

T. Times 71

Chapter 71: Three-Year Agreement

Only Cui Yuanyang truly understood what Zhao Changhe felt about the whole situation.

When the Tome of Troubled Times appeared, the Cui Clan felt that it was a pain in the ass. Zhao Changhe also felt like he had met with misfortune.

What was supposed to be him escorting someone home then wandering far away, only to look back at the journey as a joyous experience in the jianghu, had completely changed. And every method he thought of to protect Yangyang's reputation had been rendered useless.

The whole world was now envious, wondering how Zhao Changhe would become Cui Wenjing's son-in-law. However, had anyone ever considered that Zhao Changhe, from the very start, had no intention of becoming anyone's son-in-law?

Everyone was imagining the relationship between him and Yangyang. Was he supposed to take responsibility for it? All he'd done was help her get home; he had absolutely not done anything to her except for overcoming obstacles together and narrowly escaping death. Was he supposed to walk toward this future he had no intention of ever pursuing?

Other than Yanyang herself, who else had ever considered this? Everyone merely thought that he had struck gold.

The young lady had seen through all of it. She glanced back, refraining from speaking even though she wanted to. This feeling rippled in her heart, and until today, it had not gone away.

She expected Cui Wenjing to fly into a rage after listening to what Zhao Changhe said, but to her surprise, her prediction did not come true.

Cui Wenjing, on the contrary, slowly sipped his wine and leisurely asked, "This lover of yours... Is it Xia Chichi from the Four Idols Cult? Or is it Yue Hongling—who people thought she was not the real deal when she pretended to be your mountain mistress?"

Fuck. You really know too much.

Zhao Changhe's arrogant attitude, which had surprised Cui Wenjing just now, became considerably more sincere. He answered. "Chichi. My relationship with Lady Yue is one of friendship; she is both a teacher and friend, and nothing more. Other people have misunderstood, including your esteemed son..."

"Na?ve." Cui Wenjing sneered. "You might as well have said Yue Hongling. She would at least be a good match. But you're actually saving yourself for a witch from a demonic cult..."

Zhao Changhe pursed his lips, not willing to back down. He felt like Chichi treated him genuinely. Even though he said his feelings would not change until the end of time, or something like that at any rate, Zhao Changhe did not know if they would weaken in the future. She had also told him "if you want to find another woman in the future..." and did not seem to care too much. However, he felt that she very much did care, at least at that point in time.

Cui Wenjing sized him up for a while, and with every moment that passed, he found the whole thing to be more amusing.

When he put on an attitude, Zhao Changhe responded arrogantly, stood shoulder to shoulder with him, and spoke assuredly of himself. When he did not object to Zhao Changhe's stern decision, and even teased him a bit, the boy turned sincere. Cui Wenjing even felt that Zhao Changhe refusing to back down and pursing his lips without refuting him was rather cute.

What natural-born bandit or natural-born renegade? He's just someone who knows his gritudes and grudges. He's a youth who hasn't had his sharpness dulled yet.

Even his thoughts about love are typical of a youth. How the hell is he like a bandit? Have those people ever met a mountain king that shows this sort of attitude to a woman?

That identity of his... is more and more likely to be real.

Cui Wenjing lightly tapped the table with his index finger and slowly said, "I asked Yangyang repeatedly last night. You say you're not interested in her. I believe you. When you two were fleeing from danger, there was some body contact, but that was because the situation called for you to be pragmatic. The Cui Clan isn't stupid and inflexible, so you don't have to worry about being misunderstood. The problem is...I'm afraid Yangyang might be interested in you. Very interested."

Zhao Changhe did not answer.

This was why he was constantly plagued by that indescribable feeling the whole day before he came to tell Cui Wenjing that he wanted to decline the marriage.

One had to work themselves into a position of power, fame, and wealth to be with a beautiful woman. The young lady's annoyed and resentful gaze consumed his mind. It was, indeed, extremely difficult to say he wanted to reject her. If he had to say it to her, Zhao Changhe was not sure if he could do it. It was a good thing he was talking to her father.

Yangyang knows all of this. She knows it wouldn't be convenient for her to listen to us talk. She's afraid that I won't be able to say what I want to say. Maybe she's also scared of crying after hearing my words. She's actually known all this while...

Cui Wenjing looked at his expression and thought it all the more amusing. He continued, "I can't blame a little girl for being childish and having her heart moved... And to be frank, your heroism this time is worthy of moving Yangyang's heart."

Zhao Changhe could not help but scratch his head, somewhat at a loss. Why is he becoming more and more reasonable as he speaks? He even praised me. I was clearly rejecting you just now, bro. Shouldn't you be angry with me or something?

Cui Wenjing said leisurely, "When planning for the family, one must consider the pros and cons of everything. But speaking as an individual, who doesn't value heroes? If you were really after the Cui Clan's support or planned to go after our money and women, we might actually agree, but that doesn't mean we'd respect you in any way. We'd feel like our daughter has been taken away by a pig. But you declined. I love my daughter, but also admire you. In fact, it's precisely because you declined the marriage that I think you are worthy of her. Is that so hard to understand?"

Zhao Changhe: "Eh..."

Cui Wenjing smiled. "Back to the topic at hand. Since understanding must be mutual, do you understand Yangyang's current predicament? Or do you feel not a shred of guilt and feel like you can walk away from all this? About how the world will view Yangyang—do you think it's her problem?"

Zhao Changhe remained quiet for a while before saying in a low voice, "To be honest, if I thought that, I'd feel guilty...I can't bear to watch Yangyang being the object of other people's ridicule."

Cui Wenjing's smile brightened even more. "So how do you intend to resolve this dilemma?"

Zhao Changhe suddenly said, "Yangyang is still young. She's not even at the age to discuss marriage."

Cui Wenjing looked at him fixedly and did not say a word.

Zhao Changhe scratched his head. "Would you agree to us becoming adopted siblings?"

Cui Wenjing's mouth twitched. "Whether I agree or not, I'm afraid you're taking the people of the world to be idiots. Even if I gave you a grand ceremony to become my adopted son, that doesn't mean anything. Does the etiquette of your Zhao House forbid marriage between adopted siblings? Let me tell you, the rest of the world has no issue with that custom."

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Cui Wenjing: "..."

"Then...give me three years." Zhao Changhe proposed, "The Cui Clan can announce to the whole world: Zhao Changhe's background is a shabby bandit stronghold. If he cannot rise to the Rankings of Heaven, Earth, or Man within three years, he is not qualified to marry Yangyang. What do you think of this, senior?"

Cui Wenjing thought this was very interesting, because this was actually one of the solutions he had in mind. He was conflicted about it because telling Zhao Changhe this could make the young man feel like he was deliberately making things hard. However, Zhao Changhe had now said it himself.

Using this as a pretext, the Cui Clan would be the one driving Zhao Changhe away. Yangyang would not lose face, but neither would the matter come to a definite end; there would still be some hope, so the Cui Clan would not be seen as overly harsh, pitiless, or ingracious. In the eyes of people around the world, when choosing people, powerful families were obsessed with one's background. Everyone was used to this. A few might chastise the Cui Clan for it, but the family would not receive any significant damage to their reputation.

Within three years, Zhao Changhe could well die somewhere or otherwise fail to meet their demand. If that happened, would not the Cui Clan consider the matter settled?

This Zhao Changhe was very interesting. He had actually done nothing wrong, but still felt guilty. Cui Wenjing thought the solution he proposed would also put Zhao Changhe in a difficult position. The rumors about Zhao Changhe not being able to marry Cui Yuanyang because Cui Wenjing denounced him as a bandit would not be nice... Did Zhao Changhe feel nothing for his daughter? No, on the contrary, he cared for Yangyang dearly, and he was not concerned about his own reputation.

“The problem is... What if you actually manage to reach the Ranking of Heaven, Earth, or Man within three years?” Cui Wenjing smiled as he asked, “If you really come back to marry Yangyang, will you still go after Xia Chichi?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “When the time comes, why can’t it be the case that I, Zhao Changhe, hold a grudge and do not wish to go ahead with the marriage?”

“If by that time, Yangyang still hasn’t gotten over her feelings for you, will you really be able to ignore her?” Cui Wenjing laughed heartily. “We’re all men here. There’s no need to lie! By then, you’d have enough strength to decide if you want both for the taking!”

Zhao Changhe stared at him and did not respond.

He felt like he had been wrongly accused. He had not thought that much about this. He was not some military tactician that meticulously thought out each step. To be able to think of a solution to allow them to more-or-less solve this situation in such a short period of time was not easy. How could he have still thought that far ahead?

However, Cui Wenjing actually laughed heartily as he said all that. He was not one bit angry. His attitude made Zhao Changhe feel that... Eh...

Cui Wenjing smiled. “This was actually one of the solutions I thought of. I never thought you’d bring it out first... However, there’s a small difference between your plan and mine. Do you know what it is?”

Zhao Changhe shook his head. How was he supposed to know?

Cui Wenjing answered, "You said three years, while I originally intended to give you five."

Zhao Changhe was twenty this year. The age limit for the Ranking of Hidden Dragons was twenty-five, so Cui Wenjing intended to give him five years.

It naturally made sense for the Tome of Troubled Times to put in place this age restriction. There were many great figures in the jianghu, but they all had a limit to their aptitude. After all, once one reached a certain level after training for thirty to forty years, why would they not be able to defeat a youth? It was natural to rank youths by their potential.

Once one reached twenty-five years of age or older, they would have experienced much of the conflict in the jianghu. At that age, there was no longer any need to speak about potential; it would be shameful. One should have begun aiming for the Ranking of Man by then.

Of course, the exceptionally talented could do things that others could not. While other people were still at the age where they measured their potentials, they would have already become masters and entered the Ranking of Man. There were definitely people like this in history, but they were rare.

The last person that managed to do this was a certain somebody called Xia Longyuan. He was only twenty-two when he entered the Ranking of Man.

After Zhao Changhe's proposed three years, he would be twenty-three. With Xia Longyuan's precedent, reaching the Ranking of Man at twenty-three was not too shocking, but it was still something that no one under heaven would dare to boast about trying to accomplish, let alone Zhao Changhe, who had only started training in martial arts at the age of nineteen...

Cui Wenjing already felt like five years was already rather enough, but Zhao Changhe actually said three years. Do you have any idea what it means to accomplish all that in three years?

Of course, Cui Wenjing was not some goody two shoes. Damn brat. You stole my daughter's heart. Last night I didn't kill you because I didn't want her to go insane. If you say three years, am I supposed to give you five or ten?

Cui Wenjing smiled, raised his wine cup, and drank. "I have concubines myself. Naturally, I won't limit you to just one person. If you really have what it takes to reach the Ranking of Man within three years, would it be so strange for you to take a few concubines for yourself?"

Zhao Changhe felt that Cui Wenjing was subverting all his expectations. His not-father-in-law was actually quite easy to talk to.

After thinking for some time, he finally realized: He kept beating around the bush, but isn't this still a sort of engagement? This old fox even managed to settle the matter with his first wife...

Chapter 72: Not Enough

Cui Wenjing left.

Zhao Changhe was stupefied as he sat at the pavilion alone and drank his wine. The expression in his eyes was still blank.

How did things end up like this... Didn't I come to decline the marriage?

Where the hell did things go wrong? This last solution is supposed to give the Cui Clan an excuse to get out of this embarrassing situation. After three years, as long as nothing happens, then everything will be fine. Cui Wenjing, aren't you supposed to take advantage of this and reach the same conclusion?

How is it that after beating around the bush, things ended up like this... And it seemed like I was the one who said it all. He was too easy to talk to...

To be honest, Zhao Changhe simply did not feel that the person he was speaking to was ranked ninth on the Ranking of Heaven, the head of a powerful family. He felt not a shred of oppression from him. Other than those few words in the beginning used to test him, Zhao Changhe felt that Cui Wenjing was just a parent extremely concerned for his daughter. They could talk things through; he was quite genial.

After seeing how rich and powerful families dealt with poor men who stole their daughters from novels, television, and movies, Zhao Changhe felt that what he had just experienced was unreal.

However, after carefully examining the outcome, Zhao Changhe knew that Cui Wenjing had gotten everything he wanted. Even though all of it was spoken by Zhao Changhe, he had been constantly nudged by Cui Wenjing in that direction. After being flattered by Cui Wenjing, he could only wrack his brains and think of a solution that everyone could accept.

Actually, becoming adopted siblings was a viable option, and it was the one Zhao Changhe most wanted. In the end, the goalpost had been shifted by that old man. We were supposed to resolve the issue of Yangyang's reputation. If you were willing to accept me as your adopted son, then of course it would be normal for an adopted brother to escort his adopted sister home. Wouldn't the problem of her reputation be dealt with? How did it become a problem of whether adopted siblings could marry each other? These are two separate issues. But how did I get hooked into this...

Things turned out like this in the end. If after three years Zhao Changhe did not become anything, then Cui Wenjing would take it as if nothing happened. If after three years he actually made it onto the Ranking of Man, then he would be hailed as a nigh-unparalleled genius. Once they secured such a husband for their precious daughter, the Cui Clan would laugh even in their sleep.

No matter how you look at it, the Cui Clan has nothing to lose. He sold me something and I even helped him count the money he's earned.

Zhao Changhe felt he was a pretty good person. After he realized all this, he did not know whether to laugh or cry.

This was the Cui Clan of Qinghe.

Powerful families that had been around for so many years had their own methods. One could not view Cui Wenjing as just a warrior of the jianghu; there was no use seeing him as the ninth ranked person on the Ranking of Heaven. To Cui Wenjing, this was a huge turning point in his daughter's life; it was an important matter for him; furthermore, it was a politically important matter—with Zhao Changhe's suspicious identity, how could Old Man Cui actually accept him as his adopted son!?

He treated this matter of untold importance with great care. A stripling like Zhao Changhe had no chance of winning against him.

After word of this gets out, how will Chichi kill me?

What a pain.

"Big Brother Zhao! Big Brother Zhao!" Cui Yuanyang's voice traveled here from far away.

Zhao Changhe looked over. That young lady smiled happily as she lifted her skirt and ran through the flowers toward him. She looked like a butterfly moving through the flowers, and her smile was more beautiful than all the flowers and trees around her.

Is all this worth it if I can make her smile?

Zhao Changhe asked himself if he should have thanked Cui Wenjing. That wily old fox managed to handle the issue properly rather than resolving it with the blade.

As for future matters, Zhao Changhe was really too tired to think about it.

“Big Brother Zhao!” Cui Yuanyang happily ran into the pavilion. She looked like she was going to throw herself into Zhao Changhe’s embrace, but suddenly blushed and urgently stopped in front of him. With her face head, she lowered her head. “My father s—said...”

Zhao Changhe could not help but rustle her hair. “Whatever the case, I don’t want to run off right now. I can stay as a guest for a few days.”

Cui Yuanyang lowered her head and played with the hems of her clothes. “My father thinks that you won’t be able to meet his conditions in three years and can put an end to the matter, but I...I know that you’re stubborn. When you say you’ll do something, it’s because you’ll do it, and not because you want to find a way out of this situation for everyone.”

Zhao Changhe smiled. “This isn’t something I can do simply by wanting to do it. One can’t take the Ranking of Man too lightly.”

Cui Yuanyang’s head lowered even more. Her voice was softer than a mosquito. “I...I want you to do it. I feel like you can do it.”

What she said was equivalent to saying “I hope you can marry me.” But saying it in this indirect way was more moving.

Zhao Changhe sighed, and could not hold back from saying, “Yangyang, have you ever considered that because you’ve stayed at home since you were a child and barely left for the jianghu that you’ve met too few people?”

“What you mean is that I don’t really like you. It’s just that we faced life and death together this time and my heart was moved for a moment. In the future I’ll meet other outstanding men, and perhaps only then will I find out about love. Is that it?”

“Why are you less and less stupid? Are you supposed to have this sort of emotional intelligence?”

“It’s because this was something that many people kept saying to me last night. I’m sick of hearing it. I thought that you were carefree. Who knew that you’re like an aunt.”

Zhao Changhe broke out into laughter.

“Big Brother Zhao, do you feel like I’ve made things difficult for you... In your heart, I’m only a child. Indeed, things are not like what other people think. That’s why you’re saying the same things as them. You want to convince me to... But...” Cui Yuanyang finally raised her head and bravely looked him in the eye. “I’ll grow up. I’ll make you like me!”

The young lady’s soft gaze was enough to melt even the most steely of hearts. It was like a thread was wrapping itself around Zhao Changhe’s heart, no longer able to be untied.

Zhao Changhe knew he could not untie this knot by himself. Whether or not he liked her before, now he did.

So this is the taste of a woman’s love and confession. With a test like this, who can possibly pass!?

His thoughts fluttered around. He had no idea what he was thinking when he said, “Yangyang, you don’t need to grow up. Your Big Brother Zhao likes this Yangyang.”

Cui Yuanyang smiled. As the tip of her brow and the corner of her brow brightened up in delight, the flowers around them appeared to lose their color.

She happily took Zhao Changhe’s hand and started strolling around the garden. She said softly, “The number of men I’ve met isn’t small. My father is on the Ranking of Heaven and well-known; my uncles are in the Ranking of Earth and Man; and my brother has become the third Hidden Dragon at the age of twenty. The different generations of the family are all on friendly terms, they all have their own views and together form an assemblage of talented individuals. I thought they were the great men of this world, so I never thought...”

Zhao Changhe could not help but interject, “You never thought that there’d be someone like me on this earth? I believe that’s what you were going to say.”

Cui Yuanyang tilted her head and looked at him for a while in surprise. She held back her laughter and smiled. “How shameless.”

“Hmph.”

Cui Yuanyang replied bashfully. “Since you want me to finish my line like that, then we’ll go with that. Anyway, it’s not much different from what I was going to say.

“Hey... That sounds quite perfunctory.”

“I just want to say, regardless of how good other people are or how boorish or like a bandit you are, I’ll believe in you.” Cui Yuanyang did not look at him. Her eyes made rounds around the butterfly by the side as she picked flowers. “If you don’t rise to the Ranking of Man in three years, I—I’ll run away with you.”

Zhao Changhe did not know how the butterflies or flowers made her talk about running away. Her face was as red as the sky at dawn.

Zhao Changhe did not respond. He could not say “I’m not capable enough; I’ll wait for you to run away”, nor could he boast that he could accomplish that task. He wasn’t delusional.

However, he now indeed had one more reason to cultivate, and he knew that he would not have to figure things out by himself while cultivating like before. The Cui Clan would definitely help him, whether it was overtly or secretly. To them, this was an investment; they would not just leave him to fend for himself.

As expected, the next moment, Cui Yuanyang said, “Wei County is within our sphere of influence and County Magistrate Zhang is one of our own people. But this isn’t Qinghe. Today, Father will return. There are matters at home that need to be settled... Big Brother Zhao, you should return with us and be our guest for a few days. There are some things we can give you. You’re not allowed to say you don’t want anything. Even if it’s just as a thank you gift, it’s what we should do.”

Zhao Changhe was not unreasonable and nodded. “Well, I also want to see Qinghe. Other than this, after seeing what a sly fox your father is, the one that was sent to the dungeon is most likely not the true culprit. Your father is putting on an act to increase the chance the snake will come out of its hole.”

Cui Yuanyang was at a loss and her eyes went wide with shock.

Chapter 73: Qinghe

Qinghe and Beimang were the names of places in the real world and were located in similar locations as their real world counterparts. It was Beimang was more north than it should have been, but the geography of Qinghe very much corresponded to the Qinghe in the real world. When Zhao Changhe escorted Cui Yuanyang back, he thought of the meme “I’ve come to HEB Province.”[1]

The location of the capital was also very close to that of the capital in the real world. Beimang was situated more to the north, which was why Cui Yuanyong said that even though the capital was not on the way to Beimang, it was not that big of a detour to go there.

Zhao Changhe did not know how this type of phenomenon came about or what relation it had to the real world... Regarding the previous era, perhaps I can ask Cui Wenjing. Yangyang might not be very clear about it.

They walked through the streets of Qinghe Commandery. They were incomparably wide; there was an endless stream of horses and carriages; on both sides, there were small stalls from which the calls of vendors never ceased; palaces and pavilions were strewn about everywhere—it was incredibly imposing.

This was the first prosperous city that Zhao Changhe had visited in this world. It was many times more flourishing than that city where Zhao Changhe stole clothes before. I wonder how the capital compares to this?

The slaughtering of families, bloodshed, robbers looting, the conflict and treachery of the jianghu, bandits rising in revolt, clans massacring clans—all of it appeared to occur far away from this place. It felt like they did not even take place in the same world.

If one was looking for a paradise amidst these troubled times, it would probably be this place.

The Commandery Administrator was from the Cui Clan. It was not Cui Wenjing, but his brother Cui Wenjue. The Cui Clan had many more clan members, in-laws, and disciples. They also had many former subordinates that spread across the various commanderies, provinces, and the military. They were a first-rate power that truly stretched across multiple regions.

This was the Cui Clan of Qinghe.

Cui Wenjing did not hold any office in the imperial court and wanted to maintain his aloofness as the ninth person under heaven. With his strength, even Xia Longyuan had to respect him.

When Zhao Changhe met him, the head of the Cui Clan was like a sly fox, but this image of him vastly differed from how the majority of people in the world saw him. To them, he was unfathomable—an immortal that resided high above the clouds, imposing but also noble and refined.

With his modern knowledge, just from the fact that annexing lands resulted in many people being displaced, Zhao Changhe knew that beneath this prosperity lay something extremely vile. Here, the powerful families were all definitely antagonists. Oppressing the people, deceiving them, disregarding the laws of the empire, and colluding with different families—these were their fundamental methods. These powerful families played a huge part in bringing about these troubled times.

This was why Zhao Changhe, from the start, had felt apprehensive about the powerful families, so much so that he viewed them with contempt. Yangyang was indeed adorable, but she was just one person; she could not even represent her own clan, much less an entire class of people. However, after seeing the wider world and the peace and prosperity here that was completely different from what he had experienced before, he had to admit that his impression was not very objective.

There were two sides to everything. At the very least, this place really was a paradise.

The Cui family manor was located east of the city. The land it took up stretched further than the eye could see; it was extremely majestic. Outside its gates, by the footpath, willow trees were caressed by the spring wind, and there was a small bridge over a flowing stream. The solemnity of the entire place was counterbalanced by its carefree elegance. In fact, it was more stylish than the beautiful garden belonging to the Wei County Magistrate.

Cui Wenjing did not bring him here. Zhao Changhe had no idea where he was. Instead, Cui Yunyang was the one that happily brought her Big Brother Zhao into her home. From the moment they stepped in, she led him to where her chambers were located. Zhao Changhe felt the path they

took was longer than circling the Beimang stronghold three times, and there were more servants tending to the flowers here than there were people in the mountain stronghold.

She's really a rich loli.

Cui Yuanyang could see he was green with envy and grinned. "If I brought you here earlier before you discussed marriage, would you have wanted to remain here?"

Zhao Changhe answered honestly, "I'd probably say 'rich woman, I'm hungry. I want food.'"

Cui Yuanyang imitated his crude way of speaking and said, "I, Zhao Changhe, don't live off women."

"Hey, have I even said this in front of you before?"

"I don't know, but do you even need to say it? We both know that's exactly the way you think."

"I think that you've blindly overestimated me in your heart... If you give me money, I'll really take it. Really..."

"Well, have you said something like that before?"

"Yes..."

"Then I haven't overestimated you." Cui Yuanyang smiled as she led him by the hand. "Come, I'll bring you to my room. It's really cute."

"Young lady." Finally, a maid by the side could not help but say, "It's not appropriate for Lord Zhao to enter your chambers..."

These maids and servant girls had been trailing behind them for some time now. As they watched them banter flirtatiously, they had expressions that looked like they were forced to eat shit.

Right now, Zhao Changhe was basically someone shooting for something far beyond his condition. As a result, he was shunned by Cui Wenjing for being a bandit and forced to accept the three-year agreement. This matter had not been leaked outside yet, but within the Cui Clan, rumors were beginning to spread.

In reality, none of the servants of the Cui Clan felt that Zhao Changhe could reach the Ranking of Man in these three years, which was to say that they thought the marriage was never going to happen.

We let you in as a guest and didn't drive you out because you are the young lady's benefactor. This is the master's magnanimity, yet you wish to take advantage of it and even enter the young lady's chambers? What're you planning to do inside? Huh?

This was why Cui Wenjing thought that this solution would severely damage Zhao Changhe's own reputation. He was really doing all of this so Yangyang would not lose face; he did not care one bit about his own.

Cui Yuanyang knew all of this, and the more she understood, the more she could not stand other people saying such things about him. She turned around, hands placed on her hips and said angrily, "Who I bring into my chambers is my own business. If not even my father cares about this, what's your problem!?"

The maidservant urged, "The master is occupied with too many things everyday. How could he have time to concern himself with this? Young lady, you must have respect for yourself. After leaving the house without permission, was the lesson you learned not painful enough..."

Another person said, "Indeed. Just look at him. He begged for money the moment he opened his mouth. It's too.... I've never seen anyone like him. He's really a bandit."

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh.

Cui Yuanyang also laughed away her anger after hearing that line. She took out a gold piece and stuffed it into Zhao Changhe's hand. "If he wants money, I'll give him money. Who's going to stop me?"

After saying this, she tiptoed and tried to kiss Zhao Changhe on the cheek. "I can even kiss him. Why don't you call my father here to stop me."

She could not kiss him. She was too short.

As Cui Yuanyang hopped while tiptoeing, Zhao Changhe blocked her by pressing down on her head.

Cui Yuanyang seethed as she looked at him. Zhao Changhe smiled. “Trying to take advantage of the situation, eh?”

“Hmph.” Cui Yuanyang tilted her head and let go of his hand. “Let’s go. We shan’t bother ourselves with them.”

A whole group of maids stood there, stupefied. She’s even willing to kiss him in broad daylight...

It’s over. She left home for a few days and she’s already like a bandit. If she ran off to a stronghold and proclaimed herself stronghold mistress, I’m afraid that she might really fit the role...

They faintly heard Zhao Changhe say, “Alright. It’s really not convenient for me to enter your chambers. Our agreement was to protect your reputation. Don’t ruin it by yourself. It’s already a big enough headache for me and your father.”

Cui Yuanyang pouted and knew she had been too excited. In her heart, she had already thought of this whole arrangement as an engagement. However, outsiders could not and would not see it that way. On the contrary, this symbolized a falling out between Zhao Changhe and the Cui Clan.

She could not willfully ruin the efforts of her father and Big Brother Zhao.

She sighed, a little dispirited. “Oh... Then follow me over there...”

“Where?”

“The Weapon Hall,” said Cui Yuanyang as she inadvertently glanced at Zhao Changhe’s wine gourd which never left his side.

After braving the storms of the jianghu, Zhao Changhe's saber was chipped, and even he himself did not know when it happened. On the other hand, his wine gourd was still maintained in good condition; it was just showing signs of age, but he was reluctant to throw it away.

Her gaze flitted across him and, without thinking, she said, "Big Brother Zhao, your saber is chipped. I'll find the best saber for you—one that'll last forever!"

"How can there be a saber that lasts forever and won't ever chip if I bash some skulls..."

"Your w—wish is my command! Whatever you want, we definitely have it!"

How could Zhao Changhe have known that she felt like she was fighting a desperate battle? Right now, his desire to swap out his saber exceeded all his interests. Even if a naked woman lay down before him, he could not care less. "Alright. I'll make a wish. I want to see what sabers you have!"

The Cui Clan's Weapon Hall was not just one room, it was an entire heavily guarded building. Behind it was a road that led to a small hill upon which Zhao Changhe could make out a small pavilion that appeared to be made out of copper. He knew not what treasures were contained within it.

Seeing that Cui Yuanyang had brought someone to the Weapon Hall, the guards did not stop them. The daughter of the first wife of the Clan head was, of course, qualified to take most of the weapons. Cui Yuanyang had no intention of going to the copper pavilion on the hill and only brought Zhao Changhe to a room on the right. She smiled. "This room is specially dedicated to storing sabers."

Zhao Changhe's directed his gaze away from the copper pavilion and said softly, "What's over there?"

"On the hill, behind the copper pavilion, is our clan's ancestral temple. Right now, father is inside holding a trial..." Cui Yuanyang's voice lowered without her realizing it. "As for the copper pavilion, it's the place where my family's most treasured Qinghe Sword resides. Oh right, there's also a famed saber conferred upon us by his majesty. It's of great importance."

Zhao Changhe, who had read thousands of wuxia novels by this point, instinctively felt that there was more to this.

Chapter 74: After Hugging Thick Thighs

It was enough for the saber bestowed upon them by the emperor to be stored beside their ancestral hall, so Zhao Changhe felt it made no sense for the Cui Clan to store their own divine sword with it. Weapons were supposed to be used in a fight, not as ceremonial offerings to one's ancestors. What if you're unable to grab it in time when danger strikes?

Still, as one reached higher levels in this world, things were bound to become more fantastical. There were things that Zhao Changhe could not necessarily understand at his level. Whether or not there was something more to this, it was not for him, a guest, to get involved in. Zhao Changhe did not concern himself with it anymore and followed Cui Yuanyang into the Saber Hall.

Even though this was the Saber Hall, there were not many sabers inside. After all, the Cui Clan mainly used swords. Sabers were only considered side weapons. There were about thirty hung on the wall and on weapon racks. All of them were sheathed. Zhao Changhe could not tell if they were good or not.

However, Zhao Changhe's gaze was immediately caught by a saber placed horizontally on a frame.

The blade measured four to five chi, almost as long as Cui Yuanyang was tall... It was extremely thick and broad; the hilt was long, clearly for two-handed wielding, and it came with a scabbard made of some material Zhao Changhe could not make out. Just by looking at the way it was displayed, he knew that the weapon weighed a few dozen jin.

This was the broad saber from his dreams! There really was such a weapon!

Seeing Zhao Changhe so fixated on that saber, Cui Yuanyang was a little shocked. "Big Brother Zhao, do you like that saber? Isn't it too bulky..."

"Eh..." Zhao Changhe returned to his senses. "Indeed. It's probably not a saber I can wield right now."

Cui Yuanyang knew what he meant.

He could not wield it now, which meant that he intended to wield it in the future.

Well, she had to agree that it suited Zhao Changhe's personality. His wild and furious fighting spirit was appropriate for this kind of saber. If he took a fighting stance with this saber in hand, she felt that any enemy who saw him would drop to the ground in fear. It was simply too intimidating...

No wonder Big Brother Zhao likes it so much.

Cui Yuanyang bit her lower lip and thought for a moment before softly saying, "This saber belonged to a great general from a different family that was on the Ranking of Earth. Father brought it back after slaying him. It's said that that general didn't look like a human at all. He was more than a zhang tall... Actually, the saber the emperor conferred upon us is a little similar to this one. It's a bit smaller and lighter, only about four chi long, and weighs thirty jin. Perhaps it's more suited for ordinary use..."

Zhao Changhe knew very well that he would not be able to take away the saber given by the emperor. Still, he was quite interested in it. "What's it called?"

"It's called Dragon Bird. The Dragon Bird of the Great Xia."

"..." Zhao Changhe's expression turned strange.

It's a good name. Very grand. The problem is that this name also exists in the real world. It's Helian Bobo's Dragon Bird of the Great Xia[1], only that this Great Xia is quite low-level. Xia Longyuan, is this a coincidence or what...

Forget it. This has nothing to do with me. I'll never be able to touch that saber.

Zhao Changhe's gaze swept across the other sabers. He clearly knew that every saber here was multiple times better than his steel saber, but after seeing that broad saber, these regular sabers seemed paltry...

Cui Yuanyang felt Zhao Changhe acting like that was amusing. And you still call me a child. Big Brother Zhao, it looks like you're quite childish yourself at times. It's like you've lost interest in regular toys after seeing a fun one...

In the end, she picked out a valuable saber that was about as heavy and long as the one he was using and stuffed it in his hand. She was too lazy to even tell him its name. "Take this for now..."

As she said this, her gaze shifted toward the direction of the copper pavilion. She had no idea what she was thinking and bit her lower lip.

It'll be rather difficult. If someone said there was a regular but valuable saber that would never break when used, I wouldn't think them reliable. But if there is such a saber, then that's probably the only one that fits the description...

*

"You've chosen your saber?" Zhao Changhe finally met Cui Wenjing at dinner. There was no one else around, only the father and daughter of the Cui Clan and himself. From the looks of it, Cui Wenjing also did not wish for other people to pick at Zhao Changhe or make unnecessary remarks. Indeed, the head of the Cui Clan knew how to treat people.

Seeing Zhao Changhe's new saber by his waist, Cui Wenjing smiled. "I guessed you'd choose this saber. It's very similar to your old one."

Zhao Changhe cupped his fists. "This is a very good saber. I tested it out just now. It can even split hairs. Thank you, senior."

"You deserve it." Cui Wenjing laughed. "You can even receive more... I know you're not greedy. What you want is extremely clear—you probably want a way to resolve the side effects of the Vicious Blood Art, and broaden your meridians and dantian so that your internal art can keep up with your cultivation of external arts."

"It's as you say! I don't need anything else!" Zhao Changhe was delighted. "Senior, do you have a way for me to achieve all that?"

Cui Yuanyang snuck a glance at him. Didn't you say you want money...

Cui Wenjing said, "Let's first talk about the Vicious Blood Art. Its problem fundamentally stems from the fact that it uses one's blood qi and vicious qi, so naturally, it'll cause vicious qi to rush to one's head and devour their body. If you want me to excise the vicious qi from your body, I can do it. However, your saber will never be as fierce or fiendish as before. It'll mean giving up half of what strength you've been able to use thus far. Whether it's worth it or not, you'll have to ponder over it yourself."

As expected, Cui Wenjing had more methods at his disposal than Yue Hongling. Even so, it was clear that Zhao Changhe could not have his cake and eat it too. He felt that this was a pain in the ass. “The Blood God Art should also be an art that cultivates one’s blood qi and vicious qi, so why doesn’t it have these side effects? Doesn’t that mean there should be a way to resolve them without giving up my strength?”

Cui Wenjing smiled contemptuously. “If the Blood God Art was really that miraculous, then Xue Canghai wouldn’t have lost to a nineteen year old girl of a lower cultivation.”

Zhao Changhe secretly thought to himself: Xue Canghai is really in a miserable state. As long as he lives, he’ll be haunted by that defeat... The Tome of Troubled times was a pain in the ass for this very reason and Zhao Changhe had gotten a taste of it himself.

Cui Wenjing said, “No one in our clan has interacted with anyone who practices the Blood God Art. I don’t know the specifics, but the Blood God Art must have some other side effects. Moreover, Yue Hongling must have acutely realized what it was and seized upon it. Her keenness in battle is really frightening. I never would have thought that Yuanyong would actually lose to her. What he’s learned is more than ten times better than what she’s learned.”

As he said this, glanced at Cui Yuanyang.

She was very happy seeing her father interacting pleasantly with her boyfriend and did not interrupt them, resting her chin on her hand as she listened. Then, she was struck by their conversation. She knew why her father looked at her when he said that. In the past, he would always talk about outstanding women in the jianghu

that were of the same generation to inspire her, but she had always ignored him and continued doing as she pleased.

However, today, she actually felt unwilling to concede.

Yue Hongling stayed at his stronghold for such a long time. They might have already done it... Father, it’s one thing that you’ve never given her trouble, but now you’re praising her? Why did you praise her? Are you still my father!? So what if brother can’t defeat her. Don’t tell me... Arghhh, I can’t defeat her. Aieeeee!

Don't I just have to train?! I had to swallow a big loss this time. I was going to train when I got back. Why did you have to bring up that woman and piss me off? You guys should continue talking about the Blood God Art!

Zhao Changhe remained quiet for a moment before asking firmly, "Since this is the case, I don't need you to remove the vicious qi from my body. Isn't it just a small bother? If in exchange for this huge strength in battle, I have to deal with it, then it's worth it. Come to think about it, the Vicious Blood Art, without all these problems, is a pretty good martial art, right?"

"Other than this, it's an excellent martial art." This was the second piece of assurance Zhao Changhe received after Yue Hongling, and it was from a master on the Ranking of Heaven. Cui Wenjing continued, "If you can endure the side effects, there's no harm in cultivating it as your main martial art. It's worth learning. In fact, I have a feeling the Vicious Blood Art is the actual fundamental martial art of the Blood God Cult. It's just that no one is able to train in it properly. The Blood God Cult might have come up with the Blood God Art as an alternative because they wanted to get rid of the side effects of the Vicious Blood Art. The upper limit of the Blood God Art might not be as high as that of the Vicious Blood Art."

Zhao Changhe was pleasantly surprised. "Senior, are you certain?"

"Don't you think your strength in battle is a little absurd? With just a trivial third-layer cultivation, you were able to force all sorts of illusions on Qi Bubi and you actually made him feel suppressed. Is that something someone at the third layer of the Profound Gate can do? Not even I could do that when I was at the third heavenly layer!"

After a moment of silence, Cui Wenjing stated his final conclusion. "If the Blood God Art was really stronger than the Vicious Blood Art, then why is the Blood God Cult a measly second-rate sect? Why hasn't Xue Canghai entered the Ranking of Man?"

So you were already there when I was fighting Qi Bubi. Fuck you...

Zhao Changhe was too lazy to complain about this old fox. As his knowledge deepened bit by bit, the strengths of the Vicious Blood Art were gradually being unearthed and becoming more definite. Now, he was reluctant to part with it. From the looks of it, this martial art would be his main martial art for a long while. He did not know what would happen after he practiced it to a high level. Would he be able to break through to the ninth layer of the Profound Gate or peer into the Profound Mysteries?

The manual said it was possible. And now, it really looked like it was not just tooting its own horn. The problem was how he would break through to the Profound Mysteries afterward. The manual that Fang Buping gave him did not have anything written down about this.

Cui Wenjing could see what he was thinking about and said indifferently, “As for the matter with the Blood God Cult, I’ll get some people to keep an eye on them. If it’s appropriate, I’ll help make sure that they don’t make things too difficult for you in the future... Actually, I think even that Xia Chichi can help you take care of them. That is, if she doesn’t want to kill you.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Cui Yuanyang: “...”

“Now the only problem left is how to purify your body and expand your meridians.”

Just as Zhao Changhe thought he could latch onto the rich and powerful to solve all his problems, however, Cui Wenjing continued. “...We can’t do anything about this.”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

You said the matter regarding the Blood God Cult can be resolved by Xia Chichi. Is this to say that even if I latch on to the number nine person under heaven, you won’t do anything for me?

Cui Yuanyang became anxious. “Father!”

Cui Wenjing gestured with his hands and passed him a medicinal pill. “Don’t be so nervous. This pill will be of great use to you.”

Chapter 75: Fourth Layer of the Profound Gate

Zhao Changhe, in any case, was polite. He took the pill and asked, “This is?”

“Treasures that can transform your body and expel its impurities can only be discovered, not sought after; they’re not something you can just buy because you have money and power. Not even the imperial clan might have one. However, not every child is born with a good body. Families are

always thinking of ways to improve their constitutions. For example, this is one way. This pill can increase the toughness of your meridians and raise their durability.”

Zhao Changhe thought what he said was reliable and asked, “What’s the difference between widening meridians and increasing their toughness?”

“Your meridians are like a small creek that can only let that small bit of water flow through it. If you were to widen them, then it can change to be more like a rushing river. However, rivers must also be dammed up firmly, or they might overflow. It’s not hard to understand this difference.”

Zhao Changhe nodded. “I understand. Put another way, I can’t widen this small creek of mine, but I can reinforce it and it’ll allow it to hold greater streams.”

“Correct. Even if you widen your meridians afterward, this increased toughness will still be of use. What’s more, if your meridians aren’t tough enough, if an opportunity to widen your meridians appears, you might be too scared to seize it. You’ll have needed this pill sooner or later, so do you still think that I’m unable to give you anything?”

Zhao Changhe coughed dryly. “I never said such a thing.”

Cui Wenjing did not expose him and replied indifferently, “Of course, this thing doesn’t exactly solve your current predicament. It’s just a temporary measure. We’ll need some luck to find a solution that tackles the root of the problem. We’ll help you keep an eye out for such news.”

“I’m very grateful.” Zhao Changhe took the pill from Cui Wenjing and ate it without a word.

Seeing him immediately pop the pill in his mouth, Cui Yuanyang got a little nervous. “Will any problems arise if he just rushes to eat the pill like that?”

Cui Wenjing could not help but laugh. “Don’t be so flustered. Your father is here; what could go wrong? I gave it to him so he could eat it. He knows much more than you. If he doesn’t take the chance while I’m here for me to watch over him as he consumes it, is he supposed to rely on you to look after him? If a problem really arises, what can you do other than cry?”

Cui Yuanyang, having just received this slap in the face from her own father, continued munching on her food in anger.

Cui Wenjing was frustrated at her unrealized talents. “You don’t even have what it takes to give advice on such matters of cultivation. Do you know how stupid it was to waste these ten years of your life? If you knew what to do, you could have helped him. In fact, he wouldn’t have had to swallow his pride and lose face or act so apologetical in front of me.”

“I understand...” Cui Yuanyang muttered. “I’ll begin training now.”

There was a pleasant look in Cui Wenjing’s eyes.

Everyone in the clan knew Cui Yuanyang’s natural aptitude to be exceptional. From a young age, she would only have to learn things once to pick them up. It was just that she was never willing to practice diligently. However, after all was said and done, she built up a foundation since she was a child, and so was not in as difficult a position as Zhao Changhe. If Cui Yuanyang could really begin diligently training, there would be no limit to what she could achieve. After a certain amount of time, she would be able to shake the world. What need would she have for a husband then!?

To be honest, Cui Wenjing did not think that Zhao Changhe could make it onto the Ranking of Man in three years even if he threw all of the Cui Clan’s resources at him. What help he could provide, he would provide to the fullest. There was no problem investing in Zhao Changhe, and it made his daughter happy. And if he succeeded? Then the pay off would be massive.

However, in the end, the thing he most hoped for was that Cui Yuanyang woke up from her laziness. That was more valuable than anything.

Suddenly, he heard Cui Yuanyang call in a low voice, “Father...”

“Yes?”

“Are we allowed to give his majesty’s saber away? Would it be betraying him? We’re not even that afraid of h—”

“Watch your tongue.”

Cui Yuanyang quieted down.

“Do you really believe Xia Longyuan has gone senile and has lost his hold over the political situation? Do you think that he’s to blame for the darkness consuming the world today and has to rely on Tang Wanzhuang, sickly as she is, to prop up the empire? Do you think you’re reading a folk story?” Cui Wenjing said coldly. “The number one man on the Ranking of Heaven is beyond your comprehension. This is something you must not get involved in. Stop letting your imagination run wild.”

Cui Yuanyang lowered her head, dispirited.

Her Big Brother Zhao had given up so much for her and even had his name run in the mud by others for her sake, yet there was nothing she could give him. The young lady felt sorry for him and wanted most to take him to take what he wanted, but realized that there was nothing she could give him. She could not even take him to her room.

Cui Wenjing cast her a glance and suddenly realized her intention when she asked about the saber. His expression turned strange as he looked at Zhao Changhe, who now had his eyes closed as he absorbed the medicine to reinforce his meridians. Cui Wenjing stroked his beard and said softly, “It goes without saying that we can’t just casually give away his majesty’s saber. That would be extremely disrespectful. However, that is not necessarily an impediment when it comes to...certain people.”

Cui Yuanyang stared at him. “Even if that was the case, we can’t just decide by ourselves to give it to him, can we? Wouldn’t we still be overstepping our authority?”

“You’re finally thinking of your father before you open your mouth.” Cui Wenjing chuckled. “I said just now that the number one man on the Ranking of Heaven is beyond your comprehension. Ordinary people have no way of wielding his saber—they’ll be violently rejected by it. If there was someone compatible with it, it makes perfect sense that the Cui Clan should give it to them. How would that be overstepping our authority? We’re following his majesty’s will.”

Cui Yuanyang’s eyes sparkled, looking like she was eager to try something. Cui Wenjing cast a sidelong glance at his daughter and said indifferently, “But I suggest that you don’t go to find trouble for no reason.”

Cui Yuanyang smiled apologetically. “No, no. I’m just asking.”

“Refrain from speaking about things like this,” Cui Wenjing said indifferently, “Even if he denies his own suspicious identity, it’s still incredibly valuable, because as long as it’s not verified, people can only guess. They’ll hesitate when deciding how to deal with him. Once he runs off to try out

some shitty saber and finds that he's not compatible with it, even though it's not a definite confirmation, the chances of him being the real thing will plummet and his identity will lose all value. Do you know why I never discussed the matter concerning his identity with him? This is one of the reasons."

Cui Yuanyang was at a loss for words and immediately retracted her thought of stealing the blade for her boyfriend.

There were matters that adults had to give serious consideration to. She could not act wantonly.

"But..." Cui Wenjing lowered his voice and said to himself, "If he secretly went to test out the saber and it turned out that the saber does accept him...hehe, things would get interesting."

Cui Yuanyang's eyes lit up once more. If I stole the saber for him to try, wouldn't that be secretly testing? If he's rejected, I'll just put it back and pretend like nothing happened. If the saber accepts him...

Cui Wenjing said, "I put your third brother on trial again this morning. Nothing came of it. Tonight, Yuanyong has returned. Do you want to be present at the final trial in the Ancestral Hall? It'll be best if you confront some things yourself."

Cui Yuanyang lowered her head and said, "I don't really want to... Why don't we put down the matter?"

"Nonsense! You may think your life unimportant, but it is of utmost priority for the Cui Clan to root out this spy! Put down the matter?" Cui Wenjing said coldly. "This time, I'm afraid we might have to use the Qinghe Sword."

Cui Yuanyang was dumbstruck.

Zhao Changhe wondered why this treasured sword was stored away and left unused. It was because the divine sword of Qinghe was righteous and overwhelming, able to bring peace and prosperity to the world; no villains or scoundrels could hide from it. However, this divine blade had a mind of its own. Blood would be spilled when it was used. With Cui Wenjing's strength, he had no problems using the sword, but he was not at the level where he could make the blade obey him while he was distracted.

Just how many truly upstanding people were there in the world? Not even Cui Wenjing himself could be considered one. If, by chance, in a moment of carelessness, the sword began randomly attacking people, or even slit someone's throat, it would be all over for Cui Wenjing as a person.

However, if he focused while wielding it, there would definitely not be any problems.

Things have gotten so troublesome. They can no longer uncover anything. It's gotten to the point where we need to use the Qinghe Sword?

As Cui Wenjing said this, his mood soured. He flicked his sleeves and said, "Alright. Zhao Changhe has absorbed the medicine without a hitch. He's about to wake up. You bring him to rest. I still have some matters to settle."

Zhao Changhe indeed opened his eyes at that moment. For a moment, they shone with a malevolent, blood-red color, but it disappeared in an instant.

Right as Cui Wenjing was about to walk off, he stopped and looked at Zhao Changhe in shock. "You've reached the fourth layer in the Vicious Blood Art? The medicine I gave you was for the meridians used in internal arts. How did you break through the Profound Gate for external arts without a sound?"

Zhao Changhe smiled honestly. "This internal art of mine is a bit special. It can fuse with and boost the blood and qi used in my external art. Before this, I didn't have enough strength. As you said, my meridians were like a small creek and couldn't support that much qi. After taking the medicine, I realized my qi began to surge. I've already accumulated enough blood qi and vicious qi these past few days in the jianghu. Prior to this, Yangyang also fed me some medicines which helped to replenish my blood and qi. I wondered if I could attempt a breakthrough with the increased intensity of my qi, so I did."

The corner of Cui Wenjing's mouth twitched.

Zhao Changhe made it sound as simple as eating.

When Zhao Changhe just left Beimang, the Tome of Troubled Times appeared before Cui Wenjing and announced that "Zhao Changhe, having only cultivated for four months, broke through to the third layer of the Profound Gate." In other words, it had only been five months since he'd started cultivating and he was already at the fourth layer.

Strictly speaking, Zhao Changhe could not be considered a true internal and external arts practitioner—there was an imbalance between his external art, now at the fourth layer, and his internal art, which still remained at the third. Even so, the efficiency with which he cultivated was absurd. Cui Wenjing searched through his mind and actually failed to find anyone that had ever progressed faster than Zhao Changhe.

When Old Cui himself was young, after his first five months of cultivating, he had not even reached the first layer...

Of course, his circumstances were different. The esoteric internal arts of the Cui Clan required one to slowly build up their foundation and progress step by step. Of course, this meant that Zhao Changhe's constitution, comprehension of cultivation, and aptitude were one in a million. His only flaw was that he had started training at too old an age, so his meridians had already fossilized. If he could fix this problem, then his achievements...

Cui Wenjing remained calm and leisurely left with his hands clasped behind his back. "Not bad. You act decisively. But this efficiency isn't too special. You're still a ways off from me when I was your age. Don't become conceited. There is room for improvement."