

T. Times 181

Chapter 181: Soldiers Approach the City

Tang Wanzhuang went straight to Jinling that day. Zhao Changhe, who should have felt that staying at the Tang Clan was completely meaningless, did not rush to leave as he did before.

Instead, he stayed quietly in the guest house and wrote another set of sword manuals, intending to give them to Tang Buqi once he finished writing them.

It was as if the storms outside did not exist at all for him.

Surprisingly, writing another set of sword manuals did not feel bothersome at all to him. On the contrary, he even found it somewhat amusing.

Just like Tang Buqi, he had thought that Tang Wanzhuang's mind was set on serving the public, which made her seem less like a real person and more like an ideal. But in the end, he discovered that she had also made some small plans for her clan. The saintly image of her that existed in his mind suddenly collapsed, but rather than feeling despondent for having his image of her shattered, he simply felt that this was how people should be. This side of her was much more realistic.

Just like when their arms intertwined in the night, real and gentle, emerging from the illusion that the Heavenly Tome depicted and materializing before him.

And so, First Seat Tang became Tang Wanzhuang.

Writing the sword manuals was no different from familiarizing himself with the sword arts once again, and it also helped calm his mind.

During the day, he wrote the sword manuals, and at night, with the help of the Heavenly Tome, he learned the Moonglade Sutra and the Water Treading Art that had been given to him by Tang Wanzhuang.

This sutra was not a method for cultivating internal energy. It was an auxiliary technique. It was similar to the Ice Heart Sutra of many other stories—a sutra that kept one's mind clear and calm even in the face of calamity.

The Moonglade Sutra was not just about calming the mind and removing distractions. It was like an upgraded version of what Yue Hongling had taught him before. It also taught him how to use his five senses to better observe and perceive his surroundings. It allowed him to dispel illusions and reflect the essence.

This was extremely helpful in combat. With this, he could be less afraid of illusions and calmly look for the best way to achieve victory.

The prerequisite to practicing it was naturally to calm down, slow down, and observe everything around oneself. A restless mind, one that was obsessed only with fighting and killing, would not be able to approach it correctly.

Why did the Water Treading Art have comprehending this sutra as a prerequisite?

Well, the reason for that was that grasping this sutra would allow the user to better grasp the flow of air and the weight of water at a glance, and then make use of them to transport their body.

This actually involved some understanding of heaven and earth and how to utilize one's surroundings rather than just one's self. Compared to the Traceless Soaring Blood of the Blood God Cult, this movement art was simply leagues above.

Perhaps all paths in the world led to the same destination, and Yue Hongling also had something similar. It was just that, at the time, his level was low and even his senses were not sensitive enough. So how could he bypass the senses and directly tackle the soul?

In fact, even now, he felt that he was still lacking. Zhao Changhe strongly suspected that this was a technique best suited to be used after unlocking the Profound Mysteries. After all, it approached concepts such as spiritual awareness and divine sense. This gift from the person ranked third on the Ranking of Earth truly was no joke.

For now, the best thing he could do was still to concentrate his mind and stabilize his spiritual platform, preventing it from being invaded by inner demons.

Once he achieved a high enough mastery, he could finally make use of the currently useless bloodthirsty bead.

After another three days of mooching off of the Tang Clan, he had thoroughly understood the Moonglade Sutra, and he finally took out the bloodthirsty bead that had been lying around ignored. Thus began once more the long-delayed practice of the Vicious Blood Art.

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The most significant difference between practicing the Vicious Blood Art and other martial arts was that it not only required energy, but also vicious qi. Without vicious blood qi, the Vicious Blood Art would lose the superiority it held over other martial arts.

When it came down to sheer energy, everyone was more or less the same at this level. Eating well, drinking well, and using some auxiliary medicine or pills was enough. Unless people were lucky enough to stumble upon some exceptional treasures, it was difficult for them to gain any special advantages in this area.

After all, what most people saw was essentially mundane. At best, the medicine that someone else was using would be slightly better, but not by that much. Right now, Zhao Changhe was already using some of the best—this was also why he never firmly denied his identity as a prince, and why Chichi initially believed that taking on the identity would be useful for him. After all, without sufficient resources, it was really difficult to achieve anything remarkable.

Now that he had sufficient energy and resources, his focus could shift somewhere else.

It was not difficult to find things that nurtured vicious qi. Bluntly speaking, even killing a lot of people could nurture vicious qi. Ferocious objects were not uncommon—an example were weapons that had slain many people, like Dragon Bird. Unfortunately, if he dared to absorb the vicious qi of Dragon Bird, he would probably end up getting smacked to death.

The Sword Emperor's tomb was also filled with vicious qi, but it was difficult to extract it for personal use.

In any case, vicious qi really was not that difficult to find. One of Zhao Changhe's goals when coming to Jiangnan was to find something of the sort. It's just that it was only now that he had gotten around to actually using it.

Zhao Changhe carefully sent a strand of his true qi to probe the space inside the bead.

As soon as his true qi touched the bead, he immediately felt the negative emotions that filled it.

It did not have any pure energy to speak of. It had vicious qi, but it was tainted to an extreme degree, and it was practically useless. It gave off an uncomfortable feeling, making one want to throw it away immediately.

And, well, that was exactly what Maitreya had done.

Normally, Zhao Changhe would have thrown it away as well, but now he had the sutra.

He allowed these negative emotions to attack his soul. With his mental state that imitated the reflection of a moon in water, he could almost feel a group of little demons incessantly clawing and pounding at a tightly shut door. However, with a stable spiritual platform and a guarded heart, these little demons' attempts were rendered futile.

These will probably become inner demons if they manage to materialize.

This bead was just a minor component of the array that the Blood God had created. After the long passage of time, it had lost its original glory. What if it were something more sinister? Zhao Changhe was not sure if his rudimentary attainment of the sutra would still allow him to protect his spirit.

But for now, it was enough, so why worry about the distant future?

With a composed mind, Zhao Changhe did not hesitate and sent his vicious qi in to make contact with the vicious qi within the bead.

A thunderous boom echoed—only in Zhao Changhe's ears, however—as the bead trembled and the vicious qi within it began to surge violently. The vicious qi fiercely rushed at Zhao Changhe's flesh and blood as if to tear them apart.

The backlash of cultivating vicious qi, which he had not experienced for quite some time, reappeared once more. Ignoring the throbbing pain, Zhao Changhe grit his teeth, allowing the vicious qi to wash over him and integrate into his blood, and slowly transforming it into his own.

This was the process of nurturing vicious qi, feeding it with one's body.

When nurtured to a certain extent, the vicious qi would roar wildly, and bloodlust would pervade the sky, its power infinite. Even gods and buddhas would dissipate into smoke, what more ordinary enemies? They would tremble in fear in the midst of such violent malevolence.

It was a very typical evil martial art, but regardless of whether it was the righteous Yue Hongling or the pure Tang Wanzhuang, neither of them objected to his practice of such a martial art.

There were no evil martial arts, only evil people.

As long as he was upright and used it for an upright purpose, what difference was there between this “evil” martial art and a divine one?

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Zhao Changhe did not know how many days he had been practicing. In any case, at the start, he had been writing the sword manuals during the day and practicing the sutra at night. Later, he practiced the sutra and the movement art during the day and nurtured vicious qi at night.

After a few days, he still felt he did not have enough to break through to the sixth layer of the Vicious Blood Art, but he no longer felt as impatient or anxious as he had in the past.

He took his time. This was not like eating or drinking. Many heroes had been training for many years to reach the same level. On the other hand, he had only been at it for half a year.

As long as he could feel that he was making progress, then that was enough. He knew that one day, he would break through naturally.

Knock, knock, knock~

Tang Buqi’s voice sounded from outside his door. “Brother Zhao, I’m sorry to bother you, but are the sword manuals done?”

Zhao Changhe opened his eyes, and the blood-red tint in his eyes disappeared. “I finished them a few days ago, it’s just that I was busy and did not have the time to go out to look for you. Since you’re here now, you can get them yourself. They’re on the table by the window.”

Tang Buqi opened the door, carrying a flagon of wine as he walked in, “As soon as my aunt left, Maitreya raised his troops. Within a few days, various places in Jiangnan responded to his call, and his forces seem to have engulfed the entire region. Just today, Hangzhou’s Wuxing fell.”

“Wasn’t that expected?”

“Yeah, but what we didn’t expect was the slow reaction from the imperial court. The imperial soldiers still haven’t arrived.”

Zhao Changhe laughed and said, “You seem to be pretty relaxed though?”

Tang Buqi sighed. “Relaxed? Gusu is really on the front line now. Do you know why I haven’t come to pick up the manuals for so many days? It’s because I’ve been too damn busy. Maitreya won’t stop until he takes Gusu. His vanguard general, Ten Abodes Bodhisattva Fa Sheng, has probably already set out from Wuxing and has already reached Taihu Lake. If you’re going to leave, then you better leave soon. Once the city is under siege, there will be no getting out.”

Zhao Changhe was startled.

He knew that Maitreya’s forces would rise quickly, but he did not expect it to be so fast.

It had only been a few days, yet the enemy was already approaching the city.

Chapter 182: Dragons and Snakes Rise

Zhao Changhe looked at the flagon of wine that Tang Buqi was carrying and asked, “Are you here to say goodbye?”

Tang Buqi said matter-of-factly, “Yes. I don’t want you to think that I’m driving you out, so doesn’t it make sense for me to have a little drink with you as a proper farewell?”

Zhao Changhe was at a loss for words.

Tang Buqi sat down at the table and continued, “Also, I think you would also agree that you should take a break from practicing. There’s no end to cultivation. I recall my aunt also told you to slow down, didn’t she?”

Zhao Changhe also sat down and said with a smile, “I’m already taking things pretty slowly at the moment. I’m just refining and nurturing my vicious qi, and I’m not even rushing to break through.”

“It sounds as if you’re saying that you can break through whenever you want.”

Zhao Changhe smiled and said nothing.

Tang Buqi picked up the flagon and poured both of them a cup of wine. He looked a little gloomy and said, “I said I was going to travel and experience the world, but it looks like that won’t be happening any time soon.”

Zhao Changhe raised his cup and clinked it with his. “Your kind of training doesn’t really need that kind of experience. You don’t really need to roam the jianghu. In fact, I don’t know why your aunt doesn’t want me to stay here for a while longer. I feel like it would be quite good for me to work together with the military and kill people to nurture vicious qi...”

Tang Buqi took a long sip of wine and said, “I know why.”

“Oh?”

“You think that your martial arts skills are better than those of the regular soldiers. You think that you can charge into battle on horseback, with heads falling like rain on both sides of you, like all those famous warriors in history known for their individual bravery?”

“...Is that not the case?”

“When I read through history, I did feel as if there were many such brave heroes, but in fact, there are only so many of them even throughout the history of the two eras. And also...they definitely were not on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons. With our current level of strength, the impact we can have by fighting on our own is nowhere near as great as the impact of a line of well-trained soldiers stabbing at the enemy with their spears.”

“...“

“With your courage, leading a group of elite soldiers as the vanguard would be in fact pretty fitting. You might even end up being called a tiger or dragon general. But to get there, you would still need a coordinated troop of highly skilled soldiers. Also, the prerequisite to that is that you train with the soldiers for quite some time and integrate yourself into the team. You can’t just suddenly join them and charge out on horseback then call it a day.” Tang Buqi smiled teasingly. “How many days do you think it would take for you to become an integral part of a troop? And how many days do you think you’ll be staying?”

Zhao Changhe let out a dry cough and said, “Hey, it’s only been a few days. How have you changed this much?”

“A few days?” Tang Buqi’s eyes widened. “You can’t be serious. I’ve been learning these things since I was a child! Even though I haven’t actually been in the military, I’ve had to study military strategy, and if I failed any tests, I’d get a beating. By the way, let me tell you, you’re very familiar with the person who would give me those beating.”

Zhao Changhe recalled the scene of Tang Wanzhuang flipping Tang Buqi over and spanking him. She did seem really familiar with that...

Tang Buqi said lazily, “Now that all the clans in Gusu are furious at being deceived by the Maitreya Cult, we’re all united in our hatred. In addition, with Jinling and Yangzhou still intact, both sides of the Yangtze River are in our hands. With geographical advantage and a united force, this area won’t be easy to chew through. The fight here is likely to drag on, not just for days or weeks but for years, and who-knows-how-many clashes between the two sides. This is my home, and I see no issue defending it for the rest of my life. But can you do the same, brother Zhao? Unless you’ve truly changed your mind about what you want to do and what role to take in this world, you don’t really fit in here.”

Zhao Changhe remained silent for a moment, finishing the wine in his cup. “I appreciate the advice.”

Tang Buqi stared at him with a peculiar gaze for a while before suddenly saying, “Why aren’t you calling me eldest nephew anymore?”

“Well...” Zhao Changhe did not know how to reply. It seemed as if he actually felt a bit hesitant to say it.

Perhaps because, in the past, he had no such thoughts of it ever actually becoming real and could casually banter without care, but now that he had some thoughts about her, he felt a bit guilty calling him that.

However, Tang Buqi did not mean to mock him for it either. He really was not in the mood for that. He sipped his wine quietly and said, “Actually, Maitreya does seem to carry somewhat of an invincible aura, but he isn’t really fit to be a commander. He relies on the subordinates that he has recruited, and I have to admit, some of them are quite formidable.

“For example, the Ten Abodes Bodhisattva Fa Sheng I told you about earlier. According to reports, even though there was some resistance in Hangzhou, Fa Sheng managed to break through it in just an hour. He’s only at the sixth layer of the Profound Gate, yet he’s already managed to become Maitreya’s most trusted vanguard general.”

He emptied his cup and said, “I really don’t have much confidence in facing such an enemy... I heard that he’s extremely cruel, and he leaves nothing behind wherever he goes... I can’t help but worry about what will happen if he actually manages to make it through...”

Zhao Changhe said, “You’re already more amazing than me... As you said, you have the geographical advantage and a united force, so you aren’t going to be easy to deal with. Even if you might not be able to defeat this Fa Sheng at first, after a few confrontations, you should improve. We’re still young. We can still become much more.”

Tang Buqi shook his head and said, “Ah, let’s stop talking about that. Actually, you and I are ultimately people of the jianghu. Compared to learning the art of war, I still hope to improve my martial arts. One day, I hope to ascend the Tome of Troubled Times and become admired by the world... If we really do manage to reach the level of my aunt, then we might just actually be able to charge into enemy forces alone. We can fight for as long as we want, and no one can stop us. How fun would that be? One sword facing a million soldiers. You share the same sentiment, don’t you?”

Zhao Changhe admitted, “Yes. And it’s not just you or me either, most of the martial artists in this world share the same aspirations.”

Tang Buqi said, “Speaking of which, ever since you defeated Wan Dongliu last time, the Tome of Troubled Times has not had any changes. It’s honestly quite strange. In the past six months, you’ve been shining incredibly brightly on the rankings, while others have barely made any impact...”

Before he could finish speaking, the sky lit up with golden light.

Tang Buqi's hand, which was raising his wine cup, paused as he raised his head to look at the sky in surprise.

The sixth day of the sixth month, the twelfth solar term, the height of summer.

On Chi Li's twenty-third birthday, he advanced to the ninth layer of the Profound Gate. On this day, amidst a crowd of people, he killed Li Changkong, the Northern Spear King of the Great Xia, and took his place on the Ranking of Man.

The Ranking of Man has changed.

Rank 66: Fox Spirit Chi Li!

Zhao Changhe looked up at the sky, sipping his wine quietly without speaking.

Tang Buqi stared blankly for a long time, unable to drink anymore. "He's really just twenty-three years old... It's like he's declaring war on His Majesty..."

He had not finished his sentence, but how could those of the younger generation not feel a sense of frustration and fear when they witnessed such a peer? He was an enemy of the empire, and his talent made people despair.

Zhao Changhe watched quietly but still did not say anything. It was as if he was waiting for something.

Tang Buqi said curiously, "Brother Zhao, you..."

Before he could finish speaking, the golden light appeared in the sky again.

On this day, Yue Hongling, aged twenty and at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, rode alone and broke through into the Black Wolf Khan's tent, single-handedly killing Black Wolf Khan Bohu in the midst of his camp and leaving without a trace.

The Ranking of Man has changed.

Rank 68: Sunset Divine Sword Yue Hongling!

It's just directly giving them nicknames... Zhao Changhe finally understood how a real moniker came to be given. It was not just by the mouths of the Cao Gang—the “mouth” of the Tome of Troubled Times was the real deal!

Only someone like Zhao Changhe could think about monikers at this moment... In the eyes of others, the consecutive rise of two newcomers to the Ranking of Man was a truly world-shaking event. Who would have the mind to think about monikers at such a moment?

The Rankings of Heaven, Earth, and Man were different from the Ranking of Hidden Dragons. It was not something that changed depending on a single achievement. In addition, experts on the Rankings of Heaven, Earth, and Man were very cautious in their interactions with each other. How long had it been since the rankings had last changed?

But now, there were two changes in a row, and neither of them had been achieved through ordinary means. One was amidst a crowd, while the other was alone in a military camp. Their true rankings could be even higher!

Both of them were still extremely young, so they were still considered by many as juniors whose potential was still to be evaluated. Yet, in the northern region of the divine land, they had shown their might as the brightest stars of their generation.

Zhao Changhe suddenly laughed aloud, remembering Yue Hongling's confident and arrogant look... This is what you wanted, isn't it?

Chi Li had just put on a big show, intentionally choosing to make such a move on his birthday, just to show off. He also intended to boost the morale of their side and undermine the morale of those of the Central Plains as they invaded the region.

But in the end, Yue Hongling, without having to say a word, massively reduced the effects of Chi Li's move.

Although her ranking was still two places lower, Yue Hongling was only twenty and a half years old at the moment. Didn't that make her the most abnormal person to ever make it onto the Ranking of Man?

Moreover, the moment Chi Li killed a famous person in the Central Plains, she also killed a famous person in the Grasslands. She directly countered his move and boosted the empire's morale.

It was as if she had done it on purpose, yet at the same time, she could not have known what Chi Li was up to. And if this was not intentional, then it was certainly some kind of destiny at play.

Zhao Changhe suddenly wondered how long she had been stuck at the peak of the eighth layer of the Profound Gate. Was this breakthrough related to her travels on the Grasslands, or was it related to their dual cultivation in Yangzhou?

It's probably the latter...

Because of these changes, he had also moved up two places, from 38th to 36th. Thirty-six is a good number. It's the number of the Heavenly Spirits.

Meanwhile, Tang Buqi was beaming with joy. Before he could say anything, it seemed like the Tome of Troubled Times was updating again as it shone brightly.

The hidden dragon emerges from the abyss, ascending to the Ranking of Man. Those on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons move forward.

Rank 1: Cui Yuanyong.

Cui Yuanyong, who was far away in Qinghe, looked at the sky and did not know whether to laugh or cry. Reaching first place like this did not seem to sit quite right with him...

But it was not over yet.

Xia Chichi, aged seventeen and at the seventh layer of the Profound Gate, stabbed the Northern Buddha of the Maitreya Cult at a Buddhist temple in Jiangbei, taking control over all of its followers.

The Ranking of Hidden Dragons has changed.

Ranked 6: Xia Chichi.

Cui Yuanyang was in seclusion for half a year, fully absorbing the wonders of the Purple Qi of Qinghe. Upon emerging from seclusion, she had advanced to the fifth layer of the Profound Gate. On the day that she came out, she broke through the array of the Nine-Bend Yellow River Trial of the Cui Clan, obtaining the Cui Clan's most treasured sword art and becoming qualified to inherit the Qinghe Sword. Achieving this at the age of only fifteen, she shocked the entire county.

The Ranking of Hidden Dragons has changed.

Ranked 99: Cui Yuanyang.

It is time for dragons and snakes to rise.

The necks across the entire world had become sore from looking up, and they had gone from shock to numbness.

It truly was a troubled time...

The last statement of the Tome of Troubled Times was not a comment on Cui Yuanyang, but a comment on the brilliant stars shining in the sky.

Tang Buqi repeatedly thought of saying something but ultimately refrained from doing so. With winds and clouds stirring and stars shining brightly, how could someone on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons not feel their blood boil in excitement?

“What a tumultuous event...” he muttered to himself as he held his wine cup. “I’m about to fall off the rankings. I’m outside the top hundred myself. This is not where I, Tang Buqi, belong.”

Crack!

The wine cup cracked under his grip.

Zhao Changhe finally stood up, calmly picking up Dragon Bird. “Brother Tang, the Tome of Troubled Times must have seen that we had wine but no food, so it specially sent us these dishes to go with the wine, but they taste a bit too spicy... Let’s stop here. All good things must come to an end, and I should take my leave as well.”

“Hey, wait,” Tang Buqi said. “It’s already getting dark. Where are you planning to go?”

Zhao Changhe looked up at the sky, where those golden words still flickered. “Regardless of where I go, how can I not be part of this storm?”

Chapter 183: How Can I Be Absent

The night was dark and windy.

On the east bank of Taihu Lake, an army of several thousand was gathering to fetch water and make food.

They were not particularly disciplined, and they were making a fair bit of noise, which was particularly loud in the quiet of the night. However, compared to the military forces that Zhao Changhe had seen before in Yangzhou and Gusu, this army could be considered much more orderly. Indeed, in comparison, they were a well-trained elite force.

This was the vanguard army led by the Ten Abodes Bodhisattva Fa Sheng.

The so-called Ten Abodes Bodhisattva was not a title for Fa Sheng, but a rank within the Maitreya Cult, given to someone who had killed countless beings. The term “Ten Abodes” also referred to the position of a Bodhisattva. By killing more, they could become Buddha.

When he planned to entice Zhao Changhe, Fa Yuan hoped that the latter could become a Ten Abodes Bodhisattva.

Fa Sheng had only just arrived in Wuxing the day before, and after a day and night of rest, he had made use of the night to circle northward around the lake, heading straight for Gusu.

The entire vanguard could not be considered large in terms of numbers. However, there were both troops on land and ships on the lake, which clearly showed that it was not just a rowdy gang.

Considering Fa Sheng's unstoppable momentum in the past few days, even with these limited numbers, they clearly had what it took to easily break into cities.

This was partly because within the cities, there were officials and citizens that were followers of the Maitreya Cult, and partly because the military forces in Jiangnan were even more disorganized than a mob. Surprisingly, during these times, it was actually the local aristocratic or noble clans who would display some resistance, as they looked down upon the Maitreya Cult.

However, the little bit of resistance they offered was futile. These clans were often nothing more than wastrels who only knew how to eat, drink, and enjoy themselves. When the vanguard forces arrived, their booming cries of defiance soon turned into trembling knees at the sight of the overwhelming forces. They would all claim to personally take Maitreya's head and offer it to the emperor, but when faced with this small army, their legs gave out.

And so, Fa Sheng wiped them out completely, and the waters of Jiangnan turned blood-red.

This was how a "strong army" was forged—by bullying the weak. At the beginning of the uprising, they were just a group of unorganized followers who had learned a few martial arts moves. But now, after winning several battles and equipping themselves with the loot from a couple of regions, they had developed a somewhat disciplined and formidable appearance. It wasn't just appearance either; they had actually grown stronger with each victory.

In the military tent, Fa Sheng was observing the terrain map when a follower called out to him. "Bodhisattva, scouts have reported that Gusu is fortifying its defenses and clearing out its surroundings. They seem to even be neglecting the autumn harvest, and there's not a soul to be found in the villages and towns nearby."

"Tang Wanzhuang must have made preparations during her stay in Gusu," Fa Sheng said calmly. He was a bulky and strong-looking monk with a beard similar to Lu Zhishen's. "It's a pity that Tang Wanzhuang cannot be in two places at once. She must stay in Jinling to counterbalance the presence of the cult leader. If the affairs of Gusu are being managed by people like Tang Wangsheng, then Tang Wanzhuang's efforts would simply turn out to be a waste."

Someone said, "Gusu still has some notable figures. It's said Tang Wangsheng and several others are at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate... Bodhisattva, with our limited forces and without any strong leaders present, what if someone decides to risk it all and attempt an assassination?"

Fa Sheng waved his hand dismissively, "Gusu doesn't have anyone on the Ranking of Man. Tang Wangsheng does not have that ability. Even if they're at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, if they

really try to carry out an assassination, a few rounds of arrows would be enough to turn them into hedgehogs. The Northern Buddha was killed by Xia Chichi because we did not have much influence in Jiangbei to begin with. The Buddhist temple there was being held in check by a powerful member of the Four Idols Cult, and the power dynamics were different.”

After a pause, he continued, “Even with Tang Wanzhuang’s strength, she would not dare to recklessly venture into dangerous territory. Once she becomes entangled with the cult leader and surrounded by thousands of troops, she would meet her end there. In the same way, the cult leader cannot casually rush into Gusu and take Tang Wangsheng’s head. Who knows what kind of ambush Tang Wanzhuang has prepared? If action is to be taken, absolute preparation is necessary. Victory in war is not decided by the presence of a single strong individual. That is our value.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

There were not many true powerhouses, the kind who could move freely within a large army. At the very least, there was no one as abnormal as Yue Hongling in Gusu.

A staff officer said, “From the incident with the Lu Clan, it’s clear that Gusu’s military is slacking and lacks capable leaders. However, the clans in Gusu may have become more diligent and determined as a result of that event. With plenty of food stored in the city, if they can organize their members to defend the city, it won’t be easy to take it down.”

“This is why we’re launching a surprise attack under the cover of night. They lack both respected leaders and war experience. They’re probably still considering how to leverage the terrain and allocate defense zones between the clans. Once the surprise attack catches them off guard, chaos will ensue. Our opportunity lies here. We can’t afford to wait for the main army to arrive and engage in a protracted battle. Otherwise, they may become more united and difficult to defeat.”

If Tang Buqi had been here, his heart would probably have skipped more than just a beat.

Fa Sheng seemed to have a perfect understanding of his thoughts and the current situation of Gusu. They were indeed in the process of allocating defense zones, preparing to engage in a back-and-forth battle with the Maitreya Cult.

Once the city was attacked at night, it was hard to predict how the Tang Clan would react, but the other clans would almost definitely be in chaos.

“Enough about that.” Fa Sheng pointed at the topographic map. “Look here, on the east bank of Taihu Lake....huh?”

Before he could finish speaking, hurried footsteps echoed from outside the tent as someone came in and said, “Bodhisattva, Bodhisattva, there’s a report from outside the camp. They said that they encountered frogmen in the lake. Some boats have sunk. We suspect that Gusu has sent some troops to launch a surprise attack!”[1]

“There are still such figures in Gusu?” Fa Sheng and the staff officers were surprised as they walked out of the tent. They saw the flames rising in the distance on the surface of the lake, mixed with shouts of alarm and anger.

“Where’s the person who reported this news?” Fa Sheng asked. “Take me to him. I’d like to learn more about the situation.”

The messenger was waiting by the reeds outside the camp. He was a tall young man with an ordinary appearance. He looked rather sallow, thin and malnourished. He looked like he had just gotten out of the water. He didn’t even have a weapon on him, and he looked rather disheveled.

Fa Sheng took one look and was not suspicious of the other party. There were quite a few young men like this in their army, so he asked, “Tell me more about what happened on the lake? How many frogmen did the enemy send? Did you fight them?”

The young man’s voice trembled as he spoke, “Bodhisattva, the other side sent many people. It’s dark and they were underwater, so I did not dare to fight them. I swam as fast as I could to the shore instead....”

After a moment of contemplation, Fa Sheng ordered, “Assemble the archers at the shore. Don’t leave the camp without authorization. Be cautious of any attempts to raid the camp. Send scouts to the forward outpost for reconnaissance.”

As he spoke, he looked at the young man with some suspicion. “I find it hard to believe that Tang Wangsheng has such capabilities. Why should I trust your words?”

The young man looked bewildered as if he did not understand what Fa Sheng was talking about.

His gaze inadvertently swept across the camp, observing most of the archers who were gathering around the shore.

Fa Sheng continued, "Wait a moment, show me your Immovable Wisdom King Seal[2]."

The young man formed the hand seal and said, "Is this how it's done, Bodhisattva? I'm not very familiar with it..."

This was one of the fundamental seals in Buddhism, widely mentioned in various scriptures. It was something that any follower or believer of the Maitreya Cult should know. However, it was normal for an ordinary follower who had yet to even take the vows to have improper form. There seemed to be nothing suspicious about the young man's actions.

The other officers nearby felt that Fa Sheng was being overly suspicious at this time. With a mishap in the lake involving boats, why bother checking the precision of a messenger's seal?

Even Fa Sheng himself could not see anything suspicious with the young man anymore. He simply corrected the young man's hand posture with an air of humility as he laughed and said, "Don't bend your thumb too stiffly here. This is how you do it..."

At that moment, the seemingly honest young man's hand seal suddenly transformed.

His fingertips moved delicately like swaying willows, softly blooming into shadowy flowers.

Everyone, including Fa Sheng and the officers, only saw vague shadows of the fingertips, and before they could react, they had already brushed against the Lieque acupoint at Fa Sheng's wrist.

Knowing the practices of the Maitreya Cult particularly well.... This action did not only affect the Lieque acupoint, but would go on to affect the Taiyin lung meridian as well. He struck both the upper and lower positions of the Lieque acupoint, making sure that he would hit it even if Fa Sheng had shifted its position.

In an instant, half of Fa Sheng's body went numb. He hastily retreated and shouted, "It's an assassin!"

Left and right, swords were drawn simultaneously, and they swung straight for the young man's head.

However, he slightly staggered his steps, gracefully shifting to the right. With a flick of his foot, a broad saber hidden in the reeds jumped into the palm of his hand.

Roar!

The saber rose and the wind roared!

With a sharp clang, several longswords surrounding him were broken in twain. Zhao Changhe leaped into the air, stepping on a broken sword that had been sent flying, soaring toward the retreating Fa Sheng.

“Zhao Changhe! This is that bastard Zhao Changhe!”

Fa Sheng was infuriated to the point of nearly vomiting blood. Where had Zhao Changhe learnt to perform such delicate acupoint strikes? And since when had he started disguising himself? Without his scar, it was incredibly difficult to imagine that the young man was actually Zhao Changhe!

He actually dares to launch a surprise attack right outside the camp and go for the leader's head!

A dark shadow loomed in the sky, covering the moonlight.

The only light was the bloody gleam in his eyes.

A fierce saber came down from heaven.

Dragon Bird howled, vicious qi surging into the sky.

The right side of Fa Sheng's body was paralyzed, and he barely managed to draw out his jiedao to defend himself. Countless swords, spears, and glaives thrust at Zhao Changhe from all directions. The archers who had been mobilized returned, drawing their bows and nocking their arrows.

If a painter were present, this scene would surely be immortalized as a painting of gods and demons locked in combat.

Crack!

The jarring sound of blades clashing resounded through the night sky.

Fa Sheng's jiedao inexplicably failed to block the strike, and Dragon Bird seemed to just slide past it. A gash mysteriously appeared on Fa Sheng's forehead, and he died before he could comprehend what happened. Before his death, he could not understand how Zhao Changhe's move, which clearly looked like it was Scattering the Gods and Buddhas, turned into the saber slipping past his defenses.

Wasn't it supposed to be Scattering the Gods and Buddhas? How did it turn into this awkward sword technique?

A long spear grazed Zhao Changhe's ribcage, splattering blood into the air.

Zhao Changhe moved with the grace of a dove, deftly avoiding two more sabers flying at his neck. He swept back with his saber, and the spearman's head flew into the air as blood spurted up from his neck.

Fwhoot!

With a whistle, the sound of hooves pounding the ground came from the side. A black horse with white socks came sprinting like lightning.

Zhao Changhe deflected another spear with his blade and suddenly kicked another officer in the chest. Using the rebounding force from the kick, he leaped to the side, soaring several zhang through the air and landing on his horse.

Snow-Treading Crow neighed and galloped into the night.

Countless arrows were shot toward him from behind. He deflected them with a horizontal swing of his blade, laughing heartily as he rode away. "The Ten Abodes Bodhisattva is weak, and the forces of the Maitreya Cult are nothing special! See you later, losers!"

Boom!

Flames erupted from the lake as the boats that had been set alight completely sank into the lake.

The entire military camp descended into chaos.

“Young Master Tang, why are you pacing back and forth like that?”

“I feel restless.” Tang Buqi paced back and forth along the city wall, looking at the guards in their designated areas. “What if Fa Sheng attacks tonight?”

“You’re overthinking it. Fa Sheng only entered Wuxing yesterday. If he comes with a vanguard force, how many troops could he possibly have? He’ll have to wait for the main forces to join him.”

“...But he entered Wuxing with just these troops, he did not wait for the main forces from Hangzhou to arrive.”

“Once the followers of Maitreya break into key cities and towns, wouldn’t they indulge in plundering, killing, and debauchery for a few days? How could they just come directly....” Tang Buqi paced back and forth, still uneasy. He turned around and asked Wu Weiyang, “Did my aunt talk about anything else to take special note of?”

Wu Weiyang sighed and said, “Since the bureau chief has entrusted you to take charge, you should exercise your independent judgment. You can’t always ask the chief about everything. We’re the ones here. Moreover, you’re not fighting alone, you can give orders.”

Someone nearby sneered, “But what if there’s no attack?”

Tang Buqi was about to respond when a flash of golden light appeared in the sky.

Everyone paused and looked up. The Tome of Troubled Times has been updated a little too frequently recently, hasn’t it?

On the seventh day of the sixth month, at midnight, Zhao Changhe launched an attack on the Taihu military camp, beheading Maitreya's Ten Abodes Bodhisattva Fa Sheng right at the entrance to their camp before leaving on horseback. None of the Maitreya's generals and officers could stop him.

The Ranking of Hidden Dragons has changed.

Rank 18: Zhao Changhe.

With stars shimmering in the sky, how can I be absent!

Tang Buqi squinted at the people from the other clans nearby, "What do you think is the point of this attack on Fa Sheng in this military camp?"

The crowd exchanged glances and opened their mouths as if wanting to say something, but then just shut their mouths again.

Tang Buqi said in a low voice, "I'm still a little behind... This is the stage for people like Zhao Changhe."

It was time indeed.

The northern barbarians came knocking on the gates of the south. Maitreya was rising from Jiangnan. Heroes were emerging as troubled times descended upon the world.

As winds and clouds stir, dragons and snakes begin their rise.

Chapter 184: Wang Clan of Langya

Ten thousand dragon boats weave through the green willows along the canal, sailing to Yangzhou but never to return.

It's as if heaven decreed the opening up of the Bian River, where there are to be no mountains for over a thousand li.[1]

A large boat flying the Cao Gang's flag headed north along the river.

During the chaos in Jiangnan, the Cao Gang had stopped sending resources from the south to the capital. In an unusual move, the imperial court had ordered for the resources in Jiangnan to be kept where they were. There were many young men from the Cao Gang who were now assisting the government in resisting the efforts of the Maitreya Cult to spread their influence. Wan Dongliu's secret identity as a member of the Four Idols Cult still had not been revealed nor come into play. The Cao Gang remained a legitimate organization closely tied to the government.

There were not many people on this boat at the moment, and the cargo being transported was just for the personal business of the Wan Clan. Their destination was not the capital, but Qingxu.

There was another thing special about this boat. It carried two passengers who were neither workers nor paid for passage. One of these shameless passengers even brought with him a horse. Ever since the global announcement that the Tome of Troubled Times issued, Zhao Changhe no longer dared to continue operating within the sphere of influence of the Maitreya Cult. If he were to get captured by them, the consequences he would have to face would be no joke. The very night that the Tome of Troubled Times displayed his change in ranking, he immediately headed north to Yangzhou and happened to hitch a ride on Wan Dongliu's boat to continue his escape northward.

Those who had taken this boat in hopes of going to Wushan, on the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, found that this boat was not headed toward the destination they had hoped. But in the current chaos of war, there were pretty much no boats that were going the right way. They much rather set off first and figure things out later. Heading north seemed like a good alternative—perhaps there would be places of safety at Yanmen Pass, perhaps....

The other passenger who had hitched a ride was Daoist Priest Xuan Chong. He was returning to his sect, the Taiyi Sect, which was on Mount Tai. Luckily for him, the boat was heading in the right direction as far as he was concerned.

At this moment, Xuan Chong was sitting on the bow of the boat, enjoying the breeze that blew on his face and leisurely drinking wine as he admired the picturesque scenery.

What made him find the experience particularly enjoyable was the presence of a chessboard right in front of him. Opposite him sat someone with a bear-like figure, sitting cross-legged with a furrowed brow. The other person had not made a move for about an incense stick's worth of time at this point.

"Brother Zhao," Xuan Chong said leisurely. "When you said that you didn't know how to play Go, we switched to chess[2]. But when it comes to chess, it seems that you can't handle it either. As for

Gobang, you're the one who made it up. Now that we're in a deadlock, what other game do you want to try next?"

Zhao Changhe sniffed and muttered under his breath, "Are you guys even martial artists anymore? You're all experts in the four arts. Also, you've never played Gobang before, right? How are you so good?"

"The rules for it are just too simple. There's no need to have played it before to do well in it," Xuan Chong said leisurely. "It's more accurate to say that when it comes to things other than martial arts, your brain is simply too...um...too...."

After hesitating for a while, it seemed like he could not come up with any way to say what he wanted lightly. But if he were to directly say stupid, he worried that the person sitting in front of him would get angry.

"I can play the guqin now, so don't you dare say that I don't have any talents in the arts," Zhao Changhe said. Feeling somewhat distressed, he pulled out a copper coin and handed it over. "Here, take it. I admit defeat. As expected, gambling really isn't my thing..."

Xuan Chong almost burst out into laughter at his expression.

During their journey, both of them claimed that they did not gamble, so they decided to just use a copper coin for entertainment.

I never thought that Zhao Changhe would feel so distressed from losing just a single copper coin. He seems really different from how people think of him.

"What are you smirking like that for? I was so busy diving and drilling holes into the boats that I forgot about the banknotes I was carrying. All my banknotes got soaked in the water, so now I have no money..." Zhao Changhe was very distressed. "Why aren't there any storage pouches in this world? It's so inconvenient. I even had to hide my saber in the reeds."[3]

Xuan Chong burst into laughter.

"Hey, Daoist brother, are the people in your sect cultivating to become immortals? Have you ever heard of things like storage pouches or storage rings, or do you know if they might have existed during the previous era?"

“It has been mentioned in stories, but I’ve never personally seen one,” Xuan Chong said thoughtfully. “As for such items having existed in the previous era.... Hmm, it seems quite possible. I mean, these items are basically a form of spatial magic. The people of today aren’t really capable of such things. However, just because we can’t does not mean that the gods and demons of the previous era also couldn’t. According to various legends, they were in fact capable of such feats. If you really need something of the sort, then maybe you can get lucky and stumble upon one in some ruins.”

Zhao Changhe curled his lips. The Sword Emperor’s tomb was actually a top-tier ruin in a sense; it was a pity that nobody dared to explore it too deeply. Besides some of the inheritances on the outskirts, there was not anything particularly valuable, let alone storage treasures. He wondered if Sisi had seen one. Unfortunately, nobody had mentioned anything about such items.

But even if they did exist, with the current level of cultivation that everyone had, they probably would not even be able to use them.... What would they use to access the items stored inside a storage ring? True qi? Nowadays, their level of true qi was not even enough to grab something and move it through the air....

Zhao Changhe wanted to experiment a bit and suddenly stretched out his hand, attempting to lift the pieces on the board up into the air. The pieces moved slightly, but he could not lift them up.

Xuan Chong did not know whether to laugh or cry. “Brother Zhao, you might be able to succeed with a piece of paper but forget about chess pieces. You don’t really have much of a chance at being able to do something special like that unless you’ve specifically practiced absorption-type martial arts, such as the Dragon Subduing Art, and you’ve grasped special types of energy.”

Zhao Changhe’s eyes lit up. “There are actually such kinds of martial arts? Where can I find them?”

“You can go check the Thieves Guild. Is there anyone else in this world who’s better at stealing things?”

“Well...”

Speaking of which, where has Ji Chengkong gone? Zhao Changhe suspected that the man had recognized Sisi. If he really did recognize her, then he probably left since he no longer needs to look for anyone. The Thieves Guild seems interesting. I’ll see if I can improve my relations with them if I have the chance.

Feeling that Xuan Chong was also quite knowledgeable, he took the opportunity to inquire about something else. “If I were to look for a powerful and aggressive fist art, which school is the most renowned? The Beggars Gang?”

“Although the Beggars Gang is indeed an option, their martial arts primarily focus on rod or staff arts. Their fist arts aren’t particularly famous. Besides, the Beggars Gang does not follow the path of aggression,” Xuan Chong said, looking puzzled. “It’s surprising how lacking you are in knowledge of the jianghu. I know you haven’t been in the jianghu for long, but you have a good relationship with Yue Hongling and First Seat Tang. Yue Hongling has traveled all over the world, while First Seat Tang has an extensive information network. What have you been talking about with them all this time?”

Zhao Changhe felt like slapping a clown mask onto his own face.

Xuan Chong continued, “If you’re looking for the most powerful and aggressive hand-to-hand combat art, then it’s undoubtedly His Majesty’s ‘My Fist.’ Its power and aggression are unmatched in the current era.”

“His Majesty’s what now??”

“That’s what His Majesty calls it.”

Zhao Changhe secretly wondered if everything the emperor had was given a name as cheesy as Dragon Bird.

“What’s next?”

“The next would be the Heaven-Suppressing Sea Palm belonging to the Wang Clan of Langya, and the fist art of the Black Tortoise from the Four Idols Cult. I don’t know the name of that one, but it’s said that a single punch can blast a person apart...”

Blasting a person apart might be believable if it was done by injecting true qi internally to cause an explosion, but relying solely on brute force to do so seemed a bit far-fetched to Zhao Changhe. After pondering for a moment, he felt that both the Wang Clan and the Black Tortoise were out of his reach. Could it be that he really was on the road to acknowledging another father?

“What about the Taiyi Sect? Are you really cultivators?”

“Our Daoist sect follows the path of using softness to overcome hardness. Although our hand-to-hand combat arts are good, they are not what you’re looking for.”

Is that so? Zhao Changhe looked at him thoughtfully, but did not pursue the topic further. Just as he was about to ask about the next tier of fist arts, the sound of rapid hoofbeats came from the distant shore.

Both of them had keen senses. Although the hoofbeats were distant, they sensed that the riders were approaching the boat them. They exchanged a glance and ended their conversation.

Before long, a cavalry troop swept over, halting at the shore in perfect formation.

The leader of the troop raised his voice and shouted, “Stop the boat!”

The boatmen of the Cao Gang were used to being unruly, so how could they care about what some random people said? They let the boat continue moving forward without even taking a second glance at the group.

“How daring! Has the Cao Gang become so audacious as to challenge our Wang Clan?” the leading cavalryman sneered. The next moment, he suddenly leaped into the air from the back of his horse, soaring toward the edge of the boat.

There was obviously quite some distance between the boat and the shore. When Zhao Changhe had to wait for Cui Yuanyang to row to the shore, he had to wait for quite a while before he could leap onto the shore. However, this cavalryman’s leap actually took him very close to the boat.

Zhao Changhe watched with great interest. Just as the cavalryman was about to start falling, he suddenly threw out a grappling hook, which accurately latched onto the edge of the boat. With the help of this hook, he smoothly landed on the bow of the boat.

The people on the shore saw this and cheered, “Amazing!”

Zhao Changhe also secretly praised the cavalryman in his heart. That move is quite interesting. I wonder if I can learn it. Damn, I've got too many things on me. It might not be convenient to do that.

The captain walked out of the cabin with a somewhat ugly look on his face. "The Wang Clan?"

The cavalryman replied proudly, "Indeed."

The captain thought to himself, This guy is really arrogant. If I had not heard you say that you were from the Wang Clan, you would have been shot full of arrows long ago.

Of course, since he was from the Wang Clan, he could afford to be arrogant. The Cao Gang did not really dare to offend him. The captain could only swallow his anger and ask, "May I ask why the Wang Clan has called for my boat to stop?"

The cavalryman did not answer. Instead, there was suddenly a loud smack as he slapped the captain across the face, causing him to stumble backward.

Xuan Chong stood up abruptly, and Zhao Changhe's gaze instantly turned fierce.

The man suddenly felt a chill run down his spine as if he were being eyed by a fierce tiger. However, he did not know which of the two men on the bow of the boat the feeling was coming from.

Chapter 185: King of Hell

The captain was furious after being slapped, but he endured it, covering his cheek and remaining silent.

The Cao Gang was not actually too afraid of the Wang Clan, but they might not want to escalate things over a minor scuffle involving their subordinates, so if he retaliated and got beaten up, nobody would do anything about it.

The cavalryman's gaze swept across the bow of the ship, and the first person he saw was Xuan Chong. "So you really were here, Daoist Priest Xuan Chong."

Xuan Chong was astonished. “From your words, it seems as if you expected me to be here?”

“Yes, we went to Mount Tai a few days ago. Our master mentioned that you have been traveling around the southern regions for quite some time, so we went to look for you in the south. As we were moving around, we happened to hear someone say that they saw you on the bow of the Cao Gang’s ship, so we came to see if it was true.”

Xuan Chong frowned slightly. “What’s so urgent for you to look for me so intently?”

The cavalryman took out what seemed to be an invitation and said, “It will be our young master’s birthday soon, and he specially invited peers on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons to the banquet. Our group has been tasked with inviting ten or twenty distinguished individuals.”

“That’s it? You intercepted a boat, boarded it forcibly, and even resorted to violence over such a small matter?”

“A mere boatman dared to defy the will of our Wang Clan. If he gets hit, it’s nothing but his own fault.”

Xuan Chong’s expression turned grim. This was because it seemed as if his friend’s subordinate had ended up getting hit because of him, so he felt extremely frustrated.

However, the Taiyi Sect and the Wang Clan were both situated in Langya Commandery. Although they were not very close, they were still in the same vicinity. Getting into a fight would only bring trouble to both sides, so he gritted his teeth and refrained from taking action. He merely waved his sleeve and said, “I have no intention of associating with Young Master Wang. I won’t be attending this banquet of his. Please leave me be.”

The man sneered. “Just because someone is on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons doesn’t mean that they can attend our young master’s banquet. You should know that the so-called Ranking of Hidden Dragons only assesses potential, not actual strength. But what’s the point of potential if you don’t do anything with it? If our young master’s intention is to invite those with nothing but empty fame for their so-called potential, then it would be better to not invite them at all.”

Even clay figurines would have been enraged by such words, and Xuan Chong finally became furious, “Do you mean to say that you intend to test my worth before you even consider giving me an invitation?”

The cavalryman arrogantly replied, “Exactly. If you can beat me, then even if you aren’t on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, you’ll be qualified to attend the banquet. But if you can’t defeat me, then it’s no longer a matter of whether or not you accept the invitation. It’s about... qualification!”

Xuan Chong had no intention of accepting the invitation anyway, but he could not hold back his anger from the blatant provocations of the cavalryman from the Wang Clan. With a swift motion, he drew his sword and coldly said, “Then it seems I’ll be snatching an invit—”

Before he could finish speaking, a burly man who had been sitting quietly beside a chessboard suddenly stood up and threw a kick at the cavalryman’s groin.

The cavalryman was taken aback and twisted his hips to dodge, but the swift kick seamlessly turned into a graceful step, allowing the burly man, who look like a clumsy bear, to skillfully maneuver to his side. Like an unfolding fan, the burly man’s palm swiftly moved toward the cavalryman’s face.

The cavalryman urgently tried to dodge again.

But then, the palm turned into a blur, and the burly man’s fingers blossomed like a flower and brushed against the acupoints on cavalryman’s chest.

The man instantly went numb and found himself losing all his strength.

The burly man leisurely grabbed his collar with his left hand, and delivered a series of slaps to his face with his right hand, knocking out one of his teeth in the process.

He then laughed and said, “Oh my, and here I thought you were someone capable. After all, you dared to measure yourself against the heroes of this world. But in the end, you’re nothing but a joke! Pathetic!”

In the next moment, the cavalryman felt as if he were flying through the clouds as he was sent flying through the air before he eventually fell into the river with a loud splash.

The burly man clapped his hands and spat into the river. “When the northern barbarians came knocking at Yanmen Pass, why didn’t your young master measure himself against Chi Li? Go crawl

back home and tell your young master to keep his banquet to himself and fuck off with his invitations! What a fucking prick!”

Splashing around in the water, the cavalryman shouted angrily, “Who are you to provoke the Wang Clan? Do you dare say your name?”

Xuan Chong finally laughed out loud. “Ha! You’re responsible for inviting ten or twenty distinguished individuals, no? Then you can’t say that he provoked you. After all, you said with your own mouth that you were going to see if he was qualified. It’s just that the assessment was carried out a bit earlier than you planned.”

The other riders on the shore looked at the burly man’s face in astonishment, suddenly recalling a certain someone.

“Bloodthirsty Asura Zhao Changhe...”

His name cast a shadow on their hearts.

In fact, most of the people on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons did not have many notable achievements. Many were recognized by the Tome of Troubled Times for an outstanding feat they accomplished in their early years. But afterward, they would often not have any more remarkable deeds. Wan Dongliu and Tang Buqi were typical examples of this, with one being low-key while the other stagnated.

With that in mind, there was nothing wrong with these envoys measuring the actual strength of such distinguished individuals before properly offering them an invitation. Xuan Chong had not shown his prowess in quite some time, and it was said that he had even been embarrassingly suppressed by Chi Li. Naturally, others could not help but wonder if he was merely living on past glory.

But someone like Zhao Changhe, who had been riding his horse around the world and cutting down his opponents for the past half a year, was a true demon drenched in blood. Moreover, just a few days before, he had escaped unharmed after cutting down several enemies right in the middle of an enemy camp, including the Ten Abodes Bodhisattva, who was at the sixth layer of the Profound Gate.

In such an environment, not to mention cutting down someone at a higher cultivation level, even if he had merely sliced a watermelon, it would have been enough for him to boast about for a year. If

they had known that he was here too, they might not have dared to mention measuring his strength. His weighty feats spoke for themselves.

But this guy isn't carrying his broad saber on him, and his moves actually looked elegant and refined. Who would have recognized him?

The cavalryman who had been slapped and sent into the river did not speak up anymore. He obediently let his companions pick him up and only spoke up once more when he reached the shore, saying, "Young Master Zhao, if we knew that you were here, we would not have dared to measure your strength.... Our young master instructed us to just invite you over."

"What the fuck..." Xuan Chong was so angry that he laughed in exasperation. He shook his head and sat back at the chessboard, too stumped to say anything else.

Zhao Changhe chuckled in annoyance, "I actually prefer the unruly way you were acting just now. Anyway, your young master's behavior makes me suspect him of being a complete idiot. I'm afraid of being infected by his idiocy, so I won't be going."

The cavalryman rubbed his cheek, feeling that they might actually end up failing their task. His mind raced thinking about measures to mitigate the damage, and a bright idea suddenly struck him. "But there will be quite a few of your acquaintances who will be attending the banquet. Won't you go to see them?"

Zhao Changhe said, "Yue Hongling is no longer on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons. Besides, I doubt that she would be in the mood for such nonsense. As for Xia Chichi, I doubt that you would even be able to find her. And even if you managed to do so, she probably wouldn't bother attending either. Is there anyone else? Cui Yuanyong? Han Wubing?"

The cavalryman smiled apologetically and said, "Young Master Cui will probably not be going because he's engaged to our young lady, and according to etiquette, they can't meet before the wedding. However, Miss Cui Yuanyang will be attending."

"..." Zhao Changhe had not expected Cui Yuanyang to be allowed to go out so soon again. He had not even considered her, so he was caught off guard. After a while, he gestured with his hand and said "We'll see what happens."

His expression seemed to transcend the world, and he revealed a kind and comforting smile.

Indeed, it's been quite a while since we last met. I really want to see that little girl again. I wonder if she's still as cute as before.

The onlookers could not help but think, We also prefer your unruly attitude just now....

And thus, the farce came to an end. The other cavalymen helped their leader back onto his horse before leaving in a dejected manner.

The boat captain stepped forward and expressed his gratitude, "Thank you both for speaking up for me."

Xuan Chong waved his hand and said, "I'm ashamed. I couldn't actually bring myself to confront them. I only drew my sword when I couldn't hold back my anger. I'm nowhere near as bold as brother Zhao. He didn't give the Wang Clan any face at all." "I'm too lazy to wait for them to come and confront me with their petty intentions. What a joke," Zhao Changhe said. "Since you seem to know the Wang Clan fairly well, do you know why they're sending out invitations to a banquet? Is it just purely to have fun with guests like us? They can't be that stupid, can they?"

Xuan Chong chuckled and said, "It's more probable that they're inviting such figures to be sparring partners. After all, it's not very convenient to venture out alone for training, so they invite talents such as those on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons for practice. Similar incidents have taken place before, and someone has even been killed by mistake. In a sense, this invitation could be considered a summons from the King of Hell...."[1]

Zhao Changhe was astonished. "This is outrageous! Are they trying to offend the entire world?"

"Generally speaking, it's considered an honor to receive an invitation from the Wang Clan. Going to become a sparring partner does not necessarily mean that they will end up getting killed by mistake. If one can form a good relationship with them, it would be very beneficial for them in the future," Xuan Chong sighed. "Not everyone is like you, having connections with the Cui Clan right from the start. Looking up to these top-tier clans. most people are more inclined to fear and flatter them."

"Hmph, how arrogant. It seems like the Cui Clan has much better manners."

Xuan Chong secretly thought that that might not necessarily be the case. Cui Yuanyong or Cui Yuanyang might be alright, but what about others?

Individuals could never represent the entire clan. In the eyes of outsiders, there was not much of a difference between the Cui Clan and the Wang Clan. The Wang Clan's actions might not matter much to the Cui Clan either, especially since they were even intermarrying.

Besides...the Wang Clan was the empress's family, the birth mother of the deceased crown prince.

The truth behind the crown prince's death was still unclear, with at least a hundred different theories circulating. Tang Wanzhuang had never brought this matter up with Zhao Changhe, and she might not even have a clear understanding of it herself.

Seeing Zhao Changhe lost in thought, Xuan Chong said, "Of course, whether this is actually the purpose of the invitations is hard to say. I'm just guessing. It might not be the case in the end. Are you really considering going?"

Zhao Changhe came back to his senses, then grinned and said, "It would be best if there was something to it. I'd like to see what kind of Kings of Hell they really are!"