

T. Times 281

Chapter 281: Darkness, Bloodlust, and Death

The night grew deeper.

Zhao Changhe stumbled out of the tent.

Immediately, a guard stepped forward to stop him with a nervous smile, speaking in broken Central Plains Mandarin, “Mister Zhao, where are you going?”

Zhao Changhe squinted at him. “What, am I a guest or a prisoner? Is it any of your business where I go?”

“Uh, no, it’s just that this is a military camp. It’s not safe to wander around...”

Zhao Changhe scanned the circle of guards and smiled. “Did your khan tell you to take good care of your honored guests?”

“Yes, yes, he did...”

As they spoke, the guards felt a growing sense of respect for Zhao Changhe. Their khan’s orders to treat him well seemed to magnify in their minds, while the instructions to keep an eye on him and prevent him from leaving the tent faded away.

It was not just a single guard who felt this way either, all the guards nearby felt increasingly positively toward Zhao Changhe. His words subtly guided their thoughts, making them increasingly confused.

Having touched upon the door of the Profound Mysteries, Zhao Changhe could now exert a certain degree of mental and spiritual influence. The mental control derived from the Pure Bliss Art, which had been relatively useless in the past, had now become practically applicable.

Originally, the Maitreya Cult used this technique to sway the minds of followers. Later, it became more notorious and began being used to seduce women, but for some reason, Zhao Changhe found it more useful for manipulating men...

The technique's effect was similar to the fear induced by the Vicious Blood Art. If he could combine these effects, it could probably have significant impact on future battles.

And his success right now was the best evidence.

When he deceived the guards of the Lu Clan in Gusu, he had to disguise himself to enhance the effect, and he faced only a few people. Here, among many, without any disguise and relying solely on direct speech, he was still able to affect so many people. Clearly, there was a qualitative leap in its effects.

It's actually working... Thanks to the absolute difference in our power, these soldiers can't resist the subliminal suggestions.

"I need to relieve myself."

"Well, there's a chamber pot in the tent."

"I don't like using chamber pots. Can't you just let a grown man like me find a corner and be done with it?"

"Uh, you're right..."

“If you don’t want me wandering around the military camp, then why don’t you just follow me?” Zhao Changhe turned around and walked toward the corner of the tent. “Come along, come along.”

After he said that, a group of guards followed him in a daze.

A red figure flashed behind him. Yue Hongling seized the opportunity to slip away.

Seeing Yue Hongling disappear into the darkness, Zhao Changhe stopped with a smile and relieved himself behind the tent. Casually, he asked, “Is the khan entertaining new guests?”

“Yes.”

“Are they still eating right now? Are they staying in the main tent or in separate guest tents?”

“The khan is hosting them in the main tent, and they definitely won’t be staying there. There are separate guest tents for them.”

“Where are the guest tents? As a guest myself, I’d like to have a look at them.”

“Oh, sir, please come with me...”

Without realizing it, the guards had forgotten what their original duty was, and they were even waiting on him as he answered the call of nature. They were now serving Zhao Changhe as if he were their master, complying with his every request.

Zhao Changhe followed the guards through several twists and turns to a location he would not have been able to find on his own.

As he moved around the camp, the other members of the tribe did not even question him, seeing that he was being escorted by their own soldiers.

When he arrived nearby, Zhao Changhe looked at the tent guards from a distance and waved amicably. "Alright, you can go about your own duties now."

The guards who were with him saluted and retreated. "Understood, sir, have a good rest."

Watching them leave, Zhao Changhe suddenly slipped into the shadows around the corner.

Yue Hongling silently appeared beside him, her eyes narrowed and glinting mischievously. "Hey, you..."

"Hm?"

"Did you ever use this trick on me? Is that why I fell for you?"

Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh.

Knowing her question was unreasonable, Yue Hongling grumbled for a while before saying, "Anyway, you better not use this on any other girl, or I'll be the first to take your head!"

"Yeah, yeah, you can definitely take my head...."

Yue Hongling's eyebrows shot up.

Zhao Changhe tugged at her sleeve. “Someone’s coming.”

Yue Hongling quieted down, crouching beside him.

In the distance, along the torch-lit path, Batu was personally escorting the envoy Ubalu had sent, clearly indicating his current inclinations.

Both of them gripped their weapons.

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The banquet that Batu held for the envoy was far grander than the reception he held for Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling.

Deep down in his heart, Batu felt that his interactions with Zhao Changhe were somewhat shady. On the other hand, he faced the envoy from the khagan’s side at a psychological disadvantage, leading him to even arrange an exceptionally grand reception for the other party. The banquet featured lavish servings of beef and lamb, with women dancing to liven the atmosphere, and important figures from the tribe gathered.

In fact, it was not just a single envoy but rather a delegation. There were over ten delegates who had come, necessitating an even grander affair.

Amidst the singing and dancing, the lead envoy began with a reprimand, “Khan Batu, why were you so hasty? I visited your camp only to find it empty, only to turn around and then turn around again.”

Batu cursed inwardly. Do you really think I would just sit and wait for you to come and allow you to keep the Warring Lion Tribe divided? I’m not stupid.

However, he could only heartily laugh on the surface. “What are you saying? We had no idea that you were coming. Had we known, we would have surely prepared a feast for you first.”

At this point, the envoy had no choice but to accept the situation. The khagan’s desire for the Warring Lion Tribe to be divided was a clear yet unspoken agenda. Moreover, Batu was not entirely without backing. He had a connection with the shaman temple and decent relations with Chi Li. They had to consider what stance the temple would take should things get truly tough for him.

Given their delayed arrival and the Warring Lion Tribe’s unification, there was not much that they could do anymore.

They could only say that Batu’s recent military campaigns were exceedingly impressive. He swiftly and decisively attacked the Desolate Wolf Tribe, stabilizing internal affairs with the seized resources, winning over wavering allies, and rapidly striking down dissenters. The khagan’s main forces were still locked in a standoff with Huangfu Yongxian, and by the time news reached him, the once-fragmented Warring Lion Tribe had nearly unified, with only He Shan left resisting. In the end, their attempt to save He Shan had still come too late.

This demonstrated that while Batu might not be the most formidable individual warrior, his military acumen was exceptional. His ability to seize opportunities and command troops was top-notch. Frankly, even his personal strength was respectable—after all, becoming a hidden dragon was no small feat. He had inherited He Lei’s complete legacy, and with more time and a larger stage, his future was limitless.

The envoy continued, “Khan He Lei’s unexpected death in the Central Plains left the Warring Lion Tribe unable to participate in the war, which was a significant loss for our side. This setback slowed our advance, and the khagan has been deeply distressed. But now, knowing that He Lei has a worthy successor should bring some comfort to the khagan.”

Batu replied, “I must thank the khagan for his concern.”

The envoy said, “With first snow approaching, the battles between the khagan and Huangfu Yongxian have intensified., with multiple large-scale engagements and many casualties on both

sides. Since Khan Batu has stabilized internal affairs, shouldn't you join the campaign on Yanmen?"

Batu replied calmly, "I have just conquered He Shan's tribe, and there are still some remnants to be dealt with. Besides, I'm still young, and not everyone in the tribe acknowledges me. Raising a large army to join the campaign might prove a bit difficult at the moment."

"The khagan will issue an edict to all tribes, publicly declaring Khan Batu's legitimacy and bestowing upon you the title of Warring Lion King. What do you think of this?"

Batu was overjoyed. This was exactly what he had hoped for.

Nominally, Batu was He Lei's nephew, but in reality, he was He Lei's biological son, born after He Lei had an affair with Batu's mother. Since he had no children with his own wife, He Lei had always favored his "nephew," treating him as his own and passing on the tribe's treasured heirlooms to him. Even without an official will, the tribal elders understood that the inheritance rightfully belonged to Batu.

So then, why were his uncles and brothers still fighting over the inheritance?

This was because the khagan used the excuse of being too preoccupied with the war to deal with internal issues, tacitly allowing others to vie for power. After all, Batu was not He Lei's legitimate son, and that was enough to provide others an excuse to vie for power.

As long as the khagan acknowledged Batu, all the internal unrest would cease to exist, and his position would become unassailable. Moreover, other tribes would no longer dare to cover his resources; there would no longer be any tribes like the Desolate Wolf Tribe who would intercept their resources. The Warring Lion Tribe was one of the largest and most powerful tribes, and it was not to be taken lightly.

Most importantly, with the title of “king,” his political capital would change dramatically. For instance, Ubalu, who had been commanding him arrogantly, would have to kneel before him in the future.

Conquering the Desolate Wolf Tribe had already been tacitly approved of, making his subsequent plans to subdue Hu Lie’s tribe more feasible.

Compared to the precariousness of rebellion and the uncertain support from Great Xia, this seemed much more practical.

Seeing that Batu was swayed, the envoy added, “Additionally, when Hu Lie went missing, there were suspicions within his tribe that you were involved. I will take responsibility for mediating this matter.”

Batu was overjoyed. “I deeply appreciate your help! This has been causing me a headache recently. Hu Lie was defeated by Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling. That had nothing to do with me!”

The banquet proceeded joyfully, and as the envoy became tipsy, he said, “I will retire now. I need to report back to the khagan early tomorrow. If we can break through Yanmen, you could be more than just the Warring Lion King—you could become the King of Jin!”[1]

Batu was deeply moved, and he began to genuinely care for the envoy’s safety. He secretly thought that if the envoy headed back drunk, should Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling attack him, he would truly be in trouble. As such, he personally helped the envoy stand up and said, “I will escort you myself.”

He then whispered instructions to his men, “We’ll have a team of elites escort me and the envoy. Assign troops to tightly keep watch of the tent where Zhao Changhe is... No, just seize him.”

In his own camp, Batu led hundreds of men to surround himself and the envoy, escorting him to the VIP tent. Only when they were outside the tent did he stop, instructing his soldiers to surround the tent. Only when he believed it to be absolutely secure did he smile at the envoy and say, “Then I won’t disturb your rest.”

The envoy waved drunkenly.

Batu turned to leave, but he had only taken a few steps when a chilling sensation crept into his heart.

He instinctively turned to see Yue Hongling flying toward him menacingly. The figure who had saved him just hours ago was now seeking his life.

“Assassin!” Batu drew his saber and shouted, “Protect me!”

A group of personal guards, already prepared, surrounded Batu. Yue Hongling leaped onto one of their shoulders, soaring like an eagle. Then, from her elevated position, she thrust her sword toward Batu’s face. Under the moonlight, the murderous intention in her eyes was clearly visible.

“She wants to kill me...” Batu thought. He retreated rapidly to avoid her deadly strike.

Countless soldiers surged in from all directions, even the guards around the envoy’s tent instinctively moved to block Yue Hongling’s escape route.

The envoy, standing outside the tent, saw the commotion and shouted, “All of you, go help your kha—”

Before he could finish his sentence, a broad saber seemed to “grow” from the shadows, silent and unseen, not even stirring the air.

The entire space seemed to freeze—no wind, no moonlight, only boundless darkness, bloodlust, and death.

Following Scattering the Gods and Buddhas and No Man's Land, the Vicious Blood Saber Art had a third ultimate technique that could only be used at the eighth layer of the Profound Gate: "Hell on Earth."

The envoy only realized the imminent danger when the blade was already at his throat. He quickly drew his saber to block it.

However, all he saw was a pair of blood-red eyes, and it felt as if Death was staring right at him, appearing before him to claim his life.

Fear surged through his heart, and his hand, still in the process of raising his saber, froze momentarily.

In that brief moment, the broad saber swept across his neck, and his head flew into the air.

Zhao Changhe caught his head, lifted it high, and shouted, "The khan is exceedingly wise in his preparations. I have successfully executed the fiend. What shall I do next?"

The envoy's guards were stunned.

All of Batu's men were stunned.

Yue Hongling kept her sword and retreated, a smile playing in her eyes that had just been filled with killing intent.

Batu looked at Yue Hongling in midair, and then at Zhao Changhe holding the severed head. His eyes finally showed a trace of ruthlessness, “What else? Of course, kill the rest of the delegation! Leave none of them alive!”

He took a deep breath and said something that others might have mistaken for a sign of camaraderie. “Zhao Changhe, fuck your mom!”[2]

Chapter 282: The First Light of Dawn

Inside the tent, Batu faced the treacherous couple with a stern face.

At the moment, Batu felt like an utter fool.

He truly could not comprehend how, even though he had taken precautions, Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling could still so easily decapitate the envoy while surrounded by countless of his troops. Their capabilities aside, their sheer boldness was unparalleled. And there were two of them.

Not only had they managed to kill the envoy, but they also pinned it all on him perfectly. If the delegation that came with the envoy escaped and reported back, even if he killed Zhao Changhe, who would believe his explanation that Zhao Changhe had acted alone? At the very least, it was impossible for the khagan to believe it.

With no other choice, he had to order the killing of everyone that came with the envoy. Naturally, issuing such an order in front of the entire army meant that there was no turning back.

At this moment, even if Zhao Changhe stretched out his neck for him to chop, Batu would not dare to touch him, no matter how angry he was. With things as they were, if he did not draw on the support of Great Xia, he would not have any place to die, much less live.

Regardless, it seemed that they did not trust him anymore.

Just after entering the tent, Yue Hongling pressed a finger to one of his acupoints, causing excruciating pain and itchiness throughout his body. “This is my unique Sunset Glow Flickering Finger; consider it a lesson. From now on, as long as my true qi can reach you, I can make you explode at any time, leaving you without even an intact corpse. I don’t know if Timur can undo it, but even if your uncle came back to life, he probably would not be able to.”

Batu, drenched in cold sweat from the, said, “Is this really necessary? At this point, do you think I still dare make any moves against you? I already have no other choice but to follow you to the end.”

Yue Hongling said coldly, “Barbarians have no integrity; don’t blame me for being ruthless.”

Zhao Changhe sat nearby, pouring himself a drink, thoroughly enjoying his wife’s performance. The more he watched, the more pleased he felt.

Yue Hongling had traveled the world on her own for many years, and this had allowed her to learn to be ruthless and never hesitate. She would never show mercy easily.

Hehe, how did I win over such a wonderful woman? I must really be incredibly handsome.

Batu could only accept his fate, enduring the torturous pain for half an hour before it finally began to subside. He then meekly poured drinks for them, as if nothing had even happened.

Zhao Changhe thought to himself that Batu was indeed quite a character. How did I ever come to think that this guy was just a big, dumb brute?

Finally, Zhao Changhe sighed and said, “Brother Batu, why the long face? If Hongling had not saved you, you would have died under He Shan’s spear. But then you just so happened to turn on us and cozy up to the envoy sent by Timur while also placing us under tight watch. Are you upset that we did not willingly stretch our necks out for you and we ruined your grand plan to become some Lion King?”

Batu replied sullenly, “Alright, you know why I’m upset. We’re not friends; we each have our own plans. Now that you succeeded, that’s all there is to it. I have to admit, Zhao Changhe, you’re a real man. Your courage, boldness, and martial skills are truly impressive. Now that I’ve fallen into your trap, just tell me what you want me to do.”

“Before that, let’s clarify one thing.”

“What is it?”

“Who’s fucking whose mother?”

Batu’s face blushed red. After a moment, he turned to Yue Hongling and shouted, “Mom!”

Yue Hongling had just taken a sip of wine and ended up spitting it out, nearly choking.

Zhao Changhe was also astonished, “Brother Batu, I never realized you were such a quick-witted person.”

Batu, expressionless, replied, “You’re too kind, too kind. I’m far from being as clever as you.”

“Why do you look like you’ve been cheated?” Zhao Changhe leaned back in his chair and sipped on his wine leisurely. “I’m helping you take the right path. Timur’s intention to swallow your tribe is practically written on his face. Do you really think a few promises can make you take over your uncle’s status and rest easy? Are you still dreaming? Even your uncle was just a servant to him back then, and you think you can surpass him? I’d love to see how your royal days go after you become whatever king.”

Batu secretly thought that with Hu Lie as his backup, it really was possible for him to achieve a status even higher than his uncle's. He believed that it was entirely possible for him to develop his forces into an independent but still cooperative entity.

However, he did not voice this thought. Instead, he said, "It's not easy to make the decision to oppose the khagan. It would be much better if we could coexist peacefully. Especially after tonight, I've realized that if Yue Hongling is determined to assassinate me, I might not survive. So, what about if the khagan were to personally come to kill me? I didn't realize that the gap was so massive before, but today, the two of you practically opened my eyes, so now I'm even more worried."

"So, you really were fearless out of ignorance before."

"Not entirely. The khagan and your emperor are wary of each other. At Yanmen, he's only been in the rear command tent, he never personally took action. And why would he involve himself in tribal disputes? Besides, I have some connections in the temple. As long as things don't get too ugly, the khagan would not lower himself to personally assassinate someone like me. He still has his pride."

"Fair point," Zhao Changhe thought to himself. Xia Longyuan is the same, whoever says that he'd personally go out to kill a warrior at the seventh layer of the Profound Gate would probably be the first to receive a slap from him.

Batu sighed. "But if it comes to a complete falling out and a power struggle, then it's a different story. The khagan would no longer have such scruples or reservations. Taking my head would be child's play for him. Your emperor would not come to my aid, would he? Even if you promised me something like that, I would not believe it."

Zhao Changhe touched his chin and said, "If you're worried about that, how about I offer you another kind of support?"

Batu sneered. "What, is the Saibei Buddha going to bring up Cult Leader Maitreya again? Even if it were Maitreya, he's no match for the khagan."

Zhao Changhe rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry about that. I know more Ranking of Heaven experts than you can imagine.”

Batu was taken aback, realizing that there might be some truth to that. Apart from the emperor of Great Xia, Zhao Changhe indeed had sway with Cui Wenjing and reportedly had a good relationship with Situ Xiao. Who knew if Situ Xiao’s master, Li Shentong, was also in his circle?

That made three experts on the Ranking of Heaven that Zhao Xianghe knew personally, while Batu had never even seen so many.

Zhao Changhe stared at Batu. “Given the current situation, hesitation is useless. If I can find someone to restrain Timur, would you, Batu, dare to stab the Khagan of the Golden Horde in the back during the decisive battle at Yanmen?”

Batu’s breathing grew heavier.

Zhao Changhe said slowly, “You also have the temple backing you... If Timur can be the Khagan of the Golden Horde, why can’t you?”

“Stop it. You want me to attack the khagan from the rear, but that’s incredibly difficult.” Batu took a deep breath. “To reach Yanmen, we must pass Huangsha Market. If we move past Huangsha Market, then Ubalu could attack me from behind, and I’d be marching to my death. If I attack Huangsha Market first, I can’t guarantee that no one escapes. If the khagan gets wind of any such plans, I would still die.”

A smile surfaced on Zhao Changhe’s face. “What if I can make sure that Ubalu won’t attack you from the rear?”

“Are you sure? Don’t tell me that you plan to assassinate Ubalu...” Batu glanced at Yue Hongling, who had not yet spoken. “Even if Miss Yue could kill me, she would not have been able to escape. Are you really willing to risk your lives against Ubalu?”

“Whether we can do it or not... you have no choice. Do you dare to take the gamble?”

Success would mean dominating the Grasslands; failure would mean death and the destruction of his tribe.

Would he dare to risk it?

Batu gripped his wine bowl tightly, crushing it into powder with a loud crack.

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The moon shone brightly amidst the sparse stars.

A Ferghana horse galloped out of the camp, heading straight for Huangsha Market.

Yue Hongling rode in front, with Zhao Changhe holding her waist as they sped along. After they had ridden over ten li, Yue Hongling finally spoke, “I doubt I can assassinate Ubalu. I don’t think I can even get into Huangsha Market. Did you lie to him?”

Zhao Changhe smiled and said, “You’re afraid I’m sending you into danger, aren’t you?”

Yue Hongling pouted. “I know you wouldn’t, but I just can’t figure out how you plan to do it. And your talk about getting a Ranking of Heaven expert sounds like a bluff. Is your real goal just to trick him into stabbing Timur, making Timur retreat, and not caring about what consequences the Warring Lion Tribe might face after?”

“Of course not. Even if he seems like he’s being led by my words, if he does not see any actual results, he could easily drag his feet, and it would all come to nothing.”

“So you can really deliver what he wants?”

“I can only say that I’ll try my best... This time, I’m not sending you into danger. You don’t even need to enter Huangsha Market.”

“Whoa!” Yue Hongling reined in the horse and turned back to look at him with a frown. “I won’t just stand by while you take such a huge risk.”

“It’s not like I don’t need you to do anything. There are many experts from the temple in the market. Your job is to lure them away. There’s no need for you to always directly fight them. Safety comes first.”

At Huangsha Market.

By the central Huangsha Lake, Chi Li and the temple shamans had been meticulously exploring the area for over twenty days, still relentless in their efforts.

They were convinced that this place was the exit of the secret realm. They believed that as long as they stood guard there, Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling would not be able to escape.

The first light of dawn reflected on the lake, making it shimmer like an enchanting secret realm.

Chi Li even experienced a few moments of martial arts enlightenment...

In the midst of his contemplation, a clear female voice drifted in from outside the market. “Chi Li, where are you?! Do you dare to come out and finish our unfinished battle from Yangzhou?”

Yue Hongling!

How could she be outside the market?

Chi Li stared dumbfoundedly at the lake he had been guarding for over twenty days, nearly spitting out blood.

Who the hell said this lake is the exit of the secret realm?

Chapter 283: Third Lady Yuan

Huangsha Market was in complete chaos.

Chi Li and the others from the temple dashed out, heading directly toward the direction of Yue Hongling’s voice.

A Ferghana horse, far superior to her previous poor steed, galloped away under the morning sun, quickly becoming a distant dot on the horizon. Yue Hongling’s mocking voice was carried by the wind. “Chi Li, I thought you had the heart of a true warrior. We agreed on a duel, yet you bring so many people to charge at me. Do you still consider yourself a warrior?”

Chi Li’s face turned grim. He ignored her taunt, waved his hand, and commanded as if he had not heard anything, “Chase her down!”

He did have the heart of a warrior, and he would have relished a fierce duel with Yue Hongling under different circumstances.

However, as someone from the temple, he prioritized finding the secret realm that had eluded countless people for many years, pursuing the guidance of the ancient Tngri.

Compared to this goal, his personal martial pursuits were secondary.

At this moment, Yue Hongling held important clues about the secret realm. He could not afford to let her escape.

“Where the hell did she get a Ferghana horse!” One of his subordinates panted heavily as they gave chase. “Did she get it from the secret realm?”

Yue Hongling turned around and shot an arrow, knocking one of the members of the temple off his horse. “Chi Li, if you have the guts, chase me on your own. Stop sending your men to their deaths!”

Chi Li took a deep breath and suddenly leaped off his horse, flying through the air.

His speed was far greater than that of a horse.

Yue Hongling glanced back, smiled slightly, and spurred her horse faster.

Seeing his terrifying speed, Yue Hongling judged that Chi Li must have indeed gotten a glimpse of the Profound Mysteries... He was undoubtedly the most promising in the Grasslands, worthy of once being the first hidden dragon. Furthermore, with the teachings of the Great Shaman, his strength had advanced rapidly, especially in areas related to the Profound Mysteries, far surpassing someone like her who had had to figure everything out on her own.

Fortunately, with Zhao Changhe’s help, she had kept pace and was at around the same level as Chi Li.

She was filled with fighting spirit, but unfortunately, she had not come to fight this time. Her mission was to distract the members of the temple to facilitate Zhao Changhe's plans. She would carry this out dutifully even if she did not know what exactly his plans were. What she had to do now was to lead these experts away as far as she could from Zhao Changhe.

Yue Hongling realized she had almost grown accustomed to working in tandem with Zhao Changhe. Whether it was exploring the secret realm, breaking open formations, attacking Batu, or beheading an envoy, she could not have done any of these on her own. Even at this moment, she was luring enemies away while he infiltrated the market.

Suddenly, she almost forgot what she used to do when she was alone.

Yue Hongling found herself enjoying this moment of facing enemies alone. It seemed that she still held hints of that solitary nature in her heart. While she cherished his companionship, she also enjoyed independence.

It was likely that Zhao Changhe felt the same.

They truly did see another version of themselves in each other.

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Amidst the chaos, Zhao Changhe once again disguised himself, smearing his face with the last of his disguise ointment before entering Rooms Available Inn.

With him having run out of the disguise ointment, this was probably the last time he would be using this disguise for the foreseeable future. If he wanted to disguise himself again in the future, he needed to find another set of the ingredients required to make the ointment... Or maybe I can just ask Sisi for another batch next time.

As this thought crossed his mind, he spotted Lady Three sitting on the bar counter, her little feet propped up as she went through a ledger.

Apart from her, the dining hall was completely empty.

It was not just the dining hall or the inn, actually; the entire market outside, which was usually as bustling as a busy port, was now eerily quiet.

The Warring Lion Tribe's battles, the urgency of the Yanmen campaign, the presence of the temple's personnel, and the lake having been designated as a restricted area all signaled a looming storm. Any merchant with a bit of sensitivity had already left in a hurry, and there were no more drunken patrons leering at Lady Three's charms.

Lady Three knew someone had come in, but she did not even raise her head to look up from her ledger. She sighed. "Wars, wars, what's the point of all these wars? All they do is make me lose money..."

She even sniffed for added effect. Her little feet kicked around in frustration. "A bunch of idiots!"

Zhao Changhe said expressionlessly, "Why is an old lady like you pretending to be a young girl?"

Lady Three: "?"

Zhao Changhe casually hopped onto a seat beside her on the counter and said lazily, "I have a big business deal for you. Interested?"

Lady Three looked him up and down and sneered. "Are you going to say that you want to buy me?"

“I already called you an old lady. Can’t you take a hint?”

Lady Three gritted her teeth. “I know your deals. They always make me pay, and it’s never about me making money! Just spill it—how much do you want for the secret of how to enter the secret realm?”

As she spoke, the doors and windows shut tightly on their own. At this moment, not even a fly could get out.

Zhao Changhe could see the malevolent intent behind Lady Three’s usual facade.

It seemed that she believed she could just capture and interrogate him rather than pay for the information she wanted.

Honestly, Lady Three had not expected Zhao Changhe to dare come to her inn all alone. Does he really think that I only sell drinks and flirt with my customers?

Facing Lady Three’s malicious gaze, Zhao Changhe acted as if he did not notice anything amiss. He nonchalantly reached behind the counter, pulled out a bottle of wine, and took a big gulp. “Jiangnan osmanthus wine is still better.”

Lady Three smiled seductively. “You can drink as much as you want, for the rest of your life if you wish.”

“There is no point in capturing and interrogating me. Even if you get answers from me, you won’t be able to avoid Ubalu and Chi Li. In the end, you’ll just be doing the dirty work for the barbarians. The best you can do is report to the fifth lord and have him come personally. But once he arrives, your personal ambitions will have nowhere to flourish. You’d be better off cooperating with me.”

Lady Three's eyes flashed with surprise, but she smiled and said, "What personal ambitions could I possibly have? I just love money..."

"Really?" Zhao Changhe was noncommittal and continued, "Then report to the fifth lord first. I'll give him information on the secret realm in exchange for him doing something for me. I don't have any need for your money nor you."

"Can you please tell me what you need the fifth lord to do first?"

"When Timur uses his Ranking of Heaven strength to bully others, I'll need the fifth lord to restrain him. I believe that he does not fear Timur."

"No wonder you said it conflicts with my personal ambitions... He indeed does not fear Timur, but if he intervenes, how will I continue to do business in the Grasslands?" Lady Three smiled seductively. "How about you give me the secrets, and I'll promise you anything..."

Zhao Changhe jumped sideways by three chi, landing on the edge of the counter.

Lady Three laughed. "Look at how scared you are. Is that necessary?"

Zhao Changhe said, "You should know that if you support another force, your business will thrive even more. Your ambitions do not lay in finding secret realms for the fifth lord... or rather, you aren't really working for the fifth lord at all."

Lady Three's expression turned cold.

Zhao Changhe jumped off the counter, walked to the window, and gazed into the distance. "I asked Batu... Huangsha Lake had a special name many, many years ago. It seemed to be called Black..."

Before he could finish, a jade hand was already at his throat.

But as the hand grabbed, it only got hold of a softly glowing gemstone.

Lady Three quickly withdrew her strength, her grasp turning into a gentle stroke along his neck. As she pulled back, the gemstone rested in her palm.

Lady Three's eyes shone even brighter than the gemstone.

“Maybe this isn't rightfully mine, but for some reason, both Hongling and I have always inexplicably felt that it should belong to you. Maybe it's because you've devoted your whole life to it, and it would be truly pitiful to take it from you; or maybe it's because if we did, we'd be in a fight to the death. I like Chichi, and I like Big Sister Fire Serpent of Yi. I don't want to be your enemy.”

As Lady Three listened, her expression started with surprise but turned playful at his mention of liking “Big Sister Fire Serpent of Yi.”

Zhao Changhe turned around and smiled brilliantly. “There was more in the secret realm, but first come, first served. I can't give you everything. Nevertheless, this gemstone should be what you need the most. I'm giving it to you for free, asking for nothing in return. I don't need your money nor you. So is there really a need for you to interrogate me?”

Lady Three smiled seductively. “Would you like to have your Big Sister Fire Serpent of Yi?”

“Yes. Can you help me woo her?”

“Heh...” Lady Three laughed softly while holding the gemstone, and then she burst into loud laughter. She clutched her stomach from laughing so hard. “Yes, I can help you with that.”

Zhao Changhe, though slightly annoyed by her laughter, said calmly, “You’ve always wanted this gemstone, not the secret realm itself. However, Ying Five is different. He wants the alternate space. You two no longer have conflicting interests. Can you convey my proposal to the fifth lord now?”

“Sure.” Lady Three moved toward the back of the house. After a while, a carrier pigeon took off.

“The fifth lord isn’t far from here. He’ll receive the message soon, and I can assure you that he will agree.” Lady Three looked at him with bright eyes. “You gave me this gemstone. Are you sure that you don’t need me to do anything in return? I can do anything for you.”

“Instead of asking you to do something, it’s more like we’re going to work together and do something that you’ve wanted to do for a long time and even tried to have others do for you.”

“Oh?”

“Kill Ubalu. I know you won’t kill him yourself because you’re worried the Tome of Troubled Times will expose you for it. But this time, I can take the blame for you.”

Lady Three’s eyes curved into a smile. “What a clever little man.”

“Just tell me whether you’ll do it or not.”

“I will.”

If anyone overheard the last two sentences, they might think that a delightful deal had been struck.

Chapter 284: One-Lady Army

Assassinating Ubalu itself was not difficult, but escaping unscathed was another matter.

At the beginning of the war, both Chi Li and Yue Hongling had taken the heads of leaders amidst their guards. Back then, defenses were lax, and the fights they fought were essentially duels. But after those assassinations, everyone had become much more vigilant.

Ubalu either stayed hidden in the well-guarded beast ring or traveled with an entourage of troops.

Beheading him was very much within their abilities, but escaping from a sea of soldiers afterward was a bit of an issue.

Batu believed that Yue Hongling and Zhao Changhe would not be able to pull it off without trading their lives, and Yue Hongling actually thought the same.

The assassins who carried out such operations were typically not expected to return alive. Even Jing Ke^[1] declared that he would never return before setting off.

However, while this operation might prove difficult to someone on the Ranking of Man, what about someone on the Ranking of Earth?

If Black Tortoise, who was ranked second on the Ranking of Earth, was willing to act, the operation could be said to have a very high likelihood of success. It might not even warrant a mention by the Tome of Troubled Times, as it was expected of her to be capable of such actions.

Lady Three was not truly worried about the Tome of Troubled Times exposing her.

As Ying Five's subordinate, Ying Five would never allow her to kill Ubalu and disrupt their search for the secret realm. If she were to kill Ubalu, she would have to wear a mask and do it as Black Tortoise.

But if Black Tortoise mysteriously appeared at Huangsha Market to assassinate Ubalu, any witnesses who saw that Black Tortoise was a woman would easily be able to deduce that she was Lady Three. She had been undercover for years, and she did not want all that time and effort to go to waste and have her identity as Black Tortoise be revealed.

So, although Lady Three had always wanted to kill Ubalu, she did not dare to act rashly. She kept on trying to convince others to do the dirty work for her, but no one was foolish enough to risk their life for nothing, leaving her at an impasse.

This time, however, things were different. When Zhao Changhe's message reached Ying Five, she would not even need to wear a mask. She could kill Ubalu openly as Lady Three.

With the help of others, she would not even need to display her full strength, making it the perfect opportunity.

This little man is quite the genius, hehe.

At that moment, Ubalu was by the lake at the beast ring, surrounded by people.

"Yue Hongling actually appeared outside. This goes to show that the lake has nothing to do with the secret realm." Ubalu was speechless. "Why was it called Black Tortoise Lake then? That only led to everyone being misled for so many years!"

If there was anyone from the south present, they would tell him that even Jinling had a Black Tortoise Lake and that names don't necessarily mean anything.[2]

Even Lady Three, who was from the south, had been misled.

“Third Lady Yuan has coveted this lake for years, but it turns out that both of us are nothing but fools.” Ubalu sighed. “Too bad. Now she likely knows that this lake has no connection to the secret realm. I can’t use it to manipulate her anymore, and many things become impossible to do in the future....”

A subordinate standing nearby smiled and said, “Why not just capture her? The temple may not truly be protecting her; they’ve just been cooperating with her backers out of necessity to find the secret realm. Once it’s found, they’ll turn on her. In fact, now that the secret realm is confirmed to be in the mountains, this is the perfect time to turn on her.”

Ubalu’s eyes shone slightly. “That makes sense... but not now.”

“Hm?”

“Yue Hongling suddenly challenging Chi Li has caused the experts of the temple to rush out. My intuition is telling me that there’s something off about this. It feels like she’s a diversion. For now, we shouldn’t act rashly; we must move carefully.”

There was a reason Ubalu was entrusted with a leadership role by Timur. Clearly, he had a sharper sense for such things than Chi Li. As a military commander, his thinking differed from that of normal martial artists or combatants.

His subordinates shouted, “We swear to protect the commander with our lives!”

Ubalu laughed. “Once this blows over, I’ll show that bitch a thing or two. When the time comes, I’ll reward you all with her. There’ll be plenty to go for everyone!”

Just then, a subordinate rushed in to report, “Commander, Batu’s forces quietly departed last night. The camp’s empty, and we don’t know where they went.”

Ubalu was stunned. “There’s so many of them. How could they all have vanished overnight?”

He paced back and forth, frowning. “Investigate further. If they’re attacking other tribes, that’s one thing. But if they’re heading toward Yanmen, we must report to the khagan immediately and prepare to attack the Batu from the rear.”

No longer wanting to stay by the lake, he turned and left. “Let’s go to the military camp.”

Their military camp was just north of the beast ring, only a few arrows’ distance away. They would reach it just by turning the corner on the street.

Leaving the heavily guarded, enclosed beast ring, Ubalu was followed by hundreds of his personal guards, all of them riding swiftly toward the military camp.

The streets, once bustling with vendors, was now deserted. Shops were closed, and as hooves clattered along the street, the cold wind swept up scattered debris on the ground, creating an eerie and solemn atmosphere.

An enchanting figure slowly walked toward them from the end of the long street.

“Third Lady Yuan?” Ubalu’s mind raced. Before Lady Three could speak, he ordered, “Capture her!”

Seeing the charging soldiers, Lady Three was taken aback.

She had intended to stop him openly to “have a word with the general,” planning to make use of his lustful tendencies to have him get close to her and kill him then.

But instead of being driven by lust, he simply had his soldiers charge forward to capture her as soon as he saw her.

“Ubalu, you really are a piece of work.” Lady Three laughed wryly. “It seems that I came at the perfect time. If I had been any later, your troops would have surrounded my inn.”

She did not mind the approaching soldiers. She was meant to handle the battle, while Zhao Changhe would take Ubalu’s head.

On the long street, amidst the howling of the cold wind, a lone woman faced hundreds of soldiers and horses. The scene looked extremely bleak, and many who peeked from their windows could not help but sigh with pity for the woman who seemed like she was to face certain death... That was, until they saw what happened next.

The soldiers at the front had almost reached Lady Three. A soldier, grinning wickedly, threw out a noose to capture her.

Lady Three lazily stretched out her hand, catching the rope effortlessly, and then casually yanked it.

The soldier on the horse screamed as he was lifted off of his horse and into the air. Following that, he crashed into three or four other riders, causing chaos within the charging soldiers. In an instant, people were thrown off their horses and dust flew into the air.

Lady Three strolled into the midst of the soldiers as if she were walking through her own garden. She reached out and lightly tapped on the leg of one of the soldiers, which was hanging off the side of his horse.

Using some unknown technique, the force of her seemingly gentle touch severed the soldier’s leg clean off, and the soldier screamed in pain.

Her figure flashed, weaving through the horses like a ghost. Wherever she passed, screams followed, men fell from their horses, and horses bolted in chaos, turning the entire street into a tumultuous mess.

Hundreds of soldiers could not even lay a single finger on a single strand of her hair. She moved faster than the wind, her movements more elusive than a ghost's. The more people and horses there were, the more chaos ensued. They crashed into each other and trampled everything in their path, unable to stop her.

Ubalu watched in utter disbelief.

The problem was not whether his hundreds of men could capture her or even stop her. It was how long they could last before she single-handedly slaughtered all of them!

All alone, she was overwhelming an entire unit of elite guards!

Ubalu felt a chill run down his spine. He could not help but wonder how he could have ever harbored lustful thoughts about such a terrifying woman.

Is she still human? She's more like a daughter of Tngri!

Ubalu shouted sternly, "Sound the horn! Quickly!"

The guards directly around him snapped out of their stupor and blew the horns desperately.

The military camp opened, and thousands of troops charged toward Lady Three from behind her.

Lady Three pretended to make a dash, attempting to break through the blockade to get to Ubalu.

Ubalu was so frightened that he abandoned his horse and ran into a side alley, trying to bypass Lady Three and join the main army.

As long as they could delay Third Lady Yuan for a moment, he could get to the main army. He believed that no matter how terrifying she was, she could not take on tens of thousands of troops on her own.

If she could, what would even be the point of waging a war? I need to move a bit faster! Just a bit more and the army will surround her!

At that moment, however, a broad saber descended from above, striking the fleeing Ubalu.

Zhao Changhe, Scattering the Gods and Buddhas!

“I’ve been waiting for you!”

Clang!

Ubalu drew his blade to block the attack, using the force to leap away.

As expected, he isn’t just at the sixth or seventh layer of the Profound Gate! He’s an expert at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate!

Their blades clashed, producing a thunderous explosion that drowned out the chaos of the hundreds of soldiers behind them.

Ubalu was shocked again. This Zhao Changhe is actually so strong?!

Even as a warrior at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, Ubalu found himself only evenly matched against Zhao Changhe. In fact, he even felt that he was slightly outmatched.

Fortunately, he did not need to just stay and wait to be killed. Just three more steps and he would have made it out of the alley.

Just three more steps and the army will have closed in, and this will all be over!

Ubalu laughed as he ran. “Too bad, you don’t have another Third Lady Yuan!”

“Is that so?” Zhao Changhe smiled slightly. He did not argue with Ubalu. He simply stomped the ground and charged forward, his Dragon Bird slashing at Ubalu’s back.

“It’s useless!” Ubalu swung his blade back wildly, and their blades clashed once more. He once again used the force to let himself be flung away. At this point, half of his body was already out of the alley.

But then, a long sword descended from the sky, the killing intent behind it so intense that it seemed to penetrate into his very bones.

Ubalu was horrified. Who is it now?!

Caught in mid-air, with no ground to draw on his strength from, along with Zhao Changhe relentlessly following up with another attack to block his path, Ubalu found himself with no way out.

Instinctively, he swung his blade to block the incoming strike from above, but he missed.

The sword and Zhao Changhe's saber were moving in completely different ways. The sword was incredibly agile and changed direction mid-air. Then, it sliced across Ubalu's throat.

At the same time, Zhao Changhe's Dragon Bird slashed heavily into his chest, splitting him in half.

"I figured you might be at the ninth layer. Why would I try to kill you alone without a backup plan?" Zhao Changhe sighed as he lowered his saber. "My brother has been lurking in the beast ring for a month; he's already gotten quite moldy from all that waiting."

The sword light faded, revealing Han Wubing smiling slightly.

Lady Three, having broken through the military formation, arrived next to them like the wind. "Let's go!"

As tens of thousands of troops rushed toward the alley where their commander was, the three assailants had already vanished.

The only thing left behind in the alley was Ubalu's body, which had been beheaded and split in half.

Timur's most trusted general in the western frontier had been killed, and the Tome of Troubled Times did not even disclose it.

A hundred li away, Batu's army advanced steadily.

Before long, a scout rushed in with urgent news. “Khan! Ubalu was assassinated! Huangsha Market is in chaos!”

“Zhao Changhe is really reliable as an ally,” muttered Batu. Then, he took a deep breath. “Speed up! Head straight for Yanmen!”

Chapter 285: Either Join the Cult or Be Beaten to Death

Chi Li finally caught up with Yue Hongling.

However, what had begun as a pursuit by a group of experts from the temple had dwindled to just Chi Li alone.

Now that Chi Li was all alone, Yue Hongling dismounted to face him without hesitation. They clashed only once before Chi Li’s expression changed. “The first layer of the Profound Mysteries... You’ve broken through too.”

Yue Hongling smiled slightly. “I just came from the secret realm. If I failed to even break through, would I not have simply wasted all the time you’ve spent guarding it for us?”

What’s with her tone? Did she pick up bad habits from Zhao Changhe?

Chi Li felt a surge of anger rising in his throat and took a deep breath. “The first thing you want to do after breaking through is to challenge me?”

Yue Hongling replied earnestly, “What did you expect? We never got to finish our battle in Yangzhou.”

The more Chi Li thought about it, the more something seemed off. Why is she suddenly so fixated on fighting me? She isn’t Zhao Changhe... Wait!

His expression suddenly changed. “Where’s Zhao Changhe?”

Yue Hongling smiled and blinked innocently.

From the distance, a fast horse approached. Before the rider even got to them, his voice could already be heard as he shouted from afar, “Commander Ubalu was assassinated! Huangsha Market is in chaos! Return to the market quickly! We must take charge of the situation!”

Chi Li whipped around, utterly shocked.

Despite already having an ominous premonition, he still had a hard time believing that something of this magnitude had taken place.

How long have I been chasing Yue Hongling? Even though Ubalu has no top-tier experts as guards, he has thousands of soldiers. He’s as cautious as a tortoise, and he’s also pretty strong himself, so how could he have been killed in such a short time? Is this really something Zhao Changhe can pull off? No way... Could someone from the Ranking of Heaven have made a move?

In fact, his guess was quite close. Black Tortoise was at the top of the Ranking of Earth, only a step away from reaching the Ranking of Heaven. She had not made a move in a long time, so no one knew what her current strength really was. If someone like Wang Daoning, who was at the bottom of the Ranking of Heaven, were to fight Black Tortoise, the rankings on the Tome of Troubled Times might really change. At the very least, it would not be an easy fight.

Taking advantage of Chi Li being distracted, Yue Hongling quietly mounted her Ferghana horse and bolted. “You’ve got company coming again. I won’t fight you like this.”

Zhao Changhe had told her not to engage in a prolonged battle, and she listened.

Seeing Yue Hongling retreating, Chi Li was so furious that he nearly vomited blood.

How did Yue Hongling end up like this... What happened to her warrior's heart?

Earlier, Chi Li harbored a faint admiration for Yue Hongling. From his perspective back then, only a woman like her was worthy of him. But now, all that admiration had vanished. Sure enough, if you pair up with a bad man, you'll be led astray as well. The valiant heroine is no more.

What frustrated him even more now was that he was in a dilemma on whether or not to chase after Yue Hongling.

Yue Hongling held secrets pertaining to the secret realm. However, she had broken through to the Profound Mysteries, and he didn't even know if he could win against her at this point. If he wasted more time on her, then the chaos in Huangsha Market could become serious, and the consequences would similarly be aggravated.

After a moment of hesitation, Chi Li made up his mind. "Retreat!"

Yue Hongling shielded her eyes with her hand as she watched Chi Li lead his men away. Then, she directed her horse southeast, heading straight for Batu's army.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe and Lady Three, accompanied by a group of cooks and servants carrying luggage, were also heading toward Batu's army.

Han Wubing had disappeared on his own without leaving so much as a word.

Zhao Changhe wondered why Han Wubing had become so solitary and unsociable. Is this how all swordsmen end up? Yue Hongling and Xia Chichi also use the sword, but they aren't like this...

In truth, Han Wubing, having lurked around and been in hiding for a month, was really eager to celebrate and have a drink with his comrades with the success of his mission.

However, as the saying goes, once bitten, twice shy. Every time he saw Zhao Changhe, he was surrounded by different women, each more beautiful and stronger than the last. The woman who was with Zhao Changhe this time, Lady Three, was capable of single-handedly defeating an army, and she was undoubtedly a powerhouse on the Ranking of Earth. He really could not comprehend how Zhao Changhe dared to get involved with such a woman!

If he ended up as a third wheel for such a powerful woman, could he withstand her wrath?

Wait... Ranking of Earth... Black Tortoise Lake... If this woman is Black Tortoise, then with Xia Chichi and the Fire Serpent of Yi... What the hell?! Is Zhao Changhe trying to unify the Four Idols Cult with his dick?!

Having uncovered this shocking secret, Han Wubing decided to leave immediately. The Four Idols Cult was a demonic cult, and it was unpredictable and dangerous. What if Lady Three suddenly decided to eliminate all witnesses?

Han Wubing valued his life too much to stay, so he quietly left.

“That friend of yours has extremely pure sword intent. It’s rare to see such purity in a swordsman,” Lady Three said as she watched Han Wubing’s receding figure. “I feel like even his master might not be as pure.”

Zhao Changhe said, “Do you know his master?”

“I’ve beaten him before.”

“...”

“The Sword Hut is full of sword fanatics, people who are truly obsessed with the sword. But to me, that obsession does not mean purity; rather, it’s more like lunacy and monomania. Han Wubing, on the other hand, is clear and sharp, with boundless potential.”

Zhao Changhe secretly thought that if this was true, the Sword Hut might be seeking the ancient Sword Emperor. The next time the sword tomb opened, he felt that Han Wubing would definitely go and have a look.

“Speaking of which,” Lady Three commented with some confusion, “I probably had a bit of part to play in him killing Ubalu, considering I offered him a reward for it. Why didn’t he come to me for the payment I told him about after succeeding?”

Zhao Changhe was speechless. “What does this have to do with you? Han Wubing acted out of disdain for the practices in the beast ring. He believed that they needed to be ended—isn’t such a purposeful sword contrary to your idea of purity?”

Lady Three smiled slightly. “That is purity.”

“Can you elaborate?”

“It lies within the heart.” Lady Three seemed reluctant to delve into martial arts philosophy with Zhao Changhe. Her eyes darted around, looking at the inn staff running alongside them, and she transmitted a message to him, “These people belong to the fifth lord. It would be better not to talk too much, and you better not mention anything related to the Four Idols Cult’s martial arts.”

Zhao Changhe responded in kind. “I doubt your strength is much less than the fifth lord. Why stay as his subordinate?”

Lady Three smiled. “Ying Five’s people can still be of use to me... It just isn’t time yet.”

Zhao Changhe recalled what the Fire Serpent of Yi had said about the Four Idols Cult’s vast hidden power.

Indeed, it’s vast. They have influence not only in the capital, the military, and major gangs like the Cao Gang, but they’ve even infiltrated secret intelligence organizations led by someone like Ying Five, who’s on the Ranking of Heaven. Or perhaps Lady Three originally was a part of that organization, and only later devoted herself to the Four Idols Cult?

When it comes to the right time... they likely need a leader who is on the Ranking of Heaven to unify them and direct their actions. They’re strong, but it isn’t enough just yet.

However, the acquisition of the Black Tortoise gemstone might just elevate Lady Three to a higher level. While Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling saw it merely as a catalyst to transform their bodies into a certain Dao Body, the Four Idols Cult undoubtedly had deeper uses for it. Lady Three’s cheerful demeanor and good mood were evidence of this.

Lady Three smiled and continued to converse with him telepathically, “Hey, I was asked for my opinion on whether or not to admit you into the cult, as well as for my opinion on your star chart. Well, my opinion now is that regardless of what your star chart means, just with your connection with the Black Tortoise secret realm, it seems that fate is tying you to our cult. We believe in fate... And so, I agree with letting you join the cult.”

Zhao Changhe rolled his eyes. “I never agreed to join the cult, so what’s the use of your approval?”

Lady Three’s eyes twinkled mischievously. “What if I send the Fire Serpent of Yi to you?”

“She’s the imperial noble consort. I once thought that Vermillion Bird was giving her to me, but I later realized that it was just a misunderstanding. Vermillion Bird would never give away someone with such a valuable position, and neither would you... So, stop teasing me.”

“If you refuse to join the cult, things will be very troublesome for you.”

“How so?”

“Because I can confirm that your star chart is definitely not the same as the Night Emperor’s. The Night Emperor’s star chart features only the four idols, not the entire starry sky.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Why would the Night Emperor be called the Night Emperor if his star chart only contains the four idols? The Night Emperor should have the entire array of stars in the sky. Right, and the moon too! How can he be called the Night Emperor without the moon?”

“That was indeed the Night Emperor’s goal, but he never achieved it,” said Lady Three. She looked at him thoughtfully. “No one from the last era accomplished it. Your star chart is unique to you and has nothing to do with anyone from the previous era. Little brother, you better not die early. I’m quite interested in seeing how far someone with such a star chart can go.”

Zhao Changhe nodded. “I’ll try to stay alive. But then why did you say that things will be troublesome for me? Are you going to kill me just because I don’t fit into the Four Idols Cult? Can’t we just be friends?”

“I can be friends with you, but who knows if a certain little serpent would agree. She might feel deceived by a man pretending to have the Night Emperor’s destiny. Hehe...”

Zhao Changhe was dumbfounded. “Huh?”

“Either join the cult, and we can talk, or prepare to be beaten to death. Your choice.”

Zhao Changhe was annoyed. “When did I ever use that as a pretext to deceive her?”

Lady Three's eyes twinkled with amusement. "That's just a woman giving herself an excuse. Don't make her angry, little brother."

Zhao Changhe stroked his chin and thought for a moment. "I'll join the cult, but not as one of your underlings. I will walk my own path."

Lady Three's eyes turned deep. "Do you want to conquer us?"

Before Zhao Changhe could explain, she suddenly smiled and said, "Alright, I'll be waiting for you."

After saying that, she gracefully drifted away with her subordinates. "Participating in the war does not align with either my interests or Ying Five's plans. So, during the war at Yanmen, Ying Five will, at most, fulfill the agreement to restrain Timur. Expecting us to truly join in the fight is impossible. The rest is up to you, little brother."

Chapter 286: The General's White Hair

Just after Lady Three and her group left, Yue Hongling arrived on horseback. It seemed as if Lady Three had sensed the distant hoofbeats and timed her departure perfectly.

Seeing the distant figures, Yue Hongling asked Zhao Changhe in surprise, "Who are those people? Were they your helpers in killing Ubalu?"

"Yeah," Zhao Changhe muttered softly. He figured Lady Three probably did not want Yue Hongling to know her true strength, which was why she had left in such a timely manner. She would probably go berserk if her identity as Black Tortoise were to suddenly be revealed and become widely known.

So he did not expose her, merely saying, "A group of like-minded individuals, including Han Wubing."

Yue Hongling misunderstood. “No wonder it was so easy. You had such a large group of helpers. Are they from the martial artist camp from Yanment?”

“Mm-hm. How did things go on your side? Did you get hurt?”

“I’m fine. I didn’t really fight anyone,” replied Yue Hongling. Then, her expression turned serious, and she said, “Chi Li has broken through to the Profound Mysteries. His true strength is definitely beyond the sixty-sixth rank on the Ranking of Man. The next time you see him, be careful not to underestimate him. It’s best to avoid him and stay as far away from him as possible.”

Zhao Changhe chuckled. “But don’t I have you by my side?”

Yue Hongling tilted her head and looked at him for a moment before suddenly asking, “Hey, do you really plan to stay with me forever?”

Zhao Changhe was taken aback. “What do you mean? Do you want to separate from me?”

“Want to? No.” Yue Hongling sighed. “But from a martial arts perspective, it’s actually better for both of us if we part ways.”

Zhao Changhe pursed his lips. Deep down, he knew this to be true.

Especially since Yue Hongling was stronger than him. If he continued to stay by her side, he might become reliant on her, making it difficult for him to make any further progress.

Yue Hongling said, “After this battle, where do you plan to go?”

Zhao Changhe thought for a while and asked, “Where do you plan to go?”

“I might head southwest, visit the Sword Hut at Bashan[1], and check out Miaojiang[2]. I plan to explore both the north and south.”

It seemed that Yue Hongling had a clear plan for her path. A wandering heroine like her rarely settled in one place.

Strictly speaking, although he had won her heart, it didn’t mean she could just settle. Her heart was still set on wandering the world.

A time might come when she felt weary and finally longed for a home. But clearly, now was not yet that time. Moreover, the man who had won her heart was not one to stay put either.

Neither of them had a home, so where were they to stay?

In fact, Zhao Changhe thought of heading southwest too. He had always wanted to visit Wushan[3] to find Cult Leader Xue. From Wushan, Bashan was not far, and they could travel together. Plus, the idea of letting Yue Hongling beat up Cult Leader Xue amused him a little.

But then he remembered that finding and beating up Cult Leader Xue was not his priority. He had more important plans, such as searching for the blood ginseng to lay the foundation for his Blood Asura Body. His journey should follow the clues on where he might be able to find the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng rather than wandering around aimlessly.

He realized he had forgotten to ask Lady Three about it. She might have some valuable information pertaining to where he might find it.

Additionally, he realized that he should try to contact Ji Chengkong to see if there were any deals he could make with the Thief Saint. From the Thieves Guild, he could learn some item retrieval techniques, which would then allow him to use a storage ring.

Thinking of all this, he smiled and said, “Alright, I need to search for something on my own. Who knows, with our fate, I might just stumble upon you while looking.”

Yue Hongling was quite amused when she heard this. “The world is so vast. If you don’t purposefully head southwest and you still manage to cross paths with me while searching for whatever you’re looking for, then I’ll...”

Zhao Changhe blinked. “You’ll what?”

Yue Hongling’s cheeks turned slightly red. She bit her lip and turned her head away before muttering, “Then I’ll try that position you’ve been asking for.”

Zhao Changhe laughed heartily. “I’m confident. Just wait, my heroine.”

Yue Hongling said angrily, “All you think about is that.”

Who was the one who brought it up? Zhao Changhe did not call her out on it and simply smiled. “Let’s go. At least for now, we’ll still ride side by side, until we give Timur a taste of the Central Plains’ prowess.”

With that, he spurred his horse, and Snow-Treading Crow galloped forward. “Let’s see if your Red Hare[4] is better than my Snow-Treading Crow.”

Seeing his carefree demeanor, Yue Hongling’s own hesitations and reluctance melted away, and she became just as carefree. Then, she, too, spurred her horse.

“Ya!”

*

It was dusk once again, and the sun cast a golden glow over the land as it set in the west.

Wild geese flew over the mountains, crossing the pass and heading south toward Hengyang[5].

Winter was coming...

Many people had not been home for a long time, and some would never see their homes again.

Huangfu Yongxian stood atop the city walls, gazing at the countless corpses strewn across the battlefield, unable to distinguish between enemies and his own.

A section of the wall had partially collapsed, and soldiers were desperately trying to repair it. However, Huangfu Yongxian knew from experience that it could not be repaired tonight. The barbarians would undoubtedly launch a fierce attack at that weak point by tomorrow morning, and whether they could defend it was uncertain.

The soldiers on his left and right were exhausted, their faces caked with blood and grime that had not been washed off in days.

Not to mention washing, they hardly had time to sleep.

The death of He Lei had caused turmoil within the Warring Lion Tribe, preventing them from participating in this siege. Without such a massive tribe, Timur's offensive had slowed slightly. Both sides had been mainly skirmishing over supplies.

Winter was approaching, and the Grasslands were running out of food, which was also the main reason behind their current assault.

But Huangfu Yongxian found, to his dismay, that the other party's food supplies were no less than their own.

Supplies were scarce, and after passing through many hands, barely enough reached Yanmen to support the army.

Ironically, large quantities of food were somehow making their way out of the pass and into the hands of various Grasslands tribes.

Huangfu Yongxian had resorted to disguising his men as bandits to intercept these supplies, using the spoils to feed his own troops. It was a desperate measure that barely kept them afloat but did nothing to change the overall situation. If the barbarians had enough food to sustain themselves, his side, which was on the brink of collapse, would soon fall.

Their numbers were simply not on the same level.

The barbarians could launch attacks in waves, while his side could not even manage proper rotations for rest, leaving every soldier exhausted.

In the past, those in the martial artist camp, which was composed of those from the jianghu, rarely participated directly in battles, usually only responsible for causing trouble in the rear. But since Zhao Changhe rescued six people, there were fewer attempts to leave the front lines. They were now diligently assisting the army. Powerful individuals like Cui Yuanyong and Situ Xiao fought with the strength of a hundred men, serving as the spearheads and significantly boosting morale, but even that was not enough.

In the scale of tens of thousands in such siege warfare, their impact was lacking.

They could still barely hold on, but rumors suggested that the Warring Lion Tribe had unified once more. If they joined the fray, it spelled nothing but a catastrophe for those defending Yanmen.

His daughter often said it was absurd to fight for such a tyrant and such a corrupt court. What was the point of sacrificing so many family members?

Huangfu Yongxian turned around and looked around at his soldiers. When they saw the old general's gaze, they raised their heads and chests, trying their best to show that they had not lost their fighting spirit.

Huangfu Yongxian smiled.

Whether they surrendered or revolted, the soul of this army was gone, and so was his.

Might as well die fighting.

“General.” Finally, a deputy general said, “It’s late. You’re getting older. You should go and rest. We can oversee the repairs here.”

The old general chuckled. “I’m the strongest among us. How can I get to sleep first?”

“General...”

“Don’t worry. As long as I’m alive, Yanmen will stand.”

The old general held his helmet to his chest, the north wind lifting his white hair that was as frosty as the winter night.

The soldiers wanted to believe their general’s encouraging words.

But he was not yet sixty and already had a full head of white hair. With how hard he had been working all this time, would Yanmen still have a general after this war?

Before they knew it, the stars and moon receded from the sky.

The roosters crowed from within Yanmen Pass, and the sky began to lighten from the east, streaked with a few rays of dawn. It was a beautiful sight.

Woo~ Woo~

Horns sounded and the ground trembled slightly. The overwhelming tide of enemy forces approached, relentlessly approaching Yanmen Pass.

The horde stretched endlessly, an overwhelming presence that suffocated those defending, even from a great distance.

Huangfu Yongxian glanced at the collapsed section of the wall. The repairs were practically useless.

Chapter 287: A Heart Ablaze

The walls quickly turned into a meat grinder.

The corpses of yesterday had yet to be cleared away when new ones were added to the pile.

A breach in the wall did not necessarily mean that the walls could no longer be defended; it just meant that there were fewer tactical options that could be employed and a greater requirement for raw strength and courage from the defenders.

No matter how many enemies there were, only so many could squeeze through the gap in the walls at once.

The weather was getting colder and colder, and the snowfall grew heavier each day. If they could hold out until the snow fully set in, the barbarians would retreat. They were made of flesh and blood too; they had families and tribes and could not stay here indefinitely.

With this understanding came endless courage.

No matter how exhausted they were, no matter how depleted their supplies, they still held hope.

Huangfu Yongxian personally held the breach, thrusting his spear forward and skewering two barbarian warriors at once. With a mighty swing, he threw their bodies back, sending them crashing into the enemy ranks, toppling a decent number of them like dominoes.

Cui Yuanyong's sword flashed coldly as he guarded Huangfu Yongxian's side. When he saw the other party's prowess, he could not help but feel a deep sense of admiration.

He wondered if he would still be so strong in his old age.

As a direct descendant of an aristocratic family, Cui Yuanyong had initially found it hard to empathize with the soldiers at the border or understand Huangfu Yongxian's mindset. In his view, even if the barbarians broke through, they would still need to compromise with the Cui Clan in order to quickly stabilize the empire. At that time, they would simply change banners, and the Cui Clan of Qinghe would remain an influential power.

Dynasties might change, but aristocratic clans remained. He believed the Huangfu Clan to share the same beliefs, and was thus baffled as to why they fought so desperately.

An indifferent emperor? Great! It made it easier for them to become local overlords.

He had come to the northern frontier ostensibly to help defend but more so to gain experience in battle formations. He aspired to join the Ranking of Man and believed this was an excellent place to hone his skills.

However, after months of fighting, his perspective began to shift subtly.

The day before, he was laughing and drinking with friends who today lay as corpses on the battlefield. Subordinates who respectfully called him Young Master Cui or Commander Cui had changed over and over in these months, and their young faces were now flashing through his mind.

He was in a state of numbness, where life and death had become trivial.

But there was also a blazing fire burning in his heart.

He felt as if his blood, along with that of his friends and subordinates, had been poured into the defense of this city. Every brick and stone was not not brick or stone, but flesh and blood, soaked with the spirits and souls of friends, subordinates, and everyone who fought here.

That was something that could not be experienced by solely wandering the jianghu—the feeling of perishing with a city.

As long as he was there, the city would stand.

Cui Yuanyong finally understood Huangfu Yongxian. Asking such a person to give up was worse than killing him.

So, they would not give up.

His father had told him to retreat to Qinghe if things became untenable... but he felt that to be impossible now. He felt like he just could not bring himself to just abandon the city that so many had sacrificed their lives for.

Clang!

Not far away, blades and spears struck Situ Xiao, producing metallic clangs.

Situ Xiao grinned. His heavy sword swept through the air, sending heads flying along its path.

Cui Yuanyong could not help but feel envious of his comrade's invulnerability. He found it to be incredibly convenient in battle. Others had to wear cumbersome armor, yet those suits of armor were not even as effective as the defense of Situ Xiao's flesh. With such a sturdy body, Situ Xiao had much more room to maneuver the battlefield than he did.

However, it could indeed backfire. While tempering one's body to have such impeccable defense was useful against ordinary soldiers, once faced with a skilled opponent, it could easily be broken.

"Brother Situ, watch out!" Cui Yuanyong darted forward, his sword piercing the throat of an assailant who was trying to ambush Situ Xiao.

Situ Xiao turned and smiled. "Thanks. I originally didn't want to join the martial arts camp because I didn't want to deal with the airs of noble scions, but you're not half bad. At the very least, you're better than Wang Zhaoling."

Cui Yuanyong replied helplessly, "Is this the time to be talking about that?"

“What I mean by that is that if you decided or you decide now to retreat, I won’t laugh at you. As the heir of the Cui Clan of Qinghe, there’s no reason for you to die here.”

“Why can’t the heir of the Cui Clan of Qinghe die here?” Cui Yuanyong asked, puzzled. “Do you, the heir of the Divine Brilliance Sect, plan to retreat?”

Situ Xiao said, “We’re just martial artists of the jianghu. We live for the moment. There are plenty of people who can carry on the legacy of the Divine Brilliance Sect; it doesn’t have to be me.”

Cui Yuanyong thrust his sword into an enemy’s throat and smiled. “What a coincidence, I feel the same way.”

Situ Xiao looked up to the sky and laughed heartily. “Then let’s not speak of ill fate. Neither of us will die.”

Damn it, who was the one who brought up retreating first? Cui Yuanyong said angrily, “Why do you think we won’t die?”

Situ Xiao replied, “No specific reason, just trying to keep up the morale. Anyway, as long as we survive this, we’ll definitely make it onto the Ranking of Man. I don’t believe that someone like Xue Canghai has had this kind of experience.”

“Shit,” muttered Cui Yuanyong as he looked at the endless sea of enemies. He felt that death was a real possibility this time.

A thought suddenly crossed his mind. Zhao Changhe has been behind enemy lines for so long. He showed up on the Tome of Troubled Times briefly, but then there has not been any more word of him since then. Could he already be dead? No, if a hidden dragon fell, the Tome of Troubled Times would have appeared again. Since it hasn’t, that means he’s still alive. I wonder what he’s up to.

Heh, I wonder if my little sister would be more upset over my death or Zhao Changhe's.

“General!” Someone not far away hurriedly reported to Huangfu Yongxian, “There's smoke and dust in the northwest. It's likely the Warring Lion Tribe!”

Huangfu Yongxian speared a barbarian, his expression shifting slightly. “They've finally come...”

Cui Yuanyong and others nearby, having heard the report, looked grim.

There had been hope of holding out until the snowfall. But with these fresh reinforcements arriving, it seemed unlikely they could withstand this siege.

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At the camp of the Golden Horde.

Timur stood at the rear of the formation, overlooking the battle raging at the city walls.

The army of Xia was clearly running out of supplies. They used to pour boiling oil down the walls, but now they had none left. They relied solely on blood and steel to hold the line.

However, their forces could not break through. Veterans like Huangfu Yongxian had fortified the city's defenses to the point where they were nearly impenetrable. The walls were harder to crack than a turtle shell. If this dragged on for a few more days, the morale among his own troops would start to wane.

Many of his subordinates and those of other tribes did not understand why he refused to personally take action and decapitate Huangfu Yongxian.

But Timur knew he could not do that.

It was not because of the hypothetical intervention of Xia Longyuan. Timur knew that Xia Longyuan was still in the capital and could not teleport here instantly.

It was just that some precedents could not be set... If today a warrior on the Ranking of Heaven charged into battle to kill a general, then tomorrow, Xia Longyuan would feel justified to rampage through the Grasslands, slaughtering at will and turning the entire Grasslands into a sea of blood.

Even someone like Yue Hongling wreaking havoc in the rear was a massive pain, what more if it were Xia Longyuan?

At their level, they had to adhere to certain unwritten agreements.

Timur genuinely admired the Maitreya Cult. They were causing internal strife, and Xia Longyuan was not bound by any kind of mutual agreements in their case. Thus, Timur was baffled as to what gave them such courage. Even the Wang Clan would not dare do what they were doing.

Yet, Xia Longyuan had not made a move, leaving Timur curious.

His gaze shifted to Cui Yuanyong, Situ Xiao, and the others defending the wall, a hint of pity in his eyes.

These hidden dragons of the Central Plains have yet to exhaust their potential. Although few of them are truly worthy of praise... there are some.

As long as they live, their morale will remain. But unfortunately, there's too few of them. The breach in the city wall shows that they're close to their limit.

After a long observation, Timur slightly raised his hand. "Have the Vulture Tribe advance."

At this moment, someone came to report, "The Warring Lion Tribe is approaching from the northwest. They claim to come as reinforcements."

Timur paused, frowning slightly. "The envoy I sent to the Warring Lion Tribe has not even returned, yet they're already here? How many troops have they brought?"

The soldier replied, "Approximately seventy to eighty thousand."

While there was a massive gap between the army of seventy to eighty thousand and the Golden Horde in terms of absolute strength, they were a crucial variable at this moment.

Let alone seventy to eighty thousand, even ten to twenty thousand could give those defending Yanmen Pass a headache. Additional forces of such great numbers could lead to a swift end to this war.

"Batu will have had to pass through Huangsha Market to get here. Why didn't Ubalu send a message? How did Batu arrive so out of the blue?"

No one could answer the khagan's question.

Someone cautiously suggested, "If Batu bypassed Huangsha Market, General Ubalu would have noticed and pursued them from the rear..."

“Have the Vulture Tribe shift to the flank and form a line at the northwest,” commanded Timur. He suddenly stood up. “Whether Batu has come to assist us or attack us from the flank, we must not be careless. Mister Bo...”

He turned to a shaman in the tent, his expression solemn. “In a conflict with those of the south, if internal strife arises, this can no longer be considered a mere tribal dispute. Will the temple intervene?”

The shaman rose and saluted. “Rest assured, khagan. Where would Batu find the courage to rebel? He’s most likely here to join the war. Let me go and meet Batu to confirm his intentions.”

Chapter 288: Let Us See if He Can Mend the Sundered Sky

Indeed, Batu had initially overlooked one crucial issue.

He assumed by default that the temple would not interfere in tribal disputes. Even when previous battles had been brutal, the temple had remained silent. Even when Timur had massacred many tribes as he established the Golden Horde, the temple had not intervened.

Due to personal connections, Chi Li was also somewhat inclined to support him. When he was unifying the Warring Lion Tribe, Chi Li had even spoken in his favor, making the consolidation process smoother.

Since the temple had not taken sides, Batu felt that as long as there was someone who assumed the role of khagan, he had nothing to fear. If Timur could become the Khagan of the Golden Horde, so could others!

However, he forgot that backstabbing Timur was different from an open declaration of war—it was considered betrayal of the Grasslands.

The temple would not tolerate such an act.

Upon returning to Huangsha Market and finally stabilizing the chaotic situation, Chi Li learned from Ubalu's personal guards the reason behind Ubalu's assassination.

Batu had bypassed Huangsha Market and was heading straight for the rear of the khagan's army, seemingly planning to backstab Timur. Ubalu had just begun to muster forces to intercept Batu when he was assassinated. They had not even managed to send word to the khagan.

Chi Li felt a chill run down his spine. He could not believe Batu would dare do such a thing!

If Batu truly went through with this, then he, who had helped Batu in consolidating the Warring Lion Tribe, would be accomplice to a great crime!

Unfortunately, Chi Li neither had command over the troops nor knew how to lead an army. Therefore, he had to rely on Ubalu's subordinates to muster the troops and march. He had no idea if the disordered troops would be effective or if they would even arrive in time.

Chi Li could only ride out alone, hoping to stop Batu himself.

Riding on his own did indeed let him move faster than an army of tens of thousands. After pushing himself to exhaustion, he finally saw the silhouette of the army on the horizon. He knew Yanmen was just ahead.

As long as he could stop Batu before the real battle began, the situation could still be turned into an all-out attack on Yanmen!

He was just one step away!

Chi Li pushed his horse to the limit until it foamed at the mouth. Desperate, he abandoned his horse and ran. But he soon slowed down and came to a stop.

Ahead, a figure in red stood alone, her red horse casting a menacing shadow against the setting sun.

“Chi Li... I’ve been waiting for you.” Yue Hongling smiled slightly. “Now, it’s time for us to have our final battle.”

Chi Li took several deep breaths, looking at this woman who seemed to be his lifelong nemesis. He slowly calmed his emotions.

“You knew I would come to stop Batu.”

“Of course.”

“Is Batu a pig? Do you think you can deceive him so easily?” Chi Li sneered. “I’m afraid your plan will fail because the khagan has shamans from the temple around him, and they will intervene.”

“Do you really think that Batu has not considered that? If it were before, then he might have given up, but now he has no way to turn back. Whether the temple supports him or not does not matter, he only needs the support of the Great Xia. He knows I will stop you and said nothing, that is enough to show his stance.”

Chi Li laughed. “Then why stop me? Would it not be better to let me go to Batu’s army, where he can cut me down directly?”

“You are, after all, the successor of the temple, and you hold significant status. Should you reach the army, while Batu might not be shaken, the same cannot be said for his troops. Keeping you away is the simplest solution, and Batu agrees with this.”

Chi Li looked at the distant sunset and sighed. “These matters are truly not suited for me.”

Yue Hongling smiled and said, “I feel the same way. I’ve been following Zhao Chanhge’s lead, doing whatever he asks. I’ve always felt rather lost. But now, facing you alone like this, I feel a renewed fighting spirit.”

Chi Li slowly drew his blade. “Indeed... Perhaps our brilliance is only truly displayed when we face each other in battle.”

Yue Hongling dismounted and patted her Red Hare, sending it a short distance away. Then, she turned to Chi Li and raised her sword.

“Shall we?”

His scimitar cut through the evening glow, the sound of the blade like a mournful war horn.

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Almost simultaneously, the shaman beside Timur rode swiftly toward Batu’s army, shouting from afar, “Where is Khan Batu—”

The shaman had yet to finish speaking when a magnificent black steed suddenly came charging out from Batu’s army. On it was a burly man carrying a broad saber, slashing down with the momentum of the galloping horse.

The shaman bent back urgently to avoid the saber, and the words “I’m a shaman of Tngri” were left stuck in his throat.

From within the army, Batu sighed. “Zhao Changhe is really considerate, making sure my soldiers aren’t intimidated by Tngri.”

A trusted aide beside him gave him a glance.

Batu said, “At this point, do you still want to be cowards, bowing and offering our sheep and cattle as tribute? The cattle and sheep are ours, and so are the women! This is not a gamble. We are striking their rear. Huangfu Yongxian isn’t stupid. He will definitely cooperate with us! This is our best chance—our path to dominion is right before us. If we miss it, there will be no other!”

Batu could see the madness in his subordinates’ eyes, because this truly was their best opportunity. If they missed it, then... there would be no “then.”

Why could others sit on the khagan’s throne, but not them?

Batu raised his blade and roared, “Attack! Crush the Vulture Tribe in front!”

A torrent of soldiers swept forward

The shaman, still trying to speak, exchanged several blows with Zhao Changhe. But as the army surged forward, he was instantly overwhelmed.

Countless scimitars slashed toward him, and the shaman was naturally unable to fend off so many attacks at once. He fell from his horse, meeting Dragon Bird’s edge with his neck.

His head was sent flying into the air, his eyes wide in disbelief. Even in death, he could not comprehend how Batu actually dared to slight him.

Zhao Changhe looked around and saw Batu's forces already clashing with the Vulture Tribe ahead.

Everything that had to be done had been done. Whether they could win or not depended on this battle!

The lives of those of Great Xia are at stake. If you don't care about them, I care. If you will not fight for them, I will fight!

Coming to the Grasslands, he had no regrets left!

He took a deep breath, spurred his horse, and charged into the fray.

The Vulture Tribe was not a particularly strong tribe, but its leader, Vulture Beak, was a strong warrior, holding the top place on the Ranking of Man for many years. Recently, with He Lei's death and the subsequent opening on the Ranking of Earth, he had squeezed into the thirty-sixth rank.

However, his inclusion on the Ranking of Earth was somewhat unmerited. He was unable to truly fill He Lei's shoes, with him still being at the first layer of the Profound Mysteries.

Even Lady Three had to retreat when facing thousands of troops, despite her ability to single-handedly take on a small army. In the chaos of a massive battle, individual valor could certainly influence the outcome, but there were many other factors that played a part in determining victory.

Lady Three faced such limits, as did Tang Wanzhuang and Maitreya. Vulture Beak was no exception.

Vultures Beak charged left and right within his formation, his spear sending men and horses flying, unmatched by any foe. He seemed unstoppable, as if he could carve a path straight through and seize Batu's command banner.

But if someone could hold him off for just a few moves, he would immediately be in heaps of trouble.

For instance, right now.

After skewering a soldier, Vulture Beak felt an oppressive aura approaching. Though the person had not yet arrived, their overwhelming momentum matched that of a fierce tiger descending the mountain as they charged straight at him.

Turning to look at who it was, he saw a burly man on horseback charging into the formation. As the man rode, his broad saber slowly rose, seemingly gathering momentum with each stride. By the time their horses met, he would unleash his mightiest strike.

This was a true expert, someone who had gotten a glimpse of the Profound Mystery of "momentum" and could already apply it in battle. His capabilities were far beyond those of ordinary soldiers.

He Lei's techniques came to mind—Is this a young hero of the Warring Lion Tribe?

As these thoughts passed through his mind, Vulture Beak thrust his spear like lightning, aiming straight for the newcomer's chest.

Clang!

Dragon Bird descended. Saber and spear collided. The force behind Vulture Beak's strike caused the man to bend backward over his horse's back, nearly being forced off his horse.

But regardless, Vulture Beak's previously unstoppable momentum was halted. And while the newcomer was knocked back, countless blades closed in, forcing Vulture Beak into a melee.

His own troops began to suffer casualties as their spearhead was blunted, and screams filled the air.

The newcomer steadied himself, turned his horse, and swung his saber again.

Vulture Break parried with his spear and shouted, "What's your name?!"

Zhao Changhe pointed his saber at Vulture Beak and replied, "Zhao Changhe from the Central Plains, here to test the valor of the Vulture Khan!"

His voice spread for several li, causing both sides involved in the battle to take notice.

This was a young man who had been virtually unknown just a year back. How could anyone take him seriously when he was barely ranked two hundred and fiftieth among the hidden dragons?

Now, here he was, charging on horseback, challenging a renowned warrior of the Grasslands without a trace of fear.

"The sixth hidden dragon? Your reputation is well-deserved." Vulture Beak spurred his horse and thrust his spear. "It's a pity that you will die here today!"

"Really? Khan, you might want to consider that your men are dying around you. If you keep fighting with me, you won't be able to escape," said Zhao Changhe.

His eyes suddenly turned blood red.

He entered the No Man's Land state. His muscles bulged, his rationality faded, and his entire figure appeared to grow larger.

His blade then began to glow red. With the blessing of the Scattering the Gods and Buddhas, Dragon Bird's power surged, entering its own berserk state.

This was Zhao Changhe's strongest state—his full-power state that he rarely dared to use.

Of course, if he did not use it now, he might never get the chance again.

The spear strike being sent his way was the culmination of a lifetime's worth of power from the strongest warrior on the Ranking of Man.

In his irrational state, the spear before him seemed not like a spear but rather a meteor falling from the sky, a divine finger tearing through the sky, bringing with it a fiery blaze of destruction.

Though surrounded by people and amidst the din of battle, no one could intervene.

It felt like he was sailing alone on a raft in the vast, open sea. And at this moment, an overwhelming force of annihilation came down on him.

Roar!

Zhao Changhe's frenzied saber rose to meet the meteor.

Space seemed to freeze and a bloody light covered everything in sight.

If I am neither in heaven nor on earth, if the gods and Buddhas are no longer present, then where is this?

Hell!

The Vicious Blood Saber Art's most powerful killing move, a move that reached the threshold of the Profound Mysteries!

Clang!

A thunderous clash shook the sky. The hellish vision disappeared, and the meteor shattered the earth. Space was torn apart, and the battlefield returned.

Zhao Changhe spat a mouthful of blood and leaned over his horse, retreating.

He had survived.

He had managed to withstand the other party's strike.

It was not an overwhelming victory, but it was enough!

Having had his strike blocked by Zhao Changhe, Vulture Beak truly lost all his space. All around him were shadows and masses of people, his elites reduced to almost nothing.

Countless blades and spears surrounded him, like he was in the Hell of the Mountain of Knives[1].

He did not have the leisure to strike Zhao Changhe again. He quickly broke through the formation of spears behind him, shouting, "Retreat!"

Vulture Beak desperately broke out of the encirclement, and the Vulture Tribe's formation fell apart. The troops of the Warring Lion Tribe roared and charged forward. In the blink of an eye, their vanguard quickly reached Timur's central army.

Zhao Changhe weakly lifted his head from his horse. Beside him, Batu had a peculiar expression. "I must admit, you're really... amazing. I'm starting to admire you."

Zhao Changhe coughed up blood and weakly replied. "Don't give me that. I thought you were going to take this opportunity to kill me."

"Why would I kill you? I still need you to connect me with the Great Xia... Also, Timur is here. Where is the Ranking of Heaven expert you mentioned?"

Zhao Changhe suddenly raised his head, and the sky darkened.

Sand and stones flew, and the sun and moon lost their radiance.

A fierce man with a golden band around his forehead and carrying a giant ax appeared in midair, coldly stating, "Batu, your crimes are unforgivable!"

The giant ax fell.

A flash of sword light came from nowhere and struck the side of the ax. "Calm down, Khagan Timur."

“Ying Five!” Timur roared with rage. “Do you intend to completely break ties with us? After this, there will no longer be a place for your people in the Grasslands!”

A handsome middle-aged man appeared, smiling gently and speaking softly, “Khagan, perhaps you should first consider whether you can still command those of Monan...”

“Do you think you can stop me on your own?”

“But it’s not just me...” Another sword light came from the east, filling the sky with purple qi.

“Cui Wenjing...” Timur lowered his head and looked at the weakened Zhao Changhe. “This conflict is not in your clan’s interest. Are you here because of him?”

Cui Wenjing looked unhappy. “If I didn’t come, my son would end up dying here. God knows why he refuses to leave.”

Far to the north, a disheveled monk was rushing southward.

His speed was akin to that of gods and Buddhas, each of his steps seeming to cover a hundred li.

Suddenly, his footsteps abruptly halted. “Benefactor Li, why are you here?”

A man with bronze-colored skin appeared in front of him, looking troubled. “My disciple has gone mad and refuses to leave the front lines. As his master, I have no choice but to show my face.”

It was Li Shentong, the sect master of the Divine Brilliance Sect.

The confrontations of those on the Ranking of Heaven could no longer influence the mortal battlefield.

At Yanmen Pass, Huangfu Yongxian noticed the retreat of the barbarians. He looked into the distance and saw smoke and dust rising, accompanied by thunderous battle cries from behind the enemy lines.

The experienced general was overjoyed. “The enemy’s rear is in chaos. Open the gates! All troops, charge!”

The gates swung wide open, and the Great Xia cavalry surged out.

Meanwhile, the Warring Lion Tribe struck the rear of the Golden Horde. The defenders of Yanmen, charging out from the pass, helped launch a pincer attack, causing even greater chaos among the barbarian forces. The enemy suffered countless casualties and fled a thousand li, retreating into the desert.

The balance of power in the Grasslands shifted. The Warring Lion Tribe had lost their leader, who had been on the Ranking of Earth, yet they were rising in prominence in Monan, which was somewhat ironic.

Large tracts of snow fell, covering the thousands of corpses as if mourning.

Golden light from the sky shone through the falling snow, seemingly narrating the details of the battle that had ended.

Amidst this grand spectacle, Chi Li was wounded in the left arm by Yue Hongling and fled, no longer interested in the fight. Cui Yuanyong, Situ Xiao, Han Wubing, and others saw their rankings change on the Tome of Troubled Times. But regardless of how many people fought for rankings, everyone’s eyes remained on the last entry.

The long entry was as if a legend were being told.

On the anniversary of Zhao Changhe stepping into the world of martial arts, he has reached the eighth layer of the Profound Gate both internally and externally.

He and Yue Hongling assassinated Timur's envoy within Batu's army. Along with Han Wubing, they assassinated Ubalu inside Huangsha Market. On the battlefield, he slew a shaman from the temple of Tngri and held off Vulture Beak, aiding the Warring Lion Tribe in defeating the Vulture Tribe and ultimately forcing Vulture Beak to flee.

Finally, this allowed for a pincer attack to be carried out against Timur's army, leading to the defeat of the Golden Horde at Yanmen.

From autumn to winter, traversing a thousand li, sweeping across Monan, he achieved countless victories of immeasurable impact.

The Ranking of Hidden Dragons has changed.

Rank 1: Zhao Changhe!

Until death, a man's heart is as steadfast as iron. Let us see if he can mend the sundered sky!

Whether the final comment of the Tome of Troubled Times referred solely to Zhao Changhe or to all the heroes who shed blood to defend their nation, it did not matter.

These glorious achievements shone brighter than any judgment of a divine artifact, surpassing even the most illustrious hidden dragons of the past, and even those on the Ranking of Man.

He was undoubtedly the strongest First Hidden Dragon in history.

One year after coming to this world, his name now resounded throughout it.

Chapter 289: The Current Ranking of Troubled Times

Heavy snow blanketed the green mountains, covering the area inside and outside Yanmen Pass in white.

Within Yanmen Commandery, at the commandery chief's mansion, the best guest courtyard was occupied.

At this time, the first hidden dragon, known and praised throughout the world, was not participating in the pursuit. Instead, he lay limp in a soft chair, his face pale and lips blue, barely clinging on to life.

He had endured three clashes against Vulture Beak, not to mention a desperate full-force strike from Vulture Beak during the last exchange. Surviving that was an impressive feat in itself.

While other aspects of his ranking might be just supplementary, this confrontation was the core achievement that earned him even Batu's admiration.

Unfortunately, the last thing he cared about right now was whatever core achievement. The pain from his injuries, the weakness from activating all of his buffs, and the aftereffects of surging vicious blood qi were overwhelming. Zhao Changhe, who had been all bright and heroic on the battlefield, now just wanted his Big Sister Yue to come and comfort him.

Yue Hongling knew what her lover was thinking, but in the presence of Cui Wenjing and the others, the proud heroine could not bring herself to rush in for dual cultivation with her lover. She could only act like she did not know him and go join the pursuit instead.

So, it was Cui Wenjing who was left to face Zhao Changhe's pitiful look in the room.

"I don't really care if you show that sour face to others, but you actually dare show it to me too?" Cui Wenjing's expression was even worse than his. "Do you think I'm preventing you from being intimate with your heroine? Fine, go be intimate with her, but don't expect anything else from me."

Realizing that this was his prospective father-in-law, Zhao Changhe could only apologize, "Not at all, I'm just in pain from my injuries... Uncle, can you give me any medicine? I've run out..."

"This entire time you've been wandering the jianghu, you've been using the medicine from my Cui Clan!"

Zhao Changhe couldn't retort.

Actually, he had long since used up the medicine he had gotten from the Cui Clan. Most of the supplies he got later came from the Tang Clan and the Demon Suppression Bureau. However, it did not seem wise for him to argue with Cui Wenjing at the moment, lest he die at his hands before any barbarians could even get to him.

"Forget it. You were a hero this time, so there's no point in me being harsh with you." Cui Wenjing's voice softened as he tossed over a bottle of medicine. "This medicine is better than what Yangyang gave you before. It's the best medicine we've got for treating internal injuries. It's also excellent for strengthening your body and helping you recover from the backlash and weakness. "

Zhao Changhe took the medicine and felt somewhat better. He then asked curiously, "Uncle, why do you have the time to stay here? Shouldn't you be out there dealing with Timur?"

Cui Wenjing looked at him for a moment, then sighed. "You were unconscious for a short time after returning to the pass. The battle is over now. Do you really think that you just got back?"

Zhao Changhe's eyes widened.

Shit, I passed out?

Even after having suffered so many injuries during his time in this world, Zhao Changhe had never experienced anything like this before. It seemed that the gap between him and the top-ranked expert on the Ranking of Man was even wider than he had estimated. It was a miracle that he had even managed to survive.

Cui Wenjing said, "Timur has retreated into the desert with his remaining forces. Batu is sweeping across Monan. This will lead to a division between the north and south. The Golden Horde in Mobei, and the Warring Lion Tribe in Monan. Batu is perceptive, he has already petitioned to submit to the empire. If the emperor grants him a title, he will likely become the King of Monan."

Zhao Changhe said, "If Timur is just hiding and still alive, is Batu not afraid of him just coming back and beheading him?"

"Are you not worried that he might want to behead you instead?"

"I'm constantly moving around in the Central Plains. How would he know where I am at every moment? It's not like he's some clairvoyant. The Wang Clan and Snow-Listening Pavilion looked for me all over the world and never even saw my face. Batu, on the other hand, has a fixed territory and can't run away."

"That is exactly why Batu seeks to become a subject of His Majesty, becoming a vassal. That way, Timur will have to reconsider his actions."

"That's it? If I were in his place, I wouldn't care about any deterrence. With things as they stand, I'd go all out to kill him to achieve peace of mind."

Cui Wenjing smiled and said, "That's why you're a hero and not a king."

Zhao Changhe said, "So am I unyielding without desire, or am I unrestrained without burdens?"

"A weakling at the eighth layer of the Profound Gate, someone who almost died from a single hit from Vulture Beak, dares to talk about such things in front of me? Laughable."

"..."

"Timur's recent defeat has triggered many chain reactions. He's got a mess on his hands, and he might not even have enough grains for his tribes to survive the winter. Stabilizing Mobei will be a headache for him, and it be at least half a year before he can think about doing anything else." Cui Wenjing sighed. "So, can you stop worrying about these things and just rest? You say you're unburdened, but the moment you wake up, you're concerned about Timur's counterattack."

Zhao Changhe glanced at him. "Uncle, so you do care about me. I haven't even made it to the Ranking of Man yet."

Seeing Zhao Changhe's cheeky face, Cui Wenjing resisted the urge to punch him.

Ranking of Man in three years, huh? He's already at the eighth layer now. How many hurdles are left before he makes it onto the Ranking of Man?

Of course, there were many at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, but only a dozen or so made it onto the Ranking of Man. Breaking through to the Profound Mysteries was a huge barrier. Most people could not do it, but that did not mean that Zhao Changhe could not.

At this point, no one doubted that Zhao Changhe would make it onto the Ranking of Man. Even if he got stuck at the Profound Gate, he could still make it to the bottom of the Ranking

of Man. Cui Wenjing even suspected that Zhao Changhe could challenge the person ranked at the bottom of the Ranking of Man even as he was now and possibly succeed.

Wait, who's at the bottom of the Ranking of Man now? Is it Xue Canghai? No...hold on, it's actually Situ Xiao.

In this war, Cui Yuanyong and Situ Xiao had both made it onto the Ranking of Man. Timur's son, Prince Lada of the Golden Horde, encountered Cui Yuanyong on the battlefield and was soundly defeated. As a result, Cui Yuanyong took over Lada's spot on the Ranking of Man, moving to the seventy-first place without dispute.

Although there were no other direct confrontations or deaths on the Ranking of Man, the rankings still shifted. The Tome of Troubled Times updated the ranking, removing Hu Lie, citing that his severe injuries had left him incapacitated, leading to his removal from the rankings.

Consequently, Cui Yuanyong, who had just secured the seventy-first spot, moved up to seventy. At the same time, Xue Canghai advanced to seventy-one, and Situ Xiao took seventy-two.

Situ Xiao was visibly displeased at the moment. Unlike Cui Yuanyong, who had rightfully earned his position by directly challenging and defeating an opponent on the Ranking of Man, he had merely moved up to fill in the rankings. In the eyes of the public, he had yet to truly prove himself worthy of being on the Ranking of Man. Cui Wenjing thus suspected that Situ Xiao was already out looking for Xue Canghai.

This process of replacing the likes of He Lei and Hu Lie with new entrants might give the impression that the rankings of the Tome of Troubled Times were weakening as the newcomers were weaker than before, but Cui Wenjing knew otherwise.

The overall strength of the Ranking of Man had likely increased. Previously, some lower-ranked individuals had been there as placeholders, their notable achievements long past and no recent progress. Now, those on the ranking were truly battle-tested, exceptional talents, and there were much fewer weaklings.

The current top rankers on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons were almost guaranteed future entrants to the Ranking of Man, with little doubt about their qualifications.

Zhao Changhe held the top spot, followed by Wang Zhaoling, Xia Chichi, and Han Wubing.

No one doubted their eventual ascension to the Ranking of Man; it was just a matter of time.

Cui Wenjing was proud of his son, who had earned his place on the Ranking of Man by defeating a formidable enemy rather than simply moving up to fill the spots. Looking at Zhao Changhe, who was also about to join the Ranking of Man, Cui Wenjing wore a disgruntled face.

If he had known that Zhao Changhe would become so formidable, he would have finalized the marriage agreement earlier. Instead, he had insisted on some condition of reaching the Ranking of Man in three years. Now, there were endless rumors about Zhao Changhe's romantic exploits. Ignoring his potential affair with Tang Wanzhuang, it was hard to believe that nothing had happened between Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling after their long time together in the Grasslands. Only a pig would believe otherwise.

Cui Wenjing wanted to slap himself, but the announcement had been made publicly. He had to stick to it even if it pained him. Until Zhao Changhe officially made it onto the Ranking of Man, he was not Cui Wenjing's son-in-law. If Zhao Changhe wanted to pursue other women, then he had no say.

But letting Zhao Changhe wander for another year or two meant more potential romantic entanglements. Cui Wenjing wished he could just push Zhao Changhe onto the Ranking of Man and get him to marry his daughter immediately.

Cui Wenjing stared at Zhao Changhe for a long time before squeezing out a sentence through clenched teeth, "You're not planning to deliberately wander around for two more years, waiting to hit the three-year mark before making it onto the Ranking of Man, are you?"

Zhao Changhe blinked innocently.

He indeed had such thoughts—of course, it was not because he wanted to pursue women. The real reason was that he wanted to break through to the Profound Mysteries first and then ascend directly to the top ranks of the Ranking of Man.

What was the point of crawling at the bottom of the Ranking of Man while he was still locked behind a Profound Gate? It was a waste of time and effort. Only after unlocking the Profound Mysteries would he truly be a contender on the Ranking of Man, on the genuine Ranking of Man that the Tome of Troubled Times wanted it to be.

Back then, both Chi Li and Yue Hongling aimed to enter the Ranking of Man at a decent rank rather than just squeezing in at the bottom.

Zhao Changhe's ambitions were even wilder. He wanted to break into the top fifty directly.

Chapter 290: Let Me Teach You How to Marry My Daughter

Of course, Zhao Changhe did not dare actually say those words out loud to Cui Wenjing. If he did, he might really just end up getting beaten to death.

He cautiously sought advice by approaching the conversation from a different angle. "I noticed that Chi Li, Yue Hongling, and also brothers Cui Yuanyong and Situ Xiao all seemed to take a while to get past the eighth layer of the Profound Gate and into the ninth layer. Is there anything special about this threshold?"

Cui Wenjing said with a stern face, "Why don't you go and ask your heroine? She went through it herself and would know better than me, no?"

Zhao Changhe smiled apologetically, "Uncle, you're a grandmaster, someone at the pinnacle of martial arts. Why ask someone else when you're right here in front of me?"

Cui Wenjing really felt reluctant to teach him anything. Their relationship was simply that awkward. If he were to teach Zhao Changhe, it would seem as if he were saying, “Come, let me teach you how to marry my daughter.”

However, considering Zhao Changhe’s shameless praise and his status as both a hero and a potential son-in-law, Cui Wenjing felt obligated to say something.

Although reluctant, he had no choice but to speak, “Naturally, the higher you climb, the harder it gets to take that one step higher. This is the case in almost everything. For example, ascending the Ranking of Hidden Dragons by dozens of positions when you’re in the two hundredth is easy, but just moving up one or two places once you’re in the top fifty is much more difficult..”

Zhao Changhe muttered, “It wasn’t that hard.”

Cui Wenjing’s eyes narrowed.

Zhao Changhe hurriedly clarified, “Uh, I mean, it wasn’t that hard for someone who got to the top of the rankings while lying down...”

Cui Wenjing clenched his fists, his eyes flashing with anger.

Zhao Changhe nearly ducked in reflex.

Cui Wenjing took a deep breath, maintaining a stoic expression. “The ninth layer of the Profound Gate is the pinnacle of human martial arts in the world. Reaching it involves more than just the cultivation of one’s body, it often requires external forces to reach. Simply put, the ninth layer is the highest achievement for internal and external cultivation. As a result, opening that ninth Profound Gate is very dangerous.”

Zhao Changhe perked up. “Tianling?”[1]

“Yes. Tianling is the intersection between man and heaven, the core pathway of the bridge between heaven and earth. In theory, according to the principles of cultivation, opening the Tianling Profound Gate not only signifies reaching the ninth layer of the Profound Gate but also involves the key to the door of the Profound Mysteries. Because of that, it carries a vastly different significance compared to the earlier layers of the Profound Gate.”

Zhao Changhe captured the key point. “In theory?”

Cui Wenjing, pleased with Zhao Changhe’s perceptiveness, looked at him with a complex expression before sighing. “Yes, because reaching this stage is extremely difficult. When breaking through to the ninth layer, it’s very common to fall into cultivation deviation, leading to chaos in your spiritual platform and possibly resulting in death. If that happens, you’re lucky if you even get to live as an idiot. Therefore, various cultivation techniques have adopted a compromise, dividing the function of finding the bridge to the Profound Mysteries and retaining only the aspect of increasing one’s power. This makes the breakthrough much easier, leaving the Profound Mysteries for later. This is the reason why there was an explosion in the number of people reaching the ninth layer of the Profound Gate. However, this also means that those who went through this path aren’t genuine ninth-layer cultivators. They’re merely halfway there.”

Zhao Changhe understood. “So the reason Yue Hongling and the others were stuck at that stage for so long was because they were not satisfied with that half-hearted approach. The ninth layer they reached was the true ninth layer. So, although they were stuck at the threshold to the ninth layer for a long time, it was relatively easy for them to unlock the Profound Mysteries soon after they did break through. In contrast, those who took the shortcut have a much more difficult time unlocking the Profound Mysteries, and that is what has led to so many people reaching the ninth layer but very few reaching the Profound Mysteries, to the point where there aren’t even enough to fill the Ranking of Man.”

Cui Wenjing nodded and said, “Exactly. The so-called chasm is actually man-made. Well, not that it matters all that much. After all, reaching the ninth layer of the Profound Gate is already the pinnacle for ordinary people. Pushing for the Profound Mysteries, which only one in a million achieves, is quite unnecessary to most.”

Zhao Changhe smiled faintly, remaining silent.

Cui Wenjing eyed him, knowing that he would never settle for some half-baked ninth layer. In fact, Zhao Changhe had already glimpsed the door to the Profound Mysteries, so achieving the genuine ninth layer was not too difficult. Regardless, it still required him to come across a certain opportunity.

After all, Tianling was still Tianling, it did not carry such divine connotations for nothing. It was not a door that could be forced open. Unlocking Tianling required some insight and natural progression; otherwise, it would be easy to develop inner demons and end up turning into an idiot.

As for how one was to find this insight and enlightenment... It could take years... or a lifetime. Of course, Cui Wenjing believed that such would not be the case for Zhao Changhe; otherwise, his renown as the strongest hidden dragon in history would be a joke.

He did not plan to go into detail on this topic, so he changed topics, “Have you already started seeking a special physique?”

Zhao Changhe smiled. “Uncle, your eyes are truly as bright as a torch. Do you have any advice for me?”

“Unlike conventional cultivation systems, special physiques involve characteristics of ancient gods and demons. Even people like me and Wang Daoning can’t say that we have fully figured it out. The one who understands this topic best, apart from His Majesty, might be Le Shentong. What I can tell you is that it is a bottomless pit; there’s no clear end in sight. No one can give you precise guidance on what to do next; it entirely depends on your own opportunities. If you aren’t careful, you might end up riddling your body with hidden problems and ailments.”

Zhao Changhe reflected on these words and realized that, indeed, it was good that Yue Hongling had wisely chosen not to blindly accept the Black Tortoise gemstone’s transformation with her not being fully comprehensive of the Innate Dao Body. Instead, she had made slight adjustments based on her own understanding, likely taking this into account. He realized that her martial arts insight was truly profound.

But in this aspect, I've got an incredible advantage. The guidance from the golden foil is definitely reliable.

Then he asked, "Uncle, have you heard of the Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng?"

"Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng..." Cui Wenjing frowned and thought for a moment, then shook his head and said. "I've heard of many kinds of blood ginseng, but I have never heard of one with the name Dragon Elephant. If you need it for your physique, I can help you keep an eye out for any information on it."

Zhao Changhe was overjoyed. Having a powerful backer was indeed beneficial. If the Cui Clan really mobilized their forces to find something, his chances of finding it would increase significantly. Anyhow, he believed that this clearly named item should not be as elusive as those legendary treasures needed for transforming one's meridians.

Seeing him as happy as a monkey at the sight of a banana tree, Cui Wenjing grumbled, "Don't think that just finding some medicinal materials and soaking in them will be the end of it. Be prepared to spend a lifetime searching through various secret realms, researching and pondering on your next steps."

Zhao Changhe smiled cheekily. "I understand..."

Cui Wenjing stared at him for a while, then suddenly fell silent. In fact, discussing cultivation was just a way to talk about personal matters. He hoped that Zhao Changhe would advance quickly so he could marry Yangyang. Otherwise, why would he bother teaching him at all? However, these things did not need to be spelled out too clearly. Otherwise, it would really be quite awkward for him.

After a long while, Cui Wenjing sighed and brought up something he had wanted to talk about openly for some time. "Do you really intend to become the crown prince now?"

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Hm? Then why did you fight so hard in this battle? It’s clear that the turning point of this battle was you, and no one can deny that.”

“...What’s that got to do with anything? Brother Yuanyong also fought with his life on the line, insisting on retreating. Is he also trying to be the crown prince?”

Cui Wenjing raised his hand, acting as if he was going to slap Zhao Changhe, who quickly covered his face.

Cui Wenjing glared at him for a while, then sighed. “Whatever your reasons, perhaps you did it unintentionally, but objectively, you have won the favor of Huangfu Yongxian and the recognition of Great Xia’s most elite army. Do you understand what that means?”

Zhao Changhe’s first thought was that it might make it easier to get close to Huangfu Yongxian’s daughter...

Then he realized that with his current status and reputation, bloodlines did not matter anymore. However, everyone was still thinking in terms of conventional politics, not realizing that Xia Longyuan was fundamentally a lunatic who did not care about such things.

As long as Xia Longyuan continued to play his game with the gods and Buddhas, the world would never be at peace, and everyone else could only try to mend things.

This was Tang Wanzhuang’s tragedy.

And now, it seemed to be his turn, as he was now caught in the same situation.

Seeing through his thoughts, Cui Wenjing said calmly, “In this world, the more conscientious a person is, the harder and more tiring their life is. Those who only care about themselves lead much easier lives. Do you... have any regrets?”

“What about you, uncle?” Zhao Changhe asked back. “When the spirit of the Qinghe Sword faded and left the Cui Clan, you spoke of it calmly, but did you ever feel any regret in your heart? Now, with brother Yuanyong defending the pass, his heroic spirit permeating Yanmen, perhaps the sword spirit could return, but we’d never really know for sure. Did you come all this way to help him because you blame him for not knowing when to advance or retreat and not caring about his family? Or maybe, deep down, you feel a little gratified? “

Cui Wenjing fell silent and stared at him steadily.

The two of them stared at each other for a long time before Cui Wenjing finally smiled slightly. “After not seeing you for over half a year, it seems you have not made much progress in other areas, but at least you don’t talk like a vulgar bandit anymore. On the other hand, Yuanyong has been becoming increasingly vulgar in his speech.”

Then, he turned to leave and said, “Have you noticed that Dragon Bird is getting more docile? I think the day it recognizes its master isn’t far off. You might want to start thinking about that first.”

The Dragon Bird of Great Xia, the emperor’s war blade.

There was only one kind of person that it would recognize as master.

Zhao Changhe looked at the door with a headache. Old Cui was not just talking about the saber; it was as if he wanted to drape him in a yellow robe.

No wonder they’re allying with the Wang Clan through marriage. There really are rebels everywhere... They claim to be loyalists yet even they have their hidden agendas.

Just as his headache was worsening, a knock came on the door. An unfamiliar male voice laughed outside and said, “Young Master Zhao, how is your injury? I’ve brought you some good medicine, different from the Cui Clan’s... I’ll sell it to you for just one coin.”

Eighth on the Ranking of Heaven, Ying Five. He was ranked one place higher than Old Cui.

If Old Cui was still focused on worldly matters, Ying Five definitely was not.

Zhao Changhe was very interested in him.