” Cui Wenjing interrupted the newlyweds, who were gazing tenderly at each other through the veil. He said slowly, “According to tradition, the groom should take the bride to his home. But given the current circumstances, we've kept things simple. We've prepared a new bridal chamber at an estate just outside the manor. Consider it a gift to King Zhao. This way, there's no misunderstanding about him marrying into the Cui Clan or something.”

This moment was supposed to be the customary parental counseling segment, but with the mother-in-law silent in apprehension and Instructor Sun nothing more than a decorative figure, Cui Wenjing found himself unable to deliver a proper lecture. His tone could only shift to practical matters.

Zhao Changhe replied, “I didn't think about that... Thank you for being so thoughtful, Father-in-law.”

Cui Wenjing nodded. “According to custom, gifts would be presented to the groom during the bow to the elders. We'll skip that part. The estate is already yours, and the rest will be sent to the capital.”

Zhao Changhe: "..."

"Money, grain, weapons, armor, warhorses. Take it or leave it."

"...I'll take it."

"Also, the Qinghe Mirror you borrowed. It's yours now. That's it. We're done here." Cui Wenjing waved his hand dismissively, a sullen expression crossing his face. For all his urgency to marry off his daughter—even to the point of hastily arranging the ceremony before the Wang Clan's defeat—he found himself feeling suffocated at the end.

Damn it, after raising this flower for so many years, now it's being plucked by a pig. What father could feel cheerful about this?

At that moment, he rediscovered the initial irritation he had felt when he first met Zhao Changhe and silently wished the man would leave sooner.

The master of ceremonies finally spoke, "The ceremony concludes. Escort the bride to the bridal—"

"Wait!" came a loud voice from outside. "An imperial edict has arrived!"

Zhao Changhe: "?"

Cui Yuanyang nearly tore off her veil in frustration. Xia Chichi, since when do you issue imperial edicts?

Cui Wenjing's face darkened as he rose to greet the messenger. "Present the imperial edict."

Cui Yuanyong came rushing in, panting heavily, clutching an imperial scroll in his hand. The tension among the guests was palpable, the atmosphere teetering on surreal.

Unfurling the edict, Cui Yuanyong glanced over its contents, his expression growing increasingly peculiar as he began to read. "King Zhao has galloped valiantly, sweeping enemies from their lairs

with unmatched prowess. Her Majesty is greatly pleased... uh, Father, don't look at me like that, I'm just reading what it says..."

Cui Wenjing's face twitched. "I know, continue."

Zhao Changhe's and Cui Yuanyang's faces had both turned an alarming shade of crimson beneath the veil.

Cui Yuanyong continued, "Knowing how eager you are to marry, let this be a reminder: as the successor to the throne, marrying without the Empress' approval is disloyalty. Marrying without consulting the Empress Dowager is unfilial. If you have yet to marry, postpone it. If you have, expect punishment later."

He paused, evidently troubled, then finally gathered his guts and continued, "However, while your actions merit punishment, your merits are also great, and the imperial court cannot chill the heart of such a valued general. Rewards must still be given to demonstrate fairness. The following gifts are awarded: a handwritten scripture from the Empress Dowager, totaling 108,000 characters, to be meticulously transcribed as a gesture of her fond concern; and from the Empress, a single virility pill to treat the King Zhao's rumored... condition, with hopes for many future contributions to the empire."

Zhao Changhe: "?"

"...A custom torture device forged by the bureau chief of the Demon Suppression Bureau; an artisan-crafted replica of the palm of the famous swordswoman Yue Hongling; and a pill soaked in the urine of a poisonous gu from Miaojiang Saintess Xiang Simeng. May you continue to strive forward and achieve greater glory for the empire."

The earlier part of the decree had at least maintained a veneer of respect for the Empress Dowager and the Empress. But by the time it reached these so-called gifts, it was clear Xia Chichi had abandoned all pretense, piling on mockery with blatant malice. Yue Hongling and Xiang Simeng had no way of knowing this wedding was happening—where would these absurd "gifts" have come from? It was clearly Xia Chichi's way of stirring trouble.

The bride finally spoke up: "Second brother, did you bring an entire vat of vinegar from the imperial palace? It's so sour..."

The entire banquet hall collectively held back their laughter, heads lowered in a valiant effort to keep themselves from losing face on such a solemn occasion. Initially, many traditionalists had felt the empress' behavior was unbecoming, but when reframed as a petty squabble between girls hurling jabs from afar, it suddenly seemed far more entertaining. Any sense of impropriety vanished in the humor.

The blind woman was already mentally drafting her next "novel." This list of gifts absolutely has to make it in. And you think you can clean up this mess? Clean up a pigsty, maybe. Wait, what about the tortoise? Why isn't she part of the people who sent a gift? Oh, I see, the Four Idols Cult must be trying to save face this time.

Cui Yuanyong, thoroughly at a loss for how to respond to his sister's quip, looked to his father for help. Cui Wenjing remained unfazed. "Is that all? Nothing else?"

Cui Yuanyong sighed helplessly. "That's it... The edict was to be read aloud, but there are also sealed instructions—one for you, Father, and one for brother Zhao."

Cui Wenjing's expression flickered momentarily. "Not bad. It's less than I expected... Uh, I mean, it's good that there's a sealed part of the edict. Alright, proceed."

The master of ceremonies, grateful for the reprieve, shouted with exaggerated cheer, "The ceremony thus concludes! Escort the newlyweds to the bridal chamber!"

* * *

Outside, the snow fell heavily. The couple's escort was unlike any that anyone had ever seen. There were no formal processions or carriages—just a bride hidden in her sedan chair and a groom who simply hoisted the chair overhead and sprinted off at full speed.

The scene was so cartoonish that the Cui Clan guards escorting them could hardly contain their smiles. They knew the couple was not interested in the traditional slow journey; they just wanted to reach their new home quickly and enjoy their time together. But to see the infamous Asura King using his mighty martial prowess for such a task made the sight almost endearing—like Zhu Bajie carrying his bride. From within the sedan chair, bursts of laughter spilled out, the bride's joy unmistakable.

Despite all the disruptions during the wedding, the bride seemed utterly delighted. Of course, no matter how much the event had been interrupted, the other side was the one left stewing in vinegar. Her victory was complete.

The newly adorned estate bore a fresh plaque reading “King Zhao’s Estate[1].” Guards patrolled its perimeter, and the courtyard teemed with maids and attendants. It was everything one could imagine marrying into a wealthy family would be. The father-in-law had not just given him an estate, he had even provided guards for it.

And these were not just any guards. Keen observers could sense the faint but unmistakable aura of hidden experts stationed farther out. It confirmed exactly what Zhao Changhe had joked about before. The Cui Clan was now thoroughly protecting its young mistress as she was “eaten.” In fact, they seemed eager for the process to be carried out as soon as possible.

The courtyard was blanketed in snow, though a clear path had been swept leading directly to the main house. Zhao Changhe set down the sedan chair and carefully lifted the bride out, carrying her straight into the warm interior.

Outside, the snow fell in thick, silent flakes. Inside, the room was illuminated by the soft glow of candlelight.

There was none of the stereotypical drama from movies, where a bride waited nervously on the bed while the groom stumbled in, drunk. Instead, the atmosphere reminded Zhao Changhe of modern weddings—simpler, yet intimate—with him carrying his bride into their room. Thankfully, the traditional rowdiness of teasing newlyweds had been left out.

By god, that custom is terrible.

A large red candle burned steadily on the table, where two cups of wedding wine had been prepared, still warm.

Zhao Changhe picked up a jade ruyi scepter[2] from the table and studied it curiously. What’s this for?

Beneath her veil, Cui Yuanyang peeked out to see him standing nearby, yet he neither poured wine nor lifted her veil. Instead, he seemed completely absorbed in examining the scepter. Unable to contain herself, she leaned forward, hopped over, and called out, “Hey! I’m right here!”

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh. “What do you want?”

“Lift my veil, of course!”

“Don’t brides usually sit demurely on the bed, shyly waiting for their groom to lift the veil? What kind of bride jumps around demanding it?”

“That’s because those brides have never even seen their husbands before the wedding! They’re sitting there like it’s some kind of lottery draw, hoping for a prize!” Cui Yuanyang, completely unbothered by tradition, flopped onto his back, wrapping her arms around him. “Why should we follow that? If you keep dawdling, I’ll lift it myself.”

Zhao Changhe chuckled and pointed at the ruyi scepter. “What’s this for, then?”

The ever-bold Cui Yuanyang suddenly blushed. “It’s... it’s for lifting the veil.”

“Wow, rich people...” Zhao Changhe muttered, inspecting the ruyi scepter. “I heard common folks use a weighing rod[3] for this...” And with that, he slipped the ruyi scepter under the veil, gently lifting it.

Cui Yuanyang’s heart gave a sudden thump. The wedding itself had not stirred her, nor had being carried into the room. She had even rushed him to lift her veil. But the moment the cool jade of the ruyi scepter touched the fabric, the atmosphere changed. Quietly, a wave of sweet embarrassment and overwhelming joy swept through her.

So this is what it feels like to get married...

No wonder people compared the ruyi scepter to a weighing rod. It did feel like being appraised, like goods being weighed on a scale. For a moment, Cui Yuanyang was struck by the thought, Thank goodness I left home back then and met him. From beginning to end, this has always been my choice. It wasn’t like my brother or sister-in-law, who didn’t even see each other before their wedding. They could only rely on a ruyi scepter to lift the veil, hoping the person underneath matched their expectations.

Lost in her thoughts, she barely noticed when the veil was lifted. Warm light spilled in as the fabric fell away, and her eyes instinctively followed the light upward.

Their gazes met.

Whatever interruptions or distractions had marred the day melted away in that moment. The room grew still, save for the sound of their breathing and the rhythm of their hearts. They could see the affection and smiles reflected in each other's eyes, and for the first time, everything felt perfect.

Limited by her upbringing and modest capabilities, Cui Yuanyang had rarely ventured out. Their time spent together had been sparse, yet at this moment, it felt as though countless memories were flickering through their minds—those days of innocence and folly, of weakness and shared ambition. Now, captured in the glow of candlelight, those moments reminded them how precious and fortunate it was to share such memories.

Their throats moved simultaneously, as if they shared a neuron, and then they both laughed.

Zhao Changhe turned to pour two cups of wine, handing one to Cui Yuanyang. "Here."

Her face flushed as she accepted it. Without needing instruction, they crossed their arms, lowering their heads to drink. Neither could taste the wine. It was as if every drop had been replaced with sweetness.

After the wine slid down her throat, Cui Yuanyang's face burned even hotter, as though she had come down with a fever. Zhao Changhe grinned, taking her empty cup and setting it aside. Then, with a mischievous glint in his eye, he suddenly leaned in and planted a kiss on her cheek.

Cui Yuanyang pressed her hand to her cheek, giving him a playfully indignant look.

Unable to hold back anymore, Zhao Changhe scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the nearby soft couch.

Her nervous instinct kicked in, and she clung to his sleeve as the curtain slowly fell, enclosing them in a cocoon of flickering lamplight.

The intricately embroidered wedding clothes, worn for only a few hours, were carefully undone, revealing a small, delicate undergarment adorned with a playful pattern of a pair of mandarin ducks frolicking in the water. Zhao Changhe traced it gently, his fingers lingering as if savoring the moment. Cui Yuanyang bit her lip, her eyes fixed on his face. Suddenly, she murmured, “Big Brother Zhao...”

“Hmm?”

“...Nothing.”

She had wanted to confess that her dazed and flustered demeanor over the past two days might have been partly an act to see what he would think. But as the words formed on her lips, they felt unnecessary. Her Big Brother Zhao was far too perceptive to be unaware of such things. If he liked her this way, then so be it. She was content to remain his little girl forever.

Anyway, I’ve already taken the youth-preserving fruit. Why bring it up at all...

As layers of clothing fell away, her pale, delicate form curled beneath the strong embrace of her big bear. She tilted her head slightly, her gaze growing hazy and soft.

In a fleeting moment of reverie, she seemed to glimpse the sky, fragments of distant memories crossing her mind. Cold, clear eyes gazed out over the vast mountains and rivers. A phrase resurfaced from the depths of her memory: “Blood stains Qinghe while the night is still young[4].”

At the time, it had seemed like a declaration of heroism. But now? Now, it sounded suspiciously like an innuendo. The words rolled through her mind like the wheels of a cart running her over. Who wrote that nonsense?

A sharp pang of pain brought her back to reality, and her face turned pale.

Zhao Changhe immediately leaned down, his touch gentle and reassuring, as he skillfully eased her discomfort.

For a moment, Cui Yuanyang felt a flicker of indignation. Why is he so experienced? But the feeling was fleeting, replaced by amusement. She raised her arms to wrap around his neck, her voice soft and tender, “Big Brother Zhao...”

“Hmm?”

“I’ve finally... married you.”

Chapter 669: Newlywed in Troubled Times

As Dragon Bird had mused, in just a few months, Zhao Changhe’s bedchamber scenes had outnumbered those of the past two years combined—or to be precise, in the ten days since the group of heroes slew the dragon, more had happened than in several previous months.

Tang Wanzhuang and Cui Yuanyang, the two pillars of the courtly side of his alliances, had both been won within that short span.

It was a convergence of past fates blooming into fruition, fueled by an overwhelming sense of urgency.

The current state of the world left little room for patience. Gone were the days of thinking “you’re still young; I can wait a few more years,” or indulging in “let’s give ourselves more time to figure out if this is truly love.”

Now, there was a constant sense that the world could crumble away at any moment. No matter how confident or brash Zhao Changhe appeared outwardly, he was acutely aware of his own limitations. He was, after all, merely a martial artist who had just entered the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. His adversaries, on the other hand, were all in the Profound Control Realm, some like the Sea Emperor even reaching the second stage of that lofty realm.

In the past, Xia Longyuan had served as a lightning rod, drawing the attention of gods, demons, and powerful figures like Timur. No one had spared much thought for Zhao Changhe. But now, he was not just filling Xia Longyuan’s shoes in terms of significance to the world—he had become an even greater target. Bearing multiple pages of the Heavenly Tome carved a target on his back far more prominent than anything Xia Longyuan had ever had.

The only reason things seemed calm for now was the shortness of time. Whatever moves his enemies were planning were still in motion—perhaps quite literally, as they journeyed toward their next steps. But their silence was no guarantee of safety.

Zhao Changhe knew that if he delayed any longer—if he hesitated again—he might lose his chance altogether.

Fine. I admit it. I'm lustful. I just want to have you, whether it's love or not.

Cui Wenjing seemed to share the same urgency. Surely, Yangyang did as well. What young girl would be so eager to rush into marriage? But no one wanted to wake up one morning to find the world in chaos—gods and demons descending, invaders crossing the border, and perhaps even the collapse of Cui Clan itself. Better to have a grand wedding now, in glory, than to face the future in despair and ruin.

It was not about trying to one-up Xia Chichi. After all, Xia Chichi was the empress. It was not as if Yangyang could claim the position of empress outright. Even getting married first would not make her the actual main wife in the traditional sense.

Then again... if one thought about it in human terms, was Zhao Changhe not technically the "emperor," while everyone else was a consort?

Of course, in this world of gods and demons, those concepts had long lost their weight. Imperial authority was not what it used to be. The Azure Dragon was no more than a subordinate under the Night Emperor's banner, and Zhao Changhe was now regarded by many as the living embodiment of the Night Emperor. From a pragmatic standpoint, Xia Chichi was simply another leader with a larger dowry. Zhao Changhe, on the other hand, had personally subdued the Cui Clan—walking into Qinghe alone to secure their loyalty. The imperial court of the Han dynasty had not lifted a finger in that effort. Both the Cui and Tang clans, in essence, had pledged themselves to Zhao Changhe, not Xia Chichi.

Even within the Four Idols Cult, two of its venerables had already knelt before him, one way or another.

In this light, the court was increasingly coming to resemble a mere appendage of the Night Emperor, a fragment of the ancient past reborn.

And in this evolving reality, none of the women in Zhao Changhe's life could claim the title of main wife with absolute certainty. The dynamic had grown strangely egalitarian. No one felt they had a clear advantage over the others. If Xia Chichi were to press the issue too forcefully, it could even destabilize the fragile unity of the fledgling Han dynasty. This was precisely why she had hesitated to use her imperial authority to arrange her own marriage. To do so could have derailed the effort to secure the Cui Clan's allegiance entirely, turning an already delicate task into a political quagmire.

Some of the more perceptive ones even faintly felt that this hierarchy may not even be determined by who came first. One day, someone new might emerge, someone so strong and commanding that everyone would naturally submit.

Cui Yuanyang, deep down, wondered if she could one day achieve the abilities of Piaomiao and if that would give her the confidence she sought.

The first light of dawn filtered through the room as Zhao Changhe, draped in a robe, sat by the window. Outside, heavy snowflakes swirled in the wind. In his hands was a secret letter from Xia Chichi.

Cui Yuanyang stirred awake, clutching the quilt to her chest to shield her smooth, jade-like skin. Her gaze, soft and warm, rested on the man by the window. “Why not rest a little longer? You... you barely slept last night.”

Zhao Changhe set the letter aside, returning to the bed and leaning down to kiss her. “I don’t actually need sleep right now.”

Cui Yuanyang’s eyes widened. “Does reaching the third layer of the Profound Mysteries mean you don’t need sleep at all? My father still sleeps.”

“It’s not that,” Zhao Changhe explained with a teasing grin. “At the third layer, we can replace sleep with cultivation. And last night, your vital yin replenished me. That’s as good as cultivation.”

Cui Yuanyang, realizing that she actually also felt quite energized, giggled. She’d only recently broken through into the first layer of the Profound Mysteries had taken yet another significant step forward. “So if Big Brother Zhao had a few more like me, would that allow you to reach the Profound Control Realm?”

Zhao Changhe could not help but burst into laughter. “Then what exactly would I have learned to control and gained dominion over? Women?”

“Why not?” Cui Yuanyang bit her lip, her voice soft but bold. “I’d willingly let Big Brother Zhao dominate me.”

Zhao Changhe facepalmed.

What a little enchantress.

That being said, she was particularly obedient in bed—doing whatever was asked of her without hesitation. Combined with her comparatively small frame and youthful, delicate face, she radiated both a sense of conquest and the allure of complete submission. It was no wonder Zhao Changhe had indulged far longer than he had intended during their first night.

Running a hand over his chin, Zhao Changhe chuckled ruefully. “Maybe there really is a path to the Profound Control Realm like that, but I imagine the resulting combat prowess would be pretty terrible. That’s not a path I wish to take.”

Having failed in her playful attempt to flirt, Cui Yuanyang shifted to another question. “Then what path are you taking?”

Zhao Changhe’s expression grew thoughtful. “I used to think that it was the path of mastering vicious blood qi. It’s an extremely powerful force pervasive in life itself. A figure in the previous era called Lie relied on it to great effect. But as my cultivation advanced and my exposure broadened, I realized that focusing solely on vicious blood qi is too limiting. Even Lie met his end, extinguished like a dying flame. What’s the point in replicating that path? Right now, my path to the Profound Control Realm feels unclear. I don’t have a concrete direction yet. It’s something I still need to discover.”

Cui Yuanyang tilted her head thoughtfully. “Is reaching the Profound Control Realm... like attaining immortality? It sounds so mystical.”

“Immortality?” Zhao Changhe thought for a moment before shaking his head. “In this world, immortality has no place. Different lives, wielding different powers, vie for what they desire. At best, you could call it high martial arts and mysticism. Eh, forget it. Just come here and let me kiss you.”

Cui Yuanyang did not quite grasp why Zhao Changhe felt the need to define such a term, but it did not matter. His gentle kiss brought a smile to the newlywed’s face, and she asked softly, “So... with the weather so cold and the blankets so warm, want to come back in?”

“Hah... you little enchantress,” Zhao Changhe teased, giving her nose a playful tweak. “Wasn’t it just last night you were crying, saying you felt sore and needed a break?”

“Hey!”

“No one can hear us.”

“Hmph.” Cui Yuanyang turned her head away, pretending to pout. “What did Xia Chichi’s letter say?”

“So that’s what’s been on your mind? You saw me reading a letter first thing this morning and felt betrayed? Hehe... Don’t worry—it’s not like yesterday’s imperial edict.” Even Zhao Changhe couldn’t help but chuckle as he mentioned it. “Who’s ever seen an edict so ridiculous? And yet her private letter was the complete opposite—proper and serious.”

The letter was entirely focused on the strategy for attacking the Wang Clan, with no mention of Cui Yuanyang at all. The bitter jealousy and resentment that had flavored the edict seemed to vanish when it came to formal matters.

“Anyway, be good. This isn’t the time for indulgence.” Zhao Changhe ruffled her hair affectionately. “I’ll write back to Chichi, and then we need to prepare for the campaign.”

Cui Yuanyang’s eyes widened. “So soon? You don’t even need to wait for her reply to arrive?”

“Mm-hmm. Because this battle against the Wang Clan will rely on Cui Clan’s forces here and the army at Jianghuai striking from the other side. Wan Tianxiong was left in a vegetative state by Wang Daoning, and Wan Dongliu’s been fuming ever since, training his troops night and day for this moment.”

Cui Yuanyang cautioned, “Don’t underestimate the Wang Clan. Even without Wang Daoning, they still have a formidable foundation.”

“That’s true, but losing Wang Daoning threw them into disarray and robbed them of the initiative. If the Wang Clan had a strategist, they’d have launched an immediate counteroffensive, exploiting the window when your family was reconciling with them. They could’ve borrowed passage through your territory and sent a surprise force straight to the capital. That would’ve forced us onto the defensive.” Zhao Changhe smiled faintly. “But once they missed that fleeting opportunity and resorted to passive defense—or worse, pinning their hopes on someone like Desolate Calamity... well, let’s just say Old Daoning didn’t let me down. His family really is... lacking.”

Cui Yuanyang: "..."

Zhao Changhe said no more, turning back to the desk by the window and picking up his brush to write a reply.

Cui Yuanyang slipped out of bed and moved to his side, silently helping him grind the ink.

Outside, snowflakes drifted lazily to the ground. Inside, the scene was idyllic: a newlywed wife at her husband's side, her red sleeves brushing lightly as she prepared the ink. It was a moment of peace, the first on the morning after their wedding.

But this was no ordinary time. For Cui Yuanyang, who had never wished so strongly for peace, this fleeting tranquility was a cruel reminder of the troubled times they lived in. In the echo of the war drums beating across the land, she realized that for most people, a time like this could only end in sorrowful farewells.

Yet she counted herself among the fortunate—for they would not be separated. When the battles came, they would fight together.

Chapter 670: The Jianghu as It Is

As Zhao Changhe finished writing his reply, the newlywed couple shed their ceremonial wedding attire for sturdy riding gear. Mounting their steeds, they joined Cui Yuanyong and his elite soldiers on a direct march toward Puyang.

Puyang had long been a frontline stronghold for the Cui Clan. Although the major battle there had concluded, Huangfu Shaozong's imperial forces had withdrawn to the capital, and other regional troops had returned to their posts, Puyang remained heavily fortified. The Cui Clan's main forces were still stationed there, supported by the Blood God Cult, leaving a solid contingent ready to be mobilized for the campaign.

However, with troops needing to be diverted southward to guard against potential interference from the Yang Clan, the forces available for the campaign were limited. Cui Yuanyong would lead 10,000 elite soldiers, while the remaining main force would likely fall under the command of the Blood God Cult. Against the Wang Clan's resources, this was far from sufficient. Thankfully, with the Cao Gang pressuring the Wang Clan from south, the overall balance of power remained roughly even.

In terms of individual combat power, the Wang Clan had lost their pillar on the Ranking of Heaven, Wang Daoning. However, Cui Wenjing also needed to stay behind to defend against any moves from the Yang Clan or unexpected threats from the west. While Zhao Changhe's strength rivaled those on the Ranking of Heaven, the Wang Clan still had the defeated but dangerous Desolate Calamity.

On the surface, it was still a very balanced war, far from the scenario Zhao Changhe had confidently dismissed as an easy victory.

But no one from the Cui Clan raised any objections. After all, reinforcements from the capital remained a possibility. Troops from the Four Idols Cult or the Demon Suppression Bureau could also join, though the specifics of their deployment were unknown. Military matters were for those in command—following King Zhao was all that mattered to them.

Cui Yuanyong could not help but feel a mix of sympathy and poetic melancholy for his sister and brother-in-law. A newlywed couple setting out to war on the morning after their wedding. It was the kind of bittersweet tale bards might one day sing of. Yet, if anyone deserved to complain, Cui Yuanyong felt that it was himself.

Fresh from the battlefield, having barely finished overseeing the distribution of post-war rewards and punishments, he had not even had time to settle back into family life. Suddenly, the Cui Clan declared itself “conquered” by his sister's new husband.

Two years ago, Zhao Changhe had been little more than a novice. Cui Yuanyong had befriended him with the benevolent air of a senior indulging a junior. And now they were saying Zhao Changhe had single-handedly conquered Qinghe?

Conquered what? Has anyone fucking asked me?

Before he could air such grievances to his father, Cui Wenjing had sent him to the capital to present the letter of surrender—a task that felt suspiciously like being treated as a hostage. The gesture was full of sincerity, of course, but Cui Yuanyong could not help but curse inwardly. I haven't even fought a proper battle yet, and now I'm delivering a surrender?

Still, it was an important task, so he did not dare delay. Braving the wind and snow, he galloped to the capital, delivered the Cui Clan's formal statement of allegiance, and handed over Zhao Changhe's private letter.

The new empress, Xia Chichi, was yet another source of frustration for Cui Yuanyong. As the former saintess of a demonic cult, she had made waves in the jianghu

during the two years Zhao Changhe had been absent. Cui Yuanyong, as a representative of the righteous factions, had crossed swords with her before.

So when “former enemies” met again, it was only natural that Cui Yuanyong knelt in submission for an uncomfortably long time. He felt the indignity to be almost too much to bear.

Fortunately for him, Xia Chichi did not make him kneel for that long, only the time it took her to write a reply. Once the letter was done, she waved him off, insisting he hurry back without delay, lest he miss something important.

Cui Yuanyong felt like the most pitiful envoy in history. He had not even had a chance to sit down or sip tea before being shooed out. And what was the “important matter” he had to rush back for, braving the snow and wind? A goddamn wedding!

Ordinarily, being the bride’s older brother would mean a chance to extort all sorts of lavish gifts from the groom. But no, they went ahead and got married without him.

Is this not just blatant bullying?!

That being said, he found the new empress’ foresight to be quite impressive. She had predicted the couple would marry right away and, sure enough, she was spot on. Maybe his expectations for this new regime could be raised a little after all?

Finally getting a moment’s rest, he collapsed into bed and slept soundly for the first time in weeks. At dawn, though, he was dragged up to prepare for the campaign.

Cui Yuanyong could hardly suppress his grievance. If you’re so powerful that you can single-handedly conquer Qinghe, why not head over to the Wang Clan and do the same? Can’t you at least let me get some proper sleep?

“Brother Cui...” Zhao Changhe rode alongside him, attempting to strike up a friendly conversation.

Cui Yuanyong fixed him with a scowl. “I don’t dare let King Zhao call me brother.”

Zhao Changhe, naturally oblivious to Cui Yuanyong's recent miseries, scratched his head in confusion. "Did I offend you somehow?"

Cui Yuanyong shot him a sidelong glance, then remarked with some curiosity, "Hey, aren't you supposed to be the conqueror here? Submit or face execution, wasn't it? Why the camaraderie?"

"That was just the nature of the situation. If I had not assumed such a stance, I wouldn't have been able to establish the momentum I needed. Besides, my grievances were with the Cui Clan, not you personally."

"And why should I be any different? I'm no less a part of the Cui Clan. If my father hadn't chosen to submit, I'd have stood for our clan's eternal legacy just as much as anyone else. That's human nature. You find it distasteful because you've yet to have a family. But mark my words—when your expansive harem starts bearing descendants, your thinking will inevitably change."

"You're saying it's inevitable that the dragon slayer becomes the evil dragon?"

"At the very least, I doubt you'll escape such a fate."

Zhao Changhe nodded lightly. "We'll see."

Cui Yuanyong scrutinized him for a moment before continuing, "Still, I have to admit, when you reforged the Qinghe Sword, you instantly dispelled all doubts. Many worried that opposing the gods and demons would come at a catastrophic cost, perhaps even the annihilation of our clan. But you've proven that you're just as capable as they are, if not more so. Resolving Qinghe wasn't just a political conquest, it was a comprehensive one. I can't help but feel impressed. How did you become so strong?"

Zhao Changhe sighed dramatically. "A born genius is destined to inspire despair. What can you do?"

"Fuck off!" Cui Yuanyong snapped, clearly exasperated. "Right now, it's all about choosing which god or demon to follow. No matter which side you pick, you'll face the wrath of another. Now that we've chosen to align with you, you'd better make sure you keep getting stronger. If you mess up, the Cui Clan is done for!"

Zhao Changhe chuckled. “Why don’t you believe the Cui Clan could produce its own god or demon?”

“My father might have had a chance,” Cui Yuanyong replied, glancing at his sister, who was quietly following along. He sighed. “But after his recent injuries, even though he’s recovered, his body’s taken a hit. It’s unlikely now. As for my little sister... I do believe she has the potential, but it will take a long time.”

“Did you see your father this morning?”

“Of course not. I was dragged out of bed and told to prepare for the campaign.”

“If you had seen him, you’d have noticed his hair turning black again. Some of his old injuries have even faded, and his vitality is returning.”

Cui Yuanyong reined in his horse, astonished. “What did you just say?”

“I’m not trying to frame this according to the narrative of gods or demons, but maybe that’s how the Cui Clan sees it. For me, it’s just what a son-in-law should do for his father-in-law.” Zhao Changhe raised his whip, pointing to the distant horizon. “Brother Cui... With your father recovered and your clan secure, why not cast off your chains and rediscover the fire that once drove you to chase Yue Hongling across a thousand li? Why don’t you claim a place in the Ranking of Heaven amidst these troubled times with gods and demons entering the stage?”

The words struck a chord deep within Cui Yuanyong, igniting an old, almost forgotten ambition. He murmured, “Do you see this chaos as just another struggle in the jianghu?”

“Is it not?” Zhao Changhe replied, smiling. “While the stakes are higher and the scene is much grander, at its core, it’s always been about surpassing the strong, cutting through injustice, and scaling peak after peak. Maybe when no greater heights remain, that’s when the world’s purpose will finally be fulfilled.”

Cui Yuanyong studied Zhao Changhe for a long while, then broke into a wry smile. “No wonder Her Majesty and First Seat Tang let you venture out alone. You’re nothing but a born vagabond. First Seat Tang probably tried to teach you about governance but ended up quite disappointed, huh?”

Zhao Changhe laughed heartily, spurring his horse forward. “This jianghu has never matched the dream I had of it. I can only use my saber to carve it into what I want it to be... Governance was never my calling!”

“Big Brother Zhao, wait for me!” Cui Yuanyang cried, urging her black mare forward to chase her husband.

Cui Yuanyong watched the couple gallop into the distance, a faint smile tugged at his lips. An old, long-dormant sense of adventure stirred within him. He raised his whip and called out to his men, “Pick up the pace, brothers! We’ll reach Puyang before sunset!”

He turned to look at the backs of the young couple again, yet he discovered that they had already vanished over the horizon.

For the first time, Cui Yuanyong found himself admiring Zhao Changhe. He was not that impressed by Zhao Changhe’s meteoric cultivation progress—he chalked that up to the Heavenly Tome. But what truly earned his respect was how, despite wielding immense power, commanding territories from the capital to Hebei, and likely on the verge of dominating the entire realm, Zhao Changhe remained uncorrupted by his authority. His heart was as pure and untamed as it had been in the beginning.